

Social Media and Its Impact on Florida Law Enforcement: What Are We Doing and Are We Using It Effectively?

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Abstract

This paper will describe the impact of social media on law enforcement. It will discuss the current state of social media in Florida law enforcement and explore how it affects the law enforcement community. Social media is an ever changing technology that is rapidly becoming the main communication venue in our society. Used wisely it can be an immediate and effective medium for disseminating valuable information to the public as well as being a conduit for public input. As is inherent with technology that, as it advances, so too will the law enforcement community need to advance to keep pace with these changes.

Introduction

For years the law enforcement community has worked within the framework of communicating with the public by using media outlets, community meetings to hear citizen concerns, and more recently agency web sites. All of these methods are effective ways to disseminate information, but they fall short, leaving a large gap in communicating with the emerging social network crowd.

Social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Google+ and LinkedIn are just a few sites that have taken off and have become some of the most searched terms on the internet. "Facebook" was the most searched term in 2011 with users spending approximately 55 minutes a day on Facebook. Twitter adds about 500,000 new user accounts a day with approximately 190 million tweets written each day (IACP Fun Facts). 75% of online adults 18-24, 57% of online adults 25-34 and 30% of online adults 35-44 have a profile on a social network site (Lenhart). The share of adult internet users having a profile on a social network has more than quadrupled since 2005 (Lenhart). By contrast, fewer than half of all law enforcement agencies, 48.6% have a social-media policy according to a survey by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP). Recent events in the Middle East such as Arab Spring, and the Trayvon Martin case in Orlando, Florida (Hightower) show where social media has been credited with heightening the social awareness of these incidents, and it has shown the power and influence that social media can have on shaping events. When it has been used in law enforcement, it has had some success. Social media has been credited with capturing wanted criminals and pushing out valuable information to the public. The IACP indicates that the use of social media by law enforcement is catching on and agencies are starting to incorporate a social media programs. The IACP and the Department of

Homeland Security have each started social media programs to offer training or to monitor social network websites (Cain, 2011).

The intent of this study is to determine the state of social media policing in the State of Florida. Study and analysis of law enforcement agencies within the State of Florida will be done to compile data on the following:

1. Does the agency have a social media program?
2. What does the social media program entail and has it been effective.
3. Are the social media uses and mediums consistent throughout the State of Florida?
4. Which of these possible uses for social media has been most successful?
 - a. Community engagement
 - b. Recruitment
 - c. General announcement
 - d. Soliciting tips
 - e. Investigations

The results of this analysis will attempt to identify what percentages of law enforcement agencies within the State of Florida use social media. It will identify what these agencies are doing, how effective they are and which social media mediums worked the best? Finally it will also try to identify shortcomings, and recommendations for improvement.

Method

To understand the social media climate of law enforcement throughout the State of Florida, the researcher will gather information from public documents, law enforcement periodicals, newspapers, and open source information from the internet.

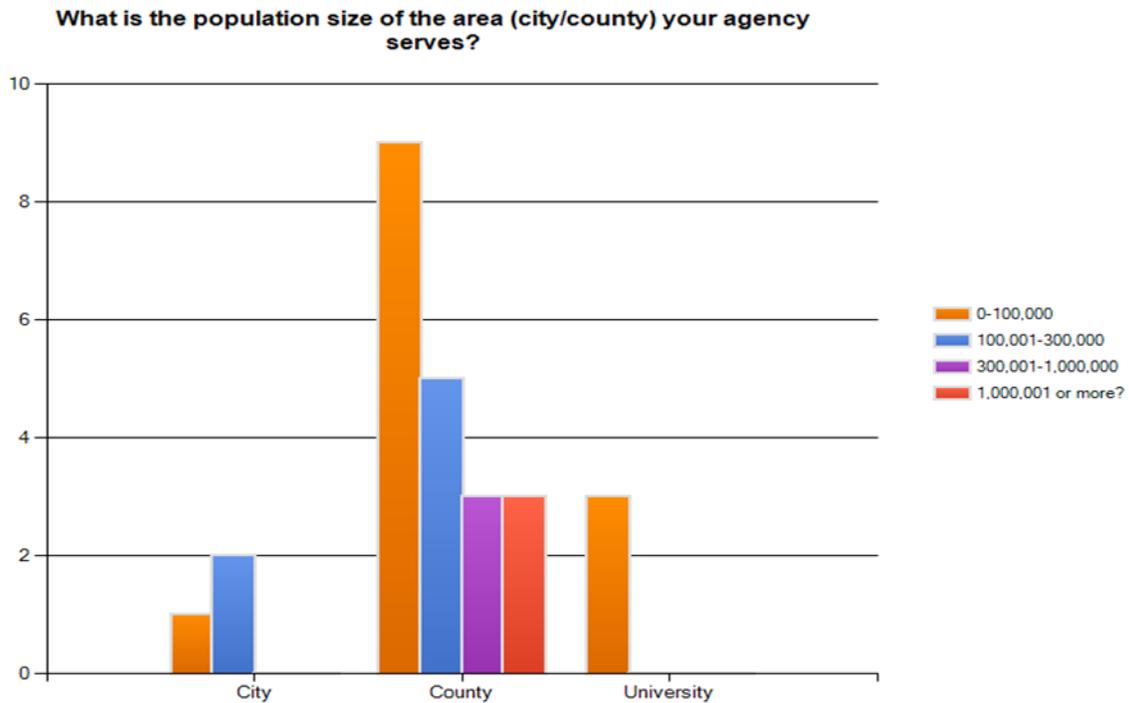
Additionally, a survey was conducted of several different types of law enforcement agencies in Florida. Some of the agencies contacted were county sheriff's offices, state university police departments and large metropolitan police departments. A total of 100 agencies were asked to participate. The survey consisted of ten questions relating to agency size, population density, fiscal means and types of social media used along with their effectiveness. The 10 question survey was sent to the identified agencies using the survey website, Survey Monkey. Each participating agency was asked the same questions. Once the survey period was complete the survey was tabulated and the results were analyzed.

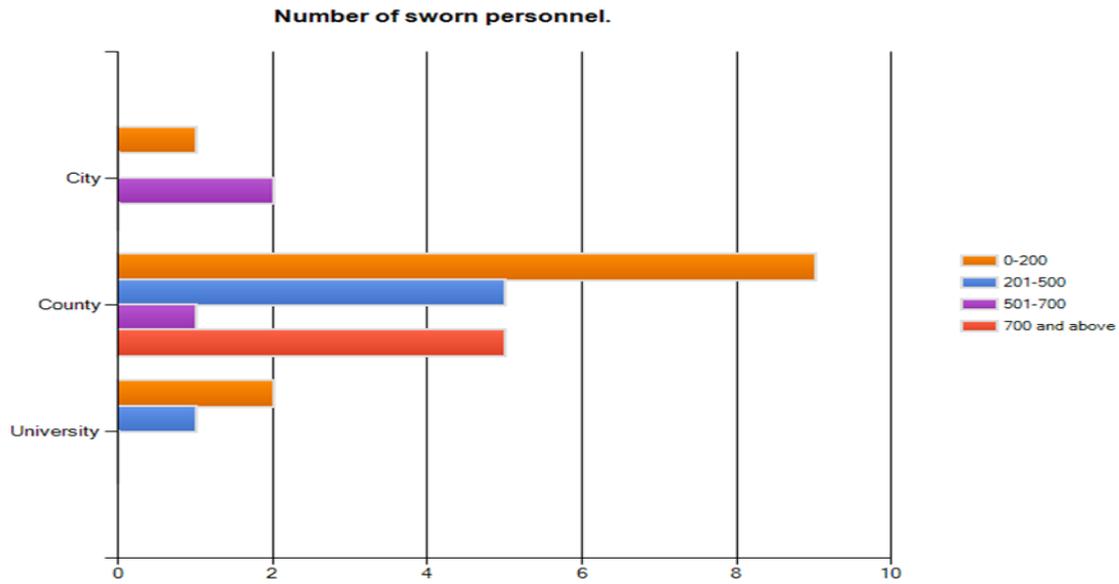
The research process faced various hindering factors such as obtaining respondents, and accounting for bias in the qualitative measures of the survey.

Results

The survey was conducted over a two month period of time. Various agency types were surveyed to include Sheriff's Offices, University Police Departments and Metropolitan Police Departments. There was a 33% response rate to the survey with the largest number of respondents being Sheriff's Offices providing 76.9% of all accumulated data. State/University Police Departments and Metropolitan Police Department each accounted for 11.5% of all accumulated data. Of the responding agencies, only one indicated they did not use social media.

Each agency was asked to provide basic demographic information concerning the number of Floridians they serve along with the number of sworn officers within the agency. As these two graphs indicate, 50% of agencies provide service for less than 100,000, 26.9% serve 100,001 to 300,000, 11.5% serve 300,001-1,000,000 and 11.5% serve one million or more. 46.2% of all responding agencies have less than 200 sworn personnel, 23.1% have between 201-500, 11.5% have between 501-700, and 19% exceeding 700 sworn personnel.





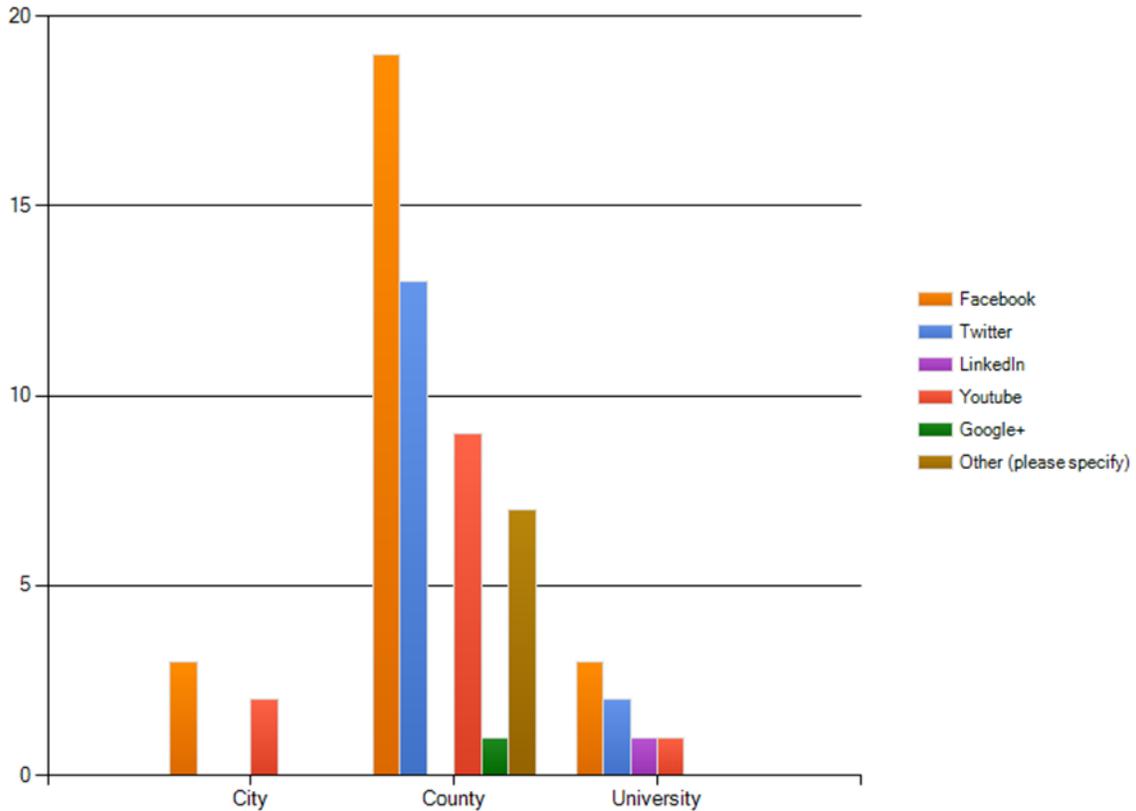
The social media question has several components to consider. Do the agencies have a social media program or use social media? What type of social media does the agency use, and what is the most effective medium? How long has the agency used a social media program, and who manages it?

92.3% of all respondents indicated the agency has some type of social media program. The other 7.7% indicated they do not have a social media program and they listed reasons such as the agency did not want one, or the program was run by an entity other than law enforcement.

Over 50% responded that the public information officer was responsible for the programs management. Community Affairs units, followed by Information Technologies, were next with this responsibility.

The social mediums in use varied between Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, Google+ and others. Many agencies use multiple forms of social media and the format type is not specific to agency types. The graph below shows that Facebook is used by almost all law enforcement agencies at 96.2%. Twitter is second with 57.7% followed by Youtube at 46.2% and LinkedIn and Google+ at 3.8%. Miscellaneous responses indicated that agency websites, electronic billboards and blogs were also used.

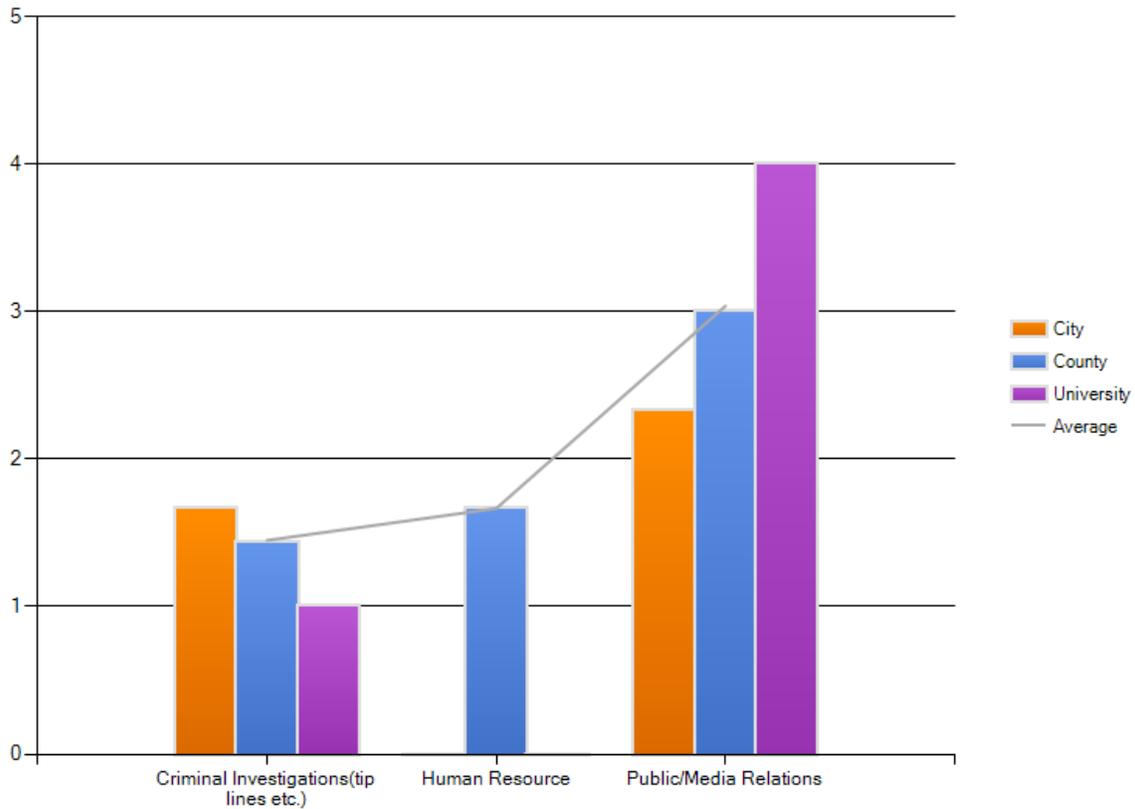
What social media formats does your agency use?



When determining the primary purpose for using social media, the respondents were given three identifiable purposes and one non-specific purpose. The identifiable purposes were Criminal Investigation, Human Resources and Public/Media Relations. Along with the purpose, respondents were asked to identify the percentage each purpose played in their program by identifying which percentage category their program fell into from 25%, 50%, 75% and 100%. In addition, each respondent was asked to identify which social media identifiable purpose their program had the most success.

Based upon this criteria, Public/Media Relations and Criminal Investigations were rated as the highest purpose categories for agency social media programs. Only county agencies used their social media programs for Human Resource purposes. This graph indicates the break down by agency type.

What is the primary purpose of your social media program?



The most success has been seen in the Public/Media Relations where 92.3% of all respondents indicated that this was their most successful part. Criminal Investigation and Human Resources each received 3.8%.

80% of all agencies agree that Facebook is the most effective form of social media, followed by miscellaneous with 15.4%, and Youtube with 3.8%. Twitter was mentioned in the miscellaneous category as situational used for real time traffic. LinkedIn and Google+ were observed to have no value.

Discussion

The use of social media in Florida is a relatively new communication tool. Most social media programs in law enforcement were started within the last five years. Most of these programs seemed to be geared towards public and media relations with its focus on pushing information in to the public.

As the study, suggests most law enforcement agencies statewide have some type of social media program. These programs are in keeping with the national trends by using social media's primary mediums, Facebook and Twitter. The primary purpose of public and media relations with these two mediums appears only to supplant telephone and personal contact methods as ways to communicate with media outlets.

Hyperlinks and press releases conducted through Facebook and agency websites to the normal media outlets are now the standard.

Facebook and Twitter both are effective and rapid ways to distribute information to the public in times of emergency. They also provide a valuable connection to the public when seeking information on crimes affecting the community. It is somewhat concerning; however, that little effect has been seen when using the largest user social media mediums for the purpose of criminal investigation. With over half the respondents stating they used social media for criminal investigations you would expect a higher effective rate than just below 4%. Because the study did not go into detail specifics on methods or content used in this category no data is available that could provide some insight into the low success rate. A future study into this category is warranted and may be able to provide some answers.

Using social media as a tool for Human Resources is another area of concern in law enforcement. Of the surveyed agencies, only Sheriff's Offices indicated that they used social media in this category with an effective rate of below 4%. These results may be explained through further research, but on its face is concerning as the emerging work demographic will be looking to social media for future job opportunities.

In this age of fast, reliable, electronic communication and it's ever changing technology, the way the world does business is in perpetual motion. The younger generations are becoming both the targeted work force and the consumers of this type of media, and they are no longer looking for information where law enforcement has traditionally provided it.

As previously stated, the largest group of social media users is below the age of 25. This group is the demographic that is taught and expected to be the user of social media. This is the group that is using things such as LinkedIn, Google+ and Twitter. They search for jobs, read their news, and send instant updates to events going on around them. This is the group that will want real time information and look to the places that provide it.

It is imperative that law enforcement agencies keep up with the changing technologies that provide these services. Law enforcement should value and place an emphasis on understanding electronic social media and the people who use it. It should design and build programs that users of social media both understand and can access independently of traditional media outlets. The social media user demographic is growing. As people look to social media sites such as LinkedIn for their employment opportunities, law enforcement needs to adapt their hiring processes and expand their recruitment practices to accommodate this. Failure to do so could potentially limit the applicant pool of qualified future law enforcement professionals.

Lieutenant Jim Morgan has been in law enforcement for 23 years. He works for the Clay County Sheriff's Office currently assigned to the Robbery/Homicide unit. His experience includes patrol, investigations, SWAT, COPS and Operations administrative supervision.

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