The Scottish Institute for Policing Research

Research Evidence in Policing: Pandemics

A special briefing series drawing together research evidence of relevance to policing pandemics

Increasing communication and engagement through social media during a pandemic: a review and recommendations

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Executive Summary: Drawing on both international and Scottish research, this brief outlines key findings that relate to police social media use and discusses how this research can provide a framework for police social media use during a pandemic. The brief argues that Covid-19 and other crisis situations make police communication and community engagement a crucial component of police work (even more so than at other times). It also argues that social media provides an excellent avenue to help achieve this communication and engagement.

Key recommendations for police social media use during a pandemic

1. Use social media to challenge or address misinformation quickly. Be a trusted voice for giving objective and consistent information in relation to policing and public safety.

2. Provide extremely localised information to communities regarding how the police are dealing with the pandemic and use local police social media accounts to monitor and respond to public concerns, as it relates to policing and keeping people safe. In doing this, the police can be resilient to emerging fears, rumours, and 'urban myths'.

3. Use social media to inform the public about their role in communicating or sharing only accurate information i.e. discuss with them the importance of fact checking. Do not only delete inappropriate or harmful posts from the public but take the chance to inform them about why certain posts might not be appropriate (or illegal).

4. Finally, this briefing further illustrates some of the barriers and challenges for the police in using social media during the pandemic. Despite the commonly held assumption that social media is free for police services, officers and staff need sufficient time to both push content and engage in two-way, meaningful conversation with citizens - and to take public input seriously. Time and resources also need to be dedicated to training for officers and staff, where they are encouraged to use social media to communicate consistently with individuals and communities, and are able to develop confidence in using both formal and informal communication styles (and to be able to discern the most appropriate style of communication to suit each situation).

INTRODUCTION

The Covid-19 pandemic has created an environment where our working and social lives - and our definitions of crime and social order - are in constant flux (Collier et al. 2020). With people at home more, crimes such as domestic abuse and cybercrime are increasing and evolving ("COVID-19 Cyberthreats" n.d.; Collier et al. 2020; Cairns and Callander 2020). Further, police are experiencing increased numbers of calls from the public, reporting people who are breaking new laws implemented to deal with Covid-19 (Dalton 2020). Maintaining social order and keeping people safe becomes even more complex when we consider that it is conceivable that restrictions on our social and work life will continue to change in the foreseeable future, with restrictions going through phases of easing and tightening. Within this context, developing communication strategies for the police to communicate with the public and vice versa has arguably never been more important. Further, given that people may have less opportunity to have face-to-face communications with the police (or not have privacy to call the police), providing avenues to communicate online is crucial. Social media is one method for the police and public to communicate with each other. It is well documented how police forces in numerous jurisdictions have been utilising social media to varying degrees in order to foster communication with the public (Crump 2011; A. Meijer and Thaens 2013; Davies, Meliala, and Buttle 2016; Meijer and Torenvlied 2016). As a result of the increased use of social media by the police, there has been a growing body of research examining police social media activities and the possible impact of these on police practices, and police engagement with citizens. This brief will succinctly present research on police social media use, covering three themes: the purpose and uses of social media by the police; barriers to police social media use; and, what works well in regards to police social media use. The brief will then outline two separate case studies conducted in a Scottish context. The first conducted by the author of this paper Heather Myles (University of the West of Scotland), and the second carried out at Edinburgh Napier University by Liam Ralph (Northumbria University). Finally, drawing on this research, the brief will provide key recommendations for best practice in relation to police use of social media during pandemics.

Purpose and use of social media by the police

Social media is used by the police for a range of operational purposes, including investigating crime, missing person appeals, and providing public safety information (Crump 2011; Trottier 2012; Schneider 2014; Ferguson and Soave 2020). In addition to helping the police with operational activities, social media has also been lauded as a means of increasing community engagement. However, research looking at police social media use has shown that their level of engagement and interaction with the public on these platforms is limited (Grimmelikhuijsen and Meijer 2015; Bullock 2018; Hu, Rodgers, and Lovrich 2018); the police use it mainly as a means of pushing information out one-way, indicating that they have largely continued to communicate the same way as they do on traditional media rather than transforming their communication to fully utilise these new social technologies (Bullock 2018; Dekker, van den Brink, and Meijer 2020). (Kudla and Parnaby 2018) argue that, although police sometimes engage in a two-way conversation with members of the public, the type of conversations they get

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involved in lack any real depth. Kudla and Parnaby discuss how posts about charity events and comical posts about their favourite sports teams and so on do not constitute meaningful engagement because they are too safe; police typically avoid bringing up difficult subjects and then refuse to reply to posts from the public that challenge police legitimacy.

Barriers to police social media use

Barriers to social media adoption within the police might explain why engagement with the public via social media is not being used to its full potential. Research from other jurisdictions discusses the type of barriers the police can face (Goldsmith, 2015; Bullock, 2018; Dekker, van den Brink and Meijer, 2020). For example, in their review of existing literature, Dekker, van den Brink and Meijer (2020) argue that structural barriers, such as limited resources, lack of clear guidance, and a lack of training can impact the amount and quality of social media use. However, the barriers can also be cultural; for example, Dekker, van den Brink and Meijer argue there is a lack of fit between the many-to-many style of communication in social media and the top-down, one-to-many style of communication within the police.

Bullock (2018) also suggests there might be cultural barriers and notes that a lack of effective social media use might be a reflection of the fact that officers do not always see it as real police work; something she notes is similar to attitudes towards community policing more generally. Further, Bullock (2018) explains that senior officers perceive a great deal of risk involved with social media; for example, it was identified that officers might disclose sensitive information, jeopardise operations, or say something that can have disastrous consequences for the reputation of the organisation. Paradoxically, there is tension from the fact that the police recognise that giving social media responsibility to individual officers can help facilitate a more personal and engaging style of communication with the public, but it also presents more risk to the organisation because information cannot be easily controlled. Indeed, increasing the number of people with the organisation who are tasked with communicating via social media channels to potentially large audiences does risk inconsistent messages being communicated. However, as long as they stay consistent on key messages, then different approaches should not be feared. Indeed, that is the whole point of having localised information - that it is tailored to the concerns and issues faced by local communities.

What works well? Police and public perceptions

There are numerous proposed benefits of social media. However, it has been argued that police use of social media is at its best when it is being used in real-time to communicate with large sections of the population. Studies have demonstrated, for example, how the police used social media effectively during the London riots in 2011, using distinctly localised information to keep the public informed, to request information from the public, and, importantly, to dispel rumours (Crump 2011; Panagiotopoulos, Bigdeli, and Sams 2014; Denef et al. 2013). However, police forces have been shown to take differing approaches to their social media during crisis situations. For example, (Denef et al. 2013) reported very different Twitter use by London Metropolitan Police (MET) and Greater

Manchester Police (GMP) during the 2011 London riots. According to Denef et al., GMP used an expressive approach, which decreased the distance between the police and the public, was largely informal and often involved interacting with individual users of social media. For instance, GMP would respond to specific users when they questioned if it was true that disorder was starting in a specific area. Further, when seeking information from the public, GMP facilitated 'tip offs' to be made from members of the public via social media. When the public did so, GMP would respond by acknowledging the information and thanking the person for their input. The MET, on the other hand, used an instrumental approach, which is characterised by a formal style of communication, maintaining the distance between the police and the public and most typically involved constructing Tweets that were aimed at a general audience rather than a specific person. When users provided information to the MET, it was never acknowledged on the Twitter feed. Specifically, then, GMP engaged in a lot of one-to-one interaction with members of the public, whilst the MET did not.

Denef et al. (2013) note how this difference in communication style only manifested after the riots had started; they adapted their approach to the riots. From interviews with GMP and MET officers Denef et al. noted how, prior to the riots, GMP had already established a significant social media presence, with 60 localised Twitter accounts in addition to the main corporate account. This experience with Twitter meant they were relatively well versed in dealing with issues of privacy, the legalities of sharing information, and issues of overstepping boundaries. This experience is what perhaps allowed them to transform their communication style to suit the social media environment and the particular needs of the crisis. Whilst Denef et al. (2013) noted there are benefits and challenges to both the instrumental and expressive forms of communication by the police on social media, they note how the expressive style adopted by GMP will foster closer relationships with the public, will increase their reach, and will create more tolerance for police mistakes on social media. This last point is important considering the expressive approach also increases the risks of dividing public opinion and saying something that might offend (Denef et al. (2013). This example from GMP provides one of the best examples where police in the UK have utilized the interaction afforded by social media. As noted earlier, this is one of very few examples documented in the literature where the police have not used social media purely for pushing information out one-way or for requesting information from the public (which then typically needs to be provided through more traditional means).

In addition to studies that document the types of communications from the police on social media, there is limited research to examine how the public perceive police social media activity and content. The limited studies that do explicitly study public reaction to police social media activity have typically explored how the public respond better/more to certain types of posts by the police. For example, Hu, Rodgers and Lovrich (2018) found that the public are more likely to interact with posts relating to police personnel and public relations posts than they are to posts about crime and criminals. Furthermore, Beshears, Beshears and Bond (2019) conducted a qualitative study of 30 Facebook users in Arkansas. Whilst they noted that a minority of participants thought that police should not be wasting time or resources on social media, many felt there is potential with social media for the police to build positive relations with the community and could be used to fight crime. However, the authors argue that many of their participants felt the police were not using social media to its full potential; for example, by not responding to comments from members of the community or appearing to not even monitor the site.

The participants in the study felt that their lived experiences would be improved if social media was used by the police to have two-way conversations – either in real time or via asynchronous communications.

Whilst the lessons learned from the above research are important and can be of value when deciding on the best approach to take in the Scottish context, there are two studies to look at police social media use in Scotland. These are discussed in the following case studies.[1]

Case Study 1: Police Social Media Use in the Scottish Context

Horsburgh (now Myles), H. (2015) A study of Police Media Activities and Accountability in Scotland: Is Social Media the Way Forward?

This research was conducted as part of a PhD at the University of the West of Scotland. To understand police media activities in Scotland (including the role of social media), twenty interviews with police communication staff and police officers of various ranks were conducted, as well as content analyses of traditional news media and police social media accounts. Below is a brief summary of findings relevant to the role of social media in policing a pandemic:

- Social media was being used by Police Scotland to reach a number of objectives and is used to communicate information to the public on some key issues that affect local communities. Interviewees discussed how social media could be used to communicate with hard to reach populations (e.g. young people) and can be used to communicate with communities in urgent or ongoing issues in order to inform, reassure and seek public input. Further, consistent with previous research, interviewees discussed how social media can be used effectively by the police to dispel rumours. Nevertheless, the research shows social media is challenging for the police in many ways; for example, it requires resources to communicate and monitor, requires adapting communication styles, and can jeopardize investigations or reputations.

- Social media creates opportunities for the police to provide context about crime and policing issues and to cover issues that might not necessarily be covered by the traditional media. However, whilst police officers discussed how they are frustrated with the lack of context provided in the traditional media, they rarely used social media to discuss the wider context surrounding controversial issues (e.g. sex offenders) and did not take the time to explain to the public why some of their comments might be damaging to investigations or public safety.

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Case Example 1 continued

- Interviewees discussed how social media provides an opportunity for the police to very quickly communicate with the public, which can be effective for addressing rumours and growing concerns. Importantly, it also gives the public an opportunity to communicate with the police. However, in practice, this function of social media was not being utilised by the police. The police need to get better at taking this conversational aspect of social media more seriously, responding to and acknowledging public input as well as using social media to generate meaningful discussion that can add real value to police and public (not just a PR exercise). In the content analysis of social media, the police did respond to members of the public on occasion, but the content of such replies echoed the concerns raised above by (Kudla and Parnaby 2018) about the conversation lacking any real depth. For example, in the analysis of Police Scotland social media accounts, some complex or important questions by the public would be ignored but the police would respond to more trivial questions - such as asking why the police have a sticker on their car window.

- Findings suggest the police should invest less time and resources into the traditional media (they are rarely satisfied with the resulting news coverage anyway) and invest more into social media. They should use social media to keep local communities informed about the issues that affect them and to communicate policing activity. Whilst the police were already doing this well at the time of research, it could be taken further. The police could increase their own accountability through social media by communicating their mistakes as well as their successes. Granted, further research is required to understand how the public will react to the police communicating their own shortcomings. However, as noted earlier, there is an argument there to suggest that if the police can reduce the distance between police and public and engage in real conversations with the public, then the public might be more willing to forgive mistakes.

- There are a number of barriers to Police Scotland using social media to its full potential. A significant barrier is resources; the police need to allocate more time, staff and training to social media in order to increase community engagement. However, there are also cultural barriers. This research argues that the police need to take social media (more specifically, public input via social media) more seriously; take the time to interact with the public, address concerns, and to acknowledge public input. Importantly, the police should stop treating social media the way they do other types of media; it is not just a means of pushing out information or asking for information when it suits them. There needs to be consistent, meaningful conversation and genuine engagement.

Case Study 2: Police Social Media Use in the Scottish Context

Ralph, L. (2020) The dynamics of police legitimacy and social media in Scotland

This research was undertaken as part of a PhD at Edinburgh Napier University with the supervision of Dr Liz Aston, Dr Andrew Wooff, and Dr Richard Whitecross. The central focus was to better understand police use of social media and citizens' responses to police practices online in Scotland. Fieldwork was carried out between November 2016 and September 2017 with police officers and staff and citizens across Scotland. This included a total of 134 hours participant observation and 40 semi-structured interviews. Social media analysis was also conducted in order to provide context and capture communication between the police and citizens online. Above all, the research findings point to the connections between police practices online and police legitimacy. There are a number of key considerations from the study for police services using social media during the Covid pandemic:

- To start with, the study supports Myles' (2015) research finding that social media allows the police to communicate directly with citizens. This is especially important when information by the police is urgent and citizens are required to take action. Using social media, the police can engage with citizens in real-time. This feature rests on the idea that police content online is accurate. Officers and staff in particular emphasise that messages shared by the police on social media are trustworthy and reliable. The need for accurate information is all the more important when rumours and urban myths emerge online and start to be read and shared amongst users. In turn, this can lead to heightened fears around crime, deviance, and other aspects of social life. Therefore, a police presence on social media is required in order to counter inaccurate reports that may spread fear and alarm amongst communities. This requires, elements of what Mergel (2010) refers to as a 'pull' and 'push' strategy. First of all, police services must pull information on social media by listening to public concerns. After this, the police can then 'push' information back to citizens that address their concerns. In doing so, the police will be resilient to emerging public rumours and anxieties.

- The study brings together a range of communication styles that the police can draw on in order to engage with citizens on social media. In essence, this includes formal and informal styles of communication. Whereas formal communication styles are written using a formulaic and often serious tone, informal styles reflect a more casual way of speaking and often convey humour and local language. For police services, deciding on which of these styles to use will involve considering the aims of using social media, and will further entail understanding how best to engage with citizens, and in particular their local audience. Therefore, drawing on officers and staff who have expertise and knowledge across different localities will be key to engaging effectively with communities in Scotland. These persons are best placed to identify local concerns relating to crime and deviance and have a command on how to enhance the quality of encounter during encounters with citizens both online and offline. In doing this, the police will be able to strengthen their relationship with citizens with citizens online meaning that they have a captive audience when they need to 'push' vital information.

Case Example 2 continued

- Finally, research findings from the study develop an understanding of some of the challenges for police services in using social media to engage with citizens. Social media allows police services to share content directly and in real time with citizens on a bigger scale as one message shared officers and staff. However, social media is not free for police services. Two-way conversations between the police and citizens online requires time and resources. Often, social media sits alongside other daily roles and responsibilities for police officers and staff. Due to financial cutbacks to policing, officers not only spend less time engaging with citizens in a physical sense, but they also cannot spend as much time utilising social media. As a result, officers and staff at times either use social media or develop content off-duty. Therefore, going forward, it is vital that police officers and staff are afforded time to use social media. This is especially important when content and information from the police is important for citizens. This connects to some of the arguments identified in this paper towards the police using social media in relation to addressing fears, rumours, and 'urban myths'.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This brief has outlined key research relating to police use of social media. Specifically, it has discussed what the police use social media for, what they could be doing better on social media, barriers to social media use, and has discussed what works well. Further, two case studies looking at the police and social media in the Scottish context have been discussed. This brief outlines four key recommendations for the police to adopt when approaching social media. Social media should be used increasingly to address misinformation about Covid-19 and the policing and public safety issues relating to it. This of course means that social media needs to be monitored consistently but it also means that the police should seek out opportunities to address any incorrect or misleading information they see; having an authoritative voice that people can trust is crucial in uncertain times. Further, this should be done at an extremely localized level and could be done in a way that challenges our communities to only create and share accurate information - which involves taking the time to fact check before sharing. Being able to address misinformation quickly, locally, and then being to inform the public about why misinformation is harmful and the role the public can take to address it is a real benefit of social media over more traditional types of media (and, in a situation where opportunities for face-to-face contact with the public are reduced). Indeed, in Case Study 1 above, interviewees discussed how social media provides opportunities to offer more context about policing and safety issues than the traditional media are willing to provide. The police need to take full advantage of these opportunities. However, it is acknowledged that there are barriers to police social media use, including resources and cultural barriers. For example, in Case Study 2, it was discussed how social media is not free for the police. Nevertheless, more time and resources need to be afforded to officers and staff to use social media effectively and to foster closer relationships with the communities they serve. Investing in social media use is especially important during a pandemic, when face-to-face contact with the public is limited.

Thus, whilst Police Scotland use social media regularly and recognise the benefit to operational policing and community engagement, there is more that needs to be done to really take advantage of the opportunities that social media can provide to bring the police closer to their communities and to keep the public informed about the policing issues that affect them. This is particularly important when operating during a pandemic (and other crisis situations); when the factors governing our working and social lives are so turbulent and the physical distance between the police and the public is restricted.

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[1] Please note that the information on the studies documented here form only a small part of the research. If you would like any more information on these the authors are more than happy for you to contact them for more information.