Is it time to revamp Marshall McLuhan's seminal catchphrase, "The medium is the message"? In a social media age, it might be more apt to say the medium is the crisis, and for law enforcement, social media has created unprecedented potential for organizational crisis. Social media has transformed how police communicate in times of crisis by allowing police to disseminate timely messages that serve the public, counter misinformation and gain insight into the mood of the citizenry. The benefits of interactive, widespread, rapid transmission on platforms widely trusted by the public also introduce significant drawbacks when the tool itself becomes the source of organizational crisis. Police officers sometimes play a role in generating that crisis either through their own use of social media, or when their conduct is recorded and widely shared on social media channels.

Social media gives power to individuals to seize on missteps and redefine an organization's brand. Those missteps are magnified in an age when citizens can propel an embarrassment into a national spotlight. This paper will explore ways that social media has the potential to turn into a communication crisis for police services in southern Ontario. The challenges will be put into the context of recent events in London and Toronto, including the fatal police shooting of Sammy Yatim, the arrest of a homeless man and social media indiscretions on both personal and police accounts. These examples reveal how social media has opened up police, either as individual officers or entire organizations, to more critical scrutiny and liability, and made reputational management even more challenging for police communicators.

Police communicators need to be highly attuned to how messaging comes across to those outside the organization, and be on guard for situations in which "the optics are bad".

Similarly, they must recognize and compensate for a biased point of view that affects public perception of their organization. Those challenges are heightened when the optics and point of view are literal. It used to be said in news media circles that police are especially wary around news videographers because they wield the eye that doesn't blink. Now, every citizen with a smartphone can point that unblinking lens at police interactions with the public. When the use of force is involved, those citizens are especially motivated to record the incident. "What constitutes police brutality or misconduct is a matter of interpretation, and until now that was left up to the police departments and the top brass." (Strong interest in BU prof's studies of social media and the police, 2016)

Canada's highest profile use-of-force incident, the shooting death of Sammy Yatim by Toronto Police, emerged as a turning point for Canadian policing. A Toronto architect, Martin Baron, was the first to upload video of the shooting to YouTube, about 90 minutes after it happened (Andrew-Gee, 2014). Yatim had exposed himself to passengers on a Toronto streetcar while wielding a 4-inch knife. All the passengers fled during the disturbance, leaving Yatim alone, still holding the knife. The Baron video shows officers surrounding the streetcar, the tension escalating with relentless demands for Yatim to drop the knife, followed by nine shots fired at Yatim. The startling incident quickly played out across social media, and the fallout was far-reaching.

Unlike many other people who die by gunfire, Yatim's death was revealed to a massive audience. It triggered streets protests, multiple social media campaigns demanding justice, a provincial probe into police tactics and use of force, a Toronto Police review of use of force involving distraught people, and a conviction of second-degree murder against the officer who

fired the fatal shots, James Forcillo, followed by his precedent-setting six-year sentence. The crisis forced a new level of accountability on the Toronto Police Service, and a new frame through which to view similar incidents across Canada. There was no way a police communicator could mitigate the effects, even though the video alone doesn't tell the entire story.

A second video recorded from a closer view by another citizen, Markus Grupp, reveals that Yatim appeared to be acting with rash daring by taunting officers with repeated insults and then stepping toward them immediately before the first shot was fired (TheEditPlayer, 2013). The audio from that same video also shows how even after Yatim had been shot multiple times and was down on the floor of the streetcar, officers continued to shout "Drop the knife" repeatedly, and then tasered him. One might infer from this that officers, apparently oblivious to the possibility the incident could be recorded, were attempting to justify the shooting by creating a scenario in which a threat existed when the video evidence suggests it did not. Or maybe they were simply reacting as many people would while in a heightened defensive state, but when the optics are literal, police actions will be viewed by the public in the absence of interpretation or context by police. The lawyer for the officer convicted in Yatim's death argued that the YouTube videos caused jurors to form a negative opinion of him before the trial began. The lawyers for the Yatim family rejected criticism that Forcillo was unfairly tried in social media. "What the defence is really saying when they say 'trial by YouTube' is that their options are very limited when there's a picture of what happened" (Janus, 2016).

A turning point has come for police services now that they are no longer the sole credible source of crime information for news media outlets. Accommodating social media

presents a new challenge for police communication in a time of crisis because citizen videos spread on social media now “displace police information as the primary sources of news media accounts” (Schneider, 2016). Kathleen Griffin, the Manager of Corporate Communications with the York Regional Police agrees that social media often supplants traditional and more controllable forms of communication: “Communications used to be media relations. Now it’s community relations” (Lamberti, 2016). Her observation points to the decline of the influence of traditional news media, and with that decline comes reduced power of police communicators to construct their own messages. In the Yatim case, Christopher Schneider concludes that “how the video was framed on YouTube directly contributed to the collective meaning-making process of the death” (Schneider, 2016). In reviewing Schneider’s book, Brian Bethune sums up the author’s assessment of the challenge: “The logic of policing (hierarchical and tight-lipped) and the logic of social media (democratic and wide-open) are in conflict in fundamental ways” (Bethune, 2016).

Ordinary citizens give each other an unflinching view of police conduct unfiltered by journalists, lawyers and communication departments, but that view is also selective and potentially misleading by the absence of video telling the story before and after the recorded incidents. The camera’s point of view, like a political one, has its limitations. The communications manager for a human rights group called WITNESS, Matisse Bustos-Hawkes, notes that “Witnesses are so plentiful these days that what is sometimes missing from the citizen journalist vocabulary is how to film things safely and ethically” (Andrew-Gee, 2014). With the limitations of citizen video, combined with its widespread power to incite, it’s more

important than ever for police to provide context for a more in-depth understanding of selected videos or still photos that circulate in social media (Schneider, 2016).

Social media provides a platform for citizens eager to position themselves as champions of the downtrodden in cases when police come into contact with individuals who live in strained socio-economic circumstances. Their supporters can generate a cause celebre that attracts hundreds or thousands to back the cause. In one case in London, video widely circulated on social media showing police officers removing a homeless man whose makeshift camp was impeding access to a public walkway generated 5000 shares immediately after the incident. The social media uproar and subsequent GoFundMe campaign upheld the man as a hapless victim of police overzealousness, even though police were summoned by residents who objected to both the obstruction he created and his behaviour. City bylaw enforcement noted that police involvement was a last resort after the man declined help from more than one social service agency (Lovie, 2017). Two days after this incident, the same man was arrested at a pharmacy following a disturbance in which he allegedly assaulted a cashier as well as a police officer. These additional factors didn’t mitigate the social media outrage generated by limiting the context to that which supports a singular message. The drive to get behind a perceived underdog, and the means social media provides to turn it into an onslaught, creates another challenge that could turn into a crisis for police communicators when their officers are involved.

The social media age means the time-honoured rules for police corporate communication no longer apply. It used to be that all communication was channeled through a single messenger to ensure that no message that conflicts with an officially sanctioned view gets into the news media. Now, it’s impractical to charge a single individual with that sole task,

and unreasonable to limit brand ambassadors to one or a few individuals. In a social media age, many officers have a role to play in presenting the brand, and they are given more discretionary power to share on social media as they deem appropriate. This unprecedented means for personal expression can be a potential route to turn a police officer into a popular law enforcement brand ambassador, as in the case of Toronto Police officer Chris Boddy. His affable Twitter presence and uplifting messages have won him praise and recognition from ordinary citizens and celebrities alike, locally and internationally (O'Neil, 2013). The flip side is the potential for any one of hundreds of officers representing their organizations to maintain the same level of awareness of and sensitivity to risks that could put their organization in disrepute.

To counter the risks that go with individuals having a platform open to a world-wide audience that could reflect poorly on their employer, many organizations establish guidelines for social media conduct, even on personal accounts. In the case of the Toronto Police Service, officers are directed to ensure their online conduct does not “jeopardize the integrity and reputation of the service, or the reputation or safety of other persons” (Gillis, 2015). This speaks to the new reality that police officers don’t enjoy the same freedom of expression as other Canadians, a circumstance explicitly stated in *Walking the Social Media Beat: Twitter Guide for Police and Law Enforcement*, written by retired Toronto Police Sergeant and a former social media manager for the Toronto Police Service, Tim Burrows. He advises officers that, “although we all have the ability to and protection from the law to saw what we want… you don’t enjoy that degree of freedom” (Burrows, 2012). Not all officers are willing to restrain personal expression to a level muted enough to ensure they are utterly above reproach.

In 2015, Toronto Constable Garvin Khan found himself under the scrutiny of the force's professional standards branch for his Instagram posts showing photos of his training or actual deployments. His personal commentary accompanying the photos was deemed by some critics to glorify violence. In one photo in which he's aiming a rifle as he stands in front of a graffiti-covered wall, Khan captioned it with, "In the safety of your bathroom mirror, you can flex, tell the girls that you're in beast mode & to come at you. But you wouldn't say that to a man. Because boy, that man will come at you. Bro" (Gillis, 2015). The undercurrent of masculine bravado in this post is undoubtedly a draw for some officers who pursue a career in policing, though such outright personal expression of it can turn into a public relations embarrassment.

Curiously enough, it was Tim Burrows, the guru of prudence for police use of social media, who lambasted the Toronto reporter for writing the article about the controversy. He also defended Khan as an enthusiastic officer who broke no laws, and revealed that most of Khan's Instragram photos showed warm family engagement, vacation locales, and congenial interactions with the public while working as a police officer. Burrows suggested that any discipline Khan would face reflects organizational hypocrisy, not individual wrongdoing. "Why is it OK for a police department to show off the big guns but it's not for their officers to do the same?" (Burrows, InstaContext, InstaPerspective: The real reason one police officer has been vilified by the online community, 2015). Despite his robust defence of Khan, he does conclude by advising officers not to mix their personal and professional lives on social media, suggesting a reluctant acceptance that organizational risk is simply too great for police officers to reveal their personal perceptions behind their public image.

Effective communicators have to speak the language of the target audience, and never has that been so crucial as it is with social media. The London Police did just that with its #DontInviteUs2UrParty hashtag used in recent years on St. Patrick's Day to help quell the type of out-of-control partying that led to the locally infamous street riot near London's Fanshawe College in 2012. The tone in social media posts from a number of officers on the ground breaking up parties was serious yet conversational, and even entertaining enough to reach the post-secondary student demographic. One of those tweets used the "Bye Felicia" meme. The tweet from an officer apparently unaware of the racial implications of the phrase (Preston, 2018) was quickly deleted, but not before some observers took offence. The term originates from mainstream films in contexts meant to dismiss marginalized black women as annoying pests unworthy of anyone's time. Timely oversight and prompt removal minimized the effect of this insensitive post, but in other cases, errors in judgement revealed by police use of social media points to another challenge of managing police communication. Police are held to a higher standard for their conduct in and out of uniform, and even their off-duty social media use under their own name can turn into a crisis for the police service that employs them.

Durham police officer, Constable Richard Cain, faced a demotion in 2017 for offensive comments on social media. He apologized for using the word "gimp" in connection to an actor with Down syndrome, and for tweets that denigrated Islam. Another tweet appeared to target women of colour, when he commented on a group photo of police officers taken to mark International Women's Day: "Push the brown girl to the front #photo#op#diversity points" (Mitchell, 2017). In that instance, he argued that his comments were misunderstood, and that he was only reflecting the sentiment of some minority officers who feel they're exploited as

tokens of diversity. Constable Cain's lawyer noted that he works in an ethnically diverse region and has had no complaints about his interactions with the public. The case shows how the blurred lines between personal conduct and professional reputation create yet another potential for crisis for police communicators to manage and mitigate when possible.

With social media putting more communication out of organizational control, it's more important than ever to take control over the aspects that police communicators do have a hand in shaping. Even after the mainstream media stops covering an event once the new angles have been exhausted, the issue may still have life on social media, sustaining it or propelling it back into mainstream news coverage. While the potential for unflattering public exposure applies to everyone, the stakes are higher for those in a profession held to a higher standard than everyone else. It is truer than ever that the medium shapes how the message is understood, but for police, social media can also expunge the message and leave a crisis in its place. The depth of the transformational change that social media brings to crisis communications in policing cannot yet be fully appreciated as both communication practice and social media evolve.

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