Law Enforcement Agencies Embrace the Social Media Lifestyle

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Abstract

The purpose of this research paper was to determine if Florida Sheriff's Offices have embraced the use of social media as a way to interact with their communities. All sixty-seven (67) counties in Florida were surveyed. The data illustrates the frequency of agencies using social media and whether social media use for community outreach has been successful. This paper also offers insight into the progressive world of social media and makes suggestions for how law enforcement agencies can become involved in social media and use it to improve their relationship with the public.

Introduction

The advancement of social media and its effects on the daily routines of our society is evolving daily. Many people have chosen to live their lives glued intently to the updates and information received from social media. We now see that people of all ages and organizations of all types are using social media like never before. The International Association of Chiefs of Police defines social media as "a category of Internet-based resources that integrate user-generated content and user participation" (IACP National Law Enforcement Policy Center, 2010, p.1). Experian Marketing Services in their 2013 Digital Marketer Report defines social media as including everything from photo and video sharing sites to social and professional networks, to online forums and more. In a typical month, three-quarters of all online adults (76 percent) say they have visited a social networking site like Facebook or Twitter, and 70 percent visited photo or video sharing sites like Flickr and YouTube (Experian Marketing Services, 2013).

Charlie Gilkey (2008) describes three different types of digital residents in society. He asks the reader to imagine two land masses separated by a river. On one land mass, he calls the analog continent, resides an older generation who did not grow up with the technological and digital developments that now define our society. On the opposite side of the river is the digital continent comprised of younger people who grew up after the invention of the modern technologies. The river between the two is the digital divide. To explain the three types of residents he explains that the people who live on the analog continent are digital transients. They only come over to the digital continent if they need to and only until their tasks are done. The next type is the digital immigrant who grew up with modern technology but must take the time to learn to use technology. Finally there are the digital natives who know no other world then the digital continent. The author concludes that one side of the divide is not any better than the other; they just have different ways of interacting with the world. (Gilkey, 2008)

Law enforcement agencies must examine the full impact of social media on society and how it affects law enforcement agency operations. If the goal for law

enforcement agencies is to capture the full attention of the public and solicit input, it is important to realize by what medium they communicate. The creation of a social media web page or forum may serve to open unused avenues of communication and create participation from the public for the betterment of the agency and community. Agencies should have an intrinsic desire to communicate with their community. Becoming engaged in social media is a way to better accomplish this necessity. Cara Donlon-Cotton (2012) states, "if you're not utilizing social networking sites for community relations, you've essentially told your community that you've chosen to ignore them. Think about this: If person tells you they prefer, and rely, on phone communications and instead, you choose to send them a letter via snail mail. What message does that send? So, if you choose not to use social networking and continue to communicate via press release, what does that say about you and your department?" (Donlon-Cotton, 2012)

Many law enforcement agencies throughout this country have already created social media pages through mediums such as Facebook and Twitter. In the 2012 International Association of Chiefs of Police Social Media Survey, a highlight was that 92.4 percent of agencies surveyed use social media (IACP Center For Social Media, 2012). Within this paper I examine whether Florida Sheriffs' Offices have embraced social media by being involved in the usage of social media; and for those agencies that have, if they feel that it has fostered a more successful partnership with the public they serve. Some discussion is given on the background of social media networking existing between law enforcement and the community and the pros and cons of a social media page for law enforcement agencies.

Literature Review

A report prepared for the U.S. Department of Energy gives some insight as to how the Seattle Police Department came to use social media. It quotes Sergeant Sean Whitcomb of the Seattle Police Department as saying prior to the widespread use of social media their department had to rely on newspapers and television to communicate with the public. Now the media landscape is changing at a rapid pace. Through blogs, Twitter, and their police blotter they have become more proactive and through these social media tools they can reach the public much quicker and build public trust. Sergeant Whitcomb explained that people value speed of information transmittal over accuracy. He further stated that people are more forgiving if information comes out quickly and is updated later than if it is withheld for verification purposes. In this same report, Glen Woodbury, Director of the Center for Homeland Defense and Security at the Naval Postgraduate School in California challenged participants to consider why they want to use social media tools. Examples given include:

- Building trust
- Communicating more effectively
- Saving lives
- Promoting participation in government
- Sharing information
- Building situational awareness
- Fostering transparency   (Lesperance, Godinez & Olson, 2010)

Now that agencies can identify why they want to use social media tools a transition into some of the ways for law enforcement agencies to be successful in using social media is plausible. An article written by Lauri Stevens describes nine steps to be successful when using social media in policing. Stevens states that social media tools create a way that agencies can monitor the pulse of the community and listen to citizens opinions about the department, crime, the quality of life, and events. The nine steps with brief descriptions are discussed below.

1) *Have a Strategy* – Each social media site or tool has benefits and drawbacks. (i.e. Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, messages boards, etc.) Use more than one if necessary to balance what they offer. Also, determine who will be responsible for managing the tools. Strategically plan the roll out of the new social media with consideration of providing training to the agency.
2) *Create a Department Policy* – A policy is essential considering the gravity of legal risks and agency concerns for participation in social media.
3) *Assign Staff* – Plan for staffing and monitoring of the social media sites. The sites often do not cost anything but personnel to monitor them does. Stevens recommends that one to four hours per day, including weekends, is suggested to monitor and manage the content going through the departments social media program
4) *Technology Is Not the Answer* – The agency must be able to provide content on its sites. Just merely existing on a social media platform is not enough. It comes back to the content.
5) *Abandon Fear* – One of the biggest concerns for law enforcement is that too much information about the department will get out. However, social media allows the department's voice to be heard which can reveal personality and culture from the inside. Social media allows departments to reach the public and it also allows the public to reach the departments. Positive and negative feedback will come from the public. By using social media, departments can at least see what the public is saying and have the opportunity to engage the community in a constructive discussion.
6) *Do Not Abandon the Effort* – If a department creates a social media presence and then walks away from it, it will lose credibility.
7) *Avoid Anonymity* – The aim is to enhance communication. Put an identified officer and profile information on the site. The content shared is only good when a real person is standing behind it.
8) *Twitter is Two-Way* – Once twittering begins, continue to follow others and post updates. This practice may lead to good investigative leads from comments in the social media universe.
9) *Get Help if You Need It* – Ask other law enforcement agencies or an expert to help who knows the tools that will accomplish the department goals. Find someone who can plan, implement and manage the social media program. (Stevens, 2010)

Anthony Guglielmi, director of public affairs for the Baltimore Police Department states that "residents have a right to know if a homicide or a violent crime had occurred in their neighborhood when it occurs, and not have to wait." He goes on to state that that the Baltimore Police Department uses social media as an extension of the local news to supplement the information. Guglielmi also says, "it's about getting people engaged. If people are talking about it and keeping abreast of what is going on, they're going to hopefully take part in crime fighting through partnering with the police and participating in community groups." ("Social networking for law enforcement," 2010)

The Boca Raton Police Department (BRPD) in Florida has clearly defined goals when it comes to social media. BRPD strives to effectively engage the community as its number one priority. Their view of the community is that the community is the Police Department's customers. This philosophy is supported by allowing two-way communication for heightened levels of transparency on the social media platforms in use. "By using social media, BRPD has been able to effectively market themselves within their community, increasing awareness and establishing positive relationships." (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2010)

Research has identified six different ways law enforcement is utilizing social media and real-time search to enhance tactics, disseminate public information, and ultimately prevent criminal activity.

1. Police Blotter Blogs – This is a record of events at a department

2. The Digital "Wanted Poster" – Modern-day law enforcement agencies are posting descriptions of criminals on today's most trafficked spots – namely the social web

3. Anonymous E-Tipsters - The program allows tipsters to send information anonymously through a variety of means including "anonymous web chat, text tips and secure social media publishing

4. Social Media Stakeout – It's important for police to search the real-time web to target particular keywords and phrases being passed on social media

5. Thwarting Thugs in the Social Space – Law enforcement has been able to infiltrate street gangs by posing as fellow gang members online, making connections, and intercepting criminal communications as they happen

6. Tracking and Informing with Twitter – At least 700 law enforcement agencies worldwide use Twitter" (Cohen, 2010)

The progression into the implementation of social media sites in law enforcement agencies comes with barriers that must be overcome. Worldwide engagement with the public on social media is recognized as a challenge. In a paper about law enforcement and social media use in the United Kingdom researchers Jamie Bartlett, Carl Miller, Jeremy Crump, and Lynne Middleton explain "the established culture of policing is necessarily based on command and control, hierarchy and operational security. It is conditioned by the role of the police as agents of the criminal justice system and hence the need to preserve the integrity of evidence and the rights of suspects and victims. These cultural values often sit uncomfortably with the openness, informality and public nature of communications on social media." (Bartlett, Miller, Crump & Middleton, 2013).

Guglielmi from the Baltimore Police Department further describes a challenge that social media emergence creates. He describes this challenge as verifying and

maintaining the accuracy of information. He says that their department receives large amounts of information, which must be verified before notifying people on social media sites. Guglielmi states that police need to make certain that the information they distribute is accurate and prevent false information from circulating into the community as an event unfolds. A final drawback that he cites, which is consistent with L. Stevens' research, is that keeping the social media sites up to date and time sensitive requires manpower. ("Social networking for law enforcement," 2010)

In his thesis paper John Lenkart sees some vulnerability of social networking. His explanation of the concerns can certainly apply to law enforcement. Lenkart says that "the availability of the wealth of personal data in social networking media is the foundation of a process to target and exploit critical individuals within an organization. Information from social networking enables social engineers to employ more refined techniques for intelligence collection." (Lenkart, 2011). He continues to explain that social engineering, which is the attempt to elicit sensitive information by obscuring the true motivation and or identity behind the request, is a viable concern that must be mitigated.

On the whole, the research conducted revealed a positive relationship between social media usage and law enforcement. The research found has shown the need for social media involvement as well as a best practices approach in the ways it is implemented within law enforcement agencies.

Method

The purpose of this research is to find out to what extent Florida Sheriff's Offices are using social media to engage their community and further if they feel it has improved the relationship between the agency and community. Although some data exists on a national spectrum, I have chosen to narrow my survey to the State of Florida and its sixty-seven (67) counties. This choice was made in order to stay true to the research question that is the focus of this paper.

The data was collected with a thirteen (13) question survey submitted electronically to the sixty-seven (67) Sheriff's Offices within the State of Florida. This ensured a large but manageable response of data to be examined. Further, it ensured that the number of personnel and population served varied. The target group for the survey was the Public Information Office or Community Services Office within the Sheriff's Offices. Personal data was not collected so that the respondents could remain anonymous. The initial questions on the survey were focused on the size of the agency as well as the size of population served by the agency. As the survey continued, if the agency answered *Yes* to using social media within their department some follow up questions were asked to help identify the following: social media tools used, hours spent on staying current with social media tools, who manages the social media, and if social media has improved the agency relationship with the community. If a response of *No* was received in reference to whether the agency uses social media, then additional questions were asked to help identify reasons for not using social media, or if use of social media is planned for implementation in the future.

A strength of this survey was determining how community relations and support are measured. A weakness found was not asking the surveyed agencies whether they felt quick release of information is better than slower released, well vetted information. In order to prevent the research paper from becoming too broad I was not able to examine all facets of social media involvement within law enforcement. Some may feel that the survey shortchanges the scope of what needs to be examined when looking at social media involvement in law enforcement. The survey is included in Appendix – A.

Results

Thirty-nine (39) of the sixty-seven (67) sheriff's offices responded to the survey. This gave me a return rate of fifty-eight percent (58%).

Response Rate Percentatge

Did not respond
42%

Responded
58%
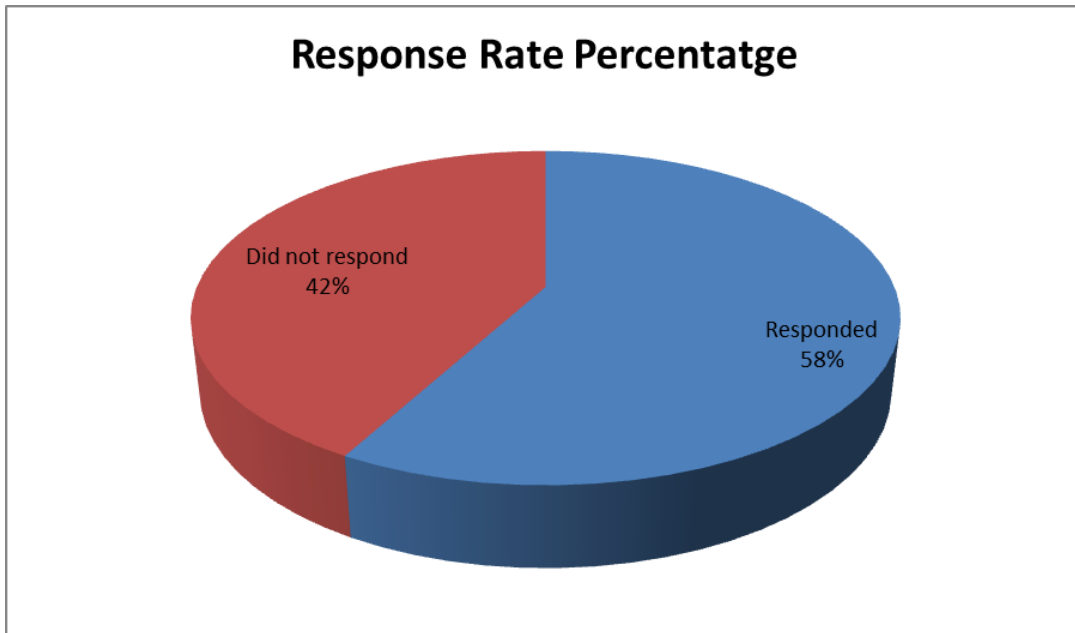
Discussed below is a sampling and description of questions directly related to the focus of this paper. Additional questions were also entertained to retrieve data that may be useful for future studies.

I examined the results of the survey and found a diverse representation of agency size. I received the greatest response from an agency size of 101-301 employees.

Q1 Please indicate the number of employees within your agency:

Answered: 38   Skipped: 1
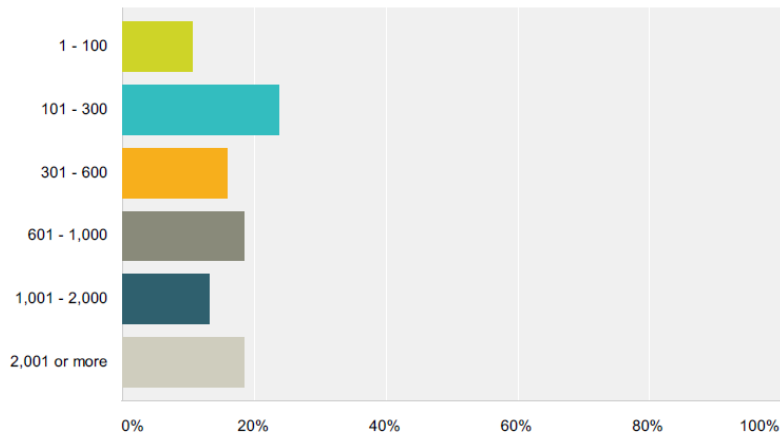
Answer Choices	Responses	
1 - 100	10.53%	4
101 - 300	23.68%	9
301 - 600	15.79%	6
601 - 1,000	18.42%	7
1,001 - 2,000	13.16%	5
2,001 or more	18.42%	7
Total		38

Also as exemplified by the graph below, I received results showing law enforcement agencies serving communities from populations of 10,000 to 500,000 or more. However, approximately 46 percent of the responding agencies surveyed have a population of 250,000 or greater.

Q2 Please indicate the population size served by your agency:

Answered: 39   Skipped: 0
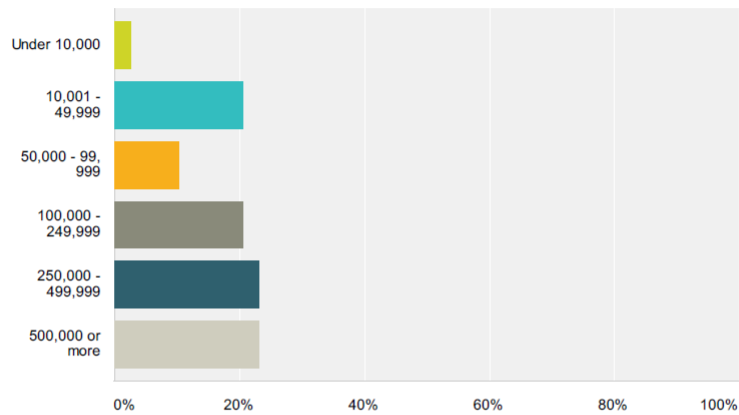
Answer Choices	Responses	
Under 10,000	2.56%	1
10,001 - 49,999	20.51%	8
50,000 - 99, 999	10.26%	4
100,000 - 249,999	20.51%	8
250,000 - 499,999	23.08%	9
500,000 or more	23.08%	9
Total		39

The results of question three (3), and the similarity in data from the 2012 IACP social media survey results that I discussed in my introduction, are comparable. Of the thirty-eight (38) agencies answering this question, ninety-five (95%) identify that they use social media. This is an increase of approximately two percent (2%) from the 2012 social media survey conducted by the IACP.

Q3 Does your agency currently use any social media tools to interact with the community (ie: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc)?

Answered: 38   Skipped: 1
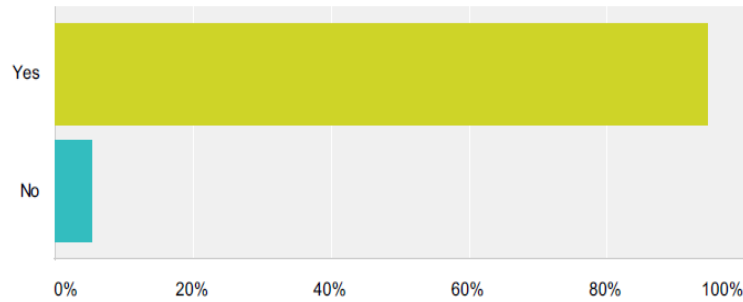
Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	94.74%	36
No	5.26%	2
Total		38

On question four (4) the data results show that one hundred percent (100%) of the thirty-four (34) agencies that answered this question use Facebook. This is followed by Twitter at seventy-six percent (76%) and YouTube at sixty-eight (68%).

Q4 What social media tools does your agency currently use? (Select all that apply)

Answered: 34   Skipped: 5
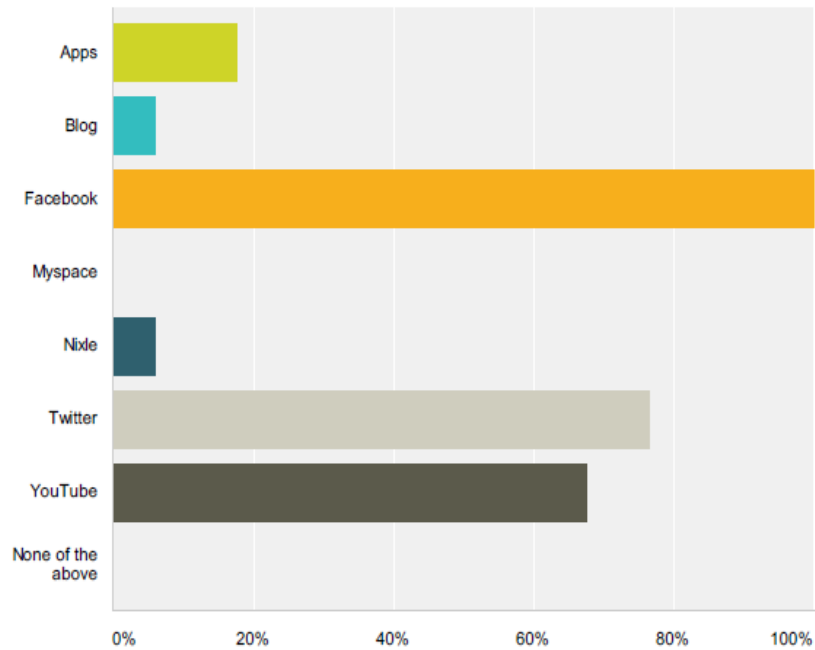
Answer Choices	Responses	
Apps	17.65%	6
Blog	5.88%	2
Facebook	100%	34
Myspace	0%	0
Nixle	5.88%	2
Twitter	76.47%	26
YouTube	67.65%	23
None of the above	0%	0
Total Respondents: 34		

Thirty-three (33) of the thirty-nine (39) agencies answered question seven (7). Of those thirty-three (33) agencies ninety-four percent (94%) either agree or strongly agree that social media has improved the agency's relationship with the community.

Q7 The use of social media has improved your agency's relationship with the community.

Answered: 33   Skipped: 6
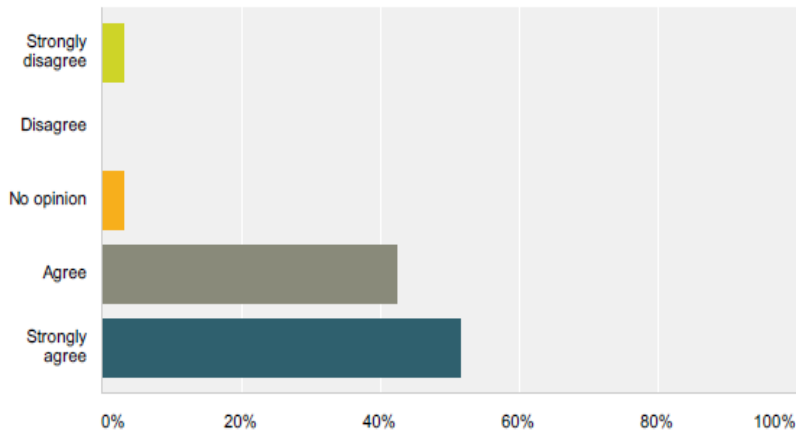
Answer Choices	Responses	
Strongly disagree	3.03%	1
Disagree	0%	0
No opinion	3.03%	1
Agree	42.42%	14
Strongly agree	51.52%	17
Total		33

Of the thirty-two (32) agencies that answered question eight (8), ninety-seven percent (97%) use social media comments and feedback to help measure relationships. Seventy-two percent (72%) also rely on word of mouth to provide measurement. Finally, thirty-one percent (31%) indicate that they also use surveys.

## Q8 By what methods do you measure the relationship with your community? (select all that apply)

Answered: 32   Skipped: 7
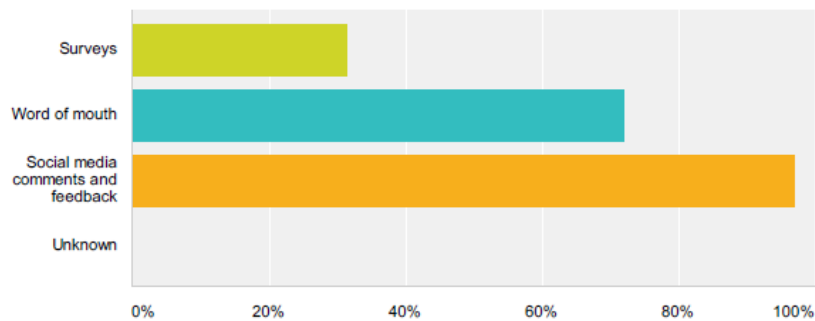
Answer Choices	Responses	
Surveys	31.25%	10
Word of mouth	71.88%	23
Social media comments and feedback	96.88%	31
Unknown	0%	0
Total Respondents: 32		

| #	Other (please specify)	Date
1	number of followers and where they are from	6/3/2013 1:11 PM
2	Feedback from all sources; letters, phone calls, social media etc.	5/23/2013 11:45 AM
3	Email received, letters to the editor, phone calls	5/20/2013 12:20 PM
4	Measure not sought.	5/20/2013 10:04 AM
5	Calls and letters	5/20/2013 9:17 AM
6	Analytics	5/20/2013 8:29 AM

In reference to question nine (9), thirty-three (33) out of thirty-nine (39) agencies answered this question. Sixty-one percent (61%) either agree or strongly agree that social media has helped solve crimes.

Social media has helped your agency solve crimes

- 21% Strongly Agree
- 40% Agree
- 24% No Opinion
- 15% Disagree
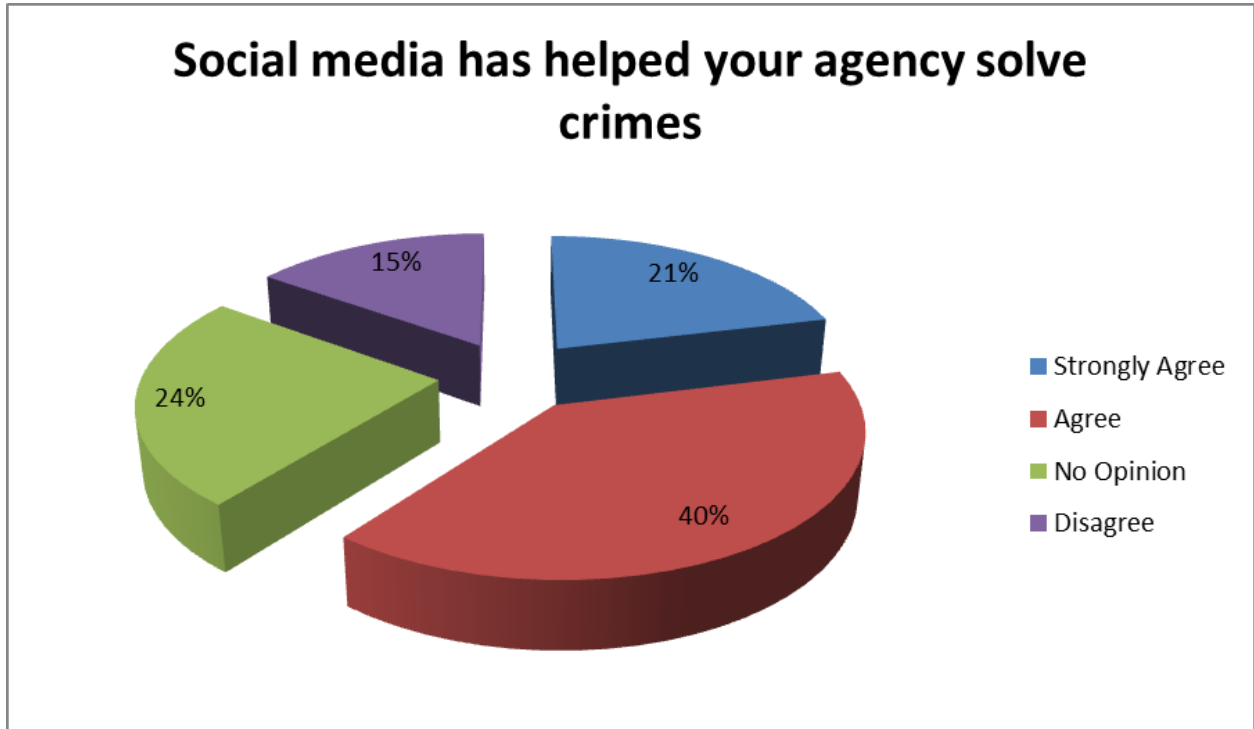
Thirty-three (33) of the thirty-nine (39) agencies responded to question ten (10). Twenty-seven (27) of the thirty-three (33) responded yes to having a written policy. Six (6) of the thirty-three (33) responded that they do not have a written policy.

Q10 Does your agency have a written social media policy?

Answered: 33   Skipped: 6
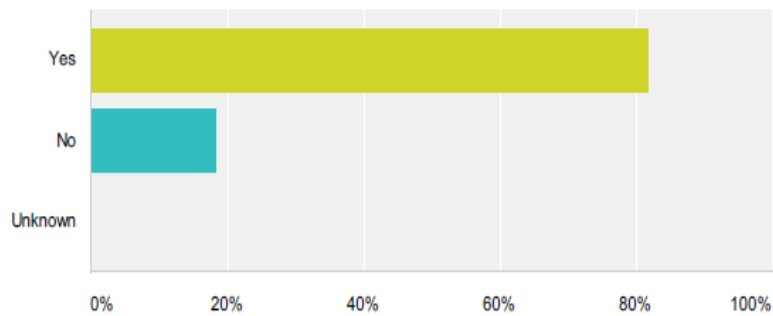
Answer Choices	Responses	
Yes	81.82%	27
No	18.18%	6
Unknown	0%	0
Total		33

Discussion

Through analysis of the data, it is evident to me that Sheriff's Offices across the state of Florida use social media as a way to interact with the community. Thirty-six (36) of the thirty-nine (39) agencies that responded to my survey indicate that they use social media. That equates to ninety-five percent (95%), which is a convincing number. In addition, ninety-four (94%) agreed that social media had improved the agency's relationship with the community. The responses showed that agencies measure their relationships by monitoring the social media feedback. In addition, word of mouth is widely relied upon, followed by surveys.

The data suggests that if law enforcement agencies intend on participating in social media as a way to successfully interact with their community, then they must dedicate manpower and the time needed to accomplish this. Out of the thirty-two (32) agencies that responded to question five (5), which asked how many hours are spent to maintain social media presence, thirty-four (34%) indicated five to nine hours a week were necessary. Twenty-five percent (25%) indicated that twenty-five or more hours a week were necessary. Twenty-two percent (22%) felt ten to fourteen hours a week were necessary.

The data also revealed that the larger the agency in size, the more time they are able to allot to maintaining, monitoring, and responding on social media sites. For a comparison of time spent on social media weekly I looked at two different agency sizes illustrated in the survey. The first is agency size of one hundred one to three hundred (101-300) as they represent 24% of the agencies response. The second is agency size of two thousand one (2001) or more as they represent 18% of the agencies response. Of the nine (9) agencies with one hundred one to three hundred (101-300) that responded to the survey, eight (8) answered the question regarding hours spent on social media. Four (4) indicated that they spent five to nine (5-9) hours a week on social media upkeep. Of the seven (7) agencies with greater than two thousand one (2001 or more) employees that responded to the survey, five (5) answered the question regarding hours spent on social media per week. Three (3) indicated that they spent twenty-five (25) or more hours on social media upkeep. In addition, most agencies use their Public Information Officer to manage their social media sites. Some, however, use civilian employees to manage them. Three (3) agencies indicated that they have an "online communications manager". Two (2) of the three (3) are agency sized of two thousand one (2001) or more and serve populations of five hundred thousand (500,000) or more. My data reveals that there is a relationship between hours spent on social media and agency size or population served. However, I feel that more research is necessary to determine if this is a direct result of agency / community size and allocated budget.

Results also yielded that sixty-one (61%) of those who responded indicated that they agree that social media has helped solve crimes within the jurisdictions. It is also important to note that of the thirty-three (33) agencies that answered the question about whether or not they have a policy in place, eighty-two percent (82%) state that they do. The results of the survey also show that Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube are widely used tools in law enforcement social media interaction.

While research was underway the Lake County Sheriff's Office (LCSO) created a social media presence by establishing an agency Facebook page. This page is primarily monitored by the public information office. I interviewed public information officer, Lt. John Herrell, to discuss the Facebook page. He stated that the page receives both positive and negative comments from the public; however it is at an approximate 9 to1 ratio; nine positive comments about the sheriff's office to one negative comment. He also indicated that the agency spends approximately 5 to 8 hours a week on the page. Press releases, community programs, and wanted subjects are all topics on the LCSO Facebook page. This social media page is in its beginning stages with approximately nineteen hundred (1900) likes. The agency is transitioning into using it more to interact with the community. The majority of feedback on the page is positive comments and support for the agency.

The research and data conducted confirms that use of social media is a positive tool for law enforcement. Participation in technology and communication is imperative for our day and age and is necessary as we continue to move into the future.

Recommendations

I found while analyzing the literature review, a dissenting opinion about the speed in which information is released and validated prior to release. Sergeant Whitcomb of the Seattle Police department states that the public is more forgiving of quickly released information even if it needs correction. However, Anthony Guglielmi of the Baltimore Police Department states that police must ensure the accuracy of information prior to its release to the public. I find this to be interesting and worthy of further research.

I would also recommend that future researchers of this topic examine law enforcement officers use of social media and disciplinary issues that coexist. I think that it would be interesting to see how frequent social media violations occur and result in disciplinary action since this technology is forever developing and becoming more prevalent. This will inevitably bring about policy changes and further limitations of social media use by law enforcement officers. I also think it would be important to monitor how societal change and civil rights movements impact law enforcement social media usage. There is an inherent expectation that civil rights challenges and freedoms by which this country was founded upon arise because of social media use or abuse.

Captain Todd English has been in law enforcement with the Lake County Sheriff's Office since 2000. During his career, he has been assigned as a patrol deputy, tactical team deputy, narcotics detective, and patrol field training officer. In 2007, Todd was promoted to Sergeant and assigned to Road Patrol as a sector supervisor. In 2010, he was transferred to the Criminal Investigations Bureau as supervisor of the property and economic crimes unit. In 2011, Todd was promoted to Lieutenant supervising the Criminal Investigations Bureau and the Crime Scene Investigations units. In 2014, Todd was promoted to Captain supervising the Special Investigations Bureau comprised of the Narcotics/Vice Unit and the Intelligence Unit. Todd earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in Criminal Justice from the University of Florida.

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Appendix – A

Survey Questions

1) Please indicate the number of employees within your agency.

   a. 1 - 100
   b. 101 - 300
   c. 301 - 600
   d. 601 – 1000
   e. 1001- 2000
   f. 2000 or more

2) Please indicate the population size served by your agency.

   a. Under 10,000
   b. 10,000 – 49,999
   c. 50,000 – 99,999
   d. 100,000 - 249,999
   e. 250,000 – 499,999
   f. 500,000 or more

3) Does your agency currently use any social media tools to interact with the community (i.e. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, etc.)?

   Yes or No   **-if no skip to Number 11 for additional questions**

4) What social media tools does your agency currently use? (select all that apply)

   a. Apps
   b. Blog
   c. Facebook
   d. MySpace
   e. Nixle
   f. Twitter
   g. YouTube
   h. None
   i. Other (please specify)

   _____

5) How many hours are spent maintaining, monitoring, and responding to your agency's social media presence on a weekly basis?

    a.   1 – 4
    b.   5 – 9
    c.   10 – 14
    d.   15 – 19
    e.   20 – 24
    f.   25 or more

6) Who manages your agency's social media tools or sites on a day to day basis? (select all that apply)

    a. Public Information Officer
    b. Community service division / officer
    c. Chief executive
    d. Command staff
    e. Civilian employee
    f. Other (please describe)
        _____

7) Has the use of social media improved your agencies relationship with the community?

Strongly disagree   Disagree   No opinion   Agree   Strongly Agree

8) By what methods do you measure the relationship with your community? (select all that apply)

    a. Surveys
    b. Word of mouth
    c. Social media comments and feedback
    d. I don't know
    e. Other (please explain)
        _____

9) Has social media helped your agency solve crimes within your jurisdiction?

Strongly disagree   Disagree   No opinion   Agree   Strongly Agree

10) Does your agency have a written social media policy?
        Yes   No

End of survey for those who answered Yes to using social media tools on question # 3

11) Is your agency considering the adoption of social media?
  Yes or No
  If No please explain why not

  _____
  _____
  _____

12) If your agency is considering the adoption of a social media presence, what is the anticipated time frame?

  a. Within the next six months
  b. Within the next year
  c. More than a year
  d. Not applicable

13) What are the concerns of using social media in your agency? (select all that apply)

  a. Security issues
  b. Privacy issues
  c. Liability issues
  d. Personnel constraints
  e. Time constraints
  f. Other (please specify)

  _____