

The briefing

June 2014



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Police use of social media

This Police Foundation Briefing looks at the current use of social media by the police and examines some of the key issues.

Introduction

Social media – a growing form of internet-based communication interfaces with all areas of policing. It offers the police a way of connecting and engaging with the public, it enables important information to be distributed quickly and easily, and it can assist in intelligence gathering. With its growing impact and reach, social media presents real opportunities but also poses challenges and is increasingly seen as a game changer for the police.

This Briefing discusses the ways in which social media can help the police, provides

examples of where it has been used to positive effect, and looks at the challenges of employing this new technology. It focuses on the police service's use of social media rather than the policing of social media or the use of social media by Police and Crime Commissioners.

What is social media?

Social media is a method of communicating using websites that allow people to 'post' public information, chat with others, send messages, and share photographs or videos.

The tool is used by organisations and individuals keen to establish a connection with millions of other users. Unlike traditional unilateral communications channels, such as television advertising, social media provides an opportunity to establish a two-way dialogue with audiences, actively engaging people in conversations rather than simply providing them with information.

There are many different forms of social media, including social networks such as Facebook and LinkedIn, where users have public profiles and network or connect with other users; micro blogging sites such as Twitter, which enable the public sharing of short updates; and photo or video sharing sites, such as Instagram or YouTube, which enable the public dissemination of photos and videos (Association of Police and Crime Commissioners, 2012). This Briefing focuses primarily on Facebook and Twitter, as these are the most relevant to policing, although many of the issues raised here also relate to other forms of social media.

Any person or organisation can set up a 'page' on Facebook or a 'profile' on Twitter in order to post information. Facebook users choose whom to 'friend' and Twitter users whom to 'follow' and in this way can keep up to date with news from these individuals or organisations. Establishing a relationship on social media is important as users must friend or follow a profile in order to see updates or messages. Wider exposure and additional friends and followers are potentially gained by people passing on ('re-tweeting') or 'favouriting' updates ('tweets') on Twitter or clicking the 'like' button below posts on Facebook, which allow a wider audience to view the original post.

Why should the police use social media?

Social media represents a major shift in the way the public are sharing and using

information. According to research by Ofcom (2014), 83 per cent of adults now go online and 55 per cent of the adult population has a current social networking site profile. 96 per cent of adults who use social media have a profile on Facebook, while three in ten have a profile on Twitter. 60 per cent of social media users, and 83 per cent of those aged 16-24, visit social media sites more than once a day.

Social media therefore provides the police with a new way to connect with the public. In a consent-based policing system engagement is crucial in building public trust and confidence; social media enables the police to engage better and to build relationships, as well as to gather information and intelligence. To take advantage of this opportunity, it is becoming increasingly important for the police to understand and make use of the different tools available.

"An online presence in a modern world is as important as traditional policing methods such as walking the beat"
Nick Keane, Digital Engagement Adviser, College of Policing (2014a)

Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) guidelines on the safe use of social media recognise that social networking sites assist the police in engagement, allow officers to respond in real time to incidents, and help the police to demonstrate greater accountability and transparency (ACPO, 2013). In particular, social media may enable the police to engage with 'hard to reach' groups, reaching a different demographic from those who traditionally attend public meetings. Younger people, for example, have expressed an interest in contacting the police online (London Assembly, 2013). It may also be a positive way of connecting with members of the community who might otherwise be uninterested or antagonistic (Knibbs, 2013).

“I go to public meetings and have the same usual suspects, which is great but social media is a chance for me to engage with potentially younger people who don’t normally come to resident meetings” Chief Inspector Blakeman, West Midlands (Sommers, 2013)

Social media sites, unlike traditional forms of engagement, provide a means for the public to raise concerns while remaining anonymous. Many users have ‘handles’ – names which are not their own – and this layer of protection enables them to contact the police without revealing their identity. A survey by Accenture (2012) found that 69 per cent of respondents would interact with the police more if they could remain anonymous, so in this respect social media may provide an opportunity for the police to receive information from people who would not otherwise have contacted them.

Current police use of social media

UK police forces began experimenting with social media in 2008. Its use was often initiated by individual officers, with varying degrees of official support (Crump, 2011). Since then the police service’s use of social media, including Twitter and Facebook, has grown substantially. All police forces in England and Wales, including the British Transport Police, now have Twitter accounts and all but two are on Facebook, while more than 2,050 officers currently have individual Twitter accounts. Police force pages in the UK have a total of 1,567,759 followers on Twitter and 825,243 ‘likes’ on Facebook.¹ Greater Manchester Police now has 72,409 ‘likes’ on Facebook, the most for a police force in England and Wales, while the Metropolitan Police Service has 195,487 followers on Twitter.²

¹ These may not be discrete users, however. One person may follow more than one police force on Twitter, for example.

² Figures correct as of 5 May 2014.

Joint guidance issued by the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) and ACPO sets out how police forces can optimise their use of social media (NPIA and ACPO, 2010) and further guidance has been issued by ACPO and the College of Policing on the safe use of social media and on the principles of online engagement and how to manage online communities.³ But despite the widespread adoption of social media by the police in England and Wales, there is as yet no national strategy that sets out how the service should use social media (Sommers, 2013). As a consequence, each force uses its own discretion, so both content and capability vary significantly between forces.

The police service’s use of social media can be broadly divided into three related areas:

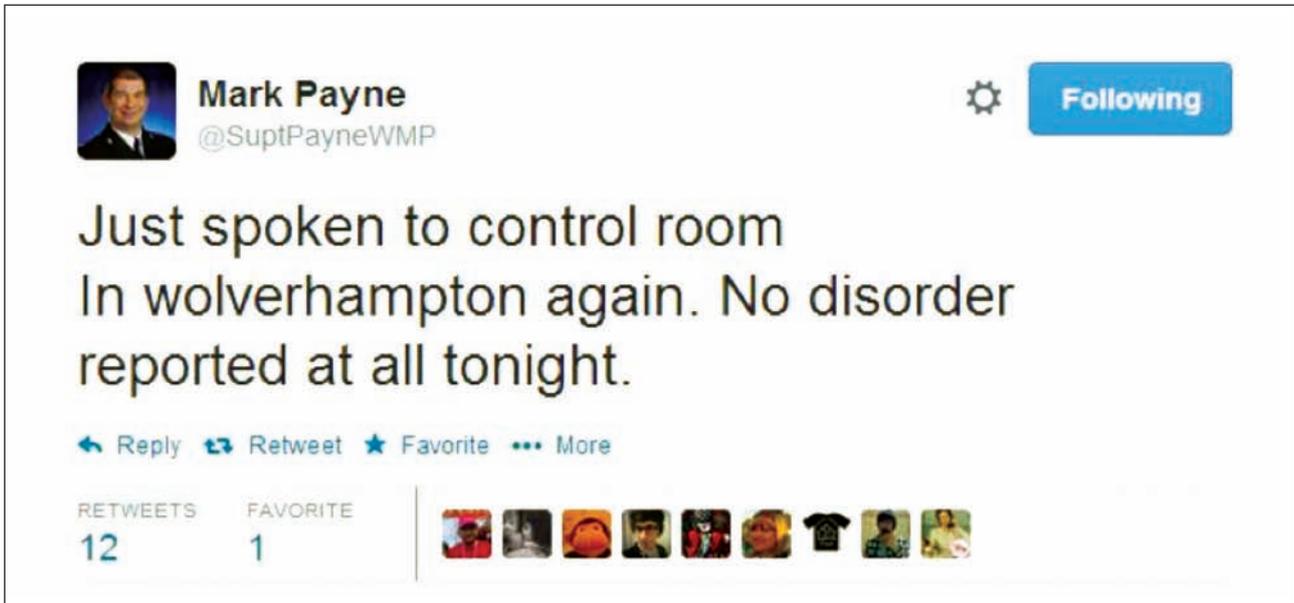
1. **Providing information** – enabling specifically-targeted information to be shared quickly, easily and cheaply.
2. **Engagement** – providing the police with a way of connecting and building relationships with local communities and members of the public.
3. **Intelligence and investigation** – allowing the police to listen to what their communities are saying and to build evidence for investigations by monitoring social media content.

Providing information

Social media gives the police a new way of sharing information with the public, beyond conventional mechanisms such as distributing leaflets or through the traditional news media. Posts can provide safety advice to the public, encourage people to be alert to criminal activity in their area, and counsel them on how to minimise risk. The information can be published

³ See: <http://www.app.college.police.uk/app-content/engagement-and-communication/communications>.

Figure 1



(Payne, 2011)

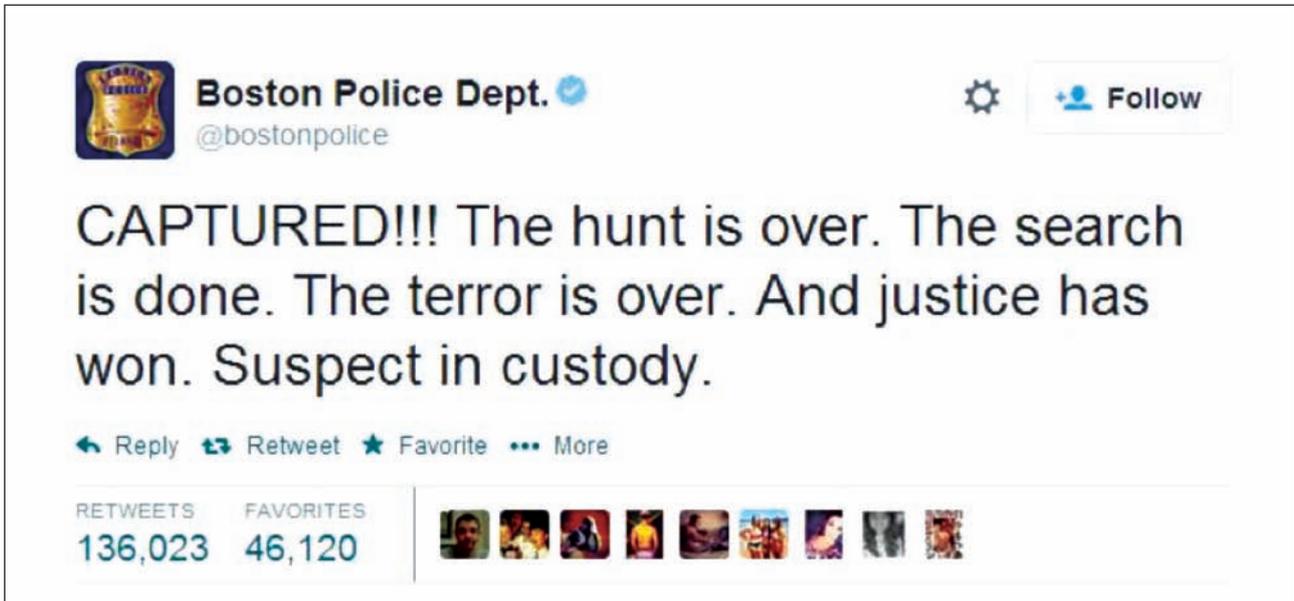
in real time and directly communicated to a ready audience in those who have signed up to receive news from the account. This audience can read the information instantly and share it at the click of a button, disseminating the material to a large number of people at little cost.

Social media is particularly useful during critical incidents, such as disorder, demonstrations and protests. One notable example of this was the summer riots of 2011, when police forces and neighbourhood officers used the tool to calm the public and refute ill-founded rumours of disorderly incidents (Crump, 2011). A good example of this is when Mark Payne, a Superintendent in West Midlands Police, used Twitter to reassure citizens that there was no riot activity taking place in his area (see Figure 1). When used in this way social media can control the spread of rumours and misinformation during protests and large scale incidents of disorder. Indeed this approach was recommended by the Home Affairs Select Committee in their report following the August 2011 riots (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2011).

Internationally, there are a number of examples of the police utilising social media effectively during large scale disturbances. For example the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) used Twitter extensively when disorder broke out during a major sporting event in 2011. The social media officer for the VPD used HootSuite (the social media management dashboard) to monitor public sentiment from the moment trouble broke out. The police team used Twitter to continually engage with the crowd, as a result of which the force's Facebook 'likes' grew by 2,000 per cent.

Social media use can also extend beyond traditional policing areas to broader disaster management and was employed in 2011 during the New Zealand earthquake and the flooding in Queensland, Australia, where it became the primary means of communication (Knibbs, 2013). More recently, the police in Calgary in Canada gained an international award for their innovative use of social media during severe weather. After the event, the public expressed their gratitude to all the emergency response teams via Twitter, which helped to boost police morale (Elliott, 2013).

Figure 2



Arguably the most high profile example of the police using Twitter during a major incident occurred following the Boston marathon bombings in 2013. At every stage of the search for the suspect, the police kept the public informed using social media. The first official announcement that the suspect had been apprehended came from a Tweet (Figure 2) (Keller, 2013). In their review of how the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) can make better use of technology, the Budget and Performance Committee of the London Assembly noted that the key to the success in Boston was that the police already had protocols in place on how to use social media in this situation (London Assembly, 2013).

Engagement

The use of social media can go beyond the one-way provision of information to enable two-way engagement with the public. Engagement is a fundamental part of policing and social media allows the police to connect with citizens; giving the public an opportunity to communicate with the police and feel that they are accessible as an organisation. Social media

sites provide an opportunity for officers to show the 'human' side of policing and discuss the day-to-day incidents that make up an average day at work (Webster, 2013), as well as to build relationships with communities. Posting interactive content such as polls and videos sparks dialogue, while innovative use of social media broadens the conversation on policing.

One of the most notable early uses of social media by the police was Greater Manchester Police's 'Twitter Day', held during 2010, during which every incident notified to their control room over a 24-hour period was posted on Twitter. The idea behind it, according to their Chief Constable, was to "raise awareness of the diverse and complex role of policing, explaining how much time officers spend with non-crime matter" (Fisher, 2012). The results were eye-opening and the force was able to demonstrate to a wide audience that much of the contact they received concerned very minor incidents or events which were not strictly police-related, such as a report of cows at loose and a phone call from a man reporting that his television was not working. As a result of the experiment, Greater Manchester Police

increased their number of Twitter followers from 3,000 to 17,000⁴ (Crump, 2011).

In addition to official force tweets, many officers tweet individually, primarily as a form of public engagement. For example, Sergeant Ed Rogerson uses Twitter to discuss his life as a community officer in Harrogate, North Yorkshire. He uses Twitter to increase his visibility, having been inspired to do so after being repeatedly told by members of the public when he was a PC that he was the first officer they had seen in months (Laville, 2012).

Social media is also useful for internal purposes: to engage police staff members or boost morale. Following the summer riots in 2011, Staffordshire police posted a 'word cloud' which collated the words most frequently posted by Staffordshire police followers. The word cloud celebrated the positive feedback the force had received for the way it dealt with the disorder.

Intelligence and investigation

Social media can assist the police in intelligence-gathering, with its speed providing a crucial advantage when appealing for witnesses or information or looking for missing persons. It can be used during ongoing incidents; for example in the case of Joanna Yeates, who went missing in December 2010, Avon and Somerset Police used Facebook to call for anyone with information to come forward. Footage from CCTV cameras was also posted on YouTube.

It can also be used to obtain information after the event. For example, in order to identify suspects in the wake of the summer riots the police posted CCTV footage and photos of suspects on the website Flickr as part of Operation Withern. The MPS used Twitter to promote this and within hours the Flickr images

had been 'retweeted' 8,500 times and viewed 4.3 million times (Denef et al, 2013).

In 2012 a post about a missing dog made by Barnet MPS on Twitter was 'retweeted' 52,820 times and the dog was subsequently returned as a result (ITV News, 2012).

In addition, social media can provide intelligence to inform deployment decisions and improve the effective allocation of resources (HMIC, 2012a). To this end, as well as using their own pages and profiles to gather information, the police follow the use of social media by others, gaining an insight into their local communities, picking up leads and preparing for potential incidents. Sir Peter Fahy, Chief Constable of Greater Manchester Police, stated that social media channels played a crucial role in intelligence gathering about community tensions following a fatal police shooting in Cheshire (Fahy, 2012).

The police also regularly visit and monitor sites known for potential criminal or antisocial activity to gather information and sources (COMPOSITE Project, 2012). These include sites on the 'Black Web' (an unofficial list of sites that criminals use to communicate), sites that propagate hate propaganda and chat rooms used by sex offenders to target vulnerable victims (Taylor, 2011). Every interaction with the internet leaves a trace and trawling through an individual's social media profiles can give the police information on his or her circle of friends or their location at a specific time. Partnership working can assist in this area: Facebook, for example, works with the police to help identify images of child sex abuse, freezing a user's data to assist investigation. Police officers from various forces across Europe report that in many cases criminal information can be found online that without social media would have required a much greater investigative effort or would not have been available at all (COMPOSITE Project, 2012).

⁴ They had 151,236 followers on 5 May 2014, the second highest number for a force in England and Wales.

The challenges of social media

Getting the tone right

Information placed by the police on social media needs to be relevant and useful. Posts which appear to be of limited practical benefit can leave the public with the impression that the police could be spending their time more fruitfully (PSI, 2012). The tone in which information is presented is also important, affecting the likelihood that it will be read and passed on and the way in which the sender is viewed.

Research has shown that different forces use social media differently (Denef et al., 2013). In an analysis of Twitter communication by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and Greater Manchester Police (GMP) during the summer riots, the MPS adopted a more formal approach, keeping its distance from the public, while GMP was more informal, connecting with the public using a more 'expressive' style of tweet. The MPS, for example, would post the following: *'New CCTV images of people police need to identify on our Flickr page <http://bit.ly/rnax8U> Pls look and RT'*, whereas GMP's post stated: *'Can you help identify these people? Check our Flickr gallery of wanted suspects and call 0800 092 0410 <http://bit.ly/oyfZiN>'*.

The study found benefits and challenges in both approaches. GMP's more informal style created a closer relationship with the public, but as a result boundaries were more fluid and easier to over-step. This can lead to a negative response from followers. For example GMP tweeted: *'Mum-of-two, not involved in disorder, jailed for FIVE months for accepting shorts looted from shop. There are no excuses'*. This triggered critical responses such as: *'That last @gmpolice tweet: wrong sentence, wrong tone, wrong everything. Pissing away goodwill collected over*

last week'. The research concluded that the MPS's more formal style reduced the force's ability to connect as effectively with the public as GMP's approach, although the Twitter feed was found to be easier to maintain and less prone to negative feedback.

"Our data indicates that choosing an instrumental versus an expressive strategy may lead to different relationships between police and public. Given the dependence of police on public cooperation, the choice may well impact police performance in the short- and long-term." (Denef et al, 2013)

Engagement, not just giving information

The art of effectively using social media is arguably to balance information provision with posts that are entertaining and fun. If followers enjoy reading police updates, and trust the tweets or posts as good sources of information, they will be more inclined to engage and come forward with information themselves. In this way information provision and intelligence-gathering can overlap with engagement, which to be effective, needs to be two-way. Studies have shown that open communication can improve the levels of trust citizens have in their forces (COMPOSITE Project, 2012; Ruddell and Jones, 2013), while an online presence which is interactive, rather than one which simply provides information, can create a personal connection with users and promote positive attitudes (Briones et al, 2011). A survey by Accenture (2012) found that over half of UK respondents (58 per cent) would like to see the police using social media to engage with the community, rather than simply to provide information. In practice however, the police often use social media platforms merely to give or ask for information, rather than to engage in a dialogue with the public (Crump, 2011). This pattern appears to be reflected across Europe, with police most commonly using social media for informing the

public about recent crimes, traffic accidents, missing people, stolen vehicles, suspects or arrests made (Denef, et al, 2012).

Engagement through social media is not without risks. There is potential for mistakes to be made if the right information is not given, or inappropriate detail is disclosed. By its nature social media is fast moving and difficult to control and any mistakes that occur are immediately exposed to the wider public. Thus for example in April 2014, the New York Police Department asked the public to tweet pictures of themselves with police officers using a specified hash tag. The response was dominated by pictures that showed the police in a negative light (Tran, M., 2014).

Publicising a police presence

If the police are to disseminate information widely or engage with citizens effectively online, public awareness around police use of social media needs to be increased. The opt in nature of the tool means that the police have to make sure the public is aware of, and will follow, their social media pages. A large and diverse audience will enable a police force to disseminate public information and engage more widely. However a survey by Accenture (2012) found that less than a fifth of UK respondents were aware that the police are currently using digital channels. If members of the public are not a 'friend' or 'follower' of the police on Facebook or Twitter, opportunities for social media engagement may be lost.

Identifying useful information

Sir Denis O'Connor, former HM Chief Inspector of Constabulary, described social media as a 'game changer', but said that currently the police were 'not geared' to make use of the data it provided (House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee, 2011). Due to the volume of information that is shared through social media, there are significant challenges in processing it and there may be a reputational

risk for the police if, due to the volume of data that is potentially available to them, they miss important information on social media that could help them prevent a crime or apprehend a suspect more quickly.

During the summer riots, the systems for developing intelligence from large flows of social media data were not always sufficient to cope with the demand to process it rapidly enough to usefully inform strategies and tactics on the ground. Tim Godwin, acting Commissioner of the MPS at that time, subsequently stated that many UK police forces were still playing 'catch up' in their use of social media (Mason, 2012).

Police have to assess the value and accuracy of any intelligence they obtain. The House of Commons Home Affairs Select Committee (2011) recognised that the task of distinguishing credible information from rumour and speculation was challenging due to the volume of information involved, and the speed of interaction. HMIC has recommended that an 'all source', public order intelligence hub should be developed to analyse trends in community tension, including through monitoring social media (HMIC, 2011).

"For information to be considered 'intelligence' it needs to meet certain thresholds of how it is gathered, evidenced, corroborated, verified, understood and applied. To be able to inform important decisions, either strategic or operational, [social media intelligence] must establish its own approach to secure these evidentiary thresholds." (Bartlett et al, 2013)

The police need to develop ways to better access and interpret the information that is available through social media. In the US, recent research has shown that using Twitter data improved crime predication rates of

stalking, criminal damage and gambling by 6.6 per cent in Chicago compared to a standard crime prediction approach (Gerber, M., 2013). In the UK, a range of tools are becoming available, such as 'Redknight', which was used during the 2012 Olympics.⁵ Similarly, the Collaborative Online Social Media Observatory (COSMOS), developed by researchers at Cardiff University, is researching the potential link between social media updates and crime. The COSMOS team has partnered with the MPS to see if they can gauge and perhaps even predict crime in certain London Boroughs.⁶ Elsewhere, social network analysis is being explored as a tool for supporting the investigation of child sex trafficking in the UK (Cockbain et al, 2011).

Managing police use of social media

Police officers and staff of all ranks and levels of experience are able to use social media, which presents considerable management challenges. Content placed on social media by police officers and staff must be appropriate for public consumption and use the right tone and style. Where this is not the case, processes must be in place to address this.

A 2012 HMIC report identified 357 instances of potentially inappropriate behaviour by police on social media over a nine month period, 71 per cent of which were on Twitter. HMIC categorised this behaviour as:

- offensive language or behaviour (132 instances)
- comments on police protocol or procedure (119 instances)
- negativity towards work (70 instances); and
- extreme opinions on the government (36 instances)

The report also found that only nine forces had the capacity to check for inappropriate

behaviour on personal accounts and that nine forces did not monitor staff use of social media at all. The report recommended further training should be given to those using social media, identifying six forces who had not carried out any training or awareness raising activity (HMIC, 2012b).

“Police forces and PCCs should ensure they have appropriate mechanisms for monitoring and managing the reputational risks which the inappropriate use of social media present” (HMIC, 2012a).

Following the controversial suspension and reinstatement of the @mentalhealthcop Twitter account of Inspector Michael Brown of West Midlands Police, it has come to light that officers using Twitter on behalf of their force must make their usernames and passwords available to their employers should they deem it necessary to remove inappropriate material or take control of an account. The police service's national lead for digital engagement, Deputy Chief Constable Ian Hopkins, has stated that police forces must exercise 'proper control' over what officers publish on their social media accounts (Sommers, 2014) and at least 10 forces are known to use monitoring software to scrutinise their officers' use of Twitter (Iszatt, 2014). The College of Policing's Code of Ethics clearly states that standards that apply to the management of information offline are equally applicable to social media (College of Policing, 2014b).

One aspect of social media that is particularly difficult to manage relates to 'cross-over accounts'. These accounts, which are particularly prevalent on Twitter, see police officers posting about work but also about their personal life. A degree of humour, frivolity or human detail can help attract followers, who do not always want to read serious, dry tweets. However, occasionally an extreme opinion is

⁵ See <http://www.redknightapps.com>.

⁶ See: <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/contactsandpeople/academicstaff/T-Z/dr-matthew-williams-overview.html>.

tweeted, or one user engages in an inappropriate debate on Twitter with another user. It is important that forces have effective processes in place to respond proportionately when these incidents occur.

Resources

The growth of social media has come at a time of austerity, when police budgets are being cut. It may also have raised expectations. If the public comes to expect immediate responses to requests for information or updates on the progress of investigations, it may be difficult to find the time and manpower to resource this.

The use of social media in its current guise is, however, not particularly resource intensive; it is being absorbed into the duties of serving officers and communications departments as an addition to their workload. But to use it operationally, beyond it being an information tool, is likely to require significant investment. As Peter Fahy suggests, “it can be a really useful tool, but you need to put a lot of resources into your control room” (Fahy, 2012).

Deploying sufficient personnel is one such investment. The police need to be able to analyse and manage the information they receive quickly and effectively. This is of particular importance in relation to critical incidents, when there is a need to analyse information at speed. But it takes time to manage information effectively. Setting up systems to mine and scrape social media for intelligence purposes might assist the police in monitoring community tension levels and anticipating behaviour, but it only comes at considerable additional expense.

The extent to which these resources are made available may depend on whether there is sufficient understanding of the value of social networking at a strategic level. Some senior officers are familiar with the use of Twitter and Facebook for operational policing, others less so.

Conclusion

Social media provides the police with new opportunities to engage with the public; to collect and impart information; and to gather intelligence. However, these opportunities come with challenges which are yet to be fully addressed.

Currently, there is no national strategy on police use of social media and every force is left to develop its own approach. In March 2013 Deputy Chief Constable Gordon Scobbie called for the College of Policing and ACPO to produce joined-up policy to embed the use of social media into policing (Sommers, 2013). However there are some potential changes in the pipeline: a Digital Communications Steering Group has been set up by the MPS to focus on key strategic social media issues – ranging from identifying the correct technology to deciding appropriate standards of usage – and the resultant report may help to clarify issues in this area.

Work remains to be done on developing systems and strategies that help embed the use of social media into everyday working practices, and ensure that lessons are learnt in terms of what constitutes best practice. Research into the public perception of the police’s use of social media may be of benefit, particularly if it helped to pin down what the public wants from a police social media account, how they view different types of tweets or posts and what impact social media has on public confidence in the longer-term. With 87 per cent of young people using social media, it represents a crucial form of communication now and in the future and could become a vital element in helping to build trust and confidence and improve policing in years to come.

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