The Internet: A New Tool for Law Enforcement

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Abstract

In the past five years personal computers and the Internet have revolutionized how people are now obtaining information they feel is important in their daily lives. With this "on-line" information explosion comes the ability for law enforcement world wide to share information with citizens, local communities and other police agencies. As this ability grows, are law enforcement agencies taking advantage of all that the Internet has to offer? Is this a useful technology or just a passing fad? This research paper will help to identify which law enforcement agencies in the state of Florida are using the Internet to post web sites as well as their perceived benefits (if any), and the agencies' goal in developing these sites.

Introduction

On June 21, 1998, a search of the Internet on the single keyword "police" using the **INFOseek** sm. search engine located 1,126,036 pages relating to that topic. A similar search conducted on June 16, 1998 within the WebLUIS library system on the key words "Police and Internet" produced only 44 citations prior to 1988 and listed 5000 citations from 1988 to 1998. These numbers alone indicate more and more criminal justice and law enforcement agencies are using this technology to some degree. But how effective is it?

With more than 40 million users, the World Wide Web offers boundless opportunities. It reaches a limitless audience, providing users with interactive technology and vast resources. No other medium can achieve this as easily or inexpensively (Clayton, 1997).

Today, more and more people are getting online. A recent Business Week article notes 21% of all adults use the Internet, the World Wide Web or both. A Baruch College-Harris Poll requested by Business Week, which surveyed 1,000 U.S. households, showed that 82% of those who use the Internet or an online service search for information. Seventy-five percent use it for education, 68 % for news and 61 percent for entertainment (Clayton, 1997).

In 1996 the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin conducted a FaxBack survey relating to law enforcement's use of the Internet. This survey revealed that the vast majority of these sites provide information about their departments to citizens. This information generally includes their mission statement, a brief history of the agency and a message from the agency head. Additionally they included information on local fugitives (some even include a list of the FBI's Ten Most Wanted), crime prevention tips, and crime tip hot lines (FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 1997).

The popularity of police home pages and other online sites is evidenced by the number of times citizens access them. Many small to medium-sized agencies generate a surprisingly high level of citizen feedback with their sites, given the relative size of the communities they serve. The town of Arroyo Grande, California, with a population of 15,500 has just over 700 computer sites with Internet access. Still, the police department home page averages 475 hits per month. The Township of Fairfield, New Jersey, Police Department's home page receives 400 and 500 hits in any given month. The Chula Vista, California, Police Department's home page receives 700 hits per month. In its second

week of operation, the Beaufort City Police Department's Web site recorded over 1,000 hits. The Davis Police Department, serving a city with a population of 51,000, receives approximately 20,000 hits per month on its Web site. The Chicago Police Department topped their unofficial survey with 40,000 hits per month (FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 1997).

Such numbers reflect very strong public interest in accessing crime - and police - related information via the Internet. Not surprisingly, several respondents noted that the number of hits their sites receive has increased at a steady rate, as the number of Internet users grows. Ironically, many of these same agencies initiated their online sites reluctantly - unsure if public interest would warrant the effort. Law enforcement agencies that have not yet established an online presence might be missing out on an exciting opportunity to advance their computer expertise while they enhance their relationship with the citizens they serve (FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, 1997).

As early as 1994 the law enforcement community began to see the importance and power of the Internet.   John Jay University offered a computer account and the City University of New York (CUNY) computer center provided the necessary hardware and software resources and in November of that year developed The Police Discussion List, POLICE-L (Rudd, Alex H., 1997).

Police-L is an e-mail-based forum for nonreal-time communications over the Internet. Any current or former law enforcement officer who has an e-mail address capable of sending and receiving mail on the Internet may subscribe.

A list member sends an e-mail message to the list address. The message, in turn, is distributed to all the lists' subscribers. If someone responds to the message, the reply, too, is distributed to everyone on the list (Rudd, Alex H., 1997).

"Everyone has heard the media trumpet the virtues of the Internet (a.k.a., the Information Superhighway, the National Information Infrastructure, etc.) and how this miraculous resource will change lives for the better. Now, law enforcement is becoming involved in this trend, although in many cases, agencies apparently get involved only to be trendy, not because they have a vision of the possibilities associated with this technology" (Manning, 1997).

The philosophy of community policing advocates increasing the communication and interaction between a police agency and the community it serves. By focusing on solving problems at the neighborhood level, local government organizations working in close concert with citizens and community groups help to improve the quality of life for all. The Internet provides a great opportunity to establish an information resource for the community and to solicit citizens' comments and questions. (Manning, 1997).

Should your agency be on the Internet? While it is true that public agencies frequently have difficulty finding resources for such a project, some situations must be approached as investments in the future. Each agency will have to examine its needs for both the short- and long - term future.

The Internet offers many opportunities for law enforcement agencies to connect with their communities, reduce publishing costs, recruit employees, and conduct research. Criminals already ply their illicit trade over the Internet. Today, leaders of the criminal justice community have a chance to embrace this exciting new resource and put it to good use instead (Manning, 1997).

This research paper will focus in on specific trends developing within this field of

evolving technology in the state of Florida. Does this new technology fit in with today's law enforcement philosophy and if so, who is using it and how is it being used?

Research Methodology

To better understand the status of the Internet within the criminal justice arena in Florida, two surveys were developed and sent by fax or mailed to four hundred and seventeen (417) State, County or Municipal law enforcement agencies. The first survey dealt with questions and issues for Florida agencies that currently have posted web sites on the Internet. This instrument consisted of 14 questions ranging from agency size and web site size to topics contained within their site (appendix A). Most questions required a forced choice. An additional comment section was included to address the issue of the agency's philosophy for developing a web site as well as its perceived benefits.

The second survey was developed for agencies which do not currently have web sites for their department. Again agency size as addressed as well as the perceived obstacles prohibiting them from having a web site if they desired one. This survey also contained 14 questions (appendix B). Most questions required a specific response. An additional comment section was included to address the issue of the agency's philosophy for developing or not developing a web site.

Prior to faxing or mailing the surveys to these agencies, each agency was contacted by phone in order to obtain their fax number and to determine if they had a web site. This information was used to direct the proper survey to each agency. A total of 12 "no web site" surveys were returned by agencies that had web sites. While the proper survey was re-sent to those agencies, only two returned the proper survey completed. Additionally, a number of the surveys were returned without being completely filled out and they offered no explanation as to why those sections had been left blank.   Inaccurate information was also received on several of the returned surveys. One large municipal agency responded that their site consisted of only two pages. A quick review of their site revealed that it contained at least 50 to 60 pages.

The original intent of this research was to try to identify key elements common in well developed, functional law enforcement web sites. Using this information, a model web site could be developed and implemented by other agencies desiring to have a web presence. The focus groups for this study were various law enforcement agencies which had already developed and posted web sites on the Internet. End user input was not addressed during this study.   Future related studies should strongly consider user groups to help determine what functionality they would desire in law enforcement sites.

Results

Of the 417 law enforcement agencies in Florida, the initial telephone survey revealed that 132 currently had web sites. Of the 417 surveys sent out, there were 174 responses. Nintety-two law enforcement agencies reported that they did not currently have web sites while the remaining 82 stated they did. The survey showed that one agency established its web presence in 1993 with the remaining sites being developed after that time. In 1995, 15 of the responding agencies went online, while in 1996, 19 more sites were added. The largest increase in agencies posting web pages occurred in 1997 with 28 and a slight decrease occurred through October 1998 with only 17 of the responding agencies placing sites on the Internet.

Growth of Web Sites

Year site established (responding agencies)
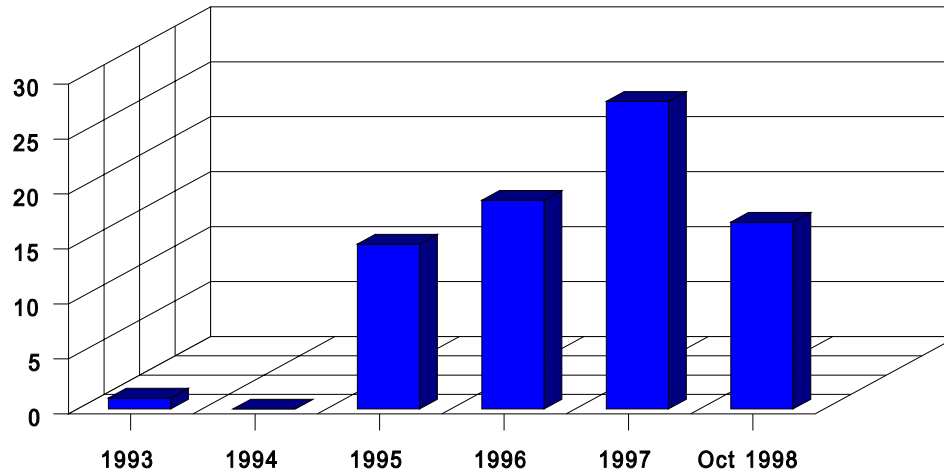
In an attempt to determine what information was being placed on web sites, 15 topics or types of information most commonly found on sites were listed and each responding agency with a site checked those items that appeared on their site.

From that list, the top seven items are listed below and are ranked highest to lowest:

1. Agency mission statement
2. Picture of agency head
3. Statement or welcome from agency head
4. Crime prevention tips
5. FDLE sexual predator list
6. Other content*
7. E-mail addresses for department and agency members

* The "Other content" was an open text comment area. While many of these comments described more detailed crime prevention programs, 73% indicated that they used the web site as a recruiting tool for the agency. No other topic was listed as often as recruiting in the "Other content" section.

Those agencies without sites were given the same 14 subject topics and ask to indicate which ones they would put onto a site should they develop one. The top seven categories for this group are as follows:

1. Mission Statement
2. Statement or welcome from Agency Head
3. Crime prevention tips
4. Crime statistics

5. Department history w/photos
6. E-mail addresses to the agency and members
7. Tip Hotline

Those departments with sites were also asked if they felt that their web sites were achieving the desired results. All 83 of the responding agencies replied affiratively. Determination of "desired results" varied widely from agency to agency, and included measures such as: volume of e-mails, personal comments from citizens, and the amount of traffic or hits registered on the sites. Although a hit counter is an excellent tool to determine if a site is being viewed, only 26 of these departments have placed a counter on their site.

Only five agencies reported that they had solved any crimes via their web site. Those agencies are The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (multiple cases), the Seminole County Sheriff's Office (multiple cases), the Fort Lauderdale Police Department, the Florida Atlantic University Police Department (two cases) and the Town of Palm Beach Police Department (one case).

The Florida Department of Law Enforcement reported the greatest success in solving crimes via the web, citing the capture of one of Florida's top 8 Most Wanted who was captured in Mexico after his photo was placed on their site. In addition, they have arrested or assisted in the arrest of more than10 sexual predators after citizens have called local law enforcement agencies to report these predators were in violation of registration requirements.

The Florida Atlantic University Police Department reported the arrest of a student for selling GHB (the "date rape" drug) after receiving a tip by e-mail.

The Town of Palm Beach Police Department reported the recovery of $15,000.00 of jewelry and cleared the case with an arrest. This was part of a one million-dollar jewelry robbery and they received information about the robbery after the case was profiled on their web site.

The web site's size (the number of pages contained within the site) was also examined. The average size of a law enforcement site in Florida is 28 pages. Four sites were excluded from this average because of their above average size as reported on their survey. Those agencies were The Seminole County Sheriff's Office (349 pages), The Florida Highway Patrol (446 pages) The Florida Department of Law Enforcement (more than 1,000 pages) and the Florida Game and Fresh Water Fish Commission (hosting more than 2,000 pages).

Agency size did not appear to dictate the size of its web site and no real correlations were drawn here. The Pasco County Sheriff's Office with an agency size of 500 personnel (Law Enforcement and Corrections) serving a population of more than 250,000 residents has a web site consisting of 11 pages. In comparison, the St. Pete Beach Police Department with a combined sworn and non-sworn staff of only 50 employees serving a population of 11,000, has a web site containing 53 pages.

Those agencies without web sites were asked to identify the primary reasons that they did not have one. There were six options to select from:

1. No perceived value to the agency.
2. Lack of knowledge about web sites.
3. Financial restraints or concerns.

4.   Lack of computer equipment.
5.   Did not know what to put onto a web site.
6.   Other (free text comment)

Thirty-five agencies stated that the main factor prohibiting their department from having a web site where the associated costs. The lack of knowledge about web sites was cited by 25 agencies while 19 stated it was either a lack of time for such a project or the lack necessary equipment. Ten agencies stated they did not see a value in having a web site and one indicated they had no idea what to put on a site.

Even among the 92 responding agencies that currently do not have department web pages, 68 have Internet access while only 16 did not. The most commonly documented reason those agencies did not have Internet access was concern about the potential abuse of its use by department personnel.

We often embrace new technology before understanding how it might impact our profession. This seems to be the case with web sites as well. Law enforcement's use of web sites or web pages is clearly in its infancy. The survey results from those agencies that currently have sites reveal that for the most part these sites consist of static pages. They offer information to the public on a wide range of topics but remain typically non-interactive. This means if the information a citizen wants is not on the web site there is no way to get it. These pages are normally posted on the web site and never change. Pages that have a welcome statement form the agency head, contain the agency's mission statement and even crime prevention tips (if they are not updated) are common examples.

Agencies without web sites

Prohibitive Factors
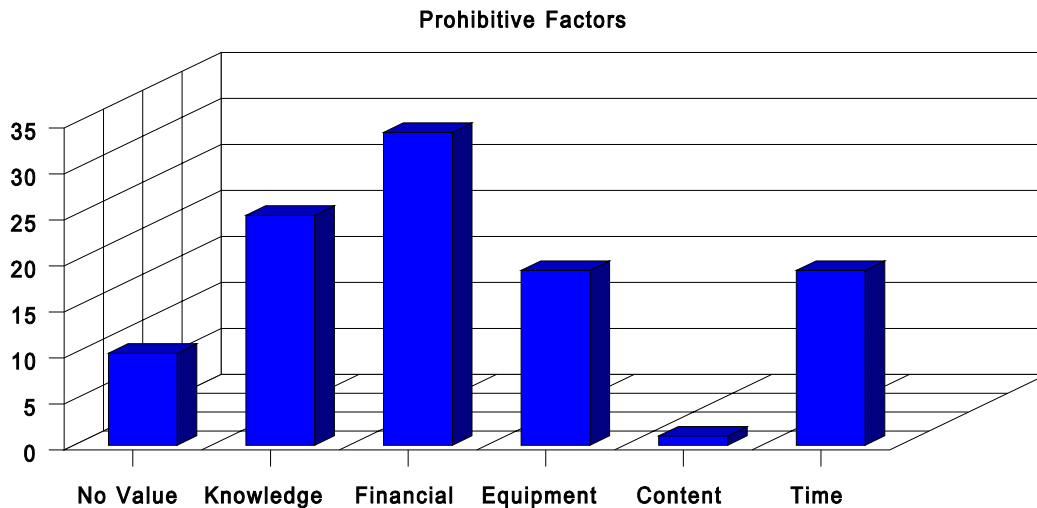
Of the 78 agencies with web sites that responded to the survey, only six offered citizens the ability to file police reports via the Internet. Of the 92 responding agencies that did not have sites, only 10 indicated would offer this feature on their site.   This is a strong indication that many agencies have not yet discovered the vast potential of web sites. The ability to be interactive with the citizens that have access to the Internet is the next direction law enforcement must explore.

Summary

Some of the current trends in law enforcement web site development are just now beginning to tap into the power and flexibility of the Internet and its many applications. Current crime statistics are now appearing on sites with the ability for "surfers" to select specific geographic areas to get crime types and trends. This feature is increasingly popular with real estate agents, home buyers and business owners who are looking to move to "safer" communities.   The ability to file a minor police report from home via the Internet is also gaining in popularity. Many of these reports are filed simply to comply with insurance requirements and have little or no solvability factors.   Such cases are seldom forwarded to the Criminal Investigations Division for follow-up. However the initial report, if taken in the traditional manner, may take a patrol officer out of service for an extended period of time to meet with the victim to obtain the required information. Internet reporting allows the agency the flexibility of determining what information they require to file a report and can easily build these requirements into the electronic reporting form. The risk of receiving false Internet police reports is no greater than with law enforcement agencies that currently take crime reports via the telephone.

The St. Pete Beach Police Department is currently developing a program which will allow insurance agencies to go on line and obtain traffic crash reports. This should greatly reduce the amount of time currently spent by their clerical staff in responding to the hundreds of requests they receive for these reports.

Nearly any law enforcement form that a citizen may need to fill out can easily be formatted into a downloadable file which can be printed at home at their convenience. These forms can be completed and then brought to the agency for proper action. These same forms (normally ones that do not require original signatures) can also be developed for electronic submission, eliminating the need for the resident to make a trip to the local, and often not so local, law enforcement headquarters. A few examples of typical forms would be bicycle registrations, burglary alarm registrations, and vacation home checks.

The cost of developing a web site for a police department should no longer be the single reason prohibiting them from establishing one. Web site development businesses are growing at an enormous rate. As competition increases, the costs associated with a sites development are dropping. Server space for sites, which until recently was only available from a limited number of vendors, averaged $80.00 to $100.00 per month. Now a number of young companies offer almost unlimited server space for as little as $15.00 per month.

Site developers charging $200.00 to $300.00 per page no longer have the "corner on

the market" as they did just12 months ago. Advances in software and the decreasing cost of high end computers has attributed to an explosion of inexpensive, professional web site designers. Any law enforcement agency looking to develop a turn key "web presence" can now do so for an annual cost of only two to three thousand dollars.

Law enforcement must continue to find new and innovate ways to reach out to the community it serves. Programs such as Community Policing, DARE, and now Comp-Stat are examples of pro-active programs attempting to meet these goals. The Internet will certainly play an important part in this redevelopment of policing philosophies as we attempt to increase the level of service we provide our citizens with the limited resources available.

Lieutenant Todd Kirchagraber is a long time member of the St. Pete Beach Police Department and administrator of the department's web site.

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