Building Productive Relationships with the Media

Dealing with New Media Culture During Crisis Situations

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COPS
COMMUNITY ORIENTED POLICING SERVICES
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF JUSTICE

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U.S. Department of Justice
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

Office of the Director
145 N Street, N.E., Washington, DC 20530

COPS

Dear Colleagues,

In an effort to examine the many issues of concern and the current trends in regard to community policing and media relations, John Jay College of Criminal Justice, through its Leadership Academy and the Center on Media, Crime and Justice, conducted a police-media roundtable for the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) in 2010. This roundtable discussed the emergence of new media and social networking technologies that have dramatically changed law enforcement relations with the press. In addition to the police–media roundtable, John Jay College of Criminal Justice conducted a case study on police–media relations featuring the Los Angeles Police Department and the 2007 "May Day" confrontation.

The COPS Office understands that the Internet and social networking technologies have dramatically transformed the way the press interacts with law enforcement. The emergence of a constant stream of news—at any time of the day—has prompted law enforcement to adapt community policing to the web. They've had to achieve a better understanding of how the "new media" environment can help law enforcement improve relations with the communities in which they serve, and a window has opened for law enforcement to use social networking on the web for their own media purposes.

By developing effective strategies in media relationships, law enforcement will gain the advantage of strong relationships with internal, external, and political audiences. The discussions and observations at this roundtable and the case study (presented here in this report) are important steps toward institutionalizing effective change within policing. I am proud to be able to share this resource with you now, and hope you all reap its benefits.

Sincerely,

Bernard K. Melekian, Director
Office of Community Oriented Policing Services

About the COPS Office

The Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS Office) is the component of the U.S. Department of Justice responsible for advancing the practice of community policing by the nation's state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies through information and grant resources.

Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime.

Rather than simply responding to crimes once they have been committed, community policing concentrates on preventing crime and eliminating the atmosphere of fear it creates. Earning the trust of the community and making those individuals stakeholders in their own safety enables law enforcement to better understand and address both the needs of the community and the factors that contribute to crime.

The COPS Office awards grants to state, local, territory, and tribal law enforcement agencies to hire and train community policing professionals, acquire and deploy cutting-edge crime fighting technologies, and develop and test innovative policing strategies. COPS Office funding also provides training and technical assistance to community members and local government leaders and all levels of law enforcement. The COPS Office has produced and compiled a broad range of information resources that can help law enforcement better address specific crime and operational issues, and help community leaders better understand how to work cooperatively with their law enforcement agency to reduce crime.

- Since 1994, the COPS Office has invested nearly $14 billion to add community policing officers to the nation's streets, enhance crime fighting technology, support crime prevention initiatives, and provide training and technical assistance to help advance community policing.

- By the end of FY2011, the COPS Office has funded approximately 123,000 additional officers to more than 13,000 of the nation's 18,000 law enforcement agencies across the country in small and large jurisdictions alike.

- Nearly 600,000 law enforcement personnel, community members, and government leaders have been trained through COPS Office-funded training organizations.

- As of 2011, the COPS Office has distributed more than 6.6 million topic-specific publications, training curricula, white papers, and resource CDs.

COPS Office resources, covering a wide breath of community policing topics—from school and campus safety to gang violence—are available, at no cost, through its online Resource Information Center at www.cops.usdoj.gov. This easy-to-navigate website is also the grant application portal, providing access to online application forms.

Acknowledgments

The authors wish to acknowledge the support and advice of Robert Harrison, course manager, California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training Command College (CA POST Command College); William Bratton, former chief of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) 2002–2009; and Frank Straub, public safety director, Indianapolis. This report is based in part on a symposium, *"The Police and the Media: Building Trust and Mutual Understanding: A Conversation between Cops and Journalists,"* held June 8, 2010, co-sponsored by the COPS Office; the Center on Media, Crime and Justice (CMCJ) at John Jay College of Criminal Justice; and the Indianapolis Public Safety Department, at Indiana University–Purdue University, Indianapolis, Indiana. A list of participants in the symposium can be found in the appendix to this report.

Introduction

The emergence of new media and social networking technology has dramatically changed law enforcement relations with the press. Not only has it added a new dimension to the skills already needed in today's 24/7 "all-news-all-the-time" media culture, but also it increases the chances of missteps—particularly in crisis or emergency situations.

At the same time, it has created new opportunities for police managers in furthering police/community/media relations.

Part I of this report offers general guidelines designed for police executives and public information officers operating in this new environment. It focuses on (1) dealing with the current media culture during crisis situations and (2) offers "do's and don'ts" for using social media in communicating with the press. Both sets of guidelines should be considered essential components in any long-term strategy for building productive relationships with the media in your community. The guidelines are based on the real-world experiences of senior police managers and on research by media technology and law enforcement experts. For more detailed information and further reading, this report also provides a list of references and additional resources.

Part II provides a real-world example of crisis management, which involved the use of both traditional and new media by then Los Angeles Police Chief William J. Bratton following the "May Day" 2007 confrontation involving LAPD officers, media, and demonstrators at Los Angeles' MacArthur Park.

PART I

Dealing with the Media in a Crisis

Silence is Not Golden

Standard Public Information Officer (PIO) responses to media inquiries when a crisis occurs have typically included: "that's under investigation;" "we're looking into it;" or "it's ongoing." These work poorly in an age when the media is able to tap a wide variety of non-official sources online almost instantly. A lack of transparency breeds mistrust and is seen as hiding something.

Instead, a more productive and proactive approach is to gain control of the story as early as possible, emphasizing that the information is preliminary. Such a response should follow the general format of: "this is preliminary information, it may change, but here is what we believe to be true at this time." By being frank and repeatedly emphasizing the preliminary nature of the operation, a police department can avoid any appearance of cover-up, and be perceived as working with the media, rather than at cross-purposes to it.

Establishing a *media strategy* aimed at **taking control** of the message should be among the first steps in a crisis. Senior staff should be involved from the beginning of an incident—mapping out a strategy, determining what information can be safely revealed, and identifying and targeting key media sources in the community, as well as others with an interest or stake in the incident.

As the story proceeds through various investigative phases, police managers and executives should make themselves regularly available to media inquiries, perhaps through the establishment of a crisis line, an online forum or FAQ page, or periodic press conferences that use interactive web conferencing technology such as Skype. The least desirable result is to leave a vacuum. If the police are not talking to the media, they will get a story from somewhere—even if it is the wrong story.

Keep the Chief Front and Center

A key part of the media strategy mentioned above involves establishing the proper roles to be played by individuals in the department's command structure. *The chief should be the principal spokesperson at major junctures of the investigation*, from the very beginning (as opposed to reacting to events or revelations). His or her comments to the media will inevitably lead coverage and will often be the headline as well. The chief should also be a visible figure on the department's web page. Using the chief's primary position in this way provides extraordinary leverage for ensuring that the

department's position remains front and center, as well as balancing negative comments from other sources. In most cases, this plays well with the media's sense of professional responsibility to provide both sides of the story.

An important element in reducing tensions is reaching out to all stakeholders with a variety of meetings—**and letting the press know you're doing it**. Stakeholders include all organizations, groups, agencies, and individuals concerned about, or impacted by, a negative police incident. *Insofar as possible, making the press aware of these efforts will reduce the emphasis on tension and conflict.* It may also be useful to open some of those meetings to press coverage.

Ten Do's and Don'ts of Using Social Media to Communicate with the Press

Many of the guidelines noted above take on special importance, and require extra skills, in an environment where social media tools such as Twitter, Facebook, and other networking technology can have a larger and more immediate (and sometimes negative) public impact than traditional media outlets such as newspapers, radio, and TV. Proactive police executives need to be well-versed in these tools—and be willing to learn from younger members of their department who may have greater facility and familiarity with them.
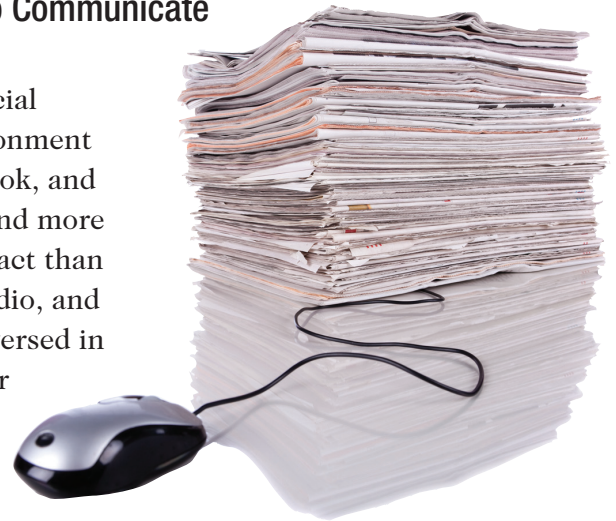
1.   Do Your Research

The long-term loss of advertising, readers, and viewers has combined with the current deep recession to cause a crisis in the traditional news industry. Staff layoffs and shortages, in turn, have placed a premium on superficial or sensational crime news coverage in the "mainstream" media. In particular, the loss of veteran beat reporters has contributed to a fall-off in consistent, in-depth coverage of criminal justice in many communities. Meanwhile, the proliferation of increasingly sophisticated interactive websites, such as Facebook, MySpace, YouTube, Tumblr, and Twitter, has enabled police personnel and public information officers to avoid the "traditional press" in trying to get their message out.

But an increasing amount of good journalism is now on the web. Many professional journalists have gravitated to local or national websites. An increasing number of cities and communities have online news sites, either funded commercially or with non-profit support.

Some examples:

- The Voice of *San Diego*
- The *St. Louis Beacon*
- The *Texas Tribune* (www.texastribune.org)

There are similar sites which post video or broadcast reports, such as Current TV, and a number of non-profit centers for crime and general reporting, such as:

- The *Center for Investigative Reporting* in California (http://centerforinvestigativereporting.org/);

- The *Wisconsin Watchdog* of the Wisconsin Center for Investigative Journalism.

Some sites are supported at schools of journalism or universities devoted to Criminal Justice, such as The Crime Report of the John Jay Center on Media, Crime and Justice. And more are added every day. A new national network of such sites was formed this year—the Investigative News Network—which has 40+ members, and is still growing.

Pay attention to these sites and other similar groupings as they emerge. Make contact with those in your community and state. Such sites are often training grounds for new reporters, and can provide useful information about evolving approaches to coverage and media issues. Researching the principal new-media players (and sites) in your community and state will enable PIOs and managers to develop ongoing partnerships that can strengthen credibility, and enable the development of long-term relationships with the next generation of journalists.

2. Do Get Hyper-Local

One of the newest trends in the online community is the "hyper-local" site. Established by a media, church, or community organization, it focuses on neighborhoods (sometimes block by block) or community-level coverage of events. The "granularity" (specificity) of such sites often encourages citizens themselves to act as reporters, providing news, provocative opinions, photos, videos, etc. Many are oriented toward specific ethnic communities. They are important message-deliverers at the front lines of public safety issues, and are a crucial connective opportunity for your department. A proactive media relations unit will seek out such sites and develop informational links with them. A local precinct, for example, could post a link or regular feature on such issues or ideas as "questions about local policing," relevant crime trends in the neighborhood, opportunities for local youth, etc.

3. Do Use Niche Sites, Discussion Forums, and Tweets to Generate Wider Coverage

A skillful use of new media entails generating wider coverage by identifying key target audiences that form spontaneously around specific stories or topic areas. The following example shows the potential: a traffic accident investigator became a media focal point by simultaneously tweeting reporters about the accidents he was investigating, including when and where he'd be doing the investigations. This saved him from having to answer individual phone calls asking the same questions, and kept the reporters better informed and up-to-date.

It turned out that the public was also interested. More than 4,000 of them followed his tweets, enabling him to supplement his media outreach; go directly to the public; to generate his own news; and to localize and organize different populations. It also presented the potential for quick information gathering—enabling him and his department to tap into what people were saying about the job local law enforcement was doing in general, and in specific areas like traffic control, Neighborhood Watch, and graffiti abatement. This information can give departments valuable clues about how they might want to shape their message, their policing strategies, and their conduct.

4.   Do Build a Social Network

Frontline police officers can attract positive and informed coverage by creating their own "interactive communities" or "fans" on public safety issues crucial to their community. A Toronto police officer used Twitter to build a network with local youth, focused on graffiti control and legal graffiti events. It was an effective part of community policing crime-prevention, but it also helped him get reporters to write about his efforts. He also acted—in effect—as a reporter and videographer, sending out press releases on Twitter to the media and the kids at the same time. The stories he generated were picked up by local media—even though they were not traditional "news." A department should consider allowing officers to develop social media networks with suitable policy guidelines.

5.   Do Fight Fire with Fire

The old police adage, "be careful out there," now has a new corollary, "be careful what you *do* out there, because everybody's watching and recording." A 2010 confrontation between Los Angeles police officers and bicyclists gathered to protest the Gulf of Mexico oil spill was caught on citizen video and posted on YouTube under the title "Hollywood Cops Attack Bike Riders." Viewed over 73,000 times, it inflamed the cycling community and brought a public apology by LAPD Chief Charley Beck during appearances at a number of local bicycle clubs. This was good proactive community oriented policing—but in the new media age, when each minute can bring a new online headline development, Beck could also have considered bringing a video camera crew with him and posting his meetings and remarks immediately on MySpace and other outlets. Exploiting the new social media's "always-on" status to develop a media response strategy can defuse a crisis, thereby making a positive out of a negative.

6.   Don't Be Virus-Susceptible

Everyone knows that viruses can create an epidemic. That's especially true of social media today, when a sensational (or wrong) story publicized online can quickly go "viral"—often making it impossible to "walk back" a story, or correct misperceptions and errors. Police agencies should therefore anticipate the inevitability of noteworthy or critical incidents involving their organization making headlines, and/or going viral, and develop policies and procedures appropriate to meet the emerging demands and news cycle. Policies should include "what if" scenarios to help guide the actions of field personnel who will most likely be the initial representatives of the agency in a crisis response.

7.   Don't Let the Mob Get the Upper Hand

Another example of learning to adapt to emerging norms in the use of social media is provided by the "flashmob" disorders experienced by the city of Philadelphia, as well as many other cities, beginning in 2009. Flashmobs are large groups that were originally intended for fun—people would spontaneously gather in public places (train stations, public squares, etc.) to dance to amplified music, and then dissipate. Flashmob dance events, announced on the Internet and through other social media, were usually peaceful. But Philadelphia marked one of the first major incidents of violence. Crowds disintegrated into groups and blocked traffic, harassed others, fought, and prompted a police response. Arrests were made and city authorities asked the FBI to help identify those responsible for the incidents. Police should train personnel to monitor trends in social media in their communities, with a view to staying alert to potentially problematic situations emerging on social platforms that could impact public safety, and work with online media to defuse them.

8.   Don't Forget: Nothing Is Private on the Internet

Nothing is lost or invisible on the Internet. When using social media tools, or posting on a web page, it must be assumed that exchanges and comments can be accessed publicly—and can be searched by the media. *It is therefore crucial to avoid posting anything that could embarrass a department or compromise an officer's ability to do his or her job.* Department policy should make this clear. Serving officers should also be aware of the danger that they may be creating unwanted perceptions of bias in the community or press if they belong to discussion groups and forums, or "friend" persons that advocate particular points of view.

9.   Don't Throw Web Tantrums

Anyone who spends more than a few minutes online knows the web is an attractive place for "rants," off-color comments, or web rage. Most of the time, such postings are done under the cover of anonymity. But resourceful researchers can ferret out identities of authors and their e-mail addresses. PIOs, law enforcement administrators, and executives must remind personnel that anything on the web is essentially there forever. It's therefore crucial to develop coherent policies toward blogs, tweets, or similar public interactions concerning the department, its members, or its actions. The underlying

A Special Tip: Develop an Online Image

An important issue the department's online policy should consider is how the agency wishes to define its "virtual identity." Each member of staff "is" the organization when he or she posts; so policies must consider limitations, depictions (visual presentations of the agency, city, uniforms, etc.), and how to separate personal opinion from department policy in statements, posts, or tweets made to others.

The agency should consider establishing formal responsibility to manage its web presence. This should include procedures created to ensure accurate information is posted, that traditional and emerging media are informed, that the public has access to desired information, and that there is consistency across the spectrum with regard to what is posted, to minimize instances where the "agency" might disagree with itself from post to post, or from division to division.

concept should be to remind public safety employees that a tactful, honest, direct, and informative approach is always preferable to an angry response, inappropriate humor, or statements that could be interpreted as demeaning, dismissive, or condescending.

The policy design should be simple and direct—a structured guide for appropriate agency members to use to respond in a concise, logical, and systematic manner. It should include option guides on whether to respond or not; *how* to respond should you so decide; how to share your agency's successes relevant to the topic; and how to rectify a situation with a reasonable solution. (See notes in the "Further Reading" section to access a matrix model.)

10. Don't Cover Up Failure

There are few secrets in today's media environment. Anything can and will be leaked. The chief and senior managers should make plain that trying to sweep things under the rug to protect the department or avoid potential lawsuits will turn out to be counterproductive.

Admitting mistakes or errors of judgment, when applicable, should be a conscious strategy, since it will strengthen the long-term credibility of the department, especially in an environment where other opposing sources have equal and instantaneous access to media online. In the words of former LAPD Chief William Bratton, "You're not going to be able to cover things up or hide anything, so why try? Go where the truth takes you." An open-media strategy can enable the command leadership to turn negatives into positives by creating widespread public support and boosting department morale—as well as strengthening rank-and-file support for any internal changes deemed necessary.

PART II

Case Study: "A Perfect Storm" May Day, Los Angeles, 2007

On May 1, 2007, between 15,000 and 25,000 demonstrators protesting U.S. immigration policies staged a peaceful march in downtown Los Angeles. About 7,000 of them marched west to MacArthur Park, an island of tranquility located in the gang-plagued, poverty-stricken Central American immigrant neighborhood of Pico Union. The crowd, accompanied by a contingent of Spanish-language and other reporters, reached the park about 5:00 PM, when a small group broke away and began an impromptu mini-march. A team of Los Angeles Police Department motorcycle officers immediately forced the marchers back.

May Day 2007, Los Angeles.

In response, about 15 to 20 people started throwing sticks, bottles, and pieces of cement at the officers. At about 6:17 PM, with only a barely discernible dispersal order being given to the crowd from a helicopter overhead, and then only in English, the LAPD Metropolitan Division, an elite crowd-and-crime-control unit of helmeted officers dressed in full riot-control gear and specially equipped with "non-lethal" rubber bullets, beanbag rifles, and 3-foot-long batons, formed a wide skirmish line. They then waded into the crowd, with a show of force, as they fired off rubber bullets and beanbag rounds.

According to the LAPD's special report to the Los Angeles Police Commission on the incident, there were "more than 100 uses of batons" (baton strikes), "146 less-than-lethal impact rounds" fired into the crowd, and "246 individuals [who] claimed injury from…broken bones to bruises and…emotional distress." Although a number of the injured were taken to local hospitals, there were no life-threatening injuries or deaths. Eighteen officers were treated for abrasions and contusions.

The media and community uproar over what was called by some the May Day "police riot" and by others the May Day "melee," forced Los Angeles Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa to return quickly from a foreign trip. And it put into question the leadership of LAPD Chief William J. Bratton, who had taken over the force just 5 years earlier as a reformer (and who was widely expected to be rehired when his term expired in June). Over the next several weeks and months, Bratton's management approach, primarily his emphasis on transparency and accountability, helped defuse the crisis.

The following case study examines Chief Bratton's response to the crisis, and draws lessons and best-practice strategies that are applicable to other police forces and public safety bureaus around the country in dealing with the media when faced with similar crises. It is based primarily on interviews with Bratton, as well as with senior LAPD police officials and "The Los Angeles Police Department Report to the Board of Police Commissioners 'An Examination of May Day 2007.'"

The Pre-Crisis Background

Despite his success in transforming the Boston Police Department, the New York City Transit Police, and the New York City Police Department, William J. Bratton had not been welcomed by some of Los Angeles' most powerful political players when he was hired as an outsider-reformer in 2002. Nevertheless, after almost 5 years as chief of the LAPD, he'd managed to turn skeptics into believers by forging alliances with many of department's best-informed and most respected critics, including constitutional and civil rights attorneys, the ACLU, and prominent leaders of LA's African-American community who'd been highly critical of the LAPD for decades. He also hired Gerald Chaleff, a liberal defense attorney and former president of the Los Angeles Police Commission, to oversee compliance with 100 mandates of a federal "consent decree" overseen by a federal judge (see *The LAPD and its Metropolitan Division* on page 12).

Chief William Bratton being interviewed in Los Angeles.

Bratton had walked a tightrope between forging ties with the African-American community and activist groups like the ACLU, and improving troop morale. He was able to rejuvenate officer morale, *and* build a trusting working relationship with the LAPD's union—the Police Protective League—which had been in a bitter political battle with his predecessor.

Crime, moreover, had dropped dramatically on his watch. From 2002 through 2006, serious crime in LA—homicides, rapes, assaults, and robberies—declined 34 percent. Murders dropped nearly 39 percent, and gang killings by almost 30 percent.

The result was that when he attended his last public confirmation meeting for reappointment to a second 5-year term as LAPD chief on the eve of the incident, there was no real opposition.

Bratton was at home during the incident, and initial reports he received from his commanders about the rally did not raise any suspicions. But he quickly changed course after he received an urgent call from Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa, who was on an official trip to Central America and had been pressed by local reporters with questions about live video of the rally showing police officers shooting into the crowd. After checking the situation, Bratton called the mayor and advised him to cancel the remainder of his trip and return home. He also lost no time in holding a press

conference and holding separate interviews with key media outlets. In remarks that irritated members of his own force, he told Los Angeles' KNX-AM Newsradio, one of southern California's most widely listened-to stations:

> Quite frankly, I was disturbed at what I saw. Some of the officers' actions…were inappropriate in terms of use of batons and possible use of non-lethal rounds fired.

The LAPD and its Metropolitan Division

At the time of the incident, the LAPD was in the fifth year of a federal "consent decree," overseen by a federal judge, which the U.S. Department of Justice had imposed in 2000, alleging a "pattern and practice of police misconduct." Bratton had devoted an enormous effort to convincing the judge overseeing compliance that the department was making substantial progress—particularly in setting consistent use-of-force policies, a key concern of the decree. He needed more time to comply with the 100 mandates of the decree, but fully anticipated successfully doing so, when disaster struck. The police attack in MacArthur Park would make convincing the judge that much harder.

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Bratton had also paid special attention to the often-difficult relationship between the LAPD and the media in his first term as chief. In 2000, during the Democratic National Convention, the LAPD's Metro Division had battled demonstrators and reporters. The MacArthur Park incident showed there was still work to be done, particularly in the LAPD's Metropolitan Division, which had achieved a fearsome reputation under one of Bratton's predecessors, the late Darryl Gates, who had once described Metro's mission as going out to "roust anything strange that moved on the streets." Bratton would later describe Metro as "the heart of the LAPD culture that people complained about: the insensitivity, the brutality, the idea that they could use force without consequence, and the feeling that they were divorced from and not part of the community." *Busy with more pressing reforms, Bratton had never gotten around to transforming the division.*

The Community and Media

The reaction of LA's press, public, and political establishment was outrage and incredulity. Press commentary and political opinion was united in raising the question about why there had been such a brutal and arbitrary response to a relatively minor and limited provocation by a few individuals in the crowd. The reform-minded Los Angeles Police Commission, the mayor, and members of the City Council, felt they had been blindsided by a police force that most everyone assumed had learned its lessons from previous controversies.

The MacArthur Park events particularly raised alarms in the city's influential and vocal Latino community. National immigration policy was already a combustible issue in the Los Angeles area. A year earlier, on May Day 2006, the city's immigrant communities came together in what observers described as one of the largest political demonstrations in American history. An estimated 500,000 people had staged a protest march against proposed congressional measures that many immigrants felt were not only deeply threatening, but also racist. Although the 2007 march drew considerably smaller crowds, tensions were still high. Representatives of every Los Angeles Latino immigrant group were present at the march; so the police action virtually united the entire community in opposition to the LAPD. Even worse, since videos of the police response had been widely broadcast in Los Angeles, the nation, and around the world, MacArthur Park became an international and national headline story (as the mayor had discovered on his trip)—to the discomfort of the city's political leaders. Decades of careful work on building trust with the Latino community threatened to fall apart.

There was also a serious impact on media–police relations. The fact that members of the media had suffered some of the more significant assaults meant that they were now reporting a story in which many of their own had been victims. During his first 5-year term, Bratton had implemented a careful media strategy that described the rights of the media and the obligations and responsibilities of officers to respect those rights. That strategy appeared to be in ruins.

Defusing the Crisis

Chief Bratton, as the responsible law enforcement executive, was faced with a set of three immediate and virtually simultaneous challenges, making the crisis—in Bratton's own words—a "perfect storm, a crisis at *every* level." These challenges were:

1) Responding to, and healing of, community and political tensions.

2) Rebuilding trust with the media in order that, among other goals, it could be used to address challenge 1.

3) Motivating senior police commanders to address the structural and policy problems raised by the incident, while rebuilding shattered morale among rank-and-file officers who again felt embattled in a hostile community.

Challenge 3 represented a particularly trying task for Bratton, since it was crucial to demonstrate that the LAPD was prepared to acknowledge the errors in policing demonstrated at MacArthur Park—and to remedy them—in order to have any hope of successfully addressing the first two challenges. Many officers, particularly in the Metro Division, had been unhappy when Bratton publicly responded to the incident with an unequivocal condemnation of their actions. There were, as a result, calls for a vote of no confidence in his leadership—which would not only have been personally embarrassing, but also would likely have further divided the community and the police.

During his first 5 years, Bratton had cultivated an excellent relationship with the Los Angeles Police Protective League, the police union. That relationship now faced rupture. Historically, the union was accustomed to the LAPD presenting a united front to defend itself in response to previous use-of-force incidents. Hearing their own chief publicly condemn a large group of officers was an unpleasant break with "tradition." And there was an additional factor: the early evidence suggested that the use of force against the demonstrators was not the result of a few officers breaking ranks, but instead had apparently been authorized and supervised by sergeants, lieutenants, and a deputy chief who had been on the scene. Mid-level police management's apparent disregard of the community oriented police strategies that Bratton had brought to Los Angeles raised questions about the effectiveness of his leadership, and re-opened doubts about whether federal supervision had made any real headway on reforming department practices.

Taking Control of the Message

The nature of the "perfect storm" crisis meant that Bratton had to deal effectively with a number of constituencies at the same time: the media; rank-and-file cops; their union; the Latino immigrant community; the Police Commission and Inspector General; the federal judge monitoring the department; the mayor and city council; and civil liberties and other police watchdog groups. It was, Bratton recalled later, like "trying to change a flat tire while racing down a highway at 60 miles an hour."

A key element in his approach was the recognition that the three challenges were closely inter-related, and that addressing them required an integrated strategy. A second key element was recognizing that a successful response required, above all, a skillful media strategy that acknowledged accountability and promoted transparency— even at the short-term risk of alienating his own department. His successful strategy entailed five key responses.

On May Day evening, Bratton met with all of his senior staff to map his strategy moving forward. With hundreds of hours of footage showing his officers assaulting a defenseless crowd, Bratton quickly grasped the reality of the situation, and defused the uproar by becoming the most outspoken critic of the department's actions. Declaring the action "the worst incident of this type I have ever encountered in my 37 years" of policing, he announced to reporters that "we can't and won't tolerate" police officers treating community members and journalists in such a manner again. He pointedly refused to engage in the "circle-the-wagons" and "admit-no-wrongdoing" approach that had too often been the LAPD's strategy in previous crises.

Bratton asked the head of his Internal Affairs Department and the Inspector General to meet him at MacArthur Park in the hours following the incident. He wanted the IG to immediately start to monitor the Internal Affairs' investigation. In Los Angeles the Inspector General is the investigative arm of the policy-setting, mayoral-appointed civilian police commission. And Bratton wanted commission members to know from the start that he had no intention of hiding anything from them. He ordered a comprehensive, transparent investigation that included gathering all the video of the event, re-staging some of the use-of-force incidents at great expense, and conducting

interviews with participants, victims, and the department's senior leadership. He also asserted leadership by publicly demoting and reassigning the highest ranking officer at the scene and reassigning the second ranking officer. He then ordered immediate department-wide retraining in crowd control and in understanding the media's role and the department's responsibility to the media.

He institutionalized reform by mandating the development of new criteria in crowd control in conjunction with the U.S. Department of Justice and the Human Relations Commission. The criteria would later become part of the curriculum of LAPD Police Training and Education units. He also directed a public information officer to convey in Spanish to the Spanish-language media outlets the department's commitment to investigate the entire MacArthur Park incident.

Emphasizing Transparency

In keeping with his proactive approach to the media, Bratton decided that the investigation of the incident should be as transparent and as thorough as possible. As he explained, it was necessary to counteract the traditional "old-school belief that you need to protect the department, sweep things under the rug, and not talk to the media." He continued:

> I've never been a part of that school, even though I grew up in an era when it was all about that notion. Similarly, the idea that you're opening the city up to great [financial] liability [because of the potential cost of law suits] was the last of my concerns—it wasn't even a concern. I've always told my cops, give me a good story, and nobody can tell it better. Give me a bad story and I'm going to tell that bad story.

Transparency was not only the *right* way to proceed, Bratton believed, but the most *effective* way forward. As Bratton said:

> There are no secrets today—none. Any piece of information can and will get leaked. You're not going to be able to cover things up or hide anything, so why try? Go where the truth takes you. Did you *consciously* engage in an [illegal or out-of-policy] act, or make a mistake in judgment? Often it's not a conscious act; you made a mistake, admit it.

Over the next several weeks Bratton and/or his surrogates met with a wide variety of stakeholders: the media (including the editors of local newspapers); the news directors of local television and radio stations (particularly the Spanish-language stations); the mayor, police commission, and city council; police-monitoring groups such as the ACLU; and numerous community groups (with the press in attendance)—anyone, in other words, whom Bratton felt could offer insights and/or help him "calm the waters."

Bratton was able to find receptive audiences for his outreach because of the good will and trust he'd built with his major constituencies BEFORE the incident. Two examples illustrate this:

May Day 2007, Los Angeles

THE SPANISH-LANGUAGE MEDIA.
Bratton had been very accessible to the Spanish-language and other Latino media, and was known as a progressive on immigrant-rights issues. He'd been a steadfast supporter of a city directive ordering police not to ask crime victims or un-arrested suspects about their immigration status; and had advocated allowing undocumented immigrants to obtain drivers' licenses. When combined with his actions in the days following the May Day confrontation, there was consequently little animosity from the Latino media directed at him—and ultimately at the department as a whole. Several weeks after the event, Bratton walked into a San Jose, California, hotel ballroom packed with hundreds of members of the National Association of Hispanic Journalists. "There were by then no questions to be asked because we had been so available to them," recalls Bratton. "They could have been hostile, but they weren't. That's why stonewalling and circling the wagons is so [counter-productive]."

THE POLICE PROTECTIVE LEAGUE. Bratton invited leaders of the Police Protective League to attend all staff meetings. League officials had used their considerable political clout to oust the previous chief. Bratton wanted them on his side. He used the media to talk directly to them about how serious he was in fighting violent crime and gang crime. Then he made a speech at the police academy and laid out common-sense disciplinary standards. "The era of gotcha [in terms of discipline] is over," he announced. "If you make a mistake, I'll retrain you; if you're careless, I'll punish you; but it will be fair and proportionate. But if you're corrupt or brutal, I'll prosecute you." The speech effectively cleared the air and was widely quoted within the department. Because of his relationship with the union, says Bratton, its leaders were relatively restrained in their comments, which indicated a "degree of trust they had in me and my leadership team."

Lessons Learned

The successful strategy adopted by Chief Bratton can offer useful guidelines for police and public safety agencies facing similar crisis situations. The strategy involved both an image-rebuilding exercise and substantive changes in department procedures based on recommendations produced from a subsequent internal investigation. It provided the space and comfort zone to allow the LAPD to fully investigate its own actions. This was a key aim of the exercise.

Bratton's approach was based on his philosophy of making a "positive out of a negative." Previous controversies involving the LAPD had been subjected to special "blue-ribbon" outside investigations. Bratton didn't want that. Instead, he saw the MacArthur Park incident as a perfect opportunity to demonstrate that the department

was making progress in a key requirement of the consent degree: proving it was capable and trustworthy of investigating itself under the oversight of the Inspector General and Police Commission. By starting early and gaining control of the situation, Bratton was able to make his department's investigation the officially accepted one.

But these short-term steps would have been unlikely to succeed without the recognition that they took place in the context of a long-term community oriented policing strategy. Arguably, the department was fortunate in that the foundations for such a strategy had already been laid prior to the crisis.

The opportunity was important for Bratton. He felt that he had begun to change the insensitivity that the whole department was accused of. Officers on the street were interacting much better with the community, and *looked like* the community: 45 percent Latino, 15 percent black, and over 20 percent female. But Metro was still one of the last holdovers of the old LAPD. So Bratton "stood down" the entire Metro Division until they could be retrained. He met with the division for an intense 90-minute meeting. Bratton promised them the investigation would be fair and that "nobody was going to be hung out to dry." But, he added significantly, "MacArthur Park had looked very, very bad," and he intended to do what was necessary to make sure it didn't happen again.

Bratton enlisted LAPD Deputy Chief Michael Hillmann to co-author a comprehensive public report highly critical of Metro's actions. Hillmann, one of the department's most highly respected officers among the troops, had helped create the Metro Division and remained one of its strongest supporters. Following his report, the officer in command at the park was demoted and "within two days," says Bratton, "was gone from the department." The second highest ranking officer was reassigned.

Institutionalizing the elements of that short-term and long-term strategy within a set of best practices, and a proactive effort to develop the knowledge and skills needed to employ such a strategy, are essential tools to help police and public safety managers navigate a crisis. As noted above, the key component of such a strategy involves the media.

Here are some of the essential short- and long-term media best practices Bratton drew from the episode:

Senior police management needs to be in constant and open contact with the media, particularly during a crisis.

Bratton made himself and other department spokespeople frequently and readily accessible. As he explained:

> One of the things you don't want to do with a big media story is to leave a vacuum, because if you're not talking to the media, somebody else is.

The principal spokesperson should be the chief. Again, Bratton's conclusions:

> Any time the chief is talking to the media, his comments will lead the story, and be the headline. If a chief is available to answer all the press questions, he'll suck up a lot of the oxygen in the room and wear out the press (while having the opportunity to repeat his story).

The language used is important. "Preliminary" is a key word to use, Bratton emphasizes.

> You can go public early if you always start off by saying "this is preliminary information; it may change, but based on preliminary information, here is what we think we know at this time." Remember, the story will change, it always does. The first story I got about the incident at MacArthur Park was not the right story. It was a much, much bigger story.

Build a trusting relationship with the media prior to a crisis.

Early in his tenure Bratton hired a former reporter to head the department's Media Relations Section, which is staffed from 4:00 AM until 12:30 PM. Media relations staff are also on call on a 24-hour basis to respond to serious major incidents. It also coordinates semi-annual meetings between the media and the chief of police, to help built trust. That helped enormously in defusing the crisis.

During a crisis, don't pull punches. Bratton states:

> First and foremost, [it's imperative that the media] trusts that you're going to tell them what you can, when you can, and you're going to tell them honestly—that you're not going to purposefully deceive them, or send them in a wrong direction.

These short-term approaches, in order to be successful, must be wedded to the department's long-term goals.

Use the media during a crisis to advance the department's long-term community policing strategy.

Once he arrived at MacArthur on May Day evening, Bratton took his first steps toward getting his message out. Wanting to insure that the situation wouldn't escalate further, he approached a group of demonstration leaders who were already speaking with the media. He promised them a comprehensive investigation, asked for their cooperation, and expressed regret for what had happened, while "right off the bat, telling the media the same thing." By engaging with (and not avoiding) reporters, he used the media to begin to promulgate his message.

Aftermath

The official LAPD report on its investigation of the MacArthur Park events was published in October 2007. The investigation involved 41 Internal Affairs investigators and consumed over 4,700 hours. It identified 26 officers who "may be subject to potential discipline." In keeping with his media strategy, Bratton ordered the highly critical report placed on the LAPD's website. At the same time, Bratton publicly accepted responsibility for not having addressed some of the issues that caused the event, before it occurred.

The report was widely acclaimed for its transparency and honesty. The department used the report, Bratton said,

> to break the back of the old LAPD culture. The department had been accused for years of insularity and provincialism. By admitting those mistakes, we were able to then correct them and retrain the entire department in every area, as a reflection of how seriously we took the incident.

In July 2009 a federal judge lifted the LAPD's decade-long consent decree, effectively ending federal oversight. The following September, Bratton resigned as LAPD chief to pursue a career as an international law enforcement consultant.

Last Thoughts: Operating on the New Media Frontier

"Police agencies have to recognize that positive relationships with the press and the outside community are important," says the Police Foundation's Karen L. Amendola. "One of the things that's needed is transparency. The term 'internal affairs' always bothered me. When you're talking about people's complaints, about the services that are provided, or lack thereof, that isn't an internal affair. And that's why citizens get upset. They want more transparency…to know what's going on. [Police must be] forthright and provide information to the community….If you explain things to them, that will go a long way."

Nowhere is this more true than in the challenge of dealing professionally with web-based media. Many critics suggest that online platforms have given a license to unprofessional, un-sourced, and biased reporting. This is unfortunately true in many cases. New media technology represents a new unregulated frontier, and it requires cautious and smart public information policies. At the same time, the emergence of new dimensions of professional journalism online represents a rich resource that can advance a department's transparency policies, and improve its image and its relationship with the community—but only if police executives and officers are trained in the appropriate skills that can help them navigate this new frontier.

It's also important to remember that the old rules of good police–media relations in the era of "traditional journalism" continue to apply in the new era. If public safety personnel are honest in their relationship with the press, and never knowingly deceive them, when a crisis occurs they'll tend to take the police account seriously.

Maintaining an atmosphere of trust and transparency is, therefore, as important to good media relations in the new media age as it was in the old.

Further Reading

Clavette, Larry, David Faggard, Paul F. Bove, and Joseph S. Fordham, n.d. *New Media and the Air Force.* U.S. Air Force Public Affairs Agency, Emerging Technology Division.

> A matrix of guidelines and suggestions for dealing with blogging, produced by the U.S. Air Force, the document (with sample blogs) is available in PDF form.

> A more basic matrix designed to respond to all social media is the U.S. Air Force "Social media triage." http://twitpic.com/1fl6vi/full

Standards and Practices Committee. 2009. *The Los Angeles Times Social Media Guidelines for Editorial Employees*. Los Angeles Times. November 19.

> Although designed for reporters, the issues of integrity and avoiding incidents that may embarrass you or your agency are remarkably similar.

Appendix A: Police-Media Roundtable List of Participants

Indianapolis, IN
June 8, 2010
Indianapolis Police Department/John Jay College Center on Media, Crime and Justice (CMCJ)
Held at: IUPUI (Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis) Campus Center

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Building Productive Relationships with the Media is a report discussing how the web and social networking technology have dramatically transformed the way the press interacts with law enforcement and affects community policing. The emergence of a 24/7, "all-news-all-the-time" media culture has produced strains and missteps on both sides. However, a better understanding of how the "new media" environment works can help senior police managers and public information officers improve relations with the communities in which they serve, and help rank-and-file officers avoid pitfalls. A case study of how the Los Angeles Police Department defused tensions following the 2007 MacArthur Park incident shows that building an atmosphere of trust and transparency remains as critical to building productive relations in the new media age as it was in the old.