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INFORMATION SHARING IN AT RISK COMMUNITIES

INTRODUCTION

Disaster research most frequently examines natural or man-made disasters, many of which have devastating effects on communities. In many communities, disaster is caused by poverty, the drug trade, violence and the threat of violence. Impending disaster is the modus operandi and many members of the community live in an ongoing state of crisis. Members of law enforcement are often on the frontlines in these situations.

My work looks at the ways local law enforcement agencies and community members are working to develop more effective communication channels; both within departments and with the public. While much of my research looks at how social media technologies are being used to achieve these goals, technology is not the only answer and face to face communication and other traditional forms of communication are still important. Trust remains a primary barrier between law enforcement and the community members who may be most at risk. My focus is on information sharing between these groups and is based in information science literature.

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; Wilson, 2000). Heverin and Zach (Heverin & Zach, 2010a, 2010b, 2011a, 2011b) have conducted excellent research on the use of social media by law enforcement, but beyond their work examinations of law enforcement and information sharing has not been widely researched in information science. In a military context, Sonnenwald and Pierce (2000) looked at information behavior in military command and control situations and much of their 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.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological approach I use is primarily qualitative based on the case study method and exemplified by focus groups and interviews (Fidel, 1984). In addition, I am also using online 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. The site for this project is Dallas, Texas. The Dallas 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 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.

THE PROJECT

This project is being 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.

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.

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.

INFORMATION SHARING BETWEEN LAW ENFORCEMENT AND THE PUBLIC

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 work is intended to serve as an introduction to an ongoing case study with the end goal of better understanding communication in volatile and high risk situations. Ultimately this work with contribute to creating a framework for including the complex environment of law enforcement and security in information interaction scholarship.

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