

Engaging with Social Media: Policing and Citizen Enquiry

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The project began by liaising with police forces to ascertain what issues concerning technology, community and psychology are currently the most important. It became clear that there are pressing questions with regards to how the police employ social media to engage with the public, and how to deal with evidence supplied by eyewitnesses who had investigated the crime using social media. To address these questions the research was divided into 4 distinct projects using a multi-method approach. Whilst one of the projects surveyed social media in general, the other three concentrated on Facebook. This was done partially based on discussion with the police and partly because of practical considerations.

Police engagement with the public through Facebook was studied using an online questionnaire, content analysis of 12 and narrative analysis of 2 police owned Facebook sites. The use of multiple research methodologies allowed for considerable scope in the specific questions and types of data that were included in the research. For example, the content analysis included social media use by a large number of forces and looked at overall types and frequency of use, whilst the use of narrative analysis allowed a detailed focus on the creation, challenge, revision and co-construction of knowledge on police owned social media sites, and on how identity is constructed and revised through networked narratives. Together with the survey of police and public use and perceptions of social media, this research offered an extensive analysis of policing and social media.

The online survey and content analysis projects both revealed significant variations in how social media is used by the police, and a growing discrepancy between what the public want and expect from social media and what the police are delivering. The survey revealed that the police appear to have a more positive view of how social media is currently used to engage the public, than the public do, who would prefer it be used to foster greater two-way communication including crime reporting. Evidence was found that witnesses are using social media to conduct their own citizen enquiries, and that the majority of policing personnel are not aware of current guidelines for handling this situation. The narrative analysis project found considerable evidence of “networked narratives” (Page, Harper and Froibinus, 2011) on police Facebook sites. Stories are contributed to in an asynchronous fashion by many people, who revise the position and hence the identity of the initial posting put onto social media. In so doing important identity work is being done by a community, not just by the police organisation.

The impact of witnesses using social media prior to any involvement in a formal police investigation was studied using a random controlled trial experiment and through items on the online questionnaire. The experiment employed a 4x2 factorial design to incorporate conditions in which the perpetrator and/or an innocent suspect was viewed (plus a control condition in which social media was not used at all) and identification procedures in which the perpetrator was present and also absent from video parades. This approach, together with the use of a mock investigative paradigm (mimicking the experience of an eyewitness), makes this the first time this research question has been addressed experimentally.

The experimental project involved the successful development of an innovative method, and the results revealed new knowledge regarding human memory, both episodic memory and memory for faces. Analysis demonstrated that where a target face was present at test, that participants were able to identify it regardless of whether or not they had seen a similar face on social media.

However, where the target was not present at test, participants were susceptible to unconscious transference effects and tended to select a face that they had seen on social media.

Overall, the current projects suggest that the public are increasingly unhappy with police use of social media. Importantly the public wish to use social media to report crime and communicate directly, yet police forces/agencies tend to see it as one-way, informal communication. At present, there is limited dialogic interaction between the police and the community on Facebook sites, meaning that new media are still being used like old media (i.e. just to release news, not to have a conversation). Police are unaware of existing guidelines on obtaining evidence from witnesses who have used social media prior to the formal investigation. Witnesses who use social media to conduct citizen enquiries prior to formal investigation are likely to contaminate their memory of the crime, and will identify an innocent suspect in a formal identification procedure if they have seen them before in social media.