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Following the lead of Barack Obama, CNN, and Ashton Kutcher: Police departments’ use of Twitter

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An increasing number of police departments are using Twitter to communicate with the public. As with any emerging communications technology, there is considerable variation in the usage of this medium. This study reports the results of a content analysis designed to determine how police departments are using Twitter.

**Methods**

**Sample/Procedure**

The largest 61 PDs (based on UCR rank) in the United States were examined; 22 had Twitter pages. All tweets posted by these departments over a 6-month period (May 15 to November 15, 2009) were collected. This resulted in a sample of 3,512 cases.

Tweets were coded, using a latent analysis approach, by one of two research teams, comprised of 2 coders each. Reliability analyses revealed 91% initial agreement for tweet clarity and 84% agreement for content.

**Results**

**Frequency of Communication**

There was a mean tweet rate of 1.54 tweets/day. However, this number was inflated by outliers. The median rate was 0.50/per day, and the range was from .04 to 10.13/day. We failed to find a relationship between department size and tweet rate.

**Clarity**

The majority (91%) of the messages were coded as clear, indicating that most of the PD tweets were easily understood.

**Hyperlink**

Nearly half (46%) of the messages contained hyperlinks. Common hyperlinks directed followers to news releases and media images.

**Number of Followers**

Bivariate analyses revealed a significant relationship between the number of followers and number of tweets. However, the relationship was not significant when using the standardized measure. This finding is likely due to the small sample size (N=22), as the correlation was quite strong (.214). The presence of a Twitter logo also failed to achieve significance. This may also be the result of limited statistical power.

**Conclusions**

This exploratory study revealed PDs are using Twitter to communicate a wide range of messages. Trends among the most active departments suggest some are using Twitter in a manner consistent with a community policing perspective.

While Twitter is being used to increase awareness, much of the communication appears to be “one-way.” The limited length of Tweets may prohibit true interaction with the community. Other social networking sites may be better suited to meeting this goal. Future research should explore the use of alternative social networking sites and identify best practices for police departments use of social media.