

A Survey of Official and Unofficial Law Enforcement Twitter Accounts in Canada, the United Kingdom, and the United States

A Report of



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CAPSM provides leadership for law enforcement on the proven, reliable and most effective best practices for Internet based communication tools relating to both internal and external purposes, and to advocate for the use such technologies for the communities they serve and the members they represent.

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ABSTRACT

To use Twitter to its fullest potential for public communications, emergency management, and other functions, law enforcement agencies must first understand the medium -- not only how citizens use it, but also how their peers use it both officially and unofficially. This study, a survey of 1,089 police and police-related Twitter accounts, used 25 different criteria to show how agencies and officers are using Twitter, where they can improve, and implications for their future use.

Keywords: law enforcement, Twitter, crisis informatics, social media policy, third-party Twitter tools, public information, community relations

INTRODUCTION

The way law enforcement agencies use social networking for public relations and communications is not well understood. It is easy to look at a handful of Twitter and Facebook accounts, and think they represent all law enforcement agencies on those particular social networks, whether they are active or inactive or positive or negative in tone.

However, this does a disservice to the 1,000+ law enforcement agencies and officers on Twitter, as well as the communities they serve. The fact is that agencies approach the way they use these tools in a variety of ways: personal accounts both official and unofficial; official department accounts; via mobile devices, third-party tools and the basic web interface; and in conjunction with other social networks. They may assign one person or a team to maintain their accounts, opt for a positive or neutral tone, or try an account briefly before ending its use.

The goal of this study is to refine our tone, or trlam-.am-.amape me o-.amafers (ey use)t agencies uey uUrve-.9

tools. This would indicate whether they had a good command of social media capabilities as well as whether they accessed their accounts from the field. Automated any aspect of their Twitter engagement, including whether they tied their accounts to other social tools such as Facebook or twitterfeed. This could indicate not just a good command of social media capabilities, but also ensure postings even when the officer was unavailable.

Included legal disclaimers or other policy about their social media use.

Tweeted information about their on-duty activities including arrests; information about wanted or missing persons, local traffic advisories, or community volunteer initiatives; or links to local news media.

Tweeted personal opinions about crime or criminal justice; hobbies or other personal interests; potentially sensitive information about subjects or ongoing cases; or prejudicial statements.

The study also assessed how talkative, or engaged, police users were.

BACKGROUND

spaces.

Twitter Usage

With regard specifically to Twitter, comScore Inc. reports that in June 2010, nearly 93 million Internet users visited Twitter.com from their homes or workplaces. Exclusive of third-party Twitter applications like TweetDeck, this represented an increase of 109 percent from the previous year. Regionally, Europe saw 22.5 million Twitter visitors in the same time period, an increase of 106 percent, while North America's 25 million visitors represented a 22 percent increase for that region.

In comScore's six mobile markets (the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Germany, Spain and Italy), Twitter use is growing among smartphone users. For the purposes of this study, 4.2 million (8.3 percent) of US smartphone users accessed Twitter.com in one month from their mobile devices, while 5.8 percent of smartphone users in the United Kingdom did likewise.

On the other hand, a recent survey showed that half of Twitter users tweet less than once per day, and nearly a third have never tweeted. Meanwhile, only ten percent of users tweet five or more times per day, despite Twitter activity increasing.

Again, police must consider the implications of these statistics for their online communications --

level task forces, reporting may well be initiated with local law enforcement when citizens become aware that the innocuous-looking link they clicked from Twitter downloaded malware to their computer or smartphone. Even if local police never find the malware's origin, higher market penetration in countries already known to host cyber criminals increases the likelihood of North American and British crime victims, and thus of reporting.

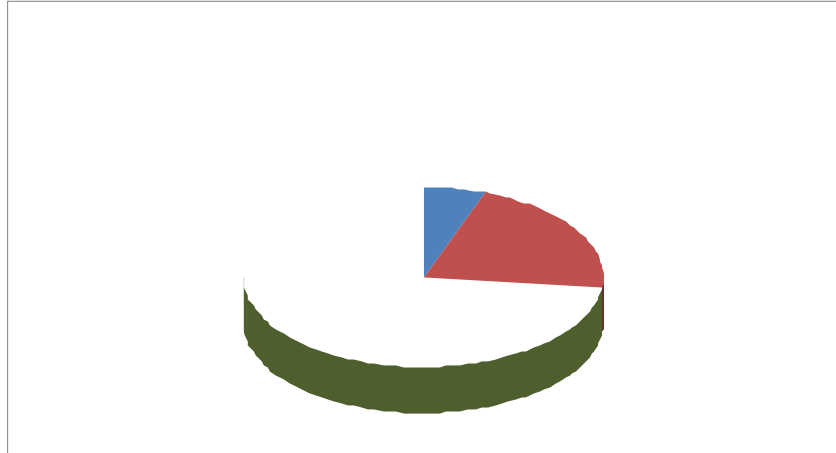
Indeed, as a recent Barracuda Labs report states, activity is increasing on Twitter. More people are joining, and the nearly 29 percent of "True Twitter Users" along with casual users are becoming more active -- resulting in more malicious activity. The Twitter Crime Rate, or accounts that ended up being suspended by Twitter, was 1.67 percent through the first half of

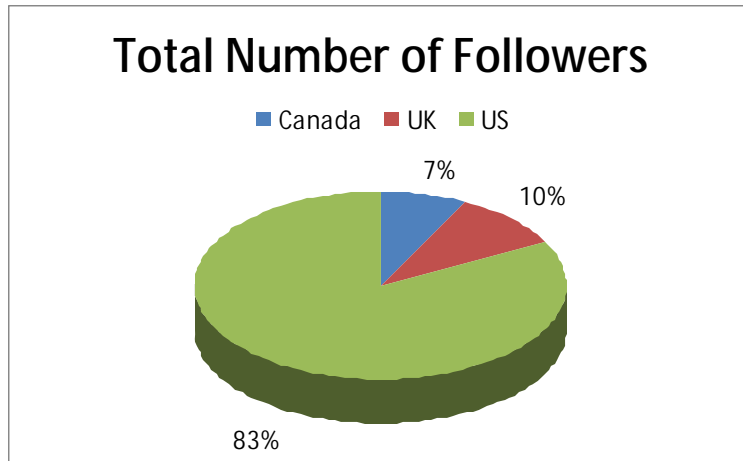
METHODOLOGY

Researchers estimated the total number of police Twitter users across Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States at 1,089, and analyzed this number of accounts. Although it is possible that some police users joined Twitter as the study was ongoing and therefore were

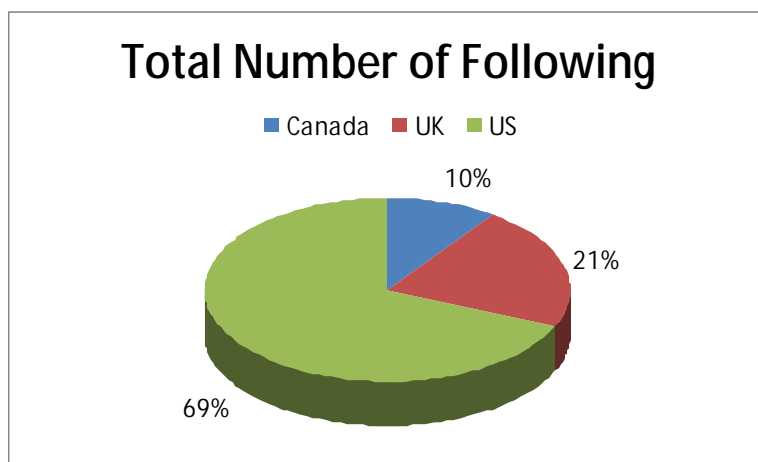
RESULTS

Of the 1,089 police accounts currently in existence, a majority of nearly three-quarters (800 accounts, or 73 percent) belong to police officers or agencies in the United States. One-fifth (227, or about 21 percent) belong to police in the United Kingdom, with the remaining 62 accounts (about 6 percent) belonging to Canadian police.





However, the proportions shift somewhat when it comes to the number of accounts the police are following. Police follow a total of 98,128 accounts; just 69 percent of these are in the United States, while 21 percent are in the United Kingdom and 10 percent in Canada.

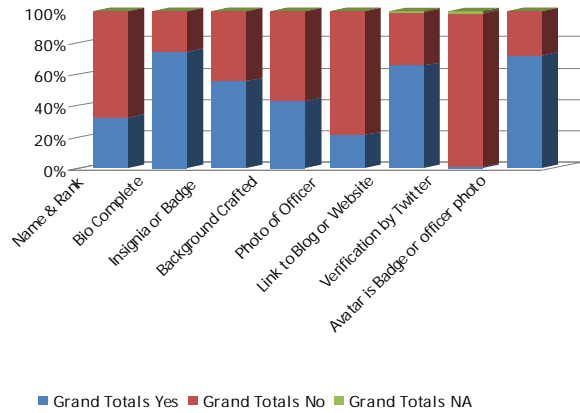


However, it is often said that follower numbers are not an appropriate measure of engagement because they do not provide the entire picture. Indeed, although they have the fewest accounts, Canadian police have an average of 590 followers (compared to 80 for British police and 506 for American). And they follow an average of 156 accounts (compared to 93 in the United Kingdom and just 84 in the United States).

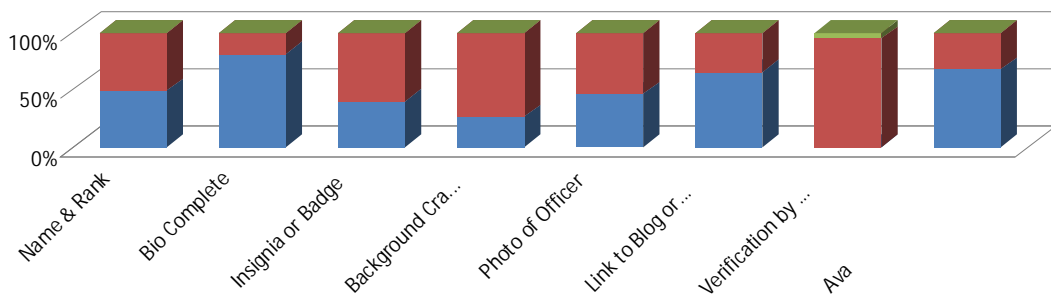
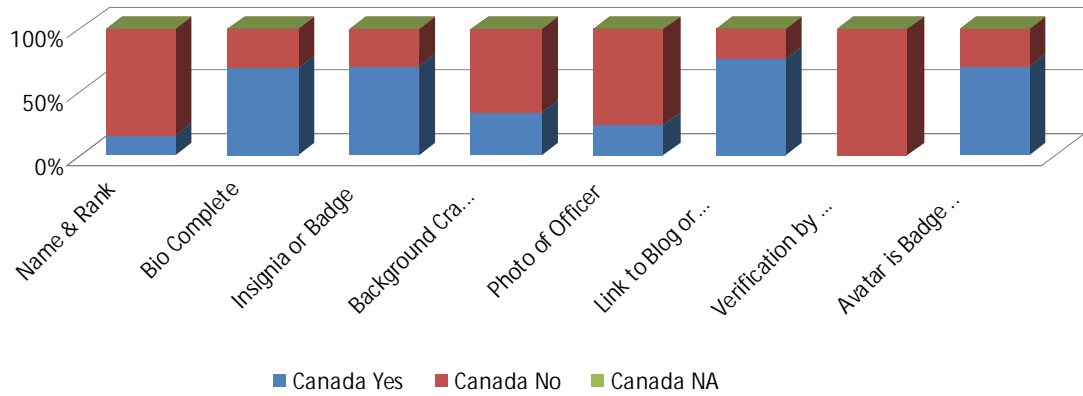
Authoritative Visuals: Use of Twitter Features

Researchers wanted to find out whether police users fully utilize Twitter's many features, such as professionally made backgrounds and appropriate avatars, to create a better sense of engagement with their followers.

Totals All Nations



Authoritative Visuals Canada



insignia, officer image, contact information and/or legal information can help to convey a sense of professionalism and authority that is not present in a generic default background.

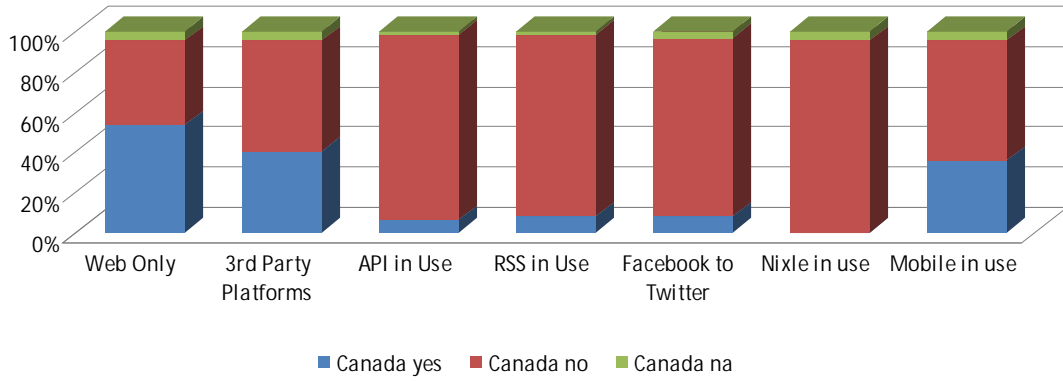
Nearly half (43 percent) of all accounts featured a crafted background. This percentage was slightly higher in the United States with 48 percent, but it was lower in Canada with 34 percent and lower still in the United Kingdom with 26 percent.

Twitter users also have the option of linking to a website from their account profiles. For law enforcement users, that might be a department website or a blog. The presence of either indicates users who seek to communicate with others beyond 140-character tweets; linking to a website can provide additional context to department activities, while a blog -- if regularly updated -- conveys the desire to provide more dynamic content to the public and can also help with verifying that it's actually a police account if links on the blog or website are also present.

Nearly two-thirds of all accounts linked to a website or blog. This percentage was similar in the United States and in the United Kingdom, but was closer to three-quarters in Canada.

Finally, a verified account indicates that the Twitter user is indeed who s/he says s/he is. This is most common among celebrity users, but can be a useful brand management tool for government agencies too -- particularly law enforcement agencies, which may be susceptible to pranksters 001 Tcpra to

Tools Utilized Canada

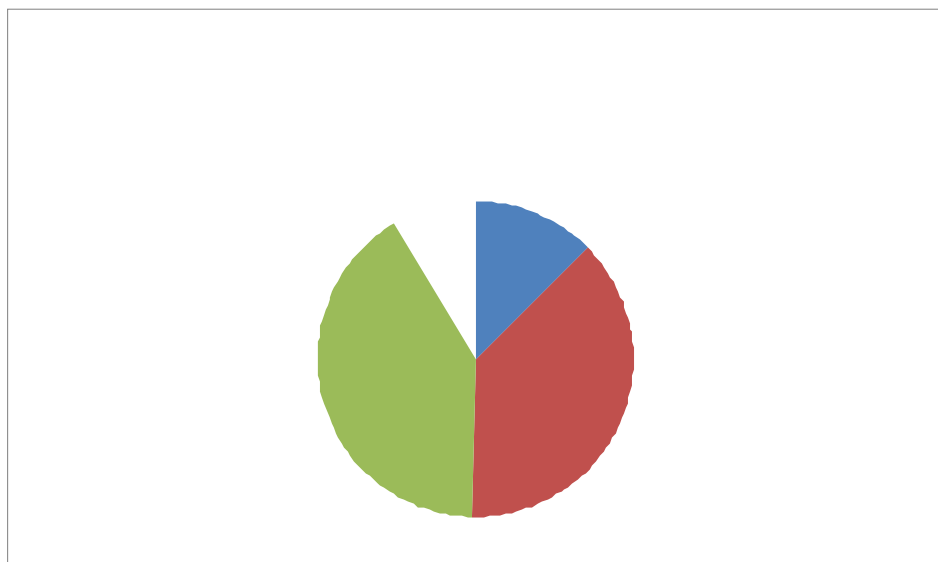


Fifteen percent of all accounts use API tools. The rate of American law enforcement agencies using API tools is much higher -- nearly 18 percent -- than in either Canada (6.5 percent) or the United Kingdom (3.5 percent) due in large part to American use of the service Nixle. Nixle, which uses the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System (NLETS) platform, was touted as a way to broadcast community information without the need to engage, as conventional Twitter use demands. Of the American law enforcement agencies that use Twitter, 12 percent use Nixle to push updates to TodayTs

Kingdom, meanwhile, no agencies posted legal disclaimers. Only one agency -- the London Metropolitan Police -- included a link to its Twitter policy. (Interestingly, however, at the time of the survey the Met had not tweeted, despite its detailed policy.)

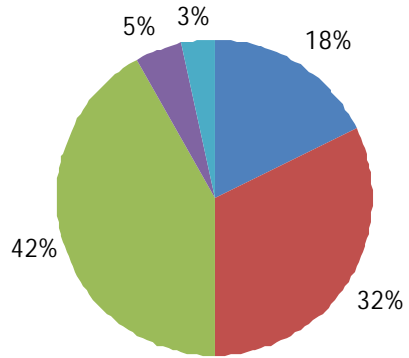
Twitter Activity and Subject Matter

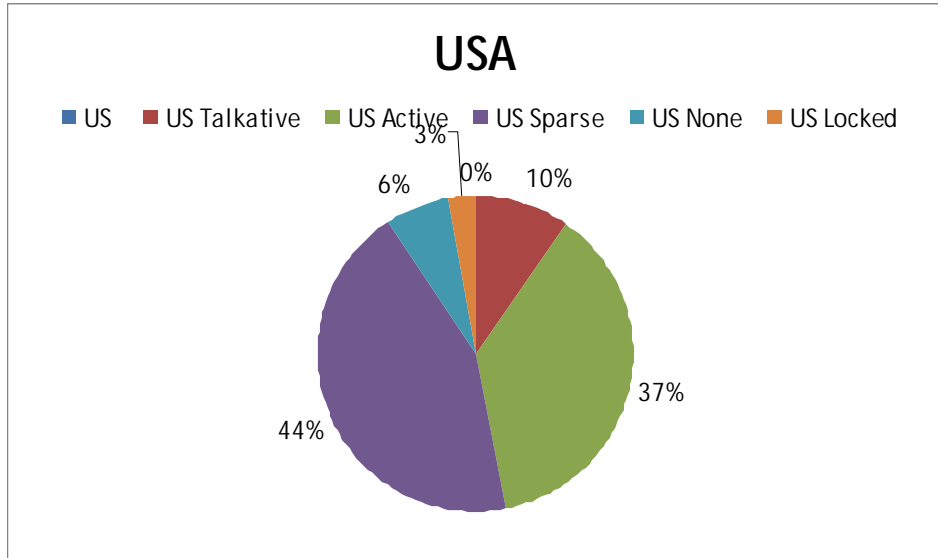
Researchers assessed how talkative, or engaged, police users were. They defined “talkative” as accounts that tweeted one or more times per day, most every day of the week, “active” as accounts that tweeted several times per week, and “sparse” as accounts with only few tweets per month or less. Accounts with no tweets were counted along with locked or protected (accessible only to approved followers) accounts.



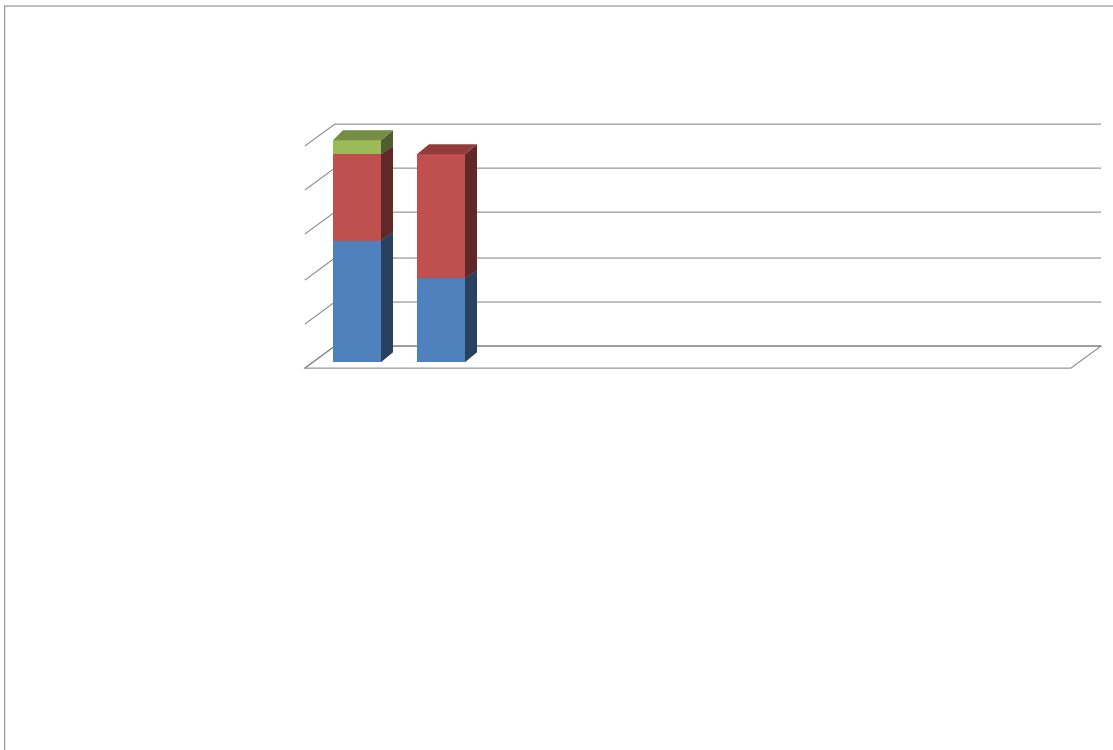
Canada

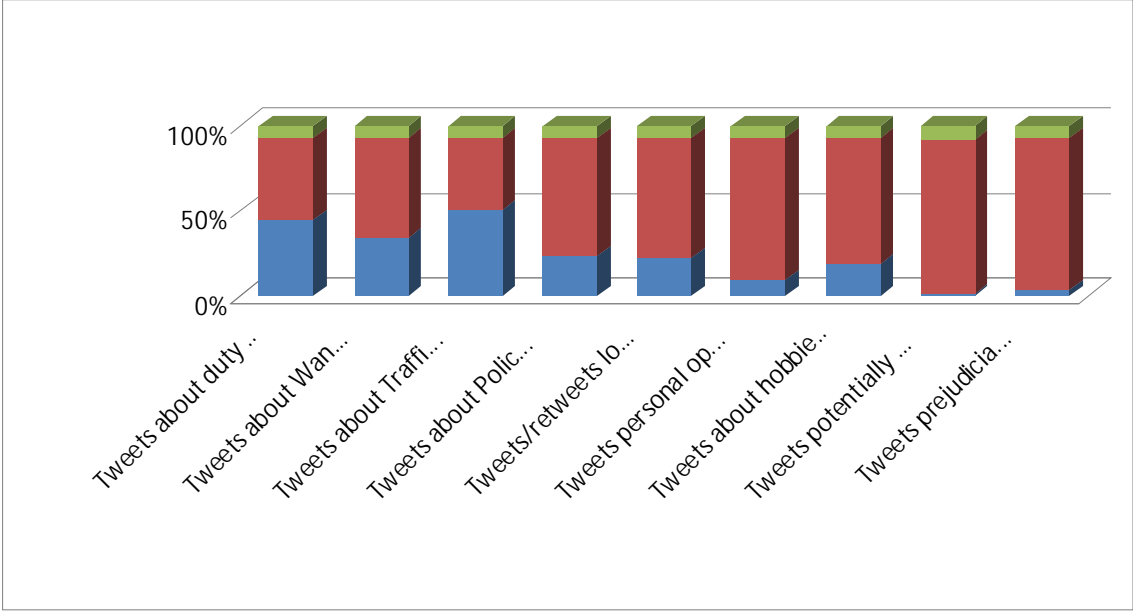
■ Talkative ■ Active ■ Sparse ■ None ■ Locked





Researchers wanted to find out whether police users tweeted information about their on-duty activities including arrests; information about wanted or missing persons, local traffic advisories, or community volunteer initiatives; or links to local news media.





Nearly one-fifth of all users tweeted about personal interests or hobbies. This was about the same in the United States, slightly lower in Canada at 17 percent, but higher in the United Kingdom at 22 percent.

Whether police users tweet potentially sensitive legal information -- such as clues that could identify suspects or victims of crimes -- was of interest, in part because of media stories about police officers posting pictures of crime victims and scenes online. Overall, 99 percent of users avoid such tweets. In the United Kingdom and Canada, only two accounts apiece tweeted sensitive information; in the United States, only 11 accounts did.

Finally, accounts were assessed for whether they tweet prejudicial or marginalizing statements, such as grouping “people on that side of town.” or statements that could be interpreted as racist or sexist. Overall, only three percent of users made such statements. Only one Canadian account had made them; no accounts in the United Kingdom had. However, in the United States, 29 accounts made such statements at least once.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Police in none of the three countries have a “better handle” on Twitter use than in others. Instead, each group of police has its own strengths and focuses, some of which may be cultural or political while others may reflect better command of social media and how it can serve the community.

For example, British police have the fewest followers on average, but have the highest proportion of “talkative” as well as “active” Twitter accounts. They also have the highest proportion of RSS use, indicating a degree of automation which may not be of as much use to followers as more personalized tweets.

On the other hand, Canadian police, even with the fewest accounts of the three, have the highest average number of both followers and followees, and a higher proportion of “talkative” accounts. Meanwhile the United States, with the most accounts and most tweets, have the fewest average followees as well as more “sparse” accounts.

In general, then, police should follow more people and companies in their own region -- not just for the sake of gaining followers or with the intent of reading every tweet, but to increase their reach: the likelihood of their tweets being retweeted during times of crisis or other need. In addition, law enforcement agencies should commit to tweeting at least 2-4 times per week in

and wanted persons information, but are least likely to tweet community and police volunteer activities. All are worthwhile types of content.

So are links to local news stories, yet agencies across all three countries tweet them least of all. In fact, no law enforcement agency should discount the value of local media, just because social

platforms. American users in particular need to school themselves on tools that exist and how to use them; for example, British police use of RSS-to-Twitter far surpasses use in either Canada or the United States (although again, care must be taken not to over-rely on any one tool). In multilingual communities, meanwhile, TweetDeck's translation tool may come in handy.

American police especially need to work harder at adopting mobile Twitter use. Being able to tweet from the scene of a bad incident or disaster can be critical to successful crisis monitoring and management.

That more police are using Twitter to connect with their communities is encouraging. However, they should take care not to use it only because it is popular or because the neighboring agency signed on. Instead, they must recognize it in the context of public communication at large: who uses it, how they use it, and where it can fit into various types of police operations.

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APPENDIX

CAPSM Research Framework for Data Analysis

Totals: US, UK, Canada

1. Total Tweets
2. Total Followers
3. Total Following

Authoritative Visuals: Visual representations and links located on police Twitter accounts.

1. Name & Rank
2. Bio complete
3. Insignia or badge
4. Background crafted
5. Photo of officer
6. Avatar is badge or officer photo
7. Link to blog or website
8. Verification by Twitter

Tools Utilized by Police Officers and Agencies When Using Twitter.

1. Web Only
2. Third Party Platforms
3. API in use
4. RSS in use
5. Facebook to Twitter
6. Nixle in use
7. Mobile in use

Quantity and Quality of Communications: Police Officers' Activity and Topics.

1. Talkative, active etc
2. Tweets about duty or arrests
3. Tweets about wanted or missing persons
4. Tweets about local traffic or safety
5. Tweets about police and community volunteer activities
6. Tweets or Retweets local news Tweets from Main Stream Media
7. Tweets personal opinions about Crime or Criminal Justice System
8. Tweets about hobbies, food, travel, sports or exercise.
9. Tweets potentially sensitive legal information or that may ID subjects
10. Tweets prejudicial comments or statements that could marginalize an identifiable group