Learning to Speak Social Media

Do you know what a microblog is? How about understanding what “terms of service” means? What about the issues that surround posting information to social media sites that can be accessed by the public?

If you’re already confused, you have plenty of company. Until recently, Jennifer Beskid was confused by social media concepts, too. Now, she facilitates a “Social Media Policy 101” training that can help public safety agencies make social media a gold mine — not a minefield.

In October 2009, Beskid, the research and grant coordinator for the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions (MPCTC), had just learned to send text messages on her cellphone. She’d heard about social media, but her knowledge was quite limited. That all changed when Lt. Katie Goodwin of the Anne Arundel County Police Department asked if Beskid — whose responsibilities include researching and developing training on current and emerging trends impacting law enforcement and corrections personnel — could develop a training program pertaining to social media policy.

When she started the development process, Beskid found herself in the same position as many agencies and officers; that is, starting from square one.

“I started out with Facebook® and moved on from there,” Beskid says. “I made some calls into the field to some of the bigger agencies we have connections with, like the National Security Agency and other agencies at the federal level, the Maryland State Police, and so on. I asked if they had social media policies and the most common response was, ‘Not really, but if you develop something, please let us know.’ ”

Her network of contacts ultimately led her to Sgt. Elliott Cohen of the Maryland State Police, who does provide extensive and in-depth training on the mechanics of social media, but not on policy. Beskid worked with Cohen to expand her own knowledge of social media, then used that newly acquired knowledge to develop the up-to-six-hour MPCTC training program, which she can customize to meet an agency’s needs.

“It’s always growing and evolving, just like social media itself. It’s pretty easy to modify depending on the target audience,” she says.

As part of her job, Beskid has traveled throughout Maryland and even central Pennsylvania to give the training at minimal cost (expense reimbursement only) to sponsoring agencies. She’ll also provide, at no charge, lesson plans and training materials to agencies so they can offer the training themselves. One recent presentation took place at the Spring 2012 National Institute of Justice (NIJ) Technology Institute for Law Enforcement (LETI), which resulted in an invitation by NIJ Law Enforcement Program Manager Mike O’Shea to present again at the Fall 2012 LETI, as well as numerous other requests from participants to become a “friend” and to help them learn more about social media in general and the training in particular.

Regardless of how the MPCTC training is customized, key points include:

■ Embrace the technology.
■ Set policies that are reasonable.
■ Educate officers about professional online behavior and why this behavior matters.
■ Above all, do not publish anything you would not want strangers to be able to access.

About the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions

The mission of the Maryland Police and Correctional Training Commissions is to ensure the quality of law enforcement and correctional services through the establishment and enforcement of standards and the facilitation and delivery of training, education and prevention programs. Other agency responsibilities include administration of the Maryland Community Crime Prevention Institute and the Leadership Development Institute.
Beskid says that when she began developing the training program, only Minneapolis had a social media policy. “I looked at all the policies that were out there, which were mostly brief and written fairly generically,” Beskid says. “Therefore, my training was approximately 15 minutes. To make it worth the time, I partnered with Sgt. Cohen.”

After training with Cohen and determining that his training is very technical, she developed Social Media 101. “I tried to gear the MPCTC program toward people who didn’t grow up using computers,” she says. “These people are now in supervisory positions and need to acquire some basic knowledge. Once I’ve given them an overview, I move on to talk about the importance of having a policy and how social media use pertains to the individual officers in both their private and professional lives.”

The MPCTC training also looks at the use of search engines, how information about individuals can be posted on the Internet without their knowledge, the use of video and music, and the difference between a microblog and a blog (a blog is an online journal, a microblog is something like Twitter or Tumblr). It includes all the basics agencies and officers may not know — the basics that Beskid only recently learned herself.

To learn more about how your agency can benefit from the MPCTC training, contact Jennifer Beskid at (410) 875-3525 or jabeskid@dpcs.state.md.us. The National Law Enforcement and Corrections Technology Center (NLECTC)-National maintains a social media presence for the entire NLECTC System via Facebook, Twitter and YouTube outlets. To connect with these outlets, visit JUSTNET, the website of the NLECTC System, at http://www.justnet.org. To learn more about NLECTC-National, contact Michael O’Shea, NIJ Law Enforcement Program Manager, at (202) 305-7954 or by email at michael.oshea@usdoj.gov.

INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE OFFERS ONLINE TRAINING

Agencies looking online for help can find a wide array of resources at the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Center for Social Media (http://www.iacp-socialmedia.org/), a site created in partnership with the U.S. Department of Justice’s Bureau of Justice Assistance in October 2010.

According to the site, “The goal of the initiative is to build the capacity of law enforcement to use social media to prevent and solve crimes, strengthen police-community relations, and enhance services. IACP’s Center for Social Media serves as a clearinghouse of information and no-cost resources to help law enforcement personnel develop or enhance their agency’s use of social media and integrate Web 2.0 tools into agency operations.”

The IACP Center for Social Media includes the following sections:

- Getting started (includes developing strategies and policies, then putting them into action).
- Detailed information on various social media technologies and platforms (e.g., blogs, dashboards, podcasts).
- Information arranged by topics such as crime prevention, investigations, research and strategy.
- Additional resources, including case studies, an FAQ section, and a variety of tools and tutorials.
- An ever-growing directory of more than 2,500 agencies that use social media, and a form to fill out that will add an agency to the directory.
- Links to articles of interest.
- A blog.

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