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Police Use of Social Media: RCMP vs Municipal

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Introduction

In Canada there are three levels of policing: federal, provincial, and municipal. Policing is a provincial responsibility. Municipalities of over 5000 people are required to provide their own police force, however they can contract with the provincial police force to police their municipalities. The provinces are responsible to provide policing to municipalities of under 5000 people, but can contract with the federal police force, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, to provide provincial policing. This has led to the RCMP fulfilling both provincial and municipal policing roles throughout the country. Unlike municipal police forces who police a single municipality, the RCMP polices a wide variety of communities varying in size. Where municipal forces can focus their social media strategies on the specific needs of the community they police, the RCMP must consider the needs of the wide variety of communities they police. This research project looked at how the RCMP can effectively use social media when compared to municipal departments in the province of British Columbia, Canada.

Background

Police agencies use social media for two main reasons: 1) reaching out to the public, and 2) 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), the public tend to have more trust in the police (Ruddell, & Jones, 2013), and the police are seen as more legitimate (Grimmelikhuijsen, & Meijer, 2015). This highlights a theme that when police departments use social media has a tool to engage the public three key things happen: 1) the public sees and acknowledges the police departments efforts, 2) the public trusts the police more, and 3) they see the police as a more legitimate institution. The literature also highlighted three types of posts. Push posts disseminate information to the public. Pull posts ask the public to engage in a specific activity either amongst themselves or with the police department and networking posts show the human side of the police department (Yun, Qunfang, Xing, & Bort, 2017).
RCMP social media pages are controlled by media relations officers, but that position may be held by a regional media relations supervisor officer, or an supervisor in the detachment with other roles. The resources available in each detachment is different, where municipal departments may have the resources to ensure their social media pages are thoroughly maintained.

Methods

A mixed methods approach was used for data collection. Quantitative data was collected from the Facebook pages of 11 municipal police departments and 12 RCMP detachments, all in the province of British Columbia. All posts from the month of January 2018 were analyzed and categorized. The populations of each municipality were also collected as well as the number of followers each page had. Qualitative data found in the literature was used to support the quantitative data and further emphasize the importance of the use of social media by police agencies. The articles selected support strategies currently being used by both RCMP detachments and municipal departments.

Results/Findings

On average municipal police agencies police more people, have more followers, have a higher percentage of their population following them, create more posts, and a much higher percentage of their posts are specifically related to the community they police.

	RCMP	Municipal Police
Average Population	90,027	115,192.91
Average number of followers	2,235.27	6,859
% of population that follows the page	2.48%	5.95%
Average number of posts	12.27	22
% of posts related specifically to their community	55.22%	79.34%

When divided into push, pull and networking posts the RCMP's distribution was: 23.88% push posts, 52.99% pull posts, and 23.12% networking posts. The municipal departments distribution was: 32.64% push posts, 37.19% pull posts, and 33.88% networking posts. While the RCMP posts a higher percentage of pull posts, these posts also include reminders such as not to be distracted while driving, or to drive carefully in inclement weather. These posts are not specific to the community. Municipal department's posts were more evenly distributed throughout the three categories.

Discussion

The RCMP does share a higher percentage of pull posts asking the community to engage in a specific activity. However, these posts can be general posts that can be posted by any police department. For municipal departments, a much higher percentage of their posts are directly related to the community they police and would not make sense if it was posted by another department. This may show an incentive taken on by municipal departments to create more posts tailored to the specific needs of their community. While the RCMP has more officers, those officers are spread out among a greater number of communities. The resources that municipal departments have are much more centralized in their departments. RCMP detachments may not have the resources to maintain a Facebook account, and when they do those accounts are sometimes maintained by a regional supervisor rather than the media relations officer in the community. Regardless of the differences between the police forces, both police forces use strategies on social media that are supported by the literature. For the most part, all attempts to engage the public on social media, big or small, are beneficial to the police department.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Even if the RCMP does not have more resources to allocate to the maintenance of their Facebook pages, the resources already being used there could change their approach. Making a higher number of posts specific about the community they police could have the potential to foster a greater relationship with the community they police. Further studies could be done on how the differences in policies between the departments change the operations of their Facebook pages. Further studies could also incorporate multiple social media platforms.

References

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