Law Enforcement and Public Safety in Cyberspace:

Evaluating the Honolulu Police Department's Social Media Presence

Benjamin T. Moszkowicz

School of Professional and Continuing Education, University of San Diego

LEPS-510: Communication Skills for Law Enforcement Leaders

Professor Kristine Allison

December 7, 2020

Recent world events, combined with the prevalence with which Americans have adapted technology in their everyday lives, underscore how important it is for law enforcement to be able to communicate directly with the public they serve. According to the Pew Research Center, "more than half of U.S. adults get news from social media often or sometimes (55%)" (Shearer & Greico, 2019). To this end, the Honolulu Police Department (HPD) shares information through a website and social media presence.

In November, 2020, the HPD finished a long-overdue redesign of their public website (honolulupd.org) from a primarily text-based site to one in which graphics and photos take center stage. A significant benefit of the new site is that the site administrator and individual department elements can easily update content. The webpage prominently shares links with visitors to the HPD's social medial presence on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube.

An examination of the HPD's four main social media pages show a substantial following. The HPD's Facebook page (honolulu.police) was created on June 15, 2011. New content is posted nearly every day, and the page has earned over 52,000 likes and 57,000 followers. Its Twitter page (honolulupolice) was first used in May 2017. According to the site tweetstats.com, the page averages 73 tweets per month and boasts 21,900 followers. There are 24,700 people following the HPD on Instagram (honolulupolice), where the department has made nearly 3,600 posts. The department has posted just over 400 videos on YouTube (TheHonoluluPD), primarily promotional ceremonies, class graduations, and awards ceremonies. Notably, the department has begun posting HPD's new "Did You Know" segment to all platforms. The video posts, which last 60-90 seconds, promote public awareness of various law enforcement topics

(online shopping scams, holiday safety tips, the importance of hand washing, the penalties for littering from vehicles, etc.).

The themes are highly consistent across most of the various social media platforms to which the HPD posts. This is likely because the content posted to three of the sites (Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) are remarkably similar, if not identical. Even the HPD's webpage has begun being updated with some of the same content. Aside from a section for 'alerts' on the site's front page, the HPD's webpage is maintained as an information repository than an outreach platform.

Patrick (2020), suggests that Twitter can be used to share information quickly. This is especially valuable when police departments are dealing with rapidly developing situations such as those involving large crowds or political protests. During this past summer's Black Lives Matter protests, the HPD used its Twitter account to dispel rumors of the involvement of mainland agitators. It also used Twitter to let the public know when roadways were closed and re-opened again during protest marches and convoys. Further analysis of the HPD's Twitter usage reveals the top five words used in their tweets: "https, #honolulupd, mahalo, closed, open" (Tweetstats, 2020). The prevalence of the third word "mahalo," or 'thank you,' is a significant in Hawaii and represents what the HPD is about culturally.

San Ramon Police Captain Denton Carlson recommends that the photos departments use on social media are attention-grabbing (Fritsvold, 2020). Honolulu is a uniquely beautiful place with one-of-a-kind scenery. The HPD has capitalized on this and posted hundreds of photos of ocean vistas, sunrises, and sailboats.

Despite the HPD's relatively frequent use of its webpage and social media accounts, there remain significant opportunities to improve its information-sharing further. Patrick (2020) recommends developing a FAQ section to more effectively make common questions easily answerable through a department's webpage. A review of the HPD's website found a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section that contains a total of ten questions. While the website contains much more information, an effort should be made to centralize and categorize these links as FAQs.

Another suggestion to enhance the public's experience would to monitor the department's social media accounts continuously. With the implementation of text-to-911 in Honolulu, citizens can already send photos and text messages to dispatchers. Communications Division watch commanders and Supervisory Police Radio Dispatchers should be trained to comb through social media accounts during non-business hours in order to provide emergency assistance when appropriate and prompt responses in non-emergency situations.

As technology advances, and the HPD's new Records Management System is implemented in 2021, efforts should be made via the department's website and social media and to publicize and implement both an online reporting system and a security-camera registry as suggested by Captain Carlson (Fritsvold, 2020).

As Doug Wiley, the Editor-in-Chief of Police One said, "It should be reminded right up front, the internet is forever" (Dudley, 2020). The HPD's efforts to communicate online with the public, while substantial, must continue to evolve to help develop honest, transparent collaboration with the public it serves.

References

Dudley, J. (2020). *How Cops Can Maintain Professionalism on Social Media* [Audio

    podcast]. Policeone.com. Policing Matters. Retrieved from https://ole.sandiego.

    edu/bbcswebdav/pid-2037385-dt-content-rid-27325524_1/xid-27325524_1

Fritsvold, E. (2020). *The tactics of online communication* [Audio podcast]. University of

    San Diego. In LEPS510 Communication Skills for Law Enforcement Leaders.

    Retrieved from https://ole.sandiego.edu/ultra/courses/_ 71736_1/cl/outline

Patrick, W. (2020). Module 6 Presentation: Online Communication – The New Face of

    Public Safety. In LEPS510 Communication Skills for Law Enforcement Leaders.

    Retrieved from https://ole.sandiego.edu/ultra/courses/_ 71736_1/cl/outline

Shearer, E., & Greico, E. (2019). *Americans Are Wary of the Role Social Media Sites*

    Play in Delivering the News. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from:

    https://www.journalism.org/2019/10/02/americans-are-wary-of-the-role-social-

    media-sites-play-in-delivering-the-news/

Tweetstats. (2020). Tweetstats for honolulupolice. Retrieved from: http://www.

    tweetstats.com/graphs/honolulupolice