



## POLICE USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA TO SUPPORT COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT — ITS RISE IN POLICE PRACTICE IN THE UK



**Nicholas John Keane**  
United Kingdom

**Keywords:** Police, social media, engagement

**Abstract:** This essay looks at the adoption by the United Kingdom Police Forces of social media (i.e. Facebook and Twitter) as part of their engagement strategies. It highlights the policy drivers that have informed this work. It indicates areas for future research.

There are many dimensions concerning police use of social media — some commentators identify three main areas: engagement, intelligence and enforcement (Bartlett et al, 2013). This essay focuses on police use of social media with regard to engagement, defined by Myhill as ‘the process of enabling the participation of citizens and communities in policing at their chosen level, ranging from providing information and reassurance to empowering them to identify and implement solutions to local problems and influence strategic priorities and decisions.’ (Myhill, 2006: iv). While the other two areas ‘intelligence and enforcement’ will be mentioned in passing. The primary focus here is how the police use social media as part of their engagement with their communities.

In his book, *A New Study of Police History* (1956), Charles Reith, a British police historian, discussed the vision of policing set out by Charles Rowan and Richard Mayne, who, in 1829 were the first and joint Commissioners of the newly formed Metropolitan Police in London. Rowan and Mayne stated that their conception of a police force was ‘unique in history and throughout the world because it derived not from fear but almost exclusively from public cooperation with the police, induced by them designedly by behaviour which secures and maintains for them the approval, respect and affection of the public’ (Reith, 1956: 14). This vision of ‘policing by consent’ has been part of policing in the United

Kingdom throughout the following decades; Reiner argued that it was a central theme of UK policing in the 1970’s and 1980’s (Reiner, 1992), however Hough argued that in the 1990’s newer systems of police management meant the concept was less in favour (Hough, 2007). The current century, it is argued, has found two different models of policing in tension with each other: the crime control model based on law enforcement and punishment and more subtle models of social control based on procedural justice. (Hough et al, 2010). The procedural justice model moves the emphasis away from understanding why people commit offences and greater emphasis on understanding why people comply with the law (Bottoms, 2002). This vision is restated from a political perspective that policing in the United Kingdom is carried out, as much as possible, with public support, with ‘the power of the police coming from the common consent of the public, as opposed to the power of the state.’ (Home Office, 2012)

Since 2008 the United Kingdom police forces have been using social media such as Facebook and Twitter as significant channels to communicate and facilitate engagement with the communities they serve. By the end of 2013, they have a substantial and increasing presence on social media platforms — analysis by Norfolk Constabulary shows that Police Force’s official accounts on Facebook have been ‘liked’ by just under one million people, while the Force’s



accounts on Twitter have 1 400 000 followers, and on the more recent Google + platform, Police accounts have 3 300 followers. (Norfolk Police, 2013). On Twitter, there are numerous of official police Twitter accounts for a range of police officers from the most senior level to the neighbourhood beat officer; there are now over 2 000 of these accounts (Keane, 2013). This essay will examine the factors that drove that widespread level of adoption and will discuss the policy issues, which have been addressed or remain to be addressed.

The past few years has seen the growth of Internet usage, the exponential rise of mobile communications technology and a widespread adoption of social media sites. In 2013, the European Commission reported that, across the European Union 40 % of the population post messages on social media sites and instant messaging (in the UK this is 57 %) (Eurostat, 2013). In addition, the use of social media is growing; in May 2011 it was reported that the micro-blogging site, twitter.com had 200 million registered accounts worldwide and was growing by 460 000 every day (BBC, 2011). In the same month, Sheryl Sandberg, Chief Operating Officer for Facebook stated that their site had over 500 million active users, 30 millions of whom were from the United Kingdom (Sandberg, 2011). These figures too are set to increase with a recent report stating that just under 1 million people now join the site everyday (Observer, 2011).

Central to understanding how UK policing has adopted social media platforms for community engagement has been increased importance in relation to the police commitment to neighbourhood policing (ACPO, 2006). The national initiative for the roll out of neighbourhood policing had its antecedents in the National Reassurance Policing Programme which trialled to address the gap between the public perception of crime in their locality (which they saw as high) together with the trends in the rates of local crime (which were dropping) (Tuffin *et al.* 2006). Guidance published emphasised the importance that the police service should meet the expectations of their communities of:

- 'Access, to the police through a named contact,
- Influence over the community safety priorities for the area,

- Interventions to solve problems and
- Answers to include feedback on results' (ACPO, 2006: 4).

The programme was seen to be achieving success and in 2009 the British Crime Survey reported falls in many areas of reported crime and in the fear of crime and increases in the confidence in the police. (Home Office, 2010).

It was against the background of these changes that the police began to adopt social media to explore its potential as a means of engaging, communicating and tackling crime. In 2008 a neighbourhood policing officer P.C. Ed Rogerson of North Yorkshire Police was identified as an early adopter of social media use, using a combination of YouTube footage and a Facebook group to highlight the issue of graffiti on his beat in Harrogate, leading to the arrest of an offender. (CRP News, 2008). It was the identification of the work of P.C. Rogerson and other early police adopters, which led to, the following year, a UK Policing Conference on social media, being held in October 2009. As a direct result of the conference, two policy areas were identified and addressed; the need for senior officer support and leadership and the need for guidance for police officers and forces. The former issue was addressed with the appointment of (then) Assistant Chief Constable Gordon Scobbie as ACPO lead for Digital Engagement and the latter was addressed by the publication, the following March, of the first national guidance for the Police Service in using social media. *Engage: Digital and Social Media Engagement* (ACPO, 2010) was a joint publication between the Association of Police Officers (ACPO) and the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA). It provided police forces with examples of use from early adopters, guidance on using Twitter and a set of principles for engagement, stating the need to be 'credible, consistent, responsive, an ambassador, inclusive, ethical and personable.' (ACPO, 2010: 7-8). This guidance was widely circulated with UK forces and is still available in 2014.

Later in 2010, saw a UK Police Force demonstrate how they were taking social media seriously. On 14th and 15th October Greater Manchester Police (GMP) used Twitter to publish information about every incident they dealt with in a 24 hour period. Using the Twitter hashtag #GMP24, GMP tweeted details of the 3 025 incidents they dealt with. The Chief Constable, Peter



Fahy, commented 'Policing is often seen in very simple terms, with cops chasing robbers and locking them up'. However, the reality is that this accounts for only part of the work they have to deal with' (BBC, 2010). This was seen as raising awareness of the range of incidents (many non-crime) that police have to deal with. At the end of the exercise, GMP reported an increase in their Twitter followership from 3 000 to 17 000.

In August of the following year outbreaks of grave public disorder in England put public and police use of social media once again in the policy spotlight. While the social media sites of Twitter and Facebook received much media coverage, it quickly became clear that the Blackberry messaging service (BBM) had been much used. (Techcrunch, 2011). Police use of social media was one of the subjects in reports following the disorder, Her Majesty's Inspector of Constabulary (HMIC) in its review of the disorders, commented on social media saying 'it is imperative that the Police Service is able to embrace these new developments' (HMIC, 2011: 73) While a special committee set up by the Prime Minister to report on the riots stated that 'police services that use social media well are more likely to have better engagement with communities' and recommended that 'every neighbourhood policing team should have its own social media capability' (Riots, Victims and Community Panel, 2012: 105) and while the report has since been archived and this recommendation is still being acted upon in the Metropolitan Police.

In 2012 the Composite project published a comparative study of how European Police forces were adapting to social media (Composite, 2012) and reported social media was being used by police forces as a source of criminal information, to have a voice in the community, to push out information, to leverage the wisdom of the crowd, for public interaction and community policing, to show the human face of policing, support the Police IT infrastructure and for efficient policing. It also highlighted that adaption by various police forces in Europe varied widely and that future research could focus on a comparison between countries who were adapting to new technology and those that (for various reasons) were not.

The current situation with UK Policing and using social media is that the police service have built a network of social media contacts throughout the UK and globally and that this can support increased and more focussed community

engagement. There are signs of innovation and leadership, the use of Facebook by Staffordshire Police has been recognised by Facebook itself, producing the first public sector case study showing the use of their platform (Staffordshire Police, 2013), while Surrey Police recently won the Social Buzz awards, more usually given to companies in the advertising industry (The Drum, 2013). What remains to be seen is how well the police are able to use both the infrastructure and their organisational skills and knowledge to make best use of this opportunity.

In other European Police Forces there has been a range of approaches to adopting social media as a form of engagement with their communities. The United Kingdom experience with social media demonstrates that with leadership and support, it is possible to build and develop both the organisational learning and infrastructure to have a visible presence for policing on social media sites and that, as these social media continue to grow and form part of the everyday life of the citizens of Europe this work will continue to have relevance for policing organisations.



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