



Irresponsible social media actions must be checked to understand the damage that occurs to law enforcement, and the creation of social problems. Social media outlets and bloggers surpass checking the legitimacy of reports to be the first. Reporting first on significant news stories produces ratings.

DISHAN JOSEPH

The virtual media environment continues changing the way Sri Lankans learn about news. The digital information domain is part of our lives. In a global context, social media outlets have sometimes complicated reporting the news as they try to stay in control of what people desire to hear, see, or listen.

Being the first to report is not a guarantee of accurate news. Globally, social media outlets have platforms where people post information on current events. Citizens are increasing the use and adoption of social and news media to participate in events, mainly because of the speed with which news travels and the ability to repost or share images and videos. The ability of the police to function as an efficient service is often predicated on the positive image they maintain with the public.

Globally, as social media outlets occupy people with reports of events, there is evidence of increasing criminal behaviour, lack of personal responsibilities, and tolerance towards others. These inaccurate reports are inspiring more individuals and groups to commit criminal behaviour targeting, even law enforcement. Targeting of law enforcement consists of increased resisting arrest, assaults using bottles and rocks, to murder by use of automatic firearms. Social media's inaccurate reports affect an officer's mentality and response when mitigating crime - this can be manifested by the police in a negative or positive manner. Violent crimes are increasing globally as criminals reassert themselves. We must pause to remember Sir Robert Peel, Founder of the Police Service in England (1829) who defined the Police Service as "The police are the public and the public are the police".

Sri Lanka Police Service

William Campbell assumed duties as the first Chief Superintendent of Ceylon Police on September 3, 1866. This date records the day the uniformed Police Force was established in Ceylon. In 1867, the first Police Headquarters was set up in Maradana. The Police Headquarters was later shifted to Fort in 1932.

The majority of the Police Force continues to do a good job, often not appreciated by the public. In retrospect, almost 90 percent of policemen and policewomen serve in stations far away from home, working long hours. In comparison to the policemen who served 30 years ago, the men and women in active duty today face greater threats. In the recent past, violent extremism has manifested into acts of terrorism. The policemen are often caught in the "first wave" of an attack as their duty positions them amidst the pub-



lic. For the record, I must mention that the Police Inspectorate (ranks of Chief Inspectors/Inspectors) is the backbone of the Sri Lanka Police, consisting of diligent hardworking officers.

The Police Department established the Special Task Force (STF) in 1983, due to the visionary leadership of the late Ravi Jayawardene, the Founding Father of the STF. The men and women serving in the STF have displayed high levels of teamwork and discipline. To date 463 Special Task Force personnel have gallantly died in action. In total, 3,100 officers of the Sri Lanka Police have been killed in the line of duty. We must remember their sacrifice forever.

There have been video clips on



social media which have deeply damaged the public's respect and confidence in the Sri Lanka Police. There were no doubt many such ugly incidents decades ago, before the use of social media and smartphones, to capture and expose them. Policemen and policewomen irrespective of rank must always remember that the public can watch and record their actions during official duty.

The second of the nine Peelian Principles states: "The ability of the police to perform their duties is dependent upon public approval of police actions". This speaks for itself of how the public validates police actions. Principle Three tells us "Police must secure the willing cooperation of the public in voluntary observance of the law". The police must enhance their bonds with the public in a multi-cultural manner, as we live in a multi-ethnic society. One of the major shortcomings at police stations is polite verbal communication when dealing with the public. People still have to use the name of



a known ASP or SSP or DIG to expedite matters positively.

Another public complaint against the Sri Lanka Police for decades is the lack of English knowledge, and working knowledge of Tamil to deal efficiently with the public. These uncertified shortcomings create an atmosphere among the public for negative social media postings, which creates resentment towards all police officers, including the good ones.

Peelian Principle Six states: "Police use physical force only to the extent to secure observance of the law after persuasion, advice and warning was found to be insufficient". This is a black area in Sri Lankan policing for decades. There was a video of a traffic sergeant assaulting a motorist in public view, which went viral a few months ago. There was no advice or verbal warning in this incident. Serious allegations are levelled at police when it comes to crowd control duty. I am disappointed to note that many media institutions use the old phrase "riot police".

This terminology tends to cloud the role and task of this police unit. The correct term is the Public Order Management Unit. Once again when a mass rally of any nature escalates to violent levels, infused by the sweltering sun in this island, protestors' emotions and temper will flare up. But the police on duty must maintain a trained professional attitude which can be challenging given the nature of some threats. Police must always realise they are on live media that has an international reach. Social media videos travel overseas within minutes. I have advocated that Sri Lanka Police must use drone technology for crowd control at vio-

lent protests, so that they have aerial footage to vindicate themselves of any violations, and hard evidence to prosecute violent offenders. Metropolitan Police, London uses helicopters for this purpose among other airborne police duties.

Some social media news clips dramatise crime reporting in Sri Lanka with music, sirens etc. - this is not professional. This kind of news reports reduces the dignity and valour of police duty. Sadly, the actions of some cops posted on social media, have undermined Sri Lanka's image on human rights values in the global community. Principle Nine reminds us - "The test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with it". This should be understood by all Sri Lankan cops. Simply, having a static presence on social media - by creating a Facebook page, or website is insufficient to foster and maintain community relationships within a multi-cultural Sri Lanka.

It is a global tendency for people to sometimes mistrust the Government as social media provides 24-hour coverage focusing on crisis events where citizens become emotional lashing out through protests or various levels of violence to manifest their perception of injustice. The irresponsible and biased social media posts cast doubts on police-related incidents. The false news further damages trust, emotions, and behaviours of individuals and groups within communities.

Social media's false reporting globally increases individuals' negative attitudes toward law enforcement. In July 2016, an individual ambushed the Dallas Police Depart-

ment (USA) killing five officers and injuring nine. The motive for the assassinations correlated with crisis events reported by the media of police officer-involved shootings of black men. Race, religion and ethnicity impact society worldwide, within the scope of police engagements.

Irresponsible social media actions must be checked to understand the damage that occurs to law enforcement, and the creation of social problems. Social media outlets and bloggers surpass checking the legitimacy of reports to be the first. Reporting first on significant news stories produces ratings. Technology advancements in mobile devices virtually allow anyone to report the news through social media platforms. Podcasters, YouTube bloggers, and Facebook personalities bring society information, which is not filtered by a discerning mind for its post impact. Social media has the ability to edit and transform neutral pieces of police information into eye-catching headlines that communicate a different message than what is intended.

Globally, law enforcement agency executives must address the responsibility to provide appropriately timed updates to critical incidents, and utilise the opportunity to engage their community transparently. Today social media is viewed as an important way to increase the visibility and transparency of police functions. Police stations must be sensitive to public opinion, and to demonstrate the problem-solving capacity demanded by the citizens. Unlike traditional media, social media (when used by police agencies) allows law enforcement the opportunity to construct and distribute their own stories. This must be done with honest responsibility and integrity, within the framework of the law allowing the police control of their own image. The Sri Lanka Police needs to observe, learn and implement good social media platforms to engage the public in this high-tech era. Likewise, the public has a responsibility to think of the positive-negative impact of their instant posts of any police interaction clips/images on social media.

(The writer is the author of the book Target Secured - Police Special Task Force)