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Government Information Quarterly

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/govinfLeveraging social media to achieve a community policing agenda[☆]Christine B. Williams^{a,*}, Jane Fedorowicz^a, Andrea Kavanaugh^b, Kevin Mentzer^c,
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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Agenda setting theory
Social media
Community policing
Police
Law enforcement
Data analytics

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the communication behavior and engagement strategies in the bilateral use of social media between law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve. It advances existing work by studying municipal level government actors in a new communications environment where social media now play an important part. Grounded in agenda setting theory, our analysis identifies police departments' social media issue priorities, analyzes the responses of their audiences to those communications, and directly compares followers' own conversation priorities with the police agenda. Our data set includes all the content from the Facebook and Twitter accounts of five similarly sized and demographically situated police departments in the U.S., plus all the tweets and posts from the followers or friends responding to those accounts over a 90-day period. We performed both manual coding and machine cluster analysis to elicit major threads of conversation. In addition to the data analytics, we conducted interviews with the five police departments to understand the similarities and differences in agenda priorities resulting from their social media goals and use.

The study shows the priorities that comprise the police agenda, identifies both similarities and differences in what their audiences communicate among themselves about most frequently in the public safety domain relative to the police agenda, and finds evidence of positive response from the public to some of the agenda priorities communicated by the police. Our data also reveal that police are using social media interactively, which could, over time, advance community policing goals. The paper concludes by considering the implications of these findings for law enforcement and community policing and suggests directions for future research on agenda setting in this new media environment.

1. Introduction

Social media use by police departments has diffused widely and rapidly. Police social media use aims to reach the public, which includes both individuals (i.e., community residents) and organizations (e.g., peer police departments, media, and community groups). Most notably, social media has emerged as important for responding to crises (e.g., the Manchester, UK arena bombing,¹ Cleveland Facebook

murder² and Orlando nightclub shooting³). However, law enforcement agencies still are experimenting with how to craft content, such as messages aimed at informing the community (notification) of events, rather than with involving citizens (interacting), connecting with the public (relationship building), or mobilizing the community (Edlins & Brainard, 2016; Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

While academic work has examined social media in private sector organizations, scant academic or practice-based work has rigorously

[☆] An earlier version of this paper appears in the Proceedings of the 2015 Annual Meeting of the American Political Science Association, San Francisco, CA, September 3–6.

This project was supported by a seed grant [BCC-SBE/HER 1338471] awarded to Bentley (led by Williams and Fedorowicz) as part of the Innovative Broadband Data Project, a partnership with the NSF, University of Iowa, the Arizona State University School of Public Affairs and Center for Policy Informatics. Bentley University also provided support for the project under a Thought Leadership Network grant. Special thanks to Gaurav Shah and David Oury whose center and lab provided file processing and data analytics support, and to Ludan Zhang for her clerical assistance with this project.

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¹ <http://www.bbc.com/news/uk-england-manchester-40010366>.

² <http://www.newsweek.com/facebook-killing-cleveland-steve-stephens-stevie-steve-elderly-man-murder-585348>.

³ <http://miami.cbslocal.com/2016/06/12/horrific-mass-shooting-in-orlando-unfolds-through-social-media>.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.giq.2018.03.001>

Received 23 September 2016; Received in revised form 4 March 2018; Accepted 5 March 2018
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investigated non-crisis management patterns of appropriation and use among police departments. Police surveys suggest that most departments lack specific goals to guide developing social media strategies as well as to inform how to measure the success of social media efforts (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016). Further, while news reports underscore that emergency responders disseminate information using social media, we found little evidence of research that examines how police departments take advantage of social media or text analytics tools to assess how their audience responds to police department communications. Despite widespread recognition of social media's potential to support community policing⁴ and a desire to leverage social media in that effort, many law enforcement agencies lack knowledge, training, time and financial resources to embrace new technologies quickly and to adapt to new patterns of use among stakeholders.

Given this limited understanding about how local law enforcement can analyze and leverage social media most effectively, we conducted a mixed methods study to identify and explain messaging patterns and community reaction to police social media usage. As described below, we ground our study of local policing and social media communications in agenda-setting theory. Understanding the interplay between police departments and their communities is the first step in the process of moving local issues and problems from the public agenda to a policy agenda whereby decision makers assess and respond to them (Birkland, 2007; Dearing & Rogers, 1996). Our study adds value to this discourse by examining whether social media can help establish and communicate a public agenda. To do so, we conducted interviews with five police departments and gathered social media data from Facebook and Twitter tied to those same five municipalities to garner understanding of how social media is used by local police departments to inform and respond to stakeholders as an agenda setting forum.

This article reports the baseline results of our mix-methods study of local policing and social media. We triangulate across quantitative analysis of actual tweets and Facebook posts and qualitative data obtained from interviews with the key informants responsible for social media at each of the five departments to glean insight into (1) whether and what agenda police generate in their social media messages; (2) evaluate the response to the police messages by the audience consuming them; and (3) determine the match between the emergent local police social media agenda and the topics that emerge in their audience's own conversations about police. Our self-report data from a subsequent survey of one of these police department's Twitter followers offers additional insights and a means to compare our methodological approach with correlational methods employed in traditional agenda setting studies. Our work provides a ground truth view of social media use, necessary for future research to glean insight into the power of social media to amplify local policing's impact on communities. Our objective then is to assess whether social media can be used to set and communicate a public agenda.

We begin by providing an overview of research on law enforcement and social media use. Next, we introduce agenda setting theory to explain potential patterns of police department social media use. Then, we describe our mixed methods of social media use by five local police departments and their audiences, and finally, results of social media use patterns found in this study. We conclude with a discussion of study results, limitations and future directions.

2. Literature review

Over time, social media interactions may help establish or enhance

⁴ Community policing is a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies, which support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques, to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues, such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime." http://www.cops.usdoj.gov/html/dispatch/january_2008/nugget.html.

relationships between local police departments and stakeholders as online exchanges develop patterns of shared interests and understandings. In this section, we describe extant work on social media use by police to identify opportunities for developing a richer theoretical understanding of the interplay between local police use of social media and their interaction with stakeholders.

2.1. Social media use by police

We focus on two social media platforms: Twitter and Facebook. We do so because Twitter and Facebook, with the types of content they facilitate sharing (e.g., news, updates, comments, photos), represent the most commonly used social media platforms across United States police departments (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2014).

Twitter and Facebook have been widely adopted by police departments in the U.S. A 2014 nationwide survey of social media use⁵ by 500 U.S. law enforcement agencies reported that 95.4% use Facebook, followed by Twitter (66.4%) and YouTube (38.5%) (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2014). In a 2016 survey by the same association (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2016), notification of public safety concerns tops the list of social media uses (91%) followed by community outreach and citizen engagement (89%), public relations (86%) and notification of non-crime (traffic) issues (86%).

While widely adopted, evidence suggests that police departments operate with relatively lean social media budgets, which may hinder their effectiveness. Edlins and Brainard (2016) suggest resource and policy shortcomings explain inconsistent patterns of change in social media behaviors exhibited by the top ten U.S. police departments between 2011 and 2012. Adapting to new trends is the top barrier to successful police department social media use, followed by measuring the impact of social media and training personnel on its effective use. Social media policies are still evolving (11% in process; 9% lacking) and only 33% have identified measurable goals for the successful employment of social media resources. Many anecdotal compilations of social media practices and performance corroborate these patterns (cf. connectedcops.net and the European COMPOSITE project (Denef, Kaptein, Bayerl, & Ramirez, 2012)).

As much as lean budgets, some evidence suggests that context and path dependencies lead to differences in communication strategies across agencies (Meijer & Thaens, 2013; Yavuz & Welch, 2014). Variation in the amount and frequency of police-related social media activity can be a function of citizens' age and education (Ruddell & Jones, 2013) as well as citizen interests (selective attention) and features of the communication (van de Velde, Meijer, & Homburg, 2014). Citizens primarily redistribute what government agencies or police departments disseminate on social media, with crime and incident reports predominating (Heverin & Zach, 2010; van de Velde et al., 2014). In a recent U.S. study of large municipal police departments, Huang et al. (2016) find that the topics of Facebook messages posted by police departments are primarily about crime, traffic, and other announcements. For many government agencies and/or police departments, this variation in the amount and frequency of social media activity is often a function of both external factors (constituency demand characteristics such as urbanization (Thackeray, Neiger, Smith, & Van Wagenen, 2012) or population (de Guzman and Jones, 2012; Oliveira and Welch, 2013; Yavuz & Welch, 2014)) and internal capacities such as bureaucratization (Oliveira and Welch, 2013 and Yavuz & Welch, 2014), organization size and resources including budget and staff (Kavanaugh et al., 2012), superiors' resistance, managerial support and training (Briones, Jin, Kuch, Liu, & Jin, 2011).

⁵ Results reported here are from the 2014 survey, which corresponds to the year of our data collection. Newer results from 2016 are available, reporting very similar statistics. (See IACP, 2016).

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