

Chapter 13

Use of Social Media for Policing

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ABSTRACT

An overwhelming amount of information (and misinformation) is available on today's social media sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, Flickr, YouTube). Law enforcement agencies actively seek to leverage these resources to improve services and communication with public. Various factors have forced law enforcement agencies to have an active voice on social media. This chapter examines the growing interest of police forces in the use of social media to engage groups previously uninvolved in discussion of community policing and for deliberation about priorities of police forces. The chapter concludes that police forces, in general, have been able to exploit the networked characteristics of social media and the potential of user-generated content. Recommendations are provided to achieve more ambitious aims for using social media for policing.

1. INTRODUCTION

Social media is a complex concept that generally refers to a broad range of non-traditional forms of electronic communication including blogs and micro blogs, discussion forums, media sharing websites, social networks, social news, social bookmarking, and Wikis (Varano & Sarasin, 2014). One common feature of all these is that they are all consumers of content. In contrast to traditional media (such as TV), a user of social media can be both a consumer and a producer of user-generated content and timely news.

One definition of social media is that “it is a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of User Generated Content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) divided social media into six types (see Table 1).

Another very significant feature of social media is rich user interaction that makes social media most successful (Wang, Tang, Gao, & Liu, 2010). Different governments agencies especially police have been using social media for many years now (Walters, 2014; Wagner, 2014). Some early examples of social media use for policing include the 2011 fires at City of Los Angeles that caused extensive damage to vehicles and property worth more than \$350,000 (CNN, 2012). Pushed to their limits, public safety of-

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Table 1. Social Media Types

| Type of Social Media | Description | Example |
|-------------------------|---|-------------------------|
| Collaborative Projects | Allow for the joint and simultaneous creation of content by end-users. | Wikipedia |
| Blogs and Micro-Blogs | Websites that provide date stamped content entries in reverse chronological order | Twitter |
| Content Communities | Sites that provide their users a platform to share media content | YouTube |
| Social Networking Sites | Sites that provides their users ability to connect by creating profiles, sending emails and instant messages to other users | Facebook |
| Virtual Game Worlds | Platforms that represent a 3-D environment whereby users can create and appear in the form of personalized avatars and interact with each other. | World of Warcraft |
| Virtual Social Worlds | Sites similar to virtual game worlds. One difference is that there exist no restrictions on the possible number of interactions that users can have with other. | Second Life Application |

officials used social media as a bi-directional communication tool to both collect and communicate real time information from the public about a rash of fires. In this situation, social media played a critical role in a quick resolution to this crisis by greatly enhancing public safety official’s ability to disseminate information to the public and accessing those segments of public that were non-conventional segments of news (Sutton, Palen, & Shklovski, 2008).

In London terrorist attack in 2005, eyewitnesses used blogs to tell their experience i.e. first-hand reports of the incident. In the Iranian presidential election of 2009, witnesses tweeted during the bloody clash that took place between protesters and government forces. This suggests that people do turn to social media in case of disaster/emergency (LeVeque, 2011; Burns & Eltham, 2009).

During the last decade, social media has brought significant changes in the way we communicate and share information. Nearly 1.11 billion people across the globe, or 16% of the world’s population, were estimated to have accessed Facebook by March 2013(Facebook, 2013). The social media has impacted social landscape, from basic interpersonal communications to playing a central role in toppling of tyrannical governments during Arab Spring of 2011 (Howard & Hussain 2011).

Such breadth and depth of social media impact has caught attention of law enforcement agencies around the globe. Law enforcement agencies, in a bid to expand the scope of their communication strategies, have started to adopt social media strategies. It was estimated that by October 2013, 92% of 600 US law enforcement agencies reported using some form of social media (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2013).

Despite such potential advantages of social media capacity, some law enforcement agencies across the globe still reluctant to accept this new form of communication (Maynard, 2013). It is clear that at least some of this apprehension is due to basic lack of familiarity and expertise (Varano & Sarasin, 2014). Another factor could be that social media are rich, but overwhelming sources of information which required time and resources for proper analysis (Kavanaugh et al., 2012).

This chapter aims to explore the state-of-the-art of social media use for policing to discover its various uses, enablers of its user, usage trends, and issues to come up with specific guidelines/recommendations for future use of social media by law enforcement agencies.

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