

Is the Information Highway a Clear Path to Better Police-Community Relations?

SOME OBSERVATIONS FROM THE BEAT AND THE STREET

by Bill Geller

Can the Internet and other electronic communications and information technology be useful to police and low-income community members whose more frequent and focused conversations, cooperation, coordination, and collaboration might make neighborhoods safer? For instance, how could such technology be used to: educate the public about reducing crime, disorder and fear; alert neighborhoods about current crime patterns so vulnerable people can take precautions; solicit neighborhood priorities for police attention; seek tips to help police investigate unsolved crimes; gain intelligence about where trouble, which could erupt into violent crime if left unchecked, is brewing; or get public feedback about police performance?

To inform the deliberations of the Panel on Technology as a Community Engagement Tool for Crime Prevention, information was collected by telephone and e-mail over three weeks in the summer of 2006 from 40 police of various ranks, 55 community developers and 10 academics and technical assistance providers. Because some respondents preferred to remain anonymous, quotations are not attributed in this working paper.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS FOR POLICE SEEKING TO USE TECHNOLOGY TO PROMOTE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN ADDRESSING CRIME

1. What are the preconditions for using the Internet and other communications technology to launch police–community anti-crime collaborations?

The means, the motive and the opportunity. To be willing to communicate with police via the Internet, community residents in crime-plagued, economically-challenged neighborhoods must have access to a computer, know how to use it, and have the time and desire to use it. Many respondents reported that in the low-income neighborhoods where they work around the nation, hardly any residents would meet all of these conditions. One respondent noted: “My neighborhood is in one of the poorest Congressional districts in America. Until recently, we had no banks. None. It’s still the only police district in our city with no parking meters. It’s a great idea to use the Internet, but how many people could we reach? Maybe we could

reach more people instead by cell phones. Even in my poor community, a lot of people have Blackberries.”

If the computer is an essential tool for the desired police–community information exchange, then, as one developer noted, one has to come to grips with the fact that “it’s expensive to own, maintain, and operate a computer with Internet access.... [The solicitation of community interaction] must be combined with a technology access service approach....”

An additional hurdle cited by most people was community residents’ reticence or unwillingness to invest trust in an unknown police officer on the other end of a computer communication. They first want to meet the officer—or some officer—face to face and be convinced that the officer and his or her colleagues can be trusted and helpful.

Most community residents in unprivileged neighborhoods, respondents said, would be weary and wary of dealing with the police because they have complained over time about crime problems, insufficient police patrols or response times, and abusive police treatment of neighborhood residents. Despite their complaints, respondents have not often noticed improvements in neighborhood safety or police activity.

Thus, a department wishing to use high-tech methods for productive two-way communication with the public would be wise to create a variety of low-tech on-ramps to the information highway. These on-ramps need to be varied to reflect the unique cultures of different neighborhoods, language and educational differences, differences in how adults and younger people learn and most comfortably communicate, and a host of other variations that constitute nuanced user-friendliness.

But average residents in fragile, challenged, or transitioning neighborhoods might, respondents allowed, be motivated to interact with an unknown officer—or even an officer whose reliability they doubt—if a trusted community-based intermediary vouched for the trustworthiness of the cops involved and the seriousness of commitment from top police officials. Still, for any such interaction to endure, the police need to follow through—by acknowledging the resident’s communication, attempting to be responsive to legitimate community requests, and keeping the resident posted on what happens to the problem at issue.

Motivating people to share ideas. Police wishing to promote Internet information exchange with the community should use a multimedia advertising campaign to make their intentions known, using, among other avenues, the broadcast news media, newspapers, and informal local communications networks. To motivate sustained participation by the community, high priority should be given to quick feedback and follow-through by the police where the request for police attention is appropriate.

One community developer said some people may be motivated enough to begin using the Internet to provide police with information and ideas because “it can be anonymous and home-based. It might be a user-friendly way for community residents to report on real problems. From the point of view of the resident, it can be very confidential. You don’t have to go anywhere to use the communications system.”

2. What preparatory work needs to be completed prior to assembling partners?

A developer recommended: “Prep work needs to be done so people will really use the system. The system has to be designed so it will not seem like Big Brother or PR nonsense. Also, the police department internally has to position this so it’s not the latest version of community policing that real cops will laugh at.” An officer opined: “For communities that don’t have elaborate engagement, start small and really involve people, then grow it. My department gets hung up on who’s the community. Just pick 10 people and start there. We don’t want to prevent people from starting by saying it has to be great.”

3. What values would you want to promote and protect as you consider different modes of communications technology to bolster police–community trust and mutual assistance?

Safety for the public. “If people without much money, who almost never use the computer, are going to have to go to an Internet café or someplace to use the ‘crime’ computer, how is this safe for the resident? How would such a high-tech system be any different than the current problem, where the cops or community leaders with cops call a meeting and nobody shows because the gang member’s girl friend is in back of the room taking notes about who’s there? We’d have to be sure the ‘cops computer’ is not physically identifiable in a chat room so everyone knows the person at the computer is talking to the cops.”

A workable feedback method. A related concern is how people whose only access to a computer is at the local library or some other such location are going to hear back from the police if the police want to reply by e-mail.

Police accountability to the ENTIRE public. A law enforcement official emphasized that there may be special ways in which the Internet’s *written* track record of communications can be beneficial to relatively powerless people when dealing with the criminal justice system: “In my area, lack of access to e-mail communication is another way in which residents are alienated from government. There is disparate access to government. If folks in a wealthy community call any public agency, they can use their political muscle, money, education to get access to top officials. The top prosecutor or police chief will shoot a memo to the local people saying, ‘Fix this problem.’ That never happens to me, as a law enforcement person, because my community doesn’t have access to the big folks.... I constantly tell folks you have to be a broken record, write a letter to the police chief. That’s how things get done. Folks get held accountable because now there’s a way to track responses to complaints. Otherwise, if you call up the department there’s no paper trail.... The Internet could provide for poor people the kind of access that the middle class already has to government.”

4. What challenges are presented for police–community linkage via Internet technology in locations with significant immigrant populations? What might work in those situations?

Language and income barriers, together with reticence to reveal crime victimization to public authorities, may inhibit police–community Internet communication in communities with non-English speaking immigrants. An Asian community developer said: “People in my neighborhood are not thirsting for information from police. All they want is for the police to clean up the streets and for things to get safer.”

Efforts to overcome language barriers are laudable and necessary (e.g., most major city Web sites post crime statistics only in English), but translations must be done with specific knowledge of an immigrant community. A cautionary tale comes from St. Paul, Minnesota, which has a large Hmong population. Several years ago, the police tried to reach out to the Hmong immigrants and had fliers translated into the Hmong language. But that didn’t help because, as the well-meaning cops learned, the written Hmong language was new. The older immigrants didn’t know how to read it.

On the other hand, there may be opportunities in some immigrant neighborhoods, as one developer suggested: there can be “huge face-losing issues in Asian communities, for instance with home invasion. The victims lose face when you bring outsiders into their crime problems. Many immigrant communities are reluctant to report, period. If the Internet encourages greater anonymity and willingness of people to tell their stories to the cops, it could be very helpful.” A number of police respondents concurred that a victim may not be able to save face when dealing with the police in person.

A police officer suggested that a useful way to involve immigrants is through radio broadcasters. “Maybe the Honduran radio broadcaster could say to his listeners, ‘The police department is working closely with me, and I want you to help them.’”

5. How would a community member know that submitting a crime report or tip to help solve a crime via the Internet would be secure and that he or she would be protected from retaliation after doing so?

One cop reflected the views of several other interviewees: “Constantly reinforce that we have the most modern technology. Anything you send to the department, only one or two people will have access to it. They are constantly supervised. We have a high level of integrity.” But still, it’s hard. “Even myself,” this officer said, “if I was going to contact the FBI or someone about an integrity problem, I wouldn’t use e-mail. What doesn’t help is when we have police officers locked up, when we have pockets of corruption. The community will ask, ‘How do we know all the cops aren’t in cahoots?’”

6. Can communications technology be used to heighten and sustain police–community efforts to safeguard low-income neighborhoods?

Technology is no *substitute* for low-tech, “high-touch” interaction. But technology may be a valuable *supplement*. Once a trusting relationship is achieved between one or more police of-

ficers and community members, it may well be useful (where the requisite computer literacy and access exist) to deepen and make more efficient their collaborative problem-solving efforts by making needed crime data and other information readily available via the Internet. As one developer who has worked in several cities noted: “In lower-income neighborhoods, the Internet is good for sharing info, not good for building relationships. It’s good to try to work at the two simultaneously by giving crime stats and other things out. But you still won’t change the relationships between police and neighborhoods using the Internet. Lower-income communities don’t use the Internet as much.”

Another developer concurred: “The Internet has made so many things so easy for us in so many ways. In some ways we’ve become spoiled in thinking the Internet can solve problems. I remain cynical. Community policing and making our neighborhood safe are difficult. There’s no easy solution. The police won’t find the Internet will make it easier. You still cannot replace the hard work of an officer really caring about the community and walking it everyday and really knowing it. Are the police trying to find an easy solution that will replace the hard work? If you think the Internet will make up for the fact that cops don’t treat people with basic respect and don’t invest in meaningful communication and assistance, forget it. Sure, if you have developed good personal relationships, and out of respect for everybody’s time, now you want to communicate by e-mail, fine. But you won’t form good relationships in that way.”

A veteran cop asked: “Technology in service of what? All the time new technology comes along and takes over (telephone, radio, guns, cars). We are mesmerized by it. For a period of time, the machines run the show. Then we realize we got mesmerized by the technology, and now we need to ask how we can really put the technology into the service of things that are important to us [such as] trying to...make your community safer. Not everybody wants to know anything about the police. Most people don’t. They want to live their lives without ever thinking about the police, because thinking about the cops means something went wrong. A lot of police departments create a big, muscular Web site that has lots of stuff on it that nobody cares about. We need to tailor the technology to serve the local interests.”

7. How do you measure success in using information technology to bolster police-community interaction?

A big-city police strategic planner said: “If, at a meeting, people say it would be useful to use the police department’s Web site to provide info, ask them what info they would like us to post. We could then do some process measurement: Did the department follow through and post the info? Then, did people find it useful? For instance, at the level of a beat, or district or neighborhood, people might ask the department about current trends on something. All of this assumes a degree of sincerity about wanting to solve problems to improve the quality of life and to use technology to solve problems. Some police agencies are serious about this and for others it’s just talk.”

Because many police agencies seek Internet links to communities to increase information exchanges between residents and the police, one basic measure of success could be to count levels of participation in contrast to attendance at beat meetings. There can be techni-

cal difficulties (e.g., in knowing how many “hits” on a Web site are from the same person as opposed to separate visitors), but perhaps technology experts could solve those problems. In Boston some years ago, a police district commander found it useful to reach large numbers of community members through a listserv the department developed at the local district level. Reporting on the experience, one interviewee said: “Some computer guys in District 4 started a listserv which at one point had 500 people on it, between the police and the community. Information and ideas flowed back and forth.... It kept participation levels up because all a resident needed to hear from a neighbor was ‘I sent them an e-mail and got an answer 24 hours later.’”

8. How could a police department enable community residents to file and track complaints about the police using the Internet?

Is the information highway that police seek to build between themselves and communities a one-way street? While police hope to receive crime-solving tips from the community, are they also willing to receive tips from the public about officers engaging in possible misconduct?

One community developer suggested: “There’s no reason [the Internet] couldn’t be an effective way to report complaints, so long as it’s not just general. It must be very detailed, and the complaint can’t be made public. The concept that you constantly have to go to the police in their fortress is not good. Complaints by e-mail could be a way of removing some of the moats and drawbridges.” A police official commented: “There’s a great deal of mystery to the police complaint process.... A department can take a lot of the mystery out of it by saying ‘Come on and complain.’ But we have to provide meaningful fields in the online complaint form so the ridiculous complaints are filtered out.”

A police official suggested possible benefits of allowing the public to file complaints online: It’s a nice convenience to be able to collect one’s thoughts and then write in a complaint, whether it helps to decompress from a stressful encounter with police, gives a greater sense of anonymity, or is simply a convenient mechanism for the complainant. We receive some through our Web site, but not many. The majority of dissatisfied people call in their complaints directly to IA [Internal Affairs], talk to a supervisor or complain in person. To some degree, I think it helps elevate trust if people know the avenue [Internet] is available, and it also provides clear information about how the process works.”

If departments open their Web sites for the public to file complaints, it would be sensible to also allow the public to file commendations of police officers who gave good service. And it may be valuable to allow people to make complaints and commendations of the whole police department. “In reality,” a former police Internal Affairs commander suggested, “many complaints against individual officers are really complaints against Department procedures and policies. Someone in IAD could post each week on the Internet the number and type of complaints filed and the status of those investigations (without identifying the specific people involved). Once that is done, the whole thing will lose its mystery and scariness. We need to achieve fairness and decent motives on all sides.”

In fact, many police departments do provide places on their Web sites for the public to offer complaints and compliments about police actions. It may be possible for police departments also to e-mail status reports to complainants who used the Internet to file complaints. This is simply another means, besides telephone, for an internal affairs investigator to update the complainant.

9. Do various cities provide citizens with crime data via the Internet, and if so, how current is the information? What do police and community development practitioners think is the value of providing crime data via the Internet?

Some doubt the value of sharing crime data with the community. “Our police department lately wants to give us stats,” said one community developer. “Who gives a damn that the stats are down if I still have a drug dealer when I walk out the door? I don’t care that you’ve made 20 arrests.”

But many respondents favor the provision of current crime statistics, with some caveats. As one community organizer put it: “It would be a good idea, so long as there is a strong partnership already to address the results of the crime analysis and a commitment to work together on the issues highlighted by the data.” Another community organizer cautioned: “It can be good to have that info out there. But it also can be harmful, especially crime stats showing a jump in crime if there is no way for people to respond to that info in real time. A monthly district-wide meeting isn’t going to cut it.” She added: “The crime stats have to be current. It won’t help the community to find out mid-July there was a rash of break-ins in the first two weeks in June. That will just tick people off rather than help them.”

Many police said they think posting crime statistics on the Internet is a good idea. But some concurred with one cop’s admonition: “It’s important also to explain the stats. Our department doesn’t put arrest stats on the Web site. [But] if the web shows our violent crimes are up, the community should also know that we’re working on it—our robbery arrests and gun arrests are up.”

A community organizer based in a community development corporation (CDC) noted: “Some CDCs won’t like to see the neighborhood be up on the Internet with crime stats—they are trying to change the rep of the neighborhood, and this just confirms it’s dangerous. If the police, CDCs, and other neighborhood groups can sit down together and talk about what info is best for both, the info can be valuable.”

A veteran police manager had doubts about the usefulness of the kind of monthly crime statistics offered by many police departments to the public—generally aggregate listings of the number of FBI-defined Part 1 felonies that occurred within a police precinct or district. He contrasts FBI Uniform Crime Report (UCR) data with data that are available to police—but rarely are made available in a timely fashion to the public—generated by NIBRS, the National Incident-Based Reporting System: “How valuable is it to get more of the info devised in 1929 more quickly? I think it’s outmoded. In NIBRS, more info is captured about the actual nature of the offenses, instead of burying it all under a hierarchy of crime classifications.” A developer shared the view that traditional UCR crime statistics aren’t very helpful: “Does it matter to me to understand whether the victims were two elderly people or

two drug dealers? Yes. If it was dealers, now I know there's a drug war. But I especially care if the people killed were elderly because you wouldn't expect them to be killed. If the police just tell me two people died, I say, "Two what?"

Even those who doubt that UCR crime data are informative to communities admitted that there can be some ancillary value to making such data publicly available. Said one police officer, "It shows some willingness on the part of the police department to reach out. The info is not so valuable, but the fact that the police are making the effort would impress me as a community member."

Another police officer wondered if police Web sites or other Internet tools could be used to clarify police enforcement priorities. One example, he said, might be traffic enforcement priorities: "In terms of information technology and what kinds of info should be provided by police to the community, let's assume that traffic stops have a positive effect on traffic calming. Could we use the Internet to explain why a police department does ticketing—come clean on our actual policy? The public doesn't know what the real speed limit is until they get pulled over."

Perhaps the Internet could be used also to help the public recommend ways that police could be more effective in fighting crime, disorder, and fear. "Maybe," said a police respondent, "if we present the public with information—not just data—about what we're trying to accomplish by addressing certain kinds of crime, the public could imagine how we could do better."

Early in the 21st century, private-sector organizations in the United States use a vast network of information superhighways to communicate with customers, collaborators, and other stakeholders. By comparison, the use of information technology in most police agencies and other criminal justice organizations is at a more rudimentary stage of development. Over time, as police attempt to upgrade from unpaved roads to information highways in linking to their service populations, they may find their paths clearer if they address the kind of considerations raised by our street-wise respondents.

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