



USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO PREVENT GANG VIOLENCE AND ENGAGE YOUTH

*Innovative Practices from the Senator Charles E. Shannon, Jr.
Community Safety Initiative Series*

March 2011



Authors:

Russell Wolff
Jack McDevitt
Northeastern University

James Stark
Executive Office of Public Safety and Security
Office of Grants and Research

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank the Massachusetts Executive Office of Public Safety and Security, including Undersecretary for Law Enforcement and Fire Services, Kurt Schwartz; Senior Counsel for Law Enforcement and Fire Services, Karen Wells; Executive Director of the Office of Grants and Research, Ellen Frank; and former Director of Research and Policy Analysis, Marc Germain for their thoughtful feedback and guidance on the development of this resource guide. Lisa Laguerre, Assistant Director of the Institute on Race and Justice (IRJ) at Northeastern University, and Julie French, Faculty Secretary at Northeastern's School of Criminology and Criminal Justice, provided invaluable assistance on the guide. The research team would also like to thank the many Shannon CSI agencies that shared their time and insight.

This project was supported by Grant #2008-DJ-BX-0715, awarded by the Bureau of Justice Assistance, Office of Justice Programs, U.S. Department of Justice, through the Executive Office of Public Safety and Security (EOPSS) Office of Grants and Research. The points of view in this document are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice or EOPSS.

INTRODUCTION

Social media are nearly constant companions in the lives of many young people. “Just as they have done in parking lots and shopping malls, teens gather in networked public spaces for a variety of purposes, including to negotiate identity, gossip, support one another, jockey for status, collaborate, share information, flirt, joke, and goof off. They go there to hang out” (boyd, 2010: 79). Familiar web sites like Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter have opened new channels for young people to communicate instantaneously with each other, both publicly and privately, from almost any location. These sites pose challenges to the way adults customarily monitor youth relationships, associations, and activities. Additionally, given the continually evolving nature of these online venues, parents and other authority figures often have trouble keeping abreast of new technologies and platforms that young people use to interact and communicate.

While most young people engage in social media activities on the Internet for primarily social reasons, these platforms are increasingly popular with youth involved with gangs and violence. The most recent National Gang Threat Assessment examining data collected in 2008 reports that gang members use the full range of Internet and mobile device technologies to conduct business such as drug sales, communicate with other members, coordinate gang actions, claim turf, recruit new members, and boast about their gang involvement and activities (National Gang Intelligence Center, 2009). In response to the growing popularity of social media among gang-involved and at-risk youth, Shannon Community Safety Initiative (Shannon CSI) collaborative partners are increasingly using social media outlets as part of their youth engagement and gang and youth violence prevention strategies.

Frequently however, law enforcement and service provider agencies find themselves struggling with the implications of social media and its impact on the young people they serve.

In particular, these agencies are striving to learn:

1. What is social media and how are gangs using social media;
2. How to use social media to deliver Shannon CSI services; and
3. How to use social media to prevent gang and youth violence.

This resource guide will introduce the basics of social media to Shannon CSI partners; it will use nationwide research and input from Shannon CSI agencies to help identify ways to use social media to deliver Shannon CSI services and prevent gang and youth violence; and it will offer recommendations that can assist Shannon CSI agencies to meet common challenges they face when implementing social media strategies.

SOCIAL MEDIA BASICS

With the large number and variety of social media outlets available, two critical questions for Shannon CSI partners to address are what is social media, and why do youth use social media? Addressing the latter question first, as the quote in the introduction by danah boyd¹ illustrates, young people, and teens in particular, use social media as another means to express themselves (e.g., venting about the day's activities, arranging times to meet up, sharing music, etc.). Palfrey, Gasser, and boyd (2010: 3) note that “many of these activities are ‘friendship-driven’: most youth interact online with people they already know from their offline lives, using the Internet to maintain existing relationships.” These findings illustrate that the line between the online and physical worlds are becoming blurred by youth.

¹ danah boyd is a Social Media Researcher at Microsoft Research New England and a Fellow at Harvard University's Berkman Center for Internet & Society. For more information on her work, please visit <http://www.danah.org/>

Addressing the question of what is social media, while there appears to be no single definition, the term refers to a broad set of Internet-based applications that provide opportunities for interaction among users. There are many sub-categories of this broader class. “Social networking” sites such as Facebook and Myspace² allow users to create personal accounts, post pictures, videos, and share personal thoughts in a public venue with other users of their choosing. These sites are most common with approximately 134 million unique visitors of Facebook and 47 million of Myspace during December 2010 (DeLuca, 2011). There are also niche social networking sites that cater to specific demographic groups (e.g., BlackPlanet, MiGente, AsianAve) and people with common interests.³ Writing about online behavior on college campuses, Gasser (2008: 63) writes that “the proliferation of multiracial groups on social networking sites shows that students look to online portals for a shared experience and supportive community.” Many social media sites allow users to integrate content from other sites (including niche networks) to their personalized Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube pages, allowing information to be shared with a larger audience.

Another type of social media focuses on video sharing (e.g., YouTube) and photo sharing (e.g., Flickr), providing a forum for users to post and comment on videos and photos, respectively. Texting and instant messaging services allow users to communicate in real time, typically on a one-on-one basis. In boyd’s (2010) discussions with youth about their use of social media, she found these more immediate forms of communication are often reserved for an individual’s closest friends while posting content on social networking sites are typically

² Myspace, once the top social networking site and Facebook’s main rival, has “undergone drastic changes” as it attempts to reposition itself (O’Dell, 2011). The site has been revamped with a focus on youth-oriented entertainment and entertainers (Parr, 2010). Social networking features (e.g., profiles, newsfeeds) reportedly will continue but will not be the site’s main focus (Parr, 2010).

³ For example, the website howstuffworks.com lists as the top five niche social networks (Ronca, nd) Kaboodle (for those who love to shop), Ravelry (for knitters, crocheters, etc.), imeem (music-oriented), Classmates.com (connecting current and former classmates), and Flixter (for movie fans).

intended for wider audiences. A more recent addition to the instant messaging world are services such as Skype and Qik that offer users personalized video-conferencing through the Internet and mobile devices. A blog (Internet-speak for “web log”) is essentially online journaling that typically provides readers the ability to respond or otherwise interact with the blogger’s content. Twitter is an increasingly popular “microblogging” service that allows users to post very short messages (140 characters or less) commonly known as “tweets.” Twitter feeds can be “followed” and users can follow the tweets of other users, although this sometimes requires sending a request to that user. In August 2010, Twitter had almost 96 million unique visitors, a 76% increase from the same period the previous year (Efrati, 2010). Table 1 identifies many of the major types of social media and provides examples and descriptions of each type.

Table 1. Types of Social Media

Type of Social Media	Examples	Description
SOCIAL NETWORKING	Facebook, Myspace, Bebo, Orkut, BlackPlanet, MiGente, AsianAve	Sites that provide forums for users to create online communities, including posting and viewing of content, interaction with other users, and variable privacy settings determining who may view content
BLOGGING	Blogger, WordPress, TypePad, Xanga	An online form of journaling that allows for viewers to interact with the blogger or otherwise comment on the blog’s content
MICROBLOGGING	Twitter	Services that offer the ability for users to send messages using a limited number of characters and follow other users when they post messages
INSTANT MESSAGING (IM) AND TEXTING	Google Chat, Yahoo Messenger, Skype, texting using mobile phones/devices	IM and texting provide the ability to send and receive (typically brief) messages in real-time. Messaging services increasingly offer video messaging capabilities as well.
PHOTO SHARING	Flickr, Photobucket, Picasa, Snapfish	Services primarily offering a platform to post, view, and share photos (and, increasingly, videos) as well as post comments
VIDEO SHARING	YouTube	Services primarily offering a platform to post, view, and share videos as well as post comments
WIKIS	Wikipedia, Wikinews	Services that allow users to create and edit web pages that generally provide information on some topic
ONLINE MULTIPLAYER GAMES/VIRTUAL WORLDS	World of Warcraft, Second Life	Online games that provide for the ability to play with individuals in various locations connected through the Internet

While the aforementioned are among the most well known social media services, many others are popping up on a regular basis allowing new and different avenues to communicate or share information with others. Staying current with social media frequently presents a challenge for an individual, but for an agency serving clients or in charge of protecting the public, the challenge is all the more acute.

Social Media Use by Gangs

Gangs, like other youth, appear to use social media for the same or similar purposes for which they engage in the physical world. Some of the uses by gangs include recruiting other youth, communication, drug sales, and publicizing activities. On the subject of how gangs recruit in the community using social media, one Shannon CSI service provider stated, “In our community gangs aren’t all Latino, or all Black, or all White...they mix and match, and it is about numbers now. The more numbers/friends they have, the more power they have.” This individual added “Social media is a real good way for gangs to quickly mobilize and gather friends.”

The National Assessment Center’s Survey on Gang Members’ Online Habits and Participation found that 74% of gang members

Learning the Language

While many “webspeak” terms—LOL for laughing out loud, IMHO for in my humble opinion, IDK for I don’t know—increasingly have infiltrated adults’ online communications, younger social media users’ adaptations of language can present more subtle challenges as well. As danah boyd notes in a recent blog posting, (February 15, 2011) “Access to content is not the same as access to interpretation.”

One example in the context of bullying illustrates difficulties agencies may commonly come across. Again, in her blog (posted November 15, 2010), she describes how teenagers she has spoken with during her research neither recognized nor referred to so-called bullying behavior as “bullying.” Rather, it was discussed in terms of “drama,” “fights,” or “being mean.”

Shannon CSI agencies, when reading and using social media, will have to be alert to the subtleties of how youth modify their language. This may promote efforts to monitor online behavior and to intervene both online and in the physical world when necessary. However, as boyd argues, we need to address the issue in terms youth understand. Lectures by adults on “bullying” she notes, may not have the intended impact if youth refer to this behavior not as bullying, but as “drama” or “being mean.”

who distinguish themselves as frequent users of the Internet report that they have established a website to “show or gain” respect for their posse (King, Walpole, and Lamon, 2007: S67). Until recently, displaying pictures of their crew or recording fights that can be seen by a large group of friends, peers, or strangers required expensive and burdensome equipment. Now this capability is at many youths’ fingertips through smartphone technology and mobile devices that allow them to take pictures and videos and instantaneously upload them to social media sites such as Facebook, Flickr, and YouTube. Locally, Northeastern and EOPSS surveyed Shannon CSI partners about whether youth in their communities have established social media websites to promote their gang in some way.⁴ More than one-third of responding agencies report that youth have done so. Of these, 19 agencies identify Facebook as the location of these pages, 13 identify Myspace, and 5 identify YouTube. Twitter and Photobucket are also identified by a single agency each.

It is important to note that the legitimacy of information found on social media websites should always be questioned. Just as it is difficult in the physical world to determine whether individuals representing themselves as gang-involved actually are, sites promoting gangs or a gang lifestyle may not necessarily be operated by members of that gang or even individuals seriously intending to promote gang-related ideas or behavior. Similarly, even individuals linked to a confirmed gang site may or may not actually be affiliated with that gang. However, this does not mean that youth who are posturing should not be taken seriously. One agency discussed how “wanna-be” gangsters have gotten themselves into trouble when attempting to project a “tough” persona online. These “wanna-be” youth often find that what they posted was taken out of context or perceived as a personal threat or sign of disrespect. One service provider described a common example in which “these youth will say something about some girl, and the

⁴ Of the 154 project partners surveyed, 62 agencies (a 40% response rate) completed questionnaires.

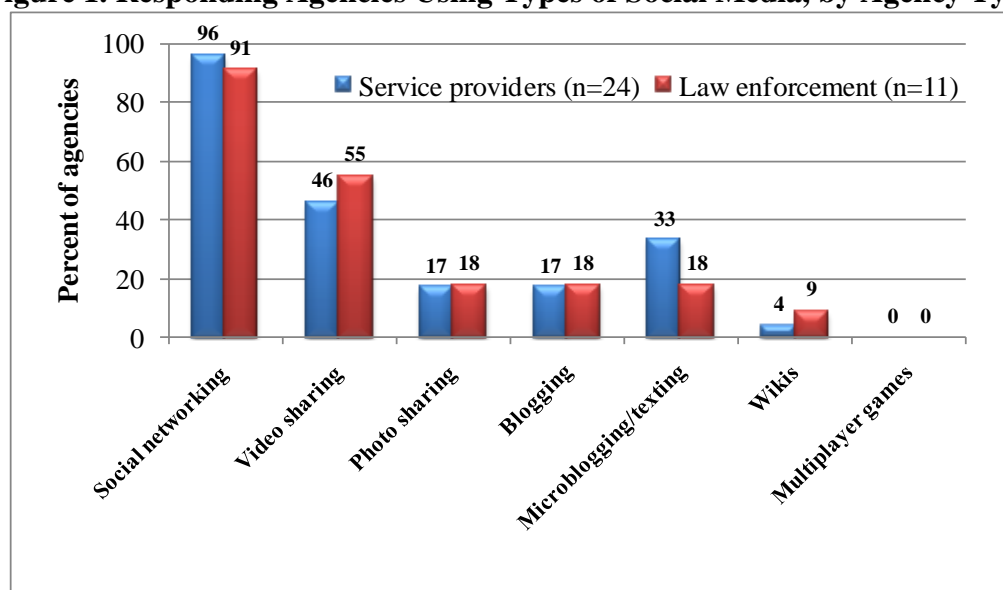
girl happens to be a sister or girlfriend of a gangbanger.” This type of situation has the potential to escalate into violence even though the youth himself was not gang-involved.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA TO DELIVER SHANNON CSI SERVICES

Belle Liang, a professor at Boston College, and her co-authors write in their article “Using Social Media to Engage Youth” that advocates “must learn to meet youth where they are—even if that means embracing and even joining their online communities and empowering unstructured networks of youth to teach and mentor each other” (Liang, Commins, and Duffy, 2010: 13). They go on to say that “the efficacy of youth advocates and intervention programs depends upon their ability to navigate the technology and communicate in the language of native digital speakers” (p.13).

The analysis of Shannon CSI partners finds that several agencies have embraced this new technology and use innovative social media strategies to address gang violence. More than half of the responding project partners report using at least one type of social media in the course of delivering Shannon CSI services. Of these agencies, social networking sites such as Facebook and Myspace are by far the most commonly used tools with almost all responding agencies reporting their use. Video sharing sites, primarily YouTube, are reported to be used by almost half the agencies. As Figure 1 illustrates, other social media outlets such as photo sharing and blogging sites were less commonly used. The figure also highlights that the use of social media by law enforcement and service providers is quite similar.

Figure 1. Responding Agencies Using Types of Social Media, by Agency Type



While 57 percent of the total number of responding project partners indicate using social media while delivering Shannon CSI services, seven additional partners report that their agencies use social media for other purposes: to advertise open job positions, services, and agency events; to fundraise; and to post information. Added to the total number of agencies using social media to deliver Shannon CSI services, more than two-thirds of responding agencies report using social media.

Three common themes emerged from those Shannon CSI agencies that indicate they use social media to deliver Shannon CSI services:

1. Information sharing and outreach to youth and the community;
2. Keeping in touch with youth; and
3. Gathering information for investigations and agency security.

Information Sharing and Outreach to Youth and the Community

Service providers in particular, though also some law enforcement agencies, use social media to advertise events and opportunities offered both within the agency and community-wide. This includes providing information about employment opportunities, educational programs, and

“Social Media allows us to work smarter by reaching out to more people in a short amount of time without overhead costs”

- Shannon CSI agency,
2011

recreational activities to youth already linked to the agency.

These agencies are also using social media to reach youth not linked to a Shannon CSI agency but who might benefit from information on these subjects, or who might benefit from the agency’s services. One Shannon CSI agency

highlights a point mentioned by many other agencies that using social media “is a very easy way to connect with many individuals at once.”

Keeping in Touch with Youth

Shannon CSI partners, most frequently service providers, use social media to keep in touch with youth. A Boys & Girls Club director says that social media “is an easy way to get a message to an individual who is not at the club, and an easy way to check in on a teen who we have not seen in a while or who we are concerned about.” One agency reports using social media to stay “closely connected with exploited girls, especially if they are on the run.”

Agencies also report using social media to keep in contact with employees to see what they are hearing on the street and to touch base with mentors working with youth.

Several Shannon CSI agencies seek out information using social media about a particular young person’s attendance in school and programs that may provide an opportunity for an informal intervention or discussion. If a student is not in school, they may brag about it through a social networking site, or if a youth client is not supposed to be spending time in a specific neighborhood or with specific youth, they may leave identifiers. A service provider describes how they monitor school attendance for this purpose:

If we suspected that a teen has skipped school we check Facebook to see if they posted about it. If they posted about it we have a discussion with that teen about why they skipped school, and why it is important to go to school. It has dissuaded a few teens from skipping school again. We believe that it encourages them to go to school (or at least not

proudly post that they did not go to school) because it is a “casual” and “friendly” way of making contact with the teen and letting them know that they disappointed you.

Reaching out through social media as well as engaging in one-on-one discussion with these youth can provide opportunities to remind them about agency activities they may be missing, the youth’s future goals, and the potential consequences of skipping school or associating with certain individuals.

Several service providers have told us that youth were surprised when agency staff informed them “that what they post can be seen by everyone.” While in some cases youth may see this form of intervention positively,

agencies should carefully consider the possible alienating consequences if youth feel that their privacy is being violated. Individuals may decide to change their privacy settings to block agency personnel from seeing certain aspects of their pages. Some young people may create parallel “mirror networks” with content for their friends and posting only innocuous information on the pages accessed by their parents or other authority figures (boyd, 2008: 132).

Gathering Information for Investigations and Agency Security

Many law enforcement agencies already monitor social media for investigative and prevention purposes. According to the Bureau of Justice Statistics Census of Law Enforcement Gang Units in 2007, the vast majority (93%) of gang units in law enforcement agencies with 100 or more sworn officers report that they “monitor Internet sites for communication among or about gang members and gang activities” (Langston, 2010: 5). Shannon CSI law enforcement partners use social media to look for tips to aid investigations or obtain more information about

“Texts on Time”

Kessler (2010) writes on Mashable.com about a school that collected students’ cell phone numbers, making it possible for teachers to “send text messages to wake chronically absent kids up before school” or to otherwise text students when the student was running late. “Texts on Time” is reported to have helped reduce chronic absenteeism by approximately 35% with no cost to the school.

an individual or gang.⁵ One police department reports they “utilize [fake accounts] to monitor chatter among our youth population with respect to disputes, parties, bullying, gang recruitment, and criminal activity,” and several other police departments indicate Facebook is frequently checked by officers in their departments. Social media is commonly used to learn more about an individual’s potential or current gang affiliations, determine with whom they associate, identify whether any comments or pictures can provide leads in investigations and gang-related incidents, and seek more information about potentially volatile situations.

Similar to law enforcement, monitoring by service providers is generally targeted at specific individuals suspected of being involved in a conflict either as an offender or a victim.

One service provider describes the basic monitoring process used by that agency:

The first procedure is to look at their pictures. Most often someone will be making a hand gesture or give some clue that they may be gang involved. However, we have to be careful not to overreact. Some of the youth are actually not gang affiliated, but rather “wanna-bes.” We also read postings and then check the sites of their friends. Over the years we have established relationships with certain youth who will give us information on who are the people to watch out for.

By getting information about current conflicts from comments, photos, videos, friends’ pages, or other depictions of gang signs and symbols, social media provides a great tool to keep their agency more secure while also mitigating the “no-snitching” culture of youth. The quote above also illustrates the importance of cross-checking information to verify the legitimacy of social media posts. Other service providers say they use certain keywords for search terms to identify streets needing additional outreach, locations that may become violent, and if their clients are in danger.

Finally, law enforcement and service providers can use social media to exchange information. While some activities, like online intelligence gathering by gang unit officers, may

⁵ Agencies intending to use social media to obtain information and support investigations are encouraged to consult their legal departments and local District Attorney’s office.

not always involve close interaction with other partners, many efforts will be amenable to collaboration with street outreach programs, faith-based programs, schools, or other service provider agencies. One Shannon CSI agency informs us that “we alert our partners (both service providers and law enforcement) when we have seen something new that we weren’t aware of, in case they hadn’t seen it as well.” As we have emphasized in other resource guides, collaboration and coordination are likely to promote effectiveness and sustainability of a community’s gang and youth violence prevention strategy.

Ways Shannon CSI Agencies Can Use Social Media

- Search social media outlets by using the names of local gangs and specific gang members to learn about past and recent activity, signs they may be using, where they hang out, and other youth that may be associated with the gang or gang member.
- Search social media outlets by using the names of locations or recent gang incidents to find out if any information has been posted that can identify persons or gangs that may have been involved.
- Develop your own social media page or Twitter feed which can allow you to pick up on common words or phrases that you might not have heard before.

PREVENTING GANG AND YOUTH VIOLENCE

As the National Gang Threat Assessment (2009) describes, many gangs are using social media to facilitate their activities, and this includes the purposeful planning of violence as well as other forms of communication (e.g., threats, taunting, boasting) that can lead to conflict between groups. Much of this communication may be viewed by a wider audience than just the direct participants, offering an opportunity for law enforcement and service providers to intervene before situations become violent. Additionally, it can be a useful area of collaboration between law enforcement and service providers. Through examination of the limited research written on

this topic⁶ and survey and interview responses, EOPSS and Northeastern will suggest ways Shannon CSI agencies might enhance their efforts by using social media as a key component of an early warning system to prevent gang and youth violence. We will first discuss how law enforcement and service providers are using social media strategies to prevent gang and youth violence, and then address how these efforts might be coordinated.

Law Enforcement Strategies

Purely law enforcement-oriented social media strategies tend to focus on the prevention of an imminent event, identification of suspects following an offense, and support of ongoing investigations and prosecutions. The popularity of social media makes it a critical resource of information for investigators. For law enforcement agencies, staking out social media sites is a modern take on a longstanding police practice of building investigations based on information obtained through surveillance. By knowing what to look for or using information gathered during an investigation of a gang incident or arrest, law enforcement can identify which youths may be involved in retaliatory violence. Law enforcement may be able to identify what streets might be “hot” and use that information for preventative policing such as hot-spot patrols or home-visits as well. Violence intervention may involve the identification of unknown perpetrators, and there are numerous accounts of gang members bragging about their exploits on social media sites. In one instance:

Constable Scott Mills was initiated into the world of social media in 2004 while investigating a youth gang stabbing in downtown Toronto. The police were able to find the perp online when they saw aliases tagged on the wall of an arcade where suspected gang members hung out. From there they went to the web and searched for those aliases as user names on popular social networking websites. They hit paydirt. “The suspect was bragging about having stabbed the teen victim on AsianAvenue.com,” Constable Mills said (Cohen, 2010).

⁶ As the advent of social media is a recent phenomenon, there are relatively few research studies or reports for practitioners addressing a role for social media in programming to prevent violence and intervene in retaliatory violence among youth and gangs.

While it is unclear whether there was a danger of retaliation in this particular instance, in similar situations this is a serious concern.

Additionally, by employing social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter, or blogs, law enforcement can immediately communicate information to the public and media.

Communicating to the public through social media outlets can aid investigations as individuals may recognize where an event took place and remember something they might have otherwise forgotten. However, it is critical that law enforcement, as with other agencies, first sift through commonly used rhetoric of actual gang members and aspiring members in terms of the probability of violence. When possible, warning content should be verified before being posted. Agencies may want to consider reaching out to Shannon CSI partners to corroborate information.

How Shannon CSI Law Enforcement Agencies Report Using Social Media to Prevent Gang and Youth Violence

- To “monitor chatter among our youth population with respect to disputes, parties, bullying, gang recruitment, and criminal activity” using Facebook.
- To search “the names of local gangs and the jurisdiction to see whether volatile situations are arising within the gang or between rival gangs; used to search for gang members by alias; used to search for and identify gang members and their associates.”
- To “search for possible gang associates and gang activity” using Myspace, Facebook, and YouTube.
- To “identify social networking of gang members.”

Service Provider Strategies

On the service provider side, a story in the online newspaper *The Uptowner*, a publication covering the New York City neighborhoods of Harlem, Hamilton Heights, East Harlem, Washington Heights, and Inwood, describes an ambitious monitoring effort in Harlem by Reverend Vernon Williams. Rev. Williams uses several high-tech tools in close conjunction with traditional techniques like speaking with youth face-to-face to monitor crew activity and

prevent retaliatory violence (Tomassini, 2010). He follows approximately 2,000 Twitter users and his tweets are followed by 400 individuals. To improve his tracking, he uses specific search terms on his Twitter account (e.g., “ratchet,” which is slang for handgun).

Multiple Shannon CSI service providers indicate they use what they hear to help them better utilize their time searching social media sites in conjunction with other violence prevention strategies. If they hear a new term or phrase they think might reference gang activity, they will search that when time permits, often during down time or after working hours.⁷ Also, their relationship with youth can lead to learning if there are certain youth or keywords they should search. As one partner says, “It is a learning process for us and we are becoming more educated in what types of things to look for.”

Coordinating Law Enforcement and Service Provider Strategies

Youth use of social media can challenge existing Shannon CSI intervention and prevention strategies. As Tomassini (2010) writes, “In the past, gang (and violence) prevention relied on keeping youth out of the streets, where trouble could find them. In the Twitter age, teens are starting trouble inside, then taking it to the streets, with even watchful parents helpless to intervene.” This makes it important for Shannon CSI partners to collaborate and coordinate strategies to determine the most appropriate response for situations where one or more Shannon CSI agencies learns of critical information through social media that may pose a threat to an individual or to the community at large. Below are suggestions for collaborations between Shannon CSI law enforcement and service providers to provide a coordinated response.

⁷ Shannon CSI agencies can refer to the Appendix which provides slang terms identified by agencies responding to the social media survey. These more localized terms are separated by those mentioned multiple times, suggesting they are more widely used, and terms mentioned by a single agency may introduce partners to terms with which they are not necessarily familiar.

Street outreach. A street outreach worker monitoring Twitter could attempt to intervene when they become aware of a potential altercation. Weischelbaum (2009) describes an incident where Rev. Williams sent some of his volunteers from the youth outreach program to locate individuals from one gang who were sending threatening tweets to a rival gang. According to the article, this action helped prevent a street war between these gangs. Additionally, a street outreach worker responding to a shooting victim may read a Facebook post indicating that the gang is seeking to retaliate for the shooting and may alert the police of certain vehicles to look for or streets that should be more heavily patrolled.

School resource officers. School resource officer (SRO) programs are inherently collaborative efforts between law enforcement and schools. SROs are in unique positions in terms of their close proximity to the social conflicts occurring at school, knowledge of youth networks, and opportunity to learn the nuances and patterns of how youth speak to one another. A number of Shannon CSI schools report that SROs review sites such as Facebook and Myspace “to monitor gang activity and potential conflicts among students” or “to monitor [in conjunction with the gang unit] chatter among our youth population with respect to disputes, parties, bullying gang recruitment and criminal activity.” In one high school, the high-level administrators, security officers, and school resource officers consult together when issues arise on social media outlets. This type of intra-agency communication will be critical to SROs’ ability to use social media effectively in the school environment.

Ways Shannon CSI Partners May Consider Using Social Media as an Early Warning System

- Use social media searches as an active part of investigations
- Use social media to outreach to the public making them aware of potential threats to the community and to solicit information for an ongoing investigation
- Use information from social media outlets to place law enforcement details, and send street outreach workers to contact youth that may either be in danger or may be dangerous
- Use information from social media outlets to speak to youth about the impact of bad decisions associations
- Use social media to quickly interact and share information with other Shannon CSI partners

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Interviews with Shannon CSI partners offered great insight into the challenges agencies face trying to successfully integrate social media into their overall youth engagement and gang and youth violence reduction strategies. In this section, we will touch upon several major challenges to implementing social media strategies as identified by Shannon CSI partners, and offer recommendations that may help agencies build a more effective and efficient social media strategy.

Challenge: Allocating Resources to Social Media

Time and again, Shannon CSI partners have told us that resource allocation issues prevented social media from being a larger part of their overall gang and youth violence reduction strategy. Most Shannon CSI partners had one or more members of their staff utilize social media to post messages about the agency's activity, keep in touch with youth in the program, or monitor youth associations. However, the task of working with social media was an ad hoc addition to existing responsibilities and was often done after formal working hours. One Shannon CSI agency told us "several outreach staff utilize social media communications depending on the project or initiative they are working on" while another said "we use Facebook

during ‘down times’ or even from home.” In short, social media use is frequently not institutionalized in agencies, and the practices surrounding social media use often do not appear to be sustainable. It is also unclear as to whether there are clear goals in agencies’ use of social media.

Recommendation: Be strategic—know why your agency is using social media, develop clear goals for your agency’s use of social media, and staff accordingly, as resources allow. Similar to other gang reduction strategies, it may make sense to develop specific plans for different contingencies. For example, it may be possible to allocate fewer resources during periods of regular monitoring or communication. However, more resources may be necessary when social media are used as part of a violence intervention strategy following a critical incident. There may also be regularly occurring ebbs and flows. For example, there may be a rise in posts on Mondays during the school year as students address the events and rumors of the weekend upon their return to school. As your agency experiments with different techniques, continually reassess these efforts.

Challenge: Determining the Accuracy of Information Found Online

As touched upon earlier, Shannon CSI partners should always be alert to the possibility that information posted on social media may be inaccurate or intentionally misleading. In an extreme case offering an example of a high-level failure to adequately verify online postings, the Mexican government experienced some embarrassment in early 2011 when the federal prosecutor’s office offered a \$2.5 million reward for a cartel leader as identified in YouTube photos (Cattan, 2011a). The problem was that the photos were a hoax. The man pictured was a factory worker, whose friends had uploaded his vacation photos with labels referring to him as

the cartel's leader. This particular example offers an extreme example of the types of challenges law enforcement agencies may confront.

Another interesting finding by Palfrey, Gasser, and boyd (2010) is that youth view privacy options, such as sharing passwords and personal information, differently than older generations. Research suggests that password sharing is typically limited to peer-to-peer exchange rather than sharing with parents or adults, “for perceived benefits” and to “demonstrate trust or get technical help with accounts” (p.13). One implication is that it may be difficult in some cases to accurately determine whether the official owner of a social media account is the individual who has actually posted certain content.

The Challenge of Online Identities

Another issue that service providers may want to address with their youth is how they construct their online identities. Adolescence is a time when many individuals experiment with different personas for a variety of reasons. With the persistence of online content, it is important to convey that online self-portrayals may have consequences, both in the short and longer-term. boyd explains that “When outsiders search for and locate participants, they are ill prepared to understand the context; instead, they project the context in which they relate to the individual offline onto the individual in this new online space. For teens, this has resulted in expulsions, suspensions, probations, and being grounded” (boyd, 2008: 133-4). She further describes a situation in which a teenager's online persona might have had serious consequences for him boyd (2008: 133):

Consider a call that I received from an admissions officer at a prestigious college. The admissions committee had planned to admit a young black man from a very poor urban community until they found his MySpace. They were horrified to find that his profile was full of hip-hop imagery, urban ghetto slang, and hints of gang participation. This completely contradicted the essay they had received from him about the problems with gangs in his community, and they were at a loss. Did he lie in his application? Although confidentiality prevented me from examining his case directly, I offered the admissions officer an alternative explanation. Perhaps he needed to acquiesce to the norms of the gangs while living in his neighborhood, in order to survive and make it through high school to apply to college?

Although working to increase agencies' understanding of the context in which a young person lives is important, youth may need to take proactive steps to explain themselves to avoid being misunderstood. Service agencies can help youth successfully navigate these complex issues.

Recommendation: Make every effort to corroborate information learned from any social media sites with non-social media sources. As youth may be boasting, or knowingly posting false information, checking with non-media sources may prevent wasteful resource allocation or actions that may damage your agency’s relationship with youth and the public. The importance of verifying online information emphasizes the need to implement social media efforts as one component of your larger gang and violence prevention strategy. Resources in the online and “offline” worlds should complement each other.

Challenge: Developing Relationships with Youth and the Community

One of the fundamental challenges inherent to violence and gang prevention strategies is effectively and productively engaging at-risk or gang-involved youth and the members of their communities and neighborhood. Developing relationships with these stakeholders involves a combination of providing information, being receptive to input and questions, interacting respectfully, and providing necessary services.

Recommendation: Work with youth to foster their creativity in using social media as a link between youth and community leaders. Locally, effective use of social media can create a number of opportunities for youth to get involved in positive change in their communities. One Shannon CSI agency uses social media to inform youth of upcoming community meetings and posts alerts “when a law is being passed and legislators need to hear from youth.” Municipal governmental agencies and service providers may also consider creating youth advisory councils or inviting youth become a member of Shannon CSI steering committees. In addition to providing their perspective more generally, youth can help community leaders decipher youth norms and language, especially as it is presented on social media.

Recommendation: Consider a social media training opportunity for youth and parents to bridge the technology gap. Developing a social media training component for youth, and in some cases parents, can increase youth awareness in the social media context. Herring (2008: 87-88) talks about the cross “generational” discussion that can be beneficial for both groups – with the youth providing insight into current usage and adults providing context for changes in culture and technology that may help youth be more critical consumers of digital media.

Some Shannon CSI partners have begun to talk to youth about various impacts of social media usage that could be damaging. One Shannon CSI agency discussed concerns about posts individuals may intend as humorous but may also be viewed by some as bullying. This agency said staff “take the opportunity to talk with both individuals about bullying, and their use of technology.” While they go on to say this is relatively new and they do not have enough examples to say if they are effective, they do say that “some good conversations have come out of things members have posted on their (Facebook) wall or others’ walls.”

Recommendation: If your organization has the resources, provide opportunities through social media to actively engage youth and the community. Another tool Shannon CSI partners may want to consider is setting up opportunities for agencies and youth and the community to interact via multiple social media platforms. The Boston Police Department maintains a blog allowing them to communicate certain messages to the public about crime rates, present new prevention strategies, post pictures seeking information from the public, and inform the public about interesting police interactions. Additionally, they maintain a Twitter account that puts out “real-time” data on matters ranging from shots fired to street closings to arrest notices to public notifications. Another tool they use is the first-in-the-country “Text-a-Tip” program, which provides residents an anonymous way to provide a tip to the police. The International

Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) suggests law enforcement agencies “may also choose to allow individual officers to use location-based networks on a professional level to enhance community policing efforts. Officers can check in at locations around their jurisdiction and leave comments with crime prevention tips or information that relates to his or her daily job activities. This not only allows the community to see that officers are in their area but also humanizes the officer and gives a unique insight into their day-to-day operations” (IACP, 2010).

CONCLUSION

One of the many impacts of the technological boom during this past generation is how it has changed the way people get information, particularly young people. A 2009 Nielson report found that “57% of young people rely on social networks as a key source of information and advice.” Shannon CSI agencies that regularly use social media as a medium to communicate with youth can bridge these technological advances by conveying messages to many youth at once and encouraging positive and goal-oriented off-line activities. Social media services can also serve as an important component of gang and youth violence prevention strategies when Shannon CSI partners know what to look for and where to look, and have a strategy for using that information to prevent and intervene in gang and youth violence.

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Appendix. Slang Terms Responding Agencies Have Seen Online

	Mentioned Multiple Times	Mentioned Once
POLICE OFFICER	po/po-po/popes, 5-0, blues, black and whites, boys in blue, heat	agua, alphabet boys, boys in blue, blocks hot, blues, c, cipher, DD's, hotboys, Jacks, James, pew pew
UNDERCOVER COP	DT/D-tech/Detech/D's/D-boys, narcs, 5-0, U.C., Jake, C.I., undercover	A-team, deep voice, feds, hacks, jump-out boys, ninja
GUN/FIREARM	gat/gatt, burner, heat/heaters, hammer, ratchet, piece, strap, gloc/glock, toy, toast,	Banger, rat, chrome, deuce deuce, iron, razz, girl, milli, 9, nina, them thangs, tools, horse, mylittlefriend, joints, water pistols, larry birds, fire, metal, law, steel, throwdown, thing thing
A SHOOTING	187, hit/hit-up, cap/capped/capped someone/busting caps, drive by, blaze/blazing, lit up, smoked/smoked out, bodies/bodied up, clapp/clapped	aired it out, buckin, burnt, dumped on, getting hotted, licking off shots, pop, spray, take out
KNIFE	blad/blade, shank, shiv/shive/shiff,	Banger, buck 50, doinker, hawk, jigga, poker, razor
A STABBING	shank/shanked/shanked someone/shanking, slash, slice/sliced, poked/poking/poked him/poked up	16 stitches, buck 50, doink, juked up, stick, lashing, jacked, jabbed, jigged up, snaked em
A FIGHT	bang/bangout/banged it out, beef/beefed, brawl, 1 on 1 fight/fairone/fair ones/shoot the ones/shoot that/throw the ones/throw the 1's/throw down/one up/one, war, hopped on, head up, scrap/scrapping	beat down, bodies him, knuckle up, fade, rounds, 30 seconds, jumped, rucus, thumping, bumpin titties
AN ONGOING FEUD	beef/got beef, war, static, dram/drama	A problem, come see me, brawl, issue
DRUGS ⁸	420, blunt(s), weed(s), tree(s), fire, haze/purple haze/silver haze, bud, green/that green, snow, ya yo/Yayo, white girl, powder, rock, candy, brown/brown t-shirt, diesel, good good/that good, pill(s)	spark-it, chronic, herbs, 5 on it, AK-47, piff, Twist, cush, flake, solvent, blow, hard, bazooka, work, perico, boy, H, dope, stuff, ball, manteca, flavor pop, disco biscuits, E, rolls, angel, pharmaceuticals, meds, 20's, 30's, 60's
DRUGS SALES	a play/plays/making a play/play to make, cop/copping, pick up, hustle/hustling, slinging	buy, cuff, deal, moves, sales, pushing, point, cuff, putting in work, pump, get busy, fence, rollin, money, makin pape, flipping chickens
OTHER TERMS	Gang: (my) boys, dogs, niggas, set, goons, hood, crew, family, nation, brothers, peeps Unmarked police car: green monster Robbery: pulling vics, work, caught a vic	

⁸ Responding agencies provided terms referring both to individual drugs as well as drugs more generally. A sample of the terms provided is provided here without differentiation.