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Police use of social media during a crisis

Robert Lamberti★

Humber Institute of Techology and Advanced Learning, Toronto (Ontario)

A R T I C L E I N F O	A B S T R A C T
	This study uses in-depth interviews with ten police person-ell, including civilians and officers, all involved in communications, to examine how social media was used during crises faced by six police services in Ontario, Alberta, and New Brunswick. The findings suggest that most of the crisis communications plans contained guidelines of timeliness, accuracy, and cooperation, focusing on the goal of the operation, rather than checklists. The research also looks at how the two-way symmetrical communications model alters during a crisis and whether checklists of functions are applicable to a crisis.

People posted more than 20,000 tweets using the hash tag #vincennes within an hour of the shootings during the January 2015 hostage-taking in a Parisian kosher supermarket. The following message from Paris police was retweeted more than 1,400 times: "Avoid the area of #Vincennes Thanks #AlerteAttentat" (Robb, Alexandra, Macfarlane, Lewis, & Fowler, 2015). Authorities now send social media messages to the public as part of their crisis response; the communications department is now as important to keeping people safe as the police's tactical response. This demonstrates how social media has reshaped the way people communicate with each-other as well as how organizations communicate with the public and vice-versa.

During pre-crisis periods, social media is used in part by organizations to develop meaningful and mutually-beneficial relationships with their publics. Police services in Canada have been developing social media policies to reach the people they serve, with much of the effort focused on building and maintaining relationships with the public (Model Policy, 2010; MacNeil, 2014). A basic social

★*Corresponding author (Robert Lamberti)*
Email: lamberti@cogeco.ca

media policy model was developed by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (Model Policy, 2010), an umbrella organization based in the U.S. that its Canadian counterpart holds membership in. Many police services are also using social media to apprehend suspects of criminal acts (Keenan, Diedrich and Martin, 2013). Social media is also used during crises, where people rely on the speed of social media for information, direction, and contact. Mersham (2010) notes the changing parameters of communications in his study of emergency management during a 2009 tsunami threat to New Zealand:

> Public attention paid to the traditional mass media and their largely unidirectional channels of delivery is falling and is being replaced by an inclusive mix of instant and ubiquitous two-way communication, dialogue and public discourse, reinvented in social media as "the conversation." (p. 141)

People communicate with each other using platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, exchanging text, audio, pictures, and video to various communities and individuals. All of this communication is increasingly taking place on mobile devices. Social media also allows government agencies to reach their publics. Veil, Buehner, and Palenchar (2011) cite the position held by Rand and Rodriguez (2007) that public relations is about building mutually beneficial relationships, a purpose central to social media practice. Relationships made in pre-crisis times become conduits of information during crises. Wendling, Radisch, and Jacobzone (2013) propose using social media accurately and in a timely fashion during times of uncertainty can alleviate fear and concern.

Research questions

Social media is now part of the daily routine of many, since it is used by at least 70% of Canadians of whom more than 65% use it several times a day (Sévigny & Scholz, 2016). Beyond communicating with family, friends, business associates, and arguing with strangers about politics and religion, there must be a definitive role for social media when a crisis hits a community. This is particularly important for police services, who require a means of informing and engaging in two-way communication with the public during crises. This study adds to an emerging body of literature on the use of social media by police during crises. Much of the existing literature is focused on emergency-

management by authorities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in general. This study focuses on police use of social media in a crisis.

RQ 1: Can common guiding principles for managing communication risks during a crisis be identified among police services in Canada? If not, what should they be?

RQ 2: Do police services have established social media policy? Do they have separate policy for social media during a crisis? Are there best practices for communicators using social media during a crisis?

RQ 3: How are the reputations of police services considered and applied in their crisis policies?

RQ 4: What kind of dialog is created and sustained between police and their publics by social media during a crisis?

RQ 5: Do specific crises affect change to the police services' social media strategies? Do their social media strategies apply to the elements of each unique crisis?

Two other issues became apparent in the course of this research: (i) whether communications specialists have a seat at the police services' leadership table and are instrumental in developing communications strategy as social media becomes more pervasive, and (ii) whether social media communication strategies diminish the role of the news media during a crisis.

Literature Review

The Institute for Crisis Management defines crisis as a disruption that creates extensive news media coverage, heightens public attention, and disrupts an organization's normal business routines (Irvine, 1997). Barton (1993) defines crisis as a significant and unpredictable event that can adversely affect an entity "and its employees, products, services, financial condition, and reputation" (p. 2). Coombs (2007) argues that crisis involves sudden and unexpected events that threaten to disrupt an organization's operations and pose financial and reputational threats, affecting stakeholders physically or emotionally.

Freberg, Saling, Vidoloff, and Eosco (2013) argue that reputational management is an important component of any organizational crisis communications strategy: "Reputation management in the private sector often focuses on consumer sales; the public sector focuses on credibility" (p. 186), and reputations are diminished if publics determine a crisis response strategy to be ineffective or incompetent. The CDC's Reynolds and Seeger (2005) suggest effective crisis communications occur when public relations professionals use their "efforts to strategically manage and frame public perceptions of an event so that harm is reduced for both the organization and stakeholders" (as cited in Freberg et al., 2013, p. 186).

In the Queensland Police Service's study of their response to the 2011 floods in Queensland, Australia, they found that one benefit of using social media during a disaster was the control of information by police services, which enhanced reputation, timeliness, accuracy, and transparency. Ownership of information had several benefits: ensuring there was no vacuum of official information; an enhancing reputation by making police services the go-to source for information; using owned-media without media filtering; stemming rumours; and offering a platform for quick interaction (QPS, 2011).

Davis III, Alves, and Sklansky, (2014) argue that the function of speed in social media is integral to quickly reaching the population. The communication model envisioned by Davis III et al. (2014) is in essence Grunig's two-way symmetrical model of public relations, developed as part of the Excellence model he crafted with collaborators, which proposes using research, dialogue, listening, and interactive communications to manage conflicts and develop relations (Grunig and Hunt, 1984; Grunig, 2009).

 Grunig designed this model for public relations, but it is also a communications model capable of issuing life-saving and right-to-know information that can have residual benefits for an organization's reputation management (Freberg et al., 2012). Grunig and Hunt (1984) argue that the model requires the development of the Excellence model of public relations, where collaboration is a key value in ethical decision-making. Without acknowledging Grunig and Hunt, Davis III et al. (2014) say it is the key communications model for police to use, as "… they join – for better or worse – an ongoing, multidirectional conversation that can have hundreds or thousands of participants at any given time" (p. 8).

Weldon (2011) argues that managing social media among police should not be confined to specific personnel to satisfy organizational hierarchies. "Instead, find someone who 'gets' social media, and will serve as a knowledgeable and responsible voice to your community" (Weldon, 2011, p. 1). Her find-

ing reflects that of the Queensland Police (QPS, 2011), which recommends a streamlined clearance procedure, demonstrating trust in the lower-ranking staff (p. vii).

Lukaszewski (1999) suggests that the communication response is the most difficult aspect of crisis management. He argues negative outcomes are possible if the communications function fails to meet community expectations. There are seven dimensions of crisis communication management in his research: operations, victims, trust and credibility, behaviour, professional expectations, ethics, and lessons learned. Those dimensions should acknowledge problems, ease pain, restore confidence, rebuild relationships, and reduce media coverage (p. 3). Complicating the process, Lukaszewski (1999) suggests that victims designate themselves and decide when they no longer are victims. Communicators should acknowledge victim expectations and emotions — such as anger, disbelief, agony, and desire for help — and respond to them. Trust and credibility reflect the organization's reputation and are enhanced by consistency. "When past behaviors have been good and helpful, and current behaviors don't match those expectations, there's a loss of credibility. trust is the absence of fear" (Lukaszewski, 1999, p. 9).

The following are best practices by Veil et al. (2011) for incorporating social media in crisis communication (pp. 111-112):

Establishing crisis policies where communications personnel are part of the decision-making process. Communications should be involved in identifying and managing risk. They should also be involved in the on-going education of the public. It is important to have crisis communications policies — outlines of how the organization will communicate with the public during a crisis — in place before a crisis hits.

Planning for crises with regular revisions. Updating procedures, manuals, and contact lists; developing relationships with stakeholders that can be relied on during a crisis; and preparing dark websites to share information during a crisis.

Developing partnerships with the public. The public has a right to know about the risks they face. Sharing information with them can ease their concern.

Communicating honestly and openly. This helps ensure that the public doesn't turn to other sources of information, but Veil et al. (2011) argue that

once an organization is no longer considered trustworthy, it loses control.

Collaborating and coordinating with credible sources. Seek out and develop relationships with experts who will share accurate information during a crisis.

Meeting the needs of media. The public often turns to media outlets for information about a crisis. Crisis communicators should continuously update the media with accurate information. They should make themselves accessible to media.

Communicating with compassion and empathy. Crisis spokespersons should show concern and empathy in their messaging, as people respond well to spokespersons who appear concerned.

Accepting uncertainty and ambiguity. Waiting to understand all the issues of a crisis before sending messages could put people at risk. Share information that is known while acknowledging that the crisis is developing and that information could change as events unfold.

Providing messages recommending actions clearly consistently, and explaining why. Actions promoting self-efficacy allows stakeholders to play a role — volunteering, donating ,or avoiding actions — in alleviating the affects of a crisis.

Accounting for cultural differences. Identify and use social media platforms that are popular among various ethnic groups, social classes, and demographic groups.

Covello (2003) argues crisis communication plans require a checklist of best practices. They include having stakeholders as legitimate partners; revealing risk information as soon as possible; releasing too much information rather than too little information to keep the public from believing the organization is hiding something; offering to quickly answer questions; correcting errors; listening to concerns, feelings, and issues; being truthful; and discussing strengths and uncertain information while avoiding speculation, exaggeration, or minimizing.

The community has a role in the crisis response, and social media is now its communications system. Those involved use the social media communities in which they are engaged to express concerns and seek information (Scherp,

Schwagereit, Ireson, Lanfranchi, Papadopoulos, Kritikos, Kopatsiaris, & Smrs, 2009, p. 3).

Reynolds (2005) suggests the CDC's experience shows that perceptions by media, stakeholders, and partners were influenced not by the responders' work but by the speed and consistency of their communications. Empathy in particular shows that the organization understands the emotional suffering of others, allowing them to relate to people as individuals rather than statistics or victims. Empathy must be expressed in the first 30 seconds of a message, or efforts to reach people are lost; "a sincere expression of empathy early in your communication will allow people to settle down the noise in their minds and actually hear what you have to say" (Reynolds, 2005, p. 50).

Methodology

This study[1] employed semi-structured interviews of police officers and civilian employees of police services who use social media or have formulated policy for the use of social media. The basic construct of the interview involved open-ended questions. Initially, the study intended to ask five basic research questions, with short follow-up questions used to expand or clarify an answer. Ten interviews representing six Canadian police services were conducted between November 2014 and February 2015 either in person or by telephone.[2] The following is a list of respondents:

- **Mark Pugash**, Director of Corporate Communications for Toronto Police Service (M. Pugash, personal communication, December 19, 2014)
- **Meaghan Gray**, Information and Issues Management Section Head for Toronto Police Service (M. Gray, personal communication, December 19, 2014)
- **Kathleen Griffin**, Manager of Corporate Communications with York Regional Police (K. Griffin, personal communication, December 5, 2014)
- **Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith**, Supervisor of Corporate Communications with York Regional Police (S. Mackenzie-Smith, personal communication, December 5, 2014)
- Digital Communications Unit Constable **Mark Smith** of the Calgary Police Service (M. Smith, personal communication, January 13, 2015)

1. The McMaster University Research Ethics Board vetted the recruitment protocol in MREB certificate 2014 202, the questions posed to respondents, and data collection and storage methods in Fall 2014. Copies of the interview guides are available from the author.
2. All respondents agreed to be identified.

- **Paul Greene**, Director of Strategic Communications with the RCMP J Division in New Brunswick (P. Greene, personal communication, January 5, 2015)
- Chief **Glenn De Caire** of the Hamilton Police Service (G. De Caire, personal communication, February 6, 2015)
- **Catherine Martin**, Corporate Communicator, Hamilton Police Service (C. Martin, personal communication, February 6, 2015)
- Constable **Stephen Welton**, Media Relations Officer, Hamilton Police Service (S. Welton, personal communication, February 6, 2015)
- Inspector **Vince Wurfel**, Field Operations, Owen Sound Police Service (V. Wurfel, personal communication, February 17, 2015)

Wurfel, De Caire, Welton, and Smith are officers. The other interviewees are civilian members of their respective police services.

Findings

Paul Greene, director of strategic communications with the RCMP J Division in New Brunswick, says his introduction to social media crisis communications was a "baptism of fire." Three RCMP officers were shot dead and two others were wounded while responding to a gun call on June 4, 2014, in Moncton, N.B. As the RCMP mobilized to find a killer, its social media was given a specific function: "What's the number one goal right now? It's to find the shooter." According to Greene, social media was also used to satisfy the needs of a fearful public and a demanding media. Messages were reinforced every 30 minutes or so, even if it was the same message. Greene says that this tactic was effective because a segment of the community was locked down. "Because there's people locked in their basements, there's kids, there's parents who can't make it home, we're the only ones communicating with them. It worked well" (P. Greene, personal communication, January 5, 2015). The service did not receive a complaint. "That says we're letting people know what [we're] up to, what [we're] doing, and why [we're] doing it. That was the goal" (P. Greene, personal communication, January 5, 2015).

Greene says there is no specific RCMP social media crisis strategy, but there is an over-arching crisis communications strategy set by the federal government. He suggests the "to-do list" that emerged includes nothing specific, but rather general principles of accuracy, timeliness, preparation, and carity

in messaging while focusing on the goal. "Every situation is different, but as long as you got the goal, that helps immensely." Greene says that while the media has its purpose, social media tools have the ability to "go around them and quite effectively as well. It's our own outlet… Certainly June 4th advanced that exponentially." Greene also notes that he plays a large role in developing and implementing communications strategy: "It has not always been the case, and in a lot of police [services], that's still not the case... That makes you a heck of a lot more effective" (P. Greene, personal communication, January 5, 2015).

Calgary Constable Mark Smith turned to social media as torrential rains caused the Bow and Elbow Rivers to overflow in June 2013. He says the service had been planning on developing a social media crisis policy before the floods hit the region: "We've always talked about it [developing a crisis social media plan], but when it happened, it was kind of a case of, "Okay now, we have to deal with it" (M. Smith, personal communication, January 13, 2015).

Calgary suffered significant property damage, and about 75,000 people had to be evacuated (Flood Recovery, 2014; Timeline, 2013). Smith argues that the two-way conversation function of social media is a key element in his crisis model. He expects questions and prepares to answer them. Smith says people appreciated the responses, and "we had the time to do it."

For Smith, two key pieces of crisis policy include issuing accurate information and maintaining a two-way "information relay" so people are not left in the dark. He said people feel safer knowing authorities are responding to the crisis and can be reached. "And by us being on social media and responding to the people … that does definitely reduce the fear" (M. Smith, personal communication, January 13, 2015).

Calgary Police didn't develop a written policy after the flood. He believes that checklists restrict communicators and that "a strict policy" could slow down response. It's important for crisis communicators – as well as organizations – to be flexible to adapt to the needs of the crisis. The important take-away Smith recalls was to quickly get involved on social media, even it there no was specific key message, to make the service's presence known.

According to Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith, Supervisor of Corporate Communications, York Regional Police (York) use social media to engage publics through dialogue, provide the service exposure, educate the community on the service's strategic objectives, evaluate the business value and impact of strategies using metrics, and be entertaining. She says York communicators should act professionally, fairly, compassionately, and that they should be informative, timely, educational, inspiring, and occasionally "sarcastic, silly, and humourous." The overarching objective is not to mock others, to degrade

or blame victims, or to ignore difficult or negative topics.

Social media is a tool to facilitate real-time conversations with media and citizens during a crisis, but there is a struggle to provide enough of what is known, which Kathleen Griffin, Manager of Corporate Communications, accepts is "never enough" for people involved in a crisis, and creates a reputational hazard for police: "A big challenge is that vacuum…so who's filling the void? Is it a citizen journalist? Or is it some random citizen with an axe to grind?" (K. Griffin, personal communication, December 5, 2014).

Mackenzie-Smith said police communicators' roles in social media are to offset the shrinking field of journalism[3] and to stifle rumours and conjecture on social media. She argued rumours and conjecture became acutely visible during the Boston Marathon bombings.

Griffin says York is planning a 24-hour operations centre where police can monitor social media for trends that could lead to a crisis. Monitoring could identify detractors and influencers so that police can turn to influencers to share messages during a crisis while countering the negative messages of detractors.

Mackenzie-Smith urges crisis communicators to respond to comments, positive and negative, redirect people to the main crisis site, and cross-promote or share pertinent messages with other social media platforms and partners. Mackenzie-Smith says the crisis toolbox includes contact of persons in other industries or emergency services, dark sites ready for launch, and a list of pre-approved key messages.

Messages should be sent out quickly during a crisis. Mackenzie-Smith says holding statements include messages like "we're aware of the incident;" "we're trying to get as much information as we can;" "please stand by and be patient with us;" "we're dealing with an operational issue right now, and your safety is our primary concern;" and "we will get you more information as soon as possible." At the same time, communicators within police services are working with their counterparts in industries or government agencies with a stake in the developing crisis. Griffin says the biggest single threat to reputation is not responding. If presence is not set in the early stages of a crisis, control of content could be lost.

Mackenzie-Smith and Griffin note that Twitter provides little opportunity for conversations during the crisis. "But in a crisis, (people are) looking for information and we're pushing the information out as best we can. That's

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3. Canadian statistics on job-loss in journalism are elusive. According to the Poynter Institute, the U.S. lost 3,800 full-time editorial jobs in 2014 (Edmonds, 2015), and the layoffs continue. Mackenzie-Smith suggests that communicators are filling in the abandoned community links by supplying information directly to the public.

exactly what it is: What do I do? Where do I go? How can I help?" (S. Mackenzie-Smith, personal communication, December 5, 2014). Mackenzie-Smith and Griffin also argue that a checklist is key to ensuring that crisis communicators can remain functional even when their communities or friends are involved in the crisis.

The role of the communicator has become increasingly more important in York. Its leadership has acknowledged this by expanding the duties of communications personnel. York communicators have pre-arranged approval to send required messaging in what they call the "Scare the Chief Model," which demands that senior police staff trust their crisis communicators. It also diminishes their need for outside media: "Communications used to be media relations. Now it's community relations, and media is slowly being eked out of the equation because we don't need the media to cover our stories" (K. Griffin, personal communication, December 5, 2014).

Mark Pugash, Toronto Police's Director of Corporate Communications, and Meaghan Gray, Information and Issues Management Section Head, say timeliness, accuracy, and cooperation are the three key guiding principles for crisis communicators using social media. Pugash believes experience provides the parameters for crisis communicators with "what you have to do." Both argue that checklists are constricting, while guiding principles are adaptive to the nature of a crisis. According to Gary, it is impossible to develop a list that can address the unique events of each crisis.

Gray says using social media during a crisis is "no different than picking up the phone [as a communications function]" to notify another organization of an incident. Cooperation involves sharing and comparing what each stakeholder will be saying to the public and the media. "Be timely, meaning get out as soon as you can and be timely with your updates, but you need to be accurate in those updates."

Pugash argues the function of crisis communicators remains the same no matter the technology. "Twitter is just a tool. It's a megaphone," he says, although it allows for two-way conversation. "It doesn't change the message, it's just a tool to reach the audience."

Reputation is a significant factor during and after a crisis. Gray says that reputation, while earned, is developed every day in normal relations with the public. "You don't wait for a crisis to say, 'Listen to us,'" she says. It is crucial that police maintain decorum and uphold professionalism during non-crisis periods. At the same time, police are also linking with stakeholders in mock disaster training: "You just can't wait for the emergency to happen to try and build that relationship; it should be ongoing, [and] it's something you work

on every single day" (M. Gray, personal communication, December 19, 2014).

Both argue that there is a greater role for communications experts at the corporate table, exerting greater influence on strategic planning. Gray suggestss there is a greater awareness in the service to incorporate communications expertise into operations and business plans:

> …that strategic communications approach, that issues management approach, the reputation management that comes with that, the recognition that we need to incorporate our partners sometimes into that response… That's what we bring to the table. (M. Gray, personal communication, December 19, 2014)

Hamilton Police's Constable Stephen Welton, Media Relations Officer, sees two groups in policing during a crisis: one expert in social media and the other an expert in operations. He says social media should be used to build relationships and understanding within communities, arguing what was once a social function to connect and converse has now taken on media functions to inform:

> How have you built it to achieve the goals of your organization and how do you use it to accomplish your goals? … Technology fueled with people is our biggest opportunity. (S. Welton, personal communication, February 6, 2015)

He agrees that timeliness, goals, accuracy, honesty, control, and presence are important guidelines in crisis communications, but he argues that there is little to differentiate social media communication pre-crisis from social media communication during a crisis. "It's the same thing. I'm talking to people" (S. Welton, personal communication, February 6, 2015). Honesty involves more than accuracy, in that "sometimes you just got to tell it like is and people will respect that" (S. Welton, personal communication, February 6, 2015). He says that a communicator who admits not knowing something but promises an update is building trusting relationships. Regarding control, Welton is succinct: "If people don't trust me, then I don't really have a job anymore" (S. Welton, personal communication, February 6, 2015). He says the public expects him to tell the truth, to be accurate, to be timely, and to be honest. If the truth changes, "tell them the truth about that, too" (S. Welton, personal communication, February 6, 2015). If the public trusts the information and its source, it allows for commanding the message.

Corporate communicator Catherine Martin of the Hamilton Police Service says that reputation is reflected in every message sent by the service, emphasizing the need to be reliable, accurate, engaging, and timely "so that when there is an issue [crisis], we are considered the source" (C. Martin, personal communication, February 6, 2015). Hamilton Police Services Chief Glenn De Caire said trust and reputation are fragile, and they would be shattered if the service provided inaccurate information.

Martin notes that during a crisis, communications changes from the two-way symmetrical conversation to predominately one-way, or push communications. The two-way symmetrical model reestablishes itself when the crisis abates. She says policy does not change, but crises may reveal weaknesses in techniques or technology. Martin says communicators have a seat at the table where the dominant coalition strategizes. De Caire adds that Welton, who deals with tactical communications, has access to him.

Owen Sound Police Services has roughly 80 employees, including both full-time and part-time officers and civilian employees, and media relations duties are shared between field operations inspector Vince Wurfel and the community service officer. The service uses its Facebook page to post press releases, activity logs, and other official messages with links to its website. The service joined Twitter in October 2010, but as of February 2015 it has not issued a tweet.

Wurfel said the service has no definitive social media policy, primarily due to a lack of resources: "If you're on Twitter, you need to feed the beast, so to speak." He says social media comes under their Computer Systems and Internet Use Policy, and social media is defined "generically" as having a role in sharing information with the public and soliciting tips:

> There's no real meat and potatoes direction, and we really need to either adapt somebody else's policy to our own, or create our own… It's a resource issue, it's a training issue, it's a policy development issue. (V. Wurfel, personal communication, February 17, 2015)

Wurfel does not use social media as vigourously as others, but he agrees that guiding principles include accuracy, timeliness, control, and consistent messaging. However, "you have to be cognizant of what information you're giving out. You need to establish within your own service at what level you are going to interact and respond" (V. Wurfel, personal communication, February 17, 2015).

Wurfel believes that managing information is part of managing risk, as they are focused on minimizing the scope of damage and diminishing publics' fear and uncertainty.

> Our messaging is all about integrity, really. Messaging should be accurate, it should be timely, and state what we're doing or what we're not doing, and if we can't tell you, say you can't... (V. Wurfel, personal communication, February 17, 2015)

He agrees it is important to create that dialogue on social media, because "if they're not there following us for the nicer things, they're not going to think of following us when we need them to or when we want them to."

Wurfel says the service remains reliant on local media, because it does not use social media extensively. Communications are sub-functions shared with a number of officers.

Analysis

Five of the six police services have social media plans that appear to mirror the findings in the research presented in existing literature. For example, Coombs (2007) called for information to alleviate uncertainty, to know what is occurring and what is being done to end the crisis. The aforementioned five services have crafted messages that provide information to enhance public safety.

The study suggests that much has been accomplished through experience and practice rather than applying the findings of scholarly research. The ability to use social media is strongly related to the availability of personnel if the communications function is integral to the service's daily routine and if personnel understand the technology.

Several themes emerged, with the goal/objective of the operation being a central factor, as shown in Diagram 1. Requirements to achieve the goal/objective include the principles of timeliness; accuracy; up-do-date technology; controlling messaging and rumours; cooperation including empathy; ensuring messages do not affect legal and case management needs; and reputation. Two other elements, (i) overarching risk and crisis policy, and (ii) membership in the executive suite, are part of the framework that makes social media crisis communications possible and functional.

The RCMP's Paul Greene emphasizes the goal of the operation as the

focal point of the guiding principles used to determine how and what information is disseminated. He argues that every message put forth by crisis communicators must work towards the goal, whatever it may be, such ending a volatile and dangerous situation or easing a natural event. Hamilton's Stephen Welton agrees that the goal plays a significant role.

Themes of accuracy and timeliness were recurrent in the research interviews. Although the interviewees suggested that those two functions are crucial in crisis communications, most offered a third theme: control. Controlling messages allow services to position themselves as sources of accurate information, stemming rumours and enhancing their reputations. Bar-Tur (2013) notes that the public should have a role in public safety and crime solving, but "an unguided mob will make unfortunate mistakes, which social media then amplifies" (3rd para.).

Toronto's Mark Pugash notes that traditional media "has lost its monopoly" as the source of information and news, while social media allows police communicators to reach their audience directly without media filters and with a significant level of trust in the quality of the information. Communications personnel imply that with owned media, the services are able to better control and frame their message and any ensuing conversations.

All of the respondents said that social media use during pre-crisis engages audiences that are prepared to at least pay attention during a crisis, which could in turn be helpful for sharing "critical information" and controlling rumours.

Greene and Mark Smith say much of what they have learned came from delving headfirst into a crisis. It appears they were able to apply their understanding of the attributes and abilities of social media during crises, and that outcomes appear to be a major influencer in defining how social media will be used in crisis communications in the future.

Research suggests a high level of trust between communicators and the command structure within the organization is crucial for the operation of crisis communications on social media. Messages routinely go through layers of hierarchy for approval before being released to the public. That lengthy approvals process could make crisis communications irrelevant. All of the interviewed communicators argue timeliness in crisis communications is crucial. When responding to the changing nature of a crisis, the expectation is that timely messages should reflect the services' brand, the limitations in law, existing umbrella policy, and reputation.

The respondents say accuracy is crucial in building trust and maintaining and enhancing reputation. If accuracy were not ensured, the public would

not consider police communicators a source of information. Only two inter-viewees specifically used the word "cooperation," but it is still a core element in all of the crisis communicators' descriptions of their functions during a cri-sis event.

Smith created Twitter lists of organizations so residents affected by the crisis, as well as media personnel, would know where to look for official state-ments. York Region is developing standard operating procedures linking various organizations — transportation, major manufacturers, government agencies and organizations, and places of worship — to collaborate on crisis communications and response.

A concern arising in three of the interviews was the quality of the hard-ware police used. Hamilton's Welton argues it is crucial that hardware keeps pace with software. Calgary's Mark Smith and the RCMP's Paul Greene also mentioned that they had technology issues; the equipment they were using could not handle the requirements of the social media, especially in high-us-age times like crises. Both Greene and Smith recall their equipment was up-graded as their specific crises were unfolding, the message being that a crisis is a bad time to discover a hardware problem. Hardware should be upgraded on a regular schedule so that police communications are ready for a crisis when it strikes.

The plans or policies for a crisis — with the exception of York Regional Police — are not as elaborate or as defined as in the existing literature and re-search. They seem to rely more on the experience of the communitor and the clarity of their purpose. While York's Mackenzie-Smith and Griffin have de-veloped detailed procedural outlines, the others adhere to guiding principles, which they say allow them to act based on the unique needs of a particular crisis. Currency in police services, as in other public agencies, is comprised of trust, credibility, and reputation, with the ability to respond quickly while maintaining transparency.

Crisis communications via social media is at the forefront of communi-cations strategy in the services that have separate communications functions and allows its communicators access to the executive table. The lone service in this study that did not have separate communications functions, mostly for staffing reasons, acknowledges it lags behind other services in developing a social media strategy and communications strategy in general.

The pre-crisis elements described by respondents that help develop rela-tionships during a crisis include the following:

Engaging publics in two-way conversation. Routine engagement in two-way conversation among stakeholders and followers helps develop relationships

that can be relied upon during a crisis, so that people will at least listen to the message.

A seat for communications in the corporate boardroom. This aids the development of communications strategies that can be accepted and implemented at all levels of the organization.

Acknowledging the crisis communicator as the first point of contact with community. The crisis communicator is the bridge between the community and the officers in command of teams dealing with a crisis, and it is important that communicators have pre-approval from the organization's leadership to issue key messages during a crisis.

Understanding of reputation during pre-crisis. By identifying detractors, communicators can work to deflect negative influences, while finding supporters/influencers can help disseminate messages to communities.

Preparing contact lists with stakeholders and partners to find out who can provide assistance during a crisis. Also, outline expectations for all agencies to follow during a crisis and if necessary prepare a checklist of duties or suggestions.

Preparing dark sites that can be activated during a crisis. Identify websites or platforms that can be utilized.

The respondents described the following helpful elements of social media communication during a crisis:

Identifying the goal of crisis communication for a particular crisis. Ask the community to help the crisis team reach this goal, such as aiding an arrest, evacuation, or avoidance of an area.

Sending messages to the public as soon as possible after a crisis is determined to ensure safety and possibly quickly resolve the crisis.

Maintain contact with simple holding messages or messages that direct the public to other sites with more information, which could include Facebook pages or dark websites with more complete information and details.

Establishing or incorporating an appropriate and specific hashtag. Use the hashtag consistently to ensure those affected by the crisis receive the messaging.

Ensuring information is accurate, positive, clear, and concise.

Monitoring messages for rumours. Immediately correcting false information. Cooperating with private and public stakeholders involved in crises. Issue consistent, concise information regularly to minimize rumours and misinformation.

Claiming to be the only accurate source of police information and countering inaccurate information with accurate information.

Ensuring all information released complies with legal and case management requirements. Preparing messages to signify the crisis has ended with instructions where more information can be found.

Helpful post-crisis elements as described by the respondents are as follows:

Reviewing procedures to determine if they need refinement. Using analytics and surveys to see if the messages reached the intended audiences.

Assessing the positives and negatives of each platform to determine if any platform fails to reach target audiences.

Assessing new technologies and platforms as they become available and popular among social media users.

The goal – that is, the objective of crisis respondants, such as capturing a suspect or evacuating homes in a flooded area – is at the centre of social media crisis communications, and it is surrounded by other elements whose purpose is to reach the goal. While the broad aim is to restore peace and order, the respondents argue the goal provides the focus of the response and is central to the operation. Police attempt to employ procedural and emotional elements outlined by Reynolds (2005), Coombs (2007), and Lukaszewski (1999), but the objective — the restoration of order — is the focal point of police operations and communications in a crisis.
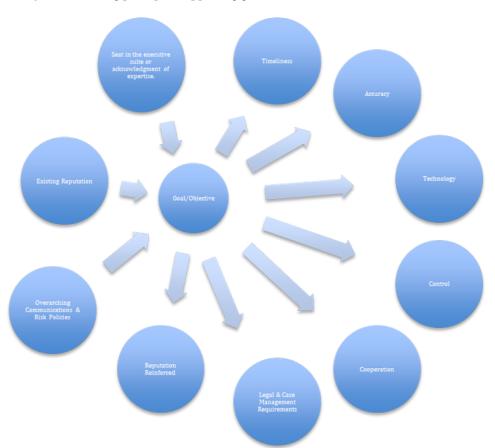
Diagram 1: Guiding principles supporting goal-oriented crisis communications

The use of a checklist appears to be a function of corporate culture. If communicators feel comfortable enough and possess enough expertise to rely on principles of operation rather the minutiae of procedural details, they may not need a checklist. Respondents from York Regional Police represented the only service that relied on a checklist. Others said they preferred not to constrain their response to each unique crisis. In his intensive care research, Atul Gawande (2007) says that checklists provide two primary benefits: they assist in memory recall in mundane routines during a catastrophic event, and they explicitly describe the "minimum, expected steps in complex processes"(Gawande, 2007, p. 13). A lack of effective systemization could put patients at risk: "Excellent clinical care is no longer possible without doctors

and nurses routinely using checklists and other organizational strategies and studying their results" (Gawande, 2007, p 2).

The respondents primarily use Twitter for its speed and Facebook for its ability to provide more than 140 characters' worth of pertinent information at a time. YouTube and Instragram are also used. While guiding principles may be described differently, the services share similar principles of accuracy, timeliness, and cooperation with community, stakeholders, media, and internal staff. Only one respondent enunciated the term "goal" as a guideline, but the concept appears to be an inherent part of communication plans, even if it is not explicitly acknowledged.

The respondents say the elements of crisis communications during an incident include controlling messages related to the police response, meeting the physical and psychological needs of the community, and having the ability to send messages with minimal oversight. However, communicators must also consider future tasks, such as the rigours of case management and pending court proceedings. There is one point that underlines the communicators' role: the communicator should be as independent as possible to meet the needs of the community, but they do not need to work in a vaccuum. They are linked to the elements of the organization responding to a crisis, such as an armed tactical response unit or other specialized teams, and they share the same responsibilities and reputation.

Social media use during crisis and pre-crisis periods differs mostly in tone, frequency of messaging, and the use of two-way communication versus one-way communication. Content changes from relationship-building during pre-crisis to relationship management in the midst of a crisis, in that recipients are being asked to help, listen, and react to messages emphasizing public or personal safety.

Reputation is central to all of the messaging performed by police and is reflected by the willingness of a community to help during a crisis. It affects the service's ability to police their communities and respond to crises. This research suggests that without trust, emergency communicators have no value to the community or the organization; it is difficult to defend a service unless that service has a positive reputation.

The respondents suggest communications is now about community management, creating links, and enhancing the relationship between the service and the community. It is no longer enough to have foot patrol officers – police require cyber officers to engage people, develop advocates and identify detractors who may disrupt messaging during crucial times. Reputation is managed through the guiding principles of timeliness, accuracy, and coop-

eration by engaging the community in a professional manner, which in turn leads to the police being the most reliable source of crisis-related information. Trust and reputation are fragile commodities in policing, and one factual error could prove disastrous in relationship management.

The respondents agree the structure of the conversation changes during a crisis. During non-crisis periods, two-way communication is the norm and part of the relationship building necessary to build engagement and mutual respect. Crisis communication, however, requires police to take control of the conversation and it does change to a primarily one-way model. The immediacy of a crisis demands people listen and discuss only for clarity sake. It is not a hard rule. The potential threat to life appears to be the primary cause of how severely the dialog structure changes.

Limitations and areas of further research

The most significant limitation of this study is its small sample size. It would be ideal to examine how all police services use social media during a crisis. This study focused on larger police services capable of assigning staff to use social media on a consistent or full-time basis with one exception, Owen Sound, a small Central Ontario police service. The findings suggest a follow-up study on the use of social media by smaller services could offer insight into whether they can provide social media and build on the prerequists of cyber-community building without affecting levels of front-line service. It would also be beneficial to sample police services from all provinces to gain a complete national picture, as well as Aboriginal police services.

Further research into the growing necessity of social media to maintain a steady stream of information from police to the media is needed, as many Canadian police services are encrypting their radio transmissions (Otis, 2015). Media had listened in to police airwaves for decades, not needing direct contact between reporters, photographers and police for news coverage of events.

Now that two-way communication between organizations and their publics are becoming more common through social media, it would be produent to research the changing role of journalism, or at least traditional journalism. The public is relying more on non-media communicators to provide information directly to them, a trend that may require either a redefinition or a reaffirmation of the traits of community journalism.

Research into the changing use of social media in crisis communication as the World Wide Web develops into Web 3.0 and beyond is also suggested.

Smith (2009) suggests that Web 3.0 "derives its 'wisdom' from software that learns by looking at online content, analyzes the popularity of that content and draws conclusions. Instead of people refining information and opinion, intelligent software would do the same thing" (p. 2). Much of the research into Web 3.0 appears to be in the fields of branding and marketing, rather than in crisis communication, and it would be interesting to see how intelligent software could apply to crisis communication.

Conclusions

Social media is now an inherent requirement in the communication strategy of an organization, particularly an emergency responder, but maintaining a social media presence is labour-intensive. That intensity is made apparent by the lone small police service in the study, Owen Sound, which cannot afford to reassign a patrol officer to social media functions. Given the findings of this study, the service's leadership must determine whether they can avoid investing the manpower to create a social media presence. Social media in policing requires constant monitoring and quick responses to determine if a crisis is developing, ensure engagement, and counter rumours or false information. In larger urban centres, it is a 24/7 function.

The nature of the crisis determines how social media is used. The usage often appears to be based not on set internal policy but on the concepts of crisis communication, the unique nature of the crisis, experience – even if this means learning on-the-fly – and common sense. Transparency is reflected through acknowledgement and honesty, promises to find out unknown information, immediacy, accuracy, a spirit of cooperation, and showing fairness and empathy. Reputation is reinforced by responding to the incident quickly and effectively, and by demonstrating an ability to deal with the issue, both operationally and with a steady stream of messages to keep the community informed.

A seat at the executive table is the link communicators have to senior personnel pre-crisis, mid-crisis, and post-crisis, ensuring continuity in planning, organizational philosophy, and response capability internally and externally.

Before social media, officers at the scene of a crisis guided people to avoid potential dangers with help from the media. Today, there is still an officer at the scene, but that officer also has the benefit of social media to provide assistance with or without the help of traditional media.

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