



Washington Association of **SHERIFFS & POLICE CHIEFS**

Understanding 21st Century Media

The relationship between the police and the media is complex, multidimensional, and contingent. Since the development of modern-day policing, the police and the media have interacted with one another in some way, shape, or form. The relationship has often been described as symbiotic and can be characterized as ebbing and flowing in terms of the power dynamics that exist.

For the police, the media present a powerful opportunity to communicate with the public about crime threats and events, as well as police successes. For the media, crime events make up a significant portion of media content, and access to police sources assists journalists in constructing such content.

The increasing professionalization of police media communications activities has further challenged the nature and scope of the police–media relationship. Not only has the relationship become more formalized, driven by police policies and practices that are concerned with managing the media, but it has also been challenged by the very nature of the media.

How the public gets their news has changed¹:

- More than 80 percent get news from screen, online or radio and 66 percent prefer to watch news rather than read it.
- Local news is still trusted over national news.
- Only 34 percent trust social media news but 69 percent get news from people they are close with – not directly from media (FB, Twitter postings)

How the media has changed²:

- 60 percent of all newspaper jobs have vanished since 1992
- Digital ad spending now 65 percent of media outlet revenue
- 24/7 news cycle requires constant updates
- Reporting doesn't pay - reporters incentivized by how many "clicks" their stories get online

Changes to the media landscape have presented police organizations with a unique opportunity to become media organizations in their own right. The rise of social media has served to broaden the ways in which the police engage with the public in the pursuit of trust, confidence, and legitimacy; however, this has also opened the police up to increasing scrutiny as citizen journalism challenge the preferred police image.³

In the digital age, information is disseminated at such a speed that by the time the truth comes out, an inaccuracy can already have spread halfway around the world. With the attention on law enforcement from both the media and the public at unprecedented levels, police departments need to face the reality that if they are not quick to provide information, those who seek it will find it elsewhere.

¹ Pew Research Center

² Ibid

³ Police Media and Popular Culture, 2017

The rise of social media and the camera phone has democratized reporting. Media coverage of police incidents can often have an impact so powerful that they instantly elicit reaction — even by a single frame of a video. These stories and others like them begin on social media and spread like wildfire before being picked up by traditional news outlets. Given this, agencies cannot afford to lag behind on coverage when their department is suddenly in the spotlight.⁴

Law Enforcement Media Relations Policies

Every law enforcement agency should have up-to-date, legally defensible policies that guide everything from Use of Force to Vehicle Pursuits and a specific media relations policy. The most frequently used policy template in Washington is the Lexipol Policy 324. It contains the basic policies for Responsibilities, Media Requests, Media Access, Providing Advance Information, Scope of Information Release and Restricted Information. Additional policies for Department Use of Social Media and Employee Speech, Expression and Social Networking are also critical to ensure consistent adherence to department protocols are understood and enforced.

Coordinated Public Agency Communications

Most law enforcement agencies have Public Information Officers who handle the day-to-day responsibilities of responding to media inquiries, posting information on social media and coordinating proactive media outreach. In addition, many other local governmental agencies (city hall, fire department, port district, health department, etc.) have PIOs. Much like every community has an Emergency Management System that creates a framework to reduce vulnerability to hazards and cope with disasters, a best practice for inter-agency coordination is to encourage PIOs stay in regular communication and conduct training events to anticipate joint communication in both good and bad times.

The direct benefit of this type of multi-agency PIO group is its ability to work with the key principles (police chief, mayor, fire chief) on coordinating messaging, practice sessions in advance of news conferences and continuity in social media outreach.

⁴ Policeone.com