



Santa Barbara, CA

# Public Records Requests for Social Media: How a free trial prepared the Santa Barbara Police Department for the inevitable

*When the Santa Barbara Police Department (SBPD) received a comprehensive public records request for all social media posts related to a gun buy-back event, it estimated it could take hours of scrolling, taking screenshots and printing pages of posts to respond manually. Fortunately, the department had recently activated a free trial of ArchiveSocial's automated social media archiving solution that captured a complete record of all the posts in a searchable, export-ready format. Thanks to proactive archiving, SBPD was able to respond quickly and confidently with very minimal effort.*

Santa Barbara, CA is a town renowned for its sunny beaches, picturesque marinas and Spanish Colonial homes lining the hills that divide the Pacific from the Santa Ynez Mountains. Often called "the American Riviera," Santa Barbara is an affluent, laid-back community, despite a crime rate slightly higher than the national average. SBPD works hard to fight crime and address local problems, but also to have a congenial relationship with local citizens. The force sponsors Explorer Post youth activities and teen art classes, offers self-defense classes and hosts ongoing "Coffee with a Cop" conversations at local cafes. Communication is a valued commodity at SBPD.

Sergeant Riley Harwood has worn many hats in his 23 years on the force — first as a police officer, and now as a public information professional and manager of a team that conducts community-oriented policing. As someone constantly in touch with the citizens the department serves, social media has become an invaluable tool for him.

Harwood deploys Nixle to send out press releases and information blasts, which link to the department's Facebook page. He also uses

Nextdoor, a community forum and alert system specific to different city neighborhoods; and in conjunction with City Hall, he sometimes uses Twitter. He says, "For a public information officer like me, social media has changed the whole landscape." He cites the value of being able to get his stories to constituents without always going through traditional media. Social media provides a platform for police to share information quickly and respond to tips from civilians, and it humanizes people's perceptions of law enforcement.

"I'm always looking for positive examples of good police work to share with the community, underscoring that these are real flesh-and-blood men and women doing a difficult job and sometimes doing it heroically," says Harwood. "Now, with social media, I have a gigantic audience I can connect with directly, and they share my information with other people."

## A Public Records Tool for Police Forces

Harwood has experienced first hand the challenges law enforcement faces — those that involve dangerous or stressful situations, and those that have more to do with ... paperwork. Of all the public records requests submitted to any department in the city of Santa Barbara, the police department racks up the most by far. Since under state law social media posts are subject to records requests just like any other kind of document, it's become critical for law enforcement and other public sector agencies to retain and archive social media for compliance and legal e-discovery.

Manual documentation of social media is time consuming and error prone. It puts agencies at the mercy of social media companies who are under no

obligation to preserve content, and of third-party posters who can delete their comments at any time. Documents produced using screenshots can also be easily edited, making them difficult to authenticate in court.

ArchiveSocial — a social media archiving service — solves those challenges by utilizing powerful technologies to record and archive customers' complete social media history down to the metadata. The automated archiving of agency posts and public comments lessens the time-consuming and error-prone burden of manually capturing and storing records. The dashboards enable simple management and centralized oversight of multiple accounts. Advanced filters make it easy to search for specific records quickly, and records are stored in their native format, making it easy to view and understand full conversations. Most critical, the software captures complete metadata to ensure legal compliance should a public records request come along — and it likely will.

"I heard about ArchiveSocial from our city's information services manager, so I connected and participated in their online webinar," Harwood says. "Interestingly, a request for public records occurred during our free trial period with ArchiveSocial ... the timing was perfect."

## Upholding the Law, Upholding Public Records Requests

In 2014, SBPD held a gun buy-back, an event Harwood says typically involves a degree of controversy. "We're kind of a liberal town, and there is definitely a political aspect to gun buy-backs," he says. "Some people like them, while others dislike them and think they're a waste of time, so there's that political discourse and debate going back and forth."

The event produced multiple photos that were posted on Facebook to an enormous response — both positive and negative — from the public. "It was probably the most complex thing that has occurred on our Facebook page," Harwood says. "Each photo generated a thread of comments. It was like the roots of a tree, branching out into these other threads."

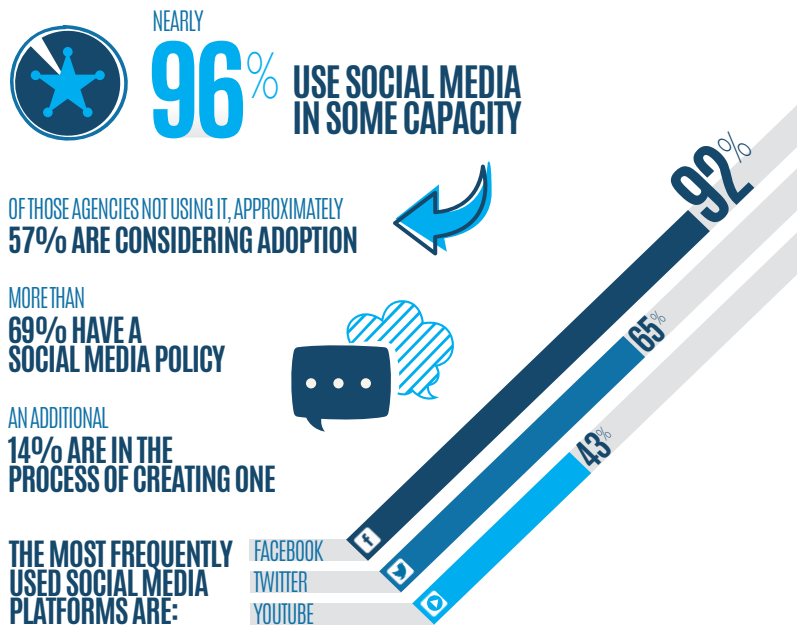
A Long Beach, CA law firm representing the National Rifle Association (NRA) frequently sends out public records requests to agencies conducting events of this nature, and Harwood suspected they might send one to SBPD. He was right. The firm submitted a comprehensive request for materials, including all emails and social media posts.

The emails alone added up to 100 pages, Harwood estimates, and as for the voluminous social media, ArchiveSocial saved him hours of laborious tasks. "It definitely would have been very difficult for me not to miss something. I'd be scrolling down, taking a screenshot, printing — and because these threads were so long, doing that over and over would be very time consuming."

For agencies entrusted with upholding the law, transparency and airtight legal compliance are nothing to leave to chance. Every state has

## Police Department Social Media Usage

ACCORDING TO A 2013 SOCIAL MEDIA SURVEY<sup>1</sup> OF U.S. POLICE DEPARTMENTS BY THE INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHIEFS OF POLICE:



different "sunshine" laws about public access to records and documents, along with penalties for failing to provide complete information. These things are key to government accountability and citizens' ability to find information they seek.

The request from the NRA attorneys happened to fall just a few days before the expiration of the department's free month trial with ArchiveSocial. "I just entered the search term 'buy-back.' It all popped right up and I was able to print and add it to the rest of the materials. It really made it quite easy in that circumstance and sold me on the utility of ArchiveSocial." The department has subscribed to the service ever since, and Harwood has been an evangelist for the ease and wisdom of using it in the public sector.

"Everyone I've talked to about ArchiveSocial agrees there's a need for it," Harwood says. "If you talk to law enforcement, which probably generates three-quarters of the public records requests for cities on a routine basis, we recognize it. Folks in other city departments who haven't received many public records requests may not quite see the urgency of it ... but they will when there's a lawsuit."

### ENDNOTE

1. [www.berkeleyside.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2013SurveyResults.pdf](http://www.berkeleyside.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/02/2013SurveyResults.pdf)

Sample an archive of your own social media at [archivesocial.com](http://archivesocial.com)

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