

**Blogging for Public Safety**

**by**

**Scott Jones**

**Fresno County Sheriff's Department**

**May 2008**

**COMMAND COLLEGE CLASS 42**

The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

## **Blogging for Public Safety**

By Scott Jones

The buzz word in government is run your departments like a business. But how long would a business last if they were constantly being scrutinized by the media? Businesses hire advertising firms to promote and manage their reputation with their customers. In law enforcement, however, we rely on the print and televised media to carry our message to our communities.

Unfortunately, these media partners are not always carrying the best message or the most accurate information to the public. The obstacle for law enforcement to overcome is how to communicate directly with their customers in a direct and timely manner. Perhaps as a new, innovative tool, the use of a department Blog could become a vehicle to communicate quickly and accurately in a faster time frame.

### **How Did We Get Here?**

During the 1960's and 1970's, society began to change on several fronts, having a major impact on law enforcement. The impacts were caused by Vietnam War, Watts Riots in Los Angeles, the Civil Rights Movement, sexual revolution, drug use, and the shooting of students at Kent State.<sup>5</sup> The moral relativists of the 1960's challenged the traditional society views on morality, by saying, "Only an individual can decide what is right or wrong for him or her and the individual's decision should be respected."<sup>6</sup> Since this time, though, the

---

<sup>5</sup> USC Library, The 1965 Watts Riots, 2005, 7 Jan. 2007, <http://www.usc.edu/libraries/archives/la/watts.html>

<sup>6</sup> Vincent Ryan Ruggiero, Thinking Critically About Ethical Issues, 6<sup>th</sup> ed. (McGraw Hill 2004) 14.

delivery of information to the public has continued to evolve.<sup>7</sup> This new thought process of that generation resulted in a change in law enforcement and the media operations.

With mass distribution television, a new era of media was created, and they became able to report incidents to the public on a national level.<sup>8</sup> America could see and hear what happened, not just read about the story. The emerging norm of televised media challenged was to question government authority and actions. The media was created to become the entity that took on the role of reporting the deficiencies and wrong-doings of the government to the public.<sup>9</sup> The most prominent example of the media's role is the Watergate incident. During the Watergate incident the media exposed the illegal actions of a President and his staff.<sup>10</sup> This created a new era for the media to closely scrutinize the actions of government.

The media has continued since Watergate to report on the activities of the government and law enforcement. According to an article in Time Magazine the level of media involvement in government affairs resulted in the creation of a Public Information Officer (PIO) so law enforcement agencies could address and

---

<sup>7</sup> Gary V. Leineweber, "History of Policing," *America Police*, 2005, 7 Jan. 2007  
[www.leineweber.com/AmericanPolice.html](http://www.leineweber.com/AmericanPolice.html)

<sup>8</sup> "Kent State, What Happened and Why" *Time Magazine*, 3 May 1971  
<http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,877000-1,00.html>

<sup>9</sup> Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls During Watergate* (Columbia University Press, 1983) 14.

<sup>10</sup> Gladys Engel Lang and Kurt Lang, *The Battle for Public Opinion: The President, the Press, and the Polls During Watergate* (Columbia University Press, 1983) 14.

liaison with the media to communicate with public.<sup>11</sup> The use of designated public information officers is a good system, but the media still edits lengthy interviews into 30 second sound bites.

How does the law enforcement chief executive better communicate with the public they serve? They can have progressive policies regarding their openness and the media's access to crime information. They can even capitalize on the power of the Internet to provide information, electronic reporting and notifications of agency activities. One area that has been little used, though, is to add a web log, or blog, to allow the public to see and send the department their comments on issues. The ability to dialogue with the police will enhance the sense of transparency and openness for the public. This can serve as a foundation for the trust and support we seek. It can also reduce our reliance on traditional media outlets to be the sole carrier of our message to the public.

### **Communication Technology Advances**

Currently, the public is receiving the law enforcement agency's message through media-chosen filters. Law enforcement agencies can eliminate the third party filter by utilizing a Blog to communicate directly with the population they serve. The use of Blogs should be standard in law enforcement agencies to communicate a wide variety of issues to the community. Real time or post crime reporting by the agency can be accomplished through the Blog. This reporting

---

<sup>11</sup> "See The Sideshow Chief," *Time Magazine* 25 May 1992, <http://www.time.com/time/printout/0,8816,975603,00.html>

would allow something that has been missing in law enforcement's communication cycle; direct access and community feedback.

The next step for law enforcement agencies is using the technology of the internet by utilizing "Web logs," a term coined by John Barger on December 17, 1997.<sup>12</sup> The term Web log was shortened to "Blog" by Peter Merholz in 1999. Blogs have evolved in their applications from private use to the use in business as a means to gain profit and communicate with customers. Blogs have several potential uses in law enforcement to communicate with the community they serve.<sup>13</sup>

A *Blog* is a "user-generated" website where entries are made in journal style and displayed in a reverse chronological order. A typical *Blog* is described as combining text, images, and links to other Blogs, web pages and other media related to its topic. The opportunity for readers to leave comments in an interactive format is an important part of certain types of Blogs. There are variations of Blogs that include *Photoblog* (photos), *Sketchbolg* (images), *Vlog* (videos), and *Podcasting* (audio). All of these variations could be used on one Blog. Some Blogs do not allow interactive postings and only allow direct communication from the reader to the Blog owner.<sup>14</sup> This technology has

---

<sup>12</sup> Yang, Johnathan, *The Rough Guide to Blogging*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 1-3.

<sup>13</sup> Yang, Johnathan, *The Rough Guide to Blogging*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 3-4.

<sup>14</sup> Yang, Johnathan, *The Rough Guide to Blogging*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 1-5.

unlimited uses for law enforcement agencies, which might use any or all of the blog options to convey information to the public.

It is difficult to determine when Blogs actually started on the internet. Blogs had a slow start with a very low user rate. In fact, the site *Xanga*, a popular Blogging and networking service, had only 100 diaries in 1997. This grew to more than 20 million users by December 2005. *Technorati*, a blog search engine, was tracking about 60 million Blogs by November 2006. The Gartner Group, a technology research group, forecasts that Blogs will peak in 2007 with 100 million personal websites.

Blogs and Blogging have become so popular that newspaper reporters and media personalities have their own Blogs where their readers and viewers can read their reporter's in-depth opinion and write directly to the Blog. For example, on the Fresno Bee Newspaper's website, there is a tab to go to their Blog page. They have several Blogs on a variety of topics ranging from the Beehive, opinion talk, sports and ask the editors. The readers interact with the media personality and share their opinion and/or information. Anyone can post on this website and it can be read by everyone that is interested. On the "Beehive", anyone can post photographs or opinions on any topic from Hannah Montana, the best New Years Eve parties in Fresno to the 10 best and worst movies of the year.

Blogs are also changing politics and political campaigns. On Presidential candidate Barack Obama's website, he has a Blog that has videos of his

speeches, written text of his speeches and a comment tab where you can comment on them. He also has polling information, events and a section where you can volunteer to help him get elected.<sup>15</sup> On former candidate Rudy Giuliani's website, he had his own Blog and a link to other Blogs that post articles about his campaign. On one Blog dig.com Mr. Giuliani's profile view was read 8,057 times by people who check that website

Some institutions that analyze Blogs believe that people and companies use the Blogs as a tool to avoid the media filters and deliver their messages directly to the public.<sup>16</sup> In an interview with Political Consultant Feleena Sutton, she said campaign websites with a Blog are an essential part of the campaign. Ms. Sutton said that the websites and Blogs of campaigns have to be monitored by campaign staff to get the pulse on the issues and to direct the candidate.<sup>17</sup> Certainly, the dynamics of communication, information-sharing and direct contact with one's constituency are all relevant to policing. If we think we might want to do a Blog, then, what might we do?

### **Blogging 101**

At blogger.com you can create your own Blog for free. The basic elements of a Blog include your header, sidebars which are tabs to entries or topics that have been commented on, Blog postings and the footer. For law enforcement uses, a Blog can simply be a place where an agency posts stories and allows email

---

<sup>15</sup> Obama 08 website, 2 Jan. 2008, <http://my.barackobama.com/page/content/hqblog>

<sup>16</sup> Wikipedia, "Blogs," 20 Dec. 2007, 25 Jan. 2007, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogs>

<sup>17</sup> Feleena Sutton, Personal interview, 7 Jun. 07.

responses from the public on the story.<sup>18</sup> Some law enforcement agencies have Blogs, but do not allow any postings from the public. They do, however, receive emails from the public and answer them. This type of Blog also does not allow readers to view the postings of other citizens. Whether an agency allows or prohibits posting by the public, there would be costs to monitor the site. Certainly, it could be a function of the organizations Information Technology staff, although the content would need to be actively managed by sworn personnel. The benefits of direct contact with one's service population, though, can pay dividends far beyond any staff costs.

The community's feedback would help an agency understand the community sentiment regarding issues, and could help direct resources towards resolving community problems and issues. This could make the law enforcement agency become more interactive with the community and their needs and opinions on a real time basis. The advantage of a Blog is that a person can submit their name, provide contact information, or remain anonymous. It can also be used to report facts on incidents, wanted persons, investigations, crime, crime prevention, and community safety alerts directly to the public without a filter or third party. Basically, the Blog can become the law enforcement agency's privately owned media site and news source for anyone who might care to view the activities of the agency. This would afford the community the ability to make their own

---

<sup>18</sup> Yang, Johnathan, The Rough Guide to Blogging, (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 61-73.

decisions about the issues and provide feedback on them for everyone to read, including the public and the agency.

Dr. Dan Cunniff, a Business Technology Professor said that if a law enforcement agency utilized a Blog to communicate with the public, it would enhance buy-in with the agency and their issues and convey a sense the department is being transparent and not withholding information. Dr. Cunniff said that Blogs would help law enforcement agencies communicate their message to the public.<sup>19</sup>

### **The Potential Uses of Blogs by Law Enforcement Agencies**

With the evolution of technology and the creation of the internet, law enforcement agencies have an opportunity to more directly and effectively communicate with the citizens they serve. Most law enforcement agencies have begun to utilize websites to inform the public about their agency and the services that they provide.

The Fresno County Sheriff's Office website has a list and photograph of all twenty-five Sheriff's that Fresno County has had since 1856. There are also sections of the site where graffiti may be reported or information obtained concerning the agency.<sup>20</sup> On the Los Angeles Police Department's website, they post crime statistics, traffic collisions and other safety alerts. They also have a Blog where people can post opinions. It is managed by the department, and

---

<sup>19</sup> Dr. Dan Cunniff, Personal interview, 7 Jun. 07.

<sup>20</sup> [www.fresnosheriff.org](http://www.fresnosheriff.org), 12 Jan. 08.

only opinions that are approved by the website author are allowed.<sup>21</sup> With these tools, these agencies are able to ensure information that is reported is communicated fully and directly to the public. The public can also communicate directly with the law enforcement agency.

During the recent Sheriff's race in Fresno, the Fresno Bee Newspaper set up a "Sheriff's Race" Blog that they operated and allowed anyone to post comments on the candidates and the Fresno Sheriff's Office. The Blog was very active and the entries were quoted in the newspaper and on radio talk shows. The downside during the election was that some department employees used the Blog to air their grievances about the department and department members. To post a comment on the Blog you only have to enter your name and email address then post your comments. Only the name you enter and your comments are displayed on the Blog postings section. The email address is kept by the owner of the Blog and not made public.<sup>22</sup> The interactive part of the Blog is the part that is new to the communication system of reporting. This allows the owner of the Blog to retain the email address of the person making the posting on the Blog.

The Orange County Sheriff's Department has a Blog on their website that details news stories and events within the department. The viewer can email the department with a comment or response. The public can also provide their email

---

<sup>21</sup> <http://www.lapdonline.org/>, 12 Jan. 08.

<sup>22</sup> FresnoBee.com Blog, 2 Jan. 2008, <http://www.fresnobeehive.com/>

address and have updates sent automatically to them. Orange County Sheriff's Department does not operate an interactive Blog, but one where the individual can communicate with the department individually and the correspondence is not seen by all viewers.<sup>23</sup> According to Orange County Undersheriff JoAnn Galisky, her Department's website has been an excellent tool to keep the residents of Orange County informed of the issues and has created an ability for them to communicate directly with their residents. They have received an increase of emails from their residents asking questions, making complaints and thanking for doing a great job in crime fighting.<sup>24</sup>

In an interview with Dr. Dan Cunniff, a professor of business technology, he said with all the people he communicates with believe the public sentiment reflects a declining trust of law enforcement agencies because law enforcement departments withhold information from the public that is negative towards their department.<sup>25</sup> The reporting of the use of force is one issue he cited. He said as more improprieties of law enforcement actions are exposed by the media, the lack of trust will increase unless law enforcement departments take a proactive approach to market their department. Dr. Cunniff said that law enforcement departments do not take advantage of technology as a business would to boost their reputation and client satisfaction. He recommends that law enforcement agencies use Blogs, but not interactive Blogs<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>23</sup> Orange County Sheriff's Department Blog, 2 Jan. 08, <http://blog.ocsd.org/>

<sup>24</sup> Undersheriff JoAnn Galisky, Personal interview, 14 Nov. 07.

<sup>25</sup> Dr. Dan Cunniff, Personal Interview. 7 Jun. 07.

<sup>26</sup> Dr. Dan Cunniff, Personal Interview. 7 Jun. 07

In the near future, most law enforcement agencies will have the capability to video link cameras affixed to their helicopters, patrol cars or carried by tactical units that will be synced with their Department Incident Command System (ICS) command posts and tactical command posts and monitoring centers.<sup>27</sup> Some agencies, such as the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and Los Angeles Police Department, are already using this technology, as well as more advanced technology with video and audio links, broadcasts and recordings to manage their critical incidents and tactical responses. The potential use for these photographs, video recordings, and audio recordings are unlimited, and could be used to populate sections of the department's Blog to assist in the management of critical incidents, identification of suspects or other public services uses. Depending on their newsworthiness, they could also be posted to convey the facts of an incident directly to the public. Although choices to post video, photos or discussions on a Blog would be the choice of each agency, there is no doubt Blogging belongs in the future for each of us.

### **Conclusion**

With the advancement of technology, society has become more informed, interactive, and visual. Today, we communicate more with technology than ever before. Teens are constantly text messaging and sending each other photos, video clips and similar images. A person can't take a drive in a car without seeing someone else driving near them using a cellular phone. We are always

---

<sup>27</sup> Jonathan Skillings, 30 Oct. 07 "Law Enforcements Tech Tester" Cnet News.com.

communicating with one another using the new technology. Our society has changed; we want to “see and hear it” for ourselves. We demand real time reporting and video on issues of interest to us.

As business and society advances, law enforcement agencies need to catch up with the technology and consider starting their own Blogs.<sup>28</sup> The media will likely continue to report on law enforcement activity as they do now. The use of a Blog would provide a more detailed picture of crime activity as well as the agency’s actions and responses on specific incidents. This could change public opinion of the media reports with a second and more detailed side to the story. We can no longer depend on the third party to do our reporting to the public. We must take control over our own destiny.

Resources and funding are becoming scarcer each year and we are competing for government dollars. Law enforcement agencies have to demonstrate their value to the public for funding and support.<sup>29</sup> This value can be created by transparent reporting through a Blog to the public. The public would be able to see what their law enforcement agency does and how valuable the agency is to them. The value is created through the trust they have in the law enforcement agency. The Blog would create this environment of trust, transparency and honesty that the public could see through written statements, video, audio and photographs. Another bonus of a Blog is it is there for the public to use when it is

---

<sup>28</sup> Wikipedia, “Blogs,” 20 Dec. 2007, 25 Jan. 2007, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Blogs>

<sup>29</sup> Mark Moore, et al., Recognizing Value in Policing (Police Executive Research Forum 2002,) 30.

convenient for them. The public won't have to watch television at a certain time or wait for a newspaper to be delivered. The public could read or watch what their law enforcement agency is doing for them at their leisure without a third party reporter filter. The public deserves to have the information that is pertinent to their community and they want trust that their law enforcement department is conducting business in an ethical manner. However, they want evidence that the department is conducting business in a professional manner, as President Reagan said, "trust but verify."<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> President Ronald Reagan, "Farewell Address to the Nation," 11 Jan. 1989, <http://www.reaganfoundation.org/reagan/speeches/farewell.asp>