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Demonstrations and Protests

Using Social Media to Gather Intelligence and Respond to Campus Crowds

KEY POINTS

- Campus protesters frequently use social media to share information about planned events or draw crowds for spontaneous demonstrations, potentially causing student-led events to go viral and draw outside attendees.

- Participants and observers in the protest's digital conversation may use incendiary words, photos, and/or videos to incite peaceful demonstrators to become violent.

- The Social Sentinel® service can provide important insight about crowd size and climate, resulting in possible strategy adjustments including deployment of officers.

DID YOU KNOW

16 🚶

were arrested and

25 🚗

were damaged during a recent protest that originated at Seattle Central College?

College campuses are often the site of demonstrations and protests. For centuries, students have protested a variety of issues, be it students at Harvard rallying for better food in 1766, people vocalizing their lack of trust in the government's decision to remain in Vietnam, or recent demonstrations against tuition increases. Most of these events begin and end peacefully, with groups of students (sometimes joined by faculty, staff, and/or outsiders) lawfully expressing their views and acting as a social force for change.

But that is not always the case. Orderly demonstrations can quickly turn violent, as was seen recently in Seattle, where a May Day rally for workers' rights that began at Seattle Central College ended with the arrest of at least 16 people after protesters threw rocks at police officers and damaged 25 vehicles. Often exacerbating such events is the use of social media.

With tools such as Twitter, protesters can easily get groups together without much advanced planning. "Flash mobs," such as a recent one at Brigham

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> "We have used the Social Sentinel service during recent protests and after a major sporting event to help our ground team understand the mood of the crowd and ensure we had security in the right place at the right time."
>
> — Crime Analyst, Michigan State University

Young University protesting police brutality against unarmed black men, can convene quickly and test the responsiveness and agility of campus security. Groups like #BlackLivesMatter use social media to organize and spread the word about their cause and list locations of planned events. During protests, anyone using a group's or event's hashtag(s) can add to the conversation. Many simply wish to disseminate information, but some use incendiary words, photos, and/or videos to incite peaceful demonstrators to become violent, or encourage violence from outside groups and individuals.

For campus security officers, demonstrations present a number of challenges. Many schools have traditional channels for students to use when planning a protest, often requiring them to apply for a permit and to comply with specific school and/or local ordinances that place limits on these events' size, noise level, and location. But even with advance planning, law enforcement professionals need to be flexible enough to respond to situations that develop beyond initial expectations. The mood of a crowd can change quickly, the demonstration can move from one location to another, and outside agitators can provoke law enforcement in ways the leaders of the event did not intend. Officers who receive social media alerts before and during protests can often stay a step ahead.

In addition to demonstrators who focus on social injustices or other causes, crowds during or following campus events and concerts sometimes erupt into violence. In 1999, students at Michigan State demonstrated their displeasure with the basketball team's loss to Duke in the Final Four by causing over $500,000 worth of property damage. In 2015, they more peacefully started a "bagel riot." Captured on social media, the event went viral. While many were amused by the bagel tossing, local authorities responded and made some arrests, noting that in their experience with crowd control, and the fuel that social media can bring to the fire, intensity can increase quickly and dramatically, shifting from benign acts to vandalism to more distressing acts of violence. Michigan State University has since ventured to create a strategy to assess the climate of events utilizing the Social Sentinel service, including another heated Final Four game against Duke. Integrating the use of the Social Sentinel service

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into their crowd control strategy resulted in a more informed approach to managing the event.

In other cases, outside organizations, such as Occupy Colleges, coordinate protests and engage students and other potential protestors using social media. There is no evidence to suggest that events organized by such groups are less peaceful than those headed by students, but they can catch campus security personnel unaware.

In a report sponsored by the US Department of Justice, it was recommended that campus security officials monitor social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram before and during events to discover trending issues, anomalies, and emerging issues pertaining to protests. In addition, the top recommendation for better addressing security at protests and demonstrations published in IACLEA's Law Enforcement Journal is continuous monitoring of social media.

Find threats with the Social Sentinel service and then take action to diffuse the situation.

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Using the Social Sentinel Service

The Social Sentinel service is an important tool for campus security to maintain the safety of faculty, staff, students, as well as other protesters, bystanders, and members of the community.

Using the threat alert service, security teams can gather information about planned events. They may also uncover information about spontaneous events or unsanctioned flash mobs. During an event, threat alerts can provide important insight about the leaders or agitators who may want a confrontation with law enforcement, the general climate of the crowd, and the potential for crowd growth. Geo-located posts can also track an event's (often changing) location, providing real-time intelligence on where response is needed. This data is critical for reducing response time and determining possible strategy adjustments, such as increased deployment of officers, location of resource deployment (based on safety/risk assessments done using information provided in posts), and/ or altering the level of force that may be necessary to protect protesters, bystanders, or the general public, who may be affected.

Take Action:

- Establish a protocol for demonstrations and protests that clearly communicates the behaviors, speech, locations, etc. that are allowed. Post the protocol on the campus website, on flyers posted around campus, and through social media channels.

- Establish and train a crowd control team that will develop detailed plans for handling demonstrations and will train the rest of your department in crowd control matters.

- Create a set of potential demonstration scenarios; including occupying buildings, rapid growth of large crowds, and blocking access to buildings or other campus spaces; and develop detailed plans for handling them.

- Periodically review local and state statutes pertaining to crowd control.

- Monitor social media for information about protest plans to stay a step ahead of expected events; stay tuned-in during events to determine changes in the mood of the crowd, whether additional protesters are joining in and where they are coming from, whether the situation requires additional deployment of officers, and the level of force needed as the event progresses.

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