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Social Media's Law Enforcement

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Police work has always been a very exciting and interesting topic. Most of the time it doesn't matter who is standing next to you at the party, when the topic of profession comes up you seem to find yourself at the center of attention. I mean yeah it's nice to be a doctor or a project manager; however, when people hear you're police officer they start to glow with excitement and here come the "have you ever..." questions. It's no wonder that that police work has always been somewhat of a public occupation; however, the early 1990's changed law enforcement forever with the widespread use of the internet (Waters, 2012).

With the evolvement of social media in 2003, law enforcement has struggled with its public image more than ever (Waters, 2012). Social network sites such as Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, YouTube, and Instagram have made it extremely easy for anyone subscribed to their site to share comments, pictures, and videos with billions of people around the world. With the invention and widespread use of smartphones and tablets everyone has immediate access to a camera with video and sound recording capabilities and instant access to social networking with the ability to post whatever content they choose to. I'm sure one could have only imagined what kind of trouble this would later bring for law enforcement.

History of Social Media

According to an article, The Brief History of Social Media, written by Dr. Anthony Curtis with the University of North Carolina at Pembroke, social media are internet sites that allow people to interact freely by sharing and discussing information about each other and their lives, using a multimedia mix of personal words, pictures, videos, and audio. These sites appear

in many different forms including blogs, forums, social networks, virtual worlds, and podcast portals.

In 2002, a social networking site called Friendster was opened to the public in the United States and within 3 months it reached 3 million users. In 2003, social networking began to grow with the launch of MySpace, a clone to Friendster. Social networking continued to grow and in 2004 Facebook was born. Facebook was originally opened to college students who attended Harvard University, and was referred to as the college version of Friendster. Another social networking site geared for sharing and viewing videos called YouTube made its debut in 2005. Facebook later opened up to high school students and in 2006 finally reached out to anyone over the age of 13. Also in 2006, social networking obtained another site which would be called Twitter, allowing users to send and receive messages called tweets. (Curtis, 2013)

In 2007, Apple a major computer manufacturer released a multimedia and internet smart phone called the iPhone. The iPhone's operating system uses applications which are more commonly referred to as apps. With Facebook allowing third-party developers to create apps, social networking sites are now delivered straight to the fingertips of their users by means of their cell phones. Along with Facebook, many other social media sites have made their sites available to their users via apps on their cell phones. (Curtis, 2013)

In 2009, Facebook was ranked the world's most-used social network site with more than 200 million users. Facebook grew to have more than 400 million users by 2010 and Apple released a new computer tablet device with multimedia and internet capabilities called the iPad. In 2010, social networks were so popular that the Democratic National Committee advertised a

position for a social networks manager to manage President Barak Obama's accounts on Facebook, Twitter, and MySpace. (Curtis, 2013)

By 2011, social media became a vital part of our daily lives with more than 550 million Facebook users, 65 million tweets sent each day using Twitter, and 2 billion videos being viewed on YouTube every day. "Social media commerce was on the rise along with mobile social media via smartphones and tablet computers. Public share of so much personal information via social media sites raised concern over privacy." (Curtis, 2013)

By 2012, 2 billion people worldwide use the internet and social media. It is estimated that by 2015 the number of internet users would double to 4 billion users. Facebook reached a billion users on its own. YouTube has more than 800 million users that watch over a trillion videos a year. Approximately 70 percent of users that watch videos on YouTube come from outside the United States and 72 hours of video is uploaded to YouTube every minute. As of 2013, YouTube has 1 billion users who view about 4 billion videos a day. Facebook has 1.11 billion users to Twitter's 500 million registered users. Social media continues to gain popularity as tweets are being sent by Astronauts on the International Space Station to a global audience. (Curtis, 2013)

The Detriment of Social Media on Law Enforcement

With the growing popularity of social media and the huge number of users, coupled with the public excitement of law enforcement, it is no wonder police work has become such a hot-

topic on social networking sites. With the speedy access to cameras and social networking sites it takes just a few seconds to record a police encounter and post it to billions of people around the world. Not only can someone post these videos, but with today's technology they can edit and post only the portions they want seen. This can wreak havoc on a police department's public image and the officer's credibility.

Social media has not only damaged law enforcement's public image by posting photos and videos of officers in a funny or inappropriate situations, but social media has caused concern with officer safety on and off duty. The relationship between social media and law enforcement has caused new types of police encounters to be born. These are situations that pose



Photo posted on www.worldwideinterweb.com a site for viewing photos and videos.

great potential dangers to officers and innocent bystanders, while the people doing so believe they are completely in the right. There are videos posted on YouTube or other social networking sites of people approaching officers while on traffic stops or other types of contacts just to see how they will react. Here in the last few years with the controversy over gun rights and gun control laws people have been approaching officers while carrying firearms to see if their rights will be violated. These people then post videos on YouTube and similar sites like the video, How to Invoke Your Rights with the Police, that was posted on YouTube by DanceRooster on January 23rd, 2010, when he approached an officer on some type of police contact while carrying a firearm. When the officer questioned him and requested his identification he refused to provide it and only wanted to argue with the officer. This type of behavior not only divides the officer's attention from the original violator, which officers have always been taught is and can

be a huge threat to their safety, but it places him in even more danger because now he has to focus on the dangers these people are presenting by interfering and bringing a firearm to the scene. In the video posted by DanceRooster the subject is aggressive toward the officer by refusing to provide information and then as the officer walks off to make a phone call he chases after him still trying to argue and prove his point. In the video, the person taking the recording is heard yelling at the officer that he is going to post the recording onto the internet. Or where others, like in a video posted on YouTube by obscuredtruth on September 6th, 2010 titled How to Neutralize Police Checkpoints, intentionally go through Driving While Intoxicated (DWI) Checkpoints to antagonize and harass police officers while trying to carry out their duties.

Not only do social media sites pose additional dangers to officers while on duty but “the power of the Internet-social media on particular—has brought danger home to officers and their families” (Waters, 2012). Personal information from public records has been available online for years; however, with social media making it easier to distribute and share information, the dangers to officers and their families are increasing. As Captain Waters from the San Bernardino, California Police Department said, in an article titled Social Media and Law Enforcement: Potential Risks, “by increasing exposure of personal information, social media has raised the threat level.” She went on to say that “social media can engender a mob mentality wherein one small stimulus spurs a wide-scale reaction that feeds on itself and grows out of control. Incidents develop faster, reach further, and spread more rapidly than anything society has dealt with before.” Since social media has become a part of a large majority of people’s daily routine, privacy concerns have developed due to the amount of personal information people put on their social network profiles or give out over posts. Even though we, as police officers, typically take precautions to protect ourselves from our personal information being distributed, it

is still possible for the information to get out. With mobile smartphones, easy access to the internet, and quick connections to almost any information at our fingertips it is very possible for a violator to have our personal information pulled up on their cellphones by the time we can return to their window to issue a ticket. Just by searching our names it is possible for an individual to have access to photographs of our loved ones, our cars, and even our homes since this information is stored on social media sites. “Outraged offenders easily could get to officers’ doorsteps before their patrol shifts end, leaving them unable to defend their homes and families” (Waters, 2012). Some officers may say that is not possible because they don’t have accounts with social networking sites but what about their spouses, children, friends, and relatives? I’m sure if you looked everyone has a close friend or relative who is an avid social media user.

The Negative Effect of Social Media on Police Careers

Not only can social media pose a safety risk to officers and their families, but it can cause huge problems for officers at work. I’m sure if you’ve worked at a police department for any length of time you know that most officers have a very vulgar sense of humor and can say things that others (non-police personnel) may find very offensive. So it’s no wonder that some officers who have social network accounts have managed to find themselves in the limelight or even hot water with their departments.

Not long ago, I had an officer who I supervised find himself in that exact situation. The whole situation came to light when a high ranking officer in the department received a new set of daily pictures on a social networking site called The Chive. While scrolling through the photos

he saw a familiar face and immediately knew who it was. An officer from my department was sitting in his patrol car, in full uniform with the patch clearly visible, and a huge smile on his face as he accepted a donut from the person taking the photo. This photograph had been distributed around the world in seconds and later found itself on numerous other social networking sites including Facebook. This photo was able to be viewed by billions of people in just seconds. As you can imagine this unwanted publicity for our department didn't make the administration too happy. Now it wasn't by any means the worst photograph, but it didn't paint our department in a good light either. The photo received numerous negative comments from viewers. Former officers from our department who had also seen the photo had contacted department personnel to voice concerns of how distastefully the photograph portrayed our department. After speaking with the officer it was discovered that he didn't post the photograph and he was actually unaware that the picture was even taken. He said he didn't know the photo had been taken until he started receiving phone calls from friends who had seen the photo on a social network site. My department, like most nowadays attempting to combat a bad public image due to social media, has a social media policy prohibiting officers from posting photographs in which they are wearing their uniform. If this officer had posted or been involved in posting the picture he would have been in violation of departmental policy and could have been disciplined. Since he didn't know about it until after the fact, this officer was not disciplined; however, still had to deal with the aftermath of the embarrassment.

Some officers aren't as fortunate as this officer such as Officer Maria Gresham who missed out on several promotion opportunities due to an on-going investigation into comments she made on her private Facebook account about another officer who was involved in an arrest she had made. Officer Gresham claimed that "she was not promoted in retaliation for her First

Amendment speech on Facebook.” The 11th Circuit Court upheld the department’s discipline of Officer Gresham (DiBianca, 2013). Other officers have lost credibility in court, found themselves in the newspaper over comments, pictures, or videos they posted on their accounts, and some have even lost their jobs. Even people who are only in the hiring process at a police department have found their prospective careers debilitated by social media. A majority of law enforcement agencies now use social network sites during the hiring process background investigation to filter out undesirable applicants.

How Social Media can be used as an Investigative Tool

Social media can be a huge detriment to law enforcement and the officers that protect our communities; however, it can also work to our advantage when treated properly. Departments can use social media to detect and screen out unwanted applicants during the hiring process, (those who could potentially pose a risk to the department). Investigators can also use the social media as an investigative tool. Detectives can create undercover accounts to gather intel on crimes and suspects. The NYPD even has a policy governing the creation of such online accounts (Sterbenz, 2013). Using social media is a good way to gather information on the identity and whereabouts of a suspect or even gain information about a particular crime. “The Supreme Court has said police don’t need search warrants to get information you’ve already shared with other people” (Sterbenz 2013).

When I worked as a detective, I assisted an officer with a burglary investigation in which a suspect had posted a photograph of himself and his accomplice in the building during the

burglary. Even though he denied being involved, it's nearly impossible to argue with a photograph. No one ever said criminals were smart. Much like the two my old partner and I arrested, Michael Baker from Kentucky posted a picture of himself committing a crime. Baker had his girlfriend take a picture of him stealing gas from a Jenkins police car as he was flipping the bird to the camera. Needless to say Baker was later arrested and went to jail for the theft.



Photo obtained from <http://www.inquisitr.com/223053/man-arrested-for-stealing-gas-from-police-car-posting-photo-on-facebook/>

After getting out of jail

Baker posted on Facebook again but this time to tell his friends he had just gotten out of jail and “yea lol I went too jail over facebook” (Montaldo 2013).

How Law Enforcement can use Social Media as a Community Relations Tool

Facebook and other social media sites have proven to be very useful during investigations; however, police departments can use them as a community relations tool in many different ways. My department has even opened up its very own Facebook account, using it to keep the city's citizens up to date on current events throughout the police department and in the city. This Facebook account is maintained by the department's Public Information Officer who has a close working relationship with the media and the public. The account is used to inform

the public of self-defense courses that are sponsored by the police department, fun events such as junior police academies and haunted houses for children held by the department, and public safety announcements. It is also used to quickly distribute accurate information or clarify incorrect information on high-profile situations such as barricaded suspects, hostage situations, or missing persons.

In September, the Montrose Police Department turned to “its newest information-generating tool – Facebook” during a missing person case. The teenager was found safe the next morning but during the investigation the police department used Facebook to distribute information about the case. Within hours the Facebook page received approximately 7,440 hits in response to the posting of the missing teenager. (Woody 2013)

Chief James McCall from the New Frazeyburg Police Department is using social networking for more than just keeping his citizens informed. Chief McCall is using Facebook to have citizens send him Facebook messages, which are being delivered directly to his cell phone, about crimes that are being committed in his jurisdiction. He wants his department activities “as transparent as possible, with plans to post his department’s monthly activity report.” (Gadd 2013)

Conclusion

In conclusion, social media has grown exponentially over the last 10 years, especially with the invention and use of smartphones and social media apps. Although many people see

social networking sites as a good way to communicate with others about themselves and their lives, they do have many negative aspects for law enforcement. With quick access to smartphone cameras and social networking sites amateur reporters can record police encounters and post only the portions they want seen, for billions of people to view and criticize. Not only are people recording their own encounters with law enforcement but they are creating new encounters which are making police officer's jobs even more hazardous. Social media has made police work not only a dangerous job while on duty, but it has increased the potential dangers to officers while off duty, as well as increased risk to their families through quick and easy access to personal information.

Officers have gotten themselves into difficult situations with their departments, courts, and even the public due to the use of social networking sites. Some officers have been disciplined, lost credibility in court, have lost promotions, and have even been terminated for their private use of social networking sites. Some cases in which officers have been disciplined have ultimately ended up in court, but even the courts are upholding some department's discipline of officers due to their conduct while on these sites. The best way for a department to combat a bad public image due to social media, and to protect their officers is to implement a policy strictly prohibiting comments, photographs, and videos involving the agency from being posted on these sites by their employees.

Even though social media sites can cause a negative public image for law enforcement agencies, headaches for police officers and police administration, or even cost someone their job, they still have many positive aspects that police departments can benefit from. Social media sites have proven to be great way to quickly share information with the public and gain valuable pertinent information during an investigation.

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