

Maximising the Security and Safety of Citizens by Strengthening the Connection between the Police and Communities They Serve

Holger Nitsch

University of Applied Sciences for Public Service in Bavaria, Germany¹



Ben Brewster
Babak Akhgar

CENTRIC (Centre of Excellence in Terrorism Resilience, Intelligence and Organised Crime Research), Sheffield Hallam University, United Kingdom



Abstract

This paper provides a discussion on the objectives, approach and findings of the EU H2020 funded UNITY project. The project aims to strengthen the connection between the police and the communities they serve by providing a suite of ICT tools to improve collaboration, cooperation and information sharing between LEAs (Law Enforcement Agencies) and the communities they serve. The paper defines the underlying concept of community policing, before moving into a discussion about the developed ICTs and the empirical research underpinning their development and the subsequent approach used to test them. Within, we build upon the theoretical notion that ICTs in isolation do little to break down existing cultural, socio-economic and other embedded factors that contribute to absences in collaboration between citizen groups and the police. Instead, ICTs are an important mechanism which can be used to reinforce existing cultures of collaboration and trust, providing an additional vector through which citizens can make a contribution in their local communities, and through which police can be made contextually aware of local crime issues.

Keywords: Community Policing; Social Media, Radicalisation, Training

Introduction

Communities the world over, despite their varying social, cultural and ethnic differences, have common and shared values, and the right to safety, security and well-being. Despite living in an age of ever increasing digital connectivity, many communities remain disconnected

from society at large and the public services designed to support them; including the Police.

The socio-economic landscape is complex and constantly changing, adapting to global events, and reflecting changes in wider society, shaping the perceptions and behaviours of individuals and the communities to which they belong and identify. Events such as the fall of the iron curtain in the late 80's and early 90's, and the ascension of many of these eastern bloc states to the

¹ Corresponding author's email: Holger.Nitsch@pol.hfoed.bayern.de

European Union in 2004, opened up freedom of movement to millions, providing many with the opportunity to travel elsewhere in Europe for work. The culture of policing in many of these areas, and the perceptions held by the public however, is very different than that which those from relatively stable democratic states would be used to. Those from traditionally autocratic states are likely more accustomed to cultures of mistrust in policing, fuelled by perceptions of corruption and malpractice, where police are seen, in extreme cases, as an enemy and not an institution that serves the wellbeing of the public.

In parallel, and in some ways compounding these issues, are social tensions between different communities. Events such as the terrorist attacks in 9/11, and subsequent attacks in London, Paris, Nice, Brussels, Copenhagen, Berlin and Ansbach have fostered a culture of fear, anxiety and suspicion, building tensions towards specific racial and religious groups. The Islamic population in particular has been the subject of scrutiny by many as a result. At the same time, ongoing conflict in parts of Africa, Syria and Afghanistan has displaced millions. In 2015 alone more than 800,000 entered Germany, with up to 2000 people per day entering via the Austria – Bavarian border alone (Bundesamt für Migration und Flüchtlinge, 2016). Moreover, the ongoing conflict in Syria has placed ISIS and Daesh firmly into the public consciousness, radicalising some to travel to become foreign fighters in the region, and others to carry out attacks in their name on European soil. This has exacerbated tensions with the Islamic community in many areas, and contributed to the growing proliferation of right-wing ideologies, and the increased profile of right-wing political parties, in a number of areas of Europe, including the UK, Germany and France.

The near ubiquity of digital communications through the web and social media has transformed how, and the frequency at which, individuals contract, and are able to disseminate, information. These platforms are now popular vectors for the spread of misinformation, or ‘fake news’ as it is now commonly referred to in social parlance, and hate-speech. As a result, maligned and minority communities are commonly excluded from many aspects of normal society (Olcott, 2012). Together, these challenges pose a great challenge for the Police in addressing local crime issues.

Community policing and social capital

Despite broad and often varied underlying definitions, a common theme throughout community and neighbourhood policing strategies establishes the need to target improvements in the relationship and level of engagement between the police and the communities they serve. Community policing approaches have long underpinned a desire to move away from reactive policing models towards those which establish a more proactive philosophy, responsive to the wants and needs of the community. The near ubiquitous proliferation of smartphones and other ICTs (Information and Communication Technologies) means they are often seen as a vector through which initiatives of all kinds can instil a culture of proactive engagement with their respective stakeholder communities.

At the core of engagement, and similarly the idea of ‘community’ as a whole, is the concept of social capital (Huysman & Wulf, 2004). Social capital is a form of economic and cultural capital in which social interaction is vital, and in which social transactions are marked by cooperation, reciprocity and trust (Flora, 1997), and where goods, services and interventions are produced in service of common goals. The concept of community policing is underlined by the exchange of social capital between the Police, other statutory and non-statutory organisations, citizens, communities and interest groups in pursuit of social cohesion and the collective efficacy that enables citizens and groups to participate in shaping the contexts and communities to which they belong and with whom they engage (Sampson & Raudenbush, 1999). The concept of community policing itself has been discussed as an extension of the ‘social contract’ that exists between police and citizens placing additional requirements and demands on both parties. From a policing perspective, this requires the acceptance of citizens and communities as a partner in local safety and security, and from the perspective of those citizens, an acceptance of the police’s role within their communities. But what is community policing? While the term is omnipresent in across western policing, an agreed and accepted definition of what it actually entails remains elusive (Cordner, 1998). Despite this continued ambiguity, the core philosophy of community policing, and thus a common thread across all of its contemporary manifestations, can be distilled to focus on those activities which seek to forge working partnerships between the police and communities (Peak & Glensor, 1996).

Methods and approach: The UNITY project

The empirical work drawn upon in this paper originates from the EU H2020 funded UNITY Project (UNITY, 2017). UNITY was undertaken with the objective of trying to build a greater understanding of the contextual factors that influence the engagement of citizens with the police at a local level, towards developing models of effective practice that strengthen the cooperation between police, other stakeholders from the statutory, non-statutory and third sectors; enabled through the use of technology. The project took a multidisciplinary approach, involving academics from a range of disciplines alongside policing practitioners and private sector technology providers. UNITY adopts the view that community policing is an important strategy in the contemporary policing repertoire as a means of moving away from traditional reactive practices to a more proactive, integrated and partner-oriented role that focuses on addressing local needs (Maureen, Brudney, & Brown, 2014). Among other benefits, it is believed that by strengthening the connection and levels of communication between police, stakeholders and citizens can play a significant role in efforts to reduce crime and the associated risk of radicalisation (Wuchte & Knani, 2013).

In total, the project undertook 249 interviews across 8 EU member states; Belgium, Croatia, Bulgaria, Estonia, Germany, Finland, Macedonia and the UK, as the projects end-user pilot testing locations. Participants consisted of 82 police officers, 91 young people identified as members of country-specific minority groups and 76 representatives from intermediary organisations who work with minority groups. The research was conducted to develop a greater understanding how ICTs are currently being used to support community policing. While the results indicated that perspective on community policing varied significantly it did establish a number of key themes centred around crime fighting, information management, cooperation and collaboration, providing (or requesting) assistance and communication (Bayerl, van der Giessen, & Jacobs, 2016).

Despite the focus on technology, a common thread throughout the findings was the perceived importance of face-to-face communication in community policing. As a result of this emphasis, the report concluded that instead ICTs should act as a mechanism to reinforce existing relationships and face-to-face communica-

tion vectors between communities and the police by facilitating improvements to information, promoting visibility and accountability (Bayerl, van der Giessen, & Jacobs, 2016). Using these outcomes, UNITY undertook to develop a suite of ICTs to support the core principles it identified.

Alongside a more conventional mobile application and web platform designed to allow for information to be exchanged between police and citizens on a local community basis, the project has developed a suite of training tools; aimed at both the police and at citizens and community groups. Many of the core principles of the project's training offering have been implemented into the training of the Bavarian police at the University of the Bavarian Police, with the core development and refinement of the police training tools under collaborative development by the projects law-enforcement partners from Finland, Bavaria, Estonia and Croatia.

Training: Applied engagement for community participation

While it is possible to deploy training and education to the police and other statutory organisations that have a duty to act, the task of engaging and raising awareness within communities, especially those which may be considered underrepresented or vulnerable can be extraordinarily challenging. With AEsOP (Applied Engagement for Community Participation) we set out to explore the possibilities of engaging with these communities using ICTs, specifically through the development of an educational videogame, to raise awareness of community policing within the communities themselves. AEsOP provides the user with a range of scenarios, each of focussing on different local policing issues. The game puts the user in the shoes of various community actors, including the police, allowing them to play through a range of interactive stories with branching decision paths, revealing how various community actors and forms of community participation can help prevent and reduce the impact of local crime issues. The game uses mechanics borrowed from the '2D adventure' genre, utilising a narrative driven storytelling approach. The game makes use of rich hand-illustrated art, to ensure AEsOP is approachable and suitable for use by all, from school children right through to niche community groups focusing on different activities and demographics. A piece of concept art for the game's modern slavery scenario can be seen in Figure 2.

Figure 1: AEsOP Concept Art - Modern Slavery Scenario

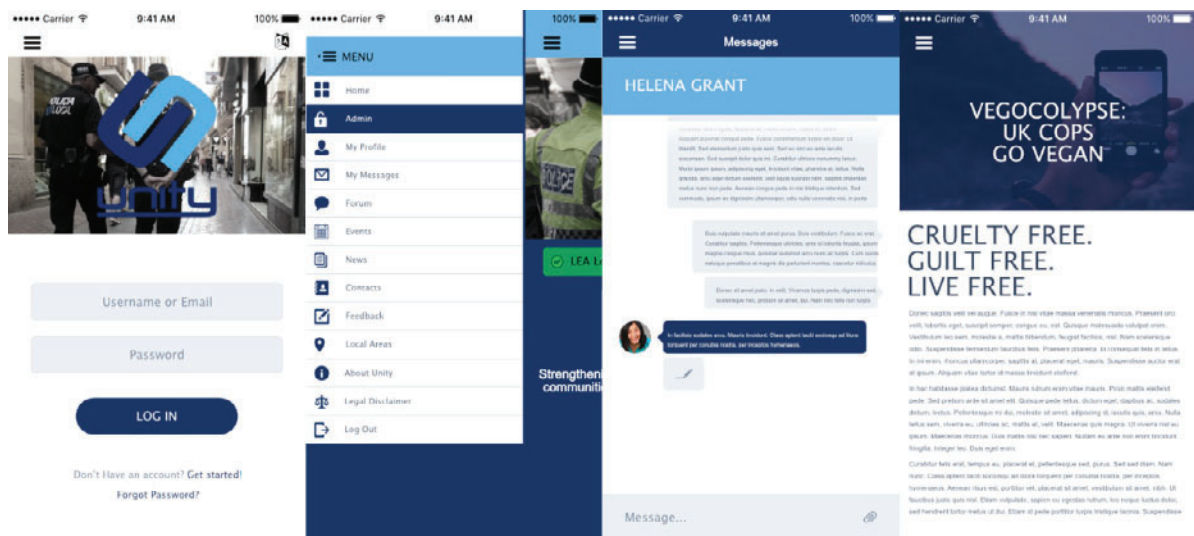


A common information exchange platform

Alongside the training and educational materials, UNITY provided a two core ICTs; a web portal and mobile app, designed to provide police, citizens and other intermediary organisations with a common in-

formation exchange platform. The app and platform try build upon and leverage existing cultures of information sharing through social media, cultures which are prominent across many groups in society. Some screenshots showing an overview of the mobile app developed during the project can be seen in Figure 1.

Figure 2: UNITY Mobile App



Some public organisations, such as the Munich police department already send out tweets in multiple languages at events such as the yearly Oktoberfest, where it is known or believed the target audience is not necessarily German speaking.

In the run up to Oktoberfest 2016, tightened security was put in place in response to the attacks that rocked parts of southern Germany only a few months prior to the event, while the chief of Munich police took to social media to provide reassurance, posting in English:

“From a policing point of view there is no reason at present for refraining from going to the Oktoberfest. That is why I have to take note of the cancelations that came out. We still have no indication of a concrete danger regarding an attack during the Oktoberfest. We have been living for the threat for many years now. This situation has not changed for this year. There is one thing you can count on: The police will do everything to ensure maximum safety during the Oktoberfest this year again. Our security concept does not start at the entrance, but includes many other measures right up at exchanging information at an international level. Nobody needs to alter the way the live. This will only play into the hands of those who want to exploit the situation for their political goals [sic] (Andrä, 2016)”.

Information such as this, designed to ease tensions, doubts and fears, can help to build trust with the target audience. While the UNITY platform does not aim to replace existing and well established social media platforms, as it would be extremely difficult to cultivate a user base to rival sites like Facebook and Twitter, thus reducing its utility, it does provide a vector where responses to more localised issues can be made.

The project’s empirical research identified that most people, unsurprisingly, are already using established social media platforms to consume this kind of information – meaning that despite the presence of systems such as UNITY, which aim to provide a more localised forum for community-oriented issues, it is important the LEAs maintain an active presence on services such as Facebook and Twitter. Events such as the 2016 Oktoberfest, and also the threat to the central rail infrastructure of Munich on New Year’s eve the same year (Eddy, 2016), are good examples of how powerful communication, and the dissemination of information, can be in maintaining calm.

The number of people following the Munich police twitter account rose significantly following the threats made against the city’s rail infrastructure on New Year’s Eve 2016. This shows that the public look to these mechanisms for information on the back of threats, showing a degree of trust in authorities such as the police. The tweets helped to reinforce a feeling of calm among citizens at the time of the events, despite the shutdown of the cities trains and subway (Eddy, 2016). The police also managed to reach a diverse audience by using multiple languages and multiple popular social media platforms, ensuring it was seen by tourists, non-native speakers and other minority communities, providing they are digitally-enabled. Examples such as these inform the training provided through the UNITY project, taking into account the specific and tailored information needs of different locales, demographics and communities.

Minority groups

The project, as part of the development of its scenarios for the pilot testing process, made efforts to identify unique contexts, groups and circumstances that would test the core principles of community policing; crime fighting, information management, cooperation and collaboration, providing (or requesting) assistance and communication. The nature of the groups identified went from ethnic minority groups and university students, to football fans, people with disabilities, and special interest groups. While it may be possible to draw parallels between the behaviour and perspectives of groups such as those with disabilities and football fans in different regions across Europe, great differences were observed among different Ethnic minority groups.

The information requirements of different groups also varied significantly. Football fans are bound to the club they support, so they are commonly interested in news around the club, safety and security information about forthcoming games, and other context sensitive information. In cases where levels of trust exist with the police exists, it can provide an opportunity to avoid the risks of being caught up in hooligan clashes, other forms of violence, travel disruption, ticketing details, and forms of security screening that may in place around specific high-profile games.

Other groups have different information requirements. For example, some forms of disability, such as blindness or deafness can cause communication problems. In such cases there is a need to adjust communication mediums. Throughout the duration of the project, UNITY worked alongside the deaf community in the UK. To mediate communication issues the project integrated features that allowed for the posting of short videos, so that British Sign Language (BSL) could be used to communicate with the deaf community face-to-face to build trust and improve the ability to exchange information. The mobile application also allowed the deaf community to post videos to the platform. The diversity of issues was also evident in other pilots. In Bulgaria the focus was on people of Roma descent, in Germany it was refugees from central Asian and Middle East backgrounds. The Estonian pilot focused in on the Russian community, while in Belgium the Jewish community of Antwerp took part.

Pilot Testing

As has been touched upon throughout this paper, the UNITY project is built upon the real-world requirements of end-users, identified as result of empirical research conducted across the projects eight 'end-user' participants from across the EU; Croatia, Germany, Estonia, Finland, Belgium, Bulgaria, the Former Yugoslavian Republic of Macedonia, and the United Kingdom. These same countries were subsequently used to test the operational impact of UNITY's community policing principles and software tools. Each pilot was set up slightly differently to reflect the local contextual needs of the communities involved in the respective case-study scenarios. The requirements identified in the projects empirical work were used to build two contrasting schematics of community policing in each of pilot regions; the Current Operating Model (COM) and the Target Operating Model (TOM). The COM was built to reflect the projects understanding of community policing, and the challenges currently faced by police in each of the projects pilot location. The TOM was built to reflect an aspirational view of community policing in location, reflecting what community policing should look like, and how it should mediate some of the challenges identified in the COM following the implementation of the UNITY technology toolkit and the core principles of community policing established during the project. In each location the technology

and UNITY approach was tested against real or indicative events and scenarios.

Conclusion

The H2020 project UNITY was established to provide LEAs, stakeholders and minority communities with a varied and broad ranging set of possibilities to build trust and accountability, and improve methods of information sharing and communication. Due to the wide range of scenarios, target groups and stakeholders, also through the advice of many experienced experts from Europe and beyond, UNITY can be used flexibly in various situations against a varied range of local community issues. UNITY also provides LEAs with training, tailored to the specific contextual needs of the user, and built on the empirical work and experiences gleaned throughout the project. The training can be completed face-to-face or online. The project also provides a mechanism to raise awareness within communities and citizen groups with AeSOP, an education game which was established to help improve understanding of community policing and to educate on how individual citizens can make a difference in the local community, making policing easier, and helping to improve the safety and security of citizens.

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