

When Social Media Hits Home

Paul W. Taylor | February 3, 2014

"Mother unwittingly live-tweets husband's fatal crash." With characteristic tabloid economy, the headline in the New York Post captured the tragedy and irony of a story at the confluence of a heartbreaking highway collision and the immediacy of social media.

Last year, a record 72 percent of adults who are online used social networking sites, according to the Pew Research Center. But of all the sites, from Facebook and LinkedIn to Instagram and Pinterest, it is Twitter that has done more to change how we get news and information in real time. The use of Twitter has doubled since 2010, according to Pew. In that time, the microblogging service has grown from a simple tool for posting updates — personal and professional — to a critical device for informing the public about major events. Sometimes, though, live-tweeting a news update touches someone very personally.

That was clearly the case for Caran Johnson from Vancouver, Wash. She made a hobby of tweeting 911 calls, traffic alerts and other incidents picked up from the county police scanner under the Twitter handle @ScanCouver.

When she heard a fatal head-on crash was blocking Interstate 205 one afternoon, she quickly tweeted it out and retweeted messages about the incident from local media, the state Department of Transportation and a Twitter account administered by District 5 of the Washington State Patrol.

Trooper Will Finn, a public information officer (PIO), managed the district's account (@wspd5pio). He got the first call about the I-205 crash at 1:57 p.m. and immediately began tweeting about the collision, advising motorists to avoid the area. Finn continued regular updates and was about to send out photos from the scene when he received a message from @ScanCouver asking whether he had a description of the vehicles. Interest piqued, he checked her feed. She was tweeting that her husband drives home on I-205, was not answering his phone and was missing.



Columbian Metrodesk @Col_cops

Here's the story we have so far on the I-205 SB collision. [Columbian.com](#) advises motorists to take alternate routes.

columbian.com/news/2013/dec/...



CJ

@ScanCouver

[@Col_cops](#) [@wspd5pio](#) do you have descriptions of the vehicles involved?

2:20 PM - 4 Dec 2013

2 RETWEETS 2 FAVORITES

He tweeted back, “@ScanCouver sorry. Not yet.”

“It was the one moment in my career that I lied,” says Finn, “but it was to protect someone from finding out on social media that a loved one was involved in an accident.”

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Finn, the incident commander and other troopers working the case soon realized the Twitter inquiry, calls to 911 from the wife of the deceased and a passing motorist who took pictures of the scene had put them in a really tight spot. “All we needed is for

[that] person to tweet out a picture of the husband's car and our job [would have] been compromised," Finn says.

They worked quickly to expedite the identification process and sent two investigators to Johnson's home to notify her in person that her husband Craig had been killed. Soon after the notification, she tweeted, "it's him. He died."

Finn says he's still working through the incident. "I don't see anything changing for me," he says. "If this situation were to happen again right now, I would still do the same thing."

This may seem like an extreme case for public agencies that use social media to link to press releases and build awareness. But there are lessons here that apply equally to civilian agencies.

Washington State Patrol had only authorized the use of Twitter for the first time last May, following its growing public popularity, but had crafted a clear purpose for using it. The patrol also had a culture and discipline that informed the use of social media even in unforeseen or extreme situations. From the beginning, Finn knew the distinction between official and personal and kept the two separate. Moreover, the agency trusted its PIOs to exercise judgment. If your agency does not and cannot, it probably has the wrong people working social media.

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