Social Media Use by Canadian Law Enforcement Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the presence of Canadian law enforcement agencies on social media, specifically Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube. It presents findings on when these social media accounts were created and how well they are received in terms of followers or subscribers. The paper further explores the roles and responsibilities of the Canadian law enforcement agencies with the most followers on social media at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, highlighting notable examples of the positive impact these agencies are making by being active on social media. The paper also discusses the evolving role of the Canadian law enforcement agencies in the context of the rapidly changing social media landscape.

Keywords

Canadian law enforcement, social media.

INTRODUCTION

Social media platforms have transformed the way individuals receive and share information. A 2020 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 53% of U.S. adults sometimes or frequently get news through various social media platforms. Most Americans get their news from Facebook (36%), followed by YouTube (23%), X (15%), and Instagram (10%) (Shearer and Mitchell, 2021).

In response to the changing communication landscape, many government agencies and emergency responders now use social media platforms as a means of communication with members of the public. Brainard and Edlins (2015) reported the use of Facebook, Twitter (now X), and YouTube by police departments in the ten most populous U.S. cities. Similarly, Chauhan and Hughes (2015) reported that police and fire departments in areas affected by Hurricane Sandy used Facebook and X to communicate with the affected communities.

This paper examines how Canadian law enforcement agencies have turned to social media platforms to engage with the public and emphasize the growing significance of this engagement within the current social media environment.

Canadian Provinces and Territories

Canada is the second-largest country in the world by land area, after Russia. Canada has ten provinces and three territories. Canada's ten provinces – Alberta, British Columbia, Manitoba, New Brunswick, Newfoundland and Labrador, Nova Scotia, Ontario, Prince Edward Island, Quebec, and Saskatchewan – are in the southern part of the country. Canada's three territories – Yukon, Northwest territories, and Nunavut – are in the northern part of the country (see Figure 1). Unlike provinces, territories are governed by a federally appointed representative rather than having their own provincial legislature.

Law Enforcement in Canada

Canada's law enforcement has three levels of policing: federal, provincial, and municipal.

Federal Law Enforcement

The Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) is the federal law enforcement agency in Canada. The RCMP is involved in four levels of policing- international, national, provincial, and local. RCMP handles national security,

border integrity, and international policing[1]. The RCMP also serves as the provincial and territorial police force, particularly in regions that do not have their own provincial or territorial police agencies.

Provincial Law Enforcement

Provincial police services are responsible for enforcing provincial laws and maintaining public safety at the provincial level. While most provinces rely on the RCMP as their provincial police force, the provinces of Ontario, Quebec, and Newfoundland and Labrador have their own provincial police services – Ontario Provincial Police, Sûreté du Québec, and Royal Newfoundland Constabulary respectively.

Municipal Law Enforcement

Municipal police forces are responsible for law enforcement within cities and towns. Many cities and towns have their own police force. These local police departments handle everyday law enforcement duties, including responding to local emergencies and crimes, patrolling neighborhoods, monitoring traffic, and engaging with the local communities. In Canada's territories, municipal police forces are quite limited, with most of the policing in these regions provided by the RCMP.

METHODS

Canadian law enforcement agencies were explored to understand their roles and responsibilities, as well as how they communicate with members of the public through social media. It was found that most of these agencies have a presence on Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube. The next step involved examining the Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube accounts of the ten provincial and three territorial RCMP, the three provincial police forces, and the municipal police services in all the capital cities of the provinces. None of the capital cities in Canada's territories has a municipal police service.

Figure 1. Map of Canada showing the five regions- the West Coast (British Columbia), the Prairie Provinces (Alberta, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba), Central Canada (Ontario and Quebec), the Atlantic Provinces (Newfoundland and Labrador, Prince Edward Island, Nova Scotia, and New Brunswick), and the Northern Territories (Yukon Territory, Northwest Territories, and Nunavut) [2]

[1] Royal Canadian Mounted Police. https://rcmp.ca/en/federal-policing, Date modified: 2024-12-17.

[2] Discover Canada. https://www.canada.ca/content/dam/ircc/migration/ircc/english/pdf/pub/discover.pdf

FINDINGS

This section examines the presence of Canadian law enforcement agencies on social media, investigates the most popular social media accounts in terms of followers at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels, and highlights the positive impact of their online presence on operations and public engagement.

Canadian Law Enforcement Presence on Social Media

Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal police agencies maintain an active presence on Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube. Facebook, launched in 2004, is the most widely used social media platform globally, with over 2.9 billion monthly active users, making it the most widely used social media platform globally[3]. X, formerly known as Twitter, was launched in 2006. Instagram was launched in 2010 and was acquired by Facebook just two years later in 2012. YouTube, founded in 2005, has more than 2 billion monthly active users, making it the second most popular social media network after Facebook[4].

Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP)

All Canadian provinces and territories' RCMP have a Facebook page and a X account. Eight out of ten (80%) Canadian provinces RCMP have an account on Instagram and YouTube. None of the Canadian territories have an account on Instagram and YouTube (see Table 1). Most of the RCMP's Facebook pages (61.5%), X accounts (61.5%), and YouTube accounts (62.5%) were created during 2007 – 2012. All RCMP's Instagram accounts were created post 2012 (see Table 2).

Table 1. RCMP's social media presence

	Facebook	X	Instagram	YouTube
Provinces	10 out of 10	10 out of 10	8 out of 10	8 out of 10
Territories	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	0 out of 3	0 out of 3

Table 2. RCMP's social media account creation year

Social media	2007 - 2012	2013 - 2018	2019 - 2025
Facebook	8 out of 13	5 out of 13	0 out of 13
X	8 out of 13	4 out of 13	1 out of 13
Instagram	0 out of 8	4 out of 8	4 out of 8
YouTube	5 out of 8	3 out of 8	0 out of 8

Most RCMP's social media accounts (46.1% Facebook pages, 38.4% X accounts, and 62.5% Instagram accounts) have followers in the range of 10,000 to 99,999. None of the RCMP's YouTube accounts have more than 9,999 subscribers (see Table 3).

Table 3. RCMP's Facebook followers, X followers, Instagram followers, and YouTube subscribers

Social media	Less than 1,000	1,000 – 9,999	10,000 – 99,999	100,000 or more
Facebook	0 out of 13	2 out of 13	6 out of 13	5 out of 13
X	2 out of 13	2 out of 13	5 out of 13	4 out of 13
Instagram	1 out of 8	2 out of 8	5 out of 8	0 out of 8
YouTube	4 out of 8	4 out of 8	0 out of 8	0 out of 8

[3] Statistica. Number of Monthly Active Users worldwide as of 4th quarter 2023. https://www.statista.com/statistics/264810/number-of-monthly-active-facebook-users-worldwide/

[4] Statistica. Distribution of YouTube users worldwide as of February 2025, by age group and gender. https://www.statista.com/statistics/1287137/youtube-global-users-age-gender-distribution/

Provincial Police

All three provincial police services in Canada have a Facebook page and an account on X, Instagram, and YouTube (see Table 4). All these pages and accounts were created before 2019 (see Table 5) and have more than 1,000 followers or subscribers (see Table 6).

Table 4. Provincial Police's social media presence

	Facebook	X	Instagram	YouTube
Provincial Police	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3	3 out of 3

Table 5. Provincial Police's social media account creation year

Social media	2007 - 2012	2013 - 2018	2019 - 2025
Facebook	2 out of 3	1 out of 3	0 out of 3
X	2 out of 3	1 out of 3	0 out of 3
Instagram	0 out of 3	3 out of 3	0 out of 3
YouTube	3 out of 3	0 out of 3	0 out of 3

Table 6. Provincial Police's Facebook followers, X followers, Instagram followers, and YouTube subscribers

Social media	Less than 1,000	1,000 – 9,999	10,000 – 99,999	100,000 or more
Facebook	0 out of 3	0 out of 3	1 out of 3	2 out of 3
X	0 out of 3	0 out of 3	1 out of 3	2 out of 3
Instagram	0 out of 3	0 out of 3	3 out of 3	0 out of 3
YouTube	0 out of 3	1 out of 3	2 out of 3	0 out of 3

Municipal Police

The municipal police services in all the capital cities of all the Canadian provinces have a Facebook page and a X account. Eight out of ten (80%) have an Instagram account, and seven out of ten (70%) have a YouTube account (see Table 7). Most Canadian municipal police services joined Facebook (70%), X (90%), and YouTube (85.7%) during 2007 – 2012. All of them joined Instagram during 2013 – 2018 (see Table 8).

Table 7. Municipal Police's social media presence

	Facebook	X	Instagram	YouTube
Municipal Police	10 (100%)	10 (100%)	8 (80%)	7 (70%)

Table 8. Municipal Police's social media account creation year

Social media	2007 - 2012	2013 - 2018	2019 - 2025
Facebook	7 out of 10	1 out of 10	2 out of 10
X	9 out of 10	0 out of 10	1 out of 10
Instagram	0 out of 8	8 out of 8	0 out of 8
YouTube	6 out of 7	1 out of 7	0 out of 7

Across Canadian municipal police services, 70% of Facebook pages, 70% of X accounts, and 87.5% of Instagram accounts have 10,000 – 99,999 followers. Meanwhile, 85.7% of their YouTube channels have fewer than 10,000 subscribers (see Table 9).

Table 9. Municipal Police's Facebook followers, X followers, Instagram followers, and YouTube subscribers

Social media	Less than 1,000	1,000 – 9,999	10,000 – 99,999	100,000 or more
Facebook	0 out of 10	1 out of 10	7 out of 10	2 out of 10
X	0 out of 10	0 out of 10	7 out of 10	3 out of 10
Instagram	1 out of 8	0 out of 8	7 out of 8	0 out of 8
YouTube	2 out of 7	4 out of 7	1 out of 7	0 out of 7

Most popular Social Media Accounts of Canadian Law Enforcement Agencies

This section focuses on the most popular social media accounts of RCMP, provincial police services, and municipal police services. The RCMP social media account with most followers is the Nova Scotia RCMP Facebook page (more than 190,000 followers). The Canadian provincial police service with the most followers is the Ontario Provincial Police X account (more than 284,600 followers). The Canadian municipal police service with the most followers is the Toronto Police Service X account (more than 458,700 followers).

Nova Scotia RCMP

The Nova Scotia RCMP has over 1,400 employees, including 1,000+ police officers and 400+ civilians. They have 53 detachments located in three districts – Halifax, Northeast Nova, and Southeast Nova[5]. The specialized services provided by the Nova Scotia RCMP include but are not limited to responding to chemical, biological, and radiological incidents and nuclear threats, investigating the production and distribution of synthetic drugs, investigating vehicle collisions with fatal and serious injuries, managing group or individual conflicts, determining crime trends, handling and disposing of explosives and detonators, investigating international serious and organized crime, offering forensic identification services, and providing support to victims of crime and trauma[6].

Nova Scotia RCMP has social media accounts on Facebook, X, and YouTube. Their Facebook page was created in December 2009 and has over 190,000 followers. Their X account was created in April 2009 and has over 154,900 followers. Their YouTube account was created in October 2011 and has 843 subscribers. The Nova Scotia RCMP uses social media to inform the public about road closures, non-critical police updates, and their involvement in community events[7].

Ontario Provincial Police

The Ontario Provincial Police (OPP) is one of North America's largest deployed police services with more than 5,800 uniformed officers, 2,600 civilian employees, and 600 Auxiliary officers[8]. They serve the province of Ontario by protecting its citizens, upholding the law, and preserving public safety. The OPP is divided into five commands: Culture and Strategy Services, Traffic Safety and Operational Support, Corporate Services, Investigations and Organized Crime, and Field Operations[8]. The OPP officers are responsible for policing over one million square kilometers of land and waterways. They provide frontline policing services to 323 Ontario municipalities and patrol over 127,000 kilometers of provincial roadways. The OPP has many specialized units including drug enforcement, aviation, explosive disposal, search and rescue, canine and emergency response[8].

The OPP has presence on Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube. Their Facebook page was created in March 2010 and has more than 102,000 followers. Their X account was created in January 2010 and has more than 284,600 followers. Their Instagram account was created in June 2015 and has over 69,900 followers. Their YouTube account was created in December 2009 and has more than 12,900 subscribers.

The Ontario government has also published social media terms of use that outlines what can be expected from their social media posts, commenting policy, links to other websites, warranty disclaimer, and limitation of

[5] Nova Scotia Royal Canadian Mounted Police. https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/ns/about-division

[6] Nova Scotia Royal Canadian Mounted Police Programs and Services. https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/ns/programs-and-services

[7] Nova Scotia Royal Canadian Mounted Police Public Communication. https://www.rcmp-grc.gc.ca/en/ns/about-division/public-communication#a2

[8] Ontario Provincial Police. https://www.opp.ca/

liability[9]. As per these terms, the social media accounts publish a few times a day on weekdays but not usually on holidays observed in Ontario, are monitored during normal business hours, and are not committed to responding to everyone.

Toronto Police Service

The Toronto Police Service (TPS) has over 5,500 officers and 2,200 civilian support staff. They provide several services to the residents of Toronto, such as reporting a crime, obtaining police record checks, criminal record checks, and vulnerable sector checks, reporting a collision, requesting destruction of fingerprint and photograph, registering a complaint, and leaving an anonymous tip[10].

The TPS maintains an active presence on Facebook, X, Instagram, YouTube, and LinkedIn. Their Facebook page was created in November 2009 and has over 77,000 followers. Their X account was created in September 2008 and has over 458,700 followers. Their Instagram account was created in October 2013 and has more than 82,800 followers. Their YouTube account was created in July 2007 and has more than 23,100 subscribers. Their LinkedIn account has over 59,000 followers.

Accounts Followed by Most Popular Social Media Accounts of Canadian Law Enforcement Agencies

Table 10 shows the number of accounts or pages followed by the most popular social media accounts of the Canadian law enforcement agencies at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels: the Nova Scotia RCMP, the Ontario Provincial Police, and the Toronto Police respectively.

Table 10. Number of Accounts Followed by Most Popular Social Media Law Enforcement Agencies.

Law Enforcement Agencies	Facebook	X	Instagram	YouTube
Nova Scotia RCMP	231	596	No Instagram Account	Not Applicable
Ontario Provincial Police	86	414	214	Not Applicable
Toronto Police Service	217	2577	625	Not Applicable

Figure 2 shows the types of Facebook pages – law enforcement agencies, government bodies, non-profit organizations, businesses, and media outlets – followed by the Nova Scotia RCMP, the Ontario Provincial Police, and the Toronto Police.

The Nova Scotia RCMP largely followed Facebook pages of non-profit organizations (32.1%), such as 211 Nova Scotia. This was followed by other law enforcement agencies (23.1%), like Halifax Regional Police; government agencies (15.8%), such as the Nova Scotia Government; media accounts (8.1%), like The Globe and Mail; business pages (4.5%), such as Cision; and 16.3% miscellaneous pages, like Acadia University.

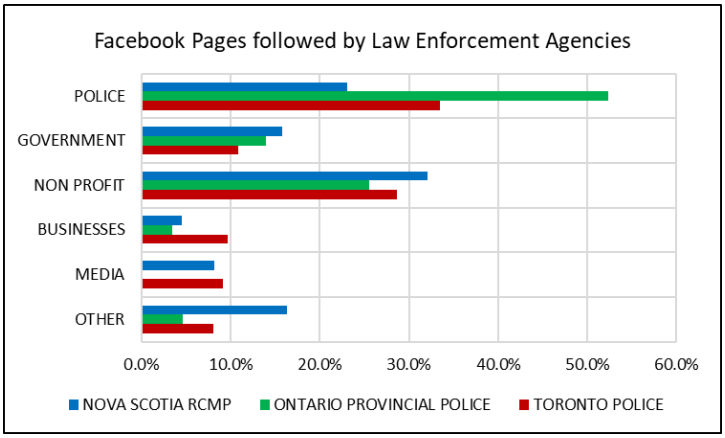

Figure 2. Types of Pages followed by Law Enforcement Agencies on Facebook.

The Ontario Provincial Police followed 52.3% law enforcement (e.g., Waterloo Regional Police Service), 25.6% non-profits (e.g., Bullying Canada), 14% government (e.g., Ontario Ministry of Natural Resources), 3.5% business

[9] Ontario Government Social Media Terms of Use. https://www.ontario.ca/page/social-media-terms-use

[10] Toronto Police Service https://www.tps.ca/

(e.g., ONroute), and 4.7% other Facebook pages (e.g., St. Joseph's Healthcare and Foundation).

Toronto police followed a variety of Facebook pages, with most (33.5%) being other law enforcement agencies, like the Niagara Regional Police Service. This was followed by not-for-profit organizations (28.6%), such as Pride Toronto, and government pages (10.8%), like the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre. Business pages, such as Meta for Business, accounted for 9.7%, while media outlets, like CTV Toronto, represented 9.2%. The remaining 8.1% consisted of miscellaneous pages, such as Maple Leafs Fans.

Benefits of Canadian Law Enforcement Agencies' Active Presence on Social Media

The active presence of Canadian law enforcement agencies on social media platforms has numerous benefits:

Real-Time Communication: Social media platforms allow Canadian law enforcement agencies to rapidly disseminate real-time crucial information to members of the public during natural disasters, terrorist events, or active criminal investigations. By providing regular updates on social media, Canadian law enforcement agencies can prevent the spread of panic and confusion, ensuring that members of the public have reliable information during crises (see Figure 3), reducing the likelihood of misinformation filling the void.

Rapid Fact-Checking and Clarification: Canadian law enforcement agencies use their social media accounts to correct false rumors (see Figure 4) or misleading reports and provide clarifications to prevent the spread of misinformation.

Crowdsourced Information and Tips: Social media platforms enable Canadian law enforcement agencies to post images, videos, or descriptions of suspects, missing persons, or stolen property and request tips from members of the public (see Figure 5), often resulting in valuable leads.

Increased Trust and Accountability: The active presence of Canadian law enforcement agencies on social media enables officers to be seen as approachable members of the community rather than distant, impersonal figures of authority. Canadian law enforcement agencies now post regular updates, share successful operations (see Figure 6), and engage with members of the public by responding to their concerns, thereby demonstrating their commitment to public safety (see Figure 7), which is essential in increasing their accountability and building public trust.

Public Awareness: Social media platforms provide a platform for Canadian law enforcement agencies to promote public safety initiatives and campaigns. Canadian law enforcement agencies now use social media to share safety tips, crime trends (see Figure 8), and community resources to promote awareness for issues like online safety, drug abuse or domestic violence.

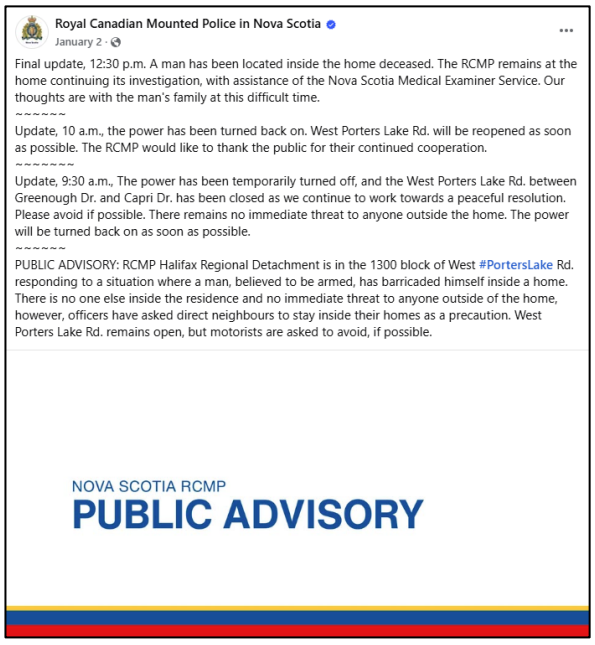

Figure 3. Nova Scotia RCMP provides frequent crisis-related updates to keep the public informed.

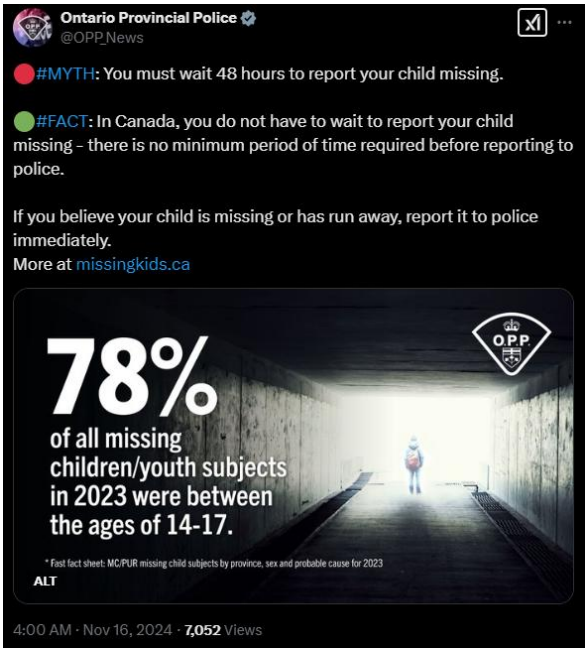

Figure 4. Ontario Provincial Police busts the myth by proving fact.

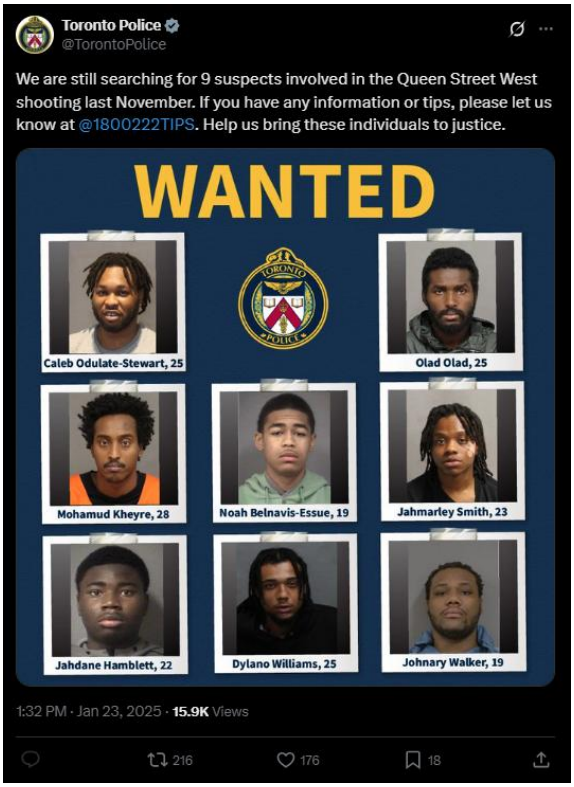

Figure 5. Toronto Police seeks public assistance to locate shooting suspects.

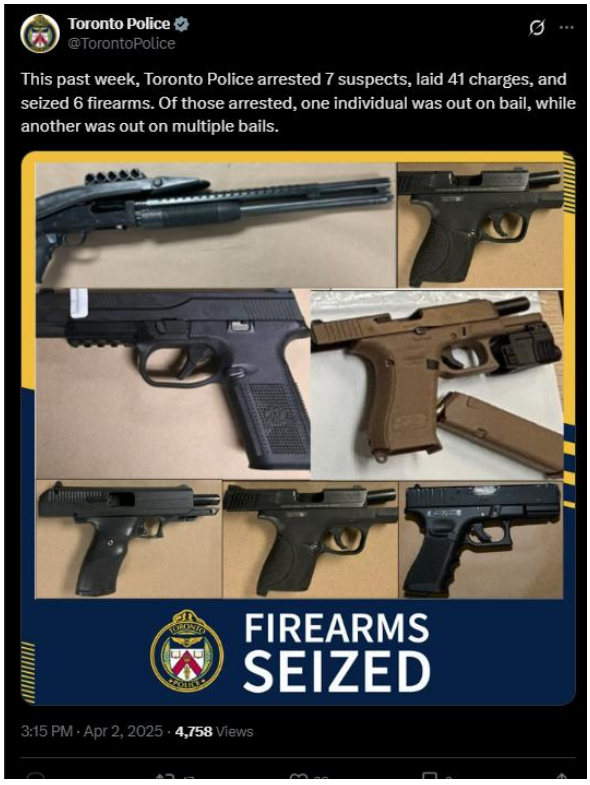

Figure 6. Toronto Police posts about successful arrests and seizure of firearms.

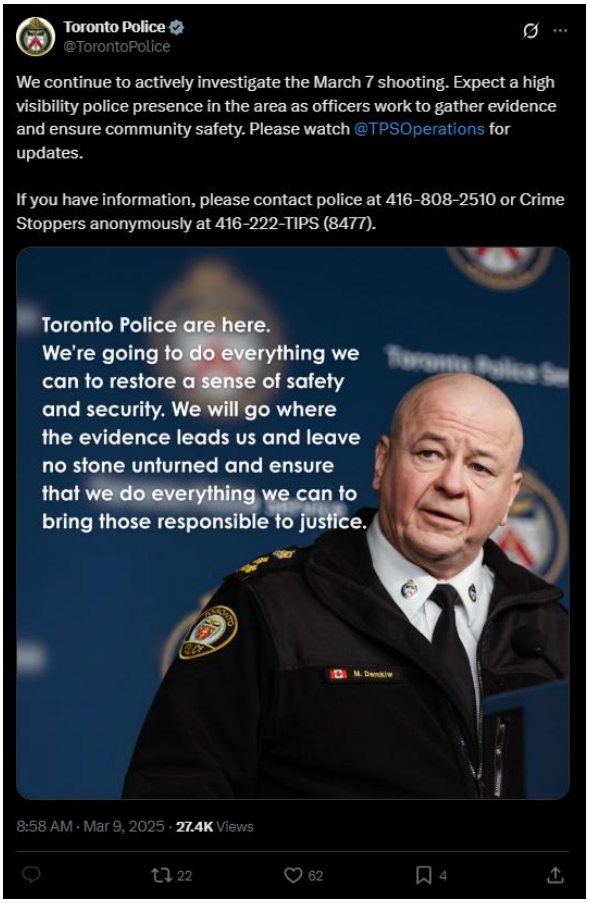

Figure 7. Toronto Police demonstrate their commitment to public safety.

Figure 8. Nova Scotia RCMP shares statistics about intimate partner crime.

DISCUSSION

Implications for Crisis Response and Management

This paper explores the presence of Canadian law enforcement agencies on Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube. It examines agencies with the highest number of followers at the federal, provincial, and municipal level. The findings offer several key insights relevant to crisis response and management:

- The presence of Canadian law enforcement agencies on social media platforms enables real-time crisis updates, quick fact-checking, increased public engagement, enhanced trust and accountability, and the promotion of public awareness.
- Having a clear social media policy can help set the right expectations for members of the public (see, Figure 9).
- A connected network of Canadian law enforcement, government, non-profit organizations, businesses, and media outlets can lead to effective collaboration during crises, such as natural disasters, public safety threats, and other emergencies.
- Canadian law enforcement agencies following other law enforcement agencies can be helpful for multi-agency operations, where coordination is essential to avoid duplication of efforts, optimize resource utilization, and ensure a unified response.
- By following media outlets, Canadian law enforcement agencies can monitor breaking news and public sentiment. Furthermore, during a crisis, these platforms can also be used by the Canadian law enforcement agencies to release timely and accurate information, thereby improving transparency and building public trust.

The Growing Need for Canadian Law Enforcement in the Evolving Social Media Landscape

While social media platforms have revolutionized communication, their continually evolving landscape presents a variety of challenges, like the growing use of artificial intelligence and the proliferation of false information. Hence, it has become more crucial than ever for the Canadian law enforcement agencies to maintain an active presence on social media. Their online presence can help address emerging challenges, offer public support, and improve safety and communication in an increasingly digital world.

Increased Use of Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence algorithms now play a central role in shaping what users see on social media platforms, from recommendations on YouTube to the posts users are most likely to engage with on Facebook, X, and Instagram. These algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement by personalizing content based on individual preferences and past online behavior. The increasing use of personalization in the ranking in social media feeds could create filter bubbles, where a social media user is shown more and more of things they like, while things they are not prone to like are hidden from them, without any active choice on their part. These filter bubbles have the potential of fueling polarization, leading to a situation where people are so far apart that they inhabit different realities (Cinelli et al., 2022).

In response to the growing polarization on social media platforms, Canadian law enforcement agencies can:

- Monitor emerging narratives that could contribute to polarization or public safety risks.
- Educate the public about filter bubbles and the importance of diverse media consumption.

The Proliferation of False Information

Social media platforms are widely criticized for the rapid dissemination of misinformation (false information spread unintentionally) and disinformation (false information spread intentionally). The consequences of false information are particularly severe in contexts such as elections, public health, and global crises like the COVID-19 pandemic. Common forms of false information include, but are not restricted to, clickbait (fake stories with catchy headlines aimed at attracting attention and encouraging clicks), hoax (intentionally fabricated story presented as factual to deceive the public), rumour (unverified claims that lack evidence and may be true, false or remain unresolved), propaganda (content created by political entities to mislead people), and framing (manipulating aspects of reality to enhance the content visibility while concealing the truth to deceive and misguide audiences) (Aïmeur, et al., 2023). A study by Vosoughi et al. (2018) found that false news spread on Twitter (now X) six times faster than factual content, with 70% of users unable to distinguish between real and fake news.

One of the more alarming developments in the misinformation landscape is the rise of deepfake technology – the use of artificial intelligence techniques to manipulate and fabricate images, audios, and videos to create highly realistic but entirely fake content. Deepfakes can be used to create false narratives, spread disinformation, or damage reputations. They have the potential to erode trust in visual evidence and challenges the authenticity of digital content. Given the sensational nature of deepfakes, they can quickly captivate audiences and generate significant attention. As deepfakes become more sophisticated, it becomes harder for users to detect them (Al-Khazraji et al., 2023).

In response to the growing threat of false and manipulated content, Canadian law enforcement agencies can:

- Promote media literacy through official social media channels, teaching individuals how to critically evaluate information, identify signs of manipulation, and verify the authenticity of the content.
- Raise public awareness about the social, political, and economic implications of deepfakes (see, Figure 10).

Figure 9. Ontario Provincial Police posts regarding their updated social media policy.

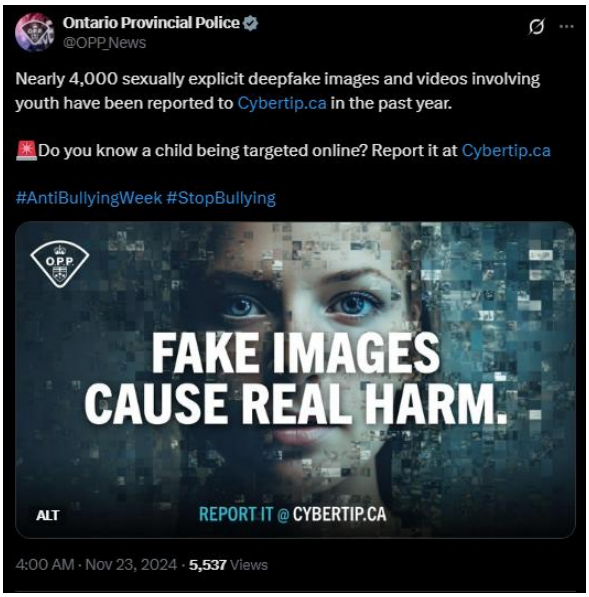

Figure 10. Ontario Provincial Police cautions against deepfake images and videos.

CONCLUSION

This paper reports on the presence of Canadian federal, provincial, and municipal law enforcement agencies on Facebook, X, Instagram, and YouTube. It emphasized the roles and responsibilities of the Canadian law enforcement agencies with the most followers at each level of law enforcement: the Royal Canadian Mounted Police in Nova Scotia at the federal level, the Ontario Provincial Police at the provincial level, and the Toronto Police Service at the municipal level. The paper further examines the impact these agencies have made through their social media engagement. Lastly, it discusses the significance of law enforcement agencies' social media presence in the context of the rapidly changing social media landscape.

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