TRAINING THE TRAINERS IN MEDIA LITERACY

Applying Critical Thinking to Training Videos

BY

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LONG BEFORE INDIVIDUALS DECIDE TO APPLY TO THE POLICE ACADEMY, THEY HAVE FORMED OPINIONS ABOUT LAW ENFORCEMENT FROM THE VARIETY OF MEDIA SOURCES THAT NOW INFLUENCE THE ENTIRE LANDSCAPE OF POLICING, AFFECTING THE PUBLIC AND POLICE ALIKE. As social media becomes a routine part of most people's daily lives, many feel empowered to post content and disclose information that depicts law enforcement activities. On popular YouTube channels, audiences can readily scrutinize the actions of police and community members, viewing footage from surveillance cameras, public recordings of police, and body-worn cameras. A growing number of people in the United States believe that it is important to document police encounters to limit abuses of power.

At the same time, most people are largely unaware of the many ways that mass media and social media depictions of crime affect people's attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors. The research literature on this topic is plentiful. For example, people who watch local TV news are more likely to believe that crime is rising than other members of society. Watching television news and crime-based reality programs affects how individuals view sentencing decisions, even after controlling for sociodemographic characteristics and experiences with crime such as fear, past victimization, and prior arrests.

Images courtesy of Austin Police Department

concerns about the increasing spread of disinformation and propaganda via social media—while online discourse about information warfare and a forthcoming "civil war" continues to intensify political polarization in the United States. The challenge of addressing the role of media and communication in domestic violent extremism has become increasingly central to U.S. national security, and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security has offered guidance on prevention strategies that help people become resilient to harmful or false narratives in the online space. The U.S. Marine Corps is also devoting time and resources to combat disinformation with specialized training that could help troops recognize and resist potential disinformation operations designed to damage morale.

In many ways, media and technology are transforming the conversation about public safety in the United States. In response, an innovative train-the-trainers initiative in Austin, Texas, helps police instructors increase their media literacy and develop their critical thinking and communication skills about media and technology in ways that improve teaching and learning.

## REFORMING THE USE OF VIDEOS IN POLICE ACADEMY TRAINING

After police officers in Austin, Texas, were charged with murdering two men in 2019 and 2020, a wave of protests against police violence in Austin occurred about one month before the murder of George Floyd in

People's understanding of crime is also shaped by crime TV shows, which are among the most popular forms of entertainment. In one study, researchers examined more than 350 recent episodes from this genre and found that the great majority of TV shows depicted criminal justice professionals as committing wrongful actions in a way that normalized them—making bad actors seem good and wrongful actions seem right. In many movies and TV shows, criminal justice professionals who are portrayed as "good guys" commit more wrongful actions than those depicted as "bad guys."

With law enforcement under the magnifying glass, deficiencies in police education are also becoming more

noticeable to the public. TV shows about law enforcement have featured storylines suggesting that the training of police officers may be a factor in officer-involved homicides. For example, in one episode of *NCIS: New Orleans,* the fictional team uncovers a gang of white supremacist police officers who were all trained by an instructor who encouraged an "us versus them" warrior-style approach to community-police interactions. Bystander videos and body-worn camera videos uploaded to YouTube may also lead viewers to believe that law enforcement professionals treat the public—particularly black community members—as the enemy.

Among the relevant factors shaping public opinion about policing are

What did you value about media literacy?	What did you value about media literacy?	How to improve relatability with the community!!
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"Media and technology are transforming the conversation about public safety."

Minneapolis, Minnesota. City leaders made ambitious calls for change to the police academy to emphasize de-escalation in violent confrontations and set about examining how racism, bigotry, and discrimination may be present in the protocols, practices, and behaviors of the Austin Police Department (APD). Leaders recognized the importance of infusing academy training with the cognitive, emotional, social, moral, and communication skills essential for officers to meet the contemporary challenges of police work. Police academy teaching has long used a distinctly vocational and paramilitary approach to training, with an adherence to traditional teaching methods that emphasize following orders, listening to lectures, practicing using equipment, and engaging in simulations where stress is induced. Critics note that this approach to teaching and learning does little to develop the communication skills and independent problem-solving competencies that are needed for decision-making and effective community engagement in the field.

In Austin, a city resolution mandated the formation of a committee to review and comment on more than 100 videos used in APD's Training Academy, in courses including Arrest, Search, and Seizure, Arrest and Control (Tactical Week/Defense Tactics), De-escalation Strategies, Crisis Intervention Team (CIT), Tactical Communications, Use of Force, and other courses. In reporting on their review process, the committee noted that the vast majority of the videos were of low quality. Most were outdated, many were hard to follow and had poor viewability, and some had unprofessional or sensationalistic commentary. There was an overrepresentation of people of color in violent interactions with police officers, portrayals that may lead cadets to see black and brown people as more dangerous. Videos depicted officers as "good guys" and the public they interact with as "bad guys," offering a view of the profession where officers are agents of control and the public stands in need of being controlled. The reviewers were also concerned about the prevalence of "what not to do" videos, which may inadvertently reinforce undesirable or ineffective behaviors, and they observed many examples where videos featured language used by police officers that accelerated public hostility instead of de-escalating it.

But when these insights from the community were shared with APD police instructors, the instructors did not understand why their video choices were being challenged—and they did not appreciate the reaction of the community members to the videos. A training initiative was designed to explore the potential value of media literacy education to increase awareness of the constructed representations of policing that are presented in the context of police education. Could police academy instructors learn to use media literacy instructional strategies not only to select and use videos that were more appropriate to the needs of the community but also to help recruits develop the communication and
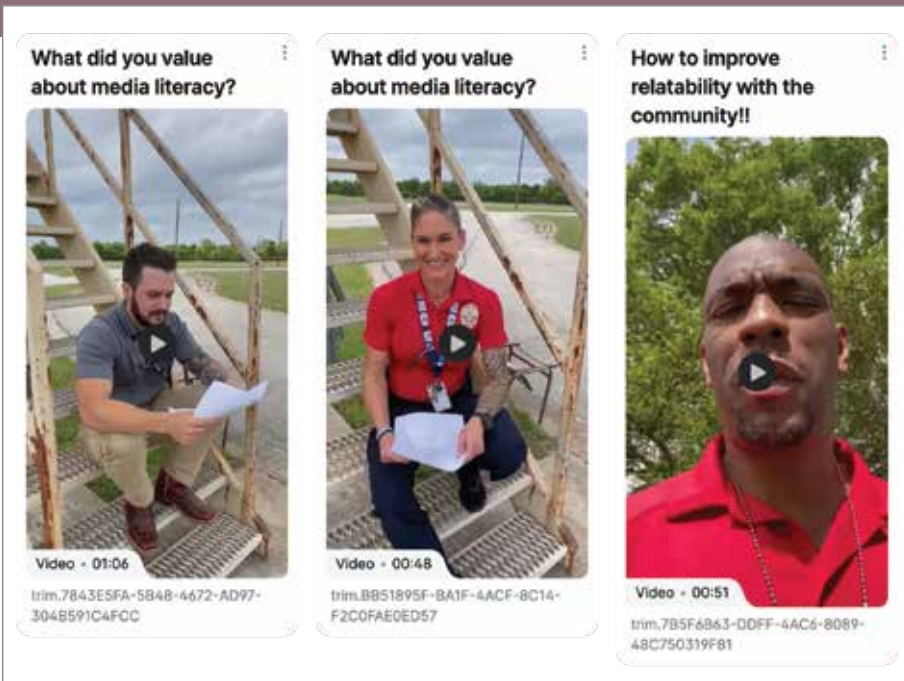
critical thinking skills needed by law enforcement officers?

To develop the media literacy program, the authors conducted two days of informal interviews and focus groups with APD leadership and instructors to better understand their perceptions and interpretations of videos used in police training. As expected, most instructors had no formal training in how to use media for educational purposes; most relied on using videos that they had encountered themselves while enrolled as cadets at the academy. From the evidence collected, the program goals listed in Table 1 were developed.

MEDIA LITERACY FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS

Video can be a highly effective educational tool, and it is well-suited to both illuminating abstract, technical concepts and providing how-to demonstrations. But police recruits (as is true with all students) do not automatically learn when a video is played in the classroom. To advance learning, instructors must use activities and practices that take into consideration cognitive load, student engagement, and active learning.

Critical analysis of media messages is also an important skill for police officers. Media literacy education is sometimes defined as the practice of "asking critical questions about what you watch, see, and read." Media literacy advances critical thinking and communication skills needed for life in a media-saturated society. Its purpose is to help individuals of all ages develop the habits of inquiry and skills of expression that they need to be critical thinkers, effective communicators, and active participants in today's world. As an approach to teaching and learning, media literacy has been used in a wide variety of efforts to address the problem of disinformation and propaganda around the world, and its effects have been verified with empirical evidence.

The six-hour introductory train-the-trainers program was developed

by Professor Renee Hobbs and Pam Steager, a community-engaged media literacy educator from Providence, Rhode Island. They implemented the program with 34 APD police instructors in April 2022, modeling 10 instructional practices that could be used to develop critical thinking and communication skills when using videos in police training. Some key components of the program are described here to show how the instructional practices demonstrated in the program may advance instructor competencies.

Choose appropriate videos for learning. Police instructors learned how to annotate videos using a digital bulletin board that enables users to write comments and respond to videos and then read the comments of others. It can be valuable to encourage learners to form interpretations of video before engaging in discussion because it

increases awareness that people make interpretations of media based on their preexisting knowledge, attitudes, beliefs, and values. Working individually, participants were invited to view a video, summarize key ideas, and respond to the question: "Would you use this in the courses you teach? Why or why not?" After formulating their opinions, they gathered for a small group discussion to consider whether the video could be effective for learning purposes.

For example, some police instructors watched dashcam footage of the killing of Patrick Lyoya, who was shot and killed by a police officer after he was pulled over for allegedly driving with an unregistered license plate. Video of the traffic stop was released by the Grand Rapids, Michigan, Police and showed a brief foot chase followed by a struggle over the white officer's

TABLE 1: MEDIA EDUCATION FOR LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICERS: LEARNING OUTCOMES

MEDIA INFLUENCES	
1.1	Examine the rising influence of video in society today
1.2	Understand how media messages about law enforcement shape perceptions of both police and citizens
1.3	Recognize how videos that are used in police training can be used to normalize or disrupt patterns of racial bias, stereotypes, and inappropriate use of force
1.4	Identify how video content and form can be used to reinforce or challenge power relationships
MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR LEARNING	
2.1	Gain knowledge about why and how videos increase learning
2.2	Learn strategies to guide the responsible selection of videos for learning purposes
2.3	Apply instructional practices to the use of videos in ways that accelerate student learning
2.4	Advance one's own critical thinking skills as a media consumer and creator
2.5	Discover opportunities to integrate critical thinking about media into the courses taught
2.6	Develop increased confidence in selecting and using videos for police training

Taser. One participant noted that the video had value for learning purposes, suggesting that it "could be used to show the importance of officer safety, scene control, what can happen when a Taser fails, and the importance of being able to implement control techniques on a resisting subject. It's basically a 'what not to do' video." Another participant suggested the video was "too recent" to be used appropriately in the context of defensive training. Still another participant wrote, "This video… may influence officers and/or cadets to think that persons of color are suspect and pose a danger." As police instructors viewed videos and encountered different perspectives on their potential value, they recognized the importance of being able to justify and articulate a process of reasoning for selecting videos.

Ask critical questions about media.
Asking questions about what one sees, watches, listens to, and reads is a foundational literacy and communication competency. The ability to ask questions allows people to assess with a critical eye what they observe in real life and what they see in the news, online, and on social media. A central component of media literacy is asking questions—about sources, messages, methods, impacts, facts, influences, and a host of other things. But it takes repeated practice for learners to internalize the process of asking critical questions about media used in the classroom because of the traditionally passive way in which video viewing is experienced in the home.

To demonstrate how to incorporate critical questions into video viewing, a five-minute excerpt from *Utah Highway Patrol*, a reality TV show, was used along with the Media Literacy Smartphone, shown in Figure 1. Police instructors were asked to address the following questions:

- **Reality Check.** What is accurate and inaccurate about this depiction of a DUI stop?
- **Private Gain or Public Good.** Who is making money from this video?

- **What's Left Out?** What's the point of view of this video?
- **Values Check.** How does this video align with your values?
- **Read Between the Lines.** What is the implied message that is not stated directly?
- **Stereotype Alert.** How are stereotypes used in this video?
- **Solutions Too Easy.** How does this video oversimplify a complex reality?
- **Record/Save for Later.** What's the important idea that is worth remembering after viewing this video?

FIGURE 1: MEDIA LITERACY SMARTPHONE

Because these questions stimulate discussion about representation, economics, values, and power, the discussion of the video touched on issues of depictions of fairness and justice. Analysis activities like these examples can help people appreciate how all sorts of different media may affect their understanding and perceptions of social reality, which in turn shapes possibilities for their own lives. This critical stance toward media messages also encourages people to examine their own positions in society and their social responsibilities as consumers and creators of media messages.

Media literacy analysis activities promote critical thinking because they connect the classroom to the culture. They help increase the perceived relevance of topics and ideas and allow for a diverse range of perspectives to encourage rich discussion that accelerates learning.

Police instructors immediately recognized the relevance of these competencies. After all, people in the United States now see fake news and disinformation as a bigger problem than terrorism, sexism, racism, illegal immigration, or climate change. Additionally, nearly 70 percent of U.S. adults say made-up news and information greatly impacts individuals' confidence in government institutions, and roughly half say it is having a major impact on people's confidence in each other.

Participate in a discussion to deepen respect for diverse points of view.
Instruction through dialogue and discussion can be enhanced with active learning strategies. In an activity called Take a Stand/Walk the Line, police instructors were taught how they could moderate a "standing" discussion. To begin, participants got a few minutes to reflect on statements that may be interpreted in different ways. For example, they were asked to agree or disagree with statements like these:

- Police know more about the community than the community knows about the police.
- Most rap music is anti-police.
- The police academy will look very different in 10 years than it does now.

Each statement was read out loud, one at a time, and police instructors moved to a spot along an imaginary line that represented their opinion, ranging from absolute agreement to complete disagreement. Many chose to stand somewhere between the two extremes. Then they were invited to explain why they have chosen to stand where they are standing, using evidence, reasoning, and examples when defending their stance. After about three or four

viewpoints were heard, and participants were invited to move to a different spot on the line if they encountered ideas that were meaningful to them. Because this activity gets many different arguments out on the table (even among participants who have similar life experiences and world views), it can be an effective way to deepen respect and appreciation for interpretations that are different from one's own.

View and discuss a documentary.
Videos that feature community members' life experiences with policing can be an important part of police training. Discussion of such cases can provide opportunities to decrease the gaps in knowledge and attitudes between police and the public.

The instructional practice called Pause, Notice, and Predict was used in this lesson. Because videos activate a range of strong feelings during the viewing experience, it can be useful to pause at certain key points to enable people to summarize ideas and interpret the meaning of what they are seeing and hearing. When this is done regularly, as part of instruction, learners make connections between ideas and information in the film and other learning and life experiences.

None of the APD police instructors were familiar with *Traffic Stop*, a 30-minute HBO documentary created in 2017 by Kate Davis and David Heilbroner about the arrest of Breaion King, a 26-year-old African American school teacher from Austin, Texas. Her brutal arrest after a traffic infraction was captured by three APD police dashcams and ended up being seen by millions. This 30-minute film was nominated for an Academy Award in the category of Documentary Short Subject.

The film shows dashcam video of the traffic stop twice: in the opening of the film and later, after viewers have learned a little bit about the context of King's life. When police instructors were invited to call attention to what they noticed, their answers varied


ONE AUSTIN SAFER TOGETHER

widely. Some officers noted that the procedures depicted in the video were consistent with department guidelines. While some noted how King was displaying resistance to arrest, other officers noted that the officer's orders were executed quickly and inconsistently, making it difficult for King to understand what was being requested and why.

In a later scene in the film, when the police officer describes King's arrest to a supervisor, his description of the encounter does not seem to line up with what viewers have just seen. These scenes are intermingled with King performing at a dance rehearsal, where we learn more about her deep mistrust of police, which has been generated by her growing awareness of police brutality against people in the black community. The film depicts her gradual process of healing from the trauma associated with the troubling experience.

The film explicitly addresses how racism and mistrust affects how the public and police interact with each other, and in the train-the-trainers program, police instructors clearly applied some critical thinking in responding to the film. For example, one instructor observed that both HBO

> **"Videos that feature community members' life experiences ... can be an important part of police training."**
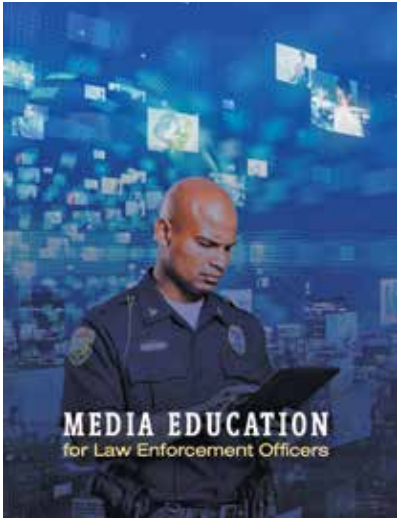
MEDIA EDUCATION
for Law Enforcement Officers

"Awareness of being video-recorded is now a fundamental part of an officer's consciousness."

and the filmmakers are capitalizing on public fears about police brutality. Another noted that the dashcam footage makes it seem highly realistic, but it is also edited to compress time, and thus offers a selective and incomplete depiction of events. Participants readily acknowledged that the dashcam footage did not capture the full reality of the encounter. One police instructor pointed out that he felt the filmmaker was manipulating him by encouraging viewers to take the point of view of King instead of the officer. One instructor noted how important it is for police instructors to help recruits more deeply understand the experience of community members who are fearful of police. Still another observed that this film may aim to persuade viewers about the need for police reform to limit excessive use of force. In film discussions like this one, there are no right or wrong answers. The use of film discussion gives law enforcement officers the opportunity to consider how perceptions of community members about the police are influenced by different types of media.

Such videos offer both the public and police a wide variety of ideas about what to expect in civilian-police interactions. For frontline police officers, awareness of being videorecorded is now a fundamental part of an officer's consciousness—and it may also impact their behavior. In one study, survey and interview data from veteran police officers in Canada found that nearly all could recall multiple instances of their on-duty conduct being videorecorded. Participating officers were asked to rate on a scale from 1 to 10 their level of awareness that their actions may be videorecorded. Fully half of the 231 frontline officers reported the maximum level of awareness. Awareness and concern that their conduct could be videorecorded by a citizen is always present in their consciousness.

For members of the public, the chronic stress resulting from exposure to videos of police misconduct may be associated with adaptive or maladaptive responses during encounters with police. For example, African American and Latinx adolescents who watch videos of police brutality have been shown to demonstrate more post-traumatic stress and depressive symptoms than those who do not view such videos. Viewing distressing videos featuring members of one's own racial-ethnic group is associated with poor mental health outcomes.

Create media. Media literacy instructional practices often include the use of student-created media to help students synthesize their learning and gain insights on the constructed nature of media messages. Only a small handful of APD police instructors had made videos to support the needs of their learners, but all were familiar with how to use their cellphones to create and share videos. Working with a partner, participants were asked to create a one-minute video using a "question-and-answer" format to explain an idea that they learned in the training program or another topic that they knew well. They had only 20 minutes to complete this activity, and yet almost all participants were able to complete the task within the allotted time, uploading their short videos to a digital bulletin board.

In some of these instructor-created videos, there was evidence that indicated emerging understandings of media literacy. One instructor answered the question, "What does it mean that 'All media messages are selective and incomplete'?" He explained,

All videos are little pictures of the person who's creating the video. Every person has an idea that they want to get across, certain feelings that they have about that video. Therefore, it's not the complete and total picture of all the information that they're trying to get through. All the information that you want to know is not always going to be there at the time you're making that video. The point of view comes from the fact that we all have a bias based on the things that we have seen and that we have maybe not truly understood everything.

Another police instructor made a video answering the question, "Why is media literacy important for APD instructors?" He explained,

It's a very important teaching tool for cadets coming to school today, to learn how to gain knowledge and give that knowledge to help cadets better understand, to help officers think critically, about not only their own values but someone else's viewpoints, as well as use it as a tool for instruction that can be used department wide. Media literacy… can be used in such a variety of topics.

LESSONS LEARNED

To the authors' knowledge, this course was the first program that offered police instructors formal training in the instructional practices of media literacy education. How will the train-the-trainer program affect their work in the classroom? Only time will tell, and it is expected that additional training will be necessary. Participants were asked to estimate how likely they were to use the media literacy instructional practices that were demonstrated in the program, using a 100-point scale. An average score of 85 reveals that most participants believe they will apply what they learned to their own classroom. In assessing the overall value of the professional development program, 32 percent of participants rated it "excellent," and 36 percent rated it "very good," while 22 percent rated it "good," and 10 percent rated it "fair." Most participants also indicated an interest in receiving additional training.

Police instructors appreciated the demonstration of a wide variety of hands-on classroom learning activities, noting that it was one of the first courses offered to in-service instructors to equip them with tools to help them teach. One participant noted, "It was relevant, interactive, and occasionally even challenging (without being confrontational)." They appreciated how viewing and discussing media content created opportunities for open conversations that increased participants' appreciation of and respect for divergent points of view. When asked to describe what they learned, participants noted that they learned how media can be used to further instruction and advance critical thinking, helping students learn and understand content. One participant noted, "I learned to be aware of the message the content is sending and to be aware of the audience receiving it." Another police trainer wrote, "Media literacy isn't a scary concept; it's a skill that anyone can learn and practice."

Living as they do in a media-saturated world, police instructors value the power of video to support and deepen student learning. But media literacy activities that make use of viewing and discussion strategies can help cultivate a new professional vision regarding the use of video that includes a heightened awareness of the constructed nature of media messages. When members of any professional group get a chance to develop new practices that are central to their work, professionalism improves.

The use of media literacy instructional practices to improve the professionalism of the workforce is an exciting new development in the field today. Police chiefs should acknowledge how media influence both officers' and community members' perceptions and interpretations of police professionalism. The authors recommend that police chiefs and police academy leaders give their workforce the opportunity to develop media literacy competencies. Police academy instructors should use media literacy instructional strategies to develop the communication and critical thinking skills of law enforcement officers so they can better understand and more effectively engage with the communities they serve. By supporting the training and lifelong learning needs of the workforce, it's possible to rebuild the bonds of trust between police and the people they serve and protect. ♡

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