

Social Media for Community Oriented Policing: Best practices from around the world and future challenges

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Abstract¹

Information Communication Technologies and particularly social media have influenced policing in the past decade significantly. New opportunities for communication and image building are especially promising for Community Oriented Policing (COP). The article outlines some of the main developments in this field of policing illustrated by numerous case examples from around the world. In addition to best practices, it analyses potential risks and challenges in form of enhanced surveillance, breaches of privacy and different forms of vigilantism. A special focus will be on the opportunities that social media tools may offer to create collaborative forms of security production in developing and post-conflict countries. The article provides an overview of the current state of research on the topic.

Keywords: Social Media, Community Oriented Policing, Developing Countries, Facebook, Vigilantism

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Introduction

Law enforcement agencies (LEAs) worldwide increasingly integrate digital tools in their operations. In emergencies and crisis situations Twitter or Facebook is used to keep citizens informed and gather relevant information instantaneously (Procter et al., 2013; Dencik et al., 2018). Moreover, while police services worldwide have leveraged visible digital spaces to communicate with citizens, influence their public perception and augment enforcement, social media tools allow citizens to expose, discuss and mobilize around perceived injustices (Walsh & O'Connor 2018; Mawby 2013; Bullock, 2016; Schneider, 2016). We observe a growing phenomenon called “Do-it-yourself policing” (DIY policing), where citizens become increasingly active in supporting the police in investigations, identifying suspects and even taking traditional police tasks in their own hands. At the same time, ‘dataveillance’, the surveillance of citizens on social media by law enforcement, becomes a growing risk (Brayne 2017).

This ‘datafication of policing’ (Van Dijck, 2014), for example, takes the shape of police officers befriending and communicating with citizens on social media platforms under false pretences sometimes circumventing or even in breach of civil rights (Jewkes, 2015; Bankston & Soltani 2013, Reeves, 2017). Practices of “online stop-and-frisk” produce pernicious self-fulfilling prophecies by generating suspect places and populations thereby producing data points to justify further scrutiny and enforcement (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018; Patton et al., 2017; O’Neil, 2016). Collected data can be integrated with other metadata and big data sources, while public or semi-public content can provide new justifications for offline interventions (Amoore, 2013; Brunty & Helenek 2014; Sandberg & Ugelvik, 2016). Not only social media platforms like Twitter and Facebook regularly cooperate with police agencies (Joh, 2014), but numerous security and technology companies offer monitoring and data analytic services to forecast behaviour and pursue preemptive interventions (Mateescu et al., 2015; Harcourt, 2015).

However, risks are not only related to the collection and (mis)use of data by law enforcement agencies or other stakeholders. Platforms like Twitter are utilized not only by peaceful political protestors but also by rioters to organize themselves, circumvent police actions and undermine their tactics (Gerbaudo, 2018; Bonilla & Rosa, 2017). During so-called “flash mobs”, robbers organize themselves via social media to rob stores in groups (Media4sec, 2016b). Illegal migration is to a large extent organized via social media networks used by illegal migrants as much as by human traffickers and smugglers (Europol, 2017). New digitized crimes have surfaced, that make use of social media reaching from cyber attacks, financial crimes, initiation of violence, recruitment of terrorists, to more grey areas such as cyberbullying and grooming.

No doubts, social media affected policing in various and complex ways. In this article, we will deal with what Walsh and O'Connor (2018:6) consider a 'less common' use of social media as a tool for bidirectional communication contextualized as community (oriented) policing (c.f. Beshears, 2017; Kelly, 2014). Most commonly, when speaking of Community Oriented Policing in relation to social media, formal or less formal question-and-answer sessions hosted by police departments are meant to promote partnerships and information-sharing; ultimately enhancing law enforcement (Eren et al., 2014; Dai et al., 2017). As much as this, indeed, makes for a substantive part of web-related COP, this article seeks to expand this scope of study in two ways: firstly, the rather scarce research on the use of social media for the enhancement of security in communities often overlooks initiatives and tools developed and implemented by citizens rather than authorities. Based on a relatively wide definition of Community Oriented Policing as a philosophy rather than a policing method (see Feltes & Hofmann, 2018a), we include some of these initiatives in the following. Secondly, it seems the academic discussion dealing with policing and social media is mainly focused on the developed Western world. This narrow view - besides running the risk of ethnocentrism - overlooks that especially in developing countries and post-conflict settings, social media use for COP and collaborative forms of security production unfold their full potential (Nelken, 2009). To fill this gap, this article maps out some of the latest developments in the social media and the broader spectrum of Information Communication Technology for COP. This is achieved by featuring a variety of case examples from around the world to illustrate best practices and challenges for authorities and communities.

Social media and Community Oriented Policing

Today, police officers across the globe walk the beat through cyber neighbourhoods (Hofmann 2017). Policing, if not revolutionized, has already been strongly influenced by social media tools. Roughly, three main categories of police engagement on social media can be identified (Police Foundation, 2014):

- Firstly, providing specifically targeted information to be shared quickly, easily and cheaply.
- Secondly, providing the police with a way of connecting and building relationships with local communities and members of the public.
- Thirdly, for investigation and intelligence purposes, allowing the police to listen to what their communities are saying and to build evidence for investigations by monitoring social media content.

In daily police work, these categories often overlap.

Most commonly, social media platforms are used by police agencies for searches and the identification of criminals or missing people. This is mostly achieved by posting photos and depending on useful information provided by social media user. Most common is the use of social media by LEAs and other state institutions in case of emergencies and crisis management, specifically when a large number of people have to be informed or guided very quickly. The medium of choice is mostly the microblogging platform Twitter or Facebook as user rates are generally high.

One of the early and well-researched examples are the England summer riots of 2011. Their spread from London to other cities gave rise to levels of looting, destruction of property and violence not seen in Great Britain for more than 30 years (Procter et al., 2013). During the riots, police and neighbourhood officers used Twitter to calm the public and refute rumours of disorderly incidents. Some Twitter accounts soon functioned as networks in which people exchanged news and voiced their concerns towards other like-minded people.

Image building campaigns using social media have become increasingly popular among law enforcement organisations. For example, the Manchester Police, as well as the Berlin Police, regularly conduct so-called 'tweetathons'. For 24 hours, all emergency calls that reach the control room are posted on Twitter. Besides giving citizens the opportunity of having a look inside daily police work the aim is to raise awareness of the misuse of emergency call lines. Activities like these may increase legitimacy, transparency and trustworthiness – but these outcomes are far from being guaranteed (Aeillo, 2018; Bullock, 2018; Ruddell & Jones, 2013). Image work, presentational strategies and influencing public audiences and press coverage have always been important aspects of police work (Manning, 1992). However, it is social media that allegedly has become the most powerful tool to steer media and public relations. (Lee & McGovern, 2013; Goldsmith, 2015).

With a view to COP, communication and interaction with citizens in communities is vital. Traditional policing methods like walking the beat, introducing themselves and their work to the citizens are sometimes time-consuming, ineffective and exhausting for police officers. By using social media, police officers can enhance their visibility and reassure the public that they are active in an area as well as making it easier for the public to contact them (Media4Sec, 2016a). For example, in Whitby, UK, the police introduced the so-called 'Virtual Community and Police Meeting' (NPIA, 2011). Residents are given the opportunity to interact with their COP officer and raise issues affecting their neighbourhood by using a virtual chat room. In the Netherlands, the police have launched a mobile app that posts the latest security-related news and provides direct contact with the COP officer (*wijkagent*). The Finnish police have even introduced an internet police force called *Nettipoliisi*. This community policing unit is specialized in social media in an effort, to shift commu-

nity policing activities from the streets to the internet, taking an entire virtual approach to Community Oriented Policing (Calcara et al., 2015).

However, it is a common misconception that successful interaction with citizens via social media is easy to achieve and does not require a professional approach. Departmental policies often rigidly dictate communication and content that is difficult to communicate and hence appear sterile and inauthentic (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). With the clear aim to control image building and information flows, police-interaction on social media is not only at risk of being fictitiously democratic and not actually enabling citizens to influence decision-making (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018), but also of achieving undesirable results. For instance, the sharing of pictures of fugitives with the public via social media can result in the creation of platforms for hate speech if the forums are not properly moderated. Disseminating mugshots may quickly foster the public perception that crime is raising or that criminals with migration backgrounds are overrepresented. The same caution must be used for image building campaigns. For example, a tweet by the Police of Cologne from New Years Eve 2016/2017 backfired immensely and brought the organisation under accusations of racial profiling. The public outcry was triggered by tweeting about the containment of 200 people at Cologne central station using the word "Nafri", police slang for migrants from North Africa. No crimes were committed at this point but the experiences from New Year's Eve one year before where hundreds of offences were committed by migrants in front of the central station had made the police of Cologne very cautious. For weeks, a political debate ensued about criminals migrating from North Africa to Germany (FAZ, 2017).

Another example for an image backlash is a campaign launched by the New York Police Department in 2014. The idea was to boost the police image by asking users to upload photos of themselves with NYPD officers. Instead of friendly photos, users began posting photos depicting aggressive arrests especially of Afro Americans and violent riot controls. The NYPD reacted considerably stating that Twitter provides an open forum for an uncensored exchange and that an open dialogue is good for the city (BBC, 2014).

A last example: a neighbourhood policing team in the UK posted a tweet depicting a female car passenger having a seatbelt over her mouth under the headline 'New Seatbelt design: 45% less car accidents!'. The author commented 'A car designer has won an award for designing a seatbelt which helps to cut down on vehicle noise pollution #IwantOne'. This tweet was widely regarded as offensive by the public resulting in negative exposure in the mainstream media and damaging the image of the police (Bullock, 2016).

Do-it-yourself-policing

Not only LEAs make increasingly use of social media. A growing phenomenon worldwide is Do-it-yourself (DIY)-policing where citizens employ social media for criminal investigations, crime prevention or public security mainly independent of the police. DIY-policing occurs in three main forms (Media4sec, 2016a): Firstly, citizens sometimes act entirely on their own and independently of any public security organization to investigate crimes and punish suspects and offenders. Secondly, citizens limit themselves to connecting and finding or checking facts and act as information providers for public security organizations. Thirdly, citizens combine aspects of the two.

A good example to illustrate these forms are the summer riots of 2011 in England. In the aftermath of the widespread destruction, the massive engagement of citizens via social media helped to arrest over 4000 rioters. A similar dynamic unfolded after the Vancouver Stanley Cup riots in 2011 resulting not only in arrests but also in online shaming campaigns, with a number of rioters losing their jobs and even being violently threatened by online vigilantes (Schneider and Trottier, 2012; Trottier 2012). But DIY-policing is not reduced to mass events. Private Facebook searches for stolen goods like bicycles are conducted on a daily basis. Neighbourhood watches are coordinated via mobile apps to prevent burglaries. Sexual harassment reporting apps crowdsource data to create heat maps of incidents that are made publicly available to help women avoid certain hotspots.

A more ambivalent example of DIY policing is the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013 (Media4sec, 2016). In the aftermath of the attacks, an unprecedented manhunt unfolded via the social news platform Reddit. The police had retrieved a small part of the backpack that had contained one of the bombs. The challenge taken up by hundreds of thousands of users was to gather all available material, like photos and videos, and search for this one backpack (Nhan et al., 2017 refer to the phenomenon as 'digilantism'). Apparently, the Boston police retrieved some useful information for their investigations from this platform that eventually led to the arrest of the perpetrators. The downside of this mass engagement was misinformation on suspects and rumours being widely circulated on Reddit and even picked up by the press. Several alleged suspects were incorrectly identified putting them in serious danger of becoming victims of vigilantism from an emotionalized online crowd (see Marx, 2013; Lally, 2017). Despite all founded criticism that unfolded in the aftermath of the aforementioned events: the digital communities amplified surveillance and outreach to an extent law enforcement authorities alone would not have been able to (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018; Reeves, 2017).

Information Communication Technologies (ICT) for COP in Developing Countries

The discourse about social media and ICT often focuses on Western countries. This narrow view may have its roots in the assumption that ICT environments in developing countries are rudimentary, smartphones and computers are scarce, and user rates of social media platforms are low. However, although varying from country to country, the so-called 'digital divide' between the developed and less developed world is shrinking (Douglas, 2015; Poushter, 2016; Sobaih et al., 2016).

ICT tools in the broader area of community policing and collaborative security production are attractive for societies struggling with the implementation of functioning security structures. The reasons are simple: ICT is easily accessible, can be used by nearly everyone and is cheap (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). Therefore, in recent years, international, national and local actors have increasingly included ICT-tools in conflict prevention and peace-building programs. Among experts there seemingly is a strong consensus that technologies improve the capacity to predict, describe and diagnose conflict by generating, accessing and sharing data in conflict-prone situations (see De Zan et al., 2016). A good example is Ushahidi² (Swahili for "testimony" or "witness") a website that was created after the Kenyan presidential elections in 2007 when a violent crisis erupted after electoral manipulations were discovered and the mainstream media was banned from reporting. The purpose of Ushahidi was to collect eyewitness reports of violence sent in by email and text-message and to use the collected data for the creation of maps on Google maps. It tackled the problem that people were only able to find out about violence that happened nearby, but had no broader picture of the situation to understand what was going on or to offer their help. The website used different sources, such as international media, NGOs and Kenyan journalists, to verify eyewitness reports of violent acts. By avoiding official sources and only relying on citizens, the data collected by Ushahidi was superior to that reported by the Kenyan mainstream media at the time. Since then, the website was used in a number of occasions, such as mapping violence in South Africa and Congo, to track pharmacy stock-outs in Malawi, Uganda and Zambia or to monitor elections in Mexico and India.

In 2016, Amnesty International implemented a project named Décor Darfur.³ Via crowd-sourcing volunteers analyzed satellite imagery of the country by looking for human rights violations. By comparing images from different times, the destruction of remote villages can be pinpointed and reported (see also Convergne & Snyder, 2015).

2 See <https://www.ushahidi.com/about>

3 <https://www.amnesty.org/en/press-releases/2016/10/digital-volunteers-to-expose-darfur-human-rights-violations/>

In Kosovo, a sexual reporting app crowd sources data to create heat maps of sexual harassment incidents.⁴ The maps are made publicly available to help women avoid hot spots for sexual harassment around the country. A similar principle is used for the detection of illegal dumping sites⁵. Via a mobile app, dumpsites can be geotagged and photos uploaded.

Safetipin is a map-based safety app developed for New Delhi providing crowdsourced safety scores for certain places in a city including information on street lighting. By using a GPS locator, the app updates the user if he is currently in a safe location. Through a GPS tracker, family and friends can keep track of the user's whereabouts. In addition, the developers cooperate with local taxi drivers that mount smartphones in their vehicles to take photos of the streets by night to assess the street lighting in certain areas. Using these parameters, the app helps to perform so-called safety audits of certain areas, which are carried out jointly by community volunteers and local police officers.. Meanwhile, it is available in a number of cities, such as Jakarta, Nairobi and Bogota.⁶

These examples (which could be easily expanded) may not be considered COP tools in a classical sense since most of them did neither involve law enforcement authorities in the development nor in the implementation process. However, security-production through social media is not monopolized by state authorities. On the contrary, the transformative potential of innovative approaches becomes most apparent where institutional control and state structures are weak (Miklian & Hoelscher, 2018).

Discussion and Conclusion

The use of social media by law enforcement authorities or, more broadly, by other stakeholders for purposes of collaborative security production is constantly changing and evolving, making this article no more than a snapshot of the most recent developments. Walsh & O'Connor (2018: 9) conclude that not only the dearth of empirical work limits knowledge on social media's impact to mostly theoretical, anecdotal and speculative studies. But also have scholars overwhelmingly privileged dissenting voices particularly in relation to grassroots monitoring and activism. Consequently, they plead for the development of a more nuanced view of the polarizing landscape of digital environments including more positive interactions between authorities and citizens. By featuring best practices and numerous case examples of Community Oriented Policing from all over the world, this article aims to contribute to a more nuanced view. In addition, we argue that

4 See <http://iwalkfreely.com/>

5 Available at <http://opendatakosovo.org/app/illegal-dumps/> the app called Trashout can be viewed here <https://www.trashout.ngo/>

6 See <http://safetipin.com/>

research should include more developing and post-conflict countries in its scope. COP strategies are increasingly regarded as a mainstay for international police missions and security sector reform in fragile and post-conflict states (Feltes & Hofmann 2018b). Here, the potential of social media unfolds as an easily accessible, cheap and participatory tool to create transparency and transformative powers.

However, one should not forget that it remains an ambivalent technology. Information provided on social networks can be used to incite violence and to promote conflicts. Where law enforcement agencies see an opportunity for controlling crime and increasing public safety, the citizens run the risk of becoming subject to more control and less privacy. The current discourse on social media or ICT, in general, has a tendency to view technologies and innovations as magic bullets for security problems. It is, however, important to keep in mind that they are no panacea for crime control and conflict resolution. We agree with Mancini and O'Reilly (2013) when they conclude: "[e]ven if you crowdsource your hammer, not every problem is a nail".

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