Chain of Command: Information Sharing, Law Enforcement and Community Participation

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Abstract

Information sharing among law enforcement officers and between law enforcement officers and the public is crucial to creating safe neighborhoods and developing trust between members of society. Since the terrorist attacks on the US in 2001 the US government has implemented a program called the information sharing environment: for both national security agencies and local law enforcement communication and sharing information is a top priority. Human information behavior and human information interaction research has been conducted in a variety of environments yet there is little research related to law enforcement and the public. This note presents early case study research in to this complex information sharing environment. The work builds on the strong tradition of research in information science related to information behavior and hopes to bridge the gap between security and law enforcement conceptions of information sharing and that of information science. This research is being conducted with the collaboration of a major metropolitan police department in the southern United States. The diverse research team brings together an academic, a law enforcement consultant and a constable from Toronto, Canada. While one deliverable of the project is to provide the law enforcement agency with a strategic communication and social media plan; the larger goal is to begin a multiple case research project to develop our understanding of information sharing with these types of unique stakeholders and in these complex environments.

1   Overview

This paper presents work in an ongoing research project to understand and improve information interaction and the information sharing environment between law enforcement and the public. The practical goal of this phase of the project is to develop communication strategies and policy that incorporate social media tools for a large metropolitan police department. The work is being conducted by a diverse team of researchers: an academic, an American law enforcement consultant and for this initial phase, a Canadian constable, with expertise in the use of social media to help create safe and successful neighborhood / police collaborations.

The relationships between law enforcement and the public are often contentious. Across the U.S., there have been concerns with excessive use of police force upon citizens, lack of community engagement in high crime neighborhoods, and frequently a widespread environment of distrust of the police among community members. Information sharing in this environment is crucial, yet plagued with a history of suspicion by both groups, which creates an extremely complex environment for information interaction. In addition to these basic obstacles, law enforcement agencies can be difficult to engage in research. They are in a continual battle to justify their actions in carrying out the jobs they've been sworn to do; the culture of the thin blue line remains strong (Noaks & Wincup, 2004). Social media is the most recent in a long line

of techniques used by law enforcement to reach out to the public and bridge some of these gaps. How to best use these tools and what kinds of policies need to be in place to structure their use is important.

2   Conceptual Framework

Human information interaction and information sharing are key concepts in the field of information science. Under the umbrella of human information behavior, Fidel has published numerous articles, and most recently a book, discussing the importance of conceptualizing information behavior as interaction (Fidel, 2012). Understanding how we interact with systems (including each other) is a key to designing better tools to help us carry out whatever work we're tasked to complete. Related research has focused on academics, students, people in the healthcare field and janitors (Chatman, 1991; Fidel, Mark Pejtersen, Cleal, & Bruce, 2004; Pettigrew, Fidel, & Bruce, 2001; Savolainen, 2009; Solomon, 1997; Diane H Sonnenwald & Iivonen, 1999; Thomas D Wilson, 2000). One group, however that has not been closely studied is law enforcement. In a military context, Sonnenwald and Pierce (2000) looked at information behavior in military command and control situations and much of her work can be applied to law enforcement because of the strong hierarchical nature of information exchange in these environments. This research adds to the robust literature in information behavior and information interaction by bringing the complex work environment of law enforcement to light. Through the case study method (Fidel, 1984) and a focus on information sharing, be it for intelligence gathering or community engagement via community policing. This research also draws on law enforcement and national security discourses of the information sharing environment which took on a new role following the terrorist attacks in the U.S. on 9/11.

2.1   Community Policing

Community policing is an initiative that first became popular in the United States in the 1970s. The goal and logic behind the concept is to increase community awareness of neighborhood safety and crime issues. Law enforcement needs community engagement to effectively carry out their jobs and through active engagement with the public, law enforcement has hoped to reduce crime and engender trust between the public and police. Features of community policing include: neighborhood watch, Night Out events, law enforcement conducting foot and bicycle patrols in communities which are aimed to increase face recognition and hopefully trust.

Community policing has been met with a fair amount of criticism and early research suggested that these efforts did little to reduce crime in neighborhoods and in fact may have resulted in merely moving the criminal element and behavior to another area of the city (Fridell & Wycoff, 2004; Kerley & Benson, 2000; Marx, 1989; Marx & Archer, 1971; Rosenbaum, Graziano, Stephens, & Schuck, 2011; Sung, 2001). More recently, critics have asserted that community policing is actually a result of the "retreat of the police and the public diffusion of surveillance responsibilities" (Reeves, 2012, p. 238).

There are three key elements that must be in place for community policing to be successful. First is an atmosphere of trust between the public and law enforcement, where the public feels that police officers are there to protect them from harm. Second, law enforcement must be transparent where the public feels that the police are honest and fair in enforcing the law. Third is a willingness on both sides to engage in dialogue where the public feels safe enough to share vital information as an engaged collaborative community member (Fridell & Wycoff, 2004). This includes a willingness on the side of the public to share information, including crime tips with the police. This willingness is thwarted by demonizing these individuals as "snitches", who Brown (2007) characterizes as cooperators and informants of crime in a corrupt criminal justice that enforces disloyalty as a means to negotiate lesser convictions resulting in less jail time. "No Snitching" campaigns have taken off as hip and cool, however, because the street/community-based repercussions against people who are willing to cooperate with the police are often grave. For example, in the early 2012, a Philadelphia woman was murdered after she went to the police and identified the thief

who burglarized her store (Stamm & Chang, 2012). This kind of incident is not an isolated occurrence and even if police do develop relationships of trust in communities, that trust is often fragile and rarely, if ever "enough", to effectively and transparently assure the safety of the public.

Social media is the newest tool law enforcement is adopting in the quest to communicate and engage with the public (Lam, 2013). Most commonly law enforcement agencies are using social media; such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube as a means to "tell their own story" rather than relying on the media. As a result, the content shared is primarily related to reporting crimes and apprehensions, but also information about community outreach events. While each of these are important, one of the most interesting affordances of social media is the opportunity they provide to help individuals engage with each other. Using these tools to primarily "push" information fails to take advantage of their greatest strengths. Community policing must involve more than information provision.

2.2   Information Sharing

Information sharing is critical for law enforcement, both internally among fellow officers and externally with the public. As noted by Pilerot, in her examination of the concept and practice of information sharing, information sharing is context dependent (Pilerot, 2012). It is important to note not only the context in which sharing occurs but also what is shared. As a distinct area of research, information sharing has received relatively little attention. TD Wilson (T. D. Wilson, 2010) conducted an extensive review of the extant literature on information sharing and found examples from information science, healthcare, management and information systems fields predominate. He notes a need for increased research in this area. Two related fields that Wilson does not address, law enforcement or security, have an extensive literature related to information sharing. As stated above, much of this work has been done since the terrorist attacks in the United States in 2001. The attacks were seen, in part, as a failure of the information sharing environment (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, 2004).

2.3   Technology: Social Media

Social media describes a collection of applications that can be used to share information in an online environment. Though dialogue is not a necessary part of the definition of social media, an implicit aim is to create a forum of not only information sharing but also, information exchange. These tools also allow users to share information about their own networks (boyd & Ellison, 2007). Some of the most well-known social media applications today include: Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Other popular social media platforms include Vine, Foursquare, and diverse photo sharing applications like Instagram and Flickr.

The popularity of these applications is based in part on the expanded use of smart phone technology. A recent PEW report stated that over 53% of adult Americans now own smartphones (Smith, 2013). For the many cell phone users, posting information concerning their daily activities, articles they may find interesting, or even making plans with friends, has become linked through cell phone use. A text message can be distributed to Facebook and Twitter with relative ease. In fact, the geo-locational feature that is activated by default of smart phones can be used to check-in or connect with the locational application, Foursquare. All of these applications are becoming increasingly intertwined as evidenced by the ever more frequent prompt that one can log in to certain applications using one's Facebook log in information. Social media provides us with the tools to broadcast our interests and proclivities widely.

It is clear that social media can be used in a dizzying variety of ways ranging from simple posting of information, links, photos, audio files, etc. to ongoing and complex exchanges of information. Thus, in turn, social media can also be used as an investigative tool. Common cases of this are recounted by employers or job seekers who have used social media to get more information about an organization or an individual. Law enforcement also uses social media to identify criminal behavior. For example, after the Stanley Cup riots in Vancouver B.C. in 2010, law enforcement was able to identify many of the perpetrators through the posts they made on Facebook (Trottier, 2012).

Social media tools are becoming a common feature in law enforcement agencies' communication practices. Little research has been conducted on the adoption and use of social media by law enforcement, though it has become recognized as an effective tool (Heverin & Zach, 2010, 2011). Earlier adopters of social media were new recruits or officers in the lower ranks of police forces. These individuals began using applications like Twitter and Foursquare to connect with other police and members of the community. Often these messages were alerts about traffic problems or road closures. At other times officers tweeted about events they were participating in with members of the community and at times officers would simple "check in" via Four Square with members of the public they encountered on their beat. Their superiors rarely approved of this police / public engagement at first glance. Social media policies across the board reflect a concern with the potential that members of the force my say something that could be considered unethical or shed a wrong light on the force. These policies mirror earlier policies that related to email usage. Social media is also being used for intelligence gathering (Hays, 2012; Wyllie, 2013).

Perhaps one of the most published methods for employing social media in law enforcement is simply officers searching public social media accounts for Twitter hash tags, image taglines or Facebook postings that exalt criminal activity. Many individuals who commit crimes are eager to publicize their exploits (Bindley, 2013) is only one of many examples. While it may seem surprising that these individuals aren't aware of the fact that their posts are public, or easily accessed, this tendency has become a primary means of intelligence gathering (Trottier, 2012; Wyllie, 2013). A somewhat more interactive method is accomplished by creating multiple identities on different social media sites and attempting to be "friended" either by a direct suspect or someone within the social network of criminals.

3   Method

This is both a formative analysis as well as action research. We are examining the communication patterns of the Dallas Police Department and will introduce ways for enhancing communication both within the department itself and between law enforcement and the public using social media. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are critical to this process and techniques for better use of social media (Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, etc), traditional methods such as email and even face to face communication are necessary to increase information sharing and trust between all constituencies. Our methodological approach is primarily qualitative using the case study method and exemplified by focus groups and interviews (Fidel, 1984). In addition, we are also using surveys to get a quantitative baseline of the organizational and communication practices, including awareness of and use of social media by law enforcement internally and externally with law enforcement and the public.

3.1   The Site

The Dallas, Texas police department (DPD) has over 3,400 sworn officers and serves a population of over 1.2 million people. The metropolitan area is divided into five sections: North central, Central, Northwest, Southwest, Northeast and Southeast. Each division is organized in a similar fashion and includes a "Community Engagement Unit." This Unit works as a liaison between the police department and the community. The officers assigned to this group work to develop a strong communication relationship with citizens within each division. They work with citizens to solve quality-of-life issues and educate the community about programs being offered through the department.

This project will be conducted in four phases: 1) initial interviews and focus groups; 2) survey design and launch; 3) additional focus groups and interviews; 4) communication strategy and policy. Data analysis will be iterative and inform each phase of the project (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We have completed phase one and are currently starting phase two. We have conducted 5 focus groups and 5 introductory interviews. Police culture follows a rigorous chain of command so our initial contacts were arranged through the Lieutenant for Media Relations with support from the DPD Chief of Police. The Lieutenant introduced

our team prior to each focus group and then left the room. One question on the survey asks if the individual would be willing to participate in a telephone interview. If so, they will be directed to a secure sign-up page. This information will be kept completely anonymous. The primary purposes of these meetings were two-fold: first, to learn about the department in a broad sense and second, to gather information to better design the surveys that we are now distributing to both the department internally and externally to the community.

3.2   Focus Groups

As stated above, we have conducted a total of five focus groups. One group consisted of citizens living in the North central division of the DPD. As the research progresses we will hold additional focus groups with citizens in each division. Our goal with the first group was to get a general idea of the issues participants felt were important, their satisfaction with communication channels between themselves (the groups they belong to) and officers assigned to their division. We also asked them to discuss the current tools they use to find information about their communities.

Within the DPD we conducted four additional focus groups: one with union representatives, one with civilian employees working in the department and two with a mix of sworn officers from different divisions. The purpose of these meetings was to provide information about our research to representatives throughout the department and to get a general idea about the communication environment within the department. This included asking about the tools they use to communicate with others, their general satisfaction with interdepartmental communication, and obstacles they feel keep them from sharing or receiving the information they need to carry out their jobs.

3.3   Individual Interviews

We also had the opportunity to conduct one-on-one interviews with two sworn officers from the Dallas Police Department's Gang Unit - which is responsible for documenting and tracking gang activity within the city; the Deputy Chief overseeing Patrol; the Assistant Chief in the administrative and support bureau and the director of a Division working with the homeless and mentally ill. As with the focus groups the structure of these interviews was open. Our goal was get a sense of the current communication environment, the level of satisfaction each had with the information interaction and to introduce our own goals for developing strategy and policy.

4   Next Steps

Field notes from the initial focus groups and interviews are currently being analyzed and links to the surveys have been sent to the Dallas Police Department Media Relations division. The link to the survey will be sent to officers as well as community groups throughout the city. We will also advertise the availability of the surveys in local libraries and community centers. We intend on closing the surveys 6 weeks after their release. At that point we will compile the data using the features available through SurveyMonkey. Any responses we receive for telephone interviews will be addressed as they come to us. We will conduct interviews, transcribe and then code the interviews. By the end of the year we will present the Dallas Police Department with a communications strategy and social media policy. We hope to follow up with the department directly.

This phase of the research is product based. Throughout this process we will be developing a theory of information interaction as it relates to law enforcement and the public. As mentioned earlier in this note this area of information interaction research has received little attention from the Information Science community. We hope that our continued work and future case studies will lead to an understanding of this aspect of information behavior and inform future policy in law enforcement and national security.

Information sharing within law enforcement agencies and between law enforcement officers and the public is complex. Between the public and law enforcement power imbalances, suspicion and distrust make the process of sharing information even more challenging and the militaristic chain of command mentality makes breaking out of traditional communication and sharing patterns a potentially insubordinate act. This note is intended to serve as an introduction to an ongoing, multiple site case study with the end goal of creating a framework for including the complex environment of law enforcement and security to information interaction scholarship.

5   References

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