

Apr 20th, 1:00 PM - 2:00 PM

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Mari Sakiyama
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Deborah K. Shaffer
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Joel D. Lieberman
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

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Repository Citation

Sakiyama, Mari; Shaffer, Deborah K.; and Lieberman, Joel D., "Facebook and the police: Communication in the social networking era" (2011). *Graduate Research Symposium (GCUA) (2010 - 2017)*. 5.
https://digitalscholarship.unlv.edu/grad_symposium/2011/april20/5

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Facebook and the Police: Communication in the Social Networking Era

Mari Sakiyama, Deborah Koetzle Shaffer, and Joel D. Lieberman
Department of Criminal Justice, University of Nevada Las Vegas

Abstract

An increasing number of police departments are using Facebook 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 Facebook.

Introduction

Police Department Communication

Community policing has become a widely adopted philosophy utilized by police departments (PDs) around the United States and internationally. The ultimate goal of community policing is crime prevention, which is viewed as a collaborative effort between police and citizens. An essential component of the community policing perspective is expanded direct public communication. Recently, PDs have started to capitalize on Web 2.0 social media tools such as Facebook (FB) to increase community interactions.

Facebook

FB has become a widely adopted social networking tool used by over 500 million active users. FB users can post and view messages from individuals or groups of interest. In addition, media such as photos and videos can be attached to messages by the use of "links." Links direct users to other FB pages or external sites such as official PD or news agency webpages. Users (known as "followers") can comment on messages and can indicate they "like" specific messages.

Current Study

The current study analyzes the content and frequency of police FB posts. In addition, it examines factors related to follower responsiveness to messages.

Methods

Sample/Procedure

The largest 61 PDs (based on UCR rank) in the United States were examined; 23 had FB pages (initially 27 PDs but 4 were inactive). All FB messages posted by these departments over a 3-month period (June 19 to September 19, 2010) were collected. This resulted in a sample of 1,347 cases.

FB posts were coded for content using a latent analysis approach. A manifest analysis was used for objective variables such as post length, inclusion of photos, and number of likes/comments. Coding was performed by one of three research teams, comprised of 2 coders each. Reliability analysis revealed 83% agreement for post content.

Variables

- **Content**
 - Each post was coded using the following major categories (subcodes were also used, but are not reported in this poster):
 - Safety Tips
 - Crimes
 - Alerts
 - DUI
 - Officer Injured
 - Missing Person
 - Recruitment
 - Public Relations
 - Direct Communication
 - Other
- **Department Characteristics**
 - Includes PD posting frequency, PD size, number of followers, whether PD allowed followers to post messages, and PD posting pattern type (i.e. Low or High Posting Frequency based on a median split)
- **Link Information**
 - Link information was recorded including link content (i.e. pictures, video, maps, additional text or other information) and link endpoint (i.e. other FB pages, PD websites, news sources, Nixle, Youtube, and other external websites, including social networking sites)
- **Post Characteristics**
 - Includes post length and follower responsiveness indicators (i.e. number of comments and "Likes" for each post)

Results

Frequency of Communication

There was a mean posting rate of 0.73 posts/day. However, this number was inflated by 3 outliers. The median rate was 0.46/per day, with a range of 0.16 to 2.95/day. When the outliers were removed from the analysis, a significant relationship emerged between PD size and posting frequency ($r = .48, p < .05$), with larger PDs posting more frequently.

Post Characteristics and Content

The median post length was 283 characters with a range of 0–3,741.

Overall, crimes were the most frequently posted category, followed by Public Relations. However, differences emerged as a function of posting frequency.

Category	All PDs	High Freq. PDs	Low Freq. PDs
Crimes	49.83	55.27	29.34
Public Relations	21.81	19.57	30.28
Other	13.88	11.87	21.45
Direct Communication	3.11	3.43	1.89
Alerts	2.84	2.58	3.47
Tips	2.64	1.67	6.31
Officer Injured	2.51	2.42	2.84
Missing Persons	1.45	1.51	1.26
DUI	1.45	1.09	2.84
Recruitment	0.46	0.50	0.32

Link Characteristics

Hyperlinks can be attached to posts and serve to direct followers to other relevant FB pages or external websites. Nearly three-quarters (74%) of messages contained links. Links most frequently went to FB pages (37%), official PD websites (30.9%), external webpages (19.7%), or news sources (9.7%). Followers were rarely directed to Nixle PD sites (1.4%) or other sources, such as alternative social networking sites (1.2%).

Seventy-seven percent of the links directed followers to additional text, 33.5% to pictures, 14% to video, 5.4% to maps, and 2.8% to other information, such as flyers.

Followers

The median number of followers across sites was 2,958 with a range from 1,144–19,435. PD size was positively related to number of followers ($r = .58, p < .05$).

Bivariate analyses did not reveal a significant relationship between the number of followers and posting frequency. However, there was a negative relationship between FB sites that allowed followers to post messages (as opposed to simply replying to PD messages) and number of followers ($r = .48, p < .05$).

Follower Responsiveness

Follower responsiveness was affected by post length, as well as the presence of links to additional text, photos, or maps. Interestingly, a negative relationship emerged between links to pictures and follower responsiveness.

Variable	Comments	Likes
Post Length	.18***	.22***
Text Included	.42***	.47***
Picture Included	-.30***	-.31***
Video Included	-.03	-.04
Map Included	.09**	.10**
Other Included	.03	.02

** = $p < .01$, *** = $p < .001$

Conclusions

This exploratory study revealed PDs are using FB primarily to notify followers about crimes or for public relations purposes. However, usage style differs between departments posting at a high versus low frequency. Low frequency departments may be using FB in a more manner consistent with a community policing perspective.

FB easily allows users to respond to messages that have been posted. In this study we examined the frequency of responses, but did not investigate the qualitative nature of such comments. Future research should more closely examine user responses to PD postings.