

**Media Usage: How Law Enforcement Uses One of the Largest Weapons Used Against Them to
Fight Public Perception**

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Abstract

The public's perception of law enforcement is negatively impacted by social media posts that color the events in the worst possible light. The increase in technology has exacerbated this problem with the ever-growing use of social media, which serves to increase the harsh light in the actions of officers are portrayed. It is now easier, in a matter of seconds, for the public to amplify officer-mistakes shared not only statewide, but nationwide. Law enforcement departments and agencies can combat this abuse by using use social media to strengthen their relationship with the community, to minimize the damage caused by would-be detractors.

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Technology has become a leading factor in affecting the criminal justice system. Over the years, new advances have called for changes in administration and management. The advances have helped the effectiveness of police departments, but certain advances have caused new difficulty. Media, in particular, has created a new obstacle. Currently, negative images of law enforcement are spread wider and more easily than ever. This causes new procedures to be put into place for law enforcement to correctly respond to this.

Conflicts between police departments and citizens happen in waves. During periods of civil unrest or large historical events, it has been seen that citizens will disapprove of law enforcement. Technology only makes this more difficult. This proved to be true in the 1960's (Brandl, 2021). At this time, the United States had many large historical events occurring. This period was heavily devoted to the civil rights movement. Technology at this time presented a negative image of law enforcement to the public. Many of these protests showed white officers facing African American protesters. Instead of seeing law enforcement as a unit of protection, many saw these white officers as an abusive force (Brandl, 2021). The country was also struggling politically. The United States had been involved in the Vietnam war for the six years leading up to the 1960's and still had 13 more years of involvement. On top of this, President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963 (Brandl, 2021). Fifty years later we are still seeing these trends continue.

Similarly to the public having negative reactions to law enforcement's actions during the civil rights movement, current trends have struck up controversies again. Whereas the sixties had access to cameras and television, technology in today's time is even more elaborate. Cameras

and television remain, but there is also the addition of social media and phones. These modern technologies allow for the public to see even more situations that are difficult for officers (Copeland et al., 2022). One of the most current examples of this is George Floyd. When this situation occurred, many in the country were in their houses due to being quarantined from the Corona virus. These individuals who were left in their homes had the unique experience of spending more time involved in the media. Individuals who may have worked a 9 to 5 before and would not usually see the news, now had access to mass media all day. This caused a large population to be more aware of situations going on within communities.

Social media gives individuals who capture videos of police to share these moments with a huge population. These videos can continuously be shared, and with each variation more of the story gets lost. This causes a large strain on the relationship between officers and a community to be common (Copeland et al., 2022). Recent controversies that happen cause the population to want new things from law enforcement. The community now pushes accountability to be one of their most important factors. Criminal justice administration achieves this through multiple different ways.

Increased training is an element being implemented in order for citizens to feel more comfortable. This training typically teaches the officers how to deescalate situations rather than jump directly to excessive force. To hold officers accountable for this, body worn cameras have become a new device often used (Boudreau et al., 2022). These cameras hold the officers accountable for their actions as the footage provides a first look at the incident that occurs. Management of law enforcement has also started to become more aware of their officers' biases. Biases are typical in every individual and are often not even realized (Boudreau et al., 2022). Being able to train officers to be conscious of these biases is an important concept when it comes to officers building relationships with the community. Individuals in the community will also

have their own biases. A large population continues to have the biased opinion that police officers are a harmful unit. Although many of these biases are formed by the perception of law enforcement seen in media, many police departments are attempting to counteract these biases by using social media for their benefit.

Law enforcement will often face the most backlash when videos of situations, or retellings of situations, get shared across social media platforms. Whereas traditional media will reach a county, state, or even a country level there is a generational gap with social media. Social media can reach a wider audience geographically as well as generationally. A younger generation is more likely to see a video of an incident through a social media platform rather than catch it on a traditional news station. Another significant difference between traditional media and social media is the transference of emotions (Bejan et al., 2018). With the increase of social media over the last ten years, many psychologists have attempted to study how it affects the minds of the individuals using it. This is especially important when examining how social media works against law enforcement.

It should be noted that traditional media and social media highly affect individual's emotions. Media is continuously used as a method to instill fear within their audiences. Many social media databases have mastered the algorithm to supply their users with ads and content that they want to see. These posts that are formatted for their viewing will gain emotional responses from them. When clips of situations with law enforcement get spread around, negative emotions are easily spread around much quicker. Studies have found that posts, specifically Tweets, with extremely positive feelings and those with strong negative feelings will have the most interactions (Bejan et al., 2018). Unfortunately, few studies have been conducted to examine the direct correlation of social media posts and a law enforcement situation that was fatal. Many police departments have begun to implement social media to assist in these

situations. One study compared a police department's normal use of social media to their use after a fatal incident happened.

To better understand an agency's use of social media in relation to the occurrence of a fatal incident, this study reflected on the posts an agency made before, after, and during an event. The following results related to the fatal incident of George Floyd. An increase in post was noted during the week following the incident. This increase also correlated to an increase in the interactions on posts. During this point in time, posts made by law enforcement were interacted with more by the community. More attention was paid to what the police were doing and saying at this time. Nevertheless, the rate at which they made posts did not continue. As time went on, the posts became less common (Dong & Wu, 2022). Even if the posts are less often, law enforcement has begun to use social media regularly for multiple different reasons.

Social media is a new way for police departments to have the ability to connect with their communities. Examples of these platforms include Twitter and Facebook. These platforms allow police departments to have direct contact with individuals. Social media acts as a two-way communication. The community can use these social media platforms to have a direct line of communication with departments. If there is a concern or a complaint, an individual can contact the police department through the social media platforms. If used correctly, the police can measure their own progress through the feedback they receive. A substantial portion of law enforcement is making sure that the community is safe, nevertheless creating a strong relationship is one of the first steps to achieving this.

When considering the implications social media and traditional media have caused law enforcement, it is logical that officers would start using these for their benefit. This causes a new form of management to be required. For a department to use social media correctly there needs

to be clear knowledge of what the department hopes to achieve. If the social media is not being managed correctly, the purpose of the agency could get lost. The purpose of using these new developments is to create a connection between the community and the officers. This is one of the best ways to effectively reflect what the police department wishes to achieve (Mayes, 2021). Policy should be established and put into place for the use of social media.

Law enforcement agencies all over the country use their social media platforms to strengthen the relationship between the community by assisting in the perceptions of the police that the community has (Mayes, 2021). Some are considering this a new step in community-oriented policing as it becomes more acknowledged across the country. In 2010 the International Association of Chiefs of Police created guidelines for police departments to follow when it comes to their social media use. The IACP viewed this resource as a way to strengthen collaboration and information exchange within law enforcement and the community. For this communication and collaboration, the departments must take care of the image they are projecting. In many cases the image they want to project is one of transparency. Rather than use social media to cover up mistakes they make, many believe that they can use social media to admit when they get things wrong. One officer when interviewed explained that social media allows them to be the first to admit that they made a mistake. The interviewee from Orem, Utah PD went on to say that having and participating in social media gives them the platform to say, “we were wrong, but we’re going to do it right” (Mayes, 2021). This honesty will likely lead to a stronger compliance to work with the police.

Though it may seem to have a negative connotation, one interviewee explained that using social media is like marketing the police department. This individual from West Linn PD believes that using social media is an avenue to humanize the police force (Mayes, 2021). Typically, in traditional media, police are seen as monstrous and not as human beings. Many

officers believe that using social media can show that they are not only humans but are members of the community. Sharing these aspects shows the community that they are out there trying their best to help the community and should not be considered villains in every situation. In reality, law enforcement has a job to do and, unfortunately, that typically takes place on the worst day of an individual's life (Mayes, 2021).

Over the history of law enforcement there have been waves of the public not agreeing with police officers correlating with large historical events. The year 2020 resulted in the country being locked down due to the Corona virus as well as the country being uneasy about law enforcement officers. The increase in fatal incidents that were spread over social media called for changes to be made in law enforcement. One of these changes includes using social media, which is typically used against law enforcement, to connect with the community. New policies have been made to better the understanding of how social media platforms can be used by law enforcement to change the perception of them.

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