

OSCAR WORKING PAPER #02

Police Communications and Social Media

A report by Nigel Fielding (Professor of Sociology, University of Surrey) and Nick Caddick (Digital Media Manager, Sussex Police)

Aims

This report aims to conceptualise and evaluate the affordances of Web 2.0 social media tools in respect of the communication functions of the police and to document the role of social media ('SM') in police communications in forces in England and Wales.

Research Design & Methods

In pursuit of the above-stated aim, exploratory research was conducted. The research design had several components. These were: (i) practice examples drawn from partners in the OSCAR project (ii) key informant interviews (iii) the research literature.

Regarding (i), the practice examples concerned accounts of social media-based interventions and communications campaigns made known to the authors. Regarding (ii), key informant interviews took place in early 2017 with a small sample of officers and staff assigned to the communications function in five police forces. The interviews sought to identify (a) instances of good/poor practice as perceived by the respondent (one criterion of good practice would be a communications intervention with a positive operational outcome) (b) wider thoughts about the role of SM in the force's communications strategy (c) appraisals of the obstacles that present themselves in making good the potential of SM (d) assessments of what it is not realistic to expect SM to do in respect of the communications brief. Regarding (iii), relevant literature included studies of human behaviour online, analyses of information flows, and evaluations of police communications using social media.

Scope

Police forces engage in multiple forms of communication, for numerous purposes, with a variety of audiences and stakeholders. We have already noted that the present study focuses on public-oriented communications rather than internal communications. Even so, the boundary is somewhat artificial: there is often an internal dimension to public-oriented communications. Information is a malleable entity that changes as it flows through forces to Comms and outwards.

An important consideration is provenance and perceived trustworthiness, but whether perceived trustworthiness is an 'inhibitor' to force communications via SM is moot. One might

speculate whether public expectations about police online communications are higher than online communications by other branches of government in a 'post-truth' era of rising public scepticism. The extent to which public scepticism extends beyond politicians to officialdom more generally is also an unknown. The criteria by which citizens interpret the trustworthiness of a communication that arrives out of the blue may be little more sophisticated than a combination of the general esteem of the institution ostensibly sending the communication and close attention to any signs of 'dodginess' such as slight misuse of language. However, police still enjoy a high level of legitimacy judging by annual surveys of the public's estimation of the relative trustworthiness of different public institutions. Unless a communication is grossly incompetent in its grammar, spelling and presentation, the fact that it is ostensibly from the police will carry weight with most recipients. It is important, however, that if sceptics contact a force for confirmation of a message's authenticity the force is quickly responsive to such requests for assurance.

Despite focusing on public-oriented communications there remains considerable breadth of scope. The communications that are in frame may relate to a specific investigation, a focused information campaign, or broader objectives (e.g., reassurance). Issues of provenance and trustworthiness play differently in each of these forms of communication to, and with, the public. A further point is that there is often a supplementary aim in police communications whatever their prime purpose, that supplementary aim being the element of relationship building. There is a danger, or at least a potential missed trick, in cleaving to instrumental purposes for communicating to the neglect of the role that social media can play in deepening the police/public relationship. Indeed, the business world is increasingly adept at introducing an element of fun and playfulness into its communications with customers via social media. When a force adopts that approach, does it undermine legitimacy? Some may feel that by sticking to instrumental purposes forces are not using social media for their core function – the social – but instead using it as simply another broadcast channel. Is this what the public expect or might it help build relationships?

Concepts

A fundamental concept employed by digital researchers is that of ‘affordances’. The concept seeks to capture both what social media can do and what they cannot do. It directs attention to how a new technology is used. By doing so, it takes a dispassionate look at both the benefits and the limitations of new technologies. This can spark new understandings. For instance, applied to Web 1.0, the affordances perspective revealed that the familiar process by which a new device is configured by a user to meet her/his requirements had its parallel in a process by which a new device ‘configures the user’. That is, in light of the features provided by the technology and the techniques that users are required to follow to make use of the features, the user’s behaviour changes. Adopting a new technology can change the way that the user seeks to solve problems for which they regard the technology to be a solution. As users discover uses for a new technology their own behavioural repertoire changes. In a policing context the corollary of the ‘configuring the user’ phenomenon is the extent to which policing has adapted its behaviours to the affordances of SM or is slow to exploit them (Aiken 2016).

By learning how to use a technology users also discover new needs that the technology can satisfy. Sometimes these processes mean that the primary use of a technology foreseen by its developers is not its primary use in actual practice. For example, the telephone was originally foreseen as a broadcast technology like radio. Rather than peer-to-peer communication via switchboard connections, it was originally expected that the switchboard would broadcast programmes to a mass of individuals dialling in to the switchboard.

Thus, the affordances of a technology are not only those for which it was designed but those that users discover it can support. Sometimes this is at the cost of efficiency, effectiveness or ethics. In an open plan office it is more efficient to walk to the desk of a colleague with whom one needs to talk and speak to them, but often an e-mail or a text is sent instead. For all their refinement, e-mail and text are not, and never will be, as efficient – and in many cases as ef-

fective – as direct communication. The example renders a further point. An e-mail or text is recoverable in a way that a direct communication is not. That is, the technological fix provides a further dimension to the communication; like other IT, communications via mail/text are self-documenting. This may or may not be a benefit. If the communication is an important discovery about a work-related matter then a retrievable record is a boon. If the direct communication is an insult one or both parties may subsequently prefer there to be no retrievable record of the exchange having occurred. Such considerations are drawn on in deciding a given technology’s effectiveness for a given purpose. As to ethics, the self-documenting aspect of digital technologies – in this example, email or SMS text – provides third parties who can intercept a communication with an opportunity to exert leverage over the two parties originally in communication, even blackmail. In the context of social media the example also raises the point that not being self-documenting may be a desirable affordance in some kinds of communication via online channels; while Facebook is persistent, WhatsApp and SnapChat are not.

In sum, the affordances concept tells us that (i) technologies change how their users behave (ii) users work actively to identify new needs that are met by the technology (iii) the spell of technology is sufficiently strong that it can sometimes displace previous approaches that were actually more efficient, effective and/or ethical. Regarding the ethical dimension, some may argue that on present evidence the new communications technologies have challenged ethical behaviour, citing the phenomena of ‘fake news’, trolling, cyber-bullying, and the retailing of ideologies such as extreme nationalism, not to mention the spectacular growth of cybercrime.

Take-up of new technologies is not immediate or complete across the population of potential users. User research in socio-technological studies has developed an ‘adoption curve’ to measure and compare the rate of take-up of a newly-introduced technology. Analysis of adoption curves shows that certain population groups are predisposed to act as ‘early adopters’, with the majority of the population following later, and a minority of roughly equivalent size to the early adopters remaining disinclined

to adopt. Typically, early adopters are young, well-educated and relatively affluent. However, circumstances make a difference. Limited broadband, hardware and technical infrastructure in Africa made for a different profile of early adopters of mobile phones in that region. Aware of the benefits of the Web, the rather limited Internet affordances of early mobile phones provided a way in to the Web not only for young Africans but for a wider fraction of the population.

Web 2.0 was explicitly designed with Social Media applications in mind. That is not its only affordance but it was a prominent one from the outset. Web 2.0 is characterised by websites that support user-generated content, are interoperable (with other products, systems and devices) and that are easy to use. Social media are interactive Web 2.0 applications. Users create a profile on the application in a way that is specific to the service. The social media service connects the user's profile with that of other users. This enables the creation, development and maintenance of social networks. It is not necessary here to elaborate the uptake of sites like Facebook, and any recital of the numbers of SM users will be obsolete before this report is finished. In the apt words of an anonymous Wikipedia article, SM have introduced 'substantial and pervasive changes to communication between businesses, organizations, communities and individuals'.

Applying the concepts to police communications with the public

The cases of Amazon and sexting suggest that, like other organizations, it takes time for the most (and least) effective uses of SM for police communications with the public to be recognised. A systematic evaluation of SM involves a considered comparison of different modes of communication – SM versus 'conventional' modes such as newsletters, static Internet pages, newspapers, radio and TV; SM versus 'traditional' modes, such as public notices or officers knocking on doors.

Each mode comparison also needs to be examined systematically in relation to the variety of different purposes for which police forces want to communicate with the public. These purposes include Publicise (e.g. a successful police initiative); Advise (e.g., how to source and install crime prevention hardware); Inform (e.g. how to recognise the signs of domestic abuse); Warn (e.g. a terrorist alert); and Appeal (e.g. request public help in seeking a criminal suspect or missing person). To these we would add the requirement to Engage. We have cited this function separately because it is often neglected against the backcloth of more immediate and/or instrumental purposes and so merits being highlighted here. The engagement function is the bedrock of neighbourhood policing and social media has a considerable potential for building public engagement. Research shows that the quality of routine, daily encounters with members of the public is most important in improving public confidence (Police Foundation 2015).

There are a number of considerations in comparing SM to conventional modes of communication, including:

Quality: SM is variable in quality and trustworthiness and estimating these characteristics may be difficult (Ruths and Pfeffer 2014), hence the phenomenon of 'fake news'.

Reach: Conventional communication modes are centralized in terms of their production and dissemination whereas SM is decentralized.

Frequency: Accesses of conventional modes are limited in number and predictable (listening to the morning radio news bulletin, watching the evening news on TV, punctuated, perhaps, by reading a printed newspaper while commuting) while SM accesses are more frequent and occur at any time (34% of all UK users, and almost half of 18-24 year olds, check their smartphone in the middle of the night; Deloitte 2016).

Accessibility: conventional modes are produced by private firms or government or-

ganizations, including the police, while SM is produced by anyone on the right side of the digital divide.

Usability: conventional media production requires specialized skills and training, SM does not.

Immediacy: conventional modes display lag before content is publicly available whereas SM is instantaneous, but the lag is due to editorial and legal accountability that controls quality while SM can instantly spread hoaxes and fake reports, and is not geographically defined.

Permanence: once conventional media are produced they cannot be changed whereas SM can be instantaneously altered or deleted; the lack of 'persistence' of SM makes it less authoritative, and possibly less 'auditable' as regards investigations or intelligence. In extremis, a communication can be distributed to a vast number of recipients and the devices sending it can be destroyed, e.g., where mobile phones are destroyed.

To understand the dimensions of the SM experience from the perspective of users amongst the general public it is useful to borrow from market research what has been termed 'the honeycomb framework' (Kietzmann et al 2011). The framework has 7 elements. They can be used to evaluate an SM communication.

Identity: extent to which users reveal their identity. Apart from demographics like age and gender this often includes disclosure of occupation, location and attitudes. However, such disclosures are often unreliable and so, particularly in a policing context, must all be treated with scepticism.

Conversations: extent of communicative interaction in which a given user engages. It can also give an insight into the user's purposes in communicating.

Sharing: extent to which users exchange, distribute and receive content (e.g., text-only, photos).

Presence: extent to which users can know if other users are available for communicative interaction. SM sites may provide symbols indicating who is online.

Relationships: extent to which users are linked to other users. This is the prime focus of Social Network Analysis, with its heuristics of 'centrality' and weak/strong 'ties'.

Reputation: extent to which users can estimate their and others' status in the SM environment. Reputation is seen as an artefact of trust, such as a reputation for providing effective and accurate advice in the user forum associated with a product. One way of estimating this is to examine patterns of who sends to whom and the extent of reciprocity. Another way involves data aggregator tools and agents that subject assertions in aggregated text to tests of accuracy (e.g. Amazon's Mechanical Turk).

Groups: extent to which users form communities around a shared interest. The broader the community the more likely it is to spawn shared communities.

So far we have discussed the issues at hand in somewhat abstract terms and largely in relation to the nature and affordances of SM technologies. We now turn to our findings.

Findings: a thematic analysis

Sample

We interviewed key informants from five forces with a combined population of 8,089,200. Informants included the Senior Communications Manager of a large shire force with two large towns, the Digital Communications Manager of a mixed suburban/rural force, the Digital Communications Manager of a large mixed urban/rural force, the Social Media manager of a second large urban/rural force, and the Head of Marketing and Internal Communications of a

large mixed urban/rural force. One respondent had 10 years police experience, the last four in digital comms leading on SM strategy; before the SM role ‘I didn’t even have a Smartphone’ (CH: 12). Another respondent began working life as a PCSO, started a local police Twitter account leading to becoming public engagement officer for one district of the force, then Divisional Communications Manager, then Communications Manager for the whole force, while also serving as a Special. A third respondent had eight years police experience, five in Comms, gaining a mix of operational news presentation, dealing with news conferences and PR stories (HF: 2). A fourth with experience in government communications (DEFRA, Home Office) and a degree in communications had three years comms experience dealing with the main force website, social media, marketing campaigns and internal comms. The final respondent was an authority on police and social media and, in addition to managing force comms, conducted research on SM in policing. Our informants thus had a range of experience from a career interest in communications from their degree onwards through to those with much police experience whose comms role developed from their original postings.

To gauge our respondents’ engagement with SM we asked which digital communications media they use in their private lives. All had a mobile phone, one having two, one for work and one for personal use. All used e-mail and Facebook. All but one used Instagram. All used Twitter; one commented ‘I have a personal profile on Twitter which I use professionally’ (DB: 10). Flickr bucked the trend, with no users for personal purposes; one respondent commented ‘Don’t see the benefit, both personally and professionally’ (DB: 10) and another said ‘found it really young and stopped using it’ (JS: 13). Three respondents used Snapchat, three used WhatsApp and LinkedIn, one respondent making the delightful observation that ‘what I like about LinkedIn is, because it’s linked to your professional job you can’t be an idiot (CH: 12)’.

We asked which medium respondents could not live without. Three nominated Facebook, with one noting ‘but I use it to its maximum levels in terms of privacy settings ... The agencies putting content on there need to take into ac-

count ... We’ve put messages out “please don’t share on Facebook when you’re going on holiday”, “oh I’m going on holiday next week” onto the police public page’ (DB: 10). Twitter was runner-up to Facebook for a respondent who said ‘Twitter I use when I want to find something out ... I heard somebody saying Tara Palmer Tomkinson had died, and I didn’t turn the radio on, didn’t look at the news, I literally went to Twitter. I use that as a reactive research tool (CH: 12)’. Mobile phones received only one ‘could not live without’ but this probably speaks the extent to which these devices have become indispensable. One respondent said ‘the phone is the TV and everything else is the radio ... you get everything through your phone (JA: 11)’. Contemporary communications media clearly play a large part in the lives of communications staff beyond their professional life, with signs in our data of the importance of such media in identity work as well as communication (Suler 2015).

Purposes

We identified the six communications ‘purposes’ noted earlier, while recognising overlap between them. Like our sample, we regard the six purposes as a useful but artificial heuristic, treating them as different ‘inflections’ rather than as wholly distinct and self-contained; ‘nothing should be mutually exclusive to them’ (DB: 2).

Publicise, for instance publicising a successful police initiative

Respondents identified the main instances of this purpose as publicising the detection of wanted and missing persons, and positive publicity around criminal behaviour orders and putting offenders behind bars – ‘social media can play a massive part in all of those’ (CH: 3). A respondent reported a shift in his force’s approach. Up to 2015 it had simply publicised press releases with a title and link to the main force website – ‘they weren’t using social media in the way the rest of the world uses it ... So we turned off automatic Tweeting and the automatic Tweet going to the Facebook and got the team to start writing posts for the platform they were using (and) in a much more

friendly and human way ... Now whenever we put out a press release publicising a good initiative we think about the platform we're using and write something that works in Facebook [or] in Twitter' (JA: 3).

Another technique practised by several forces involved identifying a popular cultural event for which SM can be used to demonstrate a policing dimension. For example, on Valentine's Day 'we put out messages to our "long lost loves", which were 5 wanted people that we wanted to find. And it got a lot of attention (JA: 3)'. The respondent noted that the example shaded into the Appeal purpose 'but yesterday we found that we had arrested one of them, so we publicised the fact ... and thanked the public for their help, we do that ... with missing people as well' (ibid). In publicising something good the messaging would include involving the audience that had helped police.

As in mainstream mass media, novelty registers with the public. 'We'll publicise if they're doing something new to combat drugs or dangerous driving or off-road bikes ... People listen more if they can see we're looking at new ways of trying to tackle a particular crime' (HF: 2). Although the media are periodically invited to attend operations or accompany teams on new initiatives 'our main success really is social media ... So we've done Facebook Live [on] "life with a response officer" ... one of my colleagues' gone out with them ... showing what this officer has to deal with on a standard night in central [very large city]' (ibid). Similarly, 'showing our Facebook followers how our forensics team runs and what kind of calls come into them', likewise the dog unit. Instagram Stories and Snapchat were also used, the latter to reach 14 to 23 year olds (HF: 2).

Social media brought new roles for established staff. Photography and visuals teams exploited the affordances of social media video functionality not only for dramatic material ('knocking down doors and drugs operations and raids'; JS: 2-3) but for crime prevention messaging such as keeping safe over holidays or how to report a crime via 101, with this content going out on the website and Facebook feeds as well as to the regular press/media.

Advise, for example how to source and install crime prevention hardware

There was a consensus that although 'the vast majority of SM content is about crime prevention and not just installing hardware but other advice like safe passwords and data security (CH: 3-4)' it was a worthy rather than exciting topic. 'Crime prevention is one of the things that they're most disinterested in on social media ... Only 11% of people were interested in that [in a comms team survey] (DB: 3)'. There was consensus on how to arouse interest in crime prevention messages. 'People are most interested in updates about incidents happening now in their area ... So what we do for normal low level crime prevention advice is tying it up to incidents. We get far more reaction if there's something that makes it relevant in a more natural way (DB: 3)', for example, advising people to lock their windows at night would be targeted to an area where the previous night there had been a residential burglary with entry gained through an open window. Roads policing units generally have a high Twitter following 'and they will put out real cases of somebody they've just caught and provide a bit of advice at the same time. So say they've caught somebody with bald tyres they will say, "Well it needs to be this depth". .. When we're giving advice it works better if it's alongside either a real story or something that's just happened' (JA 3-4). A particularly extensive instance of this used Snapchat to involve an offender that officers had detained. They 'found somebody's car was open, then they found drugs in that car, they gave him a caution but at the same time they [asked] the offender, "Do you want to talk to our younger audience about drugs and your life?" because they'd messed up his life, and he did that, which was a great little bit of advice and it was real and it wasn't "Hey, lock your doors."' (JA: 3-4).

Much thought goes into targeting Advice messages to specific groups and understanding where they start from in receiving such messaging from police. 'We have done a cyber-crime online campaign about preventing rape and serious sexual assault and building confidence to report such things ... We did bench-

mark testing before on perceptions of the police, benchmark perception afterwards and ‘did the campaign move your opinion positively or negatively’. That was targeted to the age profile, we didn’t put anything out to everybody’ (DB:3). The Advise purpose is ‘a subject where we can come across very police-y, where we’re telling people what to do’ (JA: 3-4). Thus, considerations relate not only to platforms delivering appropriate targeting but to style and tone of content.

For the Advise purpose Facebook and Twitter functionality was being exploited by production of interactive videos and ‘wideos’, an animated video creation platform for cartoon-like short videos to reach a particular audience segment. Another technique was coordinated messaging for campaigns. If there was a push on burglary Comms would change all the headers on Twitter accounts and profile pictures on Facebook ‘so it’s all pulling together (HF: 3)’. Scale was considerable; one large urban/suburban force managed over 260 Twitter accounts, with lead users tasked to promote the campaign, and also disseminated campaigns to an e-mail database. Campaign-related Twitter traffic mostly consisted of ‘blanket messages’ which could present dilemmas if recipients saw them as ‘respond to’ opportunities. ‘If someone asks us a question in our inbox, we will provide generic advice, but we still live in a position that we can’t take reports of crime. So it’s either signposting to different organisations, or “thanks for letting us know”’. It was still important to engage with responses even if engagement was not the purpose of the original campaign. ‘We get positive stuff coming in ... but a fair amount of negative comments as well, which we try and respond to ... if people have a complaint we’ll signpost them to the right place to make that complaint (JS: 4)’.

Despite these efforts there was uncertainty regarding impact of the Advise purpose. ‘It’s very complex to measure [impact of] doing a crime prevention measure based on social media ... the only way you can measure is the level of engagement you get with that post or clicks through to a website (DB: 3)’; ‘every year we’ll do a burglary campaign in the summer and winter ... but whether that gets across or not I don’t know, I don’t think it does unless there’s

something that really resonates with the audience (JA: 3-4)’.

Inform, for instance how to recognise that domestic abuse may be taking place

This wide-ranging purpose extended from simple reporting of a major RTC through to providing tips on recognising grooming or domestic abuse. Following critical HMIC inspections a force prepared a four-week campaign on domestic abuse coordinated with a time of year when statistics indicated such abuse peaked. The campaign took over all its SM channels. Images were specially designed and used alongside coordinated banners and profile pictures on the theme. Hashtags were created bearing short memorable phrases relating to the victim’s view and used in each tweet. A Flash Mob was held at the main city’s rail station, displaying placards with the short phrases, which were also promoted on Snapchat using a subset of phrases reflecting a young person’s angle on the issue.

Another sensitive Inform campaign targeted the family and friends of hardcore online pornography users. A charity advised on design and message content. Some encouraged users to contact police if they wanted help and some was directed at the family member/friend. The example was an instance of collaboration with partner organizations. ‘We’ll support bigger agencies ... the Home Office, the NCA, their “Run, Hide and Tell” [counter-terrorism] information. What comes round is generally directed at all police forces and you’ve got a certain expectation to push that’ (JS: 4-5)’. One full year campaign funded by a PCC focused on knowing one’s limits in drinking alcohol. A previous campaign tried scare tactics – ‘one punch could kill’. The new campaign informed that police had contacted bar staff, university pub crews and campus wardens not to serve people who were already drunk, highlighting the dampening effect on a night out.

Warn, for example a terrorist alert or major incident

While some warnings are routine – an abnormally large vehicle alert or warning of over-

crowding and hazardous sea conditions at a popular beach – this purpose is particularly concerned with major events. Here platform was key and Twitter was pre-eminent. ‘All UK primary accounts have Twitter alert functionality, we used that last Sunday for a large waste depot fire to warn people. We also did immediate Facebook content including video to Warn and Inform about keeping windows and doors closed, keep away from the scene’ (DB: 4). Twitter warnings ended with steers to Facebook.

Speed was of course critical in the Warn purpose. ‘If something really big is happening you have to do something about it quickly because in an incident you want the police to be the credible trusted voice [from] the start. We’ve had situations in the past [where] we don’t know what’s going on, “we’d better try and wait and write a press release”, by that point an hour has gone by and people are already following other accounts or getting updates from the media ... Get out there with something quickly, even if it’s just a holding line to say we’re aware, more info to follow’ (CH: 5). At a major incident with double-digit fatalities ‘the people at [disaster site] first was the Media Relations Team - didn’t get to social media quick enough, we had a lot of members of the public asking us what was going on but we hadn’t replied [or] even put out a statement’. Once the digital comms manager arrived (from an assignment 40 minutes away) ‘we started warning people to stay away, explaining why they weren’t allowed to leave certain areas, and that became very, very useful because it became word of mouth on the street as well as on social media’ (JA: 5). Over the week following, social media regularly updated the situation, ‘even launched a new Facebook page for the [disaster] area [for] the more localised communication once we got into the recovery stage’ (ibid).

Allied to the temporal issue is that Twitter is increasingly seen as ‘a news channel ... where people will go first for news (HF: 3)’. One force set up a new Twitter account with the force name followed by the word ‘Breaking’ to encourage people to use it as the earliest possible warning source. Twitter Alerts would warn of something about to take place as well as

events that had just happened. Alerts were followed by detail on Facebook.

It was important to know one’s audience, e.g., by anticipating that the Run, Hide and Tell national campaign could be seen by people outside major cities as not applying to them (a ‘not on our doorstep’ (JS: 6) perception). A major event that violated such assumptions was well-exploited by police. The event required Mutual Aid and an armed police presence for over a week. Joint operations command created a Twitter feed for the event. It ‘built and built as [event] went on. We’d had a lot of criticism beforehand in terms of cost and the dangers, and ... people protesting. [But] it really turned round and it was a lot to do with press officers providing far more positive imaging of what the officers were there to do ... Because in [city] you’re not as used to seeing armed police ... People used it as traffic advice, places to avoid, and information of what was going on, and had a real back and forth, far more engagement than had happened before (JS: 6-7)’. The point here is that multiple purposes can be achieved once a channel has secured public engagement.

Appeal, for example to request public help in seeking a criminal suspect or missing person

There was much testimony to the value of SM for Appeals for help with ‘misspers’. A dramatic example was ‘we’ve actually saved a life using Facebook at two in the morning on a Saturday for a missing person ... It was only through a Facebook audience that we’d already built that we reached the person with the information that led us to find the woman unconscious in her car, overdosed. We had no [other] communications channel but were able to target it to the area where we believed she was. The input came via Facebook, not 101 or anything else.’ (DB: 5). Becoming an online ‘presence’ in the community in terms of interactive communication meant forces could tap into knowledge of immediate value. A missing child or vulnerable person’s ‘picture goes out very quickly and you can very quickly get people commenting on where they are’ (JS: 7-8). One comms manager had conducted research into comparative

mode effectiveness in Appeals. ‘Nearly 60% of appeals that went out resulted in some kind of information and 95% of the information that came back was as a result of social media. Something from radio, very little from local papers (CH: 6)’.

Rather than mission creep, the way that comms builds on an initial incident or event is characteristic of current SM strategy and could not be achieved prior to Web 2.0. Describing the Valentine’s Day campaign noted earlier as ‘a culture bombing’ approach, the respondent observed ‘we’ll jump on something that we know they want to talk about, we’ll maybe surprise people a little bit because people don’t expect the police to do this kind of thing and it had results ... On top of [an arrest] it improved the reach of our social media. Our philosophy around social media is that we want to build relationships before asking the public to do something for us. So we want to do those more funny things that grab people’s attention. The algorithms in Facebook and Twitter favour pages that the audience are actually engaged with – I might have “liked” [force] but if I’m not liking or commenting on their posts, Facebook will think, “they’ve liked the page but actually they probably don’t want to see their content”. So the more that we get involved in this fun stuff the better audience we’ll get for when we need to appeal. For instance, we did the Running Man Challenge [an internet dance craze] ... That reached over a million people, engaged about 60,000 people and we got loads of likes. Two days after that we had an elderly missing person that we appealed for and that post on Facebook reached more people than any of our misspers previously (JA: 5-6)’.

Twitter and Facebook have featured so far, but other programs had their niche. A force kept its ‘most wanted’ gallery on a Flickr page, along with CCTV appeals – these also went on YouTube. Both formats referred viewers to Facebook ‘because we can give more information out on Facebook (HF: 3-4)’. Flickr albums for each police area meant they could upload their own CCTV. Flickr was liked because of its linking functionality. If Facebook was being used images or video were downloaded direct to Facebook but if Twitter was the medium Flickr Link Back was used.

SM was also subtly making comms teams the voice of an alternative perspective within forces. ‘Our corporate main account [is] just full of bad people that were needed for recall for prison. It just made people more feared of crime ... You would see the image and think, “Oh my God, that’s really frightening, it must be that all of [force area] is like this.” It just wasn’t representative of the image that we’re trying to do’ (JS: 6-7). Noting this was a driver for creating more localised accounts, this might be regarded as a somewhat subversive perspective. After all, it is inevitable that police want to interdict people who skip prison recall. However, the respondent developed the idea into a point on targeted messaging. ‘We worked a lot internally and externally in terms of not being the kind of force that you have all the images and documentaries of knocking doors down, fast cars, blues and twos, because a lot of our work is about engagement and working with communities and low key stuff ... Everyone likes to see someone be arrested but it just doesn’t give a representative world that we’re living in. We try to weed out fear factor of all these naughty people out all of the time. If we were looking forcewide then a Wanted would be appropriate, but if it was only in [large town] then why did people [elsewhere] need to know’ (JS: 7-8)’.

Engage, where what we’ve got in mind is building broader engagement with the public around a specific issue or intervention

If there is a mainstream in comms work with SM it is the contemporary emphasis on engagement: ‘engagement is a strand that I would put across all five. The engagement is what achieves the results in all those other five’ (DB: 5). Each respondent returned regularly to this theme, citing numerous examples. The view is that until SM, force communications with the public were largely ‘broadcasting’, a term all respondents used. Engagement was ‘much more about involving the community, getting them involved in a discussion and building relationships with them’ (JA: 3). This lay behind the evaluations of the affordances of the various platforms, Facebook clearly being seen as the main workhorse because of reach and its sup-

port for more extensive content while Twitter was 'more broadcast due to the sheer volume of stuff that goes out (JA: 3)'.

The more interesting theme is perhaps the interaction between the online and offline. A case in point is the force open day, a regular part of the police calendar. 'I call it turning online engagement into offline engagement. We can track that we've got 7,500 people into an open day based on social media by putting interesting content there addressing the community's needs and involving them in the planning ... For three years social media has been the primary way of getting people to attend ... We built the website around it and signposted people to the website where they could find out more, that worked far more effectively than just social media. It needed to be connected to a place they could navigate to ... rather than just a tagline or a 'this is there'. We had to make sure the content was more visual to drive the traffic and get people into it' (DB: 2-3).

Engagement involves interaction and while there are indirect benefits (e.g., ratings on public satisfaction surveys) direct payoffs come from literal collaboration. 'The riots in 2011 really kicked off our social media footprint, for us to stop rumours going round. We got on board with a local blogger [of riot updates], he was getting more followers each day and we linked in with him and managed to build our own profile up because the way he was wording his messages people knew he was getting information direct from us ... He was also directing people to our social media, so people could see that he was trusting us; he had this big following and we were getting his followers to follow us to get the latest updates and we've managed to increase from there' (HF: 4-5).

Engagement also functioned as a form of performance management. Comms staff in one force keep a close eye on other forces' output. 'I always look at the Facebook pages of our competitors, well they're not our competitors but other police forces, and we're about number 20 out of 40 in followers on Facebook, but we regularly outdo them on engagement, last week we were number 1 in amount of people that engaged with us ... 18,000 during that part of the week. The long-term strategy is to build

those relationships, because that is the only way we are going to get our audience to get involved with us instead of passively watching what we do. We see our positive sentiments gradually increasing on a monthly basis, and a big part of that is the way that we engage ... The Valentine's example, we had people commenting and us commenting back in a similar jokey but still quite serious, "We want you to help us find these people" way (JA: 6-7)'.

If comms teams represent an alternative voice within forces, one that brings in the voice of the public and sometimes direct participation, and if comms teams take as an important comparator the work of other comms teams, one might observe that comms teams have the potential to gently remake a traditionally hierarchical organization. 'Comms team don't work 24 hours a day, but we've got a control centre that do, so we've trained some of the switchboard so they can now look at social media in the middle of the night ... We're [also] doing a lot of work on a representative workforce reflecting our BME population and females ... So we're [tweeting from] local community halls [and] providing access to third parties or charities' (JS: 8)'. This can lead to working across established roles. The public 'don't care whether it's a comms officer or a switchboard operator answering them, they just really want someone to go back to them with an answer' (ibid). If an issue recurs in inboxes 'I will speak to the supervisor ... There's sometimes local community issues where people were contacting us complaining that they had spoken to an officer but they'd not spoken to them again since, and they felt isolated. It reminded me [of the Fiona Pilkington case] ... I'm quite conscious of the effect of social exclusion, so we do try and get back to them' (JS: 8-9)'. It was vital to respond to the public when it troubles to contact police. 'We started doing things like "come and get your bike marked in [town] at Sainsbury's." Everyone was really interested, and then people would say, "Oh, is there one in [smaller town]?" And no one would reply ... So it's re-educating officers that haven't been thinking like that, because it's not their priority (ibid)'.

Engagement also required accommodating distinctive perspectives of the population policed. 'We've steered away from the Manikin Chal-

lenge, you've got to know your community and people in [force area] wouldn't really appreciate it, they would think it was pointless ... They created a personality for an officer in London, "Dancing Dan", which is great, but what if Dancing Dan arrests you? You're not dancing now ... But football and rugby, one of the biggest hits was when we had the haka, an officer doing it off his own bat but the engagement for that was incredible (JS: 9-10)'. Spontaneous kindness was even more valuable, such as officers buying from their own money presents for children whose family was burgled at Christmas. This just required plain reporting – 'their natural instinct's creating [the story]' (JS-9-10) and good works well-reported honoured 'the local personalities of forces'.

Evaluating SM communication effectiveness

We asked whether respondents use Google Analytics, tools for sentiment analysis, whether they include items about SM on annual public satisfaction surveys, whether they commission evaluations by social or market research firms, and whether teams are tasked to ask the public whether they find police SM communications useful. All sampled forces use Google Analytics, though one limited use to the main force website. SocialSignIn, a suite of programs including a sentiment analysis tool, was used in only two forces. Likewise, only two forces used external social/market research (one only 'rarely'), with the remainder citing cost.

The importance of assessing impact was a recurrent theme with respondents. 'Social media is great for awareness raising, but how do you measure whether that has actually led to anything? As a result of that post someone has changed all their passwords and made them more secure, you can never find out about that unless someone says "Great advice thanks, I have gone away and done that"... It's very few and far between ... It's all very well re-Tweets, shares, views, you could definitely say that people are more aware of seeing the content. But whether that has actually led to any physical "I've gone and bought a padlock, I've changed my password, I'm not driving as

fast", it's mainly impossible to do that' (CH: 4)'. Nevertheless there are approaches providing partial insights. One was to combine online perceptions surveys with embedding different captured links in different channels 'so we can identify somebody who's running from a Twitter page to a Facebook page etc' (DB: 6). There was sometimes scope to just ask – attendees at a force open day were asked where they heard about it (70% said Facebook or Twitter; DB: 3).

Social media are now essential tools in commercial business. Police look to the same evaluation issues as big business. 'We use native analytics packages in Twitter and Facebook, Google Analytics. The slight irritation with Facebook and Twitter, they update and change them all the time. It can be hard to make sure you're comparing like with like. But there's third party tools you can use'. However, 'there's no point churning out loads of numbers unless they tell you what you need to know ... Numbers are great but they only take it so far (CH: 8)'. This suggests the potential contribution of sentiment analysis. 'Through SocialSignIn you can analyse the reach and ... whenever a message or comment comes in we check the sentiment is correct and change it if we don't think it is; there's a certain amount of human error but also a certain amount of robot error ... [They're] very good at working out if a message is negative or positive, but not good at working out if it's negative or positive towards us' (JA: 7). The respondent is referring to what content analysts call 'the disambiguation problem'. 'Words in common language, [e.g.] 'arrest' is a negative word in terms of sentiment, but in policing terms good news ... SocialSignIn judges the sentiment of every inbox interaction via Facebook or Twitter that mentions any of the force accounts ... By default it tends to be roughly a third positive, slightly more neutral and probably about an eighth negative' (DB: 6). However, this team did not have time to consistently correct default assignments. For another team 'we had to spend so much time manually changing sentiment and really looking into it' that it was a disincentive to using the tool. 'There isn't a tool out there that works for policing ... Because you see a headline "Murderer put away for 20 years thanks to great police work", that [would] come up as negative

because of the word “murder” (CH: 8).

However, the disambiguation issue is not without alternatives. SocialSignIn reports who is talking about a force’s communications. It can report how influential these ‘top engagers’ are with an influence score and tools like CLOUT also contribute. A follower’s influence can be combined with how much the user ‘likes’ the force communications. ‘We can look at all their previous interactions with us, what are their messages normally about; in Twitter specifically we can look at what hashtags they use, what other people they talk to and the sentiment overall of that user. Do they generally like or hate us’ (JA: 7)’. This is used by corporate comms or the contact centre to decide how to respond to an individual’s contacts, drawing on their previous interactions.

Two forces used Hootsuite to monitor all their social media. ‘If we have any campaigns we’ll use Hootsuite to get whether it’s been more successful on Facebook than Twitter ... If we use a hashtag in a campaign we can see how well that has done on Twitter by [whether] that hashtag’s been used by other people, re-Tweets’ (HF: 5). In another force the corporate development team used Mosaic and Compass. An intern was conducting a review of qualitative content on Twitter to see which tweets elicited response, whether a given tweet had been ignored, and whether pictures were regarded as useful. The work had exposed ‘the most depressing feed I’ve ever seen. It features a car park and PC Jones on patrol ... So it’s whether that’s impacting anyone’ (JS: 10). The intern was assigning amber and red to such content, and a senior colleague was assessing for each locale where their main Twitter followers were and areas where SM had no uptake and effort was not merited. To achieve ‘reach and engagement’ the force would also pay to boost its posts. ‘Then Facebook gives us more information than we would normally have. But as communication teams, it’s a historic thing, we’re terrible at evaluating. You get it out there and go on to the next thing ... it’s such a mix of different comms channels, we’re not really sure which one it comes from (JS: 10)’.

External social/market research was limited for resource reasons. ‘Very rarely have the budget,

we don’t do as much evaluation as I would like (DB: 6)’. One or two benchmark surveys a year around major campaigns were possible. Reliance was on diligent daily reading of comments on Facebook: ‘hard data is how many people [are] looking at the website but soft data is did they trust [and] what they’ve done (DB: 6)’. Similarly, another force ‘would pay for research at the start sometimes, and for evaluation at the end depending on the budget’ (CH: 8)’. Respondents were conscious of control design evaluation methods but could seldom apply them. Instead, forces conducted their own surveys. Facebook was used to survey views on initial artwork concepts for a grooming campaign. ‘We were flooded with response and good feedback (ibid)’. After the initial survey to check the message would ‘resonate’ there was a post-campaign Facebook survey of campaign awareness and behavioural change. ‘We did have a couple of parents that stipulated that they had checked their children’s online activity as a direct result of seeing our content and had made changes on the computer or added more security’ (ibid). There were over 500 responses to the ‘after’ survey.

As to NP teams, traditional leafleting and ‘directed conversations’ with the public were increasingly supplanted by NP team SM messaging. Here the principal media were Twitter and Instagram. Examples included NP leafleting ahead of a counter-terrorist intervention and a Q & A interaction soliciting public views on what information they wanted from police via SM.

Does social media displace other communication channels?

We asked whether respondents could foresee a time when all force communications would use social media. Traditional modes like neighbourhood newsletters, chief officer’s column in a newspaper, radio/TV remained in use but were declining, with indications they now primarily fulfilled a function as a medium of record or of accessing older audiences and the digitally-marginalized. One force had ceased producing neighbourhood newsletters. We noted earlier that publicity for a force

open day included an article in the local paper and a radio broadcast but that most attendees saw the announcements on SM ‘so we almost discounted [paper/radio] in attracting audience’ (DB: 3). The change was attributable specifically to Web 2.0. ‘Everyone had websites, but people don’t think “oh, I’ll go and have a look at a police website and see what they’re up to”, it just doesn’t happen like that’ (CH: 3). One force saw a 300% increase in visits to their website after adopting SM (JA: 9). There was variation though. In one extreme ‘gone are the days of newsletters through the door or leaflets and face to face meetings with the public ... very few and far between. SM is the primary channel for direct-to-community communications (CH: 3)’. Against this is the more frequent emphasis on ‘horses for courses’. Thus ‘for Safer Internet Day we mainly used Snapchat to talk to a younger audience because it’s that audience that it is related to; we wouldn’t have used a newspaper for that, there would be absolutely no point, but ... we still put out press releases and they’re still in the papers and the news and we still use the radio a lot’ (JA: 8-9). This respondent’s analogy gives a sense of the illusion of immediacy and proximity that SM can achieve: ‘social media is the Bobby on the beat on your computer or your phone’. The mixed approach didn’t just mean choosing a single right platform but the right strategic mix. ‘We still do use the traditional media. The child sexual exploitation [campaign] is a good example ... we used [a] big poster wall at the train station to reach a specific audience ... Somebody who sees our message in Facebook might not see it in the paper and vice versa, or, they might see both, which is great cross-pollination’ (JA: 8-9).

There was an impression that although newspaper and TV were still useful to maintain a place in the mainstream media they had no other distinctive affordances. Newsletters were particularly troublesome. ‘We’ve historically done newsletters but we can never quite get them right. People have done audits of why people want newsletters and it was becoming so hyperlocal that someone that lived on number one street didn’t care what was happening on number two street, and financially, and logistically, it’s virtually impossible to produce that hyper-local information. It was becoming

a detriment, because people ... didn’t want to know what was going on in the street next door’ (JS: 11)’. The unspoken contrast was the targeting affordances of SM.

If comms teams took a considered approach to SM, others had come to see social media as the best solution for virtually every comms purpose. There was considerable frustration over the assumption that SM affordances were easily transferable from one situation to the next and the perception that SM messaging wrote itself. ‘We focus far too much on “it must work for every occasion”, it’s the work that goes on beforehand to achieve it’ (DB: 5). Similarly, ‘social media is thought of by computing and police ... [as] a way to do something for free ... So many times you would hear the expression “We’ll just do something on social media about that” so you can tick the box that you’ve done something. “Look, it’s National Stalking Day. We haven’t got any budget, it’s not a massive priority for us ... to be seen to be doing something we’ll just do a Facebook and a Tweet”’ (CH: 9). The dilemma for comms teams was that disseminating use of SM across forces raised public engagement but at the cost of a considered approach reflecting the audience of interest and what the communication was aiming to achieve.

Respondents raised a news media type concern with ‘being first’, albeit for public safety reasons rather than getting a scoop. They added to timeliness an emphasis on being authoritative. Given that greatest public interest is in incidents happening at the instant, ‘the currency of it is critical that we’re there, maybe not the first to break the news but certainly acknowledging there’s something going on and providing the basic advice straight away’ (DB: 4). The inevitability of viewpoint is well-recognised in media studies and respondents saw SM as a means to control its effects. ‘Directly feeding that information to your audience, it’s on your own channel which means there is no spin on it from anybody else. It’s directly what you’re saying, and you can also put through factually what happened rather than having the media’s take on it’ (CH: 3).

In the following we see the germs of a new relation of what we might call ‘single voice

SM messaging', a genre that may come to mark other large organizations retailing their story directly to audiences but where police have the advantage that their core business is something most people find interesting. Before SM, forces held 'the news' about their doings but worked through intermediaries to get it to audiences; now the intermediaries were being supplanted. 'The radio had particularly picked up and talked about the [force] tweet. So it's morphing then into other channels. They've got their information from it and they're also then talking about the tweet in a different way ... It means that you don't need the media, you don't need anybody else to do that because they should all be following you, they will get the information if they want the information ... Tweet "Motorway is shut, avoid" and people do it' (CH: 4). As one respondent declared, 'we've become our own media agency, our own press. We are putting out our own stories and our own social media before we give it to the local press. That's annoyed some of them because we're breaking the story before they are, which is absolutely fair enough - we are giving our story and we are very balanced and transparent' (JA: 9). The last remark signals awareness of the subversive aspect of these developments and that, accordingly, content should be responsible but, in parallel with that thoughtfulness is the expansion of 'voices' speaking for forces. Comms teams are having to negotiate some very grown-up mass media issues, just as the explosion of citizen journalism has begun to erode comfortable assumptions about source integrity. 'We first dealt with fake news in 2011. In the [summer riots] I was dealing with somebody saying that the local Primark is on fire, that was fake news, that was beginning to get momentum on social media, we were able to be the credible, trusted voice that said "no, and here's a CCTV shot of the front of the shop"' (DB: 7).

While there may always have been an element of writing press releases that one anticipated the press would find attractive and usable in tone and details, the traditional media available to comms teams made the 'first with the news' aspect a minor aspiration. That is increasingly untrue but comms' prime role of dealing with daily exigencies makes it unlikely that comms teams are in a position to enforce standards or

monitor effects of their increasing news function.

Importance of timely response

There was testimony that the need for timely response tended to cut across normal hierarchical procedures. Customarily communications to the public were carefully managed, with sign-off by a senior officer for all but the entirely routine. This still applied to planned campaigns. 'If we're doing a campaign we'll get it signed-off by the officer that leads for that subject, and then we'll also get our Head of Comms to sign it off' (HF: 7). The pressure to be first in breaking incidents – bearing in mind that the more geo-local the targeting the more extensive and granular the 'incidents' – works against this and is another way in which SM is making police comms less a back corner of policing and more frontline. 'The difficulty is speed and what needs to be signed off and what doesn't. It used to be [that] you would need to make sure there was somebody on the scene, or in the control room you had to find your person that was going to sign off all communication and that could take a really long time. Because ... their first thought is not a statement, their first thought is "what is going on, how do we keep the public safe"? But in the world of social media you can't sit there waiting for somebody to sign off your line' (CH: 6). Sometimes even providing holding information was too slow. Moreover, to correctly configure responses comms staff needed to set up searches and streams to find out what others were already saying as that 'should be moulding your messaging'. There is a hint that the comms interest increasingly registers as a separate driver at incidents, causing friction – 'in an incident it is still thought of as a bit of a pain when people start responding (CH: 6)'.

A main source of diffusion of contact with the public is that central comms create local accounts that are managed and owned by PCSOs in a locale who 'provide the content, because the whole aim is to show what's going on in that area and if they're walking about and can take a photo of what's going on that's far more effective'. This approach represented 'a real change in view' from the traditional press officer for whom the natural instinct was

to control information and on occasion even keep it to themselves. ‘There was quite a lot of nerves around letting more people process that information. What if they said something wrong, wrong information [or] something unethical or inappropriate?’ (JS: 3-4). An example was given of a Special Operations unit which had a considerable following including postings that the press would pick up on ‘but they don’t think to let people know that it might become a press story so it is a bit tricky’ (JS: 13). However, where local accounts operated, chief officers believed their officers would correctly represent the force on the basis that if they were able to deal with the public in their accustomed role they should be able to post sensibly on Twitter. The power of the press went with the power of arrest, as it were, but training was provided. One of our respondents was instrumental in creating a social media NCALT training package. To get a local account one had to justify why it was wanted and undergo the training.

Tailoring social media communications

We wanted to know how communications teams proceed when needing to reach a particular demographic or people in a particular locale or when time is of the essence or when coverage is an issue. Forces hold privileged information of various kinds that facilitate targeting and tailoring, such as victim and offender profiles. ‘Police have really good intelligence products which tell you profiles ... There’s a real danger [with a rape awareness campaign] ... of saying “if you are this then you are vulnerable”, [it hints at] victim blaming’. To make targeting discreet ‘we used [profile information] at the back of the systems to make this post visible to females between 25 and 34 who live in this area and mention these things on Facebook so it wasn’t an overt use of that data (DB: 3-4)’. In another example the vehicle licensing database assisted a child sexual exploitation campaign. ‘That was geared towards spotting signs and we have very specific audiences for that, there were professionals, taxi drivers, parents. All with slightly different messages and different platforms ... So for professionals we were getting to them through LinkedIn and

hotels we were sending out emails through our neighbourhood alert system, and [for] parents Facebook’ (JA: 4-5). Differentiation extended to tools within the tools. ‘We used Facebook to target two specific postcode areas in [town] where there was a rape ... Instead of getting a couple of PCSOs to deliver leaflets which would have cost us about £500 and forgetting about the man-hours, we spent about £120 in Facebook to specifically target these postcodes with a little Facebook ad that said, “We need your help; talk to us”’ (ibid). Thirty calls were received within two days, with information leading to an arrest. Experience suggested that whole-town leafleting and broadcast SMmessaging would have elicited hundreds of calls, requiring sifting so ‘they wouldn’t have caught them as quickly’ (JA: 4-5).

Artful tailoring involved thinking about the human situation of target audiences. ‘We can reach people who aren’t online through their families if we tailor the message right. So targeting people in their 40s about telling their parents about bogus callers is better than putting a message out on social media about preventing bogus calls. It’s about the credibility of the message when it lands, a child ringing up their elderly parents will have more impact than them hearing that on a radio station’ (DB: 7). There was a general view that stereotypes were fading. ‘A worse generalisation to make [is] the older generation only read the local paper or newsletter. As time goes on more and more people will be digitally enabled ... my mother is in her seventies and loves Facebook’ (CH: 10).

Tailoring was around before social media. This example describes an effective albeit resource-intensive intervention, justified by it being a long-term counter terrorist investigation. It eventually resulted in ‘executive action’. Prior to the action ‘Comms produced 500 DVDs to post through people’s letterboxes in the area affected [which was] a tight-knit community, terraced back-to-back housing in a Muslim community (DB: 4)’. The DVDs were delivered to addresses near the address of interest, with leaflets including signposting to the main force website and PCSOs visiting shops in the area. Content was important as well as mode. In the DVD a local commander spoke directly to camera on the basis that it would help bridge the

language barrier compared to the written word.

A particular issue in seeking engagement is handling critical or hostile messages from the public. Negative messages were more often encountered in highly localised contexts. 'Some of the worst in terms of negativity are local appeals, because it's people that know who they are, and then they'll argue with each other, families, and they often go quite wrong very quickly, people starting to make threats and having a go at each other' (JS: 5-6). However, such exchanges were allowed to run for a time in case useful information emerged. Forces find they are dealing with grievances derived from their historical legacy. One respondent said that when Facebook was first adopted they received no positive communications but allowed this to run its course until others defended the force., recognising they were trying to get their message across 'in a busy landscape' (JS: 6)'.

We noted that big operations excite general interest but people mostly want 'hyper-local' information. Given geo-localism, SocialSignIn was used to monitor local Facebook accounts and work out whether people were coming to the website through a local station's account, one of the force's districts or accounts of the adjacent force. One force had been able to provide three Twitter accounts and three Facebook accounts to assign to the three most populous parts of each of its districts but resources reduced this to one per district. Other forces did not use multiple accounts on a geographical basis but by function (NP, Response, CID, roads unit) because they wanted to give the public a holistic view of the force's work.

In a major incident or high profile case it was assumed that the most granular accounts would be ignored by citizens in favour of the main force Twitter account and that of the person's local police. On this basis teams focused their engagement effort on the main and town police accounts and, because this was less granular, effort was made to build up the human side of posts from these accounts – 'it can still be the personality of the [town] or roads policing unit (JA: 7-8)'. The force that had launched a new 'breaking' platform from central comms went a step further. The platform functioned as a neighbourhood alert system.

Citizens subscribe to the areas across the force in which they have an interest – say, their place of residence, place of work, and children's school location – and receive crime alerts, crime trends, crime prevention images, and area event information. They can also select which of these offerings they want, say, only crime alerts (HF: 6).

A major issue in research is whether SM comms are trusted. Business research, market research and social research have all examined the issue. Our respondents were generally sanguine. Part of this was undoubtedly the belief that the police are a high-trust institution. In fact, public satisfaction surveys can be read in contrasting ways. It is true that very consistently over time around three quarters of the public declare that they trust the police but that also means that a quarter consistently do not trust police. In specific respect of police SM respondents saw public trust as flowing from responsive and appropriate interactive communication by the police. They also had a technician's eye to specific affordances. 'Every platform and medium, from traditional to digital has certain trust issues depending on who is communicating and on the receiver's world view ... Twitter or Facebook now [have] only got verification on the main force account. Sadly we have people not believe that [city] police is actually the real [city] police because they don't have verification. Unfortunately Twitter don't allow a police force to have more than one verified account; they're beginning to allow a little bit more (JA: 9)'. However, technical aspects were only important as modifiers of qualities that are essential in any respectful relationship. 'The important thing is to make sure that you're there for them in the good times and the bad. So if everyone is being positive that's great but if people are being negative or asking questions you don't shy away from it ... because other people are watching those conversations' (CH: 10)'. This was why it was important not to regard SM simply as 'a transmitting tool', leading people to conclude they were engaging with propaganda rather than a conversation and direct engagement. Here again there was emphasis on finding the right 'tone of voice'; care was needed to avoid slickness and sounding like a comms team. As with online communication in general, formality and pompousness

were off-putting. ‘Would you say to somebody on their doorstep “Oh the officer was progressing in a northerly direction”? You wouldn’t. Talk to people on social media like you would in person. People forget that, go into report writing formal mode. You can still be professional but you have to be human (CH: 10)’.

Also a factor was the issue of spin. ‘You have to put it out quite straight without a different slant on it, because then that’s showing your organisational [perspective] when really as a police force we’re meant to be “this is what we do, this is how we’re going to stop it, don’t do it”. It’s far more trusted’ (JS: 11-12). The respondent contrasted the appropriate police tone with that of the fire service, where the public praised them ‘talking really casually about what they’re doing today’. This worked for the fire service but not for a force with general powers of arrest. ‘Essentially we are a force, and people often don’t like us very much ... It’s very naïve to think that you’re going to communicate with people that never ... have any good thing to say about you’ (ibid).

Social media had not wholly displaced other media when a situation demanded a spread of media each with their own affordances. ‘We have a brand for drug enforcement which started pre-digital and that was leaflet drop, video screens on the back of vans and that’s moved more towards digital [but] the brand’s maintained, and we have evidence that that marketing activity increases the actionable intelligence by over 20% in the 20 days after the activity’ (DB: 5). Respondents were thus concerned to achieve the right ‘mix’ of media. In the case of the 2011 ‘summer of disorder’ ‘the critical element [was] making sure that the messages being delivered by local media reflected the same message going on social media and being posted through the letterboxes of people’s doors, it’s that communications mix of reinforcement’ (DB: 7). Alongside the idea that engagement professionals needed a clear idea of their exact purpose on a given occasion and what medium best served it some observations placed the communications role squarely as one of opinion-forming. ‘I’m fine with them doing capacity building pictures of police puppies ... the dog bouncing around in the snow on [our]Facebook page [is] about building reach

and capacity for the future [but] nice soft PR is not what the public always want ... If it’s about informing them and you want to drive them to a wider debate then you’re looking for lots of engagements on the conversation. So [in] the rape and serious sexual assault [initiative] we were deliberately provoking people to engage in a conversation about “can you give consent if you’re drunk?” That way we’d reach more of the audience [and] getting people to form an opinion, which means it’s going to have them thinking about it’ (DB: 7-8).

Partnership was seen as an underdeveloped potential. ‘What is still missing from police comms is thinking past your own channels. A good example was the big flooding in 2013. At the time we only had about four or five thousand followers on Facebook. Within two days of that flooding there was a [town] Flooding Group that had nine thousand people in it. We had spent the last four years trying to create our Facebook following and this group had created it! So ... we need to go where the conversation is happening. There’s three [channels] from an engagement point of view. The people that are talking to us directly on social media, so they have @ mentioned us or written on our wall. The second is people that are talking about us specifically, so they haven’t @ mentioned us, but they are certainly talking about things that we do on social media. We are pretty good at the first one, not too bad on the middle one, but the third one, the big gap, is people that are talking about policing matters [on another channel]. How do you reach people that are talking about a burglary that has happened down their road in their community Facebook group?’ (CH: 7) Facebook groups cannot be accessed unless one is a person, whereas police forces are pages. ‘I’m a member of a number of local groups on Facebook, they are talking about policing issues and lots of rumours. All it would take would be for the police to come in on that conversation and say “these are the facts” and the whole conversation would settle down, and confidence in the police would grow (CH: 7)’. Here formal technical constraints intruded on full engagement.

Obstacles to the use of social media

We asked respondents what internal or technical problems they encountered in using SM for police comms. Internal communications channels were a problem due to technical legacies. A force that was moving to Yabber and 0365 estimated six months to a year to fully migrate. The more telling problems were human. Senior officers were aware of SM but some were naïve users and late adopters who were impressed by numbers of followers and re-tweets without grasping the messages of network analysis regarding influence and targeting. Senior officers also tended to communicate with ‘their own closed network of professionals’ (DB: 8). There were also some jagged contrasts. In the early days it had been possible to write an ACPO engagement guide using a Wiki because command officers did not grasp the security implications, while one of the largest metropolitan forces created its first Facebook page only in 2014. There were still senior officers not daring to admit they didn’t fully understand SM while others thought it was the answer to everything without seeing the need for structured evaluation. This could lead to engagement being seen as an objective rather than a tool for achieving long term strategic objectives.

Contrasting the senior officers who were privately scared of SM and shunned it were those who ‘want to put absolutely everything on social media and we have to rein them in because [their sends] are not appropriate’ (HF: 7)’. This led to surreptitious Hootsuite monitoring of quite senior people and ‘sometimes we get caught on the back foot where an officer has Tweeted something and they should know it’s rather inappropriate or said something they shouldn’t have and the first call we’ve got is from the media telling us’ (HF: 7)’. This observation was not unique. In a force where each chief officer had their own Twitter feed they ‘have sometimes quite heated discussions with people on Twitter that we wouldn’t feel ... appropriate for us, but when you’ve got an ACC talking about something that’s going on and he ends it in a certain way, which you think, “Yes, okay, he’s listened to that point of view, and doesn’t agree but it’s kind of ended it”’ (JS:

8-9). Even this trying scenario was better than ‘never going back to anyone (JS: 8-9)’.

Engagement was a hard lesson to learn. Some officers reportedly still believe that forces can turn off Twitter if they don’t like what is being said. More than one respondent described ‘getting’ social media as requiring an ‘epiphany moment’, such as a chief constable who saw colleagues using SM to direct interventions in the 2011 riots and derive intelligence in real time (CH: 10-11). Another respondent regularly delivers NP team training to encourage members to adopt Twitter and Facebook. ‘There are still officers out there who don’t like to use a computer, they remember filling the old C22 [intelligence] forms in and posting them to the Intell team (JA: 9-10)’. Even if they had an imperfect understanding, chief officers could do much to lead by example through simple enthusiasm, some basic usership, and trusting those with expertise to ‘get on with it’. However, a common complaint was pigeonholing of comms teams – and SM specialists within them. ‘There’s people in Corporate Comms that always come to me when they’re about to do something with social media ... because they are not used to writing like that’ (JA: 9-10).

Respondents were frustrated that SM was pigeonholed as ‘something for the comms team’. This was not simply a division of labour issue but a problem whereby the medium through which the public made contact obstructed effective response to the message the public was making contact about. The Pavlovian association of the words ‘Twitter’ and ‘Facebook’ with the comms team confused medium and message. Thus ‘too many forces are still using their comms team to answer first contact-type messages ... So somebody tweeting “Why is there a police car parked down my road”, how is that any different to somebody phoning and asking the same question? It’s not. So why is the comms team answering questions like that? They don’t go down and answer the phone for queries like that, but because it’s on that channel, that’s just pigeonholed into the comms team (CH: 11)’.

A friction here was what happens after the comms team leaves work. Contact centre teams working after hours do have some SM

training but 'it should be properly digitally enabled. If you create these contact channels the public will use them for what they want to use them and when it suits them. It could be safer for them to use social media than it could be to make a call, say, if they've locked themselves in if there's a burglar (CH: 11)'. We have emphasised the way that SM has led comms teams to emerge from press release mode into a far more direct relationship with the public, and that this leads to certain organisational changes, but there remains recognition of core competencies. 'The quality you would get from a comms officer is very different from someone working for the PSC (Public Service Centre), because they're usually a police officer or police staff. They'll be far more frank and blunt, whereas we would be probably more wordy but we don't know as much as them (JS: 13)'. Another friction was between operational imperatives and engagement. 'If something's happening and we're slow to respond it's already been played out on Twitter, which is frustrating for press officers, but police officers and investigating officers know that they have to follow a certain way' (ibid). An example was the murder of a couple outside their workplace. 'We called it an incident, people were tweeting "I can see a body, it's not an incident, it's a murder". But we couldn't confirm that because the family hadn't been told ... We also asked people to refrain from posting those pictures [but] you can't control that anymore, which is quite scary (JS: 12)'.

We also asked whether there were particular purposes for which SM was not an appropriate medium. A distinct purpose for which SM was thought inappropriate was regards formal discipline and complaint cases against officers. 'It doesn't work if we're putting out [that] an officer has been disciplined or if there's going to be a [disciplinary] panel meeting, where now the public and journalists can attend. We don't put it on social media because it attracts so many negative comments ... We're being transparent by putting it out to the media and on our website' (HF: 8). Perhaps less controversially, there is a general view that crime statistics and force inspection results were a dry topic not suited to SM and 'people can see through the stuff you've just done because you have to' (CH: 5)'. The mainstream media would be very

interested in statistics and inspection outcomes 'because they will pick through it, find the negative and make their story', a level of effort the public would not make. Going from 'needing improvement' to 'good' on an inspection was not ripe for the social media channel but once an issue was aired via other means SM could usefully correct misimpressions. 'A lot of people ... think the police are the ones that give out the sentences. People get very upset when they think that the sentence doesn't match the crime and it can be quite difficult to explain that's the judicial system rather than the police. But at least you can point that out. The whole point of social media is the conversation, so you can correct inaccuracies, sort out rumours. So rather than just something in the paper [making] someone say "that's rubbish by the police" that conversation is on your own channel and you can correct it' (CH: 3). The distinction between asymmetrical and symmetrical communication also helps in framing the police engagement agenda. There is a trade-off between engagement and being authoritative. Thus 'policing needs to be aiming for asymmetrical communication because we'll always have a purpose for being involved in the conversation, to keep people safe, so it can never be symmetrical (DB: 8)'. This sophisticated view implies that, however desirable, engagement cannot be elevated above policing's core mission.

All respondents referred to frustration over resource constraints. There was an even sharper frustration around having been able to do more in the recent past whereas now staffing was insufficient to fully exploit constantly-improving technology. 'Our use of social media in the last year has deteriorated due to staffing issues. The public's expectation on the service has increased faster than our capability to deliver it. We've improved over the last three to five years but haven't managed to keep up ... At times we don't have the capacity to listen properly ... All the tools in the world and all the software solutions aren't going to replace somebody reading every inbox action, proactively searching for issues, it's a manual process, you cannot automate it (DB: 11)'.

Discussion and Conclusions

The move to decentralization is a principal element in the 'de-bureaucratization' of communications by government institutions in general and police in particular. Our data indicate that this is a live issue with comms staff. Analysis of use of Twitter by Dutch police found that most Twitter communication occurs via de-centralized channels (Meijer and Torenvlied 2016). A sign of attempts to balance an authoritative tone with the informality of the medium was that in most tweets officers used their formal identity, although a minority did use personal names. A hint of the mild 'disruptive' effect of SM communication on organizational culture is the interest that officers display in the tweets of other officers, although Twitter was used mostly for external communications. Meijer and Torenvlied maintain that SM has somewhat but not entirely altered police communications, producing a 'hybrid organisation of SM communications'.

Social media may be relatively transformative within police organisations but evidence of a transformative effect on the police/public relationship is limited. Police legitimacy is a prominent contemporary concern and there is evidence of a modest SM effect on legitimacy. However, such effects are manifest amongst only a small fraction of 'interested citizens' (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015). In Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer's representative sample of Dutch citizens only a 'negligible' number engaged online with police. The medium tested was again Twitter, which achieved its effect on those who did engage by enhancing the 'transparency' of police actions and policies. While 15.2% of the sample used Twitter, only 3.4% engaged with police Twitter accounts, whereas 35.8% watched 'informative' TV programmes about policing.

The other dimension tested by the study was 'participation'. There was little evidence that SM's perceived value to civilians' sense of police legitimacy arose from direct participation in police work (i.e., providing information of direct operational value). However, examining whether police SM communications add to citizen input

to police work or simply facilitate pre-existing interactive relationships finds that by enabling the police to reach more citizens there are benefits in terms of participation. Reach is also extended by 24/7 availability, a finding relevant to our data concerning the potential (and problems) of providing rapid responsiveness to out-of-hours contacts (Meijer 2014). This indicates that while participation may currently be limited, when it does occur it can have dramatic effects of the kind cited by our respondents, such that over time it is likely to become a more substantial effect of police SM communications. In particular, Meijer (2014) notes the formation of new 'virtual networks with citizens' that can be the kernel of ongoing participation whose effects extend beyond one-off incidents like a missing person appeal.

The view is that as SM becomes more integral to policing, 'reach' is an increasing consideration. An index of reach is the extent to which SM messages are 'diffused'. This has been assessed by examining message forwarding. There are indications that tone/style as well as content affects the likelihood of a police tweet being forwarded. Specifically, the use of an informal tone/style increases the odds of forwarding (van de Velde et al 2015). Regarding content, the inclusion of URL's increases the probability of forwarding. In fact, inclusion of web addresses and hashtags both increase diffusion (Suh et al 2010), although there is evidence that the effect is strongest for web addresses. Both these prime characteristics of police messages – using an informal tone/style, and providing links – received considerable emphasis amongst our respondents.

Research also suggests that a factor in message forwarding behaviour is user characteristics. 'Interactivity' (use of mentions and replies) is an alternative to the broadcast approach, and 'authorship' (node centrality in social network terms, indexed by the sender being a regular information source, prompting audience retention) are key components of the user characteristic element of message diffusion. It is also known that account age and number of messages posted predict diffusion, the rationale being that established, busy accounts indicate orientation to audience preferences (Marwick and Boyd 2010). But, across user groups,

message appeal is topic-sensitive. Thus, a missing persons Appeal elicits sympathy leading to forwarding, an effect less likely with traffic information. Summing up, the characteristics of messages that maximise the probability of forwarding are, in order of effect size, 'send replies with URLs, include URLs, use mentions to show you are socially engaged, include hashtags to increase searchability, write longer tweets and send tweets in the afternoon or evening when more people listen' (van de Velde et al 2015: 11).

This exploratory study of contemporary social media use by police in England and Wales joins a growing and highly international body of empirical research on the affordances of Web 2.0 tools for enhancing public engagement with government institutions. Themes emergent from that literature resonate in the present study. Distinctive nuances and inflections do arise – there is limited work elsewhere on the obstacles that senior staff can pose either through naïve aversion or naïve enthusiasm, for instance. Moreover, the literature does not delve into where comms teams sit in the organisational structure of policing and how SM may be altering that standing, instead largely focusing on SM communications by operational officers. The literature is also heavily skewed to research on Twitter, to the relative neglect of other platforms. However, one very secure conclusion is that social media are a rapidly growing feature of police communications and one whose benefits and drawbacks have not yet been fully explored. With technology we can do more but we also have more to do.

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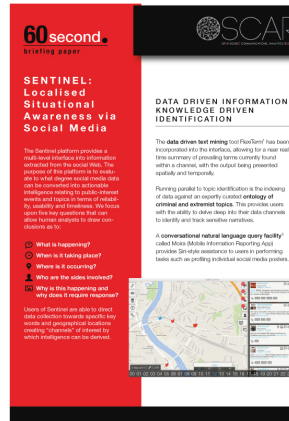
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Get in touch.



Crime and Security Research Institute, Cardiff University
Level 2, Friary House, Greyfriars Rd,
Cardiff CF10 3AE



+44 (0) 2920 875440



crimeandsecurity@cardiff.ac.uk



@CrimeSecurityCU

www.cardiff.ac.uk/crime-security



Universities' Police Science Institute, Cardiff University
Level 2, Friary House, Greyfriars Rd,
Cardiff CF10 3AE



+44 (0) 2920 875440



upsi@cardiff.ac.uk



@TheUPSI

www.upsi.org.uk