

What is the Impact of Social Media on Law Enforcement Practices?

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Introduction

This project explores the impact of social media on law enforcement practices in Canada, and in other countries. This research includes an extensive literature review, as well as original research from interviews with different police officers in law enforcement agencies in Canada. The main scope of this research is to study the impact and the influence that social media has on the police force, and the evolution in the use of social media. This study is based on the impact the use of social media has on law enforcement with regards to public-safety awareness, crime prevention practices, and investigation. Primary data from participants’ interviews and secondary data from published literature have been used as data sources. The research specifically tries to find out whether this tool is helpful, if it increases the prevention of crime, and if it is useful for investigations.

Background

The research will specifically be on finding if social media is helpful and if it can increase crime prevention. Furthermore, it will be interesting to see if it is useful for law enforcement investigations (Royal Canadian Mounted Police, 2015). The study focuses on the impact social media has on law enforcement agencies, in terms of public relations, public-safety awareness, and community assistance. The main focus is to find and demonstrate that this means of communication can be helpful in increasing the prevention of crime at the community level, as well as being an efficient tool for different investigations. (Policing and social media, social control in an era of new media, 2016).That research will provide a better understanding of the procedures and how it works. (Canadian Access to Social Media Information Project, 2013).

Methods

The scope of this research project:

1. Search of academic and professional literature describing the use of social media on law enforcement practices.
 2. Ethic approval by JIBC Research Ethics Board to conduct an interview with police agencies: purposive sampling /specific predefined group.
 3. Analyze the quantitative data.
 4. Compare the data from these sources and the literature. Conduct a comparative analysis to look for similarities/differences between the agencies' perceptions, positive/negative impact, and the literature.
- Primary data from participant interviews and secondary data from published literature will be used as data sources.

Find out if social media is helpful:

- in the prevention of crime;
- in investigation; and
- in public-safety awareness and community assistance.

Results/Findings

There are some benefits to using social media, especially in the areas of crime prevention, investigation, and providing information to the public. The important point of this research is to determine the level of the credibility in the information that is posted on social media. Furthermore, it is important to understand that the media creates the relationship between the community and the police officers of the law enforcement agency. Being active on social media provides the agency with a better response from the community when there is an emergency. Law enforcement is a worldwide profession that exposes individuals to high risks. The fact that the police need to be careful of what the officer puts on social media, which could have consequences for his role, his credibility and his personal life. Reaching communities efficiently is important. The priority to recruit qualified members to represent the agency must be considered. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012)

Positive Aspects	Negative Aspects
<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Valuable tool for police. E.g.: In investigation will use social media as a tactic to locate and/or get evidence on criminals- Good job at letting the public know when individual police officers have success in catching a bad guy.- Relationship between the public and the RCMP has improved by the fact that they involve the public in some of their current investigations.- Facebook is really helpful for crime prevention and helping find someone.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">- Risks: In some cases, officers have been fired for posting unethical pictures on their personal pages.- Every small thing is exaggerated, amplified/ unreliable information is easily released.- Careless in circulating information that can affect the officer's private life/ no consideration for the human side of the individual.- Don’t care about the real story, they just want to sell some fake information every time they get the chance.

Discussion

Police officers show up on social media in many different ways, such as through the public posting a picture or a video or through a news agency posting a story, or through a law enforcement agency posting its own story. The important point of this research is to determine the level of the credibility of the information that is posted on social media. It is essential to know from what source it comes and who provided it. Law enforcement is able to build positive relationships with the community. Looking at the answers from the interviews, and the secondary data, we can see that not every police department has a great relationship with social media. In the study, the limitations of social media were the lack of accurate information, and the presence of irrelevant information. The community has no information about the background of the person involved with the police or what information or circumstances lead up to the initial contact with the police.

Conclusions or Recommendations

The content found on social media is vast and varied and may come from any source. This highlights the importance of police agencies having to ensure that the information they disseminate comes only from those designated by the agencies to provide information on the agencies’ websites, Facebook feeds, Twitter or Instagram accounts. The credibility of the information they provide is extremely important for law enforcement agencies.

Proposals

- Minimize the online exposure and the possible threats.
- Have a designated officer in charge of web communication.
- Install mechanism to limit potential threat.
- Protect the employee with a search engine and send a personal notice by email.
- Monitor web sites to control and remove files.
- Establish guidelines on the departments' website.
- Promote public relations. (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012)

References

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