

TWEETING: AN EXPLORATION OF POLICE INTERACTIONS WITH THE
PUBLIC ON SOCIAL MEDIA

by

KAITLIN LEVY-LIOTARD

B.A, Sonoma State University, 2010

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This thesis for the Master of Criminal Justice degree by

Kaitlin Levy-Liotard

has been approved for the Criminal Justice Program by

Mary Dodge, Chair

Lonnie Schaible

Lucy Dwight

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Levy-Liotard, Kaitlin (M.C.J., Criminal Justice)

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ABSTRACT

The use of social media as a means of communication among law enforcement agencies and the community is growing in popularity. The implementation of social media outreach may represent an effective and cost efficient means of enhancing community policing. Research addressing this topic in the United States, however, is limited, and the efficacy of using social media to inform, prevent, and solve crimes, is unknown. This research explores the methods and means of employing social media in policing using qualitative semi-structured interviews with law enforcement personnel. The study examines how police departments utilize the social media platform Twitter as an effector of positive relations between community and law enforcement officials. Moreover, the current research seeks to answer questions regarding the propagation of information to the public through Twitter, as well as examine the perceived effectiveness of such platforms as tools in community policing.

The form and content of this abstract are approved. I recommend its publication.

Approved: Mary Dodge

DEDICATION

I dedicate my thesis to Mary Dodge, Ross Anderson, and my family and friends. I could not have accomplished what I have were it not for your unfaltering support and encouragement.

Mary, I truly believe that people are brought into our lives for a reason, and I am beyond grateful that you have been brought into mine. Thank you for all of your encouragement, and inspiration. I could not have completed this thesis without your guidance and support.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Over the last three decades, a technological shift has slowly begun to transform policing, revolutionizing the speed at which information can be shared with the public. As Schneider and Trottier (2012) note, “platforms like Facebook and Twitter, when coupled with mobile and digital photography, enable users to document and disseminate information about criminal events” (p. 62). The implications of such advances have yet to be explored in depth, mainly due to the recent advent of platforms such as Twitter. Nonetheless, roughly 300 million active users are on Twitter monthly, and 500 million Tweets are sent every day (<https://about.twitter.com>). As these figures suggest, a large portion of the population is active on social media, including public agencies and organizations. Currently, nearly three-quarters of all large police departments in the United States use some form of social media (Lieberman, Koetzle, & Sakiyama, 2013). As Stuart (2013) cautions however, there are risks and rewards of using social media in police departments and within other law enforcement agencies.

The present research provides a qualitative contribution to the extant literature on policing and social media. The study examines the specific audiences of police Tweets, the challenges faced by tweeting departments, implications for community policing, uses of Twitter by law enforcement, perceived risks and rewards of using Twitter in police departments, and suggested guidelines for social media in policing. The article provides a review of prior literature surrounding police practices and social media, presents original data, and finally, explores areas for future research in this field.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Current literature that pertains to the use of technology (specifically, social media) among law enforcement and other criminal justice agencies is limited, in large part due to the recent advent of websites. Much of the literature which pre-dates the early 1990s focuses on “information technology,” rather than the more broadly applied notion of “technology,” or even social media. While it is important to include a comprehensive definition of “technology” in this discussion, this paper focuses on the uses of Twitter by police departments. A majority of the literature examines three broad applications of technology as utilized by criminal justice agencies; the use of social media platforms by police officials, the use of the internet and other technologies by government officials, and the implications of technology on policing styles and trends. Within these overarching categories, four important trends are apparent in the literature. The first trend that is explored is the use of technology by police agencies to better communicate with the public, and forge stronger bonds with individuals. The second trend relates to community policing, and the ways in which social media platforms facilitate this style of law enforcement. The third trend suggests that law enforcement and governmental agencies use technology (e.g., social media platforms) to increase their legitimacy. The final trend that emerges in an overview of the literature demonstrates that technology can be used to fight crime (i.e., proactive policing), while fulfilling the aforementioned goals.

Social Media as an Enhancer of Police-Public Relations

The extant literature suggests that police use technology and social media platforms to facilitate communication, and to enhance their relationship with the public.

As Kelling and Moore (1988) note, it is the “professional ethos that defines standards of competence, professionalism, and excellence in policing” (p. 2). The ethos is continually evolving, and has shifted the importance of each of the aforementioned standards among police over time (Kelling & Moore, 1988). For instance, during what Kelling and Moore (1988) describe as the “political era” of policing, police departments lacked a powerful, central authority to assert legitimacy. In an attempt to regain some legitimacy, police emphasized maintaining citizen satisfaction and intimacy with the communities in which they worked (Kelling & Moore, 1988). Although historically police departments, as well as other criminal justice organizations, have been segregated from other organizations based on their purported goal, police remain perhaps the most respected criminal justice institution. Bittner (1970) proposes that “the role of police is best understood as a mechanism for the distribution of non-negotiably coercive force employed in accordance with the dictates of an intuitive grasp of situational exigencies” (p.46). Alternatively, during the late 19th century into the early 20th century, the primary function of police was to control crime, maintain order, and provide broader social services to communities (Kelling & Moore, 1988). Following the political era, police shifted the focus to more strict crime control and criminal apprehension, thereby becoming *law enforcement* agencies (Kelling & Moore, 1988). During the late 20th century, law enforcement agencies ultimately progressed into the “community problem-solving era,” thereby increasing foot patrol and community involvement. The function of police transformed and encompassed order maintenance, conflict resolution, problem solving, education, community organization and consultation, information gathering and provision of services to community members (Kelling & Moore, 1988).

As the evolution of policing progressed, a stronger emphasis was placed on community-relations. Historically, community-related policing has been strengthened by the general support of police expressed by the public. As Trojanowicz (1988) notes, community members feel that the police are “fundamentally honest, generally corruption free, do not discriminate, and do not regularly use excessive force” (p.8). In contrast, the author notes “blacks and Hispanics are less supportive of the police in general and are particularly more likely to feel that the police are discriminatory and use excessive force” (p.8). Although some discrepancy exists among attitudes toward law enforcement officials, police remain a highly respected entity in the criminal justice system. As such, police agencies continually strive to maintain the respect of the community members whom they serve. Perhaps one of the most effective means of procuring respect is the assertion of legitimacy in community-oriented policing.

Community-oriented policing is distinguished from traditional policing in two important aspects. The first feature that distinguishes community-oriented policing from traditional policing styles is the concept of shared responsibility. Essentially, community order must be achieved through the collaborative efforts of both police and community members, whereby both parties actively work to improve the social climate of the community. The second feature of community-oriented policing, prevention, may be classified in the broader notion of proactive policing (Adams, Rohe, & Arcury, 2002). Proactive policing enlists the values of both community policing and community involvement, both of which are contingent upon open communication. The present study seeks to acknowledge social media as a means of dissolving the communicative barriers that exist between law enforcement officials and community members. In doing so,

police and those whom they serve may engage in more cooperative and positive interactions.

The literature suggests that governmental agencies face a barrier when communicating with the public as well, however, the pressure for the former is less since they have less interaction with citizens in the same fashion as police. As Kavanaugh et al. (2012) point out, the government seeks to use social media to improve communication with citizens, as well as to improve the services. Additional research suggests that police departments use social networking sites (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, MySpace) simply to communicate with the public, and that roughly 75% of the largest departments in the United States have adopted the use of at least one major social networking site (Lieberman et al., 2013). When police departments or government agencies assert a presence on such sites, they are minimizing what might be perceived as a status gap between themselves and civilians. Conversely, those individuals in the public sector who have access to such sites may feel less threatened as police presence on sites like Facebook reinforce the humanization of law enforcement officials. This process of humanizing police officers is indispensable, since it re-affirms to the public that law enforcement officials are not to be feared, and that they are a valuable entity whose goal is to help the public.

In addition to attracting a police presence on these sites, social media are becoming increasingly popular among government organizations (Meijer & Thaens, 2013). Still, there is a great need for clearly defined applications of technology and guidelines for its use among these agencies. While social media sites have demonstrated that they serve as important information sources and outlets, there still needs to be a

comprehensive account regarding the methods in which they should be used (Kavanaugh et al., 2012). In addition to serving as informational outlets, social media are loosely defined as “internet-based applications designed to facilitate social interaction [...] through society” (Kavanaugh et al., 2012, p. 482). As such, social media sites and other technological advances have hastened the rate at which information can be shared. The ready accessibility of information helps to increase and assert the legitimacy of law enforcement and government organizations alike, which consequently legitimizes the public’s relationship with these organizations.

Social Media and Community Policing

Because the goal of technology as used by police and law enforcement is to communicate more efficiently and effectively with the public, there is an assumed partnership that exists between the officers and citizens (Yero, Othman, Samah, D’Silva, & Sulaiman, 2012). The partnership provides the foundation for understanding the concept of community policing, which is discussed in the following section.

In order to assess whether social networking sites facilitate community policing, it is important to first define this concept. Yero et al., (2012) propose that community policing is achieved through a combination of crime prevention, problem solving, community engagement, and community-police partnership. In other words, community policing suggests an implicit partnership between citizens and law enforcement agencies (Yero et al., 2012). Bullock (2013) suggests that community policing allows for law enforcement officials to broaden the scope of their mandate, and to focus on issues that may specifically affect individuals in the community. In addition to sustaining a strong relationship between these two cooperating parties, Tiedke, Freeman, Sower, & Holland

(1957) assert that a “Normative Sponsorship Theory” exists, one that states that police cannot achieve positive transformation without the support of the public. This theory emphasizes the importance of positive relations between law enforcement and the public in order to exercise effective community policing. As it pertains to community policing, the present research seeks to understand whether social media encourages the support of the public, and how specifically it can enhance relations between the two parties. Chan (2001) proposes that more generally speaking, technology creates a sort of transparency among police organizations and procedures. One goal of community policing may be to maintain such transparency.

Lieberman et al. (2013) note that police departments use social networking sites for communication with the public, as well as a means of building public relations. Furthermore, they assert that little is known about how and why departments are using these tools, and that there may be unintended consequences of communication through this sort of media. The present study seeks to answer questions such as those proposed by Lieberman and his colleagues.

An important trend across the literature appears to be that social networking sites such as Twitter are enhancers of communication between the public and law enforcement agencies, and that when used properly, they can strengthen community policing. The present study seeks to provide qualitative data on the uses of the social media platform Twitter among police agencies, as the technological trend has evolved significantly in recent years.

Social Media to Facilitate Proactive Policing and to Fight Crime

For the purposes of this discussion, proactive policing is closely tied to community policing, because both involve police and communities working closely together in order to achieve a common goal. Bullock (2013) notes that community policing is “a mechanism to legitimise the relationship between the police and communities” (p. 125). Proactive policing, in contrast, assumes that there is an existing relationship with the community, and thus the two parties may work together to reduce the aftermath of a serious incident. After a critical event, for example, a police department can use the social media platform Twitter to post informational updates. In addition, members of the community may seek out platforms such as Twitter to receive reliable information and updates regarding the event (Swann, 2013).

Historically, social media have provided a means of transmitting mass amounts of information to large audiences, almost instantly. Websites such as Facebook and Twitter allow users to notify followers of their current activities, including photos and text, at the touch of a button. Given the ease of accessibility to such information, police departments may use such websites to monitor the activities of persons of interest. Sanders and Hannem (2012) describe a shift from reactive crime control toward proactive policing, surveillance, and risk management. Evidently, social media have facilitated the shift toward proactive policing. Proactive policing can be best defined as policing that emphasizes crime-prevention, rather than simply crime-control. Bullock (2013) indicates that the evolution of community policing has resulted in a sort of neighborhood policing, which focuses on residents in a community and their respective needs. In addition, Bullock notes that monitoring of social media websites often is more practical than

patrolling an actual neighborhood, which might otherwise be inconvenient, depending on the size of the jurisdiction. In other words, social media is practical insofar as it allows for large volumes of information to be distributed across wide spaces (Bullock, 2013), and requires minimal physical presence of officers.

The use of social media websites like Twitter can be an effective tool for crisis management and inform the public of unfolding events (Crump, 2011). Swann (2013) illustrates how the police used Twitter in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon attacks, as an efficient means of managing crisis and updating the public of unfolding events. Apparently, police departments may use Twitter and other social media websites as a means of engaging with the public, especially in situations that would not otherwise be conducive to interaction between the two parties (e.g., during an unfolding critical event). Williams et al. (2013) depict how social media networks were used during riots in the United Kingdom as a means of “organising and responding to disorder” (p. 461). The authors note that social media can be utilized to “monitor signs of tension in anticipation of public disorder” (Williams et al., 2013, p. 465). Proctor et al. (2013) also describe how police in the United Kingdom used Twitter in the aftermath of the 2011 riots to inform the public and act swiftly to ensure public order. Nonetheless, the authors argued that the “police face difficult problems in making effective use of social media services such as ‘Twitter’ during crisis situations,” (i.e., scant police resources, both in communication and physical presence, keeping the public informed of unfolding events, and obtaining accurate information from other media sources) (Proctor et al., 2013, p. 433).

Since technology provides fast, efficient means of delivering information, many civilians rely on social media as a source for news, especially in an accelerated age of

smart-phones. What is of even greater interest is the notion that social media is viewed as a reliable source of information, when historically the Internet has not been held to such a standard. The reasons for this may be further explored in future research. As a tool in proactive policing however, social media networks provide a quick method of distributing information to large masses of people. Sanders and Hannem (2012) note that information technology provides at least the option to engage in proactive policing (p. 397). Consequently, by sharing this information with the public, there is some level of accountability that is presumed, and civilians may actively take part in the “fight against crime” by remaining informed and up-to-date on current events in their neighborhoods.

Williams et al. (2013) discovered that during the riots in England, social media platforms provided an especially important means of “organising and responding to disorder” (p. 461). An additional purpose of proactive policing is responding to disorder. As Proctor et al. (2013) describe, this was the case during the August 2011 riots in England, in which the role of different communication platforms was especially important during times of upheaval. In their case study, the authors note that digital communications were employed to inform the public of the unfolding crises, and that the need for police to inform the public was rooted in ensuring public order (Proctor et al., 2013). Police also used social media platforms like Twitter during the riots to make public service announcements, as well as to reassure the public (Crump, 2011).

Social Media to Assert Legitimacy

A number of scholars have proposed that the use of technology by law enforcement agencies can increase that organization’s legitimacy. As Chermak and Weiss (2005) note, maintaining legitimacy may be made possible by using external

communication strategies, especially with respect to media relations. Additionally, an organization's healthy relationship with the public is contingent on some form of legitimacy. In other words, if police departments and government agencies seek to produce better relationships and communication with the public, they must claim some form of legitimacy. For the purposes of this discussion, the "legitimacy" of an organization shall refer to its overall integrity and professionalism. So, when a police department demonstrates its ability to be open and honest with the public, it has fulfilled its duty to increase legitimacy.

Many scholars agree that using technology and social media are an appropriate means of increasing legitimacy within organizations. As Meijer and Thaens (2013) note in their study of North American police departments, social media increases both the effectiveness and the legitimacy of the public sector. The concept of increasing legitimacy is especially pertinent to strengthening the bond between community members and police, because it represents a necessary component of creating a trustworthy relationship. In the case of the Vancouver riot of 2011, social media played a crucial role for law enforcement officials both during and after the event. Establishing an online presence allowed police to strengthen their relationship with the public, and increase the effort to maintain strong public relations. Sanders and Hannem (2012) describe how "the organizational shift toward risk-oriented, intelligence-led policing is not carried out on the ground. Instead, patrol officers often utilize technologies to legitimize policing" (p. 389). With the ever-increasing boundaries of technology, policing agencies no longer require the physical presence of an officer, and intelligence-led policing can be conducted through the use of computers and other digital devices.

Historically, the implementation of technology into police practices has generated positive feedback and important advances. Chan (2001) notes, technology not only improves effectiveness of policing, but may also promote organizational legitimacy. Furthermore, technology has served as an enhancer of community relations among law enforcement agencies, thus increasing the overall transparency of that agency.

Social media websites such as Twitter also may be used to assert legitimacy on behalf of law enforcement officials. As an important component of community policing, asserting legitimacy among the public is crucial for law enforcement officials to achieve, since it increases transparency within that organization. Crump (2011) suggests that the use of social media and a shift toward community policing has served to improve public confidence in law enforcement agencies. Furthermore, Erickson (2013) proposes that social media platforms provide an outlet through which agencies can communicate with the public without any filter, thus increasing that agency's transparency. The present study seeks to understand how social media platforms such as Twitter serve to increase (or decrease) police legitimacy.

CHAPTER III

METHOD

The current study uses qualitative methods (i.e., in-depth, semi-structured interviews) to explore the use of social media by police departments. Qualitative methodology seldom employs hypothesis testing. The exploratory nature of qualitative research is “inductive, emerging, and shaped by the researcher’s experience in collecting and analyzing data” (Creswell, 2013, p. 22). In other words, according to Creswell, the methodology is inductive and from the ground up; the study employs a social constructivism framework to obtain emergent ideas through consensus. This research explores Twitter from a policing perspective in order to shed light on the manner in which social media platforms such as Twitter are used in policing, and what perceived positive and negative effects they have on community policing and community relations.

Participants

A convenient, non-random strategy was employed to construct the sample. Interviews were conducted with 24 police departments in the United States, at which point saturation was reached. Saturation is typically reached when the data collection fails to offer new and additional insights (Glazer & Strauss, 1967; Mason, 2010). Additionally, some snow-ball sampling occurred when interviewees referred the researcher to additional departments. The sample represents an almost equal number of tweeting department representatives and non-tweeting departments. Public Information Officers (sworn and unsworn), media relation personnel, and sworn officers from various police departments were contacted and asked to voluntarily participate in the study. All

participants who were interviewed were either civilians or sworn officers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants (see Appendix A).

Materials and Procedure

The present study is based on data collected from semi-structured, open-ended interviews with small, mid-size, and large law enforcement agencies. The questions are designed to allow participants to elaborate on their response and express their perspectives and experiences on the uses of Twitter (Hamel, 1993). The interviews were conducted over the phone, as well as in person. Preliminary questioning during the interview was used to determine whether or not the police department uses the social media platform Twitter. Subsequently, participants were asked a series of open-ended questions with probes, which deal with their department's use (or non-use) of Twitter (see Appendix B).

Participants were informed that the present research seeks to understand the uses of the social media platform Twitter by police departments. Additionally, respondents were informed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and that if they wished to do so, they may have recused themselves from the study at any time. Prior to conducting the interviews, participants were told that they would be free to skip any questions that they did not wish to answer.

Data Analysis

Data were collected in the form of field notes. The decision to use field notes rather than taping interviews was based on several considerations. First, respondents were less cautious and more open stating departmental uses of Twitter without tape-recorders. Second, the costs and time-consuming nature of transcription out-weighed the need for

recorded interviews. Finally, the field notes adequately captured information and rich narrative quotes.

Interviews were conducted by telephone when participants were geographically unavailable. The interviews ranged from 45 to 60 minutes in length. Data analysis was conducted separately for tweeters and non-tweeters, and subsequent analysis was conducted based on the size of the departments (small, mid-size, and large). Using Saldaña's (2015) holistic approach, the transcripts were coded for words or short phrases. Second, patterns were identified and transformed into categories. Finally, major themes were identified for the final results section. The analysis was done manually, rather than by computer, to better capture the richness of the data. Two raters were used to assist in ensuring intercoder agreement.

CHAPTER IV

RESULTS

A total of seven themes were identified in the analysis of all 24 departments. First, the dissemination of information using Twitter to targeted audiences is an important consideration for law enforcement agencies. Second, the communicative interaction with citizens presents many challenges in balancing the public's ability to freely express their concerns and the department's need to maintain communication and reputation. Third, Twitter may enhance a department's ability to engage in community policing. Fourth, the uses of Twitter are expansive and informative. Fifth, despite the expressed advantages of Twitter, there are numerous obstacles that police departments may face when implementing and using Twitter. Sixth, establishing and adhering to departmental guidelines may mitigate these disadvantages. Finally, a comparison of small, mid-size, and large departments is provided to illustrate the challenges faced by respective tweeting and non-tweeting agencies. These themes are explored in detail in the following section.

Targeted Audience

A majority of participants noted the importance of reaching particular audiences through the use of Twitter. In addition to reaching the immediate community, Twitter may inform audiences beyond local jurisdictions. This sentiment is exemplified in the following statement:

Twitter is beyond just our city. It includes anyone living in town and anyone who has family in town. We target everyone, including community, public, media and press. Twitter targets residents, seniors, businesses, city council, other law enforcement agencies, faith based communities, and neighboring communities.

Similarly, interviewees commented: “Twitter allows us to communicate with anyone who comes to this city” and “quickly disseminate information to businesses and tourists.” On the one hand, respondents noted some disagreement on the targeted audience; for example, many departments indicated that tweets are directed to the public rather than the media. On the other hand, several departments indicated the importance of communicating with the media. The participants commented that targeted audiences included residents, businesses, visitors, media, students, other law enforcement agencies, and extended family members not residing in the immediate community. Overall, the results show that the potential audiences are unlimited and not restricted to those living in the community.

Balancing Public Expression

Participants noted that the two most common communication issues faced by departments are decisions to engage in dialogue and the mitigation of negative tweets.

We can put the full story out instead of the community commenting and speculating on what happened. We love the fact that they [citizens] can speak up about the department and how open they are. Additionally, we leave negative comments on our page.

The majority of departments have established some type of parameter for determining whether or not negative comments may be removed. This includes removing profanity, off topic comments, advertising, and inappropriate links. A participant emphasized the importance of not deleting information: “It is important not to delete comments because we want to make sure that they can speak their minds. We don’t want to be a department that hides anything, for example anti-cop sentiments.”

Alternatively, some departments recognize the challenge posed by an inability to delete user comments. One participant exemplified this theme:

We follow the open records law, which can be a challenge. In other words, the law does not allow us to remove comments made by the public, and followers are able to post without any type of parameter. There are many days that we wish we could just delete.

Departments disagree on whether or not to engage in back and forth conversations with the public. Several departments described the pitfalls of this practice. One PIO commented:

With a back and forth conversation, when someone's mind is already made up, you can't change it. Our department has never engaged in conversation with anyone because once you respond to one Tweet, you have to respond to them all. This exchange becomes a losing battle because some of these people are trying to get you to say the wrong things.

Despite the advantage of quickly distributing information, a common challenge is that “some residents look for the tweeting to be an opportunity to ‘highjack’ the post with discourse and general discontent.”

Departments noted several caveats regarding posting and responding, cautioning that “you should never put something in writing because you cannot take it back.” The respondents emphasized that posts should be “professional and present just the facts.” In order to avoid heated arguments on social media, departments stated that “community members can send private messages, and we will respond to those.” Finally, interviewees discussed the importance of beginning a conversation on Twitter with the public, especially during highly charged events. Several participants referred to the 2014 officer involved shooting in Ferguson, Missouri. According to one participant, “Ferguson is an example of why they need to have social media. It took too long for them to join the conversation, and they couldn't recover. They needed to get in the conversation, but the conversation had already started.”

Promoting Community Policing

Social media represents one of many tools and approaches to community policing. In the case of Twitter, one officer commented that “relationships have improved and many people have thanked us for putting out news and adding a tool that we didn’t have before.” While social media fosters communication, some agencies continue to rely on more traditional methods of community policing:

The police department has been focused on community policing for more than 20 years. There are so many facets of the department that utilize community policing and social media is a small component of that strategy. We utilize problem oriented policing projects, public speaking and roadshows, partnerships with community organizations, department liaisons to non-profits, and beat assignments.

Nonetheless, the increasing use of social media necessitates a minimal presence on platforms such as Twitter. As one participant described, “community policing needs to include this virtual reality because it’s where they are.”

Promoting transparency. In the current climate of unrest between citizens and law enforcement officials, participants repeatedly mentioned the importance of transparency. For instance, one department mentioned that “we need to let the community know what is going on. One lesson learned from Ferguson is that cooperation and communication are extremely important.” The theme of transparency was frequently mentioned: “We push transparency, we don’t hide, we want the community to know what’s going on, and we want to promote community awareness.” Another respondent expressed that transparency was heightened when the public is aware of the entire sequence of events, which consequently allows them to feel that they have contributed to solving the crime. A majority of departments mentioned that utilizing Twitter increased transparency by rendering the agency more open, accessible, and approachable.

Elements of style. The participants in the study described two of the most common styles of tweeting. The first utilizes humor in tweets as a tool to increase approachability, often incorporating jokes and light-hearted tweets. The second approach presents information in a factual manner.

Humor is used in a variety of creative and informative means. Some of these include tweeting police dogs, entertaining posts concerning community engagement, (e.g., “coffee with cops,” “national night out,” “tweetathons,” “tweet with a cop,” and “a day in the life of a police officer”) and generally uplifting and light-hearted posts. Many departments note, however, that it is important to strike a balance between humor and maintaining professionalism.

The alternative style of tweeting involves a “just the facts” approach, in which humor is limited in use. One agency explained:

We try to limit how social media can harm us by keeping the personality away from the posts. Some agencies put personality and humor on posts. Our posts are more robotic; just give the facts and no opinions of the facts. This method has kept us from having social media come back and harm us.

Another participant explained that an important aspect of professionalism is to remember that “you are representing the police department, and the public is only representing himself or herself, so your posts are weighted a little differently.”

Deconstructing the us v. them myth. Twitter may be an effective tool in demystifying the police culture. Respondents were quick to note that Twitter can facilitate “the humanization of officers” and demonstrate that “there is a heart behind the badge.” One respondent commented:

The beliefs that law enforcement hides behind closed doors, is stoic, and the perception of lack of transparency is challenging. In many cases,

people don't know how to communicate with the police department, and police departments are not necessarily reaching out. Social media enhances this process.

Twitter may provide an effective means of further diffusing the "Us v. Them" mentality that has permeated the relationship between law enforcement officials and citizens.

Uses

The multitude of uses and potential uses of Twitter by law enforcement agencies are endless. Table 1 illustrates the most commonly mentioned uses that emerged from the data analysis.

Table 1. Descriptive Table of Most Common Uses of Twitter by Law Enforcement Agencies

Community Events	Breaking News	Crime Prevention	Traffic	Crime Solving
Fundraisers Festivals Shred day Sporting events Accolades and awards	Press releases National events Weather conditions	Safety tips Drug take backs Campaigns (Texting kills, Click it or Ticket)	Road closures Traffic accidents Road hazards DUI checkpoint	Amber alerts Missing persons Large drug busts Identification of suspects

Many departments also recommend the use of Twitter in emergency situations such as floods, rockslides, electrical storms, fires, and earthquakes. In fact, one department went as far as to suggest that Twitter be used exclusively for emergency communications during a critical incident in which public safety is a concern.

The intent of tweeting is to keep the community informed about a variety of pertinent issues. In some cases, departments may feel pressured to use Twitter, as one

respondent commented, “we have to do it because everyone does it.” In most cases, participants were “won over” because of its great success at solving crimes and tweeted enthusiastically. Additionally, tweeting departments expressed a concern over the quality of a tweet, rather than the quantity. As one respondent explained in response to how often the department tweets, “we don’t just tweet for the sake of tweeting. Sometimes I tweet 5-10 times a day, sometimes I tweet twenty. It really depends on what is going on.”

Advantages and Disadvantages

Nearly all departments note that the primary advantage of using Twitter (as opposed to any other social media platform) is “the ability to quickly disseminate information to a large group of people, as well as the media.” The speed at which tweets may be sent and “re-tweeted” is the most common advantage of using Twitter, as described by departments. Additionally, over two-thirds of participants reveal that using Twitter allows for the convenient transmission of information to media outlets. One respondent stated that “the press wants information, and we don’t want the questioning to go another way; in this case, everyone is happy, and we get no questions from the press.” Another participant noted that Twitter has allowed the department to ensure that proper information be provided to the public by “disseminating information without a third party bias on the situation (i.e., the media crafting the information to fit their story).” Many departments also referred to the efficacy of Twitter in reducing the number of calls received by the department, as community members remain informed and updated on events through the police department’s Twitter feed. The ability to quickly tweet information to the public and media outlets is credited for the reduced influx of telephone inquiries related to specific incidents.

A large number of participants further noted that Twitter allows for the police to keep the public informed and correspond directly with community members, especially during crisis situations, as well as incidents concerning public safety (e.g., road closures, DUI checkpoints, or suspects at large). Finally, nearly all departments explain that Twitter has either proven to be, or would likely be advantageous when resorting to community-assisted crime solving.

Although a majority of departments described the utility of using Twitter as a platform to communicate with its audience, it is important to note some of the disadvantages described by the participants. The primary disadvantages mentioned by departments include a lack of resources to adequately and constantly maintain the Twitter feed, members of the public reporting crimes to Twitter rather than calling 9-1-1, and a lack of characters in each tweet. As one department described, “the limitations on the number of characters (140) is impractical for describing detailed and complex issues.” Some less commonly mentioned disadvantages include the possibility of miscommunication and consequently, misinterpretation of tweets by the public, “putting things out too soon” and the risk of compromising an ongoing investigation, and an inability to respond to all comments from followers. Although the use of Twitter by police departments is not without fault, the advantages noted by the departments appear to outweigh the disadvantages. Furthermore, the disadvantages noted may be assuaged by the implementation of best departmental guidelines regarding the use of Twitter and other social media platforms.

Establishing Departmental Guidelines

The analysis of data revealed a recurrent sentiment by respondents that police departments and law enforcement agencies concerned with public safety should have at least some sort of social media presence. As one participant stated, “any law enforcement agency without social media presence is Mayberry.” Nonetheless, participants from both tweeting and non-tweeting departments expressed a need for guidelines regarding the use of Twitter within respective agencies, asserting that, “you don’t want to use it unless you can use it well.” One commonly suggested and especially salient practice is the provision of accurate facts, specifically during crisis situations. This may include assuring that the information being tweeted is correct or refraining from divulging too much information too quickly. Additionally, many participants noted the need for a written policy and set of procedures regarding those who have access to the department’s Twitter account. As one respondent described, “it is very important to have a policy that explains why we do the things we do.” For example, many departments referred to policies that ensure the integrity of the site, allowing for the removal of inappropriate language and links (e.g., links to pornographic sites).

In regards to those who may tweet, responses differed as to the ideal number of individuals who should have access to the account, although every department emphasized that the chief has the final say as to what may be posted. As an enhancement of such policies, some interviewees suggest that those who do have access to the account receive training on how to effectively use the platform.

Finally, many participants propose that departmental guidelines promote safety of community members. In order to preserve ongoing public safety, one department stated

that “we never post anything that would be compromising to an individual, we never report victim information such as names, and it is our department’s policy never to post about domestic violence or sexual assault.”

Size Matters

For the purposes of the present study, a small department is considered to be representative of a city whose population is between 100 and 19,999 inhabitants ($n=10$). A mid-size department refers to police departments in a city whose population ranges between 20,000 and 59,999 inhabitants ($n=8$), and large departments represent cities with populations over 59,999 inhabitants ($n=6$). Of the large city police departments, all have implemented the use of Twitter, beginning as early as 2009. Among the mid-size city departments, half ($n=4$) are tweeting departments while the other half ($n=4$) are non-tweeting. Finally, of the small-city departments, seven are non-tweeting, while only three have active Twitter accounts. Of the 13 tweeting departments, six are located in large cities, four in mid-size cities, and three in small cities.

Non-tweeting departments in mid-size cities possess characteristics that distinguish them from their counterparts. Two of the four cities indicated that the usefulness of Twitter is limited in its ability to reach their specific populations. As one respondent described: “Our community is very blue collar and almost half are non-English speakers, or English is not their first language. Consequently, we don’t have as many people online.” Similarly, a spokesperson for one small city department noted that “if more people were on social media in our community, then we would definitely look closer at using it.” This is consistent with what several participants expressed as the idea that older generations are less likely to be familiar with using social media platforms. As

a result, these departments have yet to implement the use of Twitter. A representative from the fourth non-tweeting department among mid-size cities indicated that their community already utilizes an alternative emergency notification system with direct text-messaging services, and that the use of Twitter would be redundant.

The three small city tweeting departments stand out from the remaining small city departments in the sample because they are located in cities that are considered to be tourist destinations with highly transient populations (i.e., commuters, businesses, and visitors). In these cases, the departments believe that Twitter provides the most efficient tool for disseminating information quickly to a wide range of individuals.

The majority of small cities have yet to implement Twitter accounts for several reasons. First and foremost, small departments serving tightly knit communities often express concerns that Twitter undermines community policing. As one participant mentioned, “we try to be as transparent as possible to the community. It is vital that we humanize ourselves to the community by getting out of our patrol cars and socializing with the public.” Another respondent explained:

Face-to-face contact is more empowering, not only for police officers, but also for community members. Community policing involves visiting businesses daily, speaking with owners, hosting national night out, bringing community members to the police department for educational purposes, and promoting things like shop with a cop, a program for low-income families and their children.

Another interviewee described community policing as “good ‘ol fashioned police work, which means getting the information out there and talking face to face, knocking on doors, and talking to people; social media can never take the place of face-to-face contact.”

All non-tweeting departments discussed the lack of resources needed to maintain an active Twitter account. Smaller departments have the potential to become overwhelmed, for example: “a bank robbery posted on Twitter may result in 500 calls which, in a 25 person department, is nearly impossible to handle.” The majority of small departments without Twitter commented on the limited number of staff, as well as the lack of Twitter-literates to properly handle the account. Additionally, chiefs in small departments expressed the concern of Twitter adding responsibility to their already demanding schedules, because they often serve as public information officers. As one chief of police commented: “I don’t have time for Twitter; it is not high on my list of priorities.”

CHAPTER V

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Previous research on the use by law enforcement agencies of the social media platform Twitter, is scarce. The results of the current study enhance understanding of the uses and benefits of Twitter from a policing perspective. Lieberman et al. (2013) noted that little is known about why and how police and other law enforcement agencies use social media platforms, and suggested that unintended consequences may arise. Furthermore, studies that examine the uses of Twitter by large metropolitan police departments often fail to encapsulate the uses of Twitter by smaller departments across the United States (Heverin & Zach, 2010). Results from the present study confirm that there are challenges to using social media, but negative consequences can be avoided through departmental guidelines and policies. Overwhelmingly, as shown in the current research, the benefits of using Twitter appear to outweigh any adverse ramifications.

Departments using Twitter demonstrate the usefulness of the social media platform, specifically in enhancing community relations, promoting a sense of community, and assisting in crime-solving matters. Although Twitter can be an effective tool in policing, it may not be well-suited to every department and the population that it serves. Many small or mid-size city departments may find the use of Twitter unnecessary. In communities in which English is a second language, for instance, communication barriers impede the effectiveness of such a platform. Additionally, elderly populations may be less inclined to utilize social media sites such as Twitter. Generally, the targeted audiences of tweeting departments are the immediate residents in that community, minor audiences such as media outlets, and those in surrounding communities.

A prevalent trend in the extant literature and the current findings shows that the use of social media by law enforcement is an effective public communication tool. Twitter can reinforce efforts to strengthen communication between police and the public. Safer communities can be achieved when police and community members work together, thus facilitating community policing. The present study supports important findings by Leiberman (2013) and his colleagues, estimating that roughly 75 % of the largest departments in the United States have adopted the use of at least one major social networking site. Although the sample in the current study does not include many of the largest departments in the country, all of the participants (even non-tweeting departments) have at least minimal presence on social media.

The current literature on social media suggests that platforms such as Twitter are enhancers of communication between the public and law enforcement agencies, and that when used properly, they can strengthen community policing. Despite the many advantages of Twitter, engaging in dialogue with the public may present problematic situations. As noted by Crump (2011), there is limited evidence supporting dialogue on Twitter as a true form of engagement with citizens. This idea was reinforced by findings of the present study that some departments maintain the discretion to remove public content deemed inappropriate. This particular approach renders engagement with the public exceedingly difficult. In fact, future research lends itself to further exploration of the actual role of social media in community policing. As supported by the results in the present study, the implementation of Twitter appears to have positive implications for promoting communication between law enforcement officials and citizens. The question remains however whether or not Twitter represents a form of community policing.

Existing literature notes the importance of establishing legitimacy within law enforcement agencies. The connection between legitimacy and transparency is one that is symbiotic. In other words, the two are dependent on one another in order to exist. Although the notion of legitimacy as proposed by Chan (2001) was not overwhelmingly supported by the present findings, some respondents did mention that the use of technology within the department has increased transparency within the organization. Nonetheless, a department's legitimacy may be increased when an agency demonstrates the ability to be open and honest with the public on social media. As many respondents noted, promoting openness and honesty with community members is a crucial aspect of transparency. The current findings support the idea that social media reinforces the humanization of law enforcement officials (Lieberman et al., 2013).

An additional trend that appears throughout previous literature is the use of Twitter by police departments during times of crisis (e.g., the Boston Marathon attack). The current findings suggest that Twitter is most efficient when informing citizens, especially concerning issues of public safety. Nearly all tweeting departments demonstrated the efficacy of Twitter at disseminating information during critical incidents. Additionally, the results support previous research suggesting that community members often seek out platforms such as Twitter to obtain reliable and time-sensitive information regarding specific events (Procter et al., 2013). As demonstrated during the Vancouver riot of 2011, establishing an online presence was crucial for police officials in their efforts to both maintain order and garner the public's attention (CITE). Furthermore, Procter et al. (2013) noted the importance of providing information in a timely manner to the public from trustworthy sources, such as verified Twitter accounts.

Several limitations are apparent in the present research. First, though saturation was reached with a sample of 24 participants, a larger sample may provide concurrent support for findings of the current study. Second, while the sample is representative of the population sought for the study, the findings are not considered to be generalizable to the greater population. A larger sample size may extend the generalizability of the findings to additional law enforcement agencies. Finally, the present sample is limited to police departments and does not include law enforcement agencies such as sheriffs, state police, highway patrol, special jurisdiction police, or federal law enforcement agencies.

The present research lends itself to an abundance of future research in both the qualitative and quantitative fields. Because the current study examines police interactions with the public on Twitter, conversely, future research might explore perceptions and opinions of the public related to police use of Twitter. Additionally, future research may examine the potential uses by police of alternative social media platforms (e.g., Nixle, NextDoor, Instagram, YouTube, and Pinterest).

An additional recommendation for future research is to examine the use of social media by law enforcement agencies that represent diverse communities (e.g., inner cities and retirement communities), as well as international police agencies. Findings of such research may provide sociologically and culturally significant contributions to the study of social media and community policing.

Finally, future research should examine the uses of Twitter by public service agencies including but not limited to fire service, environmental protection agencies, public security, and emergency services agencies. The findings of the current study may provide important implications for agencies seeking to communicate directly and

effectively with the public, adding substantive information to the expansive uses of social media. As Erickson (2013) notes, the implementation of social media in any agency needs to be a holistic process. As such, the agency must develop proper guidelines that outline the use of social media, as well as the needs of community members. As one respondent inimitably described, “it [Twitter] is not inherently good or bad, you just have to know and learn how to use it.”

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APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

University of Colorado Denver

Kaitlin Levy-Liotard
Mary Dodge, Ph.D. School of Public Affairs
Downtown Denver

Campus Box 142, P.O. Box 173364
Denver, Colorado 80217-3364
Phone: 303-315-2086, Fax: 303-556-5971

Law Enforcement Interview on Police Department Use of Social Media Platform “Twitter” – Informed Consent

About the Study

The use of social media as a means of communication among law enforcement agencies and the community is growing in popularity. The implementation of social media outreach may represent an effective and cost efficient means of enhancing community policing. Research addressing this topic in the United States, however, is limited. The efficacy of using social media to inform, prevent, and solve crimes, however, is unknown. This research explores the methods and means of using social media in policing. Additionally, the study examines how police departments utilize the social media platform “Twitter” as an effector of positive relations between community and law enforcement officials. Moreover, the current research seeks to answer questions regarding the propagation of information to the public, as well as evaluate the effectiveness of such platforms as tools in community policing.

Voluntary Participation

The choice of whether to participate in this study is completely up to you. Your participation is completely voluntary, and refusal to participate will involve no penalty to you. If you decide to participate in the study, you have the right to withdraw your consent or discontinue participation at any time. You also have the right to refuse to answer any question you do not wish to answer.

Confidentiality

We guarantee that all of your answers and comments are confidential. Your responses to interview questions will be protected according to professional standards established by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Colorado Denver. The information you provide will only be reported in aggregate form. Access to raw data is limited to the researcher and graduate student working on this project. The data will be securely stored for a three year time period only.

Benefits and Risks to Participation

Although you may not directly benefit from completing this interview, this research will provide you with the opportunity to have direct input on how police departments are using social media platforms such as “Twitter”. The minimal risks to you participation may include feelings of discomfort regarding any particular interview question.

Researcher Contact Information

If you have any questions or concerns about the research study, please contact Kaitlin Levy-Liotard by phone (415) 302-0138 or e-mail: Kaitlin.levy-liotard@ucdenver.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact the Human Subjects Research Committee Administrator, 1201 Larimer St., Denver, CO, 80210, at (303) 556-2400.

Thank you for your support,
Kaitlin Levy-Liotard and Mary Dodge, Ph.D.

APPENDIX B INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Use probes when appropriate
Introduction
Obtain verbal consent

Questions for all departments:

Does your police department use the social media platform “Twitter”?
Are you a sworn officer?
What position do you hold in the department?

Questions for departments that DO NOT use Twitter:

1. Does your department use any sort of social media platform?
 - a. If “yes”, which one(s)?
2. What do you know about the social media platform “Twitter”?
3. Are you aware of any other departments in your county that DO use Twitter?
4. Why has your department NOT started to use “Twitter”?
5. What do you perceive to be advantages to using “Twitter” in your department?
6. What do you perceive to be disadvantages to using “Twitter” in your department?
7. Does your department encourage “community policing”?
 - a. If “yes”, how so?

Questions for departments that DO use Twitter:

1. What do you know about the social media platform “Twitter”?
2. How long has your department been using Twitter?
3. What caused your department to implement its use?
4. What have the advantages been since the implementation of the department’s use of “Twitter”?
5. What have the disadvantages been since the implementation of the department’s use of “Twitter”?

6. If your department is using “Twitter”, who is your target audience?
 - ➔ Who decides what information is posted?
 - ➔ What type of information is posted?
 - ➔ How often is the information posted?
 - ➔ Who makes up your general audience? (I.e., civilians, other police departments, government agencies)

