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# Facebook for Law Enforcement

Stephen Carlisle  
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## Abstract

This article introduces what some law enforcement agencies have done to mitigate trust issues by utilizing social media as a form of community policing. There is a silent majority out there that support law enforcement. As a pioneer of using Facebook as a platform for community policing, taking criticism from my law enforcement peers was unavoidable. However, these same peers would turn to Facebook shortly after for personal and professional use. The key is to reach out and to educate the public to help gain trust in law enforcement, and using modern social media platforms to reach the masses only makes sense. Facebook is a good place to start.

## Introduction

In modern times, the negative media coverage sends the message that people distrust law enforcement, and the prevalence of social media only broadens that distrust. The Ferguson Effect, and more recent George Floyd incident, have affected public trust in the police. Law enforcement has a need now, more than ever, to gain public trust. The perception that the majority of people do not trust the police falsely convinces some of our youth to believe this is true. A law enforcement agency must identify where to effectively communicate with the public that distrusts them.

Communication to the public is important in law enforcement. The more law enforcement agencies communicate to the public, the more trust in the police there is. It is important for the people to trust a law enforcement agency, otherwise it would be difficult to police and assist them. Maintaining a good relationship with the community is critical to maintaining public safety. An agency has to have the public support and permission to effectively police that community because without that trust, they would be fighting an uphill battle. Trust and credibility take time to gain but can be lost in a second.

Is it a good idea for law enforcement to have a social media presence? In the past, the police were very secretive about what they did and minimized public information. Maybe they would have a police blotter column in the local newspaper to highlight a few activities, or the occasional media release, however these communications with the public were slow. Now, with the advent of social media, information spreads immediately. Law enforcement should be able to give out instant information like everyone else. The modern public wants or, likely, expects instant communication and transparency from their government because the technology now exists.

Is social media truly good for society? It is a matter of opinion to each individual. Facebook has given a platform to any individual to have a voice therefore giving a voice to people that may not have had one before. This has in turn made a platform for disinformation and misinformation. But it also is a platform for correct information. Fake news has been able to reach millions using Facebook, but so has real news.

How should law enforcement approach social media? There are many techniques for the police to get involved. The police should carefully choose which and how many social media platforms to get involved in. Facebook and Twitter are the easiest to get started with and the most popular. It is a benefit to the public for the police to be able to instantly put out pertinent

information in case of an emergency or even to identify a suspect. The news media also monitors law enforcement pages for potential hot topics.

Has law enforcement communication with the public changed? It has absolutely changed and will continue to do so. Communication to the public has adapted with the times over the years. Communication has ranged from messengers to public meetings, news releases, and direct communication on the internet. Over the years, police have adapted to the communications of the times. Why is this not the case with social media?

What could happen if law enforcement stayed out of social media? With the ability to directly communicate with the public through social media, the public now expects the government to utilize the tools available. This is an inexpensive way to reach the public, and the public may demand the government begin to utilize modern communication.

How is government involvement in social media effected by the Texas Public Information Act (PIA)? The government is not required to use social media to disseminate public information. The rules in the PIA must be followed. Just because a piece of information is required to be released under the PIA does not require you to put it on social media. The PIA also has restrictions of personal privacy that need to be followed.

Where is the best place to start? Facebook (Meta) is currently the most used and most popular social media, making it the best way to reach most people. There are other social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, Nextdooraarti, Snapchat, YouTube, TikTok, and many more, however it is best to start with one, Facebook, and then add more platforms as needed.

## **History of Communication**

The importance of communicating with those who officers serve is critical. It is important to the public to remain informed on what the police are doing and how they are doing it. The police are not required to communicate with the public outside of an emergency, but it is a good idea. The public has to actually give police officers permission to police them. Police cannot police its citizens without their blessing. Giving the public information and letting them know what the police do will help them appreciate it, support the government, and allow officers to police them. More importantly, social media can help to humanize the police.

In medieval times, personal messengers were the only way for the government to communicate with the public. In 12th-century England, kings traveled and did not stay in London, so messengers became a permanent royal expenditure to travel the kingdom carrying the king's word.<sup>1</sup> The messengers could not tell everyone, but word would spread on its own from that point, however, this information was often inaccurate. Eventually, written bulletins were added to the verbal messages to minimize inaccurate information.

What was communication like before the internet? Newspapers, signs, and newsletters were the primary news source through the 1800s. Radio and television news took over in the 1900s. All these forms of communication still exist and are used today.

The internet started getting popular in the early 1990s, and by the end of the decade it was booming. Email and web pages became a must and are still important. As more and more information was put on the internet, search engines were able to find any information an individual seeks. With emails, anyone could send a message or other content instantly to one or more people. Internet news did not become a primary news source for most until the introduction of social media, and now serves as a news source for the public.

In modern day communication, social media has its grasp on all generations. Whether someone wishes to keep in touch with their family on Facebook to see pictures of their grandkids or use it for everyday social life, they will see what is happening. Now, it does depend on the type of person they wish to reach and the information they have a trend of looking up. Newspapers have turned to the internet and social media, many abandoning print, instead using these trends to attempt to reach their target audience. News channels have turned to app-based viewing. Former President Trump could make a tweet and his message would reach millions instantly.

There are many benefits to governmental use of social media. One of the biggest benefits of social media is that it allows governments to share critical information in the event of a crisis. Additionally, it can allow governments to create an open channel for citizen interaction and engagement, reduce public relations and advertising costs, increase trust in the government, and allow agencies to reach people and communities on platforms they already use. Finally, social media humanizes governments.<sup>2</sup> Not only does the public want more communication with the government, they are also able to request information directly from a department. This is a right granted by the Texas Public Information Act.

## **Public Information**

The Texas Public Information Act, or PIA, gives the public the right to request access to government information. The Act is triggered when a person submits a written request to a governmental body asking for records or information already in existence. The Act does not require a governmental body to create new information, to do legal research, or to answer questions.<sup>3</sup> The Texas PIA was adopted in 1973 by the reform-minded 63rd Legislature and is codified in the Texas Government Code, chapter 552.<sup>4</sup>

The purpose of the Public Information Act is to maintain the people's control "over the instruments they have created." The Act requires the attorney general to construe the Act liberally in favor of open government.<sup>5</sup> Nearly every document that a government generates is public with few exceptions. The PIA is legislation that sets specific rules on what information the public has a right to and how to get it. In preparing a request, a person may want to ask the governmental body what information is available because the government does not have to create documents, only to provide access to those already in existence.

It is not required to have a public information request in order to make information available to the public, though it is advisable to have public information officer training before managing a social media page. A good public information officer will know what they can and cannot post and be able to judge the proper timing of publishing certain information.

## **The Issue**

In the wake of recent incidents involving the police's use of force and other issues, the legitimacy of the police has been questioned in many communities. Many cities in the United States experienced large scale demonstrations and protest marches in 2014 and 2015, and in some cases there have been riots over perceptions of police misconduct and excessive use of force. At that time, some observers argued that a "Ferguson Effect" was responsible for the crime increases. The "Ferguson Effect" was a term first coined by St. Louis Police Chief Sam Dotson III in late 2014. The essential idea was that, in the wake of anti-police protests after the events in Ferguson, officers were disengaging from discretionary enforcement activities and criminals felt empowered.

When public support for law enforcement declines, police officers tend to do less proactive policing which causes crime to go up. Changes in law enforcement in the wake of the George Floyd protests caused an increase in homicides. A reduction in discretionary law enforcement activities is now called the “Minneapolis Effect,” which explains the abrupt homicide spikes that have occurred in 2021. In the wake of the anti-police protests surrounding George Floyd’s death, less policing has occurred. Police have pulled back from some kinds of proactive policing, which is self-initiated policing methods designed to reduce crime by using preventive strategies, such as street stops. These reductions have resulted from protests or other attacks on police.<sup>6</sup>

The only way law enforcement can combat this problem is by regaining public support, and social media is the best direct approach to doing so. When the public shows their support for the police, police morale will increase and they will be more proactive to reduce crime. It is imperative that police agencies make improving relationships with their local communities a top priority.<sup>7</sup>

## **Facebook/Meta**

What is Facebook/Meta? Facebook was founded in 2004 by students of Harvard University and quickly became the largest social network in the world with nearly three billion users as of 2021, half of which were using Facebook every day. Access to Facebook is free of charge. It also noted that the bottom-up, peer-to-peer connectivity among Facebook users makes it easier for businesses to connect their products with consumers.<sup>8</sup>

Due to the risks of improper use, many governments have policies against Facebook use by its employees. Many government agencies have policies in place to prevent employees from posting city business, even on the employees’ personal social media page. However, more and more agencies have recognized the need to be involved in social media and have modified their policies to allow a trained public information officer to make posts.

Police Departments’ discovery of the benefit of Facebook have proven to generate a following. Police agencies were some of the first government agencies to get involved in Facebook despite taking criticism from their peers, but the public’s response to this was very positive. Their critics started to join social media.

Other areas of government also started to join in. With the success of the police presence on Facebook, many other government agencies started to create pages of their own. Cities began to authorize their departments to create separate pages.

Policies had to be put in place to control public information. An employee cannot be allowed to represent the agency, intentionally or not, without the proper training. Simply answering a question on social media can cause unseen repercussions. An employee known to work within the agency is always representing the agency whether they intend to or not. Even if answered correctly, the control of information the public has access to is important. It must be accurate and properly worded to prevent misinterpretation.

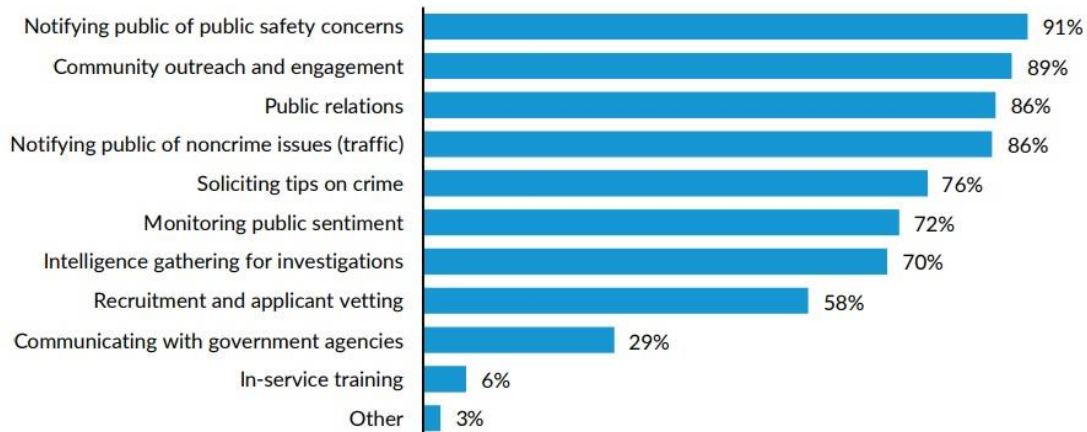
Many community groups controlled by the public are where people turn to get information, however this information is not from an approved government source and has a likelihood of being wrong. That is why information officers must direct the people seeking information to official pages.

Law enforcement agencies use social media for a variety of purposes. In 2016, the Urban Institute partnered with the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) to survey law enforcement agencies on their use of social media. Over 500 agencies responded to the survey.

Agencies were asked many questions, including why they currently use social media. The most common purposes are shown in Figure 1, and include notifying the public of safety concerns, community outreach and engagement, public relations, and notifying the public of non-crime issues (e.g., traffic).<sup>9</sup>

Figure 1.

#### What Does Your Agency Use Social Media For?



Source: Urban Institute 2016 Law Enforcement Use of Social Media Survey

### Pros and Cons of Facebook for Law Enforcement

There are many pros and cons for the police to consider before beginning to use Facebook and other forms of social media. The pros are a great benefit to law enforcement, and the cons are manageable. In the modern climate of the negative perception of law enforcement and morale being low enough to affect proactive policing, it is important for both the police and the public to see more positive attitudes towards the police. Facebook and other social media platforms are the most logical place to humanize the police as well as bring back and maintain public trust and police morale. When public trust and police morale go up, proactive policing also increases which will, in turn, lower crime.

Listed below are pros and cons according to law enforcement social media expert Tom Scholes-Fogg, author of “Police and Social Media.”

Pros of the police using social media:

- Reaching out to people within the community who use social media rather than simply using old methods of communication such as a newspaper.
- Saving time. Social media is a tool that reaches the public directly, which is a lot quicker than calling a press conference or relying on the local media which has set deadlines.
- Ability to respond to the people quickly and effectively.
- Allows those who live within the particular community to like the page and receive updates specific to their community straight to their Facebook news feed.
- Allows the public to identify wanted suspects anonymously and on their smartphone devices.

- The police would have the ability to solve crimes using social media, and in some cases the police are able to identify the location of a suspect based on information on Facebook.
- The police using social media sends out a clear message to criminals that ‘we are monitoring social media and we will get you if you break the law.’
- The police can use social media as an excellent way of ending speculation and rumor. An example is after a road traffic collision on a busy motorway, some motorists were using social media to give commentary on the incident. Police and the emergency services were able to use social media to quickly end speculation and rumors and get factual information to the public.
- Using numerous communications channels to reach more people can multiply the ‘reach’ by further sharing the information.

Cons of the police using social media:

- Legal obstacles, such as the Public Information Act, ensuring that private and confidential information remains private.
- With police budget cuts, how can forces ensure that officers and staff are highly trained in dealing with customers via social media websites and ensuring there is a decent budget for staff training?
- Some serving officers have used Facebook to post their own private thoughts about current affairs and cuts to the police service. This needs to be closely monitored to ensure officer impartiality and to allow the police to maintain a united front.
- Police users of social media need to be extra cautious about what messages are posted online. A message can be posted online within a matter of seconds and if something is posted that isn’t meant to be it will be almost impossible to remove it permanently. This is because it is possible for people to ‘screen grab’ a post or status, and this can be potentially damaging.
- Members of the police family may intend on using social media to send a private message, however the message may accidentally be posted publicly rather than being sent as a private or direct message.
- Crime maps currently aggregate information, and whilst accepting that some offences might be deemed too sensitive for broadcast, they could be improved by using point data.<sup>10</sup>

## **Getting the Police Started on Facebook**

First, consult with the city or county attorney to establish rules for the page to be published and policies for the page managers. Then set up the page following the current instructions on Facebook. Consider filtering profanity with keywords which can be found by talking with nearby agencies who already have Facebook pages. And of course, make sure the page managers are trained.

Building an audience on Facebook takes time. Start with having the page managers invite their Facebook friends. Once there are over 100 page-likes, Facebook will allow the agency to choose a URL that can be put on agency stationary. Share the page to local Facebook community groups to let the community know that the agency is now on Facebook, and ask the public to like the page. Every time someone likes a post, click on invite. Facebook will then send them an invite to follow the page. Post interesting and relevant posts and alerts regularly and do not be afraid to use humor, but be very careful it is not offensive to anyone. If done right, Facebook will recognize

that the page is getting a lot of attention and will make it available to more people by boosting it through the algorithm. Facebook does have a way to promote posts to target specific users, but there is a charge for this feature. If done right, the page will quickly build a loyal following.

Make the posts using techniques to connect with the most people. The more people that pause to consume the information, click, like, comment, and share the post, the more exposure and page likes or follows the page will receive. Facebook uses an algorithm to determine how many people see the post. This is based on the most recent posts. The more people that interact with the post, the more exposure the page will get. A share is worth more than a comment, a comment is worth more than a like, which is worth more than a click, and simply reading the information without interacting does nothing for the page. The more exposure the page gets, the more likes it will get. Facebook will start automatically putting the post on the follower's page but only a small percentage. If Facebook sees that the post, or even a recent previous post got a lot of attention, they will start exposing the posts to a higher percentage of the followers and even to non-followers.

Use a picture or short video in conjunction with text. Text only posts do not get as much attention. If using a video, try to keep it a minute or less. Lengthy videos tend to lose the attention of the person looking at it. Avoid posting multiple pictures in a single post because they can be shared independently, and this lowers the ranking of Facebook's algorithm to determine the page's exposure. Consider turning multiple pictures into a collage in order to post it as a single image.

Agencies may consider highlighting police activities and its officers. Check with local laws and policies before posting names and pictures of law enforcement officers. Also make sure the officer allows posting their name or picture online. Consider making the page fun and with the line-officer's voice, not a dry administration voice. It is okay to humanize the police using the page; the public loves it but think hard in order to avoid offensive posts. For example, if the police page posts a meme of a police car parked in front of the fire station with a sign saying, "be very quiet, firefighters sleeping," make sure you contact the fire chief prior for permission.

Keep posts as simple and short as possible. Start with the point of the post first. Give relevant details. End with stating where more information can be found, if relevant. Use grade school vocabulary and know the audience. Make posts precise and easy to read. If appropriate, make them entertaining or funny.

Once the agency masters Facebook, consider expanding to other social media platforms. Facebook automatically links to Instagram, making that the easiest next step. Twitter would be another easy step. Nextdoor is an up-and-coming neighborhood-based platform. The youth have been exploring other platforms which will steer the social media industry. Do not get outdated, it is important to keep with the times to maintain relevancy. There are many other platforms to explore, and new social media companies are going to come into the picture soon.

## **Pioneering Facebook for Law Enforcement**

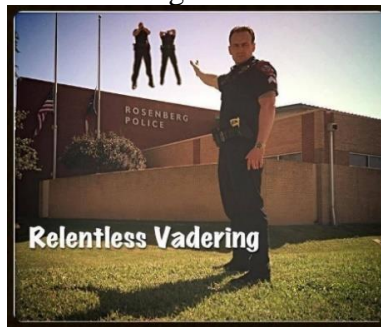
On November 12, 2021, I interviewed Ariel Soltura about pioneering Facebook for law enforcement. Soltura is a detective with the Wharton Police Department and formerly a sergeant with the Rosenberg Police Department. Detective Soltura is currently co-administrator of the Wharton Police social media and is credited with starting and managing the Rosenberg Police Facebook page. Many police agencies have followed this page as an example. The following section contains many references to this interview.<sup>11</sup>

Law enforcement first got engaged in Facebook approximately 10 years ago in 2012. The police created a Facebook page and posted blotters and general information. These pages were



kept professional and noncontroversial. With a conservative approach, I started a Facebook page called Chief Stephen Carlisle on December 30<sup>th</sup>, 2012.<sup>12</sup> Like other agencies, I kept it professional and serious. I also started the Roman Forest Police Department page on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013.<sup>13</sup> I had been following the Rosenberg Police Facebook page prior to the creation of my own. The Rosenberg Police Department first caught my attention on April 11<sup>th</sup>, 2013, when they posted a meme based on a scene from Star Wars.<sup>14</sup> This picture had a sergeant holding his hand out like Darth Vader doing a force choke and officers in the distance were ‘raised’ above the Police Department with their hands around their neck. The meme said “Relentless Vading,” shown in Figure 2. Being a Star Wars fan, this captured my attention and I saw that the Rosenberg Police Department was breaking boundaries.

Figure 2.



Source: Rosenberg Police Facebook Page

Sergeant Ariel Soltura started the Rosenberg Police Facebook page on September 14<sup>th</sup>, 2012. He said that the Houston Police Department helped him set up the page and gave him the advice to keep it police related and stay away from being funny. Ariel Soltura said that he wanted the page to be more fun, but he was the only person managing the Facebook page and stuck to following the advice of other agencies. But when his lieutenant went to a conference and saw that the Fort Worth Police Department was getting away with putting out funny memes on their Facebook page, he got involved in the Rosenberg Police Facebook page. Soltura said that, with the lieutenant’s backing, he was able to put out funny memes and situations that became popular with their citizens, humanizing the police and allowing them to connect with the public. Soltura said that the page was themed in the line-officer’s voice instead of police administration. He said for the first couple of years they took a lot of criticism from other police agencies, but now those agencies are following in their footsteps, and are actually asking for advice with their own Facebook pages. The Rosenberg Police Facebook page was the pioneer for other police Facebook pages in the Houston metroplex.

I started the Roman Forest Police Department Facebook page on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2013 and made the first humorous meme post of me zipping up my uniform shirt with a Superman shirt underneath it, getting ready to go to work and brushing my teeth titled “Truth, Justice, and the American Hygiene” on October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2013, as shown in Figure 3. The post said “Caught Chief Carlisle getting ready for work. Your secret is safe with us Chief.” At the time the page only had 300 page-likes. This post had 55 likes and seven comments, all positive. The first comment on it was, “It’s refreshing to have a police chief with a sense of humor,” but on a share to one of the community groups, it had a criticism comment saying that the police should have better things to do than posting dumb memes. That person later became one of the best supporters of the police department.

Figure 3.



Source: Roman Forest Police Department Facebook Page.

I took criticism from my peers for posting funny memes on the Roman Forest Police Department page, but the public responded well, and that is what matters. Like Ariel Soltura, I felt that humor was the best way to humanize the police to help gain the public's trust. Soltura said that he wanted to humanize the police and get away from the "T100 Terminator" perception. Following the Ferguson incident, many police agencies took the same approach, knowing that they had to do something to humanize the police and have positive engagement with the public they served.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, proper communication with the public is essential to gaining and maintaining public trust in law enforcement. Without the public trust, the public will voice their distrust causing the morale of police officers to become low. This causes proactive policing to decline, which causes crime to go up and empowers criminals. Only the police can take the steps to correct these trust issues and image shortfalls.

Social media is the modern platform of instant communication with the public. Facebook has billions of users and is the place where people are always connected thanks to smartphones and other devices. The best way to reach most people is to go where they are. If the police could capture the attention and support of the public, from the youth to the elders, their job would be much easier. Facebook is a perfect start to capture attention and gain support.

Social media has evolved and will continue to do so. It is always a good idea to keep up with the trends and keep the communication going in the most efficient means possible. As with medieval kings sending messengers with verbal messages and eventually upgrading the messages

to include written bulletins, communication with the public is ever changing. It is important for our police departments to upgrade as well. Staying up to date with public communication trends is critical for law enforcement agencies' positive relationship with the public.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Laura Crombie, "A brief history of how people communicated in the Middle Ages." BBC History Magazine: History Extra, October 24, 2014, accessed November 20, 2021, <https://www.historyextra.com/period/medieval/a-brief-history-of-how-people-communicated-in-the-middle-ages/>.

<sup>2</sup> "Social Media in Government: Benefits, Challenges and Impact on Social Perception," Ohio University. October 22, 2020, Accessed November 29, 2021, <https://onlinemasters.ohio.edu/blog/social-media-in-government/>.

<sup>3</sup> Greg Abbott, Texas Public Information Act Handbook 2020, (Office Attorney General of Texas, 2020), i.

<sup>4</sup> Act of May 19, 1973, 63rd Leg., R.S., ch. 424, 1973 Tex. Gen. Laws 1112.

<sup>5</sup> Texas Government Code § 552.001(b); see *A & T Consultants v. Sharp*, 904 S.W.2d 668, 675 (Tex. 1995); *Abbott v. City of Corpus Christi*, 109 S.W.3d 113, 118 (Tex. App.—Austin 2003, no pet.); *Thomas v. Cornyn*, 71 S.W.3d 473, 480 (Tex. App.—Austin 2002, no pet.).

<sup>6</sup> Cassell, Paul G, Explaining the Recent Homicide Spikes in U.S. Cities: The 'Minneapolis Effect' and the Decline in Proactive Policing (September 10, 2020). 33 Fed. Sent'g Rep. 83 (Dec. 2020)., University of Utah College of Law Research Paper No. 377, 26-27. Accessed November 4, 2021, Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=3690473>.

<sup>7</sup> "Community Relations Services Toolkit for Policing: Importance of Police-Community Relationships and Resources for Further Reading," U.S. Department of Justice. November 2021, 1, accessed November 2, 2021, <https://www.justice.gov/file/1437336/download>.

<sup>8</sup> Mark Hall, "Facebook," Britannica, last modified November 9, 2021, accessed November 29, 2021, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Facebook>.

<sup>9</sup> Kim, K., Oglesby-Neal, A. and Mohr, E. "2016 Law Enforcement Use of Social Media Survey." International Association of Chiefs of Police and Urban Institute, (February, 2017): 3, accessed November 28, 2021, <http://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/88661/2016-law-enforcement-use-of-social-media-survey.pdf>.

<sup>10</sup> Thomas Scholes-Fogg, "Police and Social Media," Written Evidence to the Independent Police Commission, November 2012, 9-10, accessed November 26, 2021, <http://connectedcops.net/wp-content/uploads/2012/12/Police-and-Social-Media-IPC-Evidence.pdf>.

<sup>11</sup> Ariel Soltura. 2021. Interview with Detective Ariel Soltura of the Wharton Police Department, formally a sergeant with the Rosenberg Police Department, Interview by Stephen Carlisle, November 12, 2021.

<sup>12</sup> Chief Stephen Carlisle Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/ChiefStephenCarlisle>.

<sup>13</sup> Roman Forest Police Department Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/RomanForestPD>.

<sup>14</sup> Rosenberg Police Facebook Page, <https://www.facebook.com/RosenbergPoliceDepartment>.