

Using Social Media for Missing Person Cases

*Limit misinformation & protect the privacy
of missing persons*



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Preface

This guide is designed for anyone who publishes, or plans to publish, Thunder Bay Police Service missing person media releases. This document is intended to be a resource provided by the Thunder Bay Police Service for the public to utilize at their discretion. The objective of this document is to assist the public in limiting the spread of misinformation, and protecting the privacy of missing persons once located. This guide focuses exclusively on the posting of missing person cases after a media release has been issued. This version of the guide was completed on April 28, 2018.



How to use this guide

This guide is divided into three parts: Publishing; monitoring; removing. Publishing briefly explains how the Thunder Bay Police Service pushes a missing person media release to the public after distribution to accredited news organizations. Monitoring examines how to address potential misinformation and common issues found in the comment sections on social media sites and news websites. Part Three, removing, addresses a person's right to be forgotten once they are located safely.

PART ONE: PUBLISHING

Once a missing person media release is issued, it is distributed to all accredited news outlets and journalists. A Thunder Bay Police Service media relations officer will publish the content of the media release to the Thunder Bay Police Service website and then to its various social media accounts in the following order: Facebook; Twitter; Snapchat.¹ This guide assumes, as a content

¹ When missing person is younger than 30 years old.

publisher, that your organization already determined how to best push content to social media in addition to your news platforms to maximize awareness. Therefore, this guide will go into greater depth in Part Two and Three.

Website (www.thunderbaypolice.ca)



Once a media release is issued, it will be added to the news section of the Thunder Bay Police Service website (www.thunderbaypolice.ca/news). Adding the media release to the Thunder Bay Police Service website will give it a url in the public domain. That url will be used to create posts and share on the Thunder Bay Police Service’s social media accounts.

A missing person will later be added to the ‘Currently Missing’ section of the service’s website (www.thunderbaypolice.ca/news/missing-persons/currently-missing) when one of the following conditions is met:

- A second news release is issued about the same missing person case
- The original media release is no longer on the front page of the site’s news section
- The person has been missing for one week.

A missing person will be moved to the Historical Missing Persons section of the service’s website (<https://www.thunderbaypolice.ca/news/missing-persons/historical-missing-persons>) after the case has been on the service’s currently missing section for one year.

PART TWO: MONITORING

The importance of publishing a missing person media release promptly and accurately is straight forward. The more people who see a missing person media release increases the likelihood relevant information will come forward and help investigators locate the missing person safely.

Less straight forward is the importance of monitoring and, when necessary, responding to comments made about a missing person. Comments on Twitter and Snapchat can be responded to, but there is no administrative power allowing intervention. This complicates the approach of addressing inappropriate commentary on those platforms.

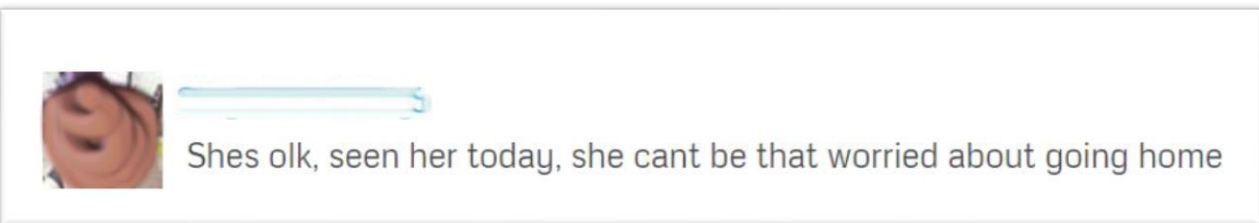
This section of the guide examines common comments made to Facebook pages. This section aims to explain how some of these comments can have a negative impact on a search for a missing person and provides a suggested framework for responding or managing such comments. Because administrative powers over Facebook page are similar to that of most websites, this section of the guide can also be applied to website comments.



Allowable commentary

The Thunder Bay Police Service tries to limit Facebook comments about a missing person to well-wishes. Comments that “hope for a safe outcome” or show similar sentiment are not hidden or deleted. These comments are not harmful, and help push a missing person media release to more Facebook news feeds. Most other kinds of comments risk having a negative impact. The most common kinds of negative comments are categorized below.

Making reports via Facebook



The Thunder Bay Police Service does not accept reports via social media, but sometimes users will attempt to provide information about a missing person on a Facebook post.

SOLUTION

The Thunder Bay Police Service deletes these comments and replaces them with a statement from the administrator of the Facebook page stating: Reports cannot be accepted via social media, if you have information that could help investigators please call police at 684-1200 or contact Crime Stoppers at 1-800-222-8477, online at www.tipsubmit.com. Moderators are urged to contact the Thunder Bay Police Service via the non emergency line so that information can be forwarded to an investigator.

Speculative comments

Facebook users, possibly in an effort to assist investigators, may guess the whereabouts of a missing person. These kinds of speculative comments may be well-meaning, but others may read them as statements of fact. In the example above, a user appears to make a guess based on a missing person's age. The comment was deleted, but later other comments asked about sightings at the CLE. In this case blind speculation appeared to have created a rumour.



Sometimes these speculative comments may also contain inappropriate and insensitive assumptions about a missing person. In addition to spreading misinformation, this speculation can spawn off-topic and inappropriate conversations. The comment above assumed a missing person was a drug user. The comment was deleted, but comments like this often lead to a back-and-forth dialogue that insensitively discuss a missing person's perceived lifestyle.

SOLUTION

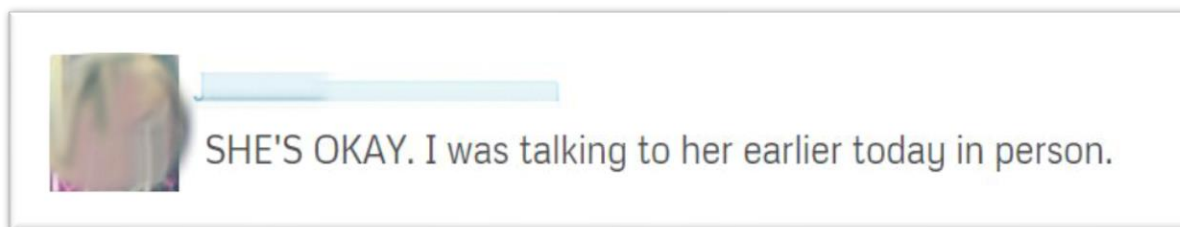
The Thunder Bay Police Service deletes speculative comments. A page administrator may also add a comment stating "All speculative comments will be deleted. Thank you for your understanding and cooperation." If comments appear to be insensitive the administrator may add "... insensitive and off-topic comments and conversations will be deleted. Please be respectful with your comments." Users who make repeated speculative comments, or appear to be purposely attempting to start insensitive and inappropriate dialogue about a missing person may be banned from the Thunder Bay Police Service's Facebook page.

Private Information

Comments will sometimes provide private information. The private information may or may not be directly linked to the missing person. The publication of private information is never appropriate.

SOLUTION All comments referencing private information are immediately deleted. A moderator will add a comment requesting that users refrain from offering private information, even if the private information is intended to assist with an investigation.

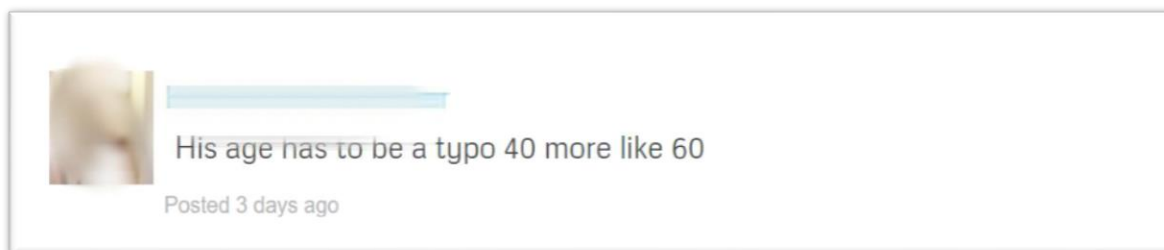
False/ Premature Information



Some comments may declare a missing person has been found safely prior to Thunder Bay Police Service confirmation. There have been cases where such comments were found to be accurate, but there have been many cases in which such comments were not. An accurate comment about a missing person being located provides little benefit to the community, while inaccurate comments can be harmful to an ongoing search. Because of this the Thunder Bay Police Service treats all such comments as potentially false.

SOLUTION Any comment declaring a person has been located safely is treated the same as a speculative comment. In addition to the “speculative comments may be deleted” users may also be reminded that a missing person investigation remains open until the Thunder Bay Police Service states otherwise. A moderator may remind users to call police or contact Crime Stoppers if they have information that could assist in locating a missing person.

Trolls

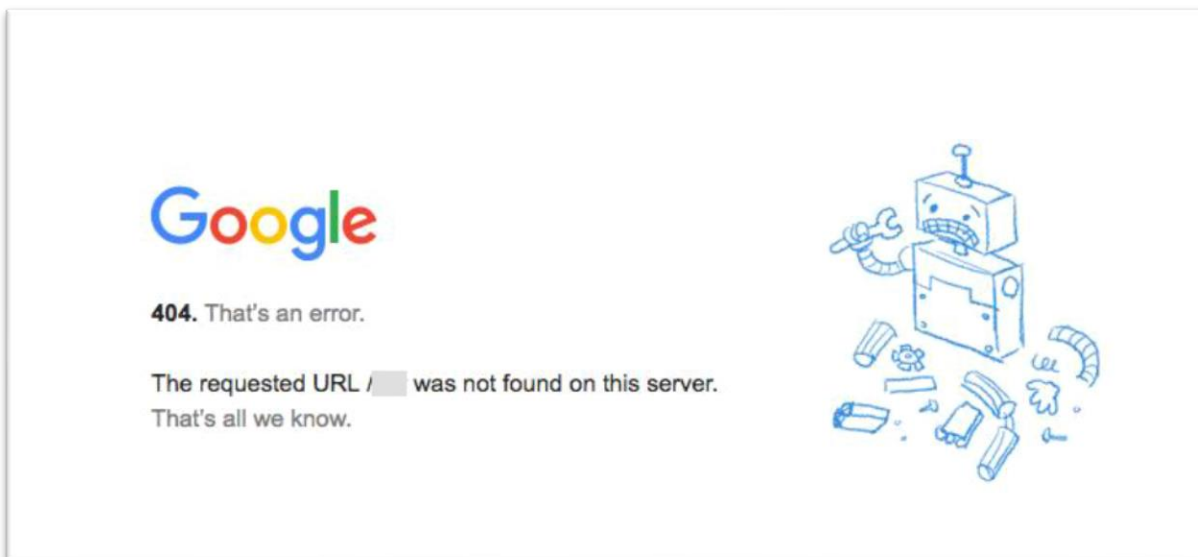


An Internet troll is defined as a person who sows discord on the Internet by starting quarrels or upsetting people by posting inflammatory, extraneous or off-topic messages with the intent of provoking other users into an emotional response. Despite the seriousness of a missing person

case, online trolls may still target such posts for harassment. In the example image above, a Facebook user mocks the appearance of a missing person.

SOLUTION The Thunder Bay Police Service has a zero-tolerance policy when it comes to trolls. Inappropriate and insensitive comments are deleted, and the user is banned from the page. This ban is permanent. A comment indicating “all insensitive posts will be deleted,” may also be added as a comment to remind users that inappropriate dialogue is not tolerated.

PART THREE: REMOVAL



When the subject of a missing person case is found safely, and a media release was previously issued, an updated media release will be distributed. The media release will request images of the missing person be removed from social media.

The Thunder Bay Police Service then takes the following steps:

- STEP 1** Delete the original missing person media release from the Thunder Bay Police Service website.
- STEP 2** Remove social media posts and delete the photographs of the missing person.
- STEP 3** Post a message stating “(Missing Persons Name) has been located. Thank you for your assistance. Please kindly remove his/ her images from your social media.” This message is removed no later than 24 hours after its posting.

Removal of dated missing person media releases is important. Some of the potential issues that may arise from failure to remove a dated missing person media release include:

- Disregarding a person’s right to be forgotten
- Creating confusion as to the status of a missing person case
- Continuation of sharing of now inaccurate information

Purging website database



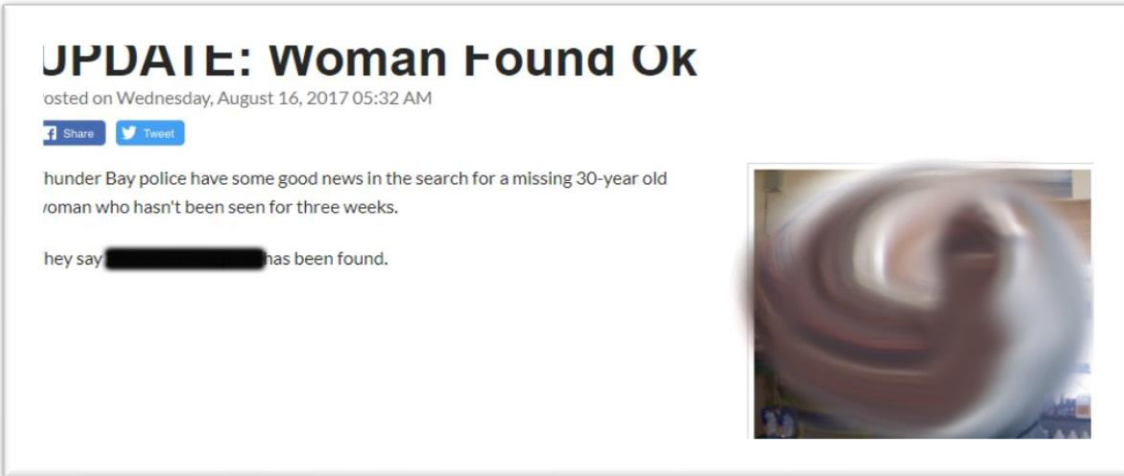
A missing person media release includes personal information and a photograph. These personal details are released because the safety of the individual is believed to be at risk. When found, there is no longer a concern for safety and restoring the person’s right to privacy becomes a priority.

This image shows a missing person media release issued in September of 2016 that could be found online as of March 2018. This missing person’s name, age and photograph remain on social media and populate in Google searches because the administrator of a webpage failed to delete the original media release from the

website’s database. Along with this person’s right to be forgotten being ignored, this lingering media release also leads to confusion about the missing person’s status. An updated media release indicating the missing person has been found was published, yet the original media release continues to circulate.

Publishing updates with a plan to expire

Deleting missing person media releases from a website’s database is important, but so too is deleting the updated media release. In the example below, a website chose to include the person’s name and photograph with the media release confirming the missing person had been located. This updated missing person includes the name, age and image of the previously missing person. While the deletion of the original media release avoids the confusion of the prior example, this example still violates the person’s right to be forgotten.



When an updated media release is published, the continued use of a person's photograph is strongly discouraged. The use of the person's name may be necessary to ensure the public is aware the case has been resolved, but this information should eventually be expired. The Thunder Bay Police Service includes the name of a missing person in their updated media release for up to 24 hours. After that time the updated media release is deleted from the website's database and all social media platforms just as the original was.

Clearing the Cache

When a url is created, Google will index and cache a preview of it. Facebook will do the same when a url is shared. This means that the image and headline of a missing person media release will exist online for a period of time after its deletion.



This is another reason why replacing an original media release with the updated media release is discouraged. Instead, webpage administrators are encouraged to delete the original url and create a new url with an update that does not include the person's image.

The top image shows a missing person media release posted on a news website that was shared to a Facebook group in May of 2018. The url was not shared by the page's administrator, nor was it a shared post from the webpage's official Facebook page. Therefore the name and photograph of the previously missing teen remain online as of

March 2018 despite the media release being updated. This image is present because it has been cached by Facebook .

When a url is cached, its original headline and image will be displayed even after it has been updated. To ensure the updated headline and image are used, webpage administrators should run the url through the Facebook debugger.



This second photograph shows how a url will be displayed by Facebook if it is shared after it has been debugged. Unlike Google, Facebook does not dynamically update its cache. This means cached image of a missing person will remain on any url post shared prior to debugging. Because of this, it is a best practice to run the url through Facebook's debugger, delete the original url, and then create a new url to host the updated media release (without the subject's image attached).

Following this, page administrators are strongly encouraged to request their social media audience delete the original urls from their own social media accounts.

Using the Facebook Debugger

go to: <https://developers.facebook.com/tools/debug>. Place the url of the article you wish to debug in the url field of the debugger and click "debug." Once debugged, continue to click "scrape again" button until the link preview appears as intended.