

Storytelling through blogging: A knowledge management and therapeutic tool in policing

Dr Simon Burnett, Dr Sarah Pedersen, Dr Rob Smith, Aberdeen Business School, Robert Gordon University, Aberdeen.

Contact: Dr Simon Burnett – s.burnett@rgu.ac.uk

Introduction

Narrative and storytelling play an important part in knowledge management in policing and criminal justice contexts. As probationary constables and young officers, officers learn the job from listening to the stories of others, and for this reason part of being a successful police officer is learning to be a competent storyteller. Officers learn to gather intelligence by listening to the stories, or whispers, of criminals and members of the public with whom they come into contact. They spend numerous hours on patrol swapping work stories with colleagues and learn to give narrated evidence in court. Policing is therefore a narrative-bounded activity. Stories enable people to share experiences and pass on what they know. Storytelling is therefore a useful way of capturing and sharing knowledge. Stories are told daily throughout an organisation in the corridor, over coffee, by e-mail or through social media. Indeed Ward and Sbarcea (2001) suggest that recently there has been an increase in stories as carriers of knowledge in organisations. Telling stories can also be a way of processing a particular experience, and can have therapeutic benefits for the storyteller. In this briefing paper, we report on a research project into the use of online blogging within a policing context that we are embarking on to investigate this exciting and under-researched area of policing studies and knowledge management.

The aim of our project is to examine the current use of story-telling within the UK Police Service blogosphere. There are many blogs written by members of the emergency services. Such blogs appear to have three main functions: to educate the public (for example, on when to ring 999); to share the blogger's experience with other professionals, thus sharing and managing knowledge and learning from other professionals' comments; and to use the therapeutic side of blogging to work through difficult experiences encountered on the job.

This aim will be achieved through the following objectives:-

- To determine whether stories in blogs are an effective way of sharing and transferring knowledge and learning from experience.
- To determine whether stories in blogs are an effective way of educating the public.
- To identify how such storytelling and blogging can be used as a form of therapy by the blogger.
- To identify the benefits/barriers to storytelling in blogs within the Police Services
- To identify any differences between the sexes within such storytelling and blogging.

Reviewing and narrating the literature on police story-telling

US research has found that many storytellers exist in the police force and that "storytelling is an essential part of the officer's equipment" (Fletcher, 1996 p.36). Police officers and other members of the emergency services recount stories to each other to warn or educate others about situations they have come across. The subject of narrative and in particular storytelling as common sense organisational knowledge features heavily in the emergency services literature,

particularly in relation to policing (See McNulty, 1994; Horton, 1995; Fletcher, 1996; Fletcher, 1999; Anderson, 2009). In the policing literature storytelling has been used to make sense of criminal trials (Bennett, 1978); organizational drama (Trujillo, 1987); police humour (Holdaway, 1988); probationer training (Smith, 1999); police culture (Wilson, 2000); police investigations (Leary, 2002); violence and the politics of storytelling (Jackson, 2002); police leadership (Rowe, 2006); and police technology (Anderson, 2010). However, very little research has been carried out in relation to the use of storytelling and blogging as a tool for knowledge management within the police.

Blogging as a knowledge management tool

As stated in the introduction, one way in which stories can be told is online in a blog. 'Blogging' has joined e-mail and social-networking sites as a mass use of the internet. Blogs are usually defined as frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single webpage. Blogs can be very useful for organisations. They can be used to store information and to transform that collection of information into useful knowledge. Information professionals have been quick to seize upon the potential of blogs as both personal and organisational tools. Ojala (2005) argues that there are two important aspects of blogging that make them particularly useful for knowledge sharing – their community and their archives. She points out that a major problem for knowledge managers in an organisation can be getting people to share their knowledge, but that blogging can help with this, making blogs an inexpensive way for an organisation to encourage employees to share knowledge. Williams and Jacobs (2004) agree that informal systems like blogs can be easier to implement and maintain than formal knowledge-management systems.

Blogs can be used for both internal and external knowledge management. For example, writing on the subject of 'Why information professionals cannot afford to ignore weblogs' Pedley (2005) explains how libraries can use blogs to keep users informed about library news, services and resources. He suggests that blogs are more useful in this regard than newsletters or even e-newsletters, which are published periodically in comparison with the constantly updated blog, and are usually tied to a few writers or editors while blogs can offer news from many viewpoints. More personally, librarians and other professionals can use blogs to keep abreast of their field and to be aware of what others are debating and discussing. Both Pedley and Ojala agree that such blogging needs to be a grassroots effort rather than being imposed by management. An internal knowledge blog needs to be viewed as nonthreatening by its users – a peer-to peer tool encouraging active and informal involvement in the process of knowledge sharing.

Blogs with the main aim of the conveyance of professional information can also offer the opportunity for the blogger to express his or her own opinions about this information (Bar-Ilan, 2005). Starting discussions with readers or providing details about their personal lives are usually of secondary importance to this group of bloggers, although the content and format of the blogs might drift over time. Indeed, improvements in information handling can be an unforeseen benefit of blogging that impacts positively on any blogger's intention to continue blogging (Miura and Yamashita, 2007) while information handling has been identified as an important motivator for both blogging and constructing personal home pages (Chun-Yao et al., 2007; Papacharissi, 2002).

The current dominance of the journal blog in the public blogosphere may mean that the importance of information gratifications (i.e. the satisfaction gained from sharing information) in blogging has been less studied in comparison to motivations related to communication and interpersonal relationships, which is why this proposed research is so important.

Using blogs for story-telling can also help the blogger cope with certain experiences. Such uses are related to both the inner spiritual journey associated with traditional diary-keeping and more modern psycho-therapeutic practices where clients are encouraged to write down their experiences in order to explore them in more depth. Writing about personal experiences can help someone understand themselves and mitigate major problems and conflicts (Miura and

Yamashita, 2007). Over the past three decades, a growing body of research has demonstrated the beneficial effects that expressive writing about traumatic or stressful events can have on physical and emotional health (for example the early work of Pennebaker and Beall, 1986). Although the participants can find the experience upsetting, they also find it valuable and meaningful (Baikie and Wilhelm, 2005). Writing about the emotions triggered by a particular event is apparently not enough on its own – the writing needs to include a description of the traumatic event itself as well as the emotions it stirred up.

Thus a blog can be seen as a safe place in which to explore its author's inner turmoil. However, a blog's very public nature also allows its author to communicate this exploration to like-minded people and hence to garner external support and commentary, usually from sympathetically minded readers. Gumbrecht (2004) points out that the limited interactivity of blogs means that bloggers can post about sensitive matters while being protected from immediate social interaction and readers can choose whether or not to respond to a post. Bloggers do not have to deal with interruptions to the flow of their storytelling when posting to a blog and therefore a blogger is able to write a post about a particular event and his or her feelings about the event without having to deal with other people's contributions or interruptions. Since bloggers have editorial control, it is even possible to remove comments added later if they are not helpful or are not what the blogger wishes to hear.

Bloggng in a constabulary context

Bloggng from within the emergency services and policing contexts can lead to the blogger being disciplined, which is why many such blogs are written anonymously. In 2009 the anonymous author of the UK blog NightJack, who had been awarded the Orwell Prize for political writing in April of that year, was outed by a journalist from *The Times* as Detective Constable Richard Horton of the Lancashire Constabulary (Gibb, 2009). The NightJack blog offered its readers an insight into frontline policing, but also included Horton's strong views on social and political issues. Some of the most popular sections included anecdotes about cases on which the detective constable had worked. Although Horton changed details such as the names of people and places, once his identity was known it became possible for the actual cases to be identified. Horton was issued with a written warning by his superiors and his blog was deleted.

The research project

A literature review will be carried out to determine the current situation within the public and private sector relating to storytelling and bloggng as a knowledge-management, educational and therapeutic tool. This in itself will be a worthwhile academic exercise with practical implications for the UK Police Service because it will help management and HR staff better understand the stresses of policing in a new age of austerity.

We have identified approximately thirty UK Police Service blogs using popular blog directories such as Britblog, Technorati and Globeofblogs.com. Following the methodology of Herring et al (2004a and 2004b) and previous research by Pedersen (2010), blogs in languages other than English will be excluded from the sample, as will photo and audio blogs with little text and blogs that contain fewer than two entries. These excluded blogs may be the focus of a future research project. Unlike Herring et al, however, blogs which have not received an entry for more than two weeks will be included in order to gain a picture of why bloggers might stop bloggng. The selected blogs will be analysed to identify the following:-

1. Stated motivations for bloggng, e.g. to educate, to share information with other professionals, for therapeutic reasons.
2. The frequency of these three behaviours within the life of the blog.

3. The relationship between the blogger and his or her organisation. Is the blogging acknowledged by the organisation?
4. The comments sections of the blogs will be analysed to determine whether other professionals or members of the public or both comment on the blog.
5. Possible differences between bloggers of different sexes.
6. Reasons for cessation of blogging.

Implications of the research project

The proposed research will be conducted over a one-year period. In addition, a project blog has been established. Previous research undertaken by Dr Pedersen has shown how effective a blog can be in both the collection of additional data and the communication of findings of the project to a larger audience. Moreover, the methodological approach developed through this study will provide the basis for examining the use of blogging for KM and therapeutic use in other contexts and industries, thus further developing the research area.

Any officer, or member of support staff, who wishes to view or contribute to the blog /research is invited to access the blog at www.policeblogresearch.blogspot.com or to contact the researchers by email. We are interested in the views of both bloggers and readers.

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