RESEARCH REPORT:

CROSS-EUROPEAN APPROACHES TO SOCIAL MEDIA AS A TOOL FOR POLICE COMMUNICATION

By

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Abstract

Based on interviews and a series of four focus group discussions, we outline systematic differences in the approaches currently adopted by European police forces in their use of social media as communication tools. We identify variations in the implementation, integration, selection and communication use. Our objective is to inform a European dialogue on social media as a tool for police communication.

Keywords*: Social Media, Police, Europe*

Introduction

Facebook, Twitter, Youtube: The rise of social media in the context of the *Web 2.0* is dramatically changing the way we live. People create text messages, photos and videos and share them over a variety of Internet services. They chat with friends, send birthday wishes, get to know new people, arrange dinners or ask for help. And they do so in skyrocketing numbers. During the time it took to read the previous sentences, people wrote about 11 000 tweets and commented 90 170 times on Facebook. Social media systems have become closely interwoven with people's everyday lives, be it work or private. Such a prominent social development cannot be ignored by police forces, which in increasing numbers follow the public to the net. In this report we showcase the range of current approaches to the use of social media by European police forces—demonstrating how little consensus exists amongst them on how best to integrate social media into existing practices. By outlining the differences we aim to provide a basis for a broader cross-European discussion to this challenge.

Study Context and Methods

This report is a result of systematic investigations into technological changes in European police forces, conducted as part of COMPOSITE, a large-scale research project investigating change processes in European policing. A first trend analysis, based on 72 interviews with ICT police and industry experts in 10 European countries, identified social media as a major technological challenge across Europe. At the same time we found considerable variations in the acceptance and use of social media. In a consecutive step, we therefore set out to capture this variation in a more systematic way. In June 2011 COMPOSITE organised a workshop with police officers from forces in Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium and researchers from academia and industry (13 participants) to discuss strategies and approaches of social media as a tool for police communication in form of concrete examples from each force. The discussions were captured in notes and flipcharts. The qualitative analysis of this data refined the typology of controversial issues and commonalities developed from the trend report. This data was then presented to police officers from the 10 countries participating in the advisory board of the COMPOSITE project[2], a symposium at the 2011 CEPOL conference, and a second COMPOSITE workshop in November 2011 with officers from the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, U.K., and Austria (23 participants). The consecutive feedback from disparate groups refined and validated our initial results leading to a systematic overview of approaches for a broad range of countries and contexts.

Results

We found cross-European variations in (1) implementation strategies, (2) media selection/integration, and (3) communication with the public.

Implementation strategy: bottom-up versus top-down

Social media are generally a bottom-up phenomenon: People adopt the technology as needed, figuring out how to use it on the way. Some police forces follow this **bottom-up** approach: Officers can use e.g., Twitter or Facebook largely without restrictions. General rules may make them aware that information sharing on social media is very similar to 'shouting out loudly in a public space full of strangers', but usage generally depends on local efforts and on personal standards. This approach provides officers with a high degree of freedom. Yet it also allows little control over who uses social media and how. Instead forces rely on the personal discretion of officers. Other forces prefer a **top-down** strategy: They first create general guidelines before social media are rolled out. These guidelines target the entire force and prescribe how officers can (or should) deal with social media in their daily work. Their objective is to safeguard

police against the potential threats of unfettered and uncritical use. On the downside, such guidelines can take a long time to develop and require continuous updates to keep in line with social and technological developments. Moreover, so far forces often lack the comprehensive experience to ground these policies in practice.

Dealing with the diversity of the social media landscape: selective, centralized and modular approaches

The social media landscape is constantly changing; networks that are popular today may not be popular tomorrow. Moreover, the choice of services also differs across user groups. Given this variety, police forces need to select the social media they work with and decide where to put their content. Police forces in our study generally decided for a **selective approach**, picking only the most popular services such as Twitter, Facebook or Youtube. The rationale is to reduce the effort of maintaining disparate services, while reaching the broadest number of users. In individual cases the selection can also include alternative services to target specific groups (e.g., a Dutch officer's presence in the child-focused 'Habbo hotel'). Forces in our sample differed in the degree of restrictiveness, some concentrating on one channel, others on three or four; yet none of them aimed for a comprehensive approach, i.e., targeting as many services as possible.

Variations also existed in the integration of

social media into existing communication channels. Some police forces use social media in a **centralized approach**. This group regards their own website as the central hub for all important information with links to social media content. On their own website police forces stay in full control. They can thus more easily integrate new systems with information systems that are already in place. An alternative is the **modular approach** in which each tool has its own purpose and communication strategy; e.g., Twitter for real-time information or personal interactions, Facebook for longer-term campaigns. We also found the conscious non-adoption of social media. These forces instead rely on communication through their website. Their objective is to stay in control of the content and presentation of information and to avoid dependence on private corporations which run social media services. For instance, commercial advertising next to crime reports can easily come into conflict with the messages and credibility of police forces (e.g., how acceptable are chain saw ads next to a message on a chain saw murder?).

Interacting with the public: informational versus relational use

The most common purpose of social media is still the dissemination of information to speed up and broaden the scope of traditional police work (**informational use**). The police inform citizens in real-time about recent crimes, traffic accidents, missing

people, stolen vehicles, suspects or arrests made. Generally, these messages are linked to requests for help from the public—with often very positive results. Yet, informational use is largely unidirectional ignoring the possibilities of direct public participation and feedback. Bringing the concept of community policing to social media, some forces therefore choose to interact with the public on a more local and personal level (*relational use*). For instance, many Dutch and British community officers have Twitter accounts on which they continuously report about their work and react to individual enquiries by citizens. Other police officers open offices in virtual space; they act as neighborhood officers in virtual worlds, such as Habbo Hotel or Second Life, and thereby become a personal contact point in both virtual and physical environments. Police officers report that relational use increases the public perceptions of transparency and accessibility and improves relationships with the public.

Discussion and Implications

The complexity police forces face in entering the social media space is high—forcing difficult decisions internally as well as in relations to the public. The overview presented in this paper shows that there is little consensus across European police forces how to approach this problem. Despite this complexity, leaving the social media space entirely unoccupied is not an option. Bogus Twitter channels or Facebook

pages demonstrate only too clearly that if the police leave a gap, others will fill it. Also, public usage of social media will grow, whether or not police forces choose to deal with the phenomenon. The power of sharing in social developments and having a strong voice in popular public discussions should not be underestimated. We do not advocate a one-size-fits-all approach in dealing with social media. Yet given the need for European integration, we hope our report will support a more informed discussion of possible ways to approach social media in Europe's police forces.

Outlook

In this report, we limited ourselves to an overview of current approaches to social media. In future studies we also aim to focus on the *impact* that disparate approaches have for police work. We further concentrated on social media as a means of communication. Yet, increasingly it is also a tool for investigations. These aspects will be part of future workshops and studies within COMPOSITE.

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