E-Policing: Environmental and Organizational Correlates of Website Features and Characteristics Among Large Police Departments in the United States of America

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, information technology has pervaded the provision of services by police agencies in the United States. Recent research (Jones & de Guzman, 2010) has illustrated that although most police organizations maintain a web presence, these departments showed significant variations in the quality of their websites and the services they offer through the Internet. Using a sample of 162 large municipal police agencies in the United States, this research isolated the factors that contribute to the adoption of e-government practices. Environmental and organizational factors were tested as explanatory variables. The results indicated that organizational resource constraints had minimal influences on the quality and function of police websites and that officer education appeared as the primary predictor. With respect to environmental factors, population size and their levels of education were significantly related to the features and characteristics of police websites. Likewise, the research examined contingency and institutional theories to explain different features and characteristics of police websites. The data tended to support assumptions made by institutional theory.

Keywords: Community Policing, Contingency Theory, E-Policing, Institutional Theory, Police Innovation, Police Practices, Police Website Features

INTRODUCTION

Police scholars claim that practices by police organizations are largely based upon organizational and environmental factors (Cordner & Scarborouigh, 2010; Langworthy, 1986; Maguire, 2003; Paoline & Sloan, 2003; Jones, 2008; Wells, Falcone, & Rabe-Hemp, 2003; Wilson, 2006; Zhao, Hassell, & Maguire, 2003). With the advent of community policing, the police are further required to be responsive and sensitive to environmental demands (Liederbach, Fritsch, Carter, & Bannister, 2007; Goldstein, 1990; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). However, the police have been continuously plagued by their
inability to solicit inputs from the community (Skogan, 2004). Thus, through the years the police have implemented various strategies and technologies to get in touch with the public. For example, the police have relied on personal touch through foot patrols and citizen contacts in order to reach out to their clients (Cordner, 1997; Cordner & Scarborough, 2010; Wilson & Kelling, 1982). More recently, the police have been using technology to reach out to the citizens through the use of the telephones (Cole & Smith, 2011; Walker, 1984). With the introduction of community policing, police departments have reinvented themselves by combining personal touch and technology to solicit inputs from and develop good relationships with the community. Thus, police organizations have used Computer Statistics (COMPSTAT) (McDonald, 2001; Swanson, Territo, & Taylor, 2008; Walsh & Vito, 2004), crime mapping, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), linkage analysis (Dempsey & Frost, 2008; Collins, Johnson, Choy, Davidson, & Mackay, 1998) or other forms of computer-related technology to gather and analyze inputs from the community.

One current technology that has enhanced communications and personal touch by the police with community members is the Internet (Alarid & Novak, 2008; Swanson, Taylor, & Territo, 2008). The promises of the Internet are hinged on four important factors. First, crime or complaint reporting could become more expedient for citizens (Alarid & Novak, 2008; Lasley & Palombo, 1995; Westbrook, 2008). The Internet could provide information about crime situations, community problems, case or complaint updates, permits, and other interventions that police organizations are undertaking both globally and locally (Farris, Jones, & Elgin, 2002; Spencer, 2009). The Internet, therefore, could serve as a public relations tool (Dykehouse & Sigler, 2000; IACP, 2010a, 2010b, 2010c, 2010d, 2010e; Lee & Shiu, 2004) as well as aid to the police in constructing the images of crime and criminals (Spencer, 2009). Third, the Internet is becoming a preferred way to build communities not only in a virtual way but also in some cases in a physical way (Smith, 2008; Sealy, 2003). This contribution of the Internet in increasing the social space produces the trickle effects of increasing social participation and social capital among communities. These uses of the Internet could provide the police another instrument to enhance their community policing programs (Smith, 2008). Fourth, through the dissemination of information on their websites, the police could enhance their accountability and transparency to the community, thereby, alleviating the tension that is due to the presence of a strong police force in a democratic society (Lundman, 1980).

Despite the promises that the Internet holds for police organizations, significant variations in the utilization of the Web among police departments have been noted (Jones & de Guzman, 2010; Westbrook, 2008). Scholars found that police websites were poorly developed and under-utilized (Jones & de Guzman, 2010; Westbrook, 2008). Furthermore, Dawes (2008) found that the local police lagged behind in their use of the Internet compared to federal law enforcement agencies in the United States. The factors that contributed to such variation and under-utilization of websites by local police agencies in the United States have remained unidentified in previous studies. Jones and de Guzman’s (2010) preliminary analyses on the correlates of website features among police departments suggested that some organizational variables poorly explained the variance in the features of police websites. Jones and de Guzman’s (2010) findings implied that previous research might have failed to include the more relevant variables in their models, thereby, failing to account for the differences of the features incorporated by police organizations in
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