

**Social Media's Impact on Law Enforcement: NU's Partnership with Participating
San Diego County Law Enforcement Agencies to Provide Social Media Expertise**

Abstract

Social media is proving to have application for law enforcement agencies. In a survey conducted by the IACP in 2012, 92 percent of the surveyed agencies used social media, and the most common social media application was investigations (primarily criminal but some internal as well). Fifty-three percent of agencies not currently using social media were considering its adoption (IACP, 2012). The authors, who are NU professors, reached out to several local law enforcement agencies in San Diego County to gauge their interest in a partnership to improve their use of social media. This paper illustrates how National University and other universities can partner with law enforcement to provide a mutually beneficial service.

Authors:

Primary: Kenneth Goldberg, DPA

Lead Faculty, B.S. Homeland Security and Emergency Management

National University

La Jolla, California 92037

Co-Authors: James E. Guffey, Ph.D.

Lead Faculty, BS and AS Criminal Justice Administration

National University

Stockton, California 95219

Ponzio Oliverio, J.D.

Assistant Professor of Criminal Justice Administration
National University
La Jolla, California 92037

Introduction

The term social media is best defined by defining its two parts separately. Media is an instrument of communication such as newspapers, radio, or television. Therefore, social media might best be defined as a social instrument of communication. Social media is also thought of as having a web or internet delivery. Examples of social media are Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Flickr. Social media has become tremendously popular in the 21st Century as a real-time means of connecting with others and disseminating and receiving information.

The purpose of this paper is twofold: (a) to demonstrate how social media has become an aid to law enforcement—a sort of serendipity as it can best be described, and (b) to illustrate how National University has partnered with the El Cajon, California Police Department to assist this agency with establishing a “state-of-the-art” social media tool.

Literature Review

A conference in Sunnyvale, California in February 2013 showed how far social media in law enforcement has progressed. The conference, called SMILE (Social Media, Internet, in Law Enforcement), began in 2010 and has grown to international proportions. Police officers from around the world attended the conference (Bloom, 2013).

Major Robert Stuart of the Montgomery, Alabama Police Department, writing for the FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin, stated,

To their benefit law enforcement agencies can use social social media for public relations, crime prevention, and criminal investigation. Departments that create a presence on social media sites open a new door of communication with the general public. By doing so citizens can received real-time information, as well as an electronic method of asking questions, making suggestions, and providing leads that help solve crimes (Stuart, 2013, p. 1).

Terence Dwyer (2012) points out the downside of social media for law enforcement. He asks, “How many stories have we encountered over the past few years about law enforcement and other first responders who lost their jobs or were disciplined over the posting of social media content” (p. 1)? Dwyer points out the importance of law enforcement agencies having a social media policy. Dwyer sites several incidents of law enforcement improprieties that have resulted in officer disciplinary actions as a result of poor judgment. A social media policy might have avoided these embarrassing situations for the officers and his/her agency (2012).

Fourth Amendment and Social Media

The Fourth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution not only protects citizens from unreasonable searches and seizures, but also protects citizen’s privacy in general. Citizen privacy includes telephone conversations, and other conversations that the citizen intended to be private. However, communications which are made public or uttered in public are not protected. Postings, photos, and any other communication made on social media are not considered private. New York City gang member, Melvin Colon, discovered this the hard way, and he is facing murder, weapons, and narcotics related

charges. A Facebook friend of Colon's agreed to give police access to Colon's "private" information, and on August 10, 2012 a federal judge ruled that Colon lost his claim to privacy when he posted on Facebook (Kelly, 2012).

A controversial approach to obtaining information from social networks is going undercover online. This involves creating fake profiles to befriend suspects. It is believed that 9 percent of Facebook's accounts, for example, are believed to be fakes or duplicates, and Facebook executives frown on this practice. Nevertheless, law enforcement has had no qualms about creating fake profiles for investigators as there is no legal sanction against this practice, and law enforcement agencies believe it is completely ethical (Kelly, 2012).

Fusion Centers and Social Media

Fresenko (2010) explores how state-operated fusion centers may not be using social networking sites in order to engage the public in the homeland security mission. A state-operated fusion center is "an effective and efficient mechanism to exchange information and intelligence, maximize resources, streamline operations, and improve the ability to fight crime and terrorism by analyzing data from a variety of sources." (U.S. Department of Justice & U.S. Department of Homeland Security, 2006, p. 2). Fresenko examines how fusion centers have been slow to use social media sites in their mission to share terrorist-related data with local law enforcement. Fresenko also points out that the utilization of Web 2.0 technology, particularly social media, within fusion centers can be problematic if not implemented with safeguards.

Technology is a rapidly changing phenomenon, and there must be procedures in place for fusion centers to govern the usage

of social media sites in order to avoid abuse by personnel and to provide safeguards against various forms of nefarious activity. Hackers, viruses, the potential divulging of proprietary information, problems verifying authenticity and ensuring transparency of information, phishing, and the effect on employee productivity are among the many concerns that will need to be addressed by fusion center and law enforcement leadership along with IT personnel prior to social media implementation (Fresenko, 2010, p. 5).

Social Media Threats to Police Officers

Social media presents the possibility of false accusations and innuendos against police officers. For example, websites--such as Yelp and Angie's List--allow anyone with a complaint about service or a business to post a personal blog about their experience, whether legitimate or not. The same can be true for citizens who have had encounters with police officers such as a citation or arrest.

Motivated individuals could destroy a law enforcement officer's sense of security without breaking any laws. With cellphone internet access and a police officer's name, an antagonistic traffic violator could have a satellite image of the officer's home displayed on the phone by the time the officer returns to issue the citation. While this is not a violation of law, it certainly would send an intimidating message to the officer. A note could be left on the front door, or a photo of a child could be

posted on a social networking site with a seemingly innocuous comment, such as “Isn’t officer so-and-so’s daughter cute?” (Waters, 2012, p. 4).

International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Center for Social Media

In August 2012, the International Association of Chiefs of Police conducted its annual survey on law enforcement’s use of social media. The survey was sent out electronically and 600 law enforcement agencies from 48 states responded. Below are demographics of the 600 agencies:

1. The vast majority of the responding agencies were municipal police agencies—85.5%
2. Most of the responding agencies could be categorized as small to medium sized agencies as measured by the number of full-time sworn police officers—85.2%
3. Seventy-eight % of the responding agencies served municipalities with populations between 2,500 to 99,999.
4. Listed below are the law enforcement activities that agencies listed as most often used in conjunction with social media:
 - a. Criminal Investigation—77.1%
 - b. Intelligence—61.7%
 - c. Soliciting tips on crime—56.8%
 - d. Notifying the public of crime problems—63.7%
 - e. Providing emergency or disaster-related information—57.1%
 - f. Crime prevention activities—58.5%

- g. Community outreach engagement—61.8%
 - h. Public relations/reputation management—59%
 - i. Vetting background investigations of job candidates—51.1%
5. The most popular social media tool is Facebook (90%), followed by Twitter (49.6%), You Tube (37.3%), and Nixle (28 %).(International Association of Chiefs of Police, 2012, p. 2-3).

When asked if social media had improved police/community relations, 64.1% responded “yes”, and when asked if social media had helped solve crimes in their jurisdictions, 74% responded “yes.” Responding agencies which indicated they were not using social media were asked if they were considering the adoption of social media and 56.3% indicated they were considering its adoption (2012, p. 4).

This survey is conducted annually so it will be interesting to see if law enforcement use of social media continues to increase. Agencies not using social media were asked what impediments stood in the way, and the most frequently given answers were resources and security concerns. Security will always be an issue when connected to the world wide web, but this risk seems to be small when compared with the many advantages of social media for law enforcement.

A factor that must be considered when law enforcement agencies adopt social media is a written policy particularly explaining how agencies might use social media for internal investigations. Police officers should be aware that social media evidence of violations of rules and regulations, both on and off duty, can result in disciplinary action which could include termination. There have already been incidents of police officer

discipline as a result of social media evidence, and these actions have held up under appeal.

The Pew Research Center’s Internet and American Life Project

The Pew Charitable Trusts contracted with the Princeton Survey Research Associates International to conduct the Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project. This project has been ongoing since 2005, and the purpose is to determine the growth and extent of social media use among Americans. The latest results of the social networking survey are based on telephone interviews among a sample of 2,252 adults aged 18 plus. The survey found that 72% of online adults use social networking sites and this was up 67% from the 2012 survey. Twitter has shown a considerable increase, from 8% in 2010 to 18% in the 2013 survey (Brenner & Smith, 2013). Table 1 indicates social media use of 5 social networking sites based on the 2012 survey.

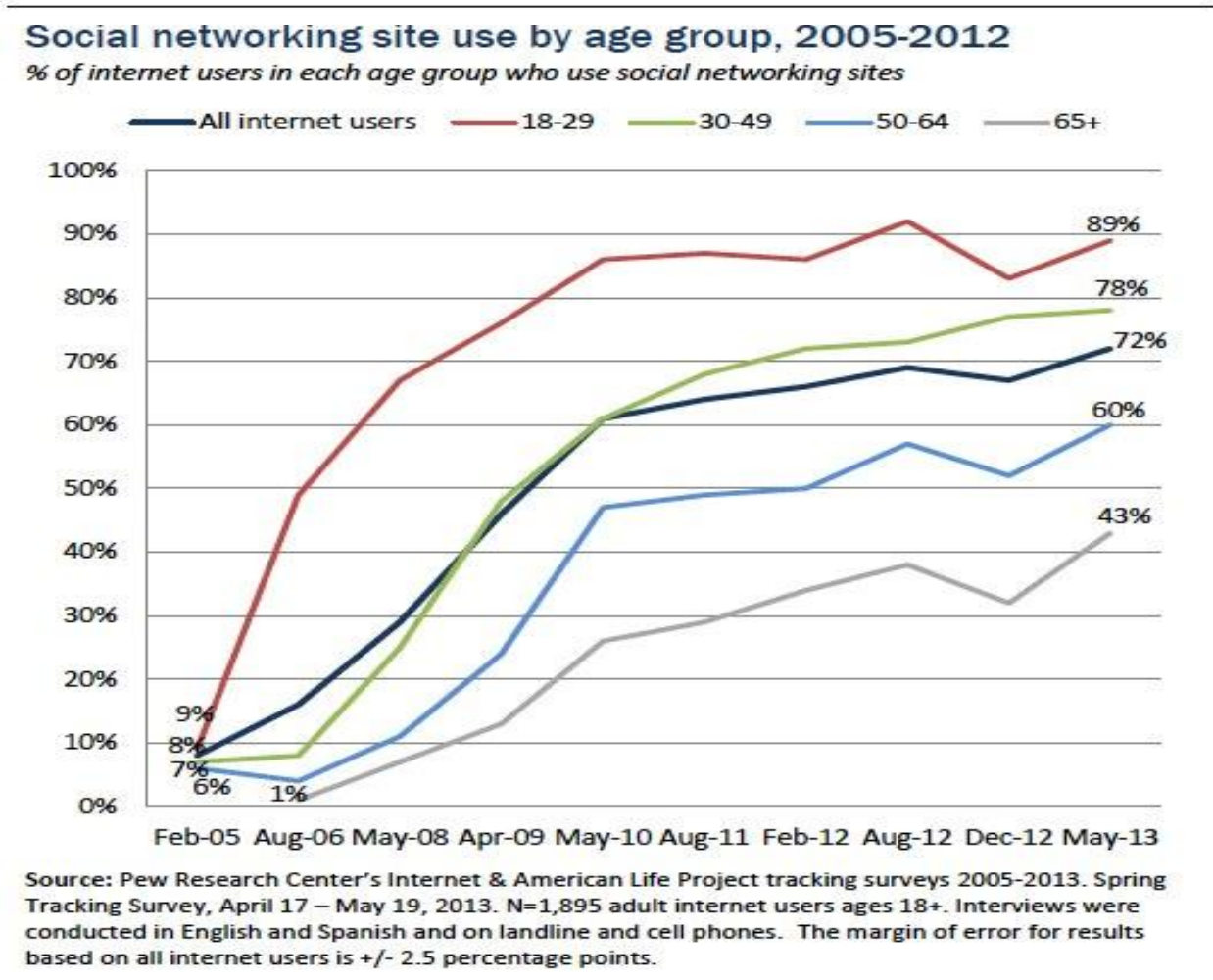
Table 1—The Landscape of Social Media Users

| | Percent of Internet users who... | This service is particularly appealing to... |
|--------------------------------|----------------------------------|---|
| Use any social networking site | 67% | Adults aged 18-29, women |
| Facebook | 67 | Women, Adults aged 18-29 |
| Twitter | 16 | Adults aged 18-29, African Americans, urban residents |
| Pinterest | 15 | Women, Adults under 50, Whites, Those with some college education |
| Instagram | 13 | Adults aged 18-29, African Americans, Latinos, women, urban residents |
| Tumblr | 6 | Adults aged 18-29 |

Source: Pew Research Center’s Internet & American Life Project Post-Election Survey, November 14-December 09, 2012.

Illustration 1 below shows the growth of social media use from 2005-2012 in four age groups and the average of these 4 age groups. The illustration shows the significant growth in social media use by all age categories.

Illustration 1—Social Networking Site Use by Age Group, 2005-2012



In summary, this literature review has demonstrated that there is a substantial interest and agreement on the part of law enforcement throughout the United States regarding the value of social media for both investigative and public relations purposes. The literature review has also demonstrated that the public, who are being served by law enforcement, also have a substantial interest in social media. The conclusion to be drawn from this short literature review is there is growing partnership between law enforcement and the social media-using public, and National University sees the potential for joining this partnership as a consultant.

Methodology

A common phenomenon experienced by Police departments is that they rely on good relationships with their communities and the citizens they serve. They therefore continually search for effective methods to achieve them. A more recent, and seemingly unrelated, phenomenon is the explosive growth, in a relatively short period of time, of social media such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. It is safe to say social media, in its various iterations, has implicated itself into the consciousness of society. The personal use by individuals is very popular and has seen tremendous growth in the early years of this century. This was followed by a substantial growth in the use by businesses looking for a way to connect with a broader consumer base. Currently significant growth of use is being observed by organizations and government, including law enforcement agencies. The purpose of this case study is to use social media as a way to achieve improved police-community relations.

Case studies are the preferred methodology for sociological studies (Tellis, 1997). This study can best be described as exploratory based on Yin's (2003) case study definitions as it involves sociological research and will hopefully be a prelude to additional studies. We have concentrated our research on studying the application and improvement of social media in the El Cajon, California Police Department, and our study constitutes a case study of this one police department. However, we hope to be able to show that our efforts with the El Cajon Police Department can be adapted by other police departments who see the positive results of our research with El Cajon. Due to this hoped for outcome this case study could also be characterized as intrinsic (Stake, 1995).

The research survey conducted by the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP), discussed in the literature review, indicates that a majority of police agencies, as many as 95%, use social media tools (IACP survey, 2013). Investigative units or individual officers often monitor sites like Facebook and YouTube for leads or as a way to gather criminal intelligence. Sometimes officers will create fake undercover profiles in order to directly contact criminal suspects. An indication of the popularity of these sites is demonstrated in that they are often used by criminal perpetrators to brag about their crimes or even as a medium to conduct their illegal activities. This has led to their use by police as an investigative tool and as the surveys indicate, this use is likely to grow. Over 57% of agencies not currently using social media have plans to do so in the near future (IACP survey, 2013). These same survey results indicate that most of the use by police officers and their agencies would be classed as passive. Very few departments have their own dedicated social media site.

Most police departments maintain a website, either on their own or through their city, and some even post to their own blogs. These sites are for the most part used for pushing information out to their communities. Police departments will use their sites to post notifications of community events or fund raisers. They may also use them to post crime statistics, or information about wanted suspects with a phone number to call in any tips. However, very few departments create and maintain a social media presence that uses active two-way communication such as sites like Facebook were developed for. One department that has successfully adopted the use of two-way social media is the City of Philadelphia Police Department (PPD).

PPD has a website, just as most departments their size do, but they also have a Facebook site <https://www.facebook.com/phillypolice>, Twitter account <https://twitter.com/PhillyPolice>, and their own section on YouTube www.youtube.com/user/PhiladelphiaPolice. The YouTube section is almost exclusively used to post video clips of crimes such as those retrieved from the surveillance cameras of convenience stores during a robbery. These videos are posted with a request for citizens who have information to contact the PDD. This is a novel and creative use of a popular and commonly used site. Exact statistics of the success or numbers of crimes solved as a result of the use of this site are not available. It is also important to note that this site, despite its popularity or success, is still largely one-way communication.

The Facebook site is more interactive. The site is divided into various sections, some of which are also in the nature of one-way communication such as posted information regarding help in apprehending wanted suspects. There is also information regarding the successful capture of wanted persons with thanks to those, when

appropriate, who helped in their apprehension. But the site does support sections that allow for input by community members and other users. There is a place for people to post their appreciation for getting a dangerous person off the streets. There is also a general comments section and the PDD, to their credit, even allows critical comments to be posted here.

Their Twitter account appears to be the most interactive, which is not surprising as Twitter is largely designed to send short text messages. There are a lot of individual thanks to the department as well as questions regarding some incident that may have been witnessed by a citizen. This account also allows for the posting of some pictures but Twitter does not generally support video.

One way the success of such sites is measured is by the amount of activity generated. The PPD Facebook site has 60,500 “likes” and their Twitter account has over 25,000 “followers”. Likes and followers are one way to register the use of a site but differ from the traditional website hit. Businesses that maintain a website count the number of “hits” to that site, a hit being each time someone logs onto the site. Facebook keeps a record of “likes” and Twitter keeps a record of “followers”. There is a distinction that separates hits from likes and followers. A hit is registered every time a site is accessed by someone logging into it. If an individual logs onto a site frequently, that individual user may be responsible for hundreds or even thousands of hits. On Facebook a person must choose to “like” the site. That will register as one like, regardless of how often the person visits the site. Similarly on Twitter, a person must elect to be a follower and it registers as one follower no matter how many times that person accesses the site.

Also, people may access either Facebook or Twitter frequently and never choose to like or be a follower.

The research cited in the literature review from the IACP, Pew Charitable Trust, and the SMILE conference all agree that police departments can greatly benefit from using social media in the way that Philadelphia has done. However, the surveys indicate that most departments are using it only passively. The authors believed the Philadelphia model could be successfully adopted by agencies in their area; San Diego County, California. Several local agencies were contacted with varying responses. Most of the contacts and subsequent discussions were done with middle manager level positions such as lieutenants and captains.

The two largest agencies in San Diego County are the City of San Diego Police Department and the County of San Diego Sheriff's Department, both agencies having over 2000 sworn officers apiece. Both of these agencies were contacted as it was deemed they would have the most resources to allocate for a successful social media program. The San Diego Police Department very early in discussions decided the project was not for them and politely declined. The Sheriff's Department showed significant interest and discussion ensued which lasted for several weeks. The management personnel who were involved in discussions showed great enthusiasm about the project but when presented to their superiors, those top level management had some concerns; the two most significant had to do with access and resources.

The Sheriff's Department currently uses social media in the manner indicated by the IACP survey. That is, their investigators access Facebook and YouTube for leads to

criminal activity. This is done by individual deputies as well as by investigative units. In maintaining their own site the department had questions regarding who within the department would have access. Discussion revolved around a centralized unit with a small span of control, say a public information officer with a few employees to run it, or more inclusive access down to individual stations throughout the county. One of the issues with broader departmental access had to do with the concern of confidential information being improperly posted, as well as the overall lack of control regarding even non-confidential information but which could have a tendency to make the department look bad. These same concerns were reported in the IACP survey.

There was also the concern of allocation of resources. While there are generally no service or subscription fees to have a site, there can be costs associated with designing a site but the largest cost can be in maintaining a site. For a site to be interesting and relevant new postings have to be continually made and to take full advantage of the two-way communication capabilities proposed by this project, someone has to respond to citizen postings. In the end the Sheriff's Department also decided to pass on the project.

Discussions with the Sheriff's Department did reveal some of the concerns that a police agency might have. While some of these were also indicated in the IACP survey, at least one arose that was not discussed there. Specifically this is the enormity of a project with a large department that oversees multiple law enforcement stations spread out over a large geographic territory. The IACP survey revealed that the vast majority of departments, about 85%, using social media had less than 250 officers. It was felt that a better reception would be found in a medium sized department. Two medium sized

departments were approached; the Chula Vista Police Department with about 250 sworn officers, and the El Cajon Police Department (ECPD), with about 140 sworn officers.

Similar to meetings with the Sheriff's Department the Chula Vista Police Department's mid-level management received the proposal with enthusiasm. Also similarly their top level managers had some of the same concerns the Sheriff's Department did, though the lack of resources was clearly their biggest hurdle. This was due in large part to the fact that the City of Chula Vista recently faced one of the largest revenue drops of any city in the country as a result of the mortgage and real estate crisis.

The timing of the approach to the City of El Cajon Police Department was fortuitous in that one of their lieutenants had just recently proposed to his department, through a research paper, that the department begin to use social media in a more active and affirmative way. The Chief of Police approved the lieutenant's proposal shortly before we contacted them. When the project proposal was submitted to the mayor for approval, the mayor was so enthusiastic he believed the project should not be limited to the police department but should be adopted city-wide.

Despite the possibility of city-wide adoption, the project will be discussed in terms of the police department as that is how it was originally modeled and all discussions have involved police department personnel. The ECPD already maintains a forum which has some popularity especially among the older citizens and business community. The project plan involves the adoption of both Twitter and Facebook, similar to the Philadelphia PD model. They are also among the two most popular social media tools currently being used. Both of these platforms will allow for two-way

communication with the community, and will enhance the current forum. This will help meet the goals of the department's desire to increase community outreach as well as follow current trends of Community Oriented Policing.

Through the use of social media in a two-way interactive model, the department hopes to accomplish several inter-related goals. Community interaction should increase significantly in a positive way. Too often police-citizen interactions are based around negative consequences such as when someone receives a traffic citation. Even when the police respond to a request by a citizen, it is often centered on a negative event such as a crime victimization. While the police may be the "good guys" in such a scenario, there is still the over-riding traumatic event to color the perception. This increased positive interaction should in turn lead to greater citizen support and cooperation which should also lead to a higher closure rate of crimes, a higher reporting rate of crimes, and ideally even a lower crime rate.

In addition to overall increased communication within the community, the use of Facebook and Twitter has the potential to broaden the ages of residents interacting with the department. Facebook is the most popular social media outlet with 55% of teens (12 – 17 years old) using it (1). Twitter, although not as popular, is used by 8 percent of teens. An anticipated outcome of the project is that this will help develop trust and visibility in a new demographic, the teens. This can also be particularly important since the police department sponsors school resource officers at three local high schools. It is conceivable that Twitter could be used within the school environment for sending alerts and reporting emergencies.

The department can also hold regular town hall type gatherings electronically on a social media platform. A common general complaint by citizens regarding local government, including police, is that they often feel as though they do not know what is going on. They would like to be better informed and the use of social media will allow for this. The El Cajon PD, like most other agencies, would like to operate more transparently, and this project will easily support this worthwhile goal. And finally, Facebook and Twitter will also be valuable communications tools during natural disasters such as earthquakes, wild fires and flooding. Building expertise in using the tools during routine operations will likely improve the effectiveness of its use during emergencies.

In addition to offering assistance in setting up the Facebook and Twitter sites, the research team will provide support in assessing the performance of the tools to help determine its return on investment. To this regard, analytics will be used similar to those in private sector marketing efforts but tailored to law enforcement. Quantifiable analytics that are expected to be provided include assessments of the following:

- A measurement of the traffic on each tool over time
- Number of crimes/incidents reported
- Number of reports leading to arrests
- Number of cases closed
- Analysis of how the tools are being used and topics reported
- Analysis of time of day and record of usage
- For Facebook – how many “Likes”
- For Twitter – how many “followers”

- For community forum – how many residents joined the forum and numbers of messages

Conclusion

In a world where news and information is being communicated increasingly through electronic media, it seems appropriate for police departments, to actively engage in those tools to maintain transparent operations; remain relevant and trusted members of the community; and most importantly improve public safety. One can suggest it is important to ‘speak the language’ of the community to remain relevant to the community. The ECPD is preparing to embark on this effort by using the communications tools that are being used by their community.

References

- Bloom, J. (2013, February 6). *Police learn how to better use social media*. KGO-TV, San Francisco, California. Retrieved on October 28, 2013, from <http://abclocal.go.com/kgo/story?section=news/technology&id=8982153>.
- Brenner, J., & Smith, A. (2013). Pew internet & american life project. Retrieved on November 11, 2013, from <http://www.pewinternet.org/topics/Social-Networking.aspx?typeFilter=5>.
- Dwyer, T.P. (2012, December 18). *Risky business: Law enforcement and social media*. PoliceOne.com. Retrieved on November 3, 2013, from <http://policeone.com/police-technology/articles/6068508-Risky-business-law-enforcement-and-social-media/>

Fresenko, V.L. (2010-2012). *Social media integration into state-operated fusion centers and local law enforcement potential uses and challenges*. Naval Postgraduate School. Retrieved on November 4, 2013, from

<http://hdl.handle.net.ezproxy.nu.edu//10945/4996>.

International Association of Chiefs of Police. (2012). IACP Center for Social Media Survey Results. Retrieved on November 3, 2013, from

<http://www.iacpsocialmedia.org/Results/Publications/2012SurveyResults.aspx>.

Koren, D. (2013, October). Social networking for the police enterprise: An in-depth look at the benefits, requirements, and challenges of establishing a social networking platform for law enforcement. Major Cities Chiefs Association. Retrieved on November 11, 2013, from

<http://community.iaclea.org/Resources/ViewDocument/?DcomentKey=8d69465b-5f38-4f78-8fef-58f67f06db2e>.

Lenhart, A., Purcell, K., Smith, A., & Zickur, K. (February 2010). Social Media and Young

Adults. PewInternet & American Life Project.

[http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-3/4-)

[Twitter-among-teens-and-adults.aspx](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2010/Social-Media-and-Young-Adults/Part-3/4-Twitter-among-teens-and-adults.aspx).

Stake, R. (1995) *The art of case research*, Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishing

Stuart, R.D. (2013, February). Social media: Establishing criteria for law enforcement use. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. Retrieved on October 28, 2013, from

<http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/2013/february/social-media-establishing-criteria-for-law-enforcement-use>

Tellis, W. (1997) Application of case study methodology, *The Qualitative Report*, 3(3)

<http://www.nova.edu/ssss/QR/QR3-3/tellis2.html#stake>

Waters, G. (2012, November). Social media and law enforcement. *FBI Law Enforcement*

Bulletin. Retrieved on November 6, 2013, from [http://www.fbi.gov/stats-](http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/november-2012/leb-november-2012)

[services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/november-2012/leb-november-](http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/november-2012/leb-november-2012)

[2012](http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/law-enforcement-bulletin/november-2012/leb-november-2012).

United States Department of Homeland Security. (2008b). Privacy impact assessment for the Department of Security state, local, and regional fusion center initiative.

Washington, D.C.: Department of State. Retrieved on November 10, 2013, from

http://www.dhs.gov/xlibrary/assets/privacy/privacy_pia_ia_slrfci.pdf.

Yin, R. (2003). *Applications of case study research*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage Publishing