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The Use of Facebook by Police
RCMP Compared to Municipal Departments

Police agencies have begun using social media accounts as ways of communicating with the public. Common messages that these police agencies share on social media regard crime statistics, current crime reports and investigations, updates during times of crisis and even just everyday messages that show what the police are doing in the community.

I looked at how the federal police force of Canada, the RCMP, uses Facebook when compared to the municipal departments in the province of British Columbia. Unlike municipal departments, the RCMP is responsible for policing a wide variety of municipalities throughout Canada. This forces the RCMP to consider the needs of multiple municipalities when it comes to their social media strategy.

I analyzed and categorized all the Facebook posts on the Facebook pages of 11 municipal departments and 12 RCMP detachments for the month of January 2018. Literature was also used to support my findings in the data.

5 key findings were that on average municipal departments: 1) police more people; 2) have a higher number of followers; 3) have a higher percentage of their population following them; 4) create a higher amount of posts and; 5) a higher percentage of their posts are directly related to the community they police.

Key themes found in the literature supported the use of social media by police and supported the findings of my research. Some departments have stated that approximately 15% of cases were closed because of tips directly from their social media posts. Social media also allows the police to display the human side of the department, which can decrease the authoritarian view of the police and increase public trust of the police.

While the RCMP may not have additional resources to allocate to their social media pages, they may be able to direct the resources they already have in the department towards a new strategy. Creating posts that are more focused on the specific community they police may lead them to see the same results found on the municipal Facebook pages.

Further studies should be done on the differences in social media policy between the RCMP and municipal departments to see if those differences lead to differences in the operation of their social media pages. This study could also be expanded to cover multiple social media accounts rather than just focusing on Facebook.

Structured Abstract

Introduction: Police agencies use social media for two main reasons: reaching out to the public, and to disseminate information and manage public opinion (Ruddell, & Jones, 2013, p. 64). When the police use social media the public perceives them as having greater community relations (Beshears, 2017), they tend to have more trust in the police (Ruddell, & Jones, 2013), and the police are seen as more legitimate (Grimmelikhuijsen, & Meijer, 2015). This research project looked at how the RCMP uses social media when compared to municipal police departments in British Columbia, Canada. The RCMP provides policing services to a wide variety of communities compared to municipal departments which only provide policing services to a specific community. So, does this difference change how the different police forces use social media to engage with the community.

Methods: A mixed methods approach was used to collect data. Primary data was collected on the Facebook pages of 11 municipal police departments and 12 RCMP detachments. All posts from the month of January 2018 were analyzed and categorized. Findings in the literature were used to support the findings in the primary data and further emphasize the importance of the use of social media by police agencies.

Results/Findings: For the police Facebook pages analyzed on average RCMP detachments police 90,027 people while municipal departments police 115,192.91 people. The average number of followers for RCMP Facebook pages was 2,235.27 and the average number of followers for municipal police Facebook pages was 6,859. On average 2.48% of the population followed RCMP pages while 5.95% of the population followed municipal police pages. The average number of posts during the month of January on RCMP pages was 12.27 and the average number of posts on municipal police pages was 22. On average, 55.22% of the posts on RCMP pages were specific to the community that detachment policed while 79.34% of posts on municipal police pages were specific to their community. Posts specific to the community, as well as posts that show the human side of the police department can increase the amount of trust the public has in the police force (Schneider, 2016; Schneider, & Trottier, 2012).

Discussion: While the RCMP has a higher number of officers, those officers are spread out over a greater number of communities. While the RCMP may not be able to allocate more resources into use of their social media pages for their individual detachments, they may be able to change the strategies that those resources use on social media. A much higher percent of posts from municipal police Facebook pages are specific to the community they police. This may show an incentive by municipal departments to create more posts tailored to the specific needs of their community. As shown in the literature this has the potential to build more trust with the public.

Practical Applications: This study demonstrates several differences in how the RCMP uses Facebook when compared to municipal police departments. This study can be used by police departments across the country to examine how they use social media and tailor their strategies to the needs of their community,

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