# NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL

**MONTEREY, CALIFORNIA**

# THESIS

**CRISIS COMMUNICATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT: CRAFTING A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY USING SOCIAL MEDIA**

by

Angela G. Coonce

March 2019

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| REPORT DOCUMENTATION PAGE | | | *Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Public reporting burden for this collection of information is estimated to average 1 hour per response, including the time for reviewing instruction, searching existing data sources, gathering and maintaining the data needed, and completing and reviewing the collection of information. Send comments regarding this burden estimate or any other aspect of this collection of information, including suggestions for reducing this burden, to Washington headquarters Services, Directorate for Information Operations and Reports, 1215 Jefferson Davis Highway, Suite 1204, Arlington, VA 22202-4302, and to the Office of Management and Budget, Paperwork Reduction Project (0704-0188) Washington, DC 20503. | | | |
| **1. AGENCY USE ONLY** ***(Leave blank)*** | **2. REPORT DATE** March 2019 | **3. REPORT TYPE AND DATES COVERED** Master's thesis | |
| **4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE** CRISIS COMMUNICATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT: CRAFTING A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY USING SOCIAL MEDIA | | | **5. FUNDING NUMBERS** |
| **6. AUTHOR(S)** Angela G. Coonce | | | |
| **7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)** Naval Postgraduate School Monterey, CA 93943-5000 | | | **8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER** |
| **9. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(E**S) N/A | | | **10. SPONSORING / MONITORING AGENCY REPORT NUMBER** |
| **11. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES** The views expressed in this thesis are those of the author and do not reflect the official policy or position of the Department of Defense or the U.S. Government. | | | |
| **12a. DISTRIBUTION / AVAILABILITY STATEMENT** Approved for public release. Distribution is unlimited. | | | **12b. DISTRIBUTION CODE** A |

**13. ABSTRACT (maximum 200 words)**

Law enforcement has begun to embrace social media as a communication tool; but, in most cases, agencies have not created strategies around using social media for crisis communication. This thesis focused on identifying smart practices in crisis communication to determine what a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement should look like. The use of force by law enforcement often results in a negative community reaction; this research focused on communication on social media after use of force incidents. An analysis of crisis communication theory and research was conducted. The analysis included situational crisis communication theory, attribution theory, image repair theory, social information processing theory, and social presence theory. An examination was conducted of successful crisis communication strategies used in the private sector, which revealed seven common elements. The commonalities led to the conclusion that law enforcement should establish protocols and create strategies with these elements: conduct regular scenario-based crisis communication training, leverage the young social-media savvy generation that grew up with technology, commonly called “digital natives,” for social media communications, actively monitor social media, with attention not only to content but also to tone and lexicon, ensure timely communication with the public after use of force incidents, and place priority in messaging on qualities, such as honesty and compassion.

| **14. SUBJECT TERMS** crisis communication, social media, crisis communication strategy, use of force, social media policy, law enforcement, social media crisis communication strategy | | | **15. NUMBER OF PAGES** 161 |
|---|---|---|---|
| | | | **16. PRICE CODE** |
| **17. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF REPORT** Unclassified | **18. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF THIS PAGE** Unclassified | **19. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF ABSTRACT** Unclassified | **20. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT** UU |

NSN 7540-01-280-5500 Standard Form 298 (Rev. 2-89) Prescribed by ANSI Std. 239-18

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# CRISIS COMMUNICATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT: CRAFTING A SUCCESSFUL STRATEGY USING SOCIAL MEDIA

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

**MASTER OF ARTS IN SECURITY STUDIES**
**(HOMELAND SECURITY AND DEFENSE)**

from the

**NAVAL POSTGRADUATE SCHOOL**
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# ABSTRACT

Law enforcement has begun to embrace social media as a communication tool; but, in most cases, agencies have not created strategies around using social media for crisis communication. This thesis focused on identifying smart practices in crisis communication to determine what a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement should look like. The use of force by law enforcement often results in a negative community reaction; this research focused on communication on social media after use of force incidents. An analysis of crisis communication theory and research was conducted. The analysis included situational crisis communication theory, attribution theory, image repair theory, social information processing theory, and social presence theory. An examination was conducted of successful crisis communication strategies used in the private sector, which revealed seven common elements. The commonalities led to the conclusion that law enforcement should establish protocols and create strategies with these elements: conduct regular scenario-based crisis communication training, leverage the young social-media savvy generation that grew up with technology, commonly called "digital natives," for social media communications, actively monitor social media, with attention not only to content but also to tone and lexicon, ensure timely communication with the public after use of force incidents, and place priority in messaging on qualities, such as honesty and compassion.

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# LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| CDC | Centers for Disease Control and Prevention |
| CDT | Central Daylight Time |
| CEO | chief executive officer |
| CERC | crisis emergency and risk communication |
| CERN | Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire |
| CMC | computer-mediated communication |
| DHS | Department of Homeland Security |
| DOJ | Department of Justice |
| EDT | Eastern Daylight Time |
| FCC | Federal Communications Commission |
| FOIA | Freedom of Information Act |
| IACP | International Association of the Chiefs of Police |
| IATA | International Air Transport Association |
| LRZ | Leibniz-Rechenzentrum |
| NFL | National Football League |
| NPR | National Public Radio |
| NTSB | National Transportation Safety Board |
| NYPD | New York City Police Department |
| SCCT | situational crisis communication theory |
| SIPT | social information processing theory |
| SWA | Southwest Airlines |
| TSA | Transportation Security Administration |
| USDA | United States Department of Agriculture |

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The police-involved shooting that occurred in Ferguson, Missouri, in the summer of 2014 was a watershed moment that launched the national Black Lives Matter movement into the public spotlight around the world. The depth and breadth of the influence of social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, on the incident is discussed in this thesis. This influence highlights the need for law enforcement agencies to have a strategy for the use of social media in crisis communication, especially after use of force incidents. This thesis examines a two-fold research question: (1) What best practices or principles of crisis communication from the private sector might be applicable to law enforcement? (2) What should a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement look like?

The socialization or increased accessibility of information through technology advances has enabled more people to share information instantly and across global systems. This sharing is a change from the older, "top-down" structure of information dissemination and provides an opportunity for narratives to be influenced by a larger population.[1] The increased speed with which information can be shared has created opportunities for law enforcement to respond more quickly in crises, but doubles as an obstacle when this pace is accessible to individuals in the community as well. Social media allows agencies to communicate quickly in times of crisis, which may lead to improved control of the narrative. It is important that law enforcement agencies consider accuracy of information, not just the quickness of the response. Agencies that have a social media communication strategy in place prior to crisis events will be better equipped to balance speed and accuracy. With social media moving from a communication platform to one that drives community action, this strategy becomes even more vital.[2]

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[1] David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenberg, *News on the Internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 147–150.

[2] Kelly Moffitt, "How Social Media Is Playing a Role in Ferguson," *St. Louis Business Journal*, August 13, 2014, https://www.bizjournals.com/stlouis/blog/2014/08/how-social-media-is-playing-a-role-in-ferguson.html.

It could be argued that law enforcement officers are especially well-suited for communication due to their training as storytellers. Part of an officer's duty is to craft a police report that captures all the details of a given scene; a record that may end up impacting the lives of those affected by the incident described. Capitalizing on this skill should allow agencies to craft stories that help influence narratives, especially after use of force events. However, hurdles arise that are sometimes genuine and other times self-inflicted.

The Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) provides law enforcement guidance on what information must be released, when requested, and allows for exclusions designed to protect the integrity of ongoing investigations. Sometimes agencies use the exclusion clause to delay or avert the release of information that may be outside the scope of the intention of FOIA. This inclination to withhold information, while appropriate in some cases, may work against agencies in other instances when releasing information can provide the community with much-needed transparency.

A majority of law enforcement agencies lack goals for social media use.[3] Only one-third of the agencies polled by the International Association of the Chiefs of Police indicated they had goals in place related to social media.[4] More than 80 percent of these same agencies find it somewhat challenging to very challenging to adapt to new social media trends and train personnel on the effective use of social media.[5]

Regulations and guidelines for users producing content on social media are lax to non-existent, which creates an environment where information is shared almost instantly and is often considered to be accurate, regardless of the source. Social media content, especially images, can trigger strong emotions and can have a mobilizing effect on individuals and groups. This mentality can have real consequences on the street for law

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[3] Ashlin Oglesby-Neal, Edward Mohr, and KiDeuk Kim, *2016 Law Enforcement Use of Social Media Survey* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2017), 9. http://www.theiacp.org/Portals/0/documents/pdfs/2016-law-enforcement-use-of-social-media-survey.pdf.

[4] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 9.

[5] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 11.

enforcement and is a motivating factor in understanding how crisis communication can influence narratives.

An evaluation of crisis communication theory provides some insight into human emotions during crisis. Situational crisis communication theory was derived from attribution theory, which describes a need to make sense of events and behaviors by assigning cause and striving to determine motivation.[6] This theory highlights the importance of providing information to the community after a use of force incident to help citizens make sense of the crisis. Image repair theory informs that a damaged reputation, which can occur after a use of force incident, will require repair as a part of the recovery process. Research has shown that the perception of law enforcement can be improved through the use of social media.[7] Social information processing theory suggests that computer-mediated communication can be as effective as face-to-face communication, which allows law enforcement to use social media to reach members of the community not otherwise be accessible in person.[8] However, social presence theory warns that social media interactions should retain a human voice to maintain an effective connection.[9]

An evaluation of the existing research on social media-specific crisis communication found the best practices to be very similar to traditional crisis communication.[10] The platform from which someone communicates after a crisis is evidently less important than the content of that communication. The best practices identified in the research closely resemble those garnered from an evaluation of successful

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[6] Timothy Coombs, "Attribution Theory," in *The SAGE Encyclopedia of Corporate Reputation*, ed. Craig E. Carroll (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, Inc., 2016), 46–48, doi: 10.4135/9781483376493.n25.

[7] Rick Ruddell and Nicholas Jones, "Social Media and Policing: Matching the Message to the Audience," *Safer Communities* 12, no. 2 (2013): 68, https://doi.org/10.1108/17578041311315030.

[8] Bobbi Kay Lewis and Cynthia Nichols, "Social Media and Strategic Communication," in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, ed. Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass (Abingdon, VA: Routledge, 2014), 547, https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203094440.ch36.

[9] Hyojung Park and Hyunmin Lee, "Show Us You Are Real: The Effect of Human-Versus-Organizational Presence on Online Relationship Building through Social Networking Sites," *Cyberpsychology, Behavior, and Social Networking* 16, no. 4 (2013): 269, doi: 10.1089/cyber.2012.0051.

[10] Mats Eriksson, "Lessons for Crisis Communication on Social Media: A Systematic Review of What Research Tells the Practice," *International Journal of Strategic Communication*, August 2018, 526–551, doi: 10.1080/1553118X.2018.1510405.

crisis communication strategies employed by the private sector. While reputation management in the private sector is conducted to improve sales, the public sector is typically driven to improve or repair credibility.[11] The strategies to regain either customers or credibility after crises are similar, even across disparate organizations.

Southwest Airlines, Taco Bell, and GitLab were all able to leverage social media to navigate crises successfully. Southwest Airlines prepares for crises with extensive training and foresight. That preparation was likely the biggest driver in their ability to respond to their first passenger fatality; an event that passengers began to record and report within minutes. The speed of their response, coupled with their compassionate and honest voice, were other keys to its success.

Taco Bell focused on honesty and transparency when faced with a lawsuit questioning the quality of their beef; potentially, a huge blow to their reputation. It used an aggressive social media strategy to communicate a defense of its reputation that ultimately led to a restoration, and perhaps an improvement, in its status. GitLab was the first to admit an error on its part that negatively impacted customers and used language that was open and apologetic throughout its social media response. Accepting blame circumvented the customers' need to assign blame, per attribution theory, and allowed GitLab to begin the image repair process.

Private sector examples of crisis response failures were uncovered in incidents at Papa John's and BP. Papa John's released a written statement that was perceived as inauthentic and remorseless in response to racist language used by the company's CEO. A video later posted to social media offered no apology or expression of understanding that the language used was wrong. The image of Papa John's was tarnished and was not successfully repaired with its social media response. BP had no strategic crisis communication plan in place to handle a crisis that occurred when the Deepwater Horizon oil rig exploded, which caused employee fatalities. The response showed indifference to the loss of life, did not accept blame, and failed to use compassionate language. BP did,

[11] Karen Freberg et al., "Using Value Modeling to Evaluate Social Media Messages: The Case of Hurricane Irene," *Public Relations Review*, 2, 2013, http://melissaagnes.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/05/Hurricane-Irene-article-Freberg-Saling.pdf.

however, seem to learn from the misstep and subsequently used social media to increase communication and outline plans for improvements moving forward.

The analysis of private sector crisis communication case studies revealed seven common threads that can be applied to a social media strategy for law enforcement. Agencies should establish protocols and form a crisis communication team with specific team members identified and a reporting structure that includes management. Law enforcement should identify high-risk incidents, such as use of force incidents, and prepare through training and scenario-based drills. Crisis communication teams should respond quickly and regularly after crises. Agencies should utilize the experience and technological savvy of digital natives for their social media communication team. Organizations should engage in both social monitoring, to ensure direct responses are accurate and timely, and social listening, to allow for a broader understanding of the concerns of a community after crisis. The language used by law enforcement on social media should be a human voice, as opposed to an organizational language, to allow agencies to connect with their audience. Finally, communication teams should emphasize compassion and honesty in their content and strive for transparency.

The importance of influencing narratives is critical for law enforcement during crises. After the Ferguson demonstrations, the Department of Justice (DOJ) found that law enforcement needed a "better and more immediate grasp on the use of social media during emergency situations" if they wanted to handle crises more effectively moving forward.[12] Obstacles to overcome include procuring funding, securing resources that can be available at a moment's notice, and deciding the appropriate personnel, law enforcement versus civilian employees. The tension that exists between the media and law enforcement may be abetted by agencies circumventing the traditional approach to communicating with the public through an increased use of social media.

Social media allows agencies a faster and more effective communication platform with the public after use of force incidents. Law enforcement should embrace the

[12] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), XVIII, https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p317-pub.pdf.

opportunity that the digitalization of society offers through social media. With the creation of a social media crisis communication strategy that incorporates the seven common threads, law enforcement leaders can tell their own stories firsthand, in a thoughtful and transparent manner.

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

When I first looked at the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) program, the idea of completing a master's degree in 18 months, while working a full-time job and juggling the daily challenges that life throws at you seemed quite daunting—so I applied! The decision to apply and fully commit to this program did not come without the full support of my amazingly supportive family and friends.

I want to thank my parents, Doyle and Shirley Coonce, for teaching me the importance of working hard for the things you want in life. You are still the hardest-working people I know. I respect and appreciate the sacrifices you made for our family. Thanks to my older and much shorter sister, Gail Webb, a teacher who has dedicated her life to literacy and reading. You have always been an inspiration and made me want to continue learning.

Many thanks go out to the amazing Naval Postgraduate School and CHDS faculty and staff. The support and encouragement from this group is simply outstanding. A special thanks to my co-advisors, Dr. Lauren Wollman and Dr. Mitchell Friedman. Without your guidance, encouragement, and patience I may never have gotten this boulder up the hill and across the finish line.

To my classmates in Cohort 1705-06, it was a pleasure spending so much time getting to know such an outstanding group of public servants. I thank you for your open and honest conversations—remember the "Monterey rules!"

Most importantly, I would never have been able to complete this program without the love and support of my north star, Rebecca Compton. You are always my biggest supporter and have seen me through this program from day one. I promise that my emails will no longer be titled "Proof Please," unless it is a vacation itinerary. I am looking forward to our next adventure and I assure you it will not involve noun clauses or em dashes. Thank you for always pushing me to be a better person and for always encouraging me to take on new challenges in life.

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# I. INTRODUCTION

## A. POLICE-INVOLVED SHOOTING OF MICHAEL BROWN

On August 9, 2014, an officer-involved shooting in Ferguson, Missouri was the catalyst for local and regional protests, the declaration of a state of emergency, and the launch of the Black Lives Matter movement. Cellular phone video and images from bystanders in the Canfield Apartments where the shooting occurred were released on YouTube, Twitter, and Facebook minutes after a deadly confrontation between Ferguson Police Officer Darren Wilson and 18-year old Michael Brown.[1] The narrative that Michael Brown, who was unarmed, had his hands in the air while surrendering to law enforcement when he was shot was shared through social media. The "Hands Up, Don't Shoot" slogan that would define the Ferguson protests was born.[2]

Citizens on scene used social media to pass on information about the shooting; word quickly spread through social media that Michael Brown had been shot in the back. Some of the social media posts reported that his hands were in the air when he was shot by police and that the officer stood over him while he lay on the ground and fired additional kill shots.[3] In a raw and emotional video that has received over 2.3 million views on YouTube, screams can be heard in the background as the camera focuses on Michael Brown's lifeless body lying in the street.[4] As the video goes on, emotional residents of the Canfield Apartment Complex can be heard asking why an ambulance was not being called to render aid to Michael Brown, while police officers can be seen standing in various locations near his body.[5] The narrative written on social media was obviously not a positive one for law enforcement. The initial press conference about the Michael Brown shooting did not

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[1] "Startling Cell Phone Video from Michael Brown Shooting Scene," 3chicspolitico, You Tube, video, 3:12, August 16, 2014, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nvE-1qAs1W4.

[2] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment of the Police Response to the August 2014 Demonstrations in Ferguson, Missouri* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), 102, https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p317-pub.pdf.

[3] 3chicspolitico, "Startling Cell Phone Video."

[4] 3chicspolitico.

[5] 3chicspolitico.

happen until almost 22 hours after the actual incident. Michael Brown was shot at approximately 12 p.m. Central Daylight Time (CDT) on August 9 and the first news conference was not held until 10 a.m. CDT the following day.[6]

Emotional and angry citizens were looking for answers to questions not being answered by police leaders. The Department of Justice (DOJ) pointed out in an after action review of the Michael Brown shooting that "during the initial response to the shooting the public was clamoring for information about what exactly had happened but was not receiving any," which helped sparked the crowd's confusion and anger.[7] Since no law enforcement accounts were provided, citizen accounts of the shooting flooded social media. Twitter erupted with posts about the incident and the hashtag #Ferguson was born, which quickly went viral.

A Pew Research Center analysis of the media coverage of the Michael Brown shooting and subsequent demonstrations saw the story break on Twitter even before it appeared on cable news.[8] The Twitter conversations about Ferguson began immediately after Michael Brown's death, with more than 146,000 Twitter posts on August 9 that topped out on August 14 with more than 3.6 million tweets in a single day.[9] According to the Pew Research Center, more than 10.6 million tweets were published about the conflict in Ferguson in the first eight days after the shooting occurred.[10] Of those 10.6 million, nearly 8.3 million used the hashtag #Ferguson, while 2.3 million additional tweets were posted without that hashtag.[11] Figure 1 illustrates the number of Ferguson-related posts on Twitter between the critical days of August 9 and August 15. The graph shows the dramatic

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[6] Department of Justice, Civil Rights Division, *Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown by Ferguson, Missouri Police Officer Darren Wilson* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2015), 8, https://www.justice.gov/sites/default/files/opa/press-releases/attachments/2015/03/04/doj_report_on_shooting_of_michael_brown_1.pdf.

[7] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment*, 102.

[8] Paul Hitlin and Nancy Vogt, "Cable, Twitter Picked up Ferguson Story at a Similar Clip," *Pew Research Center*, August 20, 2014, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2014/08/20/cable-twitter-picked-up-ferguson-story-at-a-similar-clip/.

[9] Hitlin and Vogt.

[10] Hitlin and Vogt.

[11] Hitlin and Vogt.

increase in Twitter posts from the day of the shooting through the following week, a period during which the Ferguson demonstrations peaked. The Ferguson demonstrations were largely organized and expanded through the use and exploitation of social media. In the DOJ's after-action review of the Michael Brown shooting, it determined that, "Social media was the key global driver of information and opinion, which shaped many aspects of the Ferguson demonstrations."[12]

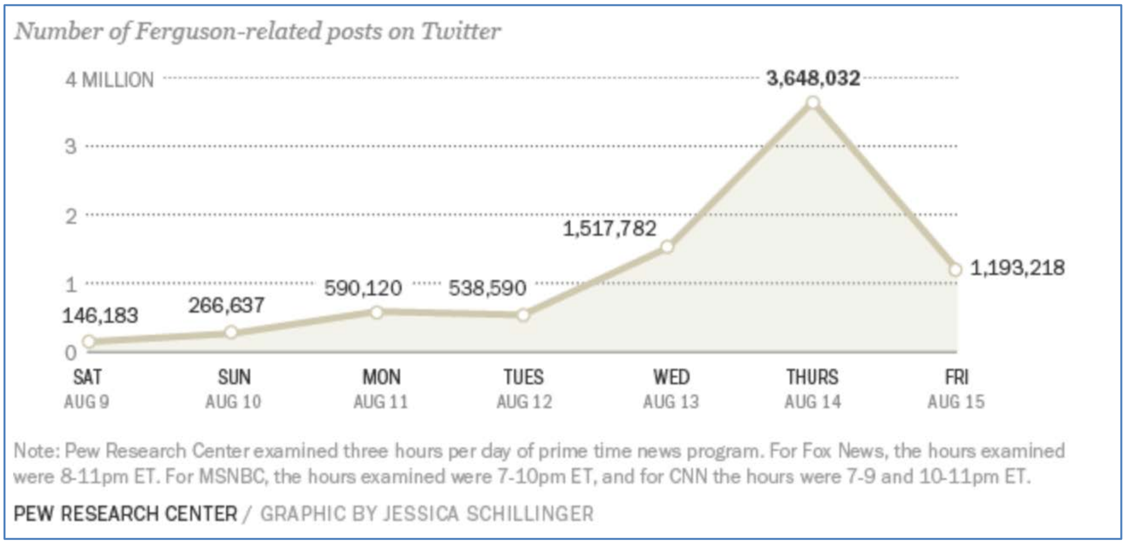


Figure 1. Ferguson Twitter Posts.[13]

As it relates to law enforcement's response and attempts at controlling the narrative, during the approximately 24-hour period, social media posts from the St. Louis region had already gone viral and spread quickly across Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. The Pew Research Center estimates that over 400,000 Twitter posts about Ferguson occurred during the first two days.[14] These social media posts painted a completely different narrative than the one the St. Louis County Police Chief would attempt to create on August 10, 2014. The

[12] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment*, XVIII.

[13] Source: Hitlin and Vogt, "Cable, Twitter Picked up Ferguson."

[14] Monica Anderson and Paul Hitlin, "The Hashtag #BlackLivesMatter Emerges: Social Activism on Twitter," *Pew Research Center*, August 15, 2016, http://www.pewinternet.org/2016/08/15/the-hashtag-blacklivesmatter-emerges-social-activism-on-twitter/.

police press conference was released on YouTube and public responses immediately suggested a conspiracy by police to cover up the fact that Michael Brown's hands were in the air when he was shot.[15]

The narrative that Michael Brown's hands were in the air would later be contested in a DOJ report on the shooting. Witness accounts were determined to be inaccurate for a myriad of reasons including inconsistencies with "physical and forensic evidence" and inconsistent statements.[16] Some witnesses later recanted their original accounts that Brown had his hands up in surrender, "admitting that they did not witness the shooting or parts of it, despite what they initially reported."[17] Although the report proved the "hands up" claim to be inaccurate, the narrative had already been established on social media and many believed, and still believe, this version of events to be true.

Social media was not used effectively by law enforcement after this use of force incident; in fact, it appeared no social media crises communication strategy was in place. In DOJ's after action report on the Michael Brown shooting, law enforcement agencies in St. Louis were openly criticized for their lack of knowledge about the effects of social media.[18] The DOJ report states, "The police on the scene in Ferguson had no concept of the effect of social media until it was too late, and all they could do was play catch-up with the massive amounts of data being shared."[19] To get in front of crises on social media, law enforcement must be better prepared. By adopting more proactive strategies with a focus on strategic messaging, social media could be used as an effective communication tool.

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[15] Jon Belmar, "Full Press Conference Ferguson Police Shooting of Michael Brown," YouTube, video, 7:00, August 10, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zUXqPDT8hr4.

[16] Department of Justice, *Department of Justice Report Regarding the Criminal Investigation into the Shooting Death of Michael Brown*, 8.

[17] Department of Justice, 8.

[18] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment*, 98.

[19] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 98.

## B. PROBLEM STATEMENT

The use of force by law enforcement often results in a negative community reaction. In a 2003 report on police use of force, the DOJ describes incidents involving the use of force by law enforcement as “flash points” for “violence, conflict and disorder.”[20] The same DOJ publication outlines how news and media coverage influences tension within the community.[21] In the time since the 2003 DOJ publication, social media has changed the manner in which news and information are both produced and consumed. Social media is now an essential tool in crisis communication strategy.

A 2013 report on the use of social media in risk and crisis communication emphasized that organizations not using social media as a communication tool during a crisis may be taken as “disorganized by the public or even sending a signal of disinterest or disdain.”[22] By not embracing social media and refusing to release information during crises, law enforcement may actually send the wrong message to the community; one that may have negative consequences during times of crises.

The days of waiting until the morning and evening news reports for law enforcement to provide information are over; such a delay in releasing information could mean the difference between establishing the narrative and losing influence over how the narrative evolves during crisis. Communicating through social media often represents the fastest way for law enforcement to tell their stories and get messages out to the community. Law enforcement agencies have been slow, however, to develop and implement strategies to guide social media communication with the public after critical events, such as officer-involved shootings. To explore this area further, a social media survey was conducted by the International Association of the Chiefs of Police (IACP). It included 539 law enforcement agencies representing 48 states and the District of Columbia.[23] The survey

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[20] Community Relations Service, *Police Use of Force Addressing Community Racial Tensions* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2003), 1, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=455881.

[21] Community Relations Service, 1.

[22] Cécile Wendling, Jack Radisch, and Stephane Jacobzone, “The Use of Social Media in Risk and Crisis Communication” (working paper, OECD Publishing, 2013), http://dx.doi.org/10.1787/5k3v01fskp9s-en.

[23] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, *2016 Law Enforcement Use of Social Media Survey*, 2.

revealed that 64 percent of agencies indicated that they do not have goals specifically related to the use of social media.[24] Although a crisis communication strategy for social media, with procedures to follow after use of force incidents, may help law enforcement tell their stories and influence narratives, many agencies lack fundamental policies and guidelines for managing communication on social media platforms during times of crises.

More specifically, the influence of social media on demonstrations in the St. Louis region after the officer-involved shooting of Michael Brown in 2014 highlighted the need for law enforcement to have communication strategies that include the use of social media, especially after use of force incidents. The DOJ report called attention to law enforcement agencies on the ground in Ferguson having "no concept of the effect of social media" until after the narrative was written.[25] The report concluded that, "If law enforcement does not provide needed information, others will fill that void with their own version of events, motives, and attitudes."[26] To influence narratives during crises, law enforcement agencies have to release details and tell their own stories, and quickly.

Rather than labor through the construction of effective strategic communication policies for social media from scratch, it behooves law enforcement to study and adopt the lessons learned and best practices of those who have achieved success; in this case, the private sector. In research on crisis communication, Seeger asserts that best practices, "usually take the form of a general set of standards, guidelines, norms, reference points, or benchmarks that inform practice and are designed to improve performance."[27] Law enforcement has long looked to the private sector for such guidance because the latter tends to innovate faster and has more resources for solving problems and developing strategies. The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has taken advantage of public-private

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[24] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 9.

[25] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment*, 98.

[26] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 102.

[27] Matthew Seeger, "Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process," *Journal of Applied Communication Research* 34, no. 3 (August 2006): 233, http://www.vodppl.upm.edu.my/uploads/docs/Artikel%201%20-%20%20Best%20Practices.pdf.

partnerships for research and development of products.[28] The advantages of these types of partnerships were highlighted in a 2011 report by DHS's Science and Technology division outlining the benefits that law enforcement agencies at state and local levels have gained from the private sector.[29]

Criminologists and scholars have long stressed that law enforcement is slow to adapt and accept change, which has resulted in labels, such as "late adopters" or "laggards."[30] Conversely, the customer focus of private sector businesses means innovation and adaptation to change is more of a priority.[31] In a 2010 report on public and private sector cooperation, Bernard Melekian from the DOJ asserted that the private sector adapts by developing "efficiencies and structures that make their organizations run smoothly."[32] The private sector has been successful at managing crises primarily through the proactive use of social media. Law enforcement can study and learn from some of those private-sector experiences, as well as leverage their best practices to standardize and implement improvements to their standard operating procedures.

## C. RESEARCH QUESTION

This study attempted to answer two research questions, as follows:

- What best practices or principles of crisis communication from the private sector might be applicable to law enforcement?

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[28] Thomas Cellucci and James Grove, *Leveraging Public-Private Partnership Models and the Free Market System to Increase the Speed-of-Execution of High-Impact Solutions throughout State and Local Governments* (Washington, DC: Department of Homeland Security, 2011), 6–8, https://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/st-leveraging-partnerships-for-state-and-local-governments-August2011.pdf.

[29] Cellucci and Grove, 9–10.

[30] Jaganhohan Rao Lingamneni, "Resistance to Change in Police Organizations: The Diffusion Paradigm," *Criminal Justice Review* 4, no. 2 (September 1979): 25, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F073401687900400204.

[31] Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, *Reaching Out to the Private Sector: Building Partnerships and Managing Your Workforce* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2010), 4, https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p193-pub.pdf.

[32] Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 4.

- What should a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement look like?

## D. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review is conducted to explore how the democratization of technology has impacted crisis communication. The review also focuses on crisis communication strategy and law enforcement's use of social media to influence narratives during crises. It examines whether law enforcement agencies use standard communication strategies when communicating with the public during crises. The literature includes diverse sources including books on crisis communication theory, law enforcement journals, scholarly articles, real-world examples of crisis communication in the private and public sector, government reports, and other relevant sources.

### 1. Socialization of Information

Access to technology, specifically social media, has provided a voice to users from all social classes, which creates a socialization of information. That is, the increased availability of technology has helped bridge gaps by providing access to equipment, information, and communication tools once unattainable or available only to certain groups. Dimitri Kanevsky, an IBM researcher and scientist who was honored by the White House as a Champion for Change for his work with the deaf, believes, "Technology is constantly evolving to remove barriers that emerge due to a person's social characteristics, geographic location, physical or sensory abilities."[33] These positive changes in technology have impacted the manner in which law enforcement must communicate during and after crises.

To be successful at influencing narratives during crises, organizations, in general, must use social media. In their book on media in the 21st century, David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenburg assert, "The trend of information control shifting away from a few

[33] Dimitri Kanevsky, "Technology as the Great Equalizer," *White House: President Barack Obama* (blog), May 7, 2012, https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2012/05/07/technology-change-great-equalizer.

powerful entities toward smaller outlets and even citizens is a type of information democratization."[34] The authors reflect on the 20th century, a time in which dominant media "operated with a system of centralized, largely one-way news dissemination."[35] Tewksbury and Rittenburg contend "communication is no longer top-down but also bottom-up and even cuts across social structures."[36] Networks and groups now form quickly through social media with networks that include members around the world.

### 2. Changes in the Speed of Communication

The literature illuminates the positive changes that result from speedier communication as a result of technology advancements. Information that may have previously taken days to transmit and receive can now be delivered in real time, or close to real time. Two-time Pulitzer Prize recipient Thomas L. Friedman states, "Innovations in computerization, miniaturization, telecommunications, and digitization have made it possible for hundreds of millions of people around the world to get connected and exchange information, news, knowledge and money."[37] Tewksbury and Rittenburg add, "Meaningful information democratization accelerated with the rise of the World Wide Web in the 1990s."[38]

The impact of Moore's Law can be seen through the democratization of technology. This frequently cited law states that as chip speeds increase, people continue to see faster and more cost-effective technology. This forward progress helped put equipment into the hands of people who previously did not have access. American author and computer scientist Ray Kurzweil believes that "we won't experience 100 years of progress in the 21st century—it will be more like 20,000 years of progress (at today's rate)."[39] Kurzweil

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[34] David Tewksbury and Jason Rittenberg, *News on the Internet: Information and Citizenship in the 21st Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 147.

[35] Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 147.

[36] Tewksbury and Rittenberg, 150.

[37] Thomas L. Friedman, *The Lexus and the Olive Tree* (New York: Anchor Books, 2000), 50.

[38] Tewksbury and Rittenberg, *News on the Internet*, 147.

[39] Raymond Kurweil, "The Law of Accelerating Returns," Kurzweil Accelerating Intelligence, March 7, 2001, http://www.kurzweilai.net/the-law-of-accelerating-returns.

believes "evolution (biological or technological) results in a better next-generation product" and that these improvements create a positive feedback loop.[40] This positive feedback loop has provided law enforcement with better, faster technology to make more data available than ever before and provide the opportunity for faster communication during crises. The literature also concurs with the related claim that participants in contemporary culture expect information immediately.

### 3. Crisis Communication in Law Enforcement

In their book, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal,* Seeger and Sellnow define crises as, "High-uncertainty events that suspend notions of normalcy, creating a need to sort through the events and make sense of them through narratives such as accounts."[41] Public crises regularly involve law enforcement agencies, as they are trained to respond to these high-uncertainty events and sort through often-disparate narratives. Therefore, providing accurate information to the public in times of crises is critical. When the narrative is communicated by parties that may not have accurate information, or by parties that may be attempting to sway the public's perception, the ability to correct the record becomes more difficult. Law enforcement thus can operate in times of crises best by being the first to disseminate accurate information and control the narrative.

To respond quickly in times of crises, a communication strategy should be used to identify and capture the correct channels of information dissemination while incorporating a built-in verification step to ensure accuracy of information. While no two crises are identical, the structure of communication can be pre-determined and provide consistency of response to include the use of social media as a communication strategy. Perhaps most importantly, the literature agrees that the demand for instantaneity is something that organizations should consider when crafting strategies around social media crisis communication.

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[40] Kurzweil.

[41] Matthew Seeger and Timothy Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis: Telling Stories of Ruin and Renewal* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2016), 48.

### 4. Social Media Crisis Communication Strategies

The police-involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, provides some insight into social media's impact on narratives during crises. In many ways, the Michael Brown shooting changed the manner in which law enforcement must respond to the community during crises. In an article on social media use in the United States, Trevor Blank points out, "The emergence of a ubiquitous, perpetually connected society has compelled individuals to search, download, forward, and generate responses to the endless flow of information."[42] This near-instantaneous sharing of information has changed how groups respond during a crisis. In their book, *Theorizing Crisis Communication*, Timothy Sellnow and Matthew Seeger contend that crises can result in both negative disruption and positive change.[43]

Along the same vein, Webster University Professor Remy Cross has studied how domestic groups use social media to bring about social change. The Ferguson demonstrations shed further light on this development. Journalist Kelly Moffitt interviewed Cross in 2014. She writes, "The conversation and reporting on what's going on online has translated to in-person action in demonstrations, cleanups and organization at a higher rate in the case of Ferguson, Missouri than in other similar situations."[44] According to Moffit, Cross' studies show that "people under the age of 35 are shifting from a passive to a more active role in their community, and credits social media as a catalyst."[45] Social media platforms geared toward communication have become a means of coordinating action, and therefore, law enforcement should have strategies in place to utilize these platforms during times of crises.

The speed at which social media can influence narratives during a crisis highlights the importance of disseminating information in a timely fashion. The literature indicates

[42] Trevor J. Blank, "Social Media," *Encyclopedia of American Studies*, 2018, https://eas-ref.press.jhu.edu/view?aid=812.

[43] Timothy L. Sellnow and Matthew W. Seeger, *Theorizing Crisis Communication* (West Sussex: Wiley, 2013), 1, https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=1110724.

[44] Moffitt, "How Social Media is Playing a Role in Ferguson."

[45] Moffitt.

that to influence narratives, law enforcement should use social media platforms to reach citizens quickly. Since speed is such an important factor, having a communications strategy in place is critical. Nicole Matejic, an internationally recognized military information operations adviser specializing in social media crisis communication, asserts, “Everything you do should be the result of deliberate strategic intent: you must consistently influence your audience toward the desired outcome one step at a time.”[46] The primary lesson here for law enforcement is to prevent narratives from being written and driven by social media; law enforcement must now respond differently and more quickly after use of force incidents.

Some law enforcement agencies have recognized the role social media now plays in crisis communication. In response, they are implementing policies. In a 2017 thesis completed at the Naval Postgraduate School, Kathleen O’Reilly looked at the New York City Police Department’s (NYPD) newly implemented social media policy. In part, O’Reilly found that the NYPD social media policy was designed to ensure “unified messages regarding large-scale events, emergencies, and sensitive incidents.”[47] O’Reilly explained the NYPD policy is important because it helps to ensure the “accurate and timely dissemination of information to the public.”[48] O’Reilly did not conclude with specific recommendations or best practices in strategic crisis communication however, as that topic lay outside the scope of her research on building public trust, not strategic communication or messaging. She did recommend that the NYPD expand its use of social media, in addition to traditional media, after controversial incidents. The research in this thesis supports O’Reilly’s recommendation for expanding social media communication but adds best practice and principles from the private sector that will help law enforcement craft better communication strategies.

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[46] Nicole Matejic, *Social Media Rules of Engagement: Why Your Online Narrative Is the Best Weapon during a Crisis* (Melbourne, Australia: Innvocantis Pty Ltd., 2015), 103.

[47] Kathleen M. O’Reilly, “Transparency, Accountability, and Engagement: A Recipe for Building Trust in Policing” (master’s thesis, Naval Postgraduate School, 2017), 39, https://www.hsdl.org/?view&did=803335.

[48] O’Reilly, 39.

Even though many police agencies currently use social media for community outreach, scant literature identifies crisis management as a top priority for law enforcement. Few agencies appear to document crisis communication strategies for social media. The lack of consistency in law enforcement's use of social media from agency to agency, and even from event to event, has resulted in criticism. For example, the DOJ conducted an after-action review of the Minneapolis Police Department's response to demonstrations after the police-involved shooting of Jamar Clark in 2015. The agency was criticized throughout the report for inconsistent messaging and ineffective communication.[49] One of the key themes in the report was, "Clear, concise, and consistent communication, particularly during critical incidents, is key to establishing trust and credibility."[50]

## E. RESEARCH DESIGN

Law enforcement uses social media platforms for two reasons, one, aiding in criminal investigations, and two, disseminating information and managing public opinion.[51] For the scope of this research, only information dissemination and managing public opinion are considered. The analysis draws from a variety of sources, including an examination of existing communication strategies from the private sector. The strategies used by the private sector provided valuable models and best practices for law enforcement. The characteristics and elements of effective social media communication strategies in the private sector included speed of communication, consistency in messaging, identifiable goals, level and method of engagement, tone and language used in messaging, staffing and management, and monitoring of social media. Three corporations are selected for their effective responses to recent crises: Southwest Airlines' (SWA's) first passenger death in 2018, Taco Bell's response to accusations about the quality of their beef in 2011, and GitLab's customer data loss scandal in 2017.

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[49] Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, *Maintaining First Amendment Rights and Public Safety in North Minneapolis* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2017), 2, https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-w0836-pub.pdf.

[50] Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, VIII.

[51] Ruddell and Jones, "Social Media and Policing," 64.

An analysis of existing crisis communication theory and research is also conducted. The analysis includes situational crisis communication theory, attribution theory, image repair theory, social information processing theory, and social presence theory.

In addition, several public and private sector cases are examined to identify mistakes in crisis communication. These examples include the owner of Papa John's pizza chain using racist language in 2018 and BP's (formerly British Petroleum) response to the Deepwater Horizon explosion in 2010. The responses of these organizations were compared to those of SWA, Taco Bell, and GitLab.

Research conducted for this thesis included an evaluation of crisis communication strategies and proactive use of social media in the private sector during crises to provide recommendations on best practices and develop guidelines for a comprehensive social media crisis communication plan. Since the use of force by law enforcement is a flash point for civil unrest, this research into crisis communication is directed specifically at communication on social media platforms after these incidents.[52] The research reveals seven common threads and lessons learned in crisis communication that can be applied to a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement.

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[52] Community Relations Service, *Police Use of Force Addressing Community Racial Tensions*, 1.

## II. LAW ENFORCEMENT'S USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

The increased availability of technology, from public library internet access to smart phones with social media access, has led to a socialization of information. The public's expectations for communication have changed as a result. Since barriers to the use of social media are rather unlimited, the power that it provides users is evident through Reed's Law, which suggests that enormous power is unleashed when the barriers to forming groups fall.[53] Today, through social media, anyone can form a group for any reason and organize it to expand the reach and impact of that group.[54] Influence and power now lie in the hands of every person with access to the internet or one of the many social media technologies available today. In other words, social media has created an accelerated feedback loop.

Modern culture is one that expects information immediately; this "instantaneity" is now both "prized and expected."[55] The demand for instantaneity is something that law enforcement must consider when crafting strategies around crisis communication. Advancements in technology have changed the manner in which law enforcement agencies manage crises. Technology and social media are so significant in law enforcement today that President Barack Obama's Task Force on 21st Century Policing dedicated the entire Third Pillar of their 2015 report to these two topics.[56] This chapter examines the importance of storytelling in crisis communication. It also highlights legal standards surrounding the release of information by law enforcement and the challenges that social media has created for law enforcement.

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[53] Nicco Mele, *End of Big: How the Internet Makes David the New Goliath* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2013), 24.

[54] Mele, 24.

[55] Blank, "Social Media."

[56] President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), 1, https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p341-pub.pdf.

## A. STORYTELLING

As narratives unfold on social media during crisis situations, such as the Boston Marathon Bombing in 2013 and the Mandalay Bay shooting in Las Vegas in 2017, consumers of the images begin to look for meaning to process the events. Creating meaning during crisis is "both a human need and a personal choice."[57] This meaning is often found through storytelling, a skill that consumes a significant part of an officer's training in the academy. Since report writing is a daily part of policing, officers are reminded regularly of the importance of detailed storytelling. Officers know their reports will often end up in court and other legal proceedings so producing clear descriptions of crime scenes and events means officers have to tell their stories.[58] In short, police officers record details and organize them in a way that makes sense so others can review the police reports in a storylike product.

Officers are taught from their first days in the police academy that their "pens" (it can now be argued computers) represent one of the most powerful weapons in their possession. An article written by Herminia Ibarra and Kent Lineback, published in the *Harvard Business Review*, states not only that "stories define us," but also that the significance of storytelling, especially when enlisting supporters, is key.[59] They posit, "What we've come to understand is that one factor more than any other makes the difference: the ability to craft a good story."[60] As we live in a society whose members expect information instantaneously, the days of waiting for media outlets to tell the stories of law enforcement incidents no longer suffices.

To tell their stories and to have influence over narratives after use of force incidents, law enforcement agencies have to release details and tell their own stories, and quickly. However, acting in this fashion is not as easy as it sounds. Media and social media policies

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[57] Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis*, 32.

[58] Joel Shults, "5 Keys to Great Report Writing," PoliceOne, November 29, 2012, https://www.policeone.com/investigations/articles/6049898-5-keys-to-great-report-writing/.

[59] Herminia Ibarra and Kent Lineback, "What's Your Story?" *Harvard Business Review*, January 2005, https://hbr.org/2005/01/whats-your-story.

[60] Ibarra and Lineback.

for law enforcement vary from agency to agency, as no standard guideline determines what, or how quickly, information should be released to the public during critical incidents. In addition, legal standards guide what information is released to the public.

## B. FREEDOM OF INFORMATION ACT

Law enforcement often relies on FOIA, which provides clear laws for when agencies must release information including rules, opinions, orders, records, and proceedings.[61] However, Congress has provided special protections or "exclusions" in FOIA for three narrow categories of law enforcement and national security record.[62] The exclusion specifically related to this discussion protects the "existence of an ongoing criminal law enforcement investigation when the subject of the investigation is unaware that it is pending and disclosure could reasonably be expected to interfere with enforcement proceedings."[63] This exclusion has historically provided law enforcement a way to protect information and to provide time to ensure all the facts are correct and to guard investigations before releasing critical information. During press conferences, therefore, police leaders and public information officials rely on the phrase "ongoing investigation" to protect their agencies from releasing information or fielding the media's questions about the specifics of investigations.

The use of this exclusion occurred during the investigation in Ferguson, Missouri. The Ferguson Police Department used FOIA to protect dispatch records, video footage, and information about a strong-arm robbery of a convenience store in which Michael Brown was believed to be a suspect prior to his interaction with Police Officer Darren Wilson.[64] On August 15, 2014, after the first night of calm in Ferguson since the shooting of Michael Brown, the Ferguson Police Chief, relying solely on live news media reports,

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[61] Department of State, *The Freedom of Information Act, 5 U.S.C. 552* (Washington, DC: Department of State, 2016), https://www.justice.gov/oip/freedom-information-act-5-usc-552.

[62] Department of State.

[63] Department of State.

[64] Thomas Jackson, "Ferguson Police Chief Speaks on Michael Brown," YouTube, video, 10:49, August 15, 2017, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Yher0Ix3rrk.

held two separate press conferences.[65] In the first press conference, he released Police Officer Darren Wilson's name as the officer involved in the shooting of Michael Brown. In a highly criticized move during that same press conference, he released the information about the robbery. In the second press conference later the same day, he was confronted about the timing of the release of the video and dispatch recordings. He was challenged with the accusations that Michael Brown's family believed it was a calculated attempt to "assassinate the character of Michael Brown."[66] In response, the Ferguson Police Chief admitted that they had possession of the surveillance tape and had been "sitting on it," and only released it because "I had to"—and even going as far as to say, "I held it for as long as I could."[67] In this press conference, which lasted just over 10 minutes, the Police Chief referenced the terms "Freedom of Information Act," "FOIA," and "media requests" on six different occasions.[68] In short, law enforcement had tried to withhold information from the public.

In this case, the public's demand for transparency and details about what happened on August 9 was not satisfied with the release of information five days later. Public criticism over the timing of the release of the surveillance tape of the robbery with the release of the officer's name was significant.[69] Many questioned the legitimacy of the surveillance tape, some believing it truly was a conspiracy by law enforcement, or a means to justify the police shooting.[70] After one night of peace, more violent demonstrations erupted on the streets of Ferguson the night the press conferences were held.

The "ongoing investigation" exemption also applies when cases are no longer open, even when the protection was originally meant for active investigations. Information is

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[65] Jackson.

[66] Jackson.

[67] Jackson.

[68] Jackson.

[69] Kim Bell et al., "Day Six, Day: The Rev. Jesse Jackson Shows up at Protest Site as Brown Family Calls for Calm," *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, April 15, 2014, https://www.stltoday.com/news/local/crime-and-courts/ferguson-officer-who-shot-michael-brown-identified-brown-named-as/article_52c40b84-ad90-5f9a-973c-70d628d0be04.html.

[70] Bell et al.

protected from release under an "investigative file" claim, although the validity of such a claim is murky at best. The Iowa Division of Criminal Investigations came under fire in 2018 when it denied 40 out of 59 record requests, 28 of which were based on "investigative file" privileges.[71] This agency faced similar controversy in 2014 when it refused to release records of several subjects who died after use of force incidents during which Tasers were deployed.[72] While agencies struggle with what information to share and how quickly to do so, citizens can share real-time information on social media, which impacts law enforcement's ability to withhold information without negative consequences. A difficult balance is thus created for police leaders who must walk a fine line between protecting the integrity of investigations and providing the public with the information. As a result, as investigations unfold, getting information out quickly sometimes means the original statement changes.

This challenge was evident in a recent officer-involved shooting in St. Louis City. On January 24, 2019, the St. Louis City Police Chief was at the hospital where a 24-year-old female police officer had just been pronounced dead. With the media clamoring for answers, he provided the information he had available, that an officer was shot and killed "accidentally" by another officer.[73] It was later determined that the two officers were playing a Russian roulette-type game when the female officer was shot in the chest. The police chief was later criticized, and the department was accused of obstructing the investigation, in part, because of statements made immediately after the shooting classifying it as accidental.[74] In an effort to be transparent, the police chief made a decision to release what information he had available. Since facts in the investigation were still unfolding, his initial statements were not accurate and opened the door for criticism.

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[71] Jason Clayworth, "Iowa's Open-Records Law is Being Used to Hide Unflattering Police Video, Open Records Advocates Say," *Des Moines Register*, September 12, 2018, https://www.desmoinesregister.com/story/news/investigations/2018/09/12/how-iowas-open-records-law-being-used-hide-police-video/1278686002/.

[72] Clayworth.

[73] Kevin Held, "Gardner Accuses SLMPD of Obstruction in Officer's Shooting Death," *Fox 2 News*, January 29, 2019, https://fox2now.com/2019/01/29/gardner-accuses-slmpd-of-obstruction-in-officers-shooting-death/.

[74] Held.

## C. CHALLENGES FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT

The example from St. Louis City highlights the thin line law enforcement must walk and the challenge they face in producing timely and accurate information. While the use of social media offers law enforcement agencies opportunities to improve crisis communication, it does present new challenges. Many of these challenges relate to the need for law enforcement, a population not known for early adoption, to embrace ever-improving technology and trends. Challenges related to the use of social media are outlined in the following sections.

### 1. Lack of Goals for Social Media Use

Although many law enforcement agencies now use social media, few have clear goals on how to do so. In the IACP's 2016 social media survey mentioned previously, 539 law enforcement agencies were polled.[75] Figure 2, taken from the IACP report, shows that over 300 of those agencies reportedly started using social media as part of their official operations between the years of 2012 and 2014.[76]

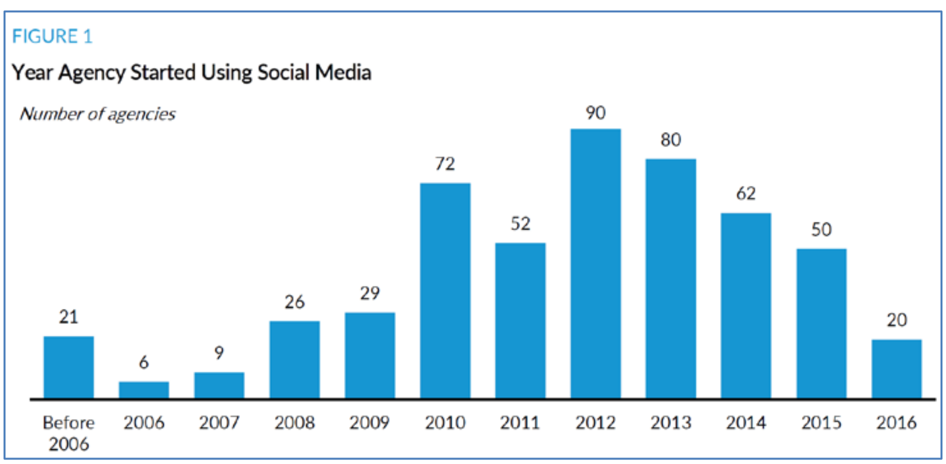


Figure 2. IACP—Year Agency Started Using Social Media.[77]

[75] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, *2016 Law Enforcement Use of Social Media Survey*, 1.

[76] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 3.

[77] Source: Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 3.

Once agencies began to use social media, the majority still did not have a clear strategy for its use. In fact, "64 percent of agencies self-reported that they do not have specific goals related to the use of social media."[78] It is hard to determine how exactly to utilize and exploit social media if law enforcement agencies do not have set goals or desired outcomes for its use. Adopting policies around social media use in crisis communication should be a goal of law enforcement.

### 2. Inability to Keep Up with Changing Trends

Law enforcement has struggled to find resources to allocate dedicated and trained personnel to manage social media and stay current on new and ever-changing trends. In the same survey referenced in the preceding section, IACP also explored some of the challenges law enforcement agencies now face with social media (see Figure 3).

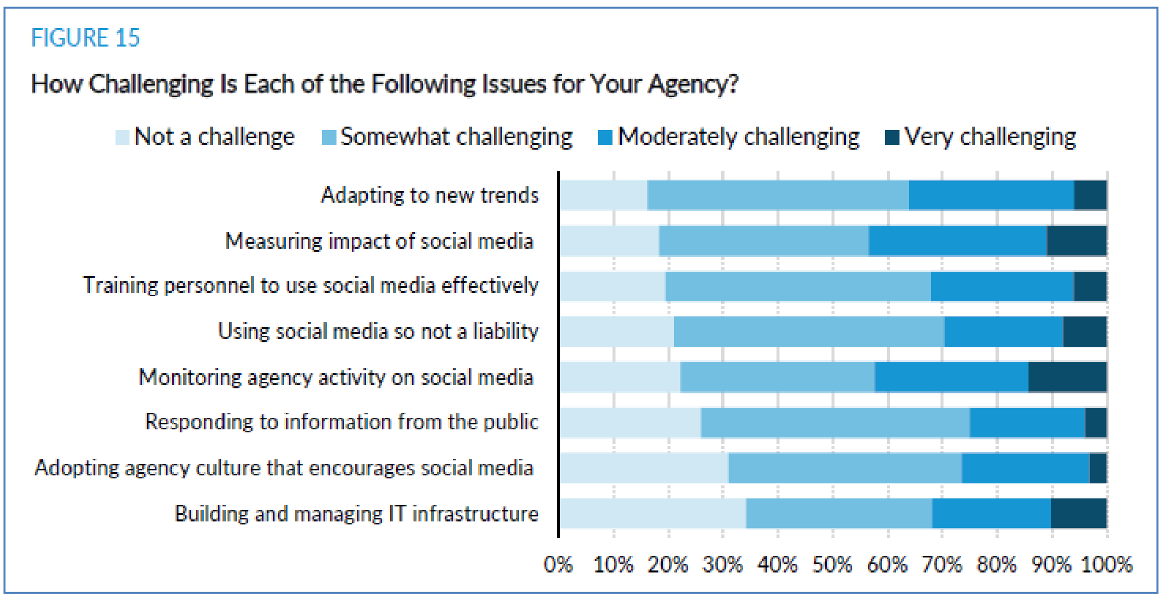


Figure 3. Social Media Challenges for Law Enforcement.[79]

[78] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 9.

[79] Source: Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 11.

The survey data show that "84 percent of agencies find adapting to new social media trends online at least somewhat challenging, 82 percent believe measuring the impact of their social media presence is a challenge, and 81 percent find training personnel to effectively use social media to be difficult."[80] The changes that have occurred in public expectations, including a demand for greater transparency and increased speed of messaging, could be part of the reason agencies struggle. The structure of law enforcement includes a strict chain of command, one in which the top leaders typically approve all public messages. The speed and volume of expected information means this strict oversight is not always possible. Since the top leaders typically do not craft social media messages, he use of social media requires trained personnel who possess the communication and technical skills to manage the disparate platforms; oftentimes, digital natives. As a esult, law enforcement leaders must allow younger, less experienced personnel to speak on their behalf.

### 3. Unfiltered Nature of Social Media

Unlike the strict regulations applied to traditional media on radio, television, wire, satellite and cable, no Federal Communication Commission (FCC) standards or federal guidelines are available for users producing content on social media; it remains relatively unfiltered in comparison to traditional media.[81] Social media platforms do not require users to confirm or provide sources of information. Users can share information with the world in real time without the requirements placed on paid journalists, which makes everyone on social media an instantaneous "citizen journalist" of sorts. In fact, "the emergence of a ubiquitous, perpetually connected society has compelled individuals to search, download, forward, and generate responses to the endless flow of information."[82]

News on social media now supplements traditional news outlets. In fact, a Pew Research Center survey from August 2017 revealed "two-thirds (67%) of Americans report

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[80] Oglesby-Neal, Mohr, and Kim, 11.

[81] "Broadcast, Cable and Satellite," Federal Communications Commission, October 27, 2017, https://www.fcc.gov/general/broadcast-cable-and-satellite-guides.

[82] Blank, "Social Media."

that they get at least some of their news on social media—with two-in-ten doing so often."[83] Even though social media provides challenges, the examples provided in this thesis show the benefit of having real time access to information and data. To influence narratives, social media platforms can be utilized to reach the vast number of citizens who rely on them for news and real-time updates. By exploiting the speed and reach of Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, providing carefully crafted messages could help influence narratives during crises.

### 4. Role of Social Media in Demonstrations

The role social media plays in social movements, such as the Black Lives Matter movement that advanced during demonstrations in Ferguson, is significant. Information sharing has been the driving force. In a 2018 study explaining the effect social media has on protest participation, Yuan Hsiao observes, "Social media activity triggers the psychological incentives of anger, social incentives, identification, and individual efficacy."[84] The findings in Hsiao's research suggest "social media may be a new mobilization structure via changing the decision-making processes of individuals."[85] Therefore, platforms typically geared towards communication and social purposes have shifted to those of action and response.

This shift to action can have serious consequences on the ground after use of force incidents, when the community searches for information and answers. These incidents typically lead to heightened emotions, and an active community response can, at times, impede law enforcement's efforts. Further disruption in the community could result. To this point, in a study on the effect social media and alternative media have on protests, Michael Chan from the University of Hong Kong found that media content effects the

[83] Elisa Shearer and Jeffrey Gottfried, "News Use across Social Media Platforms 2017," *Pew Research Center*, September 7, 2017, http://www.journalism.org/2017/09/07/news-use-across-social-media-platforms-2017/#.

[84] Yuan Hsiao, "Understanding Digital Natives in Contentious Politics: Explaining the Effect of Social Media on Protest Participation through Psychological Incentives," *New Media & Society* 20, no. 9 (January 2018): 3457–3478, https://doi.org/10.1177%2F1461444817749519.

[85] Hsiao.

emotional response of citizens.[86] His research asserts that images can stir strong feelings of anger and may result in direct action.[87]

In the Ferguson example, in the absence of information provided by law enforcement, videos and images released on social media from the streets quickly led to direct action from the surrounding community and eventually around the world. Law enforcement therefore could be more effective at managing crisis by understanding the potential influence of narratives created on social media after use of force incidents.

In addition, an evaluation of existing crisis communication theory and research provides some insight into human emotions and motivations during crisis. Private sector responses to crises are particularly illustrative here, and are considered in the next chapter.

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[86] Michael Chan, "Media Use and the Social Identity Model of Collective Action: Examining the Roles of Online Alternative News and Social Media News," *Journalism & Mass Communication Quarterly* 94, no. 3 (September 2017): 670.

[87] Chan, 670.

## III. CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY AND RESEARCH

### A. CRISIS COMMUNICATION THEORY

Crisis communication researchers Timothy Sellnow and Matthew Seeger believe that without introducing theory into crisis communication, researchers are "limited to anecdote and general description."[88] They stress that by looking at different theories on crisis communication, opportunities for improvement are related to message delivery and the ability to gain a greater understanding of the intended audience's needs. Several crisis communication theories can help law enforcement to understand human behavior better, four of which are outlined in the following section.

#### 1. Situational Crisis Communication Theory and Attribution Theory

Situational crisis communication theory (SCCT) is one of the most prominent crisis management theories. Timothy Coombs introduced the theory and asserted that SCCT "provides an evidence-based framework for understanding how to maximize the reputational protection afforded by post-crisis communication."[89] Coombs' theoretical approach to crisis communication helps provide structure, a means to understand better why organizations respond to negative events. This focus is important because it can help law enforcement better understand the community's reaction to use of force incidents.

The roots of Coombs' SCCT can be found in attribution theory. Developed in the 1950s by Fritz Heider, attribution theory postulated that people are "naive psychologists" trying to "make sense of the world around them."[90] After a use of force incident, like the Ferguson case, citizens will try to make sense of the event. They will be searching for explanations of how and why the crisis happened.[91] The day Michael Brown was shot, the

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[88] Sellnow and Seeger, *Theorizing Crisis Communication*, 243.

[89] Timothy W. Coombs, "Protecting Organization Reputations during a Crisis: The Development and Application of Situational Crisis Communication Theory," *Corporate Reputation Review* 10, no. 3 (September 2007): 163, doi: 10.1057/palgrave.crr.1550049.

[90] Coombs, "Attribution Theory," 46–48.

[91] Coombs, 46–48.

residents of the Canfield Apartments were desperately searching for answers, as captured by a YouTube video. They were trying to make sense of the tragic event.

Coombs stressed that the core assumption of attribution theory "is that people are driven by a desire to assign causes to events and behaviors. Hence, people routinely make attributions about causes, often based on very little information."[92] In today's climate, people increasingly believe law enforcement is to blame for use of force incidents. In the case of Michael Brown, his death was definitely the result of a fatal encounter with police. Since citizens were not provided with information or a narrative by law enforcement, cause was attributed to the police, and inaccurate stories about the fatal encounter were circulated.

Coombs further uses attribution theory to explain how crisis can effect an organization's reputation, by asserting, "Attributions of crisis responsibility have implications for corporate reputations. The reputational damage from a crisis intensifies as stakeholder attributions of crisis responsibility strengthen."[93] Based on his interpretation of attribution theory, Coombs believes that the need to attribute cause increases the more negative the event. Use of force incidents by law enforcement are negative events that can seriously damage a law enforcement agency's reputation and fracture its relationship with the community, as it did in Ferguson. As a result, attribution theory should be considered when discussing the use of force by law enforcement, in particular officer-involved shootings that result in loss of life.

Use of force incidents are by nature negative events that forever alter the lives of those involved. As mentioned previously, the DOJ recognizes use of force incidents as flash points for civil unrest. Coombs stresses that, "The attributions made during a crisis do seem to have an effect on the affect and behavioral intentions of stakeholders."[94] The communication and actions by law enforcement after use of force incidents could influence the behavior and citizen response to the crisis. Citizens look for the cause and motivation to rationalize the use of force. Questions about law enforcement's justification for use of

[92] Coombs, 46–48.

[93] Coombs, 46–48.

[94] Coombs, 46–48.

force, and the search for causal control, need to be addressed quickly, something that law enforcement can do by telling their stories.

Coombs describes causal control as "the degree to which the outcome of the event could be changed."[95] Coombs asserts that causal control is related to "intentionality" of the event.[96] Attempts will be made to determine if the police officer(s) involved in a use of force event intentionally or voluntarily acted and if the cause of the use of force was internal (i.e., the officer(s) involved) or external (i.e., the situation).[97] In the video referenced earlier, citizens could be heard asking what Michael Brown had done, in other words, what had caused the shooting. They were trying to make sense of the crisis, assign cause, and identify motivation. Understanding these basic tenets of attribution theory will help law enforcement leaders understand the importance of providing information to the community after a use of force incident, which will in turn, help citizens make sense of the crisis.

### 2. Image Repair Theory

Crisis communication and image repair go hand in hand. Law enforcement agencies face challenges to their image regularly. The agencies managing the Ferguson crisis suffered damage to their image and reputation. Repairing or restoring an organization's image after it has endured a crisis constitutes part of the recovery process. The recovery process is particularly important when organizations have faced accusations of wrongdoing or when stakeholders attribute the cause of the crisis to the organization. In such instances, studies of crisis communication often reference image repair theory, introduced by Dr. William Benoit. When discussing image repair, Benoit emphasizes, "Threats to our image are common and our reputation is very important to us."[98] He asserts, because of these two factors, the need for image repair discourse will remain constant. Simply put, if

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[95] Coombs, 46–48.

[96] Coombs, 46–48.

[97] Coombs, 46–48.

[98] William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2015), 123.

organizations do something that the public perceives as wrong, image repair messaging is needed to repair the reputation. Social media should be a part of that strategy.

Research shows that citizens' confidence in and perceptions of law enforcement can be modified using social media. Data collected during a survey of community and university populations in Canada revealed, "a statistically significant association between confidence in the police and accessing the police service's webpage or social media: individuals who visited either the department web site or Twitter feed expressed higher levels of confidence in the police than their counterparts who had not accessed these forms of computer-based information."[99] In the study, 41% of respondents who had a "high" perception of police had visited the department's Twitter page.[100] Figure 4 shows the results of the Canadian survey.[101]

| *Total confidence in the police*[a] | *Low* | *Medium* | *High* |
|---|---|---|---|
| *Visited the department web site?* ($\chi^2 = 16.846$, df = 2, $p = 0.000$) | | | |
| No (%) | 35.8 | 39.5 | 24.8 |
| Yes (%) | 18.4 | 40.4 | 41.2 |
| *Visited the department Facebook?* ($\chi^2 = 3.797$, df = 2, $p = 0.150$) | | | |
| No (%) | 33.1 | 39.1 | 27.8 |
| Yes (%) | 17.1 | 48.6 | 34.3 |
| *Visited the department Twitter?* ($\chi^2 = 7.706$, df = 2, $p = 0.021$) | | | |
| No (%) | 33.5 | 39.2 | 27.2 |
| Yes (%) | 12.8 | 46.2 | 41.0 |

**Note:** [a]Total confidence in the police is the sum of seven survey items that measured agreement about the police service's performance with the following issues: enforcing the law; promptly responding to calls; being approachable and easy to talk to; supplying information to the public on how to reduce crime; ensuring the safety of citizens in your area; treating people fairly, and cooperating with the public to address their concerns

Figure 4. Perceptions of Law Enforcement and Social Media.[102]

[99] Ruddell and Jones, "Social Media and Policing," 68.

[100] Ruddell and Jones, 67.

[101] Ruddell and Jones, 67.

[102] Source: Ruddell and Jones, 67.

In short, image repair theory raises important considerations that should not be overlooked as local police departments develop their strategies for responding to officer-involved shootings on social media.

### 3. Social Information Processing Theory and Social Presence Theory

Scholars have long studied communication theory, but research and theory involving the use of social media is relatively new. In their research on existing theory, Lewis and Nichols examined theoretical frameworks to explain social media and social media interactions. They examined five related theories, including social information processing theory (SIPT).[103]

SIPT was introduced by behavioral scientist Joseph Walther in 1992, prior to the emergence of social media. Walther's research focused on the differences between computer-mediated communication (CMC) and face-to-face communication. He tested the concept that CMC and face-to-face interactions could produce similar, if not the same impressions. This similarity suggests that law enforcement can take advantage of social media's broad reach to interact with citizens who they may not otherwise have the opportunity to meet in person. These interactions through CMC can yield positive impressions.

Walther determined that while CMC relationships may form and grow at slower rates than conventional relationships, once formed, they hold many of the same qualities as relationships formed through face-to-face contact.[104] When SIPT is used to "establish and understand strategic communication in social media, it can explain the interaction and attachment that individuals form toward a certain product or person."[105] Using social media for brand establishment and online relationship building can help organizations form strong relationships with their stakeholders.

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[103] Bobbi Kay Lewis and Cynthia Nichols, "Social Media and Strategic Communication," in *The Routledge Handbook of Strategic Communication*, ed. Derina Holtzhausen and Ansgar Zerfass (Abingdon, VA: Routledge, 2014), 546–560, https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/doi/10.4324/9780203094440.ch36.

[104] Lewis and Nichols, 546.

[105] Lewis and Nichols, 547.

While Walther's research shows that strong relationships can be formed using CMC, it is important to consider social presence theory because it highlights some obstacles that must be overcome. Although social presence theory was also developed in the 1970s, prior to the emergence of social media, its application is still practical today. Walther describes social presence as the "feeling that other actors are jointly involved in communicative interaction."[106] Declining social presence may mean that the receivers of messages view them as less personal. CMC is lower in social presence compared to more personal face-to-face communications.[107]

Since CMC is lower in social presence, social presence theory can be used to explain why social media users (stakeholders) may feel less connected, as if they are not communicating with a real human. Because of this feeling, organizations should stress the importance of using personal language to connect with social media users during crisis communication. For law enforcement, this theory points to the need for less formal language and a more conversational tone on social media. Law enforcement should use less police jargon and official language in exchange for a more personal and friendly tone to connect with social media users.

## B. CRISIS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH

Considerable research has been conducted on effective crisis communication. Scholars, such as Timothy Coombs, Matthew Seeger, Timothy Sellnow, William Benoit and others have attempted to identify lessons learned and best practices by case study analysis and theory application. For example, Robert Littlefield and Timothy Sellnow summarize "best practices associated with strategic planning include planning for pre-crisis logistics, coordinating networks, and accepting uncertainty associated with crises; proactive strategies encompass forming partnerships, listening to public concerns, and

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[106] Joseph Walther, "Interpersonal Effects in Computer-Mediated Interaction: A Relational Perspective," *Communication Research* 19, no. 1 (February 1992): 54, https://doi.org/10.1177/009365092019001003.

[107] Walther, 54.

being open and honest."[108] They proceed to summarize strategic responses as "being accessible to media, communicating compassion and providing self-efficacy."[109]

New studies on best practices highlight lessons learned and common themes to consider in crisis communication that specifically focus on social media. In a 2018 study analyzing crisis communication on social media, Mats Eriksson concluded that research on social media crisis communication revealed many similarities to "best practices" in basic crisis communication of the past.[110] Many of the lessons learned and best practices in crisis communication prior to social media's prevalence apparently still hold true today.

Law enforcement needs to understand best practices for social media communication so they can craft appropriate strategy. Looking to Eriksson's study, critical lessons learned include "the need for pre-event planning, partnerships with the public, listening to the public's concerns, and understanding the audience's need for credible sources."[111] More specifically, he described five lessons learned.

> **Lesson 1:** Effective social media crisis communication is about using the potential for dialogue and choosing the right message, source and timing;
>
> **Lesson 2:** Effective social media crisis communication is about being prepared, understanding social media logic, and making friends before you need them;
>
> **Lesson 3:** Effective social media crisis communication is about using social media for monitoring;
>
> **Lesson 4:** Effective social media crisis communication is still about prioritizing traditional media, this somewhat downplays the importance of social media because of the credibility of traditional media;

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[108] Robert Littlefield and Timothy Sellnow, *Risk and Crisis Communication: Navigating the Tensions between Organizations and the Public* (Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2015), 1–2, http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/ebook-nps/detail.action?docID=4086515.

[109] Littlefield and Sellnow, 1–2.

[110] Eriksson, "Lessons for Crisis Communication on Social Media," 541.

[111] Eriksson, 541.

**Lesson 5:** Effective social media crisis communication is just about using social media, highlighting that social media is a crucial component of effective crisis communication.[112]

As part of his research, Eriksson looked at the American Red Cross, an organization that has spent a considerable amount of effort producing guidelines on best practice during crisis response. Figure 5 includes the American Red Cross' recommendations for effective crisis communication.

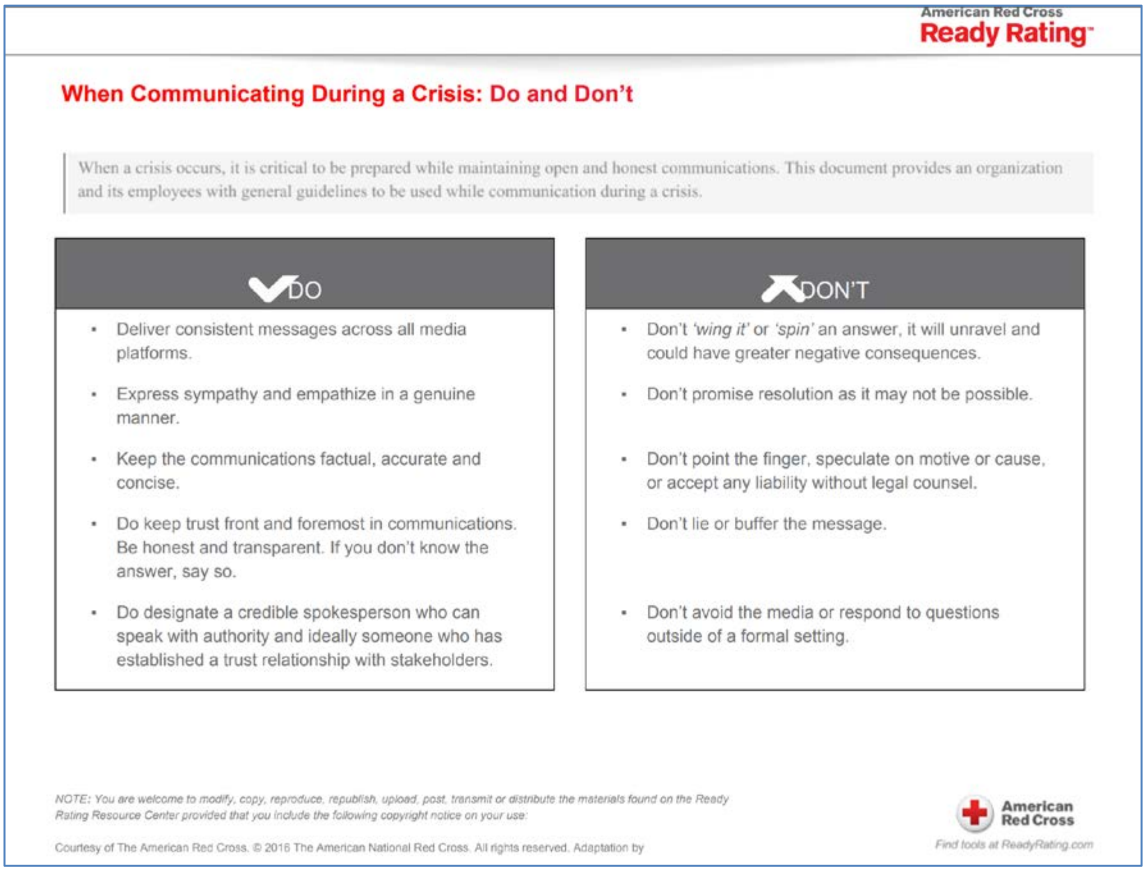


Figure 5. Red Cross' Do and Don't Recommendations for Crisis Communication.[113]

[112] Eriksson, 541.

[113] Source: "When Communicating during Crisis: Do's and Don'ts," American Red Cross, February 21, 2017, https://www.readyrating.org/Resource-Center/All-Resources/crisi-communication-dos-donts?.

The American Red Cross recognizes the need to use consistent messaging on all media platforms, maintain open and honest communications, demonstrate sympathy and empathy in terms of the language used, emphasize transparency, and build and maintain trust.[114] Many of these common themes identified in the analysis of private sector cases in the following chapter are also referenced in this thesis in the American Red Cross' document. These themes are explored in depth in the following chapters.

[114] American Red Cross.

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# IV. PRIVATE SECTOR CRISIS COMMUNICATION

Sellnow and Seeger point out that much crisis research and theory has been based on case studies featuring real world examples of organizations in crisis.[115] Lessons learned from these past crises can help in crafting future responses for law enforcement. This chapter includes an analysis of three successful crisis responses in the private sector. Southwest Airlines, Taco Bell, and GitLab all faced crises and were recognized for their successful crisis communication efforts. In comparison, Papa John's and BP also faced crises but are examined because of their unsuccessful communication responses. This chapter examines the cases in an effort to determine commonalities that can be applied to a crisis communication strategy for law enforcement.

## A. SUCCESSES IN CRISIS RESPONSE

Social media communication during crisis limits damage to the company or brand image in the private sector. In a case study on the use of value modeling to evaluate social media messages during Hurricane Katrina, Freberg et al. stressed that reputation management is an important consideration in crisis communications strategies. The authors point out, "Reputation management in the private sector often focuses on consumer sales; the public sector focuses on credibility."[116] This comparison works because without consumer sales, profit-seeking private sector companies would fail; likewise, the public sector entities, like law enforcement, need credibility and legitimacy to be effective. The researchers further assert, "A reputation can be greatly tarnished if an audience perceives a crisis response strategy to be ineffective."[117] More specifically, looking at successful private sector social media crisis responses can aid law enforcement in crafting effective strategies. Three private sector cases are examined in the following sections to identify common threads and best practices in crisis communication.

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[115] Sellnow and Seeger, *Theorizing Crisis Communication*, 3.

[116] Freberg et al., "Using Value Modeling," 2.

[117] Freberg et al., 2.

### 1. Southwest Airlines

Aviation is similar to law enforcement in that much of the work done in the field each day largely goes unnoticed. Like the thousands of calls for service and police interactions with citizens every day, professionals in aviation interact with thousands of passengers who safely make it to their travel destinations without incident. When crisis does occur, like a plane crash or an officer-involved shooting, credibility and reputation are at stake. Attribution theory advises that citizens will look for a cause for the plane crash and assign blame; whether it was an error by the pilot or failure of the airline to maintain the plane. For this reason, both fields train for the worst. In the aviation field, pilots train for the unexpected by using in-flight simulators. Law enforcement officers train in judgement and decision making in use of force simulators. This training takes place because, inevitably, crises happen and lives are at stake.

Although aviation accidents and crises are rare, planning and preparation for communication during crisis appear to be an important part of an airline's strategy. In 2016, the International Air Transport Association (IATA), a trade association of the world's airlines, released a "best practices" guide for the aviation industry. The IATA guide stressed the importance of social media in crisis communication, and asserted, "The proliferation of social media channels, and the exponential growth in mobile smartphone use have ensured that 'breaking news' of an accident or major incident will usually appear first on Twitter, Facebook or Weibo."[118] IATA recognized that a real time response will appear on social media by customers after a crisis, stating in part, "Photos, commentary and even streaming video may be available, in real time, to a vast global audience before the companies involved are fully aware of what happened."[119] IATA suggested that airlines prepare robust communication strategies for social media during "peacetime," and not in the midst of crisis.[120] The Appendix includes the full IATA guide to "best practices" for

[118] International Air Transport Association, *Crisis Communication in the Digital Age: A Guide to 'Best Practice' for the Aviation Industry* (Montreal, Canada: International Air Transport Association, 2016), 3, https://www.iata.org/publications/Documents/social-media-crisis-communications-guidelines.pdf.

[119] International Air Transport Association, 3.

[120] International Air Transport Association, 28.

the aviation industry that contains useful information and suggestions for crafting a best practice strategy.

Like the field of law enforcement, aviation crises generate considerable media attention. Headline coverage is almost assured and citizens demand answers. In her book on strategic communication after major airlines crashes, Dr. Sally Ray emphasized, “Throughout the various phases of crisis, the organization must organize and protect its own long-term corporate interest and public image; therefore, open and accurate communication is critical to the control of a crisis.”[121] Dr. Ray also believes that, “Communication failures may also play a key role in causing crisis.”[122] For this reason, airlines like Southwest Airlines spend time preparing robust crisis communication strategies. Social media is a key part of their strategy.

Southwest Airlines’ crisis management highlights how the private sector can use social media as a strategic communication tool. The airline experienced a challenge that can be considered a positive social media communication response. On April 17, 2018, SWA faced a crisis; their first passenger fatality in over 50 years of operation and the first passenger fatality from a U.S. airline accident since 2009.[123] The accidental death occurred after one of its planes, a Boeing 737-700 (N772SW) recorded as SWA Flight 1380 flying from New York to Dallas, experienced engine failure causing fragments of the plane’s engine cowling to shatter a passenger window.[124] One passenger, a wife and mother of two children, died as a result of the trauma she suffered after she was partially sucked out of the open window.[125] In addition, eight other passengers suffered non-life threatening injuries.[126]

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[121] Sally J. Ray, *Strategic Communication in Crisis Management: Lessons from the Airline Industry* (Westport, CT: Quorum Books, 1999), 20.

[122] Ray, 15.

[123] Scott Calvert, Andy Pasztor, and Doug Cameron, “‘Panic Just Ensues’: Inside Southwest’s Fatal Midair Engine Failure,” *Wall Street Journal Eastern Edition*, April 23, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/southwest-jet-makes-emergency-landing-in-philadelphia-1523985825.

[124] “Southwest Airlines Engine Accident,” National Transportation Safety Board, 2018, https://www.ntsb.gov/investigations/Pages/DCA18MA142.aspx.

[125] Nation Transportation Safety Board.

[126] Nation Transportation Safety Board.

As IATA predicted in their report, after the SWA's April 17 tragedy, passengers aboard flight 1380 jumped on social media to post their own accounts of the accident, with one passenger even broadcasting live video from the plane on Facebook. As confirmed during the demonstrations in Ferguson, social media posts created by the public can now be expected during crisis. The difference in this example was that SWA's strategic communication team was not far behind. The timeline of events demonstrates the short time between the crisis itself and the start of social media communication. Flight 1380 departed from La Guardia Airport at 10:43 a.m. Eastern Daylight Time (EDT). The engine failure occurred at 11:03 a.m. EDT, 20 minutes into the flight. A passenger on the flight started live-streaming video on Facebook at 11:12 a.m. EDT while another passenger uploaded video from the plane on social media at 11:16 a.m. EDT. Flight 1380 made an emergency landing in Philadelphia, 22 minutes after take-off. At 11:20 a.m. EDT, passengers began posting photos of the damaged plane along with personal commentary about the event.[127] Figure 6 shows a Facebook post from one of the passengers. The post included photographs of the plane's damaged engine and window.[128]

[127] Scott McCartney, "At Southwest Airlines, the Minutes after Disaster Struck," *Wall Street Journal*, April 24, 2018, https://www.wsj.com/articles/at-southwest-airlines-the-minutes-after-disaster-struck-1524586032.

[128] Marty Martinez, Facebook, April 17, 2018, https://www.facebook.com%2Fmarty.martinez.96%2F videos%2F10211397296550342%2F&display=popup&ref=plugin&src=video.

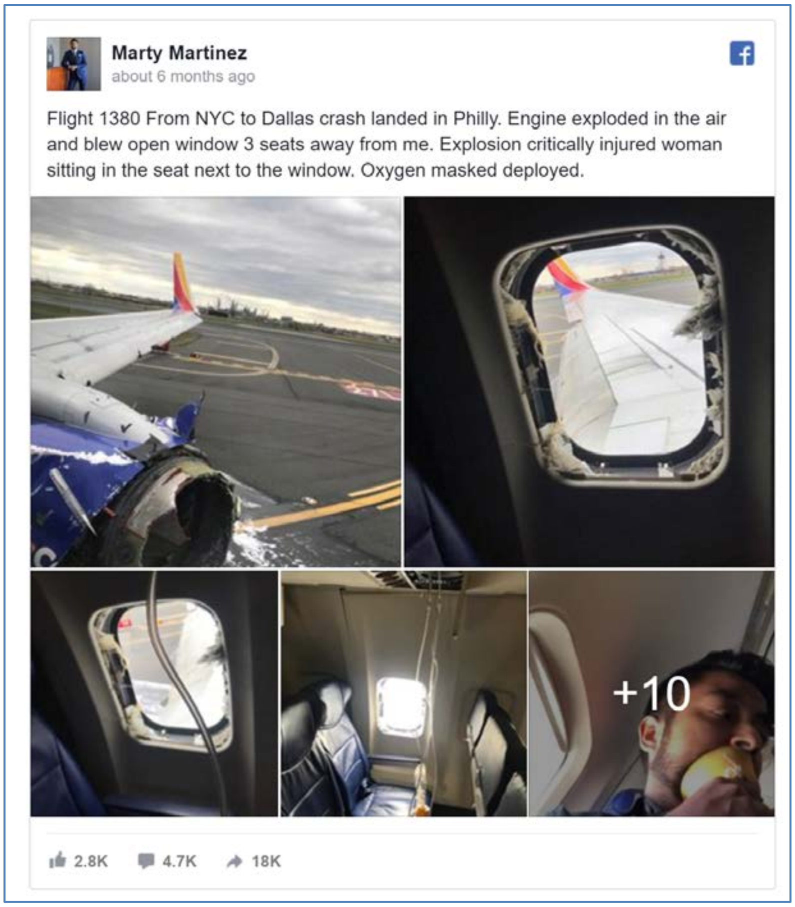


Figure 6. Social Media Post from SWA Passenger Marty Martinez.[129]

Figure 7 includes a Twitter post from another passenger with a detailed photo of the plane's damaged engine.

[129] Source: "One Dead in Southwest Airlines Flight Emergency Landing in Philadelphia," CBS News, April 17, 2018, https://www.cbsnews.com/news/southwest-airlines-flight-emergency-landing-today-2018-04-17-live-stream-updates/.

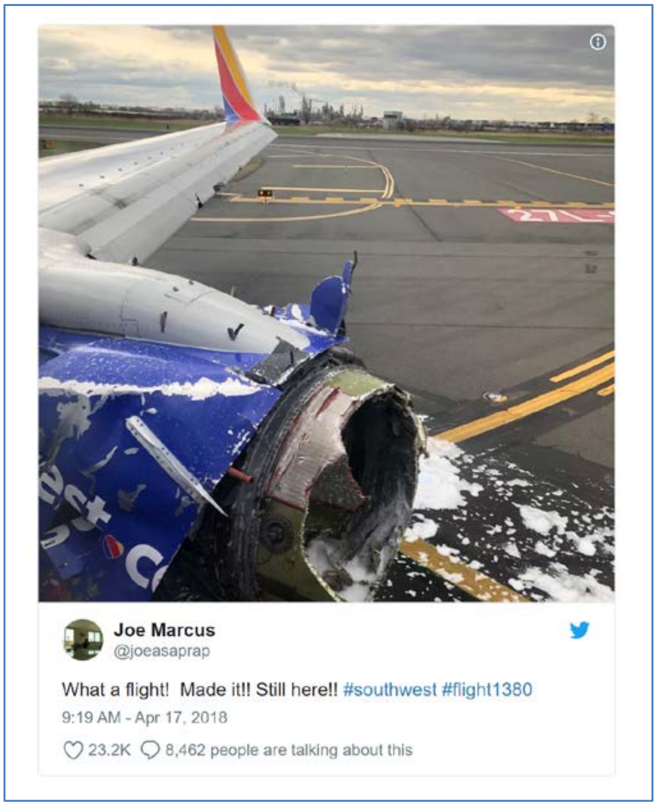


Figure 7. Social Media Post from SWA Passenger Joe Marcus.[130]

Twenty-two minutes after the SWA accident, the narrative for the crisis was already being written on social media. In this same time, the SWA team had already initiated its crisis management plan. SWA has 2.12 million followers on Twitter alone, which makes its social media reach broad.[131] Even though the communications team had few details about the event, within an hour of the engine failure, SWA was releasing information through social media, including Facebook and Twitter.[132] Figure 8 includes SWA's first Twitter post after the accident. Although little confirmed information was available to

[130] Source: Andrew Hawkins, "One Passenger Dead after Southwest Airlines Flight," *The Verge*, April 17, 2018, https://www.theverge.com/2018/4/17/17248518/southwest-airlines-emergency-landing-passenger-dead.

[131] Southwest Airlines (@SouthwestAir), Twitter, February 25, 2018, https://twitter.com/SouthwestAir?ref_src=twsrc%5Egoogle%7Ctwcamp%5Eserp%7Ctwgr%5Eauthor.

[132] Southwest Airlines (@SouthwestAir), Twitter, April 17, 2018, 9:39 p.m., https://twitter.com/SouthwestAir/status/986283039339810817.

share, SWA appeared to release as many details as possible and assured social media followers they would share updates as information was confirmed.


Figure 8. SWA's First Social Media Post after Flight 1380 Accident.[133]

Linda Rutherford, a senior vice president and the chief communications officer at SWA, stressed the need for proactive communication during a crisis. In a 2017 article she wrote for *PR News*, she discussed the challenges of speed and accuracy during crisis. Rutherford recommended, "In the rush to get out information, don't speculate. Give frequent, factual updates."[134] She added that "quickness" can have a negative impact on "accuracy."[135] She also focused on the importance of honesty and the need to explain why the crisis occurred, and advised, "Explain the cause, the effects and what you're doing to make it right."[136] In another interview with *PR Weekly* in 2018, Rutherford discussed

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[133] Source: Southwest Airlines (@SouthwestAir), Twitter, April 17, 2018, 9:39 p.m.

[134] Linda Rutherford, "How Southwest Responded to a Crisis under Unthinkable Circumstances," *PR News*, August 15, 2017, http://www.prnewsonline.com/southwest-responded-crisis-unthinkable-circumstances/.

[135] Rutherford.

[136] Rutherford.

SWA's communication strategy and pointed out the need for a "personal touch."[137] Personalizing language helps overcome the challenges previously identified by social presence theory. Avoiding legal or business language helps overcome the less personal nature of CMC, and makes social media users feel more connected. She described SWA's strategy as having "two pillars: compassion and action" and stressed that they strive to be "transparent and communicative" and "compassionate to the dynamics of a situation."[138]

SWA's response after the April 17 accident followed the strategies outlined by Rutherford. Just hours after the incident, SWA's chief executive officer (CEO) Gary C. Kelly was featured in a 94-second prepared video response that was released on all of SWA's social media channels including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube.[139] Figure 9 contains SWA's Twitter post, a video of their CEO confirming the incident and delivering a heartfelt message to the public. The video begins with Mr. Kelly's confirmation that a SWA passenger lost her life on Flight 1380. The video begins and ends with condolences to the family and loved ones of the deceased passenger.

[137] Diane Bradley, "Communicating in a Fog of War: How Southwest Airlines is Responding to a Passenger Death," *PR Weekly*, April 19, 2018, https://www.prweek.com/article/1462622/communicating-fog-war-southwest-airlines-responding-passenger-death.

[138] Bradley.

[139] Southwest Airlines, "Gary Kelly—Flight 1380," YouTube, video, 1:34, April 17, 2018, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fz2rC1deJd0#action=share.


Figure 9. Social Media Post by SWA's CEO Gary C. Kelly.[140]

Mr. Kelly did several important things in the video: he expressed deep sadness and sympathy for the victim and the loved ones of the victim, he took responsibility and promised a full inquiry ensuring the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) would be investigating the incident, and, finally, he showed gratitude for the crew members and SWA employees for their actions in landing the plane safely. SWA's communication stayed within the two pillars discussed by Rutherford, compassion and action. Compassion was shown for all those affected by the tragedy (i.e., victims, loved ones of victims, SWA customers, and SWA employees), and action was promised by ensuring full cooperation with the NTSB.

SWA's success at crisis communication on social media is not by chance. Linda Rutherford stressed that the SWA communication teams "plan for the unexpected" by reviewing their crisis plans and participating in drills to help ensure they are prepared for any situation thrown their way.[141] Rutherford explained that SWA's crisis communication

[140] Source: Southwest Airlines (@SouthwestAir), Twitter, April 17, 2018, 2:21 p.m., https://twitter.com/SouthwestAir/status/986354089591062528.

[141] Rutherford, "How Southwest Responded to a Crisis."

objectives are to, “Demonstrate success in responding to the issue and our concern for anyone who may be affected; defuse conflict or controversy; and reduce pressures facing Southwest Airlines as a result.”[142]

### 2. Taco Bell

The fast food industry may not be as easily compared to the field of law enforcement as aviation, but like law enforcement, health and safety is a major focus of the food industry. Businesses in the fast food industry provide quality food products to millions of consumers each day. Disputes related to food quality create crises because negative accusations against a fast food chain can damage the reputation of the organization and have a devastating effect on their success. Comparing accusations about the quality of ground beef to a use of force incident by law enforcement may seem like a stretch; however, this case highlights a challenge to the organization’s reputation and image, something that law enforcement faces regularly.

The Taco Bell Corporation serves over two billion customers a year with roughly 7,000 locations around the world.[143] On January 19, 2011, the Taco Bell Corporation, based in Irvine, California, was served with a class action lawsuit filed by the Beasley Allen law firm on behalf of California resident Amanda Obney.[144] According to a 2011 article in the *Wall Street Journal*, news of the pending lawsuit was already spreading across the internet days before Taco Bell was officially notified.[145] The lawsuit claimed that Taco Bell was misrepresenting the quality of the beef being served to its customers. Beasley Allen’s lawsuit claimed, “Rather than beef, these food items are actually made with a

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[142] Rutherford, “How Southwest Responded to a Crisis.”

[143] Steve Tulman, “How Taco Bell Is Winning at Social Media Marketing,” *Vunela Magazine*, July 26, 2017, https://magazine.vunela.com/how-taco-bell-is-winning-at-social-media-marketing-d9e52d2a3eb4.

[144] *Amanda Obney v. Taco Bell Corporation*, Case 8:11-CV-00101-DOC-FFM (C.D. Cal. 2011), http://www.scribd.com/doc/48740872/Taco-Bell-Lawsuit.

[145] Julie Jargon, Emily Steel, and Joann S. Lublin, “Taco Bell Makes Spicy Retort to Suit,” *Wall Street Journal Eastern Edition*, January 31, 2011, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748704832704576114280629161632.

substance known as ‘taco meat filling.’”[146] The lawsuit ultimately sought to have Taco Bell halt all advertising that promoted “seasoned ground beef” and “seasoned beef.”[147]

Beasley Allen’s claim further stated this information constituted “false and misleading advertising” because the meat being used by Taco Bell was inconsistent with the United States Department of Agriculture’s (USDA) definition of beef.[148] They alleged that Taco Bell used what they labeled as “seasonings” to increase volume, not to add taste or flavor to their beef.[149] The allegations in the lawsuit went viral, quickly flooding social media with negative comments and responses about the fast food chain.

Taco Bell is active on social media. The company’s homepage has its own blog and links to several social media platforms including Snap Chat, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, and Instagram.[150] The company’s social media reach is vast, with over 9.9 million Facebook followers alone.[151] Like SWA, Taco Bell acted quickly to defend its reputation.

After being served with the lawsuit in 2011, Taco Bell took out full-page advertisements in major newspapers and used social media to defend its reputation aggressively and to tell its own story. Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube were used to spread the company’s own narrative about the lawsuit. Like SWA, Taco Bell released a one-and-a-half minute video on YouTube featuring the company’s President Greg Creed. The message was simple, “Thank you for suing us. Here’s the truth about our seasoned beef.”[152] Figure 10 contains a picture of the ad Taco Bell ran in newspapers across the country, which were also shared on social media. Creed later said the crisis from the lawsuit afforded Taco Bell the opportunity to talk about the quality of its food.”[153] Creed defended the

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[146] *Taco Bell Corporation*, 2.

[147] *Taco Bell Corporation*, 2.

[148] *Taco Bell Corporation*, 2.

[149] *Taco Bell Corporation*, 2.

[150] “About Us,” Taco Bell, accessed September 5, 2018, https://www.tacobell.com/about-us.

[151] “Taco Bell,” Facebook, accessed September 5, 2018, https://www.facebook.com/tacobell/.

[152] Greg Beaubien, “Taco Bell Bites Back at Beef Complaint,” *Public Relations Tactics*, February 1, 2011, http://apps.prsa.org/SearchResults/view/9018/105/Taco_Bell_bites_back_at_beef_complaint#.XIC6tsBKjcs/.

[153] Beaubien,

company's seasoned beef mixture and explained that they used 100 percent USDA inspected beef and that the mixture is 88 percent beef in contrast to the accusation that the mixture was only 35 percent beef.[154]

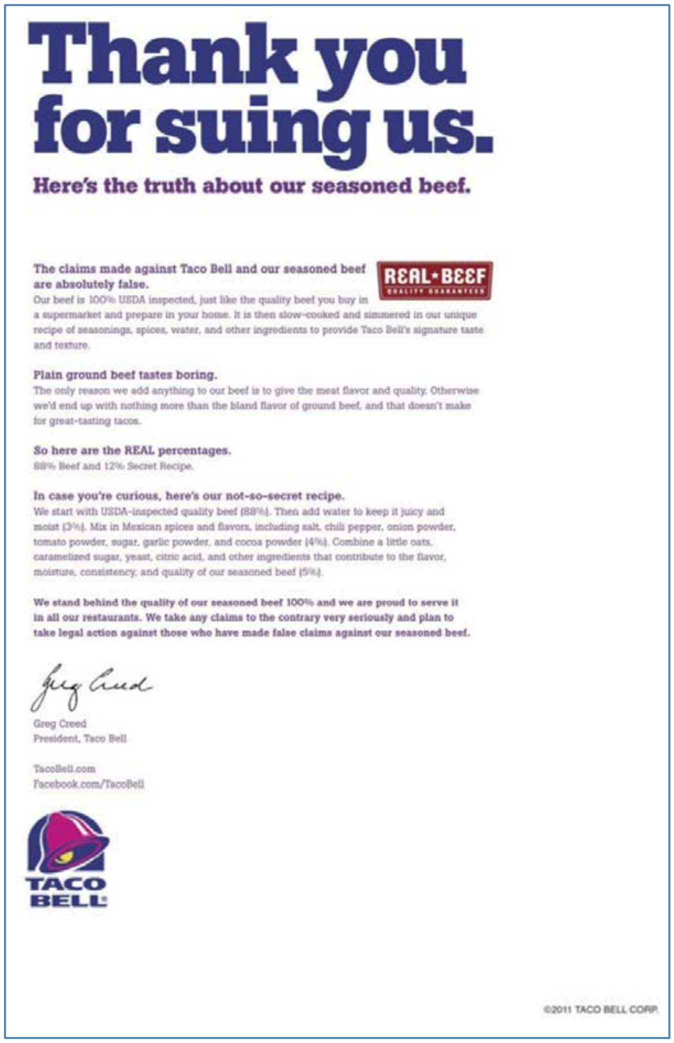


Figure 10. Taco Bell Advertisement after Lawsuit Filed.[155]

[154] Beaubien.

[155] Source: Colin Sterling, "Thank You for Suing Us. Taco Bell Fights Beef Lawsuit with Full-Page Ads," *Huffington Post*, January 28, 2011, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/taco-bell-beef-meat-lawsuit-ads_n_815303.

Like the video released by SWA after its first passenger death, the YouTube video Taco Bell released focused on honesty and transparency. After Creed ensured that 88 percent beef was used, he went on to explain the other ingredients. Creed playfully asks, "So what's the other 12%? It's our secret. And I'm gonna give it to ya."[156] Creed gave a complete list of the other "secret" ingredients used by Taco Bell, and gave a narrative that was transparent and provided the appearance of full disclosure by the company. Taco Bell's aggressive social media defense during this crisis was successful, and it helped repair its reputation and image.

In April 2011, just months after filing the lawsuit, Beasley Allen voluntarily withdrew the litigation with no money exchanged between the parties and no advertising changes by Taco Bell.[157] Even after the lawsuit was withdrawn, Taco Bell stayed on the offensive to defend its reputation. Full-page advertisements were again purchased in national and local papers and posted on social media that asked the Beasley Allen law firm, "Would it kill you to say you're sorry?" Figure 11 includes a picture of the ad Taco Bell ran in newspapers across the country and posted on social media.

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[156] PublicApologyCentral, "Taco Bell CEO Defends against Accusations that Beef Is Not Really Beef," YouTube, video, 1:38, December 8, 2011, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o5nUUK21wZI&t=1s.

[157] Nathan Becker, "Lawsuit over Taco Bell's Meat is Dropped," *Wall Street Journal*, April 19, 2011, http://libproxy.nps.edu/login?url=https://search.proquest.com/docview/862562964?accountid=12702.


Figure 11. Taco Bell Advertisement after the Withdrawal of Lawsuit.[158]

Taco Bell remained focused on crisis communication after the lawsuit because its reputation was still at risk. Image repair theory highlights how threats to an organization's image require corrective actions and image repair messaging to restore the reputation. Taco Bell went on the offensive to ensure the public knew that it was not at fault, which highlighted that no changes were made to its ground beef and no settlement or money was exchanged. These actions helped further repair its image and restore customers' trust in the quality of its beef. Similarly, law enforcement's image and reputation is tied to public trust and legitimacy, and Taco Bell's response offers a high-profile example to emulate.

[158] Source: Maureen Morrison, "False Advertising Suit Withdrawn but Taco Bell Stays on the Offensive," AdAge, April 20, 2011, https://adage.com/article/news/taco-bell-breaks-ad-push-false-advertising-case-ends/227089/.

### 3. GitLab

Trusting a company with your personal data requires a significant level of confidence. Losing customer data means the reputation and image of that company is at risk. The start-up company GitLab, which hosts source code for programmers and developers around the world, experienced its first major crisis on January 31, 2017.[159] Client data from one of its primary database services was removed by accident, as a result of human error. To exacerbate the crisis further, GitLab's data backup efforts failed, which resulted in a significant loss of its customers' intellectual property. The crisis resulted in GitLab.com services being unavailable for 18 hours thus risking negative consequences to the brand's reputation.[160] GitLab's mistake affected more than 5,000 client projects, including major organizations, such as IBM, Sony, NASA, Alibaba, Invincea, Jülich Research Center, O'Reilly Media, Leibniz-Rechenzentrum (LRZ), and Conseil Européen pour la Recherche Nucléaire (CERN), the European Organization for Nuclear Research.[161]

GitLab's crisis communication strategy and use of social media helped salvage its reputation. Instead of trying to hide its mistake, the company chose to personally expose it. On January 31, 2017, after discovering its own error, GitLab used social media to reveal exactly what happened. In a move out of SWA's playbook, GitLab explained the cause of the data loss, how it would affect customers, and its plans for fixing it. It provided regular updates about what the company was doing to restore service. GitLab took to social media quickly and helped control the narrative. Figure 12 includes GitLab's Twitter post after the data loss, which included the link to a Google document that provided live updates and notes from the company.

[159] Nadia Nazarova, "This Company Accidentally Deleted its Clients' Data. Here's How it Won them Back," *Entrepreneur*, March 2, 2017, https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/289836.

[160] Nazarova.

[161] Nazarova.

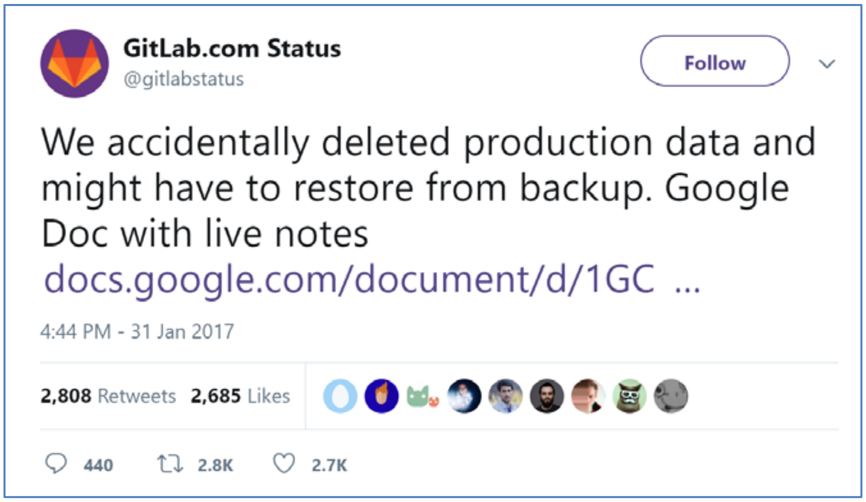


Figure 12. GitLab Twitter Post from January 31, 2017.[162]

GitLab took responsibility for the data loss and outlined the steps it was taking to ensure it would not happen again. Customers did not have to search to assign cause or blame, as the mistake was clearly GitLab's. The company's reputation was at stake, and image repair discourse was necessary to restore its image because customers lost confidence in the company. On February 10, 2017, GitLab's CEO Sytse "Sid" Sidbrandij posted a "postmortem" statement about the crisis on its website citing in part, "Losing production data is unacceptable."[163] GitLab openly discussed what went wrong, how it recovered the data, and the steps it was taking to ensure it never happened in the future.[164]

Like SWA and Taco Bell, GitLab's CEO responded quickly and proactively to the crisis and personally apologized. Social presence theory and the effect CMC has on communication suggests GitLab responded in the correct manner to customers on social media. It used a personal and apologetic tone to have conversations with customers through social media. In part, Sidbrandij's apology stated, "To the GitLab.com users whose data we lost and to the people affected by the outage: we're sorry. I apologize personally, as

[162] Source: GitLab Status (@gitlabstatus), Twitter, January 31, 2017, https://twitter.com/gitlabstatus/status/826591961444384768.

[163] "Postmortem of Database Outage on January 31, 2017," GitLab, February 10, 2017, https://about.gitlab.com/2017/02/10/postmortem-of-database-outage-of-january-31/.

[164] GitLab.

GitLab's CEO, and on behalf of everyone at GitLab."[165] Its willingness to accept responsibility and assurances that the mistake would not happen again helped repair its image and restore customer trust. In the days following the data loss, GitLab kept its customers updated regularly on social media. Figure 13 includes a post from GitLab's Twitter page the day after the data loss. The post is transparent and explains exactly what happened and how the company was going to fix the problem.

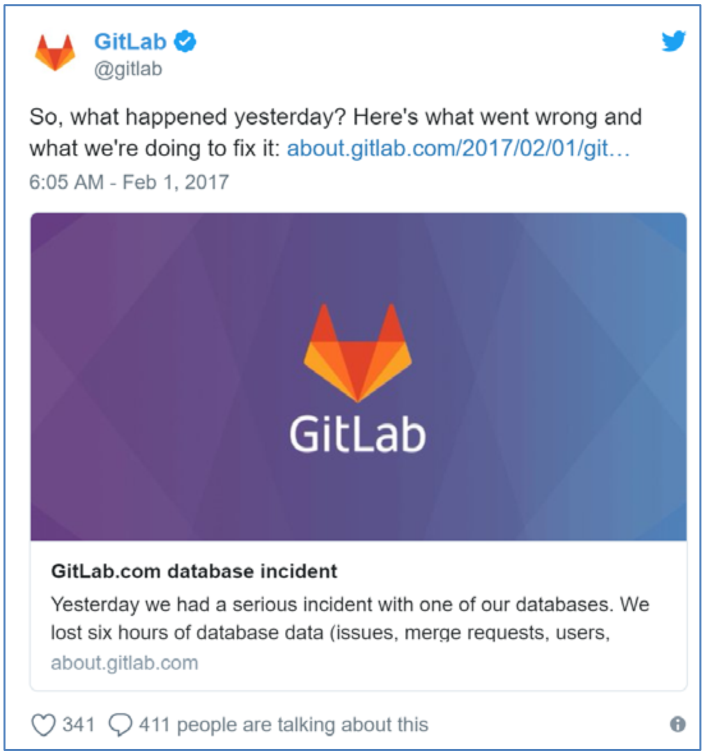


Figure 13. GitLab Twitter Post from February 1, 2017.[166]

In an *Entrepreneur* magazine article, marketing manager Nadia Nazarova examined the GitLab data loss crisis. Nazarova believes the case is remarkable because of the company's crisis response, specifically pointing out that GitLab:

[165] GitLab.

[166] Source: GitLab (@gitlab), Twitter, February 1, 2017, https://twitter.com/gitlab/status/826778395048546304?lang=en.

- Admitted the mistake publicly and asked for help.
- Was transparent and responded effectively, and pointed out that it was doing everything possible to solve the problem.
- Took it as a professional challenge, which led the company to gain help from the entire community.
- Was professional, accepted responsibility, and solved the problem.[167]

Part of image repair requires owning mistakes. Like SWA and Taco Bell, GitLab's honesty and transparency in communication were important factors in successfully managing the crisis on social media. In SWA and GitLab's case, this action included apologizing. Much like these organizations, law enforcement makes mistakes each day. What is different between GitLab, SWA, and law enforcement is that the latter is not known for apologizing. The inability or unwillingness to do so can be attributed to a myriad of reasons including fear of admitting guilt and fear of the repercussions in court.[168]

Fortunately, a recent shift in the willingness of police leaders to accept blame when their agencies are at fault seems to be occurring. In September 2018, the Police Chief of Prince George's County publicly apologized less than 24 hours after his officers conducted a search warrant at the wrong address that resulted in shots being exchanged between an innocent citizen and his officers.[169] During the press conference, the chief stressed that the people had a right to know what happened, and emphasized "transparency is what fosters confidence."[170] In another case from November 2018, the Kirkland Police Department in Washington State also issued a public apology. Officers were called to a yogurt shop and

[167] Nazarova, "This Company Accidentally Deleted its Clients' Data."

[168] Matt Stiehm, "What Doctors Can Teach Cops about Saying 'I'm Sorry,'" PoliceOne, July 11, 2013, https://www.policeone.com/police-jobs-and-careers/articles/6318101-What-doctors-can-teach-cops-about-saying-Im-sorry/.

[169] Tom Jackman, "Prince George's County Police Chief Does Amazing Thing: Provides Facts and Apologizes for a Mistake Almost Immediately," *Washington Post*, September 24, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/crime-law/2018/09/24/prince-georges-police-chief-does-amazing-thing-provides-facts-apologizes-mistake-almost-immediately/?utm_term=.db95ac554208.

[170] Jackman.

subsequently helped the owner of a business remove a 31-year old African American male for no other reason than workers felt he looked suspicious.[171] The male was an Air Force veteran who was present as a court-appointed special advocate to monitor a court-supervised visit between a parent and child.[172] These types of negative interactions can have serious repercussions on law enforcement's reputation. Taking responsibility and using this type of apology language in crisis communication is critical for image repair.

## B. FAILURES IN CRISIS COMMUNICATION

While successes can be many, the private sector does not always handle crisis communication well. It is possible to learn much from recent failures, as they help to inform best practices in police departments.

### 1. Papa John's

In 2018, the pizza chain Papa John's learned the hard way how not using effective crisis communication messaging on social media can hurt a company's performance. After the face of the company, controversial founder and former CEO John Schnatter, used a racial slur during a conference call, social media ignited with angry posts about the company.

Schnatter had already caused backlash from the media over statements on race after demonstrations by National Football League (NFL) players. The company quickly prepared and released a written statement for the media the same day news of the racial slur broke. Customers did not respond positively to the written message. The use of a written apology, as opposed to an in-person response by a Papa John's representative similar to the YouTube responses by SWA and Taco Bell, fueled the impression that the apology was less heartfelt. Soon after the crisis, Papa Johns' sales dropped 10% for the

[171] Aris Folley, "Police Apologize for Removing Black Man from Wash. Yogurt Shop," *The Hill*, November 21, 2018, https://thehill.com/blogs/blog-briefing-room/news/417903-police-sorry-for-removing-black-man-from-yogurt-shop-because.

[172] Folley.

months of July and August.[173] On August 24, Papa John's finally released video on social media with an emotional message to the public.[174] The message indicated that Papa John's had heard the outcry from hurt and angry customers. The video highlighted some of the negative social media posts the company had received since the racist remark by Schnatter and provided assurances that the company would do better. Figure 14 contains an image of Papa John's Twitter page after the release of its apology video. The video has been viewed over 3.4 million times.[175]


Figure 14. Papa John's Twitter Post from August 24, 2018.[176]

[173] Americus Reed and Erik Gordon, "Marketing to Digital Natives: How Brand Loyalty is Changing," *Knowledge@Wharton*, September 19, 2018, http://knowledge.wharton.upenn.edu/article/marketing-to-digital-natives/.

[174] Papa John's (@PapaJohns), Twitter, August 24, 2018 at 11:43 a.m., https://twitter.com/PapaJohns/status/1033062371928035328.

[175] Papa John's (@PapaJohns).

[176] Source: Papa John's (@PapaJohns).

Communications and Public Relations strategist David Grinberg analyzed the Papa John's case. Grinberg highlighted Schnatter's breakdowns in communication, including his failure to follow a crisis communication guide, his failure to face the media in person by choosing to release a written statement, his unwillingness to admit wrongdoing or apologize to the public, his unwillingness to show meaningful regret or remorse, his unwillingness to ask to be forgiven, and most importantly, his inability to explain that he understands the use of racial slurs is always wrong and is committed to combating racism.[177] Grinberg believes if Papa John's had followed these steps, the company could have pivoted to a positive message that would have enabled it to overcome the damage inflicted by the crisis and perhaps even become a leader against racial injustice.

### 2. BP

New York University Professor Helio Fred Garcia stresses, "Communication is rendered ineffective when it's impulsive or self-indulgent."[178] He references the oil company BP as an example of how not to communicate during a crisis. After the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in 2010, which left 11 dead and many more injured, then CEO Tony Hayward faced difficult questions from the media. In a moment of frustration, he responded to questions by proclaiming, "There's no one who wants this thing over more than I do. You know, I'd like my life back."[179] Hayward's impulsive statement expressed personal self-pity and lacked empathy for those who literally had lost their lives during the incident. Through his research on crisis communication, Garcia has discovered, "This perception of indifference is the single largest contributor to harm in the aftermath of a crisis, especially when there are victims. Companies, governments, and leaders are forgiven when bad things happen. But they won't be forgiven if they're seen not to care that bad things have happened. This is a lesson that many leaders fail to understand or to

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[177] Gil Rudawsky, "Crisis Communication Playbook Thrown out in Papa John's Saga," *Ground Floor Media and Center Table* (blog), July 27, 2018, https://groundfloormedia.com/blog/2018/07/crisis-communication-playbook-thrown-out-in-papa-john-saga/.

[178] Helio Fred Garcia, "Leadership Communications: Planning for the Desired Reaction," *Strategy & Leadership* 40, no. 6 (2012): 42–45, https://doi.org/10.1108/10878571211278886.

[179] Elizabeth Shogren, "BP: A Textbook Example of How Not to Handle PR," NPR, April 21, 2011, https://www.npr.org/2011/04/21/135575238/bp-a-textbook-example-of-how-not-to-handle-pr.

act on in the initial early phases of a crisis."[180] Imagine how Hayward's statement, that he would like his life back, actually resonated with the loved ones of those who had indeed lost their lives during BP's oil rig explosion.

BP's failures in communication are glaring but examining how the company got to that point has value. Hayward had cut BP's funding in public and government relations and relied, in part, on consultants to help navigate his way through communication during the incident. BP did not have a public relations strategy and it neglected to communicate effectively with the community.[181] In a series on the communications industry, a National Public Radio (NPR) reporter observed that BP "failed to communicate the three key messages the public needed to hear: That BP was accountable for the disaster, was deeply concerned about the harm it caused and had a plan for what to do."[182]

One thing BP did get right when the company found itself entangled in crisis was finally turning to social media. Prior to the Gulf of Mexico accident, BP had no dedicated social media staff. Although BP had a social media presence, it was not being utilized effectively. At the time, BP's Facebook page had only a few hundred followers. In the aftermath of the incident, BP became more involved on social media. It started posting videos and briefings to explain the extent and seriousness of the problems it was trying to solve. At the height of the crisis, BP was active on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube and had attained tens of thousands of followers.[183] Four years after the incident, a 2015 study on the use of social media during crisis in the oil industry concluded, "The impact of utilising social media as a communication platform during an organisation's image and reputation is considerable and can build trust and positive relationships among its

[180] Helio Fred Garcia, "Effective Leadership Response to Crisis," *Strategy & Leadership* 34, no. 1 (2006): 4–10, https://doi.org/10.1108/10878570610637849.

[181] Shogren, "BP: A Textbook Example of How Not to Handle PR."

[182] Shogren.

[183] Shogren.

stakeholders. Using social media during a crisis not only benefits the affected public but is also of advantage to the organisation itself."[184]

The unsuccessful crisis strategies used by Papa John's and BP highlight failures in communication and pitfalls that law enforcement should avoid when crafting strategy. The positive examples examined in this chapter revealed common threads in successful crisis communication strategy deployed by SWA, Taco Bell, and GitLab. These strategies are examined in detail in the following chapter.

[184] Nor Emmy Shuhada Derani and Naidu Prashalini, "The Impact of Utilizing Social Media as a Communication Platform during a Crisis within the Oil Industry," *Procedia Economics and Finance* 35, no. C (2016): 650–658, https://doi.org/10.1016/S2212-5671(16)00080-0.

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# V. COMMON THREADS IN SUCCESSFUL CRISIS STRATEGY

The analysis of existing research and theory reveals several principles and common themes in effective crisis communication. These hold true today despite the impact that social media has had on communication. The analysis of private sector crisis communication case studies revealed similarities across successful strategies. The research found seven common threads in crisis communication that can be applied to a social media strategy for law enforcement. The seven commonalities were identified in the previous case studies involving SWA, Taco Bell, and GitLab; they are examined in detail in this chapter. Many of these exact elements were absent from the unsuccessful crisis communication strategies summarized in the Papa John's and BP case studies. These seven common threads can be used as smart practice when crafting a crisis communication strategy for law enforcement.

## A. ESTABLISH PROTOCOLS AND IDENTIFY A CRISIS TEAM

Organizations should not wait for a crisis to occur to begin preparing a communications strategy. Establishing protocols and forming a crisis communication team while in non-crisis mode is important. The IATA best practices guide stressed the importance of developing a crisis communication plan ahead of a crisis and clearly identifying and training members of the crisis team.[185] Ellen Hartman, CEO of Hartman Public Relations, also stresses how important it is for organizations to prepare for crisis in advance. This type of preparation includes the development of clear protocols, the establishment of a crisis team, and the identification of vulnerabilities and subsequent agency responses in a manual.[186]

An organization's crisis communication team should include members of the leadership to ensure decision makers are part of the social media communication strategy.

[185] International Air Transport Association, *Crisis Communication in the Digital Age*, 28–29.

[186] Sara Rush Wirth, "How to Handle a Crisis and Prevent Viral Negativity," *Restaurant Business Online*, December 17, 2015, https://www.restaurantbusinessonline.com/marketing/how-handle-crisis-prevent-viral-negativity.

Bobbi Kay Lewis and Cynthia Nichols conducted an examination of existing theory and practice in communication research, and specifically, those addressing social media. They believe that social media has many benefits and point out that various disciplines within organizations have attempted to take ownership over social media. These disciplines include public relations, marketing, advertising, and management. They argue that to be effective in each of the aforementioned disciplines, the "social media plan needs to be positioned in the strategic communications of an organization, meaning it is part of the management structure that makes all of the key organizational decisions."[187] IATA provides a suggested basic framework for the development of a crisis management team. Figure 15 shows the image of an organizational chart that IATA recommends for a crisis communication team.

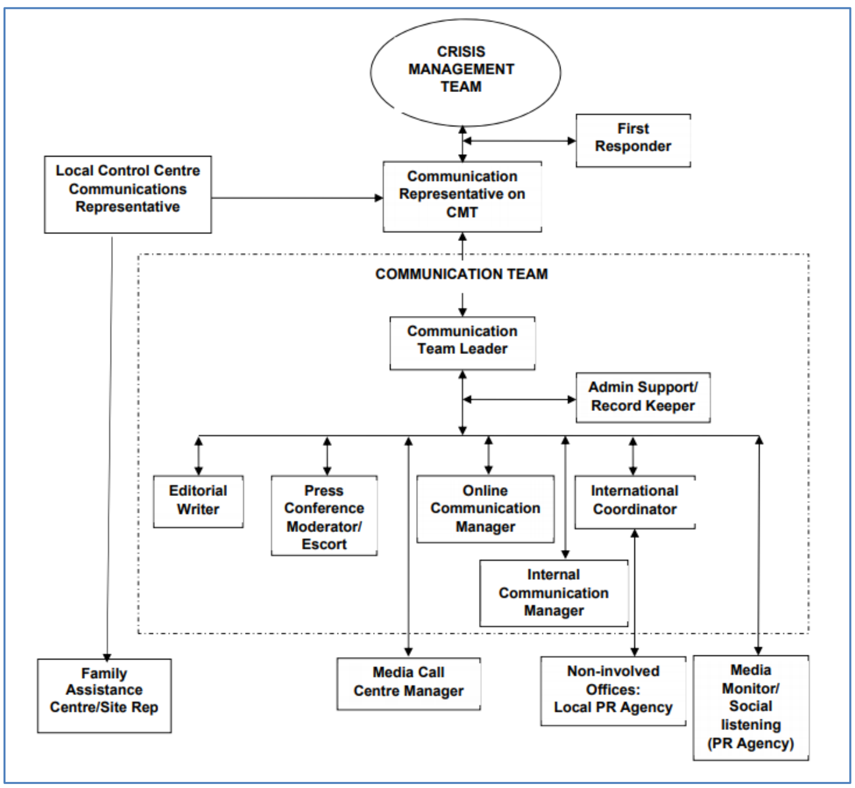


Figure 15. IATA's Organizational Chart for a Crisis Communication Team.[188]

[187] Lewis and Nichols, "Social Media and Strategic Communication," 557.

[188] Source: International Air Transport Association, *Crisis Communication in the Digital Age*, 32.

While this organizational chart may not apply to every agency in the private and public sectors, value is seen in how its development will add structure to a crisis team. Forming a crisis management team, with clear roles and responsibilities, can aid organizations by providing structure and clear lines of authority. In chaotic times of crises, having this clear structure in place will help ensure each team member's responsibilities are carried out.

## B. PREPARE FOR CRISIS: TRAINING- AND SCENARIO-BASED DRILLS

Research and common sense indicate that effective crisis communication does not happen by accident; it is a thoughtful, purposeful process. Honing communication skills takes both time and effort, and leaders must invest their time and energy preparing for crises. When preparing a crisis communication plan, Kathleen Fearn-Banks encourages organizations to, "Imagine the worst. Experts advise organizations to develop crisis plans after identifying the mostly likely and damaging issues and situations they might face."[189] For example, because SWA methodically prepares for crisis, when it experienced its first passenger fatality, its response was very effective.

Organizations should prepare for the worst when they are in non-crisis mode. In his research on best practices in crisis communication, Seeger outlined steps organizations should take while in pre-crisis mode. He asserts, "These include identifying risk areas and corresponding risk reduction, pre-setting initial crisis responses so that decision making during a crisis is more efficient, and identifying necessary response resources."[190] He believes great benefit can be gained in identifying potential crises and formulating a plan of action if they should occur. For law enforcement, the use of force is inevitable and poses an obvious risk to the reputation of the agency involved. Ensuring the right message gets out, in an open and transparent manner, therefore should be the focus for law enforcement

[189] Kathleen Fearn-Banks, "Crisis Communications Lessons from Sept. 11," *Public Relations Tactics* 9, no. 9 (September 2002): 1.

[190] Seeger, "Best Practices in Crisis Communication," 237.

leaders. Garcia asserts, "Leaders need to invest as much time at getting good at communication as they do at the more quantitative or technical elements of their jobs."[191]

Like the scenario-based simulation training used in the aviation and law enforcement fields, crisis communication skills can be honed by using a similar approach. Rick Van Warner, president of the consulting firm The Parquet Group, encourages crisis media training and drills to prepare for crises.[192] While media training and the simulation training used by law enforcement are not exactly the same, real life scenarios and common crisis situations can be simulated in table top exercises to prepare crisis teams for real life events. Crisis managers in law enforcement can identify events that put agencies at risk each day, such as police-involved shootings, fatalities caused by police vehicle pursuits, or use of force incidents with non-lethal weapons that result in serious injury or death. Crisis teams can draft and practice social media responses to these scenarios to help ensure the team is prepared and that the crisis communication strategy is followed from the initial notification of a crisis through the days and weeks following.

These type of pre-planning drills help crisis managers to prepare better for future events. IATA recommends that at minimum an organization should conduct one annual real-world exercise. It stresses this practice is important so that each member of the crisis team "understands their role, and the purpose of the plan."[193] Using scenario-based training and preparing draft responses to potential events will help ensure organizations are ahead of the game and ready for crises.

## C. RESPOND QUICKLY

Each case study evaluated from the private sector suggested that the speed of communication on social media after a crisis is one of the most important factors in a good crisis communication strategy. Garcia stresses, "Speed matters, and time is a leader's

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[191] Anonymous, "Crucial Communications during a Crisis: Q&A with Helio Fred Garcia," *Public Relations Strategist* 18, no. 2 (July 1, 2012), http://search.proquest.com/docview/1030711152/.

[192] Wirth, "How to Handle a Crisis and Prevent Viral Negativity."

[193] International Air Transport Association, *Crisis Communication in the Digital Age*, 33.

enemy in a crisis."[194] As showcased in the examples of police agencies apologizing for recent mistakes, plausible deniability is simply no longer an acceptable response during a crisis. Organizations can quickly lose control of narratives if they are not transparent and timely in their initial statements. Crisis management strategist Melissa Agnes stresses, "The more time you allow for rumors and speculation to circulate, the more you risk losing control of the narrative, and the more damage control you'll be forced to undertake in the future."[195] This state of affairs was glaringly evident in the Ferguson case and made efforts to regain control of the narrative in the midst of crisis difficult, if not impossible.

The cases illustrated also highlighted the importance of the speed of the initial statement and the content. SWA, Taco Bell, and GitLab all responded quickly and thoughtfully during their respective crises. Linda Duke, CEO of Duke Marketing, stresses that an organization's initial response should occur quickly and include both the admittance and acceptance that a crisis had occurred, followed by assurances to customers that a follow up is being conducted. Rick Van Warner, president of The Parquet Group, adds, "Our rule of thumb is no later than 15 minutes from the time you learn something happens."[196] In her book, *Crisis Ready*, Agnes also recommends that the initial communication during a serious crisis should occur within 15 to 60 minutes of the incident forming an online presence.[197] The ubiquitous nature of technology today means that consumers expect this near real-time information sharing on social media. The IATA best practices guide for aviation also highlights the first 15 minutes of a crisis, in the SWA case, an accident with a fatality, as a critical time for aviation leaders to respond on social media.[198] The IATA guide, moreover, recommends that regular updates be provided on social media as new information is vetted, with the first 24 hours being critical.[199]

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[194] Garcia, "Effective Leadership Response to Crisis."

[195] Melissa Agnes, *Crisis Ready* (Herndon, VA: Mascot Books, 2018), 35.

[196] Wirth, "How to Handle a Crisis and Prevent Viral Negativity."

[197] Agnes, *Crisis Ready*, 70.

[198] International Air Transport Association, *Crisis Communication in the Digital Age*, 10.

[199] International Air Transport Association, 10.

The Ferguson case highlighted the negative effect that waiting to release information can have on narratives. Stephanie Mackenzie-Smith, Supervisor of Corporate Communications, York Regional Police (York) stresses the importance of sending out messages quickly during crises.[200] She cautions that withholding information can have a negative effect on an agency's reputation and result in the loss of control of the narrative. Instead of remaining silent, she encourages the release of short messages that reassure the public that the agency is aware of the incident and is working to resolve it. Urging the use of common language, she promotes the need to stress safety as a main priority when applicable, as well as the promise to release more information once it becomes available. Using simple terms, a statement, such as, "we will get you more information as soon as possible" can help fill the community's need for answers.[201]

Many examples support the quick release of information and self-reporting during a crisis. Davia Temin, a global crisis, risk, and reputation strategist, analyzed Target's response to a data breach in 2013. Target suffered a cyberattack that ultimately included the loss of personal information of over 40 million of its customers.[202] Temin believes one mistake Target leadership made was not being the first to release its story. She emphasizes that leaders should not wait to go public like Target did; instead they should take responsibility for the problem and provide customers with whatever information is available to them at the time. By promising to keep customers updated and finding solutions to the crisis at hand, it is possible then to control the story. Temin asserts that by following this communication strategy, "Your business will definitely take a major hit, but your credibility will not. And if you keep the trust of your customers, your profitability can rebound."[203]

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[200] Robert Lamberti, "Police Use of Social Media during a Crisis," *Journal of Professional Communication* 5, no. 1 (January 2016): 58, https://mulpress.mcmaster.ca/jpc/article/view/2605/2677.

[201] Lamberti, 58.

[202] Davia Temin, "Target's Worst PR Nightmare: 7 Lessons from Target's Well-Meant but Flawed Crisis Response," *Forbes*, December 30, 2013, https://www.forbes.com/sites/daviatemin/2013/12/30/targets-worst-pr-nightmare-7-lessons-from-targets-well-meant-but-flawed-crisis-response/#7bd0d6fb43cf.

[203] Temin.

This statement does not merely hold true in the private sector, but applies to the public sector as well. For example, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has a robust crisis communication plan. The CDC has adopted the mantra, “Be first. Be right. Be credible.”[204] Speed is a big component of the CDC’s response as crises unfold. In its own words, “In the initial phase of a crisis or emergency, the public wants information about the situation immediately, including who, what, where, when, and why.”[205] To support this effort, the CDC has developed a robust crisis communication strategy. Figure 16 shows the six principles of the crisis emergency and risk communication (CERC) model used and promoted by the CDC.

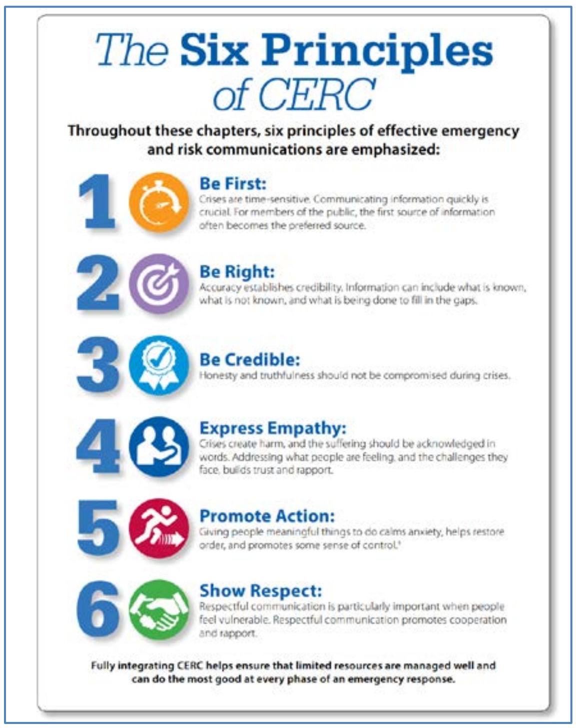


Figure 16. Six Principles of CDC’s Crisis Emergency Risk Communication.[206]

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[204] Department of Health and Human Services, *Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication—Crisis Communication Plans* (Washington, DC: Center for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014), 31, https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/ppt/CERC_Crisis_Communication_Plans.pdf.

[205] Department of Health and Human Services, 5.

[206] Source: Department of Health and Human Services, *CERC: Crisis + Emergency Risk Communication* (Washington, DC: Center for Disease Control, 2018), 8, https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/ppt/CERC_Introduction.pdf.

The six principles of CERC underscore that to be effective, crisis communication should be fast, accurate, honest, and empathetic. CERC also stresses that crisis communication should promote a sense of control and should be respectful to promote a better rapport with stakeholders.

## D. USE DIGITAL NATIVES

A common theme identified through the examination of the private sector case studies was the importance of capitalizing on the talent of "digital natives" as a means to support the strategic use of social media. Public sector cases also showed the benefit of utilizing digital natives for the social media section of crisis communication.

In 2001, educator and American writer Marc Prensky coined the term "digital native" in describing a new generation of students that grew up immersed in technology.[207] Prensky described digital natives as "native speakers of the digital language or computers, video games and the Internet."[208] In contrast, those who grew up in the analog age who adapted or immigrated into the new digital world were coined "digital immigrants."[209] Although Pensky did not determine a timeframe for labeling these terms, some have adopted the notion that those born after 1980 are digital natives.[210]

In their book on digital natives, Alexei Dingli and Dylan Seychell further describe this group as a "generation or population growing up in the environment surrounded by digital technologies and for whom computers and the Internet are natural components of their lives."[211] Since technology has been ingrained in their everyday life, digital natives' expectations for communication and information sharing are different from past generations. Prensky described digital natives as having unique qualities:

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[207] Marc Prensky, "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants." *Horizon* 9, no. 5 (October 2001): 1, https://www.emeraldinsight.com/doi/pdfplus/10.1108/10748120110424816.

[208] Prensky, 1.

[209] Prensky, 1.

[210] John Palfrey and Urs Gasser, *Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives* (New York: Basic Books, 2008), 1, https://pages.uoregon.edu/koopman/courses_readings/phil123-net/identity/palfrey-gasser_born-digital.pdf.

[211] Alexei Dingli and Dylan Seychell, *The New Digital Natives Cutting the Chord* (Heidelberg, Germany: Springer, 2015), 9.

> Digital Natives are used to receiving information really fast. They like to parallel process and multi-task. They prefer their graphics before their text rather than the opposite. They prefer random access (like hypertext). They function best when networked. They thrive on instant gratification and frequent rewards. They prefer games to "serious" work.[212]

According to research by the University of Auckland Business School in New Zealand, digital natives see their social media presence as an expression of who they are; that is, their identities are a sum of their in-person and online personas.[213] This characteristic helps to make them adept at managing social media accounts for organizations. Non-natives may see social media as a tool to communicate, but digital natives, seeing it as a part of themselves, use it to express things as part of the overall heuristics of digital life.[214]

While people born after 1990 have a higher likelihood of being introduced to the internet and social media at an earlier age, it does not mean this demographic is naturally all digital natives.[215] Leaders must remember that access to technology varies by socioeconomic status, connectivity, and geography. Rather than demarking a specific year of birth and age range to identify digital natives, it would be best to annotate the characteristics of what digital natives do, then companies and government agencies in the private and public sector can identity who digital natives are and how to incorporate them into their social media architecture.[216]

### 1. Private Sector

To be more successful in social media crisis communications, the private sector is capitalizing on the use of technology-savvy digital natives. Nick Tran, a former social

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[212] Prensky, "Digital Natives," 3–4.

[213] Shahper Vondanovich, David Sundaram, and Michael Myers, "Research Commentary Digital Natives and Ubiquitous Information Systems," *Information Systems Research* 21, no. 4 (December 2010): 711–714, doi: 10.1287/isre.1100.0324.

[214] Vondanovich, Sundaram, and Myers, 711–712.

[215] Safirotu Khoir and Robert Davidson, "Applications of Social Media by Digital Natives in the Workplace: An Exploratory Study in Indonesia," *25th Australasian Conference on Information Systems*, December 2014, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/313477854_Applications_of_Social_Media_by_Digital_Natives_in_the_Workplace_An_Exploratory_Study_in_Indonesia.

[216] Khoir and Davidson.

media lead at Taco Bell explained, “Our method is hiring Millennial-minded individuals because they live and breathe social media.”[217] Tran emphasized, “The digital natives entering the workforce today are passionate about social; by having them dispersed throughout our teams, we are staying on the forefront of trends.”[218]

In a study of social media use in Indonesian companies, Khoir and Davidson found that digital natives used social media to share news, company updates, best practices and other information that would affect business. This information sharing helps overcome the challenges imposed by time and distance. The companies that harnessed these digital natives used social media to share news with supply chain partners, create a more interactive atmosphere with customers, and promote corporate events. These organizations succeeded in utilizing digital natives to reach customers and stakeholders in a way that was meaningful to them. For example, one non-government organization that works with orphanages used social media to recruit volunteers and help children in need find their way to an orphanage. Overall, Indonesian firms that harnessed a combination of Facebook, Skype (a communications application that provides both video conferencing and voice calls), Twitter, and Yammer (a social network for businesses) were able to increase their market presence through strategic messaging and marketing.[219]

The Wendy’s Company fast food chain successfully uses Twitter to connect with its customers and provide them with a positive image of the company in a way that other fast food chains have not been able to achieve. Wendy’s uses its Twitter account to engage customers with funny and satirical posts that helps to build its consumer base. Digital natives, especially, want that interaction; they want the recognition and attention on social media.[220] Andy Dunn, CEO and founder of Bonobos, exerts “Digitally native vertical brands are maniacally focused on the customer experience and they interact, transact, and story-tell to consumers primarily on the web.”[221] Wendy’s success demonstrates that the

[217] Tulman, “How Taco Bell is Winning.”

[218] Tulman.

[219] Khoir and Davidson, “Applications of Social Media by Digital Natives in the Workplace.”

[220] Reed and Gordon, “Marketing to Digital Natives.”

[221] Reed and Gordon.

ability to engage with the customer via design and service can positively impact sales and overall brand value.

### 2. Public Sector

The benefits the public sector can gain by using digital natives are no different from the private sector. Public service organizations in federal, state, and local governments can learn from the private sector and implement programs that utilize digital natives to connect with their constituents via social media. In particular, digital natives can provide law enforcement with a valuable skill set, one that can be utilized through social media crisis communication.

In an article published by a popular online law enforcement resource, PoliceOne.com, Mountain View Police Department social media experts Police Captain Chris Hsiung and Social Media and Public Relations Coordinator Katie Nelson encourage the use of digital natives as a part of law enforcement's social media strategy. Hsiung and Nelson stressed the importance of preparation and the need to be familiar with the various social media platforms prior to events occurring. The authors assert, "Be sure that you have a policy in place, a sound strategy going forward, and you have someone in the position that not only knows the impact of social media, but is a digital native."[222]

The Transportation Security Administration (TSA) offers another positive example of a public government agency utilizing digital natives to control the messaging and connect with travelers in an engaging manner. The program @AskTSA has 30,000 followers and answers hundreds of questions on Facebook and Twitter every hour.[223] TSA is successful in this regard in part because it employs 10 people, primarily digital natives, who avoid the formal language of government and talk to people using common language

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[222] Chris Hsiung and Katie Nelson, "10 Things that Can Damage—if Not Destroy—Our Agency's Image on Social Media," PoliceOne, October 22, 2018, https://www.policeone.com/social-media-for-cops/articles/481815006-10-things-that-can-damage-if-not-destroy-your-agencys-image-on-social-media/.

[223] Mohana Ravindranath, "Be Funny and Other Tips from TSA's Social Media Team," NextGov, November 2, 2017, https://www.nextgov.com/emerging-tech/2017/11/be-funny-and-other-tips-tsas-social-media-team/142256/.

to promote the feeling of a personal connection.[224] Like Wendy's, @AskTSA uses humor when communicating with customers. The TSA social media team also helps passengers who may have left something behind, which makes passengers feel like they are directly engaged with the agency in a meaningful way.

The TSA shows that, like private agencies, government agencies can also benefit from the use of digital natives as part of a social media communication strategy. If law enforcement agencies create effective social media teams utilizing digital natives, they can engage communities in a manner that connects with them, control messaging, and help influence narratives during crises.

## E. LISTEN TO AND MONITOR SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media listening and social media monitoring are terms often used interchangeably, but distinctions exist between the two that serve different purposes. Organizations should understand the difference when crafting a crisis strategy. A common way to describe the difference in the two is that, "Monitoring sees the trees; listening views the forest."[225] Monitoring takes a look at individual social media messages and direct mentions of a brand or organization name, including direct tags, so organizations can respond accordingly.[226] In a study on online reactions to crises, Arunima Krishna and Kelly Vibber asserted that organizations should monitor social media to identify emerging discussions and hot issues.[227] Social listening increases the social media reach and tracks the broader conversations occurring on social media, not just about a brand or name but the entire industry.[228]

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[224] Ravindranath.

[225] Patrick Cuttica, "Social Media Monitoring versus Listening: Does it Matter?" CMO, March 17, 2016, https://www.cmo.com/opinion/articles/2016/2/26/social-media-monitoring-versus-listening-does-it-matter.html#gs.RK5zm7sb.

[226] Sarah Parker, "What's the Difference between Social Listening and Monitoring?," *The Union Metrics* (blog), April 26, 2017, https://unionmetrics.com/blog/2017/04/social-listening-monitoring/.

[227] Arunima Krishna and Kelly S. Vibber, "Victims or Conspirators? Understanding a Hot-Issue Public's Online Reactions to a Victim Cluster Crisis," *Journal of Communication Management* 21, no. 3 (April 2017): 315, doi: 10.1108/JCOM-08-2016-0067.

[228] Parker, "What's the Difference between Social Listening and Monitoring?,"

Research shows that both listening and monitoring social media during a crisis is part of a good communication strategy. Monitoring social media for mentions of the organization in posts or direct tags can help organizations correct false information and address questions during a crisis. Listening to wide-ranging conversations, such as dialogues about law enforcement's use of force against unarmed minorities, will help agencies understand the public's broader concerns. Seeger emphasizes, "Whether accurate or not, the public's perception is its reality."[229] Determining what that perception is will help organizations in the private and public sector influence their own stories, especially on social media.

The airline industry recognizes the importance of monitoring social media during crises. In their guide on crisis response, the IATA outlined the importance of having a team to monitor real-time images streamed on social media.[230] Media monitoring helps ensure that all "relevant electronic, print and online media coverage is collated and reported" to those managing the crisis communication.[231] IATA believes social listening is important to a good crisis strategy; their guidelines highlight how essential it is to follow online conversations to gather intelligence during crises.[232] IATA stressed that social listening allows the "company to adapt its communication strategy and engage more effectively."[233]

Monitoring and listening were common threads and important factors in the crisis communication strategies of SWA, Taco Bell, and GitLab during their respective crises. When discussing "tactics" after their 2018 crisis, Linda Rutherford from SWA emphasized, "Externally, we leveraged Southwest's social media properties. The Social Care Team had all hands-on deck to quickly respond to customer inquiries coming in through multiple social media accounts. Customers reaching out to us hourly equaled what we see during an entire day."[234] The Social Care Team referenced by Rutherford is housed in SWA's

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[229] Seeger, "Best Practices in Crisis Communication," 239.

[230] International Air Transport Association, *Crisis Communication in the Digital Age*, 17.

[231] International Air Transport Association, 30.

[232] International Air Transport Association, 13.

[233] International Air Transport Association, 13.

[234] Rutherford, "How Southwest Responded to a Crisis."

listening center in Dallas, Texas. SWA's Social Care Team uses the real-time feedback provided by their customers to make "smarter business decisions," particularly when faced with operational challenges.[235] The constant feedback loop from its customers to SWA helps the organization understand the perceptions of its stakeholders.

Like SWA, Taco Bell also believes listening to customers' online conversations is critical. It is also part of its communication strategy. Matt Prince, Manager of Public Relations and Brand Engagement at Taco Bell, stressed that with 7,000 restaurants, "social listening" is an important part of their social media strategy and crisis response.[236] Unlike SWA, Taco Bell looks to a third-party company, NetBase, to assist it with monitoring and social listening, as well as how to best draw from the data it collects related to its efforts on social media platforms.[237]

GitLab also focuses on social monitoring and believes watching social media for customer responses are the responsibility of each employee. On the company's website, GitLab stresses, "Any time GitLab is mentioned or relevant to a thread it gets directed to our different chat channels and someone from GitLab should be responding to questions or feedback."[238] In short, social monitoring provides GitLab the opportunity to be involved in online conversations about the company.

Public sector agencies are also using social media monitoring as a means to provide better service. During Hurricane Harvey, many 911-call centers in Texas were overwhelmed. Desperate for help, victims started calling the Coast Guard's federal headquarters sparking the Coast Guard to open a call center in Washington. Part of the emergency call center included a "social media cell" set up to monitor the locations of

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[235] Ashley Mainz, "Southwest Airlines introduces State-of-the-Art Listening Center!" *Southwest Airlines*, August 27, 2014, https://www.southwestaircommunity.com/t5/Southwest-Stories/Southwest-Airlines-introduces-State-of-the-Art-Listening-Center/ba-p/42136.

[236] "The Bell System: How Taco Bell Assesses a Social Situation before It Responds," PR News, June 12, 2017, https://www.prnewsonline.com/bell-system-taco-bell-assesses-social-situation-responds/.

[237] PR News.

[238] "Social Media Guidelines," GitLab, October 18, 2018, https://about.gitlab.com/handbook/marketing/social-media-guidelines/.

distress calls.[239] This social media analysis helped the Coast Guard to better assess where response teams should be directed.

In 2002, the American Red Cross opened its first digital operations center focused on monitoring social media. The positive results have resulted in the expansion of these centers, now sprinkled throughout the country. By 2015, Red Cross employees were monitoring between 5,000 to 7,000 social media posts a day; posts that mention the Red Cross specifically or broader topics of concern, aligned with social listening.[240] These centers participate in customer care, storytelling, building social relationships, and listening.[241]

### F. USE APPROPRIATE LANGUAGE AND VOICE

Language is an important consideration when discussing crisis communication today. Social media has brought about many changes in language and communication. The use of digital communication over face-to-face media interviews brings about new challenges organizations must consider. Finding ways to connect with stakeholders on social media is important to ensure messages are interpreted in the manner intended. As seen in the private sector cases, voice and tone play a big part in how stakeholders receive messaging during crisis. In the Papa John's example, its communication team appears to have failed to consider social presence theory. Releasing a written statement was not the best strategy, as the message was not well received.

Like corporations in the private sector, public sector organizations must determine what voice and tone to use during computer-mediated communication. A 2013 study by Hyojung Park and Hyunmin Lee examined the difference in "human voice" versus "organizational voice" on social media. Social presence theory was used as a main theoretical framework of their research. Their study showed that "conversational human

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[239] Ravindranath, "Be Funny and Other Tips from TSA's Social Media Team."

[240] Joe Ciarallo, "How the Red Cross Uses Social Media for Disaster Response and Engaging Donors," *Medium*, April 21, 2015, https://medium.com/salesforce-on-marketing/how-the-red-cross-uses-social-media-for-disaster-response-and-engaging-donors-9e4e2f7d2477.

[241] Ciarallo.

voice was perceived to be greater for organizations' social networking pages with a human presence than for those with an organizational presence."[242] When comparing the social media pages of nonprofit organizations, such a law enforcement, to for-profit organizations, such as SWA, Park and Lee found that "for-profit organizations' pages were more likely to be perceived as using a conversational human voice".[243] Their findings highlighted the fact that using human voice on social media is critical to fostering positive relationships with the stakeholders in the public. The results of their study revealed, "Participants' perceptions of relationships with an organization were significantly more favorable when its Twitter page had a human presence rather than an organizational presence."[244]

As noted in the case studies, SWA, Taco Bell, GitLab, and TSA all used personal human presence and casual communication to interact with their stakeholders on social media. They avoided using business or "just the facts" type language, and instead chose to use social media to form personal connections with their customers.

## G. EMPHASIZE COMPASSION AND HONESTY

Scholars have identified several specific qualities and common themes found in effective crisis communication. In determining best practices, Seeger emphasized using "honesty, candor and openness" in all crisis communication.[245] He stressed that honesty is a necessity for maintaining the credibility and trustworthiness of an organization during a crisis. Seeger simply defines the term "honesty" in the most basic sense, not lying.[246] Organizations perceived as deceptive can quickly lose the public's trust.

He goes on further to define candor as communicating "the entire truth as it is known, even when the truth may reflect negatively on the agency or organization."[247]

[242] Park and Lee, "Show Us You Are Real," 269.

[243] Park and Lee, 269.

[244] Park and Lee, 269.

[245] Seeger, "Best Practices in Crisis Communication," 239.

[246] Seeger, 239.

[247] Seeger, 239.

GitLab showed a great amount of candor when the company revealed they had lost their customers' data, which exposed backup failures within the organization. Finally, he describes openness as a "kind of accessibility and immediacy that goes beyond even a candid response."[248] Openness is challenging in crisis communication, especially for public entities where the tendency has historically been to keep information close to the chest.

Seeger also stressed the importance of the use of "compassion, concern and empathy" whether the organization is communicating with the public, employees, or the media.[249] Failing to show basic human compassion can have a negative effect on the audience. BP's leadership would have likely benefited from focusing on these three qualities when responding to the Deepwater Horizon oil rig explosion in 2010. GitLab directs its employees to use what it describes as "GitLab's voice" when responding to customers on social media. It has specifically defined this voice and directs employees to, "Be responsive, positive, open minded, curious, welcoming, apologetic, transparent, direct, and honest."[250]

[248] Seeger, 239.

[249] Seeger, 241.

[250] GitLab, "Social Media Guidelines."

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# VI. CONCLUSION

Research shows that law enforcement leaders should craft strategies with "deliberate strategic intent" to influence narratives during a crisis.[251] This chapter reveals the findings of the research by summarizing seven principles of an effective crisis communication strategy. These were identified through the private sector case studies and by examining existing research and theory. Implementation of a crisis strategy does not come without impediments and obstacles. Several of these challenges are outlined in this chapter as well.

## A. FINDINGS

High standards of public accountability for law enforcement require a transparent and timely approach to releasing information to the media and on social media, especially during crises, times when the importance of influencing narratives is the most critical for law enforcement. Opportunities now exist for faster and more effective communication with the public after use of force incidents. The police departments in Boston and Las Vegas demonstrated the positive effects that proactive social media use can have during crisis, with the Boston Marathon bombing, and the Mandalay Bay mass shooting, respectively. Even with these positive examples, finding documented crisis communication strategies and plans for communication after use of force incidents are not common in law enforcement. As seen in the Ferguson case, the most critical time for law enforcement to communicate with the public is after using force on a member of the community. Navigating social media during these types of crises can be challenging, and agencies should have a strategy in place to be successful.

As seen the past five years, use of force actions by law enforcement are significant incidents that can become flash points for civil unrest. The increased use of social media

[251] Matejic, *Social Media Rules of Engagement*, 103.

by activists is a growing challenge for law enforcement.[252] The DOJ's after action report on Ferguson pointed out, "The police response to the mass demonstrations was generally reactive and did not appear to establish a strategic approach to effectively mitigate the complexity of issues and respond more effectively to the mass gatherings."[253] Had a crisis communication strategy been in place, social media likely could have been utilized more effectively by law enforcement agencies in St. Louis starting on August 9, the day Michael Brown lost his life. The DOJ's after action report stressed the importance of law enforcement telling their own story and pointed out if they do not then "others will fill that void with their own versions of events."[254] The damage to the reputations of the police agencies managing the Ferguson crisis, and their relationships with the communities they serve were negatively impacted by the lack of a crisis communication strategy.

Although law enforcement has embraced social media as a means to push out positive stories about officers and to build trust with the community, information on its use as a strategic crisis communication tool is less prevalent. A presentation at the Bureau of Justice statistics data user's workshop reinforced the notion that law enforcement is now, "subjected to more scrutiny than was imaginable a few decades ago due to advances in information and communication technologies, a more aggressive and intrusive media, and elevated standards of public accountability."[255] In analyzing the law enforcement response to demonstrations in 2015, the DOJ stressed that a "better and more immediate grasp on the use of social media during emergency situations is necessary" if law enforcement is to cope effectively with similar crises in the future.[256] Unfortunately, many law enforcement agencies still do not have social media crisis communication strategies in place.

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[252] Jack Newnham and Peter Bell, "Social Network Media and Political Activism: A Growing Challenge for Law Enforcement," *Journal of Policing, Intelligence and Counter Terrorism* 7, no. 1 (April 2012): 37, https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/18335330.2012.653194?needAccess=true.

[253] Institute for Intergovernmental Research. *After-Action Assessment*, XIV.

[254] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, 102.

[255] Brian Forst, *Improving Police Effectiveness and Transparency: National Information Needs on Law Enforcement* (Washington, DC: American University, 2008), 1, https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/Forst.pdf.

[256] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment*, XVIII.

The purpose of this research paper was to determine what a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement should look like. Cases from both the public and private sector were analyzed to determine what is working and what can be improved. Research was conducted to determine what best practices or principles from the private sector might be applicable to law enforcement. The research clearly showed the socialization of information through advancements in technology, specifically through the social media platforms Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, affects the users' ability to influence the narrative during crises. A positive correlation appears to exist between the ability of law enforcement to influence narratives during crises and the proactive use of social media. Interestingly, research on crisis communication prior to the prevalence of social media is still quite relevant. Although the speed and reach of crisis communication have been amplified using social media, the basic tenets of good crisis communication have remained relatively constant.

Based on this research, the author discovered the following seven common threads in crisis communication that can be applied to a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement. They are as follows:

- Establish protocols while in non-crisis mode and clearly identify a crisis team. Preparation includes the development of clear protocols, the development of a crisis team, and the identification of vulnerabilities and subsequent agency responses in a manual used in regular training exercises.

- Prepare regularly for a crisis through training and scenario-based drills. Identify worst-case scenarios and use pre-planning drills to help crisis managers better prepare for real life events. At a minimum, annual scenario-based training is recommended with the entire crisis team.

- Speed is a critical factor; establish a social media presence quickly. Due to the speed in which news travels over social media, organizations can quickly lose control of narratives if they are not transparent and timely in their initial statements. Accuracy should never be compromised for speed;

acknowledge the crisis and provide information as it is vetted. Initial communication on social media should be within the first 15–60 minutes of the crisis. After the initial response, social media communication should continue regularly in the days and weeks after a crisis.

- Utilize digital natives in the social media enterprise of the organization. Capitalize on the skills of technology-savvy digital natives because they live and breathe social media, and can navigate the disparate platforms easily since they grew up with the social media.

- Actively participate in social monitoring and social listening, especially during a crisis. Monitoring posts and specific social media tags with the organization's name can help in correcting false information. Listening to the public and understanding their concerns during crises is important. Getting real-time feedback allows organizations to respond faster and influence narratives.

- The language and tone of communication utilized on social media for crisis communication is important. The use of social media is less personal than face-to-face interaction so organizations should use a human voice and tone instead of a digital or organizational language. Connecting with the audience on a personal level is important.

- Specific qualities that affect messaging on social media should be emphasized during crisis communication. These qualities include transparency, honesty, openness, candor, compassion, concern, empathy, and sympathy.

To be successful, these seven principles should be incorporated into law enforcement's crisis communication strategies. The CDC believes that during the most critical event, times of crises, "The right message from the right person at the right time can save lives."[257] Embracing social media and creating a social media crisis communication strategy for law enforcement that includes these seven factors provides a great opportunity for more successful communication after use of force incidents.

## B. IMPEDIMENTS AND OBSTACLES

Creating and implementing a robust crisis communication strategy within an organization does not come without challenges. Overcoming impediments and obstacles will be a necessary battle along the way. Leaders can expect to face common hurdles and difficulties. For starters, "openness" was identified as vital to good crisis communication. While this strategy may sound easy, various levels of "openness" may pose challenges to public agencies, in particular law enforcement. As mentioned previously, law enforcement officials experience a difficult balance because of the sensitive nature of use of force investigations. The need to preserve evidence and maintain the integrity of investigations is always a major consideration. However, Seeger maintains that by withholding information, the public sector risks losing or reducing the level of public trust.[258] Thus, a struggle ensues for organizations that will always have to weigh the costs and benefits of releasing information about ongoing investigations. Some law enforcement agencies may need to change their culture and make difficult decisions when determining the amount of information to release.

Getting individual buy-in will also be a challenge, especially for law enforcement. A level of distrust exists between the police and the media that must be overcome. A 2016 study by the Pew Research Center showed that close to eight-in-ten officers, roughly 81%, in police agencies with more than a hundred commissioned officers believe that the media treats police unfairly.[259] Having this high level of distrust for the media may actually be advantageous in gaining buy-in for implementation of a crisis communication strategy. A good strategy can help agencies tell their own stories on social media; police agencies

[257] Department of Health and Human Services, *CERC: Crisis + Emergency Risk Communication*, 8.

[258] Seeger, "Best Practices in Crisis Communication," 240.

[259] John Gramlich and Kim Parker, "Most Officers say the Media Treat Police Unfairly," *Pew Research Center*, January 25, 2017, http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/25/most-officers-say-the-media-treat-police-unfairly/.

would have more influence over narratives and be less reliant on the organized media to tell their stories during a crisis.

Financial investments will be required to implement a robust strategic communication strategy. For instance, social monitoring and listening requires a significant investment in the form of dedicated resources. In a Canadian study on police use of social media during a crisis, Robert Lamberti concluded, “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.”[260] Since social media represents an around-the-clock responsibility, leaders in organizations will have to make financial investments in personnel. SWA is an example of an organization that has made substantial investments staffing watch centers. Instead of staffing watch centers, organizations can follow Taco Bell’s lead and hire third-party vendors to monitor social media for them; both options require financial investment.

Having dedicated resources not just to monitor, but to handle social media communication during crises will also require additional resources. Digital natives can be a valuable asset in this case. Agencies must determine the correct number of personnel to staff public information offices and provide that staff with robust training. If providing information to the community during crises helps quell demands for information, it is important that law enforcement make this investment. The development of social media strategies and dedicated resources are needed to ensure the timely release of information and communication or collaboration with the community. The DOJ recognized the challenge law enforcement faces with resources, but its belief is that, “An effective social media capacity requires an investment of resources including funds and personnel. This is sometimes difficult for some agencies to embrace; however, effectively building this capacity requires an investment and a commitment.”[261]

Technical and policy challenges must be overcome to implement a successful communication strategy. Even organizations embracing social media for crisis

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[260] Lamberti, “Police Use of Social Media during a Crisis,” 70.

[261] Institute for Intergovernmental Research, *After-Action Assessment*, 104.

communication have encountered unforeseen obstacles. After the nation witnessed a series of school shootings over several years, the University of Texas at Austin implemented an emergency alert system that harnessed social media, email, and text messages. The program was designed to alert all staff and students of a crisis situation to mitigate the loss of life and damage to the school. However, a recent study of the system revealed that certain policies restricting the use of cell phones and data led to a loss of information and lack of response by many staff. The University of Texas example shows how organizations with crisis communication plans in place can be negatively affected by restrictive policies, in this case a policy that restricted the use of the tools required to access social media.[262]

Finally, the debate on whether to use commissioned personnel or civilian employees for public information roles should be addressed. Special consideration should be given to the personnel filling the public information office positions, those responsible for crisis communication. At one time, the civilianization of law enforcement positions was resisted.[263] However, the number of civilians serving in law enforcement has continued to increase. A 2008 census by DOJ reported that nearly 33 percent of full-time employees in state and local police agencies were civilians.[264] Agencies should consider the use of professional civilian personnel with experience in media and communication fields in public information positions.

Agencies that have tried this approach have seen success. In 2012, the Boston Police Department hired Cheryl Fiandaca, a former news reporter who served as the Bureau Chief of Public Information during the Boston Marathon bombing. Fiandaca has been widely recognized for her team's strategic social media communication during the Boston Marathon attack and the subsequent investigation. In a 2013 interview with *Public Relations Tactics* magazine, Fiandaca explained, "I wanted us to become a news

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[262] Jessica L. Ford, Keri K. Stephens, and Jacob S. Ford, "Digital Restrictions at Work: Exploring How Selectively Exclusive Policies Affect Crisis Communication," *International Journal of Information Systems for Crisis Response and Management (IJISCRAM)* 6, no. 4 (2014): 4, doi:10.4018/IJISCRAM.2014100102.

[263] William King and Jeremy Wilson, *Integrating Civilian Staff into Police Agencies* (Washington, DC: Office of Community Oriented Policing, 2014), 2, https://ric-zai-inc.com/Publications/cops-p290-pub.pdf.

[264] Brian Reaves, *Census of State and Local Law Enforcement Agencies, 2008* (Washington, DC: Department of Justice, 2011), 2, https://www.bjs.gov/content/pub/pdf/csllea08.pdf.

organization in addition to being a police department. If you want to know about something that's happening [with the police], we want to be the source."[265] Her experience with media relations provided a unique perspective during the Boston crisis and helped navigate the agency through the crisis. A mix of commissioned officers and civilian personnel would provide agencies experience in both law enforcement and communications.

Regardless of the challenges, law enforcement leaders should view social media communication as an opportunity. The democratization of technology and the socialization of information provide law enforcement a means to reach a broader audience than ever before. As Seeger concludes in his book, *Narratives of Crisis*, "As more crises occur, the stories we choose to tell will play a central role in how these events are managed at the individual, institutional, community and societal levels."[266] As trained storytellers, law enforcement should embrace the opportunity that the digitalization of society offers through social media. With the creation of a social media crisis communication strategy, law enforcement leaders can tell their own stories first-hand, in a thoughtful and transparent manner.

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[265] Patricia Swann, "How the Boston Police Used Twitter during a Time of Terror," *Public Relations Tactics*, May 24, 2013, http://apps.prsa.org/Intelligence/Tactics/Articles/view/10197/1078/How_the_Boston_Police_Used_Twitter_During_a_Time_o#.XIC5CsBKjcs.

[266] Seeger and Sellnow, *Narratives of Crisis*, 178.

# APPENDIX

Free information and guidelines to promote best practices are available to assist the communications and social media departments of airlines, airports, and manufacturers to handle the news media in the digital age after an aviation accident occurs. The following guidelines from the IATA are just one example.[267]

[267] "Guidelines—Crisis Communications in the Digital Age," IATA, December 2016, https://www.iata.org/publications/Pages/crisis-communications-guidelines.aspx.

# CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

## A GUIDE TO "BEST PRACTICE" FOR THE AVIATION INDUSTRY

## DEC 2016

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## Contents

## 1. Introduction

Aviation accidents and serious incidents are extremely rare. Despite the almost exponential increase in passenger numbers and flights operated since the start of the jet age, the rate at which hull loss accidents occur has steadily improved. Most communication professionals working within the industry (indeed, most airline employees) will therefore never face the unique and emotionally stressful experience of responding to an aviation disaster.

Unfortunately accidents do still happen, and the challenges of planning and managing an effective response have never been more complex. Profound – and accelerating - changes to the business, political, social and media environment have created pressures and expectations which did not exist even a decade ago.

The proliferation of social media channels, and the exponential growth in mobile smartphone use, have ensured that "breaking news" of an accident or major incident will usually appear first on Twitter, Facebook or Weibo. Photos, commentary and even streaming video may be available, in real time, to a vast global audience before the companies involved are fully aware of what happened. Flight tracker websites will allow anyone to see the aircraft's last known position, heading, speed, altitude and other parameters, including the history of the aircraft concerned, the service history of the aircraft type and any issues related to the operations of the airline.

The first opportunity to define the event, and to shape the unfolding narrative, will belong to the people who experienced it, those who saw it, and those affected by it. The airline may be left struggling to make its message heard above the cacophony created by citizen journalists, politicians, government agencies, celebrities, "experts" and self-publicists eager to share their opinions.

This document updates previous Guidelines on Crisis Communications published by IATA in 2012 and 2014 and is intended to help communication professionals across the aviation industry understand some of the factors which have contributed to the increasing demands on airlines, manufacturers, airports and other involved parties after an accident.

It offers "best practice" guidance on roles and responsibilities in managing the flow of information; and on structuring a crisis communication plan which meets the needs of your organization. It also suggests how to integrate online platforms and social media channels to ensure that the communication response is consistent across every touchpoint.

## 2. The changing environment

The last decade has seen rapid and profound changes in the structure of the aviation industry; the political and social environment; and in the media landscape. The impact of these interconnected changes, underpinned by advances in communication technology, can be seen in the reaction to several recent aviation accidents and other major events. Some of these examples are described in the Appendix to this document.

### 2.1 The evolution of social media

Unless an aircraft "disappears" over the ocean or an unpopulated wilderness, it is virtually inevitable that someone with a smartphone will share the first photo or start streaming live video of an accident scene within moments. After the Asiana Airlines OZ214 accident at San Francisco in July 2013, the first photo was posted on Twitter in less than one minute, by a passenger waiting to board another flight. Once ignited, the social media "firestorm" spread so quickly that it generated more than 44,000 tweets within the next 30 minutes.

Three trends are facilitating this phenomenon, and its impact on the way airline accidents are reported:

I. **Connectivity:** Almost one-third of the world's population actively use social media channels, and tens of thousands of new accounts are created every day. The proliferation of these channels, and the continued growth of the population participating in social media, has fundamentally changed the way the world communicates, receives and shares information.

II. **Mobility:** Internet-enabled "smartphones" have become the fastest-selling gadgets in history, outselling personal computers by four to one. By 2020, some 80% of adults globally (and many of their children) will own a personal smartphone. This in turn is driving an irreversible trend, which reached its "tipping point" in 2014: more than 50% of all internet usage is now on mobile devices – predominantly smartphones.

   Internet connectivity now extends to passengers on many commercial aircraft. On-board wifi is on its way to becoming as much of a standard service offer as in-seat entertainment systems on most airlines, which means passengers will be able, if they choose, to share photos, videos and commentary about an in-flight emergency, in real-time, while the situation is still unfolding.

   Airlines which offer on-board wifi should therefore give careful thought to their policy on whether the service would be turned off in an emergency (rather than leaving it to the discretion of the crew)

III. **Streaming Video:** At Facebook's F8 development conference in April 2016, the company revealed its key priority in the drive to maintain its dominance of the social web: live streaming. Facebook Live quickly achieved notoriety after several shocking incidents were streamed on the platform as they occurred. With companies like Facebook, Twitter and others focusing their efforts on this technology, the quality, speed and availability of streaming video will improve rapidly.

The rapid improvement in video technology and network bandwidth is not only benefiting "citizen journalists". Professional broadcasters can now use smartphone applications or lightweight handheld equipment to "go live" from a breaking news event over wireless or data networks without the need for a cumbersome satellite dish or even a full production crew.

**2.2 The disrupted media landscape**

Contrary to widespread belief, the global circulation of paid newspapers is actually increasing – by more than 100 million units between 2010 and 2014. However this is almost entirely due to the growing number of people buying newspapers in Japan, India and China – which together account for nine of the world's top 10-selling newspapers. Elsewhere, there is a very different picture, with marked declines in circulation, readership and – critically – advertising revenues in Western Europe, North America and Australasia.

Most of those which survive, including many of the world's oldest and most respected "big city" newspapers, have been relaunched as web-based multimedia platforms to compete with a new generation of online-only news portals. These "newspapers" now operate with smaller editorial teams, include more user-generated, shared and syndicated content, and are accessed via paywalls. Subscribers can view the content on smartphones or tablets.

Breaking news of major events is covered by rolling "live blogs" which copy or link to photos, videos and commentary posted on other online sources, including social media channels. Long-form analytical coverage, written by more experienced or specialist reporters, will not appear until the following day, or possibly in a weekend edition of the print newspaper, also available online. But by that time the public's perception may already have solidified.

The same commercial pressures are affecting broadcast news operations, which find it difficult to attract large audiences (and therefore to maintain advertising rates) unless a major crisis is in play. Coverage of Malaysia Airlines MH370 led the prime-time evening news on all three major US TV networks (ABC, CBS and NBC) for 11 consecutive nights in March 2014 – an unprecedented level of domestic interest when only three American citizens were among the 239 people on board.

Television news requires pictures. As editorial budgets decline, the best (and cheapest) source of images is often citizen journalists who experienced or witnessed the event and caught it on their smartphones. News organisations will often be alerted by applications such as Dataminr, which constantly scours the internet for the sudden appearance of a cluster of social media posts which may indicate a breaking news story. If a genuine crisis is unfolding, Dataminr allows the professional news team to very quickly identify the location and potential scale of the event, and to find potentially important eyewitness comments and images.

### 2.3 Specialist websites

Flightradar24 is an aircraft tracking site which was established by two Swedish enthusiasts in 2006. It aggregates crowd-sourced data from multiple sources - primarily volunteers with ADS-B (automatic dependent surveillance-broadcast) receivers - to show flight tracks, origins and destinations, flight numbers, aircraft types, positions, altitudes, headings and speeds for virtually any commercial flight. Other sites offering similar services include Flightaware.com; Flightview.com and Radarbox24.com.

These sites can show time-lapse replays of previous flights and historical flight data by airline, aircraft, aircraft type, area or airport. If a crew "squawks" a distress code, indicating an on-board emergency, Flightradar24 will automatically alert its 330,000 followers, including news media, who can then track the progress of the aircraft in real time – or see whether the aircraft has disappeared from radar. This in turn will create an alert on applications such as Dataminr (see above).

After an accident or major incident, the flight tracker sites, and other specialist sites including Aeroinside.com; AvHerald.com; and Planecrashinfo.com can provide a full history of the flight with animations, graphs and charts; the history of the aircraft model and tail number, and previous accidents and incidents involving that airline, aircraft type, engine type or airport. This information will be instantly available to anyone with an internet connection – regardless of whether the airline involved is willing or able to confirm it.

## 2.4 Rising expectations of Next of Kin

The Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act was passed into law in the United States in 1996, the first piece of legislation which required airlines to submit a Family Assistance plan to show how it would support victims and families after an aircraft accident. Similar legislation has spread around the world, with ICAO publishing its global Family Assistance Policy in 2013.

Regardless of what legislation may be in place, the expectations of accident survivors and families of victims is steadily increasing as a result of the activities of family advocates and associations (particularly those formed after previous accidents) and plaintiff's attorneys. Family groups have been willing to share their experiences through the media and on the internet, while plaintiff's attorneys are quick to position themselves as alternative sources of information to the airline or the investigating bodies.

While it may be illegal in certain jurisdictions for lawyers to approach the families of accident victims directly, some law firms regularly set up dedicated websites after an accident. These sites offer to help families uncover the "real truth" about what happened to their loved ones, and to hold those responsible accountable in court. If families sign up for legal representation, plaintiff's attorneys have been known to charge up to 40% of any award or settlement.

## 2.5 Airline Consolidation and Fragmentation

Since the first "codeshare" agreements were created more than 20 years ago, the airline industry has been transformed. Alliances, codeshares, franchise agreements, wet-leases and charters have created endless scope for confusion among passengers over which airline will actually operate the aircraft they are booked to fly on.

Consolidation of major airlines into holding companies; joint ventures; the launch of low-cost and hybrid brands by established carriers and the inexorable rise of the low-cost airlines – some with multiple sub-brands or operating entities – have created further complexity. For the traveling public and the news media, it has never been more difficult to establish which company would be responsible for the welfare of passengers and their families after an accident, and who should be managing the flow of information.

## 2.6 Outsourcing

Almost every airline relies, to some extent, on third-party contractors such as Ground Handling Agents (GHAs) to support their airport operations. But as airlines have restructured and consolidated to reduce costs, many have outsourced all of their airport operations to GHAs, particularly in overseas ports. In other cases, the airline's local codeshare or alliance partner may also be their ground handler.

Low-cost airlines and charter operators are heavily reliant on GHAs, to the extent that if an accident occurs outside the airline's home market, there may be no employees of that airline on scene. In which case, the airline's only representation would be a GHA, some of whose front-line staff (such as check-in agents) may actually wear the airline's uniform.

The potential for confusion after an accident is obvious, particularly if GHA staff are surrounded by "meeters and greeters" or journalists demanding information and brandishing smartphones which can record or live-stream any comments. The airline may then discover its "spokesperson" being quoted by the news media, even though he or she is not an employee and has no mandate to speak on the airline's behalf.

**2.7 Increased government involvement**

While acts of terrorism against the aviation industry are not a new phenomenon, recent suicide attacks on Brussels and Istanbul airports have escalated the threat to a different level. Terrorism has become the default theory for any unexplained accident, particularly in the early stages, as demonstrated by the initial media coverage of the Egyptair MS804 crash in May 2016.

This in turn is encouraging government and military leaders to be far more proactive in being seen to respond to events like MS804, MH370 or MH17. While the government agency charged with investigating accidents will normally be the main source of information about the progress of the investigation itself, an airline's ability to shape the unfolding narrative about its own actions may be severely constrained or overshadowed by the involvement of politicians and other agencies or branches of government. This includes local prosecutors or magistrates, or elected officials at the local or regional level, who may see the event as an opportunity to raise their own personal media profile.

This problem is particularly challenging for airlines which are state-owned and where the Board, CEO or members of the senior management are government appointees. But it potentially affects any airline which operates into multiple different countries, some of which may have a different understanding or interpretation of the role of the airline after a major accident than they are accustomed to in their home market.

**2.8 The Global "Leadership" Crisis**

Research* has shown an alarming – and escalating – crisis of leadership around the world. Put simply, an overwhelming majority of people surveyed believe that political or business leaders don't communicate honestly and transparently; don't demonstrate effective leadership; and don't take responsibility when things go wrong.

While there are significant variations in the expectations and performance of leaders from different cultures, geographies and business sectors, some findings are universal. One is that in the midst of a crisis, it is not enough to simply "show empathy" or apologise for the resulting distress or disruption. If words are not aligned with actions, an "apology" is simply empty rhetoric.

To maintain and build trust, the company must accept an appropriate level of responsibility, commit to a concrete plan of action, and communicate honestly and sincerely. Above all, it requires the personal involvement of the leader – as demonstrated after several recent aviation accidents including those involving Germanwings, AirAsia Indonesia and Virgin Galactic.

The primary role of the CEO in a crisis is therefore to be *visible* – to the families, to the other parties involved in the response (including government agencies and regulators), to the employees – and of course, to the news media.

**"Ketchum Leadership Communication Monitor"*

### 3. Best Practice: Communication Flow and Timeline

Airlines, and other parties directly involved in an accident or major incident, no longer have the luxury of time to confirm information and wait for internal clearances before issuing some form of public statement – or at least an acknowledgement that they are aware of the initial reports and responding appropriately.

But once the first statement has been issued, it is essential that the airline, in particular, maintains a regular flow of information, which lasts beyond the first few hours or even days of the crisis. The precise timing and content of specific communications, actions or events (such as memorials) will always depend on the circumstances and must take account of cultural factors and the expectations of those involved or affected.

While some of the following actions may not be required, or even possible, a general guide to the potential communication flow and timelines after an accident with fatalities is outlined below (T is the point at which the airline was first notified). Note: if the accident/event did not cause fatalities, some of what follows would be inappropriate or unnecessary:

**T+15 mins**: Release first "tweet" acknowledging initial reports. Update regularly with short posts as new information is confirmed.

**T+ 60 mins**: Issue longer summary of information confirmed to date, via multiple channels and posted on website. Release new summaries hourly, or as key developments are confirmed, while maintaining regular flow of short updates.

**T + 60 mins**: Change branding to monochrome/remove promotional images and messaging from all online platforms. Dark Site activated. Ensure consistent messages/information appears on every online platform, with simultaneous updates

**T + 3 hrs:** First media appearance/statement by most senior executive to arrive at location where families, media and authorities are congregating (usually at/near the accident scene or arrival/departure airport).

Depending on circumstances, the airline may decide to post a broadcast-quality video statement by the CEO on its website and/or YouTube, in which he/she confirms key facts and outlines the airline's immediate priorities, with appropriate messaging. This would ensure that the CEO is "visible" early in the response, without necessarily exposing him/her to media questions at a point where confirmed information is scarce.

**T + 6 hrs:** First in-person press conference with CEO or most senior executive available (may be at HQ, departure/arrival airport or accident location)

**T + 6-24 hrs:** Further statements, media interviews and press conferences as relevant information is confirmed (may be done jointly with emergency services, response agencies, airport operator, government representatives or investigating body)

**Days 2-7:**

- CEO press conference/s at/near accident location, arrival/departure airport or base for search & recovery operations
- News releases updating progress on family assistance activities
- Response to emerging issues (if appropriate and within airline's scope)
- Daily family briefings (in private, although information may be shared or streamed live on social media by participants). *Note: new information should be shared with families first, before being released publicly.*
- CEO communication to employees
- CEO/CFO communications to investors & financial markets
- Talking points for front-line staff
- CEO communication to key customers/partners
- CEO to meet families of victims or visit injured passengers (if circumstances allow)

**Events which may require ongoing communication (Day 3 and beyond)**

- Recovery/identification/repatriation of victims
- CEO visit to accident site (if accessible)
- Memorial events (internal/external)
- Funerals (employees/passengers)
- Release of initial investigation findings
- Return to business-as-usual (phased)
- Paid advertisements expressing sorrow & thanks to community
- Future recovery of additional wreckage or remains
- Conclusion of recovery/identification process
- Release of interim investigation report
- Release of final investigation report and recommendations
- One-year anniversary (possible mass interment of unidentified remains)
- Completion of criminal/civil litigation
- Subsequent anniversaries (particularly "milestones" – 10 years etc.)

## 4. Developing a Social Media Strategy

An integrated, consistent and authentic communication response to an accident is essential, using all available channels to engage with its internal and external stakeholders. Challenges tend to arise when different parts of the organization "own" different channels.

- As an airline's website is normally commercially focused (selling and booking tickets) it is most often operated by the Commercial Department (Marketing or Sales). Similarly, the airline's presence on other online channels such as Facebook, Twitter or Instagram may be used by the Commercial Department primarily to advertise fare promotions, new routes, service offerings or for destination marketing. While there is usually no issue with the communications department taking leadership of these channels in a crisis, after an accident, there may well be internal tension over how quickly the website and other social media channels should return to "business as usual" – for example, taking down the crisis "dark site" and restoring the normal promotional messaging and images. Similar issues may arise when considering when to relaunch advertising or new fare promotions, or the appropriate messaging during the transition back to normal operations.

- A starting point for developing an online crisis communication strategy is to determine which social media channels are already used by the organization, and who manages them. This may be at several levels – personal, divisional, regional or corporate. To ensure consistent messaging across all channels, the administration rights for all of the company's social media channels should either be consolidated within one department, or the individual account "owners" should be named in the crisis communications plan, so they can be easily reached in a crisis and instructed to post the updates released by the communications team.

- Branding on all online channels should be changed after an accident with fatalities, as a mark of respect and acknowledgement of the human tragedy. This should be done within one hour of confirmation that lives have been lost, and synchronized across all touchpoints. Typically, this involves "greying out" the airline logo. A hash-tagged phrase may also be posted on Facebook and other platforms, which allows condolence messages to be grouped and tracked. The airline may also create a memorial symbol or logo which can be used on all its online platforms.

- The decision on when to transition back to the normal promotional branding is sensitive, and should be synchronized with other communications and marketing activities. The transition may be done in phases, with unaffected markets used to test the audience response. “Transitional” branding and images may also be used if appropriate – for example, smiling faces of cabin crew on the website or Facebook page, but with the “crisis” hashtag still displayed.

- Individuals within the management team who use social media personally (for example, a high-profile “celebrity” CEO) should also be persuaded to limit their comments to the approved messaging, which must remain authentic. Other employees should also be reminded of the company’s social media policy.

- Monitoring online conversations (“social listening”) about the company is an essential form of intelligence, particularly during a crisis, and will allow the company to adapt its communication strategy and engage more effectively with key influencers as the story develops. There are numerous free and paid online tools which allow companies to monitor online conversations, to measure sentiment about particular issues, and to analyze the impact of the company’s own social media activities.

- This includes monitoring “live streaming” channels such as Facebook Live or Periscope (owned by Twitter), which are rapidly gaining in popularity (see section 2.1iii). Similarly, it is important to monitor the detailed technical information about the flight path and the aircraft involved which will quickly be available to any interested party on sites like FlightRadar24, Flightaware.com, Flightview.com or Aeroinside.

- Decisions on whether to actively engage with online conversations about the crisis situation, whether on owned or third-party platforms, should be a policy decision made at a senior level. Staff designated as online “spokespeople”, should have received appropriate training and be clear on the communication strategy and messaging. The company’s own social media platforms may be used to engage directly with customers, to acknowledge their concerns or answer questions in real time – for example, about potential service disruptions a result of the event. When responding to online conversations or posts, respond in the same medium – Twitter to Twitter, or Facebook to Facebook.

### 4.1 Using Online Channels:

**Company Website**
The company website is a primary communication channel, and usually a major source of revenues for airlines, through online booking. It is also one of the first places journalists, customers and others will look for information about an accident or major incident, and how it might affect ongoing operations (for example disruption at an airport). All public statements should be posted to the website, with the link referenced in news releases and social media posts.

It may also be effective to launch a "live blog" on the website, with rolling updates and information about the unfolding situation and the company's response to it, with links to statements made by other involved parties or agencies (similar to the "live blogs" now commonly seen on online news portals after a major event).

- A "dark site" should be prepared during "peacetime". This is a dedicated site which can be activated almost immediately (within minutes) after notification of an accident and replaces the normal home page on the website. The "dark site" would normally be activated in the event of an accident with fatalities, although it may be appropriate in other circumstances, depending on the nature of the event and the degree of media/public interest (for example a massive systems failure which creates extensive disruption).

- For lesser events (or for non-airline parties involved in an accident), a short statement posted on the website may suffice. Consider hyperlinking key words in the statement to more detailed information for those who wish to find it.

- The "dark site" should be branded very simply, with logos changed to monochrome and without any of the promotional material which normally appears on the home page. It should display the latest statement on the situation. Previous statements should be archived and available via a link. Customers should be able to click through a link to reach the standard home page so they can continue to make online bookings or access other information. However, any inappropriate images should be removed from the home page after an accident – for example photos of smiling cabin crew, or promotions involving the route flown by the aircraft involved.

- Other material which may be provided on the "dark site" includes:
  - Background information on the aircraft and engine type
  - Background information on the company and its operations
  - Summary of the company's response to date
  - Link to video of statements made by the CEO or other senior executives

- Some organizations publish a "blog" from the CEO on their website. Blogs are usually less formal in tone than other forms of executive communication, and are intended to show the "human" face of an otherwise impersonal organization. In the event of an accident or serious incident, a CEO blog can be an effective means of demonstrating a genuinely "caring" response by talking about the personal impact of the event and what it meant to the author. But it needs to be carefully worded to avoid appearing glib or insincere. If the sentiments expressed are not authentic, the blog should not be published.

**Twitter**

Twitter is the most widely used "micro blogging" service, with millions of users posting short messages (tweets) to their online followers every day. Twitter is available in more than 30 languages, including Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Arabic. However in China the most popular micro-blogging service is Sina Weibo, which has more than 260 million active users of which 91% use the service on mobile devices.

- Any Twitter user can become a "follower" of anybody who tweets, and anyone receiving a tweet can reply to everyone copied on the message, or "retweet" it to their own followers. This can create an exponential surge in the number of users talking about a compelling story. Twitter has become a primary source of breaking news, particularly in fast-developing situations like an aircraft accident.

- A tweet from a survivor or eyewitness can reach tens of thousands of users around the world in minutes, including "mainstream" journalists who monitor Twitter. The 140-character limit (now increased to 160 characters for re-tweets) does not provide space for explanation or context, but Twitter allows companies to post instant updates to a potentially global audience, and to link to more detailed statements or to videos posted elsewhere.

**Using Twitter**

- A Twitter feed should be established in "peacetime" and used for regular announcements and promotions. This will build a dedicated follower community of customers, fans and mainstream journalists.
- Hashtags (#) should be combined with keywords to "tag" the subject matter of a Twitter post – for example: "#(flight number)" or "#(flight number) response".
- After an accident with loss of life, "grey out" the company logo on Twitter as a mark of respect. This should continue until the airline's branding is restored on all online channels
- Use a maximum of two hashtags per tweet. Hash tags allow followers to group and identify Twitter conversations on this topic.
- Tweets can be used to update followers on the latest information on the company's response (for example: "#(flight number). Passenger information center now open. Call 800 1234 5678".

- Posts should include links to more detailed sources of information – for example, statements posted on the company website or a video on YouTube
- Twitter can be used to post links to statements made by other parties, or to "retweet" messages which are supportive of the company's position. A retweet always includes the Twitter username (@xxx) of the person who posted the original comment. This extends the longevity of the post by ensuring it appears again, possibly several times
- Exercise caution when using Twitter's automated "retweet" button, as this simply forwards the entire message to your own followers without an additional comment. If you wish to add a comment before forwarding the tweet, retweet the post manually.
- Share Twitter content with the audience on other networks by re-posting tweets on Facebook and LinkedIn, when appropriate. A tweet can also be embedded into the website. Click on the date in the upper-right-hand corner of a tweet. Then click More and select Embed Tweet. Copy the code and add it to the website.
- Develop a policy on whether the company would respond to tweets containing the company name (Twitter handle) in a crisis. Many companies use Twitter as a customer relations channel and maintain a dedicated social media team with specific protocols for timing and tone of responses, or this function may be outsourced to an external agency. In a crisis situation, the sheer number of people posting comments may preclude responding to individual tweets (apart from posting new information to all followers, as above). But this should not be left to the discretion of individual employees or agency staff.

**Facebook**
With more than 1.7 billion active users (as of mid-2016), Facebook is arguably the best social media channel for engaging with customers and "fans" of the company. In "peacetime" the company's Facebook page can be used to promote new products and services and to engage in conversations with customers. In a crisis, it becomes an invaluable addition to the company's overall communication response.

**Using Facebook**
- The Facebook page should be treated as a primary communication channel after an accident or serious incident. Any statements and information published on other channels should be posted to Facebook, and updated at the same time.
- After an accident, the cover photo and any colorful images on the Facebook page should be reviewed and temporarily replaced by somber or plain branding ("grey out" the logo). Inappropriate or insensitive images, for example pictures of smiling cabin crew, should be removed. This should continue until the branding on all online channels is restored.
- Because users can post their own comments and refer to other sources of information, conversations on the Facebook page should be monitored and a policy established for responding to comments, or for correcting any misinformation or incorrect statements which are posted.

- Facebook can be a useful channel for engaging directly with customers in a crisis – for example, by responding to their questions in real time.
- Particular attention should be paid to posts by employees. If the post contravenes the company's social media policy, it should be deleted or hidden. Inappropriate or abusive posts can be hidden by hovering the cursor to the right of the offending post. The "hide" button will appear. When this is clicked, a dialogue box will appear which asks if you want to hide all current and future posts by that user.
- The "Facebook Live" application may contain real-time streaming images of the accident scene or other key developments (including supposedly private next-of-kin briefings). This channel (and other live streaming applications such as Periscope) should be constantly monitored by the social listening team.
- You may choose to stream media briefings on Facebook Live, although you should consider whether to show only the CEO/senior executive statement, or continue streaming during the question/answer session afterwards, during which the media may become hostile or persistently demand answers to questions which you cannot answer

**YouTube**

An estimated 300 hours of video material are uploaded onto YouTube every minute (according to Google, which owns the channel) and there are more than 4 billion video views each day. TV coverage of aviation accidents is commonly uploaded to YouTube, including amateur video taken by eyewitnesses. Many companies, including airlines, have created their own dedicated "TV channel" on YouTube, through which they regularly post videos to be viewed by customers and other followers. A dedicated YouTube channel can be customized with the company's corporate branding and include images, links and relevant information.

**Using YouTube**

- Even if the airline does not operate a dedicated YouTube channel, statements from the CEO or by other senior executives after an accident can be uploaded to YouTube. The video should be publicized by posting the link on the website and on Twitter.
- When uploading videos to YouTube, choose the appropriate category and use keywords ("tags") to describe the content. The tags will allow users to find the video via the YouTube search engine.
- As with Facebook and other social media sites, other users may post comments in response to anything posted on YouTube. You should monitor these comments and make a policy decision on whether to respond to any negative or misleading statements
- YouTube is owned by Google, and user accounts are identified by the individual's Google+ profile. The company profile should be established on Google+ before posting to YouTube

## 5. Managing Information After an Accident: Roles and Responsibilities:

Numerous parties will be involved in the response to an aviation accident or serious incident. To a greater or lesser degree, all will face pressure to provide information to the news media and other parties, particularly in the immediate aftermath of the event. Depending on the circumstances, this may include the airline, emergency services, the investigating body, government agencies, arrival and departure airports, codeshare or franchise partners, third-party contractors, air navigation service provider and the aircraft and engine manufacturers.

To avoid confusion and inconsistency, it is important that each party understands its role in the response, the kind of information it can legitimately provide, and the appropriate messaging to use. In other words: stay in your lane!

### 5.1 Operating Carrier:

The operator of the aircraft will inevitably attract the most intense public interest and demands for information. With the likelihood that "breaking news" will appear on social media channels almost immediately, the airline should be prepared to issue a first acknowledgement of the event (or that it is aware of emerging reports) within 15 minutes of notification. This first brief message would ideally be posted on one or more of the airline's social media platforms such as Twitter or Facebook and also appear as a link on the main website. Note: if you are unable to confirm that the initial reports are correct, use conditional language ("We are working to establish the facts"). Do not confirm information which you are unable to verify through the airline's own channels.

The first message should include the following:

- Confirmation that the airline is aware of the event, or has seen initial reports
- Any factual information which is already verified (flight number, aircraft type, origin/destination, nature of the event)
- Commitment to provide further information as soon as it is available

Further factual information can be posted as it becomes available, but the airline should aim to release a more complete summary of what is known to date (a "holding statement" or "Statement #1") to the media and posted on the website and other online channels. The airline may also choose to respond with factual updates to comments posted to its "owned" social media platforms, or on third-party sites

The first summary ("Statement #1") should include the following:

- Confirmation of the nature of the event
- Expression of regret and concern for those on board
- Factual information which has been verified (flight number, aircraft type, origin/destination, number on board, where and when the event occurred)
- Actions taken by the airline since it was notified - for example, opening an emergency enquiry center, mobilizing support teams
- Immediate priorities for the airline – for example, dispatching a "Go-Team" to the scene, or contacting loved ones of those on board

As the situation develops, facts should be clarified in successive statements, which should focus on the actions taken by the airline. These statements can be issued via a combination of traditional news releases and social media channels. Short-message platforms like Twitter can be used to alert users to new information, with a link to more detailed communications posted on the airline's website or Facebook page.

After the initial acknowledgement, future statements from the operating carrier should include some or all of the following:

- Expressions of regret and concern for the wellbeing of passengers and crew members and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the flight (e.g. flight number; aircraft type; origin; destination; number of passengers and crew; departure time; where and when the incident occurred; codeshare partner/s involved)
- Specific actions the airline has taken since it was notified of the event (e.g. activating crisis management center/s; activating a passenger information center; deployment of special assistance teams; establishment of family assistance center/s; care and support provided for survivors and/or families; financial assistance; memorial ceremonies)
- Factual information about the aircraft (aircraft and engine types; dates of manufacture and acquisition; flight hours, number of flights; how many in the fleet; seating configuration; cargo capacity; maintenance history)
- Factual information about the crew (names*; designations; operating experience; type ratings; history with the airline)
- Factual information about the passengers on board (number of passengers; names*; nationalities; number of adults/children)
- Expression of support for the investigation
- Factual information about the airline (history; company structure; network; aircraft fleet; crew training; maintenance; previous accidents or incidents)

**NB: Names of passengers and/or crew members should not be released publicly (if at all) until their legal next-of-kin have been notified, and only then in close coordination with the authorities.*

The Operating Carrier should <u>avoid</u> commenting on any of the following:

- How the investigation will be structured, and what it will focus on
- Information in the maintenance records
- The possible cause/s of the accident – for example, failure of on-board systems or airport equipment
- The way the aircraft broke apart, and what this might indicate
- Finding key pieces of evidence, e.g. flight data or cockpit voice recorders
- The actions of the crew before the accident, or what they might have done to prevent it
- The possible relationship between crew training and the accident
- The possibility of pilot error, or of error or wrongdoing by any other employee
- The likelihood that someone else must be to blame
- The role of weather or air traffic control
- The condition of human remains, and how they will be identified

### 5.2 Franchise services: Operating Carrier

Many airlines, particularly regional carriers, operate in the livery, and using the flight designator code, of a larger "Network" carrier, under franchise agreements. The smaller airline may be owned by the Network carrier on whose behalf it operates, but it is legally designated as the operating carrier (AOC holder), and should therefore take the lead role in dealing with the news media after an accident or major incident.

As a general rule, published statements should be issued under the letterhead and in the name of the operating carrier, and any spokespeople quoted in statements or appearing at press briefings or interviews should be employed by the operating carrier. However, the fact that a franchise flight carried the livery, flight number and passengers of another airline cannot be ignored. If this relationship is not acknowledged and clarified, it may cause confusion among the news media, families, and other stakeholders.

In situations where the Operating Carrier is a wholly-owned subsidiary of a larger group), it may also be appropriate for the Group to stand alongside or even lead communications after an accident, particularly if the likely cause raises wider issues for the Group itself. As ever, a previously agreed policy between the Group and the subsidiary may need to be reviewed in light of the particular circumstances (for example, the response to the Germanwings accident in 2015, in which the Deutsche Lufthansa Group CEO took a leading role).

In addition to the "best practice" guidelines described in section 5.1 above, a franchise or "feeder" airline should therefore also include some or all of the following in its public statements or in comments to the news media:

- The nature of its relationship with the "Network" carrier on whose behalf the flight was operated
- The support which the "Network" carrier is providing to survivors and/or to family members of those on board
- The support which the "Network" carrier is providing to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activation of its call center to handle enquiries about passengers; assistance in establishing family assistance center/s)

### 5.3 Franchise services: Network Carrier (owner of the primary brand)

After an accident involving an outsourced franchise or feeder operation, any attempt by the Network carrier to distance itself from the accident or from the operating carrier will raise questions about its integrity and commitment to its customers. It is therefore in the interest of the Network carrier to be seen to support the smaller operating carrier and that statements from the two companies are consistent.

While the operating carrier should take the lead in dealing with the news media in most circumstances (see above), the Network carrier should focus on the following in any statements or responses to questions:

- Expression of concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Acknowledgement that the accident/incident involved a franchise service operated on its behalf, and carrying its customers (ticket-holders)
- Actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims
- Assistance provided to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activating telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center)

All other questions should be deferred to the operating carrier, or to the investigating body.

The Network carrier should <u>not</u>:

- Deny or downplay the existence of the franchise partnership
- Speak on behalf of the operating carrier
- Issue statements or make any comments which contradict or are inconsistent with statements made by the operating carrier

### 5.4 Codeshare Partner/s

The proliferation of codeshare and alliance partnerships has made it increasingly likely that two or more airlines may be involved in the same incident – either as the operating carrier or as a codeshare partner whose flight designator code is carried on that service, and whose passengers or crew members may be on board. In such cases, the operating carrier should always take the lead in dealing with the demands of the news media. However, it is important that codeshare partner/s are prepared to respond to questions from journalists or from other stakeholders.

The Codeshare Partner should focus on the following:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Acknowledgement that the accident/incident involved a codeshare service on which its own customers (ticket-holders) and/or crew members may have been on board
- Actions taken to provide care and support for survivors and/or families of the victims
- Assistance provided to the operating carrier (e.g. logistics; activating a telephone enquiry center; establishing family assistance center/s)

All other questions should be deferred to the operating carrier, or to the investigating body.

The Codeshare Partner should <u>not</u>:

- Deny or downplay the existence of the codeshare partnership
- Speak on behalf of the operating carrier
- Issue statements or make any comments which contradict or are inconsistent with statements made by the operating carrier

### 5.5 Aircraft and Engine Manufacturers

**(Also applies to suppliers of key systems or components)**

After an aircraft accident or serious incident, the primary role of the aircraft and engine manufacturer is to support the accident investigation and to keep the operating carrier and other operators informed of any relevant information or recommendations which may result from the investigation.

The manufacturers will normally be in constant contact with the airline's flight operations or engineering departments after an accident. A similar dialogue should also be maintained with the airline's Public Relations staff, to ensure they have access to the latest information and to ensure that responses to the news media and other stakeholders are consistent from both parties.

While the manufacturers will often attract intense media interest, particularly if the performance of the aircraft or engines appears to be a factor, they are strictly bound by the "party" rules on the release of information which are normally imposed by the investigating body. However, the manufacturers still have a role to play in providing factual background information about the specific aircraft or engine type, as long as the information is not intended to encourage journalists to make judgments or reach conclusions about the likely outcome of the investigation.

In statements to the news media, the aircraft and engine manufacturers should focus on:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the aircraft or engine type (serial number; date of delivery; flight hours; number of flights; number in service; number of operators)
- Expressions of support and commitment to the accident investigation
- Description of actions taken in response to the accident/incident (e.g. deployment of accident investigation team)
- Safety record of the aircraft or engine type
- Actions taken (if any) as a result of the investigation

The manufacturers should <u>not</u>:

- Comment or speculate on the progress or likely outcome of the investigation
- Selectively "leak" information which is intended to exonerate the aircraft or engine type or imply that other parties or factors were responsible
- Comment on or publicly dispute statements made by the investigating body
- Attempt to discredit or undermine the investigating body, or its findings

**5.6 Airport Operator**

If there is an accident or serious incident at or near an airport, the airport itself will become the focal point of media attention. Journalists will congregate in the terminal area attempting to find company spokespeople, eyewitnesses and the friends and family of those on board. TV crews and photographers will also request access to the accident site, or a suitable vantage point.

Depending on the circumstances, the airport itself may be temporarily closed or suffer serious disruption as a result of the accident, so it will need to communicate quickly with passengers and with airline station personnel, ground handlers and other airport users.

The airport operator will have an important role to play in dealing with the news media on-site and coordinating any press briefings or media access to the accident scene. If the airport has a media center, this should become the location of media briefings by any of the parties involved (e.g. the operating carrier). Where appropriate, joint briefings may be arranged which could involve the airport authority, emergency services, operating carrier and/or the investigating body.

The airport itself should also be prepared to respond to questions from journalists. Any statements or comments from the Airport Operator should focus on the following:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the circumstances of the accident/incident
- The progress of the search and rescue operation
- Facilities and equipment which the airport has provided to support the search & rescue or recovery operations
- Support provided by the airport authorities to the operating carrier (e.g. assistance in establishing a reception center for “meeters and greeters”)
- The impact on the ongoing operation of the airport
- Actions which the airport has taken to mitigate the impact on other airlines and to minimize passenger inconvenience

All other questions should be directed to the operating carrier, the emergency services or the investigating body.

The Airport Operator should not:

- Speak on behalf of other involved parties – for example, the operating carrier
- Be the first to release information about the number of injuries or fatalities, or their identities
- Speculate about the potential cause of the accident/incident
- Comment on the accident investigation

**5.7 Air Navigation Service Provider (ANSP)**
There have been numerous examples of accidents which implicate the air navigation service provider (ANSP) – for example, mid-air collisions or accidents in which questions were raised about the information or instructions given to the crew by air traffic controllers. In these cases, the ANSP can expect to become one of the targets of media and public attention as well as being a party to the investigation.

The ANSP should be prepared to respond to questions from journalists, and from other stakeholders (for example, employees). Any statements or comments should focus on the following:

- Expressing concern for survivors and/or sympathy for victims and their loved ones
- Factual information about the circumstances of the accident or incident
- Expression of support and commitment to the investigation
- Description of actions taken in response to the accident/incident
- Factual information about the nature of the service provided by the organization, its resources, operating structure, ownership etc.
- The training and experience levels required of front-line staff such as air traffic controllers
- Actions taken (if any) as a result of the investigation

The ANSP should <u>not:</u>

- Comment or speculate on the progress or likely outcome of the investigation
- Selectively "leak" information which is intended to exonerate individuals or the ANSP itself, or imply that other parties or factors were responsible
- Comment on or publicly dispute statements made by the investigating body
- Attempt to discredit or undermine the investigating body, or its findings

### 5.8 Ground Handling Agents

The role of Ground Handling Agents (GHAs) in a crisis is a matter for contractual agreement with the airline concerned and is fraught with issues of legal liability and insurance coverage. In many cases, GHAs do not include specific responsibility for crisis support in their Service-Level Agreements, although it is advisable for airlines to discuss this issue with their GHAs and, if crisis support is required, to offer appropriate training. GHAs can play a valuable role in supporting an airline after an accident away from home base.

In terms of support for the communications team, this may include:

- Activating a local PR agency to provide media monitoring, translation and distributing statements in the local market
- Attending and reporting back on any press conferences conducted locally by the airport, emergency services or local authorities
- Monitoring and reporting back on any comments made by families or other involved parties to the news media
- Ensuring its staff do not make any comment to the media (or post messages about the accident on their own social media channels)

### 5.9 Investigating Body

The investigating body is normally the main source of information about the progress and conclusions of the technical investigation into any aircraft accident or serious incident. Other parties invited to participate in the investigation are generally required to accept rules prohibiting the disclosure of information on the progress or findings of the investigation, unless that information is released by the investigating body itself.

As the investigation team comprises recognized experts in their respective fields, there is usually enormous interest from journalists in any information they provide, particularly in the first few days after an accident. The investigating body should therefore consider holding regular press briefings and maintaining a flow of information as it becomes available.

Statements or comments to the news media from the investigating body could include:

- Factual information about the accident or incident (aircraft and engine types; operator; circumstances of the accident; persons on board; number of injuries and/or fatalities)
- Actions taken by the investigation body to date (deployment of investigation team; name of investigator in charge; parties invited to participate in the investigation)
- Structure of the investigation team and focus areas
- Potential timeline for the investigation
- Timeline and channels for the release of further information (e.g. daily press briefings, news releases, statements posted on website)
- Statements of initial findings
- Date and location of any public hearing
- Date when the final investigation report will be published
- Summary of key findings and safety recommendations, if any

### 6. Guide to Planning

The day after an accident is not the time to develop a crisis communications strategy. While every crisis situation is different and may throw up circumstances and issues which were not anticipated, having a plan provides an invaluable frame of reference to guide the response to any situation.

Invest the time to create a robust communication plan in "peacetime", and on training and exercising the people who will implement it. If your organization has limited resources, or does not employ fulltime communication professionals, consider where you could source external help to deal with the full spectrum of communication challenges you would face in a crisis. Focus on what you *can* do with your current resources, rather than on what you can't.

#### 6.1 Creating a crisis communications plan

A crisis communications plan should describe how the company will mobilize its communication resources to support the response and provide guidance on roles, responsibilities and actions for each member of the communication team.

The main elements of a robust crisis communications plan include:

- Statement of company communication policy, including the names (or positions) of authorized spokespeople
- Outline of the communication organization, and its interface with the corporate Crisis Management Team (the head of communications should sit on the CMT)
- Protocols for ensuring all available communication channels are properly coordinated and that information and messaging is consistent to all audiences
- Description of functional roles and responsibilities, and candidates
- Checklists for each functional role, outlining the main tasks
- Templates for initial statements, including the first online posts, which can be issued immediately after key information is confirmed. Templates should be developed for various possible scenarios, including accident; serious incident; diversion; hijacking/security incident; service disruption
- Database with phone and email addresses of important internal and external contacts (including primary media outlets, online influencers and service providers)
- Standard forms and documentation (for example, media call logging form, press conference registration form)

### 6.2 Crisis communication team: Key positions

The crisis communication team is responsible for developing and implementing the company's communication strategy and for ensuring that it is able to communicate rapidly and effectively with key internal and external stakeholders across multiple channels.

In a crisis, the company's own communications team may need to be supplemented by external resources, for example from a Public Relations agency. At a minimum, the team should be capable of executing the following functional responsibilities. Actual designations for each position will vary within each company, but the broad division of responsibilities between functions remains the same. If resources are limited, one individual may be responsible for two or more functions.

1. **Communication Representative on the Crisis Management Team**
   The Communication Representative on the CMT is responsible for providing strategic communications advice to the CEO and members of the CMT, and for ensuring that the airline is providing accurate and timely information to internal and external stakeholders, via all available channels. Also, to ensure that all communication channels are properly coordinated and that information and messaging is consistent to all audiences. This position is normally filled by the Head of Communications.

2. **Communication Team Leader**
   The Communication Team Leader is responsible for the overall management of the Communication Team and for ensuring that the communication strategy is executed. This includes managing the flow of information to the media via news releases, social media posts, interviews and press conferences and ensuring that media enquiries are being managed effectively, at head office and at other locations.

3. **Editorial Writer**
   The Editorial Writer is responsible for drafting all written materials, including news releases, backgrounders, briefing documents and statements delivered by company spokespeople.

4. **Online Communication Manager**
   The Online Communication Manager is responsible for managing the company's social media and online channels and ensuring that new information is posted promptly. The Online Communication Manager is also responsible for coordinating online activities with other departments such as the commercial team, monitoring online conversations about the situation and advising on whether the company should engage with online conversations by posting responses on "owned" or third-party social media platforms.

**5. Internal Communication Manager**
The Internal Communication Manager is responsible for ensuring that all statements issued externally are provided to employees via internal communication channels such as blast emails, company intranet, bulletin boards or platforms such as Yammer. This includes liaising with operational departments to ensure that front-line employees such as cabin crew, call center agents or airport staff are provided with guidance on how to respond to customer enquiries.

**6. International Co-ordinator**
The International Coordinator is responsible for maintaining contact with overseas offices and PR Agencies and for ensuring that they receive updated information as it is released from Head Office. This includes ensuring that media enquiries are managed effectively in markets affected by the crisis and that local media coverage is being monitored and reported to Head Office

**7. Media Monitoring Co-ordinator**
The Media Monitoring Coordinator is responsible for ensuring that all relevant electronic, print and online media coverage is collated and reported to the Crisis Management Team. This includes social listening to ensure that relevant conversations on social media are monitored, particularly any images which are posted.

**8. Media Enquiry Center Manager**
The Media Enquiry Center Manager is responsible for supervising the team answering incoming media calls, and for ensuring that agents responding to the media are provided with updated statements and talking points. A summary of media enquiries should be provided regularly to the Communication Team Leader.

**9. Communication Representative/s on the Go-Team**
The Communication Representative/s on the Go-Team is/are responsible for traveling to the scene of the event and coordinating all communication activities locally. This includes arranging press briefings and interviews by the senior executive on-site and ensuring that the Communication Team Leader is kept informed of developments at the scene.

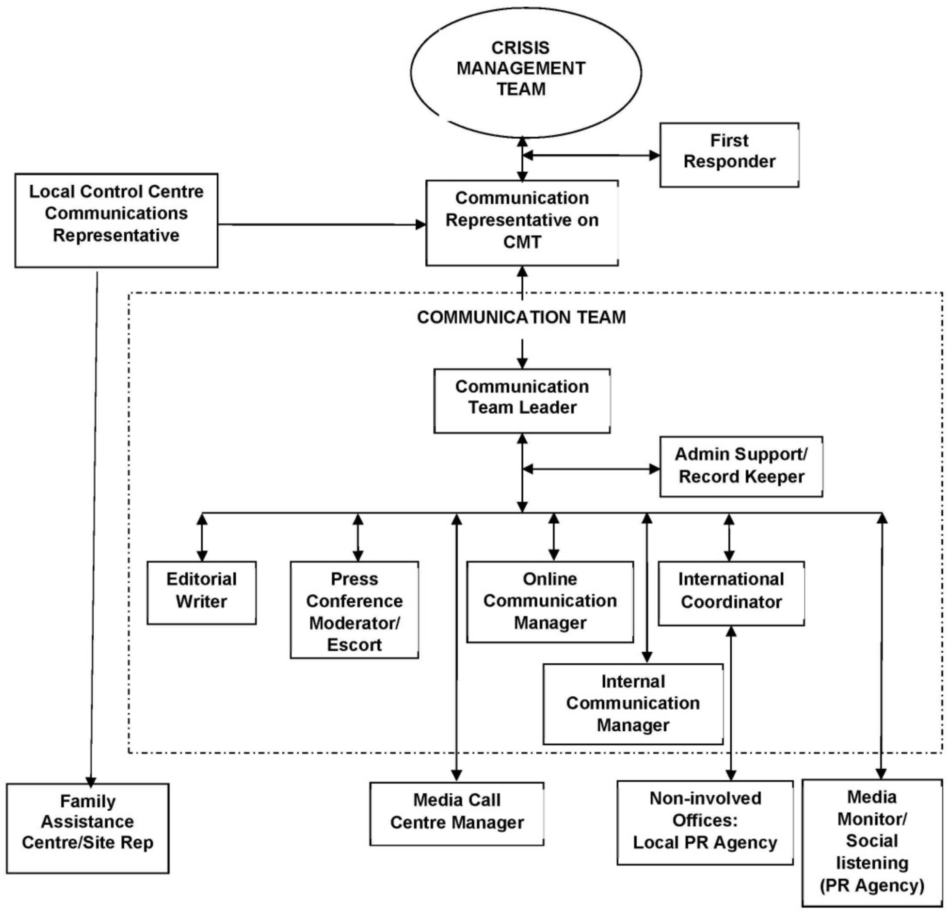
If the resources are available, more than one communication representative may travel with the Go-Team, or other members of the communication team may “rotate” to the accident location and provide some backup and relief.

It may also be helpful to assign a member of the communications team to the Family Assistance Centre (FAC), where family interviews and briefings are conducted. There is often intense media pressure around the FAC, with journalists attempting to interview family members or even to attend the confidential briefings. Family members should not be prevented from talking to the media if they wish to do so – but equally, they should be protected from unwanted media intrusion.

Family members should also be advised not to take photos or videos within the FAC, or to post information from the family briefings on social media sites. However it is always possible that one or more family members will record (or even live-stream) family briefings on their smartphones. Executives designated to brief family members should therefore be aware that their comments may become public.

In a crisis, traditional means of communication such as mobile phone or e-mail can become deluged with incoming information. Careful consideration should be given to using “group chat” apps such as Line or WhatsApp as a means to keep everyone apprised of the latest information.

## 6.3 Crisis Communication Team: Organization Chart

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### 6.4 Training spokespeople

Dealing with the media in the midst of a major crisis, particularly with the added emotional stress of responding to a fatal accident, is not "business as usual". Spokespeople must understand how to defend the organization under pressure from aggressive reporters who may have more information than they themselves do. Front-line operational or commercial managers based far from Head Office (for example, airline country managers or station managers) may be the first company representatives to reach the scene, and may have no previous experience of dealing with the news media.

Anybody designated as a potential spokesperson in a crisis should receive appropriate training. This includes senior executives who may have previously received "media training" or who may feel that they are already familiar with how journalists work. Crisis communication training should provide:

- An understanding of the challenges the organization will face after an accident, and what audiences expect to see and hear
- How the news media work, and what they will look for
- The impact of social media on breaking news coverage
- The role of company spokespeople
- How to deliver key messages
- The importance of non-verbal communication
- Handling different interview situations – live, recorded, "down the line", ambush, press conference
- Interview techniques – "blocking and bridging"
- How to hold a press conference

### 6.5 Exercising the plan

Do not leave your crisis communication plan on the shelf and allow it to gather dust. The moment you most need it, the plan will be out of date, nobody will understand their roles, and key players may no longer be with the organization. Ensure that you review or update your plan at least every six months. Check contact lists and the nominated candidates for key positions. Ask whether the current version of the plan still reflects the "real world", or if it is now outdated as a result of organizational changes, or changes in the external environment.

At least once per year, conduct an exercise to test the plan and to ensure that everyone understands their role, and the purpose of the plan. An exercise may be a simple table-top or a full-scale input-response exercise run by a "control team". Accidents do not happen with plenty of warning, during working hours. Neither should your exercises. Run no-notice exercises at inconvenient times, or when key players are absent. This will provide a far better indication of your true capabilities, and your ability to respond effectively to a major event which occurs at 2 a.m. on a Sunday morning.

The proper time to prepare for an accident or serious incident is before it occurs, and these preparations should be exercised on a routine basis. In addition to this document, IATA has detailed Emergency Response Planning (ERP) guidance materials on how to prepare for these rare events from an operations perspective.

Communications exercises which you may consider running include:

- **Notification exercise**: Check contact numbers are valid and key players can be reached quickly
- **Slow walk-through**: Take a potential scenario and ask a series of questions of your team. Check whether your current plan provides the answers
- **Tabletop**: Run through a simple scenario and test one aspect of the plan – for example, developing updated press statements
- **Input-response exercise:** Test the entire communication plan by using an exercise control team to provide “inputs” via phone calls, emails, social media posts and “news reports”.

After each exercise, conduct an immediate de-brief to capture key learning points and ensure the plan is updated and improved. Exercises may include other departments, or overseas offices. You may also wish to include third parties (for example, codeshare partners) in your exercise.

Time invested in preparing, training and exercising your communication plan is never wasted, even if you never experience an accident or major incident.

## 7. Sample Social Media posts and Crisis Statements

**7.1 First tweet – Aircraft accident**
#*(flight number)*alert. We are investigating reports of an incident involving flight xxx *(origin)* to *(destination)*. More information shortly.

**7.2 Second tweet – Aircraft accident**
#*(flight number)*alert. *(Airline)* regrets to confirm flight xxx *(origin)* to *(destination)* involved in an accident at *(location)*. Response teams mobilized. More information to follow.

**7.3 Third tweet – Aircraft accident**
#*(flight number)*alert. Media Statement 1 – *(flight number)* accident. Released at *(time, date). (Link to statement published on company website)*

**7.4 Statement #1 – Aircraft accident**

XXX bulletin #1 Issued at (*time*), (*date*)

**ACCIDENT TO XXX FLIGHT XXXXX:**
*(Airline)* regrets to confirm that flight (*number*) from (*origin*) to (*destination*) has been involved in an accident at/near (*location*). The aircraft was a (*aircraft type*)

At this time, search and rescue operations are in progress. It is believed that there were (*number)* passengers and (*number)* crew on board the flight, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest.

*(Airline)* has established/is working to establish a passenger information center, and a toll-free number is available/will be available shortly for family or friends of those who may have been on board the aircraft.

The toll-free number (*if available*) is: (*give number)*. For those calling from outside (*country*), please call *(give international country code or alternative numbers)*. Updated information will also be posted on the XXX website and on Twitter at @(airline name) #(flightnumber).

Note to Editors: We ask that members of the news media do not call the XXX Telephone Enquiry Center, as this line is reserved for family members seeking information about those who may have been on board. Please direct your calls to XXX' media hotline, (*give number)*.

### 7.5 Second statement – Aircraft accident

XXX bulletin #2
Issued at (*time*), (*date*)

**ACCIDENT TO (*AIRLINE)* FLIGHT XXXXX:**
*(Airline)* can now provide further details on the accident to flight (*number*) from (*origin*) to (*destination*) earlier today.

The accident occurred at/near (*location*) at (*time*) while the aircraft was *(phase of flight)*. The aircraft was a (*aircraft type*)

We deeply regret to confirm that there are a number of fatalities among those on board, although we do not have further details. Search and rescue operations are still in progress, and we will release additional information as soon as it becomes available.

*(Airline)* Chief Executive XXX said: “Everyone at *(airline)* is deeply shocked and saddened by this tragic accident and our thoughts and prayers are with the families and friends of our passengers and colleagues on board the flight *(number)*”.

It is believed that there were (*number)* passengers and (*number)* crew on board the flight, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest. *(Airline)* has established/is working to establish a passenger information center, and a toll-free number is available/will be available shortly for family or friends of those who may have been on board the aircraft.

The toll-free number (*if available*) is: (*give number)*. For those calling from outside (*country*), please call *(give international country code or alternative numbers)*. Updated information will also be posted on the *(Airline)* website: *(give address) and on Twitter at @airlinename #flightnumber*

Note to Editors: We ask that members of the news media do not call the XXX Telephone Enquiry Center, as this line is reserved for family members seeking information about those who may have been on board. Please direct your calls to XXX’ media hotline, (*give number)*.

### 7.6 First statement – Aircraft incident

XXX bulletin #1
Issued at (*time*), (*date*)

**INCIDENT TO (*AIRLINE)* FLIGHT XXXXX:**
*(Airline)* can confirm that flight (*number*) from (*origin*) to (*destination*) was involved in an incident today at/near *(location)* when *(describe nature of incident)*. The aircraft was a (*aircraft type*)

The crew of flight *(number) (describe actions of crew)*, in accordance with standard operating procedures. The aircraft landed safely at *(airport)* and there were no injuries to the passengers and crew on board.

It is believed that flight *(number)* was carrying (*number)* passengers and (*number)* crew, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest. Our priority now is to ensure that passengers are rebooked on other flights and can continue their journeys without further delay.

*(Airline)* regrets the inconvenience caused by today's incident. The incident will be investigated by *(name investigating body)* and *(airline)* will cooperate fully with the investigation.

Updated information will also be posted on the *(Airline)* website: *(give address)* and on Twitter at @*(airlinename) #(flightnumber)*

**7.7 First statement – Aircraft diversion**

XXX bulletin #1
Issued at (*time*), (*date*)

**DIVERSION OF (*AIRLINE)* FLIGHT XXXXX:**
*(Airline)* can confirm that flight (*number*) from (*origin*) to (*destination*) diverted to land at (*location*) today, after *(describe nature of in-flight incident)*.

The aircraft landed safely at *(time)* and there were no injuries to passengers or crew members on board. The aircraft was a (*aircraft type*)

The crew of flight *(number) (describe actions of crew)*, in accordance with standard operating procedures. It is believed that flight *(number)* was carrying (*number)* passengers and (*number)* crew, but we are currently confirming the details of the passenger manifest.

Our priority now is to ensure that passengers are rebooked on other flights and can continue their journeys without further delay. *(Airline)* regrets the inconvenience caused by today's diversion.

The incident will be investigated by *(name investigating body)* and *(airline)* will cooperate fully with the investigation.

Updated information will also be posted on the *(Airline)* website: *(give address)* and on Twitter at @*(airlinename) #(flightnumber)*

## Appendix: Case studies

### Malaysia Airlines MH370

Malaysia Airlines flight MH370 disappeared on 8 March 2014 while flying from Kuala Lumpur to Beijing with 239 people on board. The crew last contacted air traffic control when the aircraft was heading north-east towards Vietnamese airspace, less than one hour after departure. MH370 diverted from its planned track shortly afterwards and normal transmissions from the aircraft stopped. The Boeing 777-200ER was carrying 12 Malaysian crew members and 227 passengers from 15 countries.

Analysis of radar traces and a series of electronic "handshakes" with Inmarsat's satellite communications network revealed that the aircraft had turned back and flown across the Malaysian peninsula and the northern tip of Sumatra before heading south. The Malaysian Prime Minister announced on 24 March 2014 that Flight MH370 had ended in the southern Indian Ocean. Small pieces of debris have since been recovered, but the final resting place of MH370 is still unknown.

MH370 became the world's number one news story throughout most of March and April 2014, leading the main news programmes on all three major US domestic TV networks for 11 consecutive nights after the aircraft disappeared – an unprecedented level of interest for an event in which only three American citizens were involved. The story also dominated global news channels like CNN, the BBC and Al Jazeera, with interminable speculation about the possible causes of the disappearance.

Malaysia Airlines activated its emergency response procedures in the early hours of 8th March, and made the first public announcement that the aircraft was missing shortly after it had been due to land in Beijing, followed by a press conference in Kuala Lumpur later that morning. But while the airline maintained a steady flow of statements focused on its actions to care for the MH370 families and to support the ongoing search effort, there was very little substantive information to share.

Control of the media operation was taken over by the Malaysian Government, which held daily press conferences in Kuala Lumpur attended by more than 800 journalists. The airline had little influence over the conduct of these briefings, even though its CEO stood on the podium alongside the Acting Minister of Transport and other officials.

The airline also had limited control over the content or timing of statements made by the Malaysian Prime Minister, senior military officials and other agencies, and often scant advance warning of significant announcements. This became a particular challenge when trying to ensure that family members were notified by the airline before new developments became public. This ultimately resulted in some families (and the news media) blaming the airline for "miscommunication" for which it was not responsible, or claiming that the airline had somehow "withheld" information which it did not have.

**AirAsia Indonesia flight QZ8501**

On Sunday 28 December 2014, an AirAsia Indonesia Airbus A320 went missing over the Java Sea while operating flight QZ8501 from Surabaya to Singapore with 155 passengers and seven crew members on board. The aircraft lost contact with Air Traffic Control at 07.24am Singapore time, shortly after the crew requested permission to divert around a storm system. The A320 was declared overdue at Singapore's Changi Airport at 08.30, but it took a further two days for the wreckage to be found.

AirAsia Indonesia is a 49%-owned joint venture with local partners and one of nine separate operating carriers within the AirAsia Group, which is based in Kuala Lumpur. Even though a family reception centre had been opened at Changi Airport shortly after the flight was due to land, nothing had been posted on social media channels about the missing A320 until AirAsia issued its first statement at 11.42am in Malaysia.

AirAsia Group CEO Tony Fernandes is an unusually high-profile "celebrity CEO", with more than one million followers on his personal Twitter account and numerous other business interests including part-ownership of Queen's Park Rangers football club in the UK. As the "face" of the AirAsia brand – not least to the Group's more than 17,000 employees – his personal involvement was pivotal in establishing a positive perception of the company's response to the loss of flight QZ8501.

Fernandes arrived at company headquarters shortly after QZ8501 disappeared, and quickly assembled a group of executives to accompany him on a flight to Surabaya. While en route, he began posting a series of comments on his own Twitter feed describing his personal devastation and his commitment to supporting the families involved. His comments reinforced the core messaging in AirAsia's official statements, which were published on all its online channels and released to the news media.

In Surabaya, Fernandes regularly briefed journalists and spent several days with family members waiting for news of the missing passengers and crew. When the aircraft was finally located, Fernandes memorably told the media that, as AirAsia's leader, it was his "personal responsibility" to take care of the families of everyone involved, including those of his own employees. This included escorting the family of the first flight attendant to her funeral, and ensuring that all crew families received the same treatment and compensation payments as passengers' relatives, despite different insurance arrangements. Fernandes remained personally involved throughout the response, including doing video calls with family members when he was unable to attend meetings in person.

AirAsia's response to the loss of QZ8501 was widely commended, including in the United States, where AirAsia does not operate and the brand is virtually unknown. The *Washington Post* and *The Wall Street Journal* both cited Fernandes as an example of how a CEO should react in the aftermath of a major accident, while *PR*

*Week* said he had provided "a lesson in crisis management…a textbook public relations response".

**Germanwings Flight 4U9525**

Germanwings Flight 4U9525, a scheduled Airbus A320 service from Barcelona to Dusseldorf, crashed into the French Alps on 24 March 2015 after the co-pilot, Andreas Lubitz, initiated a steady descent towards the mountains. All 144 passengers and six crew members were killed in what was the first fatal crash in the history of Germanwings, a low-cost subsidiary of the Lufthansa Group established in 2002.

Lubitz had previously been treated for suicidal tendencies and declared "unfit to work" by a doctor, but hid his illness from his employer and reported for duty as normal. The revelation that the co-pilot had deliberately crashed the aircraft after locking the captain out of the cockpit came two days later from the French prosecutor leading the criminal investigation, based on information from the cockpit voice recorder.

Lufthansa Group policy stipulated that the Operating Carrier should take the lead as the public "face" of the response to any major event, supported by the full resources of the Group. However it was agreed that Lufthansa Group CEO Carsten Spohr and Germanwings CEO Thomas Winkelman would appear together at all media briefings and other public events to publicly acknowledge their shared accountability.

Germanwings issued the first public statement on Twitter at 11.49am (just over an hour after the crash), saying it was "investigating" breaking news reports of a fatal accident in the French Alps. The same information was posted on its Facebook page, suggesting that visitors check the Germanwings website for further updates. Unfortunately the website "crashed" due to the volume of traffic and remained unavailable for approximately two hours.

Before the crash was confirmed officially, a statement from Carsten Spohr was posted on the Lufthansa Facebook and Twitter pages, shared and retweeted by Germanwings. Both companies activated their "dark sites" shortly afterwards, using monochrome branding which remained in place for the next month, together with the hashtag #indeepsorrow. The other Lufthansa Group airlines, including Austrian, Brussels Airlines and Swiss, also changed the branding on their websites and social media channels.

Daily summaries of factual information were published on the Germanwings website, with links posted to Twitter and Facebook. Both Lufthansa and Germanwings also answered user comments and enquiries on Facebook and Twitter, redirecting them to the emergency telephone hotline or customer service, as appropriate. An online condolence website was also launched a week after the crash, in five different languages, where users could leave messages for the affected families.

Lufthansa Group's response to the 4U9525 crash emphasized yet again the importance of rapid (and sustained) engagement with key audiences via online channels, even during the "breaking news" phase when very little factual information may be available. Also, the need to ensure that the CEO is positioned visibly at the centre of the response, not only with conventional media briefings and interviews, but also through their personal engagement with families, response teams and on social media.

**Brussels Airport Bombings**

Two suicide bombers, carrying explosives in large suitcases, attacked a departure hall at Brussels Zaventem Airport shortly before 8am on 22 March 2016. A third bomb was detonated at the Maalbeek metro station in central Brussels. The attacks killed 35 people, including the three bombers, and more than 300 others were injured. The attacks were the deadliest act of terrorism in Belgium's history.

Brussels Airport was closed for 12 days after the explosions and partially reopened at less than 20% of its capacity and with check-in facilities relocated to a temporary structure. The departure hall did not reopen fully for 40 days, although the airport has since returned to normal operations. During the closure of Brussels Airport, flights were either cancelled or diverted to nearby Amsterdam Schiphol or to regional airports in Belgium including Brussels South-Charleroi and Ostend-Bruges.

The first indication that a serious event was under way came on Twitter, with a photograph showing smoke above the terminal building posted eight minutes after the first explosion. The European Air Traffic Control agency Eurocontrol posted confirmation that Brussels Airport was "unavailable until further notice" approximately 20 minutes later, as the airport was being evacuated. Brussels Airport itself tweeted confirmation of the explosions at 8.41am, telling people to avoid the airport area.

The "home" carrier Brussels Airlines, part of the Lufthansa Group, was severely disrupted after the attacks and forced to relocate operations to four alternative hubs: Frankfurt and Zurich for US and Africa-bound flights and Antwerp and Liege for regional flights within Europe. This created a massive logistical challenge which included repositioning aircraft, crew and ground support services; arranging new take-off and landing slots, and transporting passengers between Brussels and the temporary airports.

Brussels Airlines used online platforms as its primary communication channels, posting regular updates on its website and Facebook page and tweeting short statements with links to more complete information, particularly about cancelled and rescheduled flights. The airline's social media team was augmented by 140 volunteers from across the company, with additional support from Swiss and the Lufthansa Group. They worked 24/7, responding to up to 5,000 passenger comments and questions per day, usually specific enquiries about bookings.

As the situation developed, the airline's communication strategy was based on three key pillars of its response: sympathy and caring for the people affected (including its own employees); maintaining operations, despite the relocation of some flights to other airports; and recovery efforts going on "behind the scenes".

Brussels Airlines maintained a steady stream of stories which showed the "human" face of the company and the determination of its staff to help passengers overcome the temporary inconvenience resulting from the attack. It also decided not to engage in the hugely sensitive discussion about additional screening measures, which caused additional delays when the airport reopened. Four months after the attacks, Brussels Airport recorded the second busiest July in its history, only 3% below passenger numbers for July 2015.

**Emirates Flight EK521**

On 3 August 2016, Emirates Flight EK521, a Boeing 777-300 carrying 282 passengers and 18 crew from Trivandrum, crashed while attempting a go-around after landing at Dubai International Airport. The aircraft climbed less than 30m above the runway before its speed decayed and it hit the runway again, this time with the landing gear partly retracted.

The impact tore off one engine and started a fire in the starboard wing, which quickly spread. Emergency services reached the aircraft less than 90 seconds later and tackled several fires while the passengers and crew were evacuated. Nine minutes after the aircraft came to rest there was an explosion in the centre fuel tank, which killed one of the firefighters.

In total, 24 people on board EK521 were injured, along with several of the firefighters, and it took more than 16 hours to bring the blaze under control. The airport was closed for more than five hours and reopened with one runway unusable. A total of 63 flights were diverted to Sharjah or Jebel Ali and a further 246 departures were cancelled. The disruption affected more than 23,000 passengers temporarily stranded in Dubai and created “ripple effects” throughout the networks of the two home carriers, Emirates and FlyDubai.

As the operating carrier and airline most affected by the partial closure, Emirates took the lead on the communications response, but in close coordination with the airport communications team. While Emirates focused on care of the passengers and crew on EK521 and the effect on other flights, Dubai Airport discussed the efforts to cater for disrupted passengers and to return to normal operations as quickly as possible. A separate statement was issued regarding the death of the firefighter and support for his family.

Emirates issued a stream of updates on its social media channels and the website as new information was confirmed. Branding was also changed to monochrome across all its online properties, acknowledging the seriousness of the accident. A personal statement was issued from the Emirates Group CEO and chairman Sheikh Ahmed Bin Saeed Al Maktoum (also chairman of Dubai Airports) and posted to Facebook and the Emirates website, with a link on Twitter. A videotaped version of the statement was positioned on the Emirates channel on YouTube and the subsequent press conference was also recorded and an edited version posted on YouTube and on the Emirates website.

Analysis of the conversations about EK521 on social media channels revealed more than 74,000 posts about the accident. This included videos of the accident scene taken by staff on the airport ramp or directly involved in the response, in contravention of their terms of employment. This highlighted the challenge of trying to ensure that employees of airlines, airports or third-party contractors do not post sensitive images or comments about the response to a major incident on their personal social media channels.

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