

Law enforcement “journalism” in the modern age
How does social media erode journalistic authority?

Beth Potter
University of Colorado Boulder
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ABSTRACT

In the age of social media, more than 30,000 residents are signed up to receive “news alerts” on Twitter from a local county sheriff’s office (2) in the Denver metro area, while about 3,000 receive “news alerts” from the community newspaper in that county(1).

What does this say about eroding journalistic authority, if anything? Specifically, how are journalist interactions with police sources changing in today’s social media-heavy environment? This study finds that journalists continue to follow industry norms of objectivity and verification - especially sourcing - while using social media tools to help them find information they need to do their work, while law enforcement public information officers often bypass journalists to post information directly to their social media “followers”.

This study poses questions about both journalistic and law enforcement authority. It also examines how social media blurs journalists’ “watchdog role” in a modern democracy. While the study is limited to less than 50 participants because of the small number of people working in this particular area (both journalists and public information officers in Colorado), it provides valuable insights into the changing nature of who is considered authoritative in providing public information, which can pave the way for a systematic analysis of this issue across the United States.

INTRODUCTION

Ambulance personnel took one person to the hospital after an ATV accident in the foothills near Evergreen west of Denver on a sunny winter weekend in 2019. Reporter Deborah Swearingen at the Canyon Courier community newspaper heard sirens and saw a post about a “possibly fatal ATV accident” on the “Evergreen Neighbors and Friends” Facebook page and the MyMountainTown.com web page. Swearingen called her editor that Saturday to ask for instructions. She then made several phone calls and social media queries to try to get more verified information. She tried to contact the resident who made the Facebook post, the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office public information officer, the Evergreen Fire Rescue ambulance service, and other emergency services in the surrounding area. She finally reached fire department spokeswoman Jenny Fulton at Inter-Canyon Fire Protection District, who confirmed that a Jefferson County resident had been airlifted to a Denver hospital. Swearingen then called two Denver hospitals to try to confirm that an ATV accident victim had been taken to Denver from Evergreen. Because she did not have the name of the person, and because hospitals follow federal Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act, or HIPAA privacy rules, Swearingen did not find out any more information about the incident. Based on the newspaper’s standards for information verification, Swearingen decided not to write a news story or to post anything on the newspaper’s web page.

Once the work week started, Swearingen again tried the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office to see if she could get more information. That day, she saw information on the sheriff’s office Twitter account that described the incident but did not give the name of the person who went to the hospital or many details about what happened. After several more fruitless attempts to reach the sheriff’s office spokesperson by phone and email, the reporter moved on to other

tasks. She and the newspaper editor decided that they could not get enough verified information from sources to write a story about the incident. This example shows how law enforcement officials now use social media as the primary outlet to get information to the public, including to journalists.

In this paper, I examine the issue of journalistic authority, specifically as it relates to journalism's "watchdog role" in democracy. Journalistic authority is a theoretical model in which the right of journalists to tell the news to the audience can be assessed, as well as the right of the journalists to be listened to (Carlson, 2017). Journalism's "watchdog role" is to serve as a monitor of power that keeps government institutions accountable to the public (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014, Norris, 2014). In addition, Bourdieu's field theory comes into play, in that relations of power between the fields – in this case the journalistic field and the institutional or governmental field – structure human action (Benson & Neveu, 2005).

Both journalists and law enforcement public information officers interviewed for this paper use real-life examples to illustrate why they believe it's important that their institutions (news outlets or law enforcement offices) generally are the ones who should have the most right to tell their information to the audience and the most right to be listened to. Journalists interviewed in this project most commonly said that it's important for an outside third party to examine police reports and other law enforcement documents, since only then do they play the "watchdog role" expected of them in a democracy. This is an area of journalism studies often discussed by normative theory scholars (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Christians et al., 2009; Carlson, 2012; Habermas, 1991) who talk about the importance of independent, information verification done outside of government institutions (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014).

Carlson (2017), Anderson and Schudson (2008), Zelizer (1992), Robinson (2011), and others have grappled with the nature of what makes an occupational group such as journalists be considered as an authority on public knowledge. Moreover, as Bourdieu theorizes, the journalistic field has its own “nomos,” or ways of functioning, even though it cannot be completely independent of the outside world (Bourdieu, 2005). The journalistic field is seen as just one area of an overall field of power, and the individuals within it accumulate “social capital,” both with sources and with the audience (Benson & Neveu, 2005). Anderson and Schudson (2008), and Shoemaker and Reese (2013) discuss specifically the nature of the routines journalists use to do their work as a way to explain the industry’s professional norms.

Carlson says generally that to be an authority, one must have “institutional control” over the knowledge in the domain in which one wants speak (2017, p. 8). At the same time, law enforcement personnel have increasingly used social media in the last 10 years to disseminate information directly to the public (Kim et al., 2017) using social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram (Dai et al., 2017; Kim et al., 2017).

Surveys consistently show that local news consumers most want to know about crime, weather and traffic (Pew Research Center 2015) in the regions where they live. Many of those consumers have migrated to social media sites in recent years, to find information (Kim et al., 2017; Kavanaugh & Fox, 2012; Rahman et al., 2019). Current Twitter use in the United States is more than 50 percent but less than other social media sites such as Facebook and Instagram, according to a survey done in 2013. The survey indicates that 62 percent of all adults say they use Facebook, and 30 percent say they get news on Facebook (Mitchell et al., 2013). Twitter news consumers generally are young, mobile and educated (Mitchell et al., 2013).

With these thoughts in mind, this study is meant to take a more detailed look at how journalists around Colorado interact with law enforcement officials and how those interactions are changing because of technology – specifically, social media technology.

RQ1: How, if at all, are journalist interactions with law enforcement personnel changing in the age of social media?

RQ2: How, if at all, are law enforcement personnel interactions with journalists changing in the age of social media?

This study is based on in-person, phone and email interviews with reporters and editors at the Canyon Courier, the Columbine Courier, the Clear Creek Courant (Evergreen Newspapers); the Brighton Standard Blade, the Fort Lupton Press, the Commerce City Sentinel (Metrowest Newspapers); the Greeley Tribune, the Ouray County Plaindealer, the Grand Junction Sentinel, the Colorado Sun, and the Denver Post. It also is based on interviews with public information officers at three law enforcement offices in Colorado. In addition, comments made by a Colorado Sun editor at a meeting of about 50 public information officers at an Emergency Services Public Information Officers of Colorado meeting held in the Denver metro area in Spring 2019 serve as background for the literature review. The comments illustrate some of the complexities of the relationships between journalists and public information officers.

This study adds to the body of existing research on journalistic authority by analyzing how professional journalistic roles are being redefined in a variety of ways in the current

transitory news environment, especially as they relate to law enforcement sources, and vice versa.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Traditional journalistic authority

To understand journalistic authority in society, it is important to look first at the concept of what “authority” means. Long before social media sites existed, scholars such as Weber and Arendt suggested that authority is a hierarchical social arrangement (Carlson, 2017). They postulated that authoritative figures have enforcement mechanisms and legitimating practices in society that others do not have. In a traditional democratic system such as the one in the United States, institutional authorities such as law enforcement, judges and elected officials will always remain authoritative, while journalism is seen as *an* authority among others (Carlson, 2017).

When it comes specifically to journalistic authority, Anderson says that the journalistic field is one bound by people and organizations who do the “work of journalism” (Anderson, 2015; Benson & Neveu, 2005). Bourdieu explains that the journalistic field accrues social capital related to the work it does – the network that journalists have of institutionalized relationships with sources and others (Benson & Neveu, 2005, p. 119). “Social capital” also is related to the recognition that journalists receive from others, including law enforcement bodies and other institutions. By hiring their own additional social media public relations experts, law enforcement and government officials effectively are saying that journalism’s social capital is diminished.

A key to understanding how both journalism and law enforcement institutions might *gain* authority through social media is to think about how authoritative figures perform their roles

through discourse (Carlson, 2017; Anderson, 2015). Journalists always have used the news platforms of newspapers, radio and TV to perform that discourse, while other institutional authority figures such as police, judges and elected officials traditionally had less of a chance to perform that discourse independently of journalists. Since social media sites have become ubiquitous in American society in the last decade, all nature of institutional authority figures have taken advantage of the independent discourse they offer.

Since journalists perform their roles through discourse, they're also studied as the gatekeepers of information (Shoemaker & Vos, 2009). Journalists often see gatekeeping as a public and moral responsibility (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015) including that of providing a forum and in serving as a check on abuses on political and economic power (Vos & Heinderyckx, 2015; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Journalists now seem to have lost at least part of that power of the "watchdog role" to the law enforcement agencies (Weaver et al., 2007; Weaver & Willnat 2012). As Starkman (2014) points out, complex information can be released in ways that put the law enforcement agencies in the best light. Other information can be "actively hidden by interested actors" (Starkman, 2014).

Journalism has always relied on its relationship between reporters and "elite" news sources – individuals or organizations that possess the reputation and audience to command public attention on their own – to report the news. These "elite" news sources are largely institutional. In law enforcement, for example, such sources would include the local sheriff or police chief. At the same time, in the journalistic field, reporters have always accumulated social capital by attributing information to others (Benson & Neveu, 2005), including these "elite" sources. This practice helps journalists strive for objectivity and professionalism in the field. (Benson & Neveu, 2005; Carlson, 2015).

In recent years, however, the ways that government officials, including law enforcement officials, now use the internet and social media have completely disrupted journalism, and news-gathering routines have become unsettled. (Reese, 2016). For example, scholars study how the roles of news sources and boundaries between the news sources and the journalists helps establish journalistic authority (Robinson 2015; Carlson, 2017; Beckett & Deuze, 2016). Those scholars specifically look at the role the social media giant Twitter has played in how elite sources such as the American presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama interact with the public. Politicians and companies (and other institutions such as law enforcement officers) now have their own “in-house newsrooms,” where they can frame their messages to suit themselves (Beckett & Deuze, 2016).

Journalists are alarmed by the user-generated content posted by sources, because of its potential for inaccuracy (Lewis & Carlson, 2015). Singer says that journalists now use user-generated content for tips, but re-verify all of the details (Singer, 2015) and do independent reporting to fill in journalistic “holes.” Journalists also are worried about being bypassed by the information on social media (Macnamara, 2014). Taken to its ultimate conclusion, such social media posting leads to misinformation and propaganda corrupting the public sphere (Macnamara, 2014).

Journalism’s “watchdog role” is guided by professional ideals such as objectivity, independence and fairness (Anderson, 2015, Zelizer, 1992). When journalistic authority declines, it’s likely to affect journalism’s power as a watchdog of government (Christians et al. 2009; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014; Anderson, 2015).

In basic terms, journalists want to protect society from corruption, while officials in government and business want to protect their own interests (Anderson, 2015; Kovach &

Rosenstiel, 2014; Benson & Neveu 2005). Institutional sources such as courts, police and the legislature want to shape meaning and promote their own versions of reality (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 6). To extend this line of reasoning, the tension between journalists and sources is to decide an “ephemeral social power,” according to Berkowitz (2008) in which each side is constantly negotiating for the upper hand in an asymmetrical relationship (Berkowitz, 2008; Carlson, 2017). In the past, journalists accrued power because of media scarcity. Now, news sources need to be reassessed in an era of media abundance (Carlson, 2016). However, most traditional routines and practices of news production remain constant in newsrooms, despite new technology and outside challenges (Reese, 2016; Usher, 2014).

These themes of gatekeeping, changing interactions with news sources, and journalists’ “watchdog role” in democracy reinforce what journalistic authority traditionally has meant in the United States. However, they’re now being challenged by a host of factors, especially technology as it relates to social media.

B. Law enforcement social media messaging threatens journalistic authority

A small number of scholars have studied how journalist news-gathering processes have changed in recent years to adapt to law enforcement dissemination practices (Powers and Vera-Zambrano, 2017). Past research on how law enforcement agencies interact with the public has focused generally on increased government transparency and efficiency during emergency situations. Specifically, officials and consumers have turned more to social media outlets to send and receive information in times of emergency (St. Denis et al., 2013). Such research generally has focused on public trust and the reach of government information on social media (Hughes & Palen, 2012). Scholars have looked at how law enforcement agencies make plans for emergency

situations as well as the actual posts that law enforcement officials make in such situations.

Overall, the existing body of research focuses on ways that government agencies try to be more modern and proactive to meet the needs of the public directly.

Hughes and Palen (2012) also discuss the increased pressure on law enforcement public information officers and social media officers because of cutbacks and staff shortages in traditional print and broadcast media outlets. Palen and Liu predicted in 2007 research that those pressures would cause fundamental shifts to the formal institutions of emergency management.

Scholars have examined law enforcement officials' push to better control the message to mass media and to residents. Many law enforcement officials have said that they are better able to control the information when they post it directly to social media outlets (Huey & Broll, 2012). Indeed, some officers have said they do not have to respond immediately to media questions probing for more information about crime incidents (Huey & Broll, 2012).

Law enforcement officials say that residents give them tips on social media (Hermida, 2010; Stassen, 2010). Law enforcement officials also use social media to interact more with residents once the officials have posted information (Stassen, 2010). In a similar vein, the Federal Communications Commission has expanded the government's use of emergency alerts to social media and to sending text messages to all mobile phones (Lindsay, 2011). The Federal Bureau of Investigation now sends out direct alerts on Twitter, and the FBI and other emergency agencies send "test" messages to all cell phones. One example of this in Colorado is the FBI message sent to Twitter followers on April 17, 2019, about an armed and presumed dangerous shooter named Sol Pais who came to Colorado and bought a shotgun after posting messages about the anniversary of mass shootings at Columbine High School.

(<https://twitter.com/FBIDenver/status/1118326723056152576>) In this case, FBI officials used Twitter first, before following up with interviews with local news outlets(2).

However, Farhi says it's no big deal when institutional posts on social media gain attention (2009). He says that if journalists have to find out police information from social media sites these days, it's similar to journalists listening to police scanners or using press releases from law enforcement personnel to gather information a decade ago – in the days before social media gained the public dominance it now enjoys. Boczkowski and Anderson take a more measured approach, saying that whomever controls the information flow to audiences is able to derive benefits from that information, whether it's the benefit of influence (the previously mentioned “social capital”) or other benefits (Boczkowski & Anderson, 2017).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses interviews with journalists and law enforcement sources to find out details about how journalist interactions with police sources are changing in the current era of social media. These interviewees were found through this author's personal professional network and a follow-up snowball sampling approach.

Interviews are the most appropriate method of analysis in this type of research because of the details one can find from asking specific follow-on questions (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019). Because this area of study has not been closely examined in the past, interviews give the researcher the capability to easily follow new areas of inquiry. This interview methodology could be easily scaled up to include sheriff's offices and other police departments across the United States.

FINDINGS

The number of “followers” a social media site has doesn’t necessarily correspond with the importance of the site to the audience. But for the purposes of this paper, the number of “followers” on a social media site such as Twitter serves as a data point to help tell a piece of the story about changes going on in the journalistic world and in the law enforcement world. For example, more than 30,000 residents are signed up to receive “news alerts” on Twitter from a local county sheriff’s office (1) in the Denver metro area, while about 3,000 receive “news alerts” from the community newspaper in that county. (2) In Denver, the state capital, about 246,000 residents are signed up to the Denver Police Department website, while 569,000 residents are signed up to the Denver Post website. (3)

Two key themes emerged from the interviews in this study: 1) Law enforcement challenges to journalistic authority and 2) a shift in journalistic relationships with law enforcement sources.

First, both journalists and law enforcement public information officers acknowledge that the nature of journalistic authority has been changing in recent years.

Generally, journalists who were interviewed for this study say they’re frustrated that law enforcement officials aren’t corresponding with them (as we saw in the vignette in the beginning of this paper). As Deb Hurley-Brobst, the news editor at Evergreen Newspapers, says: “They are bypassing us to post directly to the web. We hear about it when everybody else does.” Not only do law enforcement officials bypass the press, but they do so specifically so they can promote

their own agendas, according to Noelle Phillips, breaking news editor at the Denver Post.

Phillips says: “In my opinion, they (the Denver Police Department) tweet out what’s favorable to them. They use social media, and it sounds like propaganda.”

Hurley-Brobst says that the Jefferson County sheriff’s department often does not respond for days, if at all, to requests for comment from reporters at Evergreen Newspapers. She worries about the lack of institutional sources in the small mountain community.

Phillips (3) and Joe Moylan, government and police reporter at the Greeley Tribune (5) say they have similar issues about the way their news-gathering processes are changing. Phillips says that she requires all Denver Post breaking news reporters to have Tweetdeck * open on their computer screens at all times, but sometimes police don’t send out information about situations that the journalists feel are newsworthy. (*Tweetdeck is a social media “dashboard” program that shows all tweets for the chosen Twitter accounts that a user “follows.” This makes it easy for reporters to see all of the Denver Police Department tweets in one place as soon as the tweets are posted).

Moylan says that the Weld County sheriff has told him that he feels that social media has more public impact, since information provided there is free to the public and news stories on the Greeley Tribune website are subscriber-only.

In both the Denver Post and the Greeley Tribune cases, reporters and editors are worried that their readers will not understand the difference between the verified news that they are trying to provide and the framed information that law enforcement institutions provide online through social media. Phillips says, for example, “(Law enforcement) think they can communicate more with the public, and they can bypass us, and they don’t need us. With social media, they can put out the body camera

footage to YouTube with the police chief's commentary, and various perspectives to help the public interpret what they see, and it's cutting us out from them. You need the savvy public to look at that with a critical eye and digest it and break it down, and I don't know if everyone is (savvy) or not."

Editor Dana Coffield at the online newspaper the Colorado Sun (4) complains that Twitter now seems to be the preferred method of communication for law enforcement looking to get their messages out to the public, but that information posted on Twitter worse than information in a press release because it is so limited and is sometimes inaccurate. Coffield says, "We need more information, and if you're going to be only on Twitter, you'd better be answering every single question. You can't be like, 'Sorry, we don't respond on Twitter.' You have got to figure out what your protocol is going to be, and even though you may think you're communicating in a super clear way, sometimes you're not."

As with other journalist interviews in this study, Coffield here is referring to the idea of journalistic authority in that she is saying that journalists have been trained to verify information before making it public (Bourdieu, 2005; Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). Coffield's point about law enforcement officials communicating only on Twitter harkens back to literature review findings from Habermas (1991), Carlson (2012) and Kovach and Rosenstiel (2014), who all say that independent reporting on government topics is crucial to creating a healthy democracy.

All journalists interviewed for the study feel that they should continue to demand information from law enforcement officials directly rather than through social media sites. Some have searched for ways to mediate the issue, such as Michael Hicks, the editor at Evergreen Newspapers, who said he has tried to meet with the Jefferson County Sheriff in the past to

express the importance of clear lines of communication. A new sheriff in the sheriff's office, and turnover in that role over the last several years has made it hard for him to develop a relationship with those in authority, Hicks says. "They have an avenue (with Twitter) and they don't need the middle man," Hicks says. (1)

Evergreen Newspapers has about 5,000 subscribers all together (newspaper websites www.canyoncourier.com, www.clearcreekcourant.com, etc.). The Greeley Tribune has about 20,000 subscribers (greeleytribune.com). The Grand Junction Sentinel has about 15,000 subscribers (gjsentinel.com). The Ouray County Plaindealer has about 1,500 subscribers (ouraynews.com). The online-only Colorado Sun has about 22,000 subscribers. (newspaper website www.coloradosun.com) By comparison, the public information officers for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office (Jeffco.us/sheriff), the Adams County Sheriff's Office (adamssheriff.org) and the Denver County Sheriff's Office (denvergov.org/content/denvergov/en/sheriff.html) have combined totals of social media followers that are much higher than the number of subscribers to the news outlets. For example, 33,000 people "like" the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office Facebook site. (2) Jefferson County, Colorado, is on the west side of the Denver metro area and includes Evergreen, where Evergreen Newspapers is based. In Adams County, about 18,000 people "follow" the Adams County Sheriff's Office on Facebook, and 11,000 follow the sheriff's office on Twitter (7). Adams County is on the northeast side of the Denver metro area.

On the law enforcement theme, Rebecca Ries, full-time social media and public relations person for the Greeley Police Department says she sends press releases to news outlets daily and that she also posts information "instantly" to the police department's social media channels on

Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, NextDoor, YouTube and Snapchat. According to Ries, “I think the big change for law enforcement was when social media ‘blew up.’ We now have our ‘own channels’ – so to speak – to get our information out the way we want to tell it.”(6)

In an interview at the Jefferson County Sheriff’s Office, public information and social media officer Dionne Waugh says her job in law enforcement has changed over the last 10 years, and that she works closely with the sheriff to be strategic about how she puts out information. As an example, she now has made a schedule of the types of social media posts that go out at different times of day, based on what time the internet metrics show that the audience wants information.

Waugh gives another example of strategy, saying she recently interviewed the sheriff in a short video about body camera footage, then spent a full day getting internal review and feedback before posting it. Waugh adds, “If we have something big, we put it out on Twitter. That’s the fastest way to reach everybody: the reporters, the community, that’s how we update everyone, everywhere.”(2)

Sgt. Paul Gregory at the Adams County Sheriff’s Office follows similar rules in his job. Gregory says he learned new ways to use social media at a week-long course put on by the nonprofit national law enforcement-related group FBI LEEDA. The group, made up more than 7,000 law enforcement and public safety leaders across the country, especially sheriff’s offices, focuses on training, education and networking , according to its mission statement (www.fbileeda.org).

CONCLUSIONS/IMPLICATIONS

Based on this data set, it appears that law enforcement public information officers feel they’re successful in getting their messages out to the public without going through journalists.

In addition, they believe that social media helps them do their jobs more quickly and efficiently - they can send information to news outlets and to residents all at the same time.

Several of the journalists said they continue to examine the nature of their authority in their communities. In some cases, journalists and the news outlets they work for have discussed not reporting breaking news types of information that can more quickly and easily be gotten from other sources.⁽⁴⁾ In that case, they might focus on more detailed examinations of areas where their reporting might make more of a difference, whether it's discussing the importance of a growing or decreasing budget at a law enforcement agency or taking time to investigate tips of wrong-doing by law enforcement officials. This is an area of journalism that continues to remain in flux, threatening the normative theories of journalism and journalism's "watchdog role" over government institutions in a democracy.

Journalists and law enforcement officials often have had adversarial relationships over the years, driven by a variety of situations and events. As law enforcement agencies have embraced the digital age and social media, their interactions with journalists have changed.

Given the changes happening in both law enforcement and the journalism industry, this area of interaction between the two groups appears to hold interesting new insights. At an applied level, the tension between law enforcement and journalists points to the continuing concern about if journalists serve as an independent check and balance on public officials. At a theoretical level, this paper points to how shifts in how law enforcement's technology/social media use now puts into question how journalism, as a field of practice, may have to consciously and reflexively explore the "rules of the game" (Bourdieu's field theory of doxa) again as related to its ability to cover things like crime, traffic accidents, weather and natural disaster stories.

This study matters because in a democracy, it's important to have outside news outlets play their roles as government watchdogs. This is something so fundamental to democracy that citizens often forget that freedoms they take for granted actually require constant monitoring for their government institutions to continue operating in an open and transparent manner.

Democracy is weakened when any aspect of those freedoms erode.

ENDNOTES

1. D. Hurley-Brobst, personal communication, Feb. 20, 2019.
2. D. Waugh, personal communication, April 8, 2019.
3. N .Phillips, personal communication, Jan. 18, 2020.
4. D. Coffield, personal communication, March 5, 2019.
5. J. Moylan, personal communication. Jan. 3, 2020.
6. R. Ries, personal communication. Feb. 18, 2020.
7. P. Gregory, personal communication. March 10, 2019.

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