Abstract – This article will go into look at the Pulse Nightclub Shooting from the perspective of the Public Information Officer and determine what could have been done better to inform the public at large, the media, and other official agencies that were helping in aiding the Orlando Police Department. During the emergency, a lot of communication was done via social media and while the Orlando Police Department did all they could to control the situation and the message as it was sent out, a lot of things had happened in 6 hours prior to the shooting as well as during the days after the shooting that made their control and management of the crisis a struggle. Within this study, alternative options will be presented to find ways to manage crises like this better in the future.

Overview of the Crisis

On June 12, 2016, just after last call at 2am, an American born man named Omar Mateen walked into the Pulse Nightclub on Orange Street in Orlando, Florida, armed with a Sig Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle and a 9mm Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol and started shooting (Wiki, 2017).

It was at 2:35am, a half an hour after the shooting began, that the shooter started to make calls to 911, according to the FBI (NPR, 2016).
"I wanna let you know, I'm in Orlando and I did the shootings," the gunman told the operator during this 50-second call, according to a transcript released by the FBI.

"What's your name?" the operator asked.

"My name is I pledge of allegiance to Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State."

A short time after calling 911, Mateen started to speak to the hostage negotiators with the Orlando Police Department, identifying himself as “an Islamic Soldier” and threatening to detonate explosives – including a car bomb and a suicide vest (NPR, 2016).

After a three-hour standoff with the Orlando Police Department, police crashed into the building with an armored vehicle and stun grenades and killed Mateen (CNN, 2016). Mateen ended up killing 49 people and wounded 53 others who were at the gay nightclub for Latin night.

The Pulse Nightclub Shooting will go down in history as not only the deadliest mass shooting by a single shooter, but also the deadliest incident of violence against LGBT people in United States history. It was the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States since the September 11 attacks in 2001.

**Communication Prior to the Crisis**

Prior to the crisis, a different one occurred altogether. Christina Grimmie, a 22-year-old former contestant on *The Voice*, was shot and killed Friday night (the night before the Pulse shooting) while signing autographs after her concert with the band Before You Exit at The Plaza Live. Kevin Loibl opened fire on her then fatally shot himself after Christina’s brother, Marcus, tackled him to the ground (Rolling Stone, 2016).
This shooting caused all major media outlets to flock to Orlando, Florida, to cover this event. These major news outlets, on top of the local news outlets and the news media outlets of surrounding cities (Daytona, Jacksonville, Tampa, Pensacola, etc) coming to Orlando to cover the shooting of a young up and coming music sensation saturated the city.

Aside from that, the Orlando Police Department Public Information Officers were on scene to manage them and handle the shooting and investigation as well. In order to coordinate everything that was going on, on top of the extra media outlets that were now involved, it was an all hands-on deck situation.

**Communication During the Crisis**

During the shooting, Michelle Guido of the Orlando Police Department (OPD) took lead responsibility of communicating with the media and the public at large who was asking questions and wanting to know what was going on. She and all other agencies who were responding guided folks to the OPD Twitter account for instant updates of information, when media briefings were going to be held, and shared other information from the other agencies from this account as well.

Media Briefings were held at Media Staging areas away from the club for the safety of the media outlets who were responding, with as much information as the OPD was able to release as well. OPD was quite lucky that this incident happened when it did, as most of Orlando was asleep.

However, many people who were inside the club during the hostage portion of this crisis were also tweeting out information, messaging loved ones, and trying to communicate what was happening inside the club. A lot of misinformation was being shared on social media for those
who were awake and online at this time of the night – including media producers who were preparing for their morning newscasts.

Communication After the Crisis

At 5:15 a.m., police reported the shooter was down. A police tweet confirmed Mateen’s death at 5:53 a.m., just before sunrise Sunday morning (NPR, 2016).

The chaos of the crisis didn’t slow down after the death of the shooter though. In fact, the opposite occurred: the chaos escalated. The media frenzy increased, wanting to know more and more details on what happened, what caused the shooter to attack those who were inside the club, names of those who were killed and who were injured, names of those officers who were involved in the shooting, and so much more.

Getting information from the OPD wasn't enough for them anymore either. The media turned to the medical examiner, the mayor’s office, the attorney general, the hospitals treating the victims, the county and the city for information on how they were handling things pertaining to the Pulse Nightclub shooting. Some politicians took this as a chance to step out and speak on their own behalf and make statements, sometimes offering up incorrect information in press conferences and statements about how victims were and what types of investigations were being done as well.
The Crisis Response

The overall response to the Pulse Nightclub Shooting followed the traditional law enforcement guidelines and despite previous events hampering staffing was solid. Access to the Public Information Officer was limited due to the severity of the crisis, but that should be expected given the crisis. As soon as information was available to be shared with the media, it was – whether in person during an interview, or via social media (Twitter, specifically) so that all who needed to be kept up to date was.

OPD was also able to continue to keep the public and the media up to date throughout the process of the investigation and even after. OPD was the main point of communication for anything pertaining to the investigation, while other public information officers within other organizations (IE: the PIO for the medical examiner) took over being the point of contact for their organizations after the height of the crisis had passed.

The Evaluation of the Crisis Response

The initial response to the shooting was done well, but it wasn’t without its flaws. While OPD did the best job it could by being the leading agency and the place where media outlets should go for the most accurate information, inaccurate information still made its way on air. Some of that may have come from taking tweets claiming to be from victims inside the club, sharing information that the suspect said he had explosives. It’s hard to say.

Another challenge that OPD had to deal with was dealing with the media as a whole. With so many media outlets in the city after the shooting death of The Voice star Christina Grimmie, OPD didn’t have a chance to really get themselves situated before the big dogs came barking and demanding things that only the big media outlets do. They were already stretched thin as well, having to take some of their staff away from the Grimmie case to work the Pulse
Shooting. Being shorthanded in not one but two shooting crises makes for complete coverage of both almost impossible.

Plus, the big media tend to have less professional courtesy. One example specifically with the Sunshine Law here in Florida. The Florida Public Records Law, also known as the Sunshine Law, is as open as it can get. Unless it is specifically exempted by the Florida Legislature, it’s open record and therefore can be released to anyone who requests that record. (MyFloridaLegal.com) Given that the suspect in this shooting died in an officer involved shooting, the names of the officers were kept out of the media. The media had to request the names of the officers involved, and per the Sunshine Law, they had to release them.

The major media outlets started hounding the officers to speak on camera about the shooting, which they are unable to do as it was still under investigation. So, they went one step further: the media started to hound the family and friends of the officers involved. One went so far as to stalk one of the officer’s daughters at her school. OPD finally had enough of what they were doing, and called one of the major outlets out by name on Twitter and started a Twitter war between themselves and the media on what they were doing.

One Major Weak Spot – Having to deal with one crisis is hard enough, but when you have a second, larger one happen just 4 hours later you need to be able to handle both or have the ability to call on people who can help. Having a crisis communications team is critical in situations like this. The more people who can participate in this team, the better.

How to Improve That Weak Spot – Build that crisis communications team, and make sure you have plenty of people who are cross trained and able to do just about anything and everything you could possibly need them to do.

If it’s another person to answer the phone, then get someone to answer the phone. If it’s another person to field questions on where media staging will be, then get someone to find a
place for media staging and have them answer those questions. If it’s another set of eyes on Social Media, then get someone to start monitoring social media for you. During the Public Information Officer Symposium, Michelle Guido of the Orlando Police Department spoke about how she was the only one posting to their Twitter account. Not having a second set of eyes on Twitter to see what else people were saying hurt them, and I’m certain helped spread the misinformation that made it on air on numerous news stations.

Another example of this happened when the public information officers were setting up a press conference and were pulled away from the open microphones for some prep questions. While they had stepped away, an unexpected politician stepped up and started speaking to the gathered crowd. He offered condolences to the families of the slain, and spoke out against the suspect, then started answering questions that he had no right to be answering. The ladies who were supposed to be running the press conference were flabbergasted and didn’t know how to pull him away from the microphone, or handle the situation.

The Florida Association of Public Information Officers has a PIO Deployment Team that can provide support to localities that require additional public communications capability during an emergency. This was utilized during the airport shooting in Ft. Lauderdale, but wasn’t utilized during the Pulse Nightclub Shooting. This is one way the mistakes made due to lack of help could have been handled better.

**Rationale of Crisis Evaluation**

This crisis had many things go right and many things go wrong in how it was handled. After sitting through a presentation done at the Florida Association of Public Information Officers PIO Symposium in January where four PIOs from Orlando who worked the Pulse Nightclub Shooting incident, I learned that even they believe that they did a lot of things wrong.
Looking at how things unfolded on air with the media, how things were picked up from social media and how aggressive things got when OPD felt the only way they could defend their position was to call out media outlets via social media outlets, it’s obvious that a lot of things were missed and the crews that were working were overwhelmed and exhausted. They were trying to continue to do the correct things and be professional even when others were not doing so, and snapped when things got to be too much and their professional courtesy requests were not being met.

I feel that this happened because there was just too much going on in Orlando that weekend. Trying to handle not one but two major crises can stretch even the best of agencies thin, and with resources being tied to two different high profile shootings where media and the public are demanding to know what happened, not to mention how other major law enforcement agencies were now involved given the magnitude of this shooting… it’s exhausting just to think about. These men and women lived it. They needed help, and they should have reached out to nearby cities and asked neighboring agencies for aid in both of these crises.

**Conclusion**

The Pulse Nightclub Shooting will go down in history as not only the deadliest mass shooting by a single shooter, but also the deadliest incident of violence against LGBT people in United States history. Since the shooter pledged his allegiance to ISIS Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi of the Islamic State, it will also go down as the deadliest terrorist attack in the United States since the September 11 attacks in 2001 (NPR, 2016).

Orlando Police Department did a fantastic job overall in commanding the situation and controlling the information flow during this crisis, despite being spread thin and having a different one less than 6 hours prior. They kept the public informed via Twitter during the chaos of the
shooting and the stand-off, then continued to keep the public informed via press briefings and media conferences in the days after.

A lot of things have changed since this shooting: a country came together and started fundraisers to find a way to show the LGBTQ community that they stood with them, the fight about gun laws and gun safety fired up once again, and information about the FBI investigating the shooter was leaked to the press showing. Orlando Police Department continued the investigation, answering questions, and moving forward to help take care of the surviving victims while watching the major media outlets fade from view as the left the Sunshine State.

The PIO’s who worked the shooting said they learned a lot of lessons during this crisis, when they spoke to us during the PIO Symposium. They learned a lot of things to do differently, and by telling us about it, we learned how to do it differently too. More hands-on deck, ask for help, take control no matter what, correct the incorrect information, and own the message when it comes to details about the shooting. We’ll consider it a lesson learned in multiple crises and prepare for the next one.
Annotated Bibliography


Statewide Public Information Officer Deployment Team, Florida Association of Public Information Officers, Florida Fire Chief’s Association https://www.ffca.org/florida-association-of-public-information-officers

Open Government – The Sunshine Law, Florida Office of the Attorney General, MyFloridaLegal.com
On June 12, 2016, a man who pledged his allegiance to the leader of the Islamic State of Iraq, walked into the Pulse Nightclub on Orange Street in Orlando, Florida, and opened fire on the patrons killing 49 people and wounding 53 others in a terrorist attack/hate crime after a three-hour standoff with police.

That man is 29-year-old Omar Mateen, an American born Muslim from Fort Pierce, Florida. The shooting happened just after 2am Saturday morning, shortly after last call was made. That was when Mateen walked into the club armed with a Sig Sauer MCX semi-automatic rifle and a 9mm Glock 17 semi-automatic pistol and started shooting.

We now have a timeline for the events of the shooting. They are as follows:

At 2:45 am, Mateen called a television station, claiming to be the shooter and that he was carrying out the shooting on behalf of ISIS and began speaking in Arabic.

Police hostage negotiators spoke with Mateen by telephone three times between 2:48 a.m. and 3:27 a.m. He claimed during one of the calls that he had bombs strapped onto him. He also claimed that he “had a vehicle in the parking lot with enough explosives to take out city blocks.”

At 3:58 a.m., police announced to the public that there was a shooting at the club, and that there were multiple injuries.

At 4:21 a.m., eight of the hostages escaped after police had removed an air conditioning unit from an exterior wall.

At approximately 4:29 a.m., Mateen told negotiators that he planned to strap explosive vests to four hostages, strategically place them in different corners of the building, and detonate them in 15 minutes. Police officers then decided to end negotiations and prepare to blow their way in.

No shots were heard between the time Mateen stopped exchanging gunfire with the first responders and 5:02 a.m., when police breached the building’s wall.

At 5:07 a.m., fourteen SWAT officers successfully breached the building when a policeman drove a BearCat armored vehicle through a wall in the northern bathroom. They then used two flashbangs to distract Mateen, and shot at him. The breach drew Mateen out into the hallway, and at 5:14 a.m., he engaged the officers. He was shot eight times and killed in the resulting shoot out, which involved at least eleven officers who fired a total of about 150 bullets.

He was reported “down” at 5:17 a.m.

At 5:53 a.m., the Orlando police posted on Twitter, “Pulse Shooting: The shooter inside the club is dead.” Thirty hostages were freed during the police operation. The survivors were searched by police for guns and explosives.

As of right now, 47 of the 49 victims’ families have been notified. We are not going to release the names of the victims until all families have been notified. Names will be released then.

The investigation is ongoing, and we appreciate your patience.
Social Media Post 1 – Twitter

“#PulseShooting Update #5 – Victim’s Resource Center is up and running. If you need help, call (INSERT NUMBER HERE) We are here for you.

Social Media Post 2 – Facebook

Pulse Shooting Update 5 – Our Victim’s Resource Center is up and running. If you need help, call us or come by. We are here for you and want to help you find some peace. Together, we can stand united against violence like this. (below would be a graphic created with details on the resource center including an address, phone number, and email)

Social Media Post 3 – Twitter

#PulseShooting Update #7 – Tonight’s Prayer Vigil is still happening! Wear your rainbows and join us at Universal Citywalk. They said parking is free for attendees.

Social Media Post 4 – Twitter

#PulseShooting Update #9 – One Week Later. We still remember everything. 49 new souls dancing in Heaven right now. We will miss you!