

USING THE INTERNET FOR
POLICE/COMMUNITY RELATIONS IN 2008

Article

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The Internet is one of the most significant technological innovations of the twentieth century. It has created unprecedented opportunities for communication, business, commerce, research, and education, and it is changing the way individuals and groups interact. This article focuses on how law enforcement can use the Internet for police/community relations in 2008 by examining how law enforcement agencies interact with the communities they serve and the potential role of the Internet in these interactions. The issues discussed include the changing nature of communities, the growth and use of the Internet, the nature of law enforcement communications, the decline of social capital, and the potential uses of the Internet in communities.

Redefining Communities

Law enforcement agencies routinely identify the communities they serve by the physical location of the residents, such as a geographic neighborhood or business district within the political boundaries of a city or county. The Internet has changed the way communities are defined by enabling individuals to communicate and form interest groups without regard to geographic location or boundaries. Vast numbers of people now communicate and share information quickly and efficiently via the Internet. Lovers of Shakespeare can now gather in online chat rooms to discuss his written works rather than meet in neighborhood book clubs. Congregants can attend virtual religious services in a church across the country; mourners can attend the funeral of a friend when they are unable to be there in person.

While the Internet has blurred the boundaries and definitions of community, it has also enabled users to strengthen ties with, and increase participation in, local groups and organizations within their geographic communities.

Internet Use

As the Internet increasingly becomes integrated into everyday life, and access becomes easier and more affordable, the number of users has grown steadily. During the second half of 2002, the number of individuals accessing the Internet increased from about 88 million to 104 million, or 56% of all adults in the United States (Rainie & Packel, 2001). The largest user group, representing 75% of adult Internet users, consists of individuals from 18 to 29 years old. By the end of 2002, 60% of Americans had access to the Internet (Horrigan & Rainie, 2002).

The Internet has become a primary source of all types of information for users; the variety and amount of information available on the Internet is staggering. The use of the Internet to access federal, state, and local government Web sites has increased from 47% of Internet users in March 2000 to 62% in the summer of 2002 (Horrigan & Rainie, 2002). Seventy-one percent of Internet users report they always or almost always find the information they want from a government Web site (Horrigan & Rainie). As government agencies continue to improve the services and information they offer online to meet the high expectations of users, the demand for this information and the number of users who turn first to the Internet for government information will continue to grow.

Law Enforcement Communications with Communities

Communicating with individuals, groups, and communities is an integral part of a peace officer's job. Most people never experience personal contact with a law enforcement officer. Their perceptions are formed by images portrayed in the media, or by the shared experiences of others, which are often perceived as negative or unwanted contacts (e.g., traffic enforcement stops).

Law enforcement agencies routinely distribute information through the media and publicity programs in order to change public perception, portray the positive duties performed by officers, and to generate support for the police during times of crisis. This form of communication is largely one-way and asymmetrical.

Many individual and small group contacts made by police provide greater opportunity for two-way symmetrical communication, such as neighborhood meetings and project committees. However, these contacts are limited in scope and few people in the community may be aware of them.

The Internet offers the potential to increase opportunity for widespread communication with and among community groups, and for two-way symmetrical exchanges of information and ideas. By utilizing features such as group e-mail, Internet chat room discussions, and Internet videoconferencing, law enforcement has the opportunity to reach large numbers of individuals quickly and to receive information and immediate feedback from those receiving the communication (Flanagin, 2002). Different groups of individuals can be identified and communications designed for their specific need, such as providing real-time crime information for each block in a neighborhood. Groups can be linked for better coordination and exchange of ideas, and individuals who are unable or prefer not to attend community meetings can be included via cyber-meetings and video conferencing.

Communities and Social Capital

Law enforcement professionals have long recognized that communities and neighborhoods that enjoy a high level of participation and communication among their residents tend to be safer and more desirable places to live and work. Law enforcement

agencies have committed much time and many resources to community-based programs like Neighborhood Watch in order to help build this involvement and connectivity. Such programs provide social networks that have value both to the individual within a specific community and to society as a whole. This concept has been studied by social scientists and is referred to as social capital.

Social capital refers to the myriad of ways individuals connect with each other and form social networks which produce benefits to both the individual and the community (Putnam, 2000). Through networks, people obtain jobs, connect with others who share similar interests, find personal satisfaction in clubs and group associations, and gain a sense of belonging. Communities benefit from strong social capital by enjoying lower crime rates, greater civic involvement and input, and stronger economic conditions.

The Decline of Social Capital

While elaborate and scientific studies of social capital over time are limited, there is some indication that social capital has steadily been declining since the 1960s (Putnam, 2000). Surveys conducted in the late 1980s and 1990s indicated that the majority of U.S. citizens believed that their parents' generation was more involved with the community, the average American was less honest and trustworthy than the previous generation, people had become less civil, civic involvement had weakened, and social and moral values were lower than when they were children (Putnam). A study of trends in various forms of civic engagement indicates that, compared to the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, civic involvement and the resulting social capital have significantly declined (Putnam). The types of civic engagement studied included political, civic, and religious participation, workplace connections, informal social involvement, volunteerism, and

philanthropy. One of the most concerning effects of this decline has been on the reciprocity and trust among individuals (Putnam). A community with a high degree of social capital tends to experience a greater sense of trust and reciprocity among its residents. Honesty increases; community members are more likely to respect the rights of others and less likely to tolerate cheating and lying (Putnam, 2000). Communities that operate with trust and reciprocity tend to be safer, healthier, more efficient, and economically stronger than those with lower levels of social capital.

The Internet and Social Capital

Although the Internet is a new technology, it may have potential as a communication tool to build social capital and impact the trends described above. Currently, Internet users can participate in almost any type of group or social movement via the Internet, including virtual meetings, chat rooms, protests, clubs, church services, and support groups. There are indications that the Internet has actually increased social capital during the past decade by forming networks in cyberspace (Lin, 2001). Although it is too soon to determine the impact of the Internet on communities or whether or not social capital will increase, it is valuable to examine the potential contributions and pitfalls of the Internet on civic engagement.

Since communication and connectivity is a basic prerequisite for building social capital, it is reasonable to view the Internet as having significant potential in facilitating these connections and in enhancing communities (Putnam, 2000). The Internet makes communication and involvement both convenient and quick. It creates the ability to connect with others within the same community and all over the world, forming various types of virtual communities and groups.

Although the potential for the Internet to enhance social involvement is significant, there are several challenges that must be considered when examining this potential. First, there is still a fair degree of inequity between those who have access to the Internet and those who do not. This limits the ability of the Internet to build social capital and to engage groups of people who have traditionally been inactive in community-building activities (Putnam, 2000). Second, Internet communication does not effectively transmit nonverbal cues and information that are important to building understanding and trust in communications (Putnam). Third, although the Internet greatly increases communication, it does so mainly among individuals who share the same interests (Putnam). Unlike physical communities, which consist of many diverse individuals with a variety of interests, Internet groups tend to be interest-based and relatively homogenous. Fourth, there is risk that the Internet encourages solitary activity and decreases personal contact and involvement with others, which could lead to isolation and antisocial behavior (Cornish, 1999).

Increasing Internet access for low-income individuals and groups can help mitigate the current inequity between those with Internet access and those without. This can be accomplished by providing inexpensive or subsidized Internet service, public access areas such as libraries and community centers, and training and support for new users.

The communication challenges presented by the Internet - overcoming the lack of nonverbal communication cues, developing trust, and building bridging social capital by connecting diverse individuals - are more difficult to address. The solution may lie in viewing Internet communication as an enhancement to face-to-face contact rather than as

a substitute for it (Putnam, 2000). Building strong and involved communities and increasing social capital may be best accomplished by strengthening more traditional forms of community interaction and involvement, while layering on Internet communication to create multiple means and opportunities for involvement (Putnam).

Expert Input using the Nominal Group Technique

The nominal group technique (NGT) is a structured process during which a small group of individuals with expertise related to a certain issue reach consensus about the issue. The purpose of an NGT is to receive informed input and to generate ideas and information about an issue in order to better anticipate and prepare for the future. This is accomplished by identifying trends and potential future events that may impact the issue. An NGT panel convened in December 2002 to consider how the Internet will be used for police/community relations in 2008. The following is a summary of the panelists' opinions.

The panelists believed the future use of the Internet for police/community relations will greatly depend on the ability of individuals to access law enforcement information and services online. The panelists believed the ability to access these services will increase fourfold in ten years due to several factors, including rapid technological advances, the capacity of law enforcement agencies to dedicate the resources necessary to provide and maintain online services, and the widespread availability of the Internet to individuals of all socioeconomic levels and ethnicities. The number of users will be important because demand for information is likely to be a significant factor driving the availability of information via the Internet.

The panelists felt the amount and variety of law enforcement information, as well as the number of methods used to deliver the information via the Internet, will dramatically increase in the future and will have significant impact on police/community relations. New methods of connecting to the Internet are emerging rapidly, such as wireless connections with cellular phones, and clothing and accessories wired for mobile Internet access. These Internet tools will allow individuals to interact with, and access information from, law enforcement agencies from any location at any time. This could allow individuals to access information based on location, such as crime information for specific neighborhoods.

The panel extensively discussed the security of information transmitted via the Internet. The panelists believed that although Internet security would improve in the future, it would remain a significant concern for both law enforcement and Internet users. If users do not believe the Internet is secure, they will neither share information with law enforcement nor trust information they receive from law enforcement. The ability for the public to trust law enforcement was a key issue during most of the panel's discussions.

The panelists felt that as Internet technology becomes more advanced and a greater variety and amount of information is stored on the Internet, the system will become more vulnerable to computer hackers, even with increased security. In general, the panel was concerned about events that would diminish the public's trust in using the Internet for involvement with law enforcement agencies.

The Issue of Trust

One of the overarching concerns expressed by the NGT panelists throughout the exercise was the impact of the identified trends and events on the public's trust of the Internet, of the security of the information exchanged over the Internet, and of law enforcement's use of the information gathered via the Internet. The panelists believed the effective use of the Internet for police/community relations would hinge on whether or not the users trust both the police and the Internet itself. If users perceive the information they provide will be misused by the police, or if there is risk of hackers obtaining the information, users will be reluctant to use the Internet to communicate with the police or to form Internet networks within their communities.

Research and the Nominal Group Technique results indicate that the technology associated with the Internet will allow multiple and convenient ways to connect with individuals and communities. However, the Internet should be used to enhance rather than replace more traditional forms of community relations, such as face-to-face meetings.

Vision of the Future

The vision that emerged is one in which law enforcement uses the Internet to enhance community partnerships with Internet-based interaction and to help build social capital in communities. The key issues involved are (a) building and maintaining trust in Internet communications and in the law enforcement agency; (b) ensuring the security of the information and technology; (c) engaging community members in two-way, symmetrical communication with the police and with each other; and (d) providing convenient and affordable Internet access to community members.

Strategic Approach

A suggested strategic approach for using the Internet to enhance community partnerships and build social capital is to phase in implementation by selecting one community, such as a well-defined neighborhood, as a pilot community. The law enforcement agency would work with the stakeholders and residents of the pilot neighborhood to design and implement Internet communication programs and measure the response and results. The methodology could be modified and perfected prior to expanding the services to a larger area.

There are several advantages to such an approach. The phased approach would allow for short-term successes within the pilot community while paving the way for expansion if the program proves successful. Developing the methodology in a pilot community would allow time to build the necessary trust between the community and the police and would allow problems to be worked out before wider implementation. The use of a pilot community would require a moderate investment of resources initially and, if successful, would increase the chances of continued public and private support. This strategy increases the chances for long-term success by creating opportunities for short-term wins and limiting exposure of problems.

Objectives

The objectives of a strategic plan to utilize the Internet for police/community relations in a pilot community can be divided into two categories: technological and sociological. Technological objectives include goals related to providing Internet access and law enforcement services to communities. Sociological objectives deal with building

trust between the police and community members and enhancing social capital within communities. The following is a list of objectives for each category:

Technological Objectives

- Secure funding to support expanded Internet services within the law enforcement agency, including specialized personnel and training for employees.
- Partner with corporate and/or community-based organizations to provide Internet access and secure communication platforms to the pilot community.
- Partner with public and community organizations and groups to provide facilities where residents in the pilot community who lack home computers can access the Internet.
- Acquire appropriate technology to deliver law enforcement services and information online.

Sociological Objectives

- Enhance in-person neighborhood meetings with Internet-based meetings and discussions conducted via the Internet.
- Utilize the Internet to engage pilot community members in discussions and problem solving about issues that affect them.
- Provide an Internet-based forum for pilot community members to share information and ideas with the police and with each other.
- Disseminate timely crime-related information to community members via the Internet to enhance the traditional concept of neighborhood watch.

A strategic plan to achieve these objectives can be developed and implemented. A strategic plan provides a roadmap for achieving a desired future and acts as a guide for the organization in setting priorities and allocating resources.

Conclusions

The Internet holds great potential for law enforcement agencies to enhance their relationships with communities by combining online, interactive communication with more traditional forms of interaction such as face-to-face community meetings. The Internet offers significant communication advantages, such as real-time transmission of information and data, and the ability to link many individuals simultaneously. Greater involvement by individuals in their community and with their local government can enhance the overall social capital in the community, which generally correlates to lower crime and better quality of life. The success of such communication, however, hinges on the trust developed and maintained between the community members and their law enforcement agency.

By 2008, Internet technology will have advanced to a point where law enforcement agencies could create and implement Internet-based communication networks with their communities. These networks would allow the real-time exchange of information, ideas, and feedback, and would enhance the social capital of the community. If the agency recognizes the potential of the Internet, identifies public relations and community building as priorities, and commits the necessary resources, the Internet will prove to be a valuable tool. It will facilitate open and honest two-way communication between residents and the police. It will provide forums to discuss neighborhood issues and exchange information about criminal activity. The Internet will supplement

neighborhood meetings with frequent online communication, thus building social capital by providing opportunities for community involvement and commitment. The Internet should never replace personal contact between police officers and the people they serve. However, if used creatively, the Internet will enhance the relationship between the police and their community, and between community members themselves.