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Social Media and Police Leadership: Lessons From Boston

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Introduction

The Boston Police Department (BPD) has long embraced both community policing and the use of social media. The department put its experience to good and highly visible use in April 2013 during the dramatic, rapidly developing investigation that followed the deadly explosion of two bombs at the finish line of the Boston Marathon. BPD successfully used Twitter to keep the public informed about the status of the investigation, to calm nerves and request assistance, to correct mistaken information reported by the press, and to ask for public restraint in the tweeting of information from police scanners. This demonstrated the level of trust and interaction that a department and a community can attain online. In the aftermath of the investigation, BPD was "applauded for leading an honest conversation with the public during a time of crisis in a way that no police department has done before."[1]

In critical ways, BPD's successful use of social media during the marathon bombing investigation relied on previous trust building by the department — including a longstanding, if more mundane, use of social media.[2] This paper

discusses the lessons to be learned from BPD's use of social media during the marathon bombing investigation and earlier. However, it is not strictly or even primarily a case study. It is an effort to contribute to a broader, ongoing discussion about police and social media. It is a reflection, in light of Boston's experience, on the opportunities and challenges that social media present to the police and on the ways in which social media can help develop new models of policing that are adapted to our 21st-century world but rooted in traditions of community engagement stretching back through the community policing movement to Robert Peel's 19th-century goals for a modern constabulary.

Police can learn some tips and tricks about social media from the corporate sector because businesses have already encountered some of the same challenges in this new environment that police departments are now facing. However, police departments are not corporations, businesses nor even run-of-the-mill government agencies; they have unique powers, unique responsibilities and a unique relationship to the public. Police need their own models, their own best practices, and their own discussions and philosophies about how to incorporate social media to achieve their distinct purposes.

This is especially true because the police may have distinct and natural advantages in this area, and the imperatives of social media coincide in important respects with the perennial imperatives of law enforcement. Social media are a means of communication and conversation, which have always been at the center of policing.[3] Social media also draw upon communities and can help to build them; using social media is thus a way for police departments to take community policing into the networked age of Web 2.0.[4] The promise of social media for policing is not to transform or add to the work of law enforcement but to emphasize the deep connection with the community that has always been the focus of good police work. Among the central tenets recognized by social media practitioners is that "to speak with a human voice, companies must share the concerns of their communities … but first, they must belong to a community."[5] That is a familiar, even foundational idea in law enforcement; it echoes Peel's enduring principle that "the police are the public and the public are the police."

More than 2,800[6] law enforcement agencies in the U.S. have social media accounts, and that number is growing every day.[7] This paper focuses more on social media as a tool for engaging with the community than on the use of social media as an investigative tool, a practice that raises distinct issues pertaining to privacy and the risk of damaging public trust.[8] The two topics overlap, though, partly because an engaged community is itself an invaluable asset in an investigation and partly because the clumsy or irresponsible use of social media as an investigative tool can do immense damage to the public's trust in and willingness to engage with the police.

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Social Media and the Marathon Bombing

At 2:49 p.m. on April 15, 2013 — Patriot's Day, a public holiday in Massachusetts — two devices detonated in quick succession near the finish line of the Boston Marathon, causing three deaths and approximately 280 injuries. The bombings set off a weeklong series of events that gripped not only Boston but also the nation. The week's social media milestones are cataloged here and are referenced in a discussion of lessons learned later in this paper.

Immediate Response

Boston police officers at the scene realized quickly that social media would play an important role in keeping the public informed about the explosions and their aftermath. En route to the scene of the bombing, police commissioner Davis instructed the Media Relations Office to prepare to use all forms of social media and to push accurate and complete information to the public. About 10 minutes after the detonations, a BPD commander on the scene called for the use of social media to communicate to the public the steps the police were taking: "I need somebody up there to get on social media and let people know what we're doing here."[9] Within an hour of the detonations, BPD sent a tweet confirming what had occurred: "Boston Police confirming explosion at marathon finish line with injuries."[10]

In the ensuing hours, BPD used its official Twitter account to request public assistance;[11] to keep the public and the media informed about road closures, news conferences, and police activities;[12] to reassure the public and express sympathy to the victims and their families;[13] and, crucially, within two hours of the explosions, to give the public accurate information about the casualty toll and the status of the investigation.[14] BPD promptly alerted the media and the public that there had also been an incident at the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library; it sent another tweet half an hour later indicating that this incident appeared to be fire-related rather than a bombing.[15] (By the next day, fire department investigators concluded that the fire had been caused unintentionally by "careless disposal of smoking material."[16]) When the FBI took control of the marathon bombing investigation on the evening of April 16, BPD sent a tweet noting that fact[17] but continued to keep the public informed via its Twitter feed and to correct erroneous reports sent by others. Shortly after sending the tweet about the FBI, BPD tweeted that three people had died from the blasts (correcting inflated fatality reports by some media sources) and that no suspect was in custody (in response to media speculation that a Saudi Arabian man had been arrested).[18]

All of the BPD tweets about the bombings on April 15 were sent on the department's official Twitter account, which was directly overseen by BPD's public information bureau chief, lawyer and former television journalist Cheryl Fiandaca.[19] Assisted by two sworn officers and three civilians, Fiandaca operated @bostonpolice as a 24-hour "digital hub" for information about the investigation over the next several days.[20] She and her staff were briefed by commanders three to five times per day during this period.[21] BPD tweets rapidly became the most trusted source of information about the status of the

investigation and were often retweeted hundreds, thousands or tens of thousands of times.[22]

The day after the bombings, other BPD personnel also used Twitter to communicate with the public. One of the most active Tweet from the Beat accounts (by BPD deputy superintendent John Daley) posted information about street closures and took questions from other users about whether the police needed volunteers to answer phones, whether flowers could be placed at the site of the bombings, and how to submit pictures and videos as evidence.

False Leads and Real Leads

In the days following the bombing, most of BPD's social media activity occurred through its official accounts (overseen by Fiandaca and her staff). One of the most important uses was correcting the misinformation that was spread through both professional media and social networks.

Early in the afternoon on April 17, CNN reported that an arrest had been made in the case.[23] Within minutes, other media outlets echoed that report. Tweets by CNN and the Associated Press containing this report were retweeted more than 5,000 times.[24] BPD responded promptly, also through Twitter, that no arrest had been made.[25] CNN retracted its report almost immediately, and the BPD tweet was amplified by nearly 11,000 retweets.[26]

The following day, after photographs and videos of the scene were rapidly circulated through social media, public networks began speculating based on those images. On April 18, possibly fueled by social media discussion and image sharing, the *New York Post* ran its "Bag Men" cover, which identified Salah Barhoum as a suspect in the case. This report was corrected later that afternoon, when the FBI released surveillance camera footage of the two individuals whom law enforcement actually considered to be suspects in the case.

The FBI made its announcement in a formal press conference; minutes later, BPD again turned to social media, releasing a series of tweets containing videos and pictures of the two suspects. These posts were retweeted thousands of times each — far more than the department's earlier, more open-ended requests for assistance.

The Public's Own Investigation

As information was being released online, both through official and unofficial channels, the social media audience was conducting its own "investigation" in parallel with law enforcement efforts.

As early as April 17 (and likely much earlier), online forums such as Reddit began independent efforts to identify the bombers, even before the FBI had singled out any images of potential suspects. These efforts were met with mixed reactions. At least one notable online news source was skeptical of the effort, and commenters worried about the possibility of racism and false information being perpetuated by Reddit users.[27]

Reddit users ramped up their efforts after official images of unnamed suspects were released. This led to the false identification of Sunil Tripathi, whose name first surfaced on Reddit sometime on the evening of April 18 for reasons that remain unclear. The rumor that Tripathi, a college student who had been missing for about a month at that time, was suspect #2 gained energy overnight.[28] The information was widely retweeted (including by staff and reporters at CBS, Politico and BuzzFeed and by the "hacker collective" Anonymous, whose 3 a.m. tweet on April 19 sent the name to more than one million followers).[29] The theory about Tripathi was refuted later the same morning, first by television news reports clarifying that he was not a suspect and later when BPD released the names of the true suspects.

Identifying and Pursuing the True Suspects

At 4:02 a.m. on April 19, the BPD commissioner sent a tweet on his own Twitter account, which is distinct from the department's account, noting that one of the two suspects had been killed and that the second was at large and dangerous.[30] Ninety minutes later, at 5:34 a.m., the commissioner tweeted again to share a picture of the surviving suspect. At 8:24 a.m., BPD tweeted the suspect's name: Dzhokhar Tsarnaev.

As the manhunt continued, and with hundreds of thousands of individuals listening to scanner feeds online, BPD asked the media (via Twitter) not to "compromise officer safety/tactics by broadcasting live video of officers while approaching search locations."[31] By the time the second suspect was captured on the evening of April 19, BPD's Twitter account had more than 300,000 followers, up from about 40,000 prior to the week's events. The official tweet reporting the suspect's capture was retweeted more than 140,000 times. In the aftermath of the investigation, BPD was "applauded for leading an honest conversation with the public during a time of crisis in a way that no police department has done before."[32]

A Presence on Multiple Platforms

Although Twitter updates were more rapid and seemingly captured more attention, the department also leveraged its already popular Facebook page to publish information and establish a connection with the public. Throughout the week, the official page published images of the suspects, license plate information to support a BOLO ("Be On The Lookout"), a map of the cordoned-off area in the immediate aftermath, maps directing the media to conferences and approved parking areas, and updates about public transit service interruptions related to the investigation. In the days that followed, BPD also used its Facebook page to memorialize the deceased victims and to send messages of condolence and support to survivors.

Early postings of the suspects' images were shared more than 6,500 times. The posting that garnered the most interaction (more than 35,000 "likes") was a message from media officer James Kenneally returning thanks to members

of the public who had sent in encouraging and supportive correspondence: "We hear you. We thank you. God Bless you all."[33]

Tweets From the Beat

In late 2011, BPD began its Tweet from the Beat program to connect officers directly with the department's social media audience. BPD had operated a Twitter account under the @bostonpolice handle since 2009; all tweets were sent by designated personnel in the Media Relations Office and Operations. The Tweet from the Beat program uses the GroupTweet application and allows authorized members of the command staff to post directly from their personal Twitter accounts to the BPD official Twitter account by using the #TweetfromtheBeat hashtag.[34]

The program was developed as an extension of BPD's community policing activities. Members of the command staff (deputy police superintendent and above) set up individual Twitter accounts and were encouraged to post using the #TweetfromtheBeat hashtag during their walking beats or in regard to other positive interactions with the community.

Whereas BPD's social media accounts had primarily been used to broadcast more traditional police communications (crime alerts, arrests, officer commendations and safety tips), the Tweet from the Beat program allows command staff to show a more personal presence within the city of Boston. Even when posted to the @bostonpolice feed, the GroupTweet application identifies the author of the message so that subscribers to the official BPD feed still know which officer shared the message. It also allows command staff to publicize positive interactions with the community that are important but would not be picked up by traditional news outlets.

The subjects of #TweetfromtheBeat messages range from formal community meetings and events to humorous pictures and personal encouragement.[35] Twitter messages are sometimes used to direct people to Facebook, YouTube or the BPD website, where more information is available. Likewise, some Facebook and YouTube postings encourage citizens to connect with the BPD Twitter account. Despite the range of topics, command staff have used the program judiciously, using their personal accounts for replies that are of less general interest.[36] Although #TweetfromtheBeat messages have received fewer retweets, favorites and replies than other items within BPD's Twitter feed, they are still (at least in theory) reaching the same broad audience. Moreover, the tweeted photo or message demonstrates the officer's active interest in the community, in the true spirit of community policing.

Characteristics of Social Media

What lessons can be drawn from BPD's use of social media both before and during the marathon bombing investigation? Perhaps the most important lesson concerns the implications of new communication technologies for the traditional goals and concerns of the police.

Law enforcement should not be defined by the tools it uses but rather by the values it embraces and seeks to promote. New tools, such as social media, should be applied in ways that further the longstanding mission of the police and that incorporate the lessons learned in the late 20th century about the importance of partnering with the community. In other words, while the use of social media creates new capabilities and possibilities for the police, law enforcement agencies should make sure they are shaping the tools rather than the other way around. Effective use means respecting the characteristics of social media but using them in ways that are adapted to the traditions and goals of community policing.

At the same time, incorporating social media into the police mission is not simply about extending current thinking with a new tool. In some ways, social media are indeed platforms for communication, to be used in ways that best suit policing. However, social media have their own logic, norms and culture, and the police need to understand and respect the nature of social media if they are to use them effectively.

Fortunately, some of the most important characteristics of social media are entirely compatible with the best traditions of policing. In fact, the new networking capabilities provided by social media allow the police to rethink how they communicate with the public. The essential characteristics of social media offer possibilities for law enforcement agencies to return to and deepen their commitment to the ideas at the heart of community policing — rethinking what the police want to get across to the community, how the police should listen to the community, and how the police and the community can work together in pursuit of their common objectives.

Social media have three sets of characteristics with important implications for law enforcement: scope, structure and tone. The **scope** of social media is staggering and is continually growing. In 2010, almost half of all adults in the United States were using social networking sites such as Facebook, Twitter, MySpace and LinkedIn. At that time, 59 percent of all Americans who used the Internet were using social media.[37] By 2012, 67 percent of Internet users were using social media.[38] From 2011 to 2012, the amount of time Americans spent on social media increased by 37 percent, from 88.4 billion minutes to 121.1 billion minutes.[39]

This is not simply a matter of how Americans spend their leisure time: more than half of all people ages 25 to 34 are now using social media at work.[40] Nor is it only about youth: although younger Americans still tend to be the most active online, social media sites are no longer gathering places for teenagers and young adults exclusively. The average age of social media users is gradually increasing, and the age profile of social media users now aligns more closely with the general population.[41] In 2012, for the first time, more than half of Americans older than 65 were regular users of the Internet.[42]

Equally important is the **structure** of social media. Social media are essentially networks in

which each user can serve both as a recipient and a source of information. This means that social media can give the police an opportunity to have a two-way conversation with the community. More than that, it means that when the police use social media, they join — for better or worse — an ongoing, multidirectional conversation that can have hundreds or thousands of participants at any given time. When police converse with an individual online, many other members of the public can see that interaction. If the interaction is positive, observers benefit from the information transmitted, and police also can benefit from increased awareness of their services and from the public's recognition of their willingness to engage in conversation. Moreover, the networked nature of social media means that information can be transmitted, and updated, very rapidly.

The conversation that takes place on social media also tends to have a distinctive **tone:** informal, conversational, sometimes humorous and quite distinct from traditional press releases or marketing messages. Corporate messaging on social media fails when it neglects to conform to that tone. Traditional advertising and public relations often fall flat on social media, precisely because they are "not funny … not interesting … [and] only wants us to buy."[43] Police departments, with their ingrained, bureaucratic approach to public relations, can easily make a similar mistake when attempting to use social media. On the other hand, police departments — particularly line officers — have a lot of practice talking with the public directly and informally, and the community policing movement did much to refocus attention on the importance of this kind of communication. Therefore, the tone of social media may come more naturally to the police than to corporations.

Because of their distinctive characteristics, social media provide the police with two different opportunities — the **power of publication** and the **power of conversation** — and certain distinct and natural advantages within each of these opportunities. The first is more obvious and is easier to pursue, but ultimately the second is more important and more potentially rewarding. In addition to these opportunities, the special characteristics of social media also present some special challenges for the police. These challenges will be discussed later in this paper.

The Power of Publication

The scope and speed of social media make them a highly attractive way for police departments to get information to the public. This is the power of publication. It is the opportunity to expand communication beyond the traditional press release model and to send a message without using the press as an intermediary. Using social media, the police can deliver information in a nonsensational and expedited way.

This can include information not traditionally reported by commercial news operations. BPD, like many police departments, was long frustrated by the failure of traditional media to report on the day-to-day work of the police outside of the spotlight: identifying problems, crafting solutions and responding to calls for

assistance. Social media provide a way for the police to pass along information directly to the public. The Tweet from the Beat program has allowed BPD to inform citizens in a direct way about the day-to-day activities of its officers.

The marathon bombing investigation highlighted a different, but equally important, way that police using social media can take advantage of the power of publication. Social media can help the police ensure that the public has accurate, timely and balanced information about high-visibility criminal investigations. Years ago, moving a public statement on a major incident such as a homicide was significantly time-intensive, requiring interoffice memos as well as the writing and screening of statements. It took time not only to approve the statement to ensure uniformity and strength in messaging, but also to deal with the logistics of getting the information distributed to and published by reporters. Today this process can be abbreviated: The use of social media allows the police to push information to the public directly and instantaneously.

Coordination still takes place, but electronic communication allows even that process to be much faster. During the pursuit of the marathon bombing suspects, BPD and the Massachusetts State Police were able to coordinate very quickly to release updated images of one of the suspects. The BPD commissioner was able, with three clicks of a mouse, to distribute to the public the same image that the State Police sent on its own social media accounts. This happened without a formal press statement or scheduled press conference.

Embracing this opportunity to broadcast widely and instantaneously requires a significant cultural shift for many law enforcement agencies. In many ways, law enforcement communications in recent times have been characterized by efforts to control rather than distribute information. However, any hesitation to be more open and prompt in releasing information should be tempered by the fact that police information will be broadcast rapidly on public media regardless of whether the police choose to do the broadcasting themselves. Every major newspaper and television or radio news department now has social media accounts, and — as the marathon bombing investigation highlighted — many users of social media post information they obtain from police scanners, observe at a scene or fabricate themselves. If the police do not use social media, they risk having information about their activities distorted, sensationalized or circulated irresponsibly.

The social media audience will not patiently wait for information to be released through official channels. If the police are not on social media, someone else will shape the way that information from the police is presented on social media. On the other hand, if police do provide information through social media — and if they have worked to maintain the community's trust — the police can play a powerful role in shaping the story. In Boston, long before the marathon bombings, the department found that when it issued press releases on Twitter and Facebook, reports by local newspapers and commercial broadcasters relied

heavily on those releases, both for content and for tone.

One of the lessons of the marathon bombing investigation is that a police department that has worked to earn the public's trust can use social media to disseminate information directly to the public without the traditional intermediary of commercial news operations. This is the power of publishing: the ability of the police, with reasonable effort, to be the source for accurate, timely information that seizes the public's attention and contributes to public awareness and understanding in critical ways.

Advantages of publication. In employing social media for the power of publication, police have two notable advantages over traditional media channels.

The first advantage is that police control much of the information in which the public is most interested. The American public is turning more and more to social media for their news. For people younger than 40, the Internet is often the main source of information.[44] More importantly, the nature of the information people are interested in overlaps significantly with areas in which police are routinely involved. Breaking news, crime, community events and traffic information are among the local news topics that most interest the public.[45] Police, by virtue of their day-to-day activities and responsibilities, have much of this information, and at a level of detail and understanding much greater than the commercial media.

This is particularly true because of the geography of police work. Patrol officers, detectives and neighborhood liaison officers often spend their time in troubled parts of the community: places that many members of the public are greatly interested in but rarely, if ever, enter. In this respect, as in others, the normal, day-to-day operations of the police put them in a position to provide nuanced, ground-level information on subjects of great public interest.

The second advantage to police flows naturally from the first: Police have more time to process and publish information on social media without losing the public's attention. That is, police do not need to be the first to "break" a story in order to capture the most attention.

Speed can be important when releasing information on social media. In the absence of information from a reliable source, inaccurate or misleading information can circulate rapidly on social media. However, because the police department is the source of information, it maintains an advantage in reliability and trust — assuming, again, it has worked over the years to maintain the community's trust. Commercial media outlets, under pressure for ratings, often move extremely rapidly in an effort to be the first to break a story. A police department that has earned the public's confidence must still move swiftly with information, but is afforded a reasonable amount of time to shape and verify information before releasing it and will still have the upper hand in shaping the story.

During the marathon bombing investigation, traditional news media, facing intense competitive pressures, made significant errors.[46] Using social media, the police were able to correct the mistaken reports quickly and convincingly. CNN erroneously tweeted that an arrest had been made early in the investigation, and that report saw about 1,400 retweets. About 20 minutes later, a police tweet with accurate information — "there has not been an arrest" — had nearly 11,000 retweets in a matter of minutes.

Later, when an arrest was actually made, commercial news outlets again took to Twitter with the report. A local news network in New England had about 150 retweets of the message. CNN's tweet of the same information had about 2,000 retweets. The impact of those reports seems minuscule compared to the 140,000 retweets of BPD's original posting.[47] By the time the surviving suspect was arrested, it was clear that the public was listening much more intently to police accounts than to the commercial news media, regardless of who broke the story first.

The Power of Conversation

Publishing can be extremely powerful, but it only works in one direction. Social media work in two, three, or a thousand directions at once. The power of publication is only part of what social media can do for policing — and it is the lesser part. The more important part is the power of conversation. Social media are about conversation, and the social media audience is sensitive to any interactions that do not feel genuine.

When BPD began using Twitter, it saw social media as a way to send out press releases so that the public received the information at the same time as news organizations. In other words, BPD saw Twitter simply in terms of the power of publication — a means for broadcasting information widely and rapidly.

However, the department quickly learned that social media are networked forms of communication. Members of the public react to the information they receive, provide rapid feedback, and add their own thoughts and impressions to messages available to others. The dissemination of information in this way is distinct from simply broadcasting.

Social media's potential benefits to policing go far beyond the ability to notify and to broadcast. Social media allow police to engage in open dialogue with the communities they serve in an instantaneous, networked manner. Social media also allow departments to build relationships with the public that provide benefits — not only in a crisis such as the marathon bombings but also in the day-to-day work of fighting crime, reducing fear and improving the quality of life.

Social media should not be used primarily as an exercise in public relations but as an extension of community policing. They can enhance and build on community policing principles, allowing police to reach and engage people who do not attend community meetings or other traditional venues through which police have sought to listen to and partner with the community. They

can allow police to interact with citizens much more rapidly than was previously possible, and they can offer both police officers and citizens the opportunity to join in ongoing conversations not limited by physical location.

One of the key lessons of community policing is that effective partnership with the community requires the police not only to talk but also to listen, and social media offer the police such a platform. During the Occupy protests, for example, BPD used social media to monitor and engage with protesters so police could gauge the crowd's intent and adjust tactics in real time. More importantly, police officers were able to engage in dialogue with the protesters. Social media allowed officers to address protesters in a direct and personal way that would be impossible through news media. They allowed police to communicate with the public about their intentions and to assure protesters that police would seek to relocate the protest rather than end it. Social media also allowed the police to listen, and to be *seen* as listening, to the concerns of protesters and the public throughout the process.

Advantages of conversation. In this area, police enjoy certain natural advantages. As with publication, making full use of these advantages may require shifts in police culture, but these shifts may also be seen as a return to fundamental principles rather than the adoption of new norms.

The first natural advantage, one that is not yet fully realized, is that police can adopt a much more genuine tone of engagement. As noted earlier, social media public relations efforts can easily fall flat if they do not sound genuine or sincere. This is a significant challenge for corporate marketing. Efforts of that nature must, by definition, have an agenda that goes beyond sincere relationship building — the goal is to sell a product. The underlying motive of profit is ever-present, always preventing genuine conversation.

Police, on the other hand, "don't have to sound like [they] are trying to sell me something, because unlike so many other entities on social media today, [they] actually aren't."[48] Policing is (or should be) rooted in public service. The end is not about securing revenue but rather providing a service to society, although often the police seek to provide that service in part through influencing public behavior. This creates the opportunity for dialogue that is more about sincerity than about marketing spin.

This is, however, an opportunity that may be overlooked by parts of law enforcement today. Sincere relationship building is a foundation of community policing. Yet many law enforcement agencies have adopted a culture of silence and have overly guarded information, which forces an unnaturally bureaucratic tone to communications through any media. Police leaders at times recognize that this is not best suited to true community partnership. Hence the important advantage in building genuine engagement.

A corporate entity that tries to take on a genuine, human tone finds itself out of its element. A police

department that does the same may find it is, in fact, shedding a burden that conflicts with the foundations of the profession. Law enforcement leaders should recognize this opportunity to lower some of the walls that inhibit genuine dialogue.

The second advantage, once again flowing from the first, is that police departments (particularly those that already embrace the principles of community policing) may find it easier to determine what they want to gain from social media engagement and how to measure it. Even as police move into a networked age, their activities will still be derived from a basic core mission — one that already includes elements of engagement, information, communication and public cooperation. This was true even after the marathon bombings and is evidenced by how quickly the call came out from leadership at the scene to begin using social media to inform the public.[49]

Learning to measure success on social media will be a major challenge and is discussed in the following section. However, police may adapt more naturally than corporate or commercial entities. Those organizations will struggle to adapt return on investment, added-value measures, click-through rates and other marketing techniques that may prove ill-suited to sincere engagement. Police, on the other hand, may find metrics derived from a core mission that already includes public engagement and, with some effort, conform them to social media.

Challenges for the Police in Using Social Media

Although social media offer important opportunities to the police, taking advantage of such opportunities will also present the police with significant challenges. This section discusses one of these challenges in detail — one that arose during the marathon bombing investigation — and briefly mentions four others.

Monitoring and Managing Public Information

Because of the networked nature of social media, any information the police release through this means can quickly be reshaped or put to new uses by anyone participating in the network. This is the flipside of the ability that social media give the police to speak directly to the public. Social media can operate like an amplified, multidirectional version of the old game of "telephone" to produce distorted information, a fact that police must keep in mind. The misidentification of Sunil Tripathi as a suspect in the marathon bombing illustrated this danger.[50]

This presents an interesting dilemma — both a hazard to be aware of when releasing information and a powerful and untapped opportunity. The hazard comes in the form of information being misused and distorted through public sleuthing. The opportunity lies in the potential to leverage social media to enlist public assistance in a police investigation, or indeed in any police operation. The police have long used wanted posters, public alerts and traditional news channels to get the

public involved in criminal investigations — but only when and to the extent that the police thought public involvement would be helpful. Social media offer the police new and powerful ways to enlist the public's assistance, but they are also far more challenging to manage. The police cannot shut down social media discussions of fast-moving investigations, nor should they want to do so even if they could. However, the police need to be aware of how the public may use the information they release; in appropriate cases, the police may need to intervene to correct false, misleading or irresponsible use of the information they have provided.

Tone

In many ways, the informal tone of social media is well-suited to bringing community policing into the 21st century. Using social media, police can speak with the public casually — but not unprofessionally — in a way that invites cooperative dialogue across a broad section of the community, including young adults who may not have engaged meaningfully with the police in the past. Over the years, however, many police departments have grown accustomed to bureaucratic ways of speaking, both internally and in communications with the public. Effective use of social media will require breaking those habits.

Careful use of humor can be an important and effective way to set the right tone. When BPD's website was attacked by the "hacktivist" group Anonymous, for example, the department released a widely praised, satirical video[51] on YouTube that made light of the situation — while at the same time underscoring the department's commitment to keeping lines of communication with the community open and publicizing the many channels through which the public could access information from the department, even when the website was down.[52] Within days, the video had been viewed more than 150,000 times.[53]

Similarly, the Toronto Police Service was mocked on Twitter with a photograph of an unauthorized sign warning motorists about an upcoming speed trap. Instead of responding with anger or by threatening arrest, as might have been the response elsewhere,[54] the department took the matter in stride, retweeting the image and commenting "That's a win for us. People will slow down!"[55]

Internal Coordination and Control

Social media allow both individuals and organizations to contribute content. Police departments need to consider not only their use of social media as organizations but also the use of individual social media accounts maintained by line officers, supervisors and command staff.

In Boston, a trained communications manager oversaw the police department's Twitter and Facebook activity throughout the marathon bombing investigation. To keep accurate and relevant information flowing smoothly, the Media Relations Office had great leeway in deciding what to publish as well as a high degree of access to the command teams of the agencies involved.

As part of BPD's Tweet from the Beat program, the department's superintendents have their own Twitter accounts. However, in the days following the marathon bombings, a deliberate decision was made to silence those accounts so that the department would be speaking with one voice.

The BPD commissioner maintains his own Twitter account. This account sees less traffic than the department's official Twitter feed; however, the public interacts more with this account than with the department's because of its pseudo-personal nature. During the marathon bombing investigation, it was used for some of the most critical messages, including disseminating the photographs of the suspect at large.

Social media accounts maintained by line officers raise 21st-century versions of longstanding questions about maintaining the image and integrity of the police while allowing officers to have personal lives. A growing number of departments have promulgated rules regarding how officers should present themselves in social media.[56]

Measuring What Matters

Social media are easily measured — maybe too easily. At the end of the day, a user has a concise tally of followers and retweets, fans and "likes," views and subscribers, and total impressions made that day. It is simple to compare the numbers compiled by different departments.[57] It can be tempting to build a social media strategy that focuses on numbers alone and that judges its success solely in terms of these numbers.

This strategy should be avoided. If social media are seen — as they should be seen — as a way for police to extend their efforts at community policing, it should be clear that simple statistics quantifying the amount of contact with the community and crudely measuring public response can tell the police only so much. Tallies of retweets, followers, views and subscribers are measures of process, not outcomes, and one of the most important lessons of community policing is to focus on outcomes — improvements in community safety, confidence and vibrancy — not simply or even primarily on process.[58] Ultimately, the question should not be how extensively, visibly or artfully the police use social media; the question should be how effectively the police are making use of social media, and all of the other tools at their disposal, to improve the lives of the people they serve.

Endnotes

1. Bindley, Katherine, "Boston Police Twitter: How Cop Team Tweets Led City from Terror to Joy," *Huffington Post,* April 26, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/04/26/boston-police-twitter-marathon_n_3157472.html.

2. See Bar-tur, Yael, "Boston Police Schooled Us All on Social Media," *Mashable,* April 22, 2013, http://mashable.com/2013/04/22/boston-police-social-media.

3. See, for example, Manning, Peter K., *The Technology of Policing: Crime Mapping, Information Technology, and the Rationality of Crime Control,* New York: NYU Press, 2011;

Miller, Susan L., *Gender and Community Policing: Walking the Talk,* Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1999; and Muir, William Ker Jr., *Police: Streetcorner Politicians,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1979.

4. "Web 2.0" is a term commonly used to describe changes in the way information moves on the Internet. It has moved away from the static-display Web pages of the early Internet toward platforms for rapidly updated, user-generated content such as social media, blogs and video sharing. For more information, see, for example, O'Reilly, Tim, "What Is Web 2.0: Design Patterns and Business Models for the Next Generation of Software," http://oreilly.com/web2/archive/what-is-web-20.html.

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6. Numbers throughout this paper that represent certain online metrics, such as the number of likes, shares or retweets received, or the number of agencies present on social media, may change frequently and are accurate as of December 2013.

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8. See, for example, Lee, David, and Shane Witnov, *Handbook on Conducting Research on Social-Networking Websites in California,* Berkeley, CA: University of California, Berkeley, School of Law, Samuelson Law, Technology & Public Policy Clinic, 2008, http://www.law.berkeley.edu/files/Social_Networking_Website_Research-Handbook.pdf.

9. See Jasper, Todd, "Boston Police Commander: I need somebody up there to get on social media … ," Blog post, April 17, 2013, http://toddjasper.com/2013/04/17/boston-police-commander-i-need-somebody-up-there-to-get-on-social-media.

10. Boston Police Dept. [@bostonpolice]. (2013, April 15). Boston Police confirming explosion at marathon finish line with injuries: #tweetfromthebeat via @CherylFiandaca [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/bostonpolice/status/323883302899564544.

11. For example, "Please clear area around marathon finish line," "Boston Police looking for video of the finish line," "BPD asking for tips," "BPD asking people not to congregate in large crowds," "Community members wanting 2 assist this investigation anonymously can call the BPD's Crime Stoppers Tip Line @ 1 (800) 494-TIPS," "BPD asking people to be on heightened state of alert," "MEDIA ADVISORY: The BPD is directing media outlets to park live trucks on Arlington St between Beacon & Boylston Streets."

12. For example, "News conference in 15 minutes Westin Hotel," "Police stabilizing situation — checking packages," "Area around crime scene will be closed for the foreseeable future," "Family members looking for info relative to individuals

injured during the incident are encouraged to call (617) 635-4500."

13. For example, "Commissioner Davis: 'I offer my sympathies to the families impacted by this horrible tragedy. Those responsible will be brought to justice.'" "Commissioner Davis: 'The BPD is on high alert. All sworn personnel working around the clock. 12 hour shifts in effect. Days off cancelled.'"

14. Boston Police Dept. [@bostonpolice]. (2013, April 15). Update 23 injuries 2 dead: #tweetfromthebeat via @CherylFiandaca [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/bostonpolice/status/323890086792019968.

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18. See, for example, Wemple, Erik, "New York Post: 12 still dead in bombings that killed at least 3," *Washington Post,* April 16, 2013, http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/erik-wemple/wp/2013/04/16/new-york-post-12-still-dead-in-bombings-that-killed-at-least-3/.

19. See note 1.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid.

22. Ibid.

23. CNN [@CNN]. (2013, April 17). Suspect arrested in Boston terror attack, source says [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/CNN/status/324582648624328704.

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26. CNN Breaking News [@cnnbrk]. (2013, April 17). DOJ and Boston PD: No arrest has been made in #Boston bombings [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/cnnbrk/status/324593940223385600.

27. See Fitzpatrick, Alex, "Reddit Scours Photos in Search of Boston Bombing Suspects," *Mashable,* April 17, 2013, http://mashable.com/2013/04/17/reddit-finding-boston-bomber.

28. See, for example, "How Reddit and Twitter got it wrong and made life worse for a missing kid's family," http://www.unlikelywords.com/2013/04/19/how-reddit-and-twitter-got-it-wrong-and-made-life-worse-for-a-missing-kids-family.

29. See Madrigal, Alexis, "It Wasn't Sunil Tripathi: The Anatomy of a Misinformation Disaster," *The Atlantic,* April 19, 2013, http://www.theatlantic.com/technology/archive/2013/04/-bostonbombing-the-anatomy-of-a-misinformation-disaster/275155/. The same tweet also misidentified Mike Mulugeta as suspect #1 based on a misunderstanding of a police radio broadcast. See Ibid.

30. Edward Davis [@EdDavis3]. (2013, April 19). One suspect dead. One at large. Armed and dangerous. White hat suspect at large. [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/EdDavis3/status/325157562955751424.

31. Boston Police Dept. [@bostonpolice]. (2013, April 19). #MediaAlert: WARNING – Do Not Compromise Officer Safety/Tactics by Broadcasting Live Video of Officers While Approaching Search Locations [Tweet]. Retrieved from https://twitter.com/bostonpolice/status/325296472117620736.

32. See note 1.

33. Boston Police Department (Official). (2013, April 16). To all those who have offered words of strength, encouragement and support, we at the Boston Police Department would like to gratefully and humbly state, "We hear you. We thank you. God Bless you all." [Facebook status update]. Retrieved from https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10151424493832685.

34. See Craft, Ryan, "Twitter for Law Enforcement: How @Boston_Police is using GroupTweet & Twitter," GroupTweet Blog, April 17, 2013, http://grouptweet.com/blog/twitter-tip-how-boston_police-and-other-law-enforcement-agencies-are-using-grouptweet.

35. For example, "Roxbury Presbyterian Urban Earth Day," "Quincy school students perform at city council chamber," "Jamie Kenneally and I at the promotion today with 'Boston's Finest,'" "I might have to transfer some taller guys into the gang unit" (with a picture of a basketball game), and "Snowy shout-out to you Fantastic Bostonians. You guys have been great!! Thank You!"

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Networking Sites and Our Lives, Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, June 16, 2011, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Technology-and-social-networks.aspx.

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40. Ibid., p. 11.

41. See note 37, and as compared to available census data.

42. See Zickuhr, Kathryn, and Mary Madden, *Older Adults and Internet Use,* Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, June 6, 2012, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Older-adults-and-internet-use.aspx.

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44. See Rosenstiel, Tom, Amy Mitchell, Kristen Purcell, and Lee Rainie, *How People Learn About Their Local Community,* Washington, DC: Pew Internet & American Life Project, Sept. 26, 2011, http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2011/Local-news.aspx.

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50. See note 29 and Kang, Jay Caspian, "Should Reddit Be Blamed for the Spreading of a Smear?," *New York Times Magazine,* July 28, 2013, p. 36.

51. See "The Boston Police Virtual Community," http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ILhiW76B3H8.

52. See, for example, Condliffe, Jamie, "Boston Police Department's Response to Anonymous is Hilarious," *Gizmodo,* Feb. 13, 2012, http://gizmodo.com/5884549/boston-police-departments-response-to-anonymous-is-hilarious; and Murphy, David, "Video: Boston Police Fight

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55. Modified from the original tweet, which is no longer available publicly due to the length of time that has elapsed since the original posting.

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