Chapter 13
E-Policing:
The Value of Police Websites for Citizen Empowered Participation

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ABSTRACT
This chapter provides a bridge between e-government research related to websites and the study of police organizations and strategy. In a digital age, the police need to have a strong web presence to engage in good governance by maintaining transparency and empowering citizens to participate. It is posited that web presence and citizen participation are linked to policing strategy, allowing citizens to work in tandem and co-produce public safety in their communities. This research utilized content analysis of the websites of police departments employing 250 or more sworn officers serving a municipal population. Using previously employed measures of website evaluations as well as some developed for this research, we found that police organizations have minimal web presence. Policy recommendations related to enhancing website presence are provided.

INTRODUCTION
With the increased availability and rapid development of computer hardware and software, the use of information technology is pervading in public organizations exponentially. This chapter addresses the use of information technology via organizational websites of a particular public organization—police departments. Since the police are the government’s most controversial arm (Cordner & Scarborough, 2008), comprehensive, functional, and participative websites can assist police organizations in maintaining open and transparent relationships with the community as well as empowering citizens to participate and actively co-produce public safety. Thus, a comprehensive web presence can assist American police organizations in achieving their strategic missions.

Minimal research exists related to the utilization of e-government in policing. The few studies that were available have examined the prevalence and utilization of the e-government and policing...
in India (Mitra, 2004; Mitra & Gupta, 2007) and the Netherlands (Korteland & Bekkers, 2007). In the United States where local public police departments total over 17,000 (US Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2008), this issue is largely under-researched. Although some researchers have examined specific police department websites, the policing components of prior research are merely part of larger e-government projects (Holzer & Melitski, 2003) or research focused upon a specific website capability (Westbrook, 2008).

The primary goal of this chapter is to provide a comprehensive description of the current state of police websites. It summarizes the state of U.S. police departments’ efforts to integrate the Internet into their operations. The second goal is to provide preliminary explanations for the existing variability in the development of police websites. Factors are identified that may explain why some department websites are so comprehensive, informative, and engaging of the community while others are rudimentary. Previous research has demonstrated that differences in practice of police organizations are largely based upon organizational and environmental factors (King, 1999; Langworthy, 1986; Maguire, 1997; 2003; Wilson, 2006). This chapter explores the relationships of these factors to the digital practices of police departments. Through these two goals an informative description on the “state of the art” of websites is provided to municipal and police administrators. Based upon this description, policy prescriptions are proposed to assist departments in the development of critical aspects of their web presence.

The third and final goal of this chapter is to provide insights to US police departments on the extent they have solicited community participation in policing through the Internet. It has been observed that community members’ participation in community oriented meeting has been minimal (Grinc, 1994; Skogan, 2006). The results of the study informs administrators on how their website has contributed to their community policing efforts and should guide policy makers as to the importance of the engagement of the people in governance and how the Internet can enhance that participation. Although the Internet only provides virtual participation, it may bring the community and the police closer together. Indeed, there were contrary views about the ability of technology to bring the community and the police closer together. For instance, Samuel Walker (2001) observed that technology in the Reform Era brought the police closer to the community as opposed to Wilson and Kelling’s (1982) view that technology brought them apart. However, there seems to be a prevailing consensus that the Internet strengthens social relationships. Therefore, the previous contentions about the contributions of technology about social distance seem unwarranted.

BACKGROUND

Inevitably, one must ask; why should any body of e-government research focus on the police rather than any other public organization? The answer is two-fold. First, the police have a uniquely tenuous relationship with the polity in a democratic society (Bittner, 1970). The basic tenets of liberal democracy adhere to notions of protection from the arbitrary use (and abuse) of power. The mere presence of a strong organized police force can put a society in conflict with this tenet (Bittner, 1970; Caldero & Crank, 2004). As Manning (1987) has stated, the police are the most visible representatives of the state. As such, they are often counted on by the community as a twenty-four hour representative of government. Furthermore, the police have the ability (if they choose either justifiably or unjustifiably) to seize life, liberty, and property without prior adjudication (Jones, 2008). Given these propositions, the police are in a constant pursuit of legitimacy among the polity and must therefore maintain the utmost level of transparency and accountability to ensure
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