

Social Media: A tool for COP in Post-Conflict Settings?

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Information and communication technologies have changed the way we communicate over the past decade. Social media plays an important role for the provision of security - for police agencies as much as for citizens. The same is true for post conflict societies.

Community-oriented policing in post-conflict settings can benefit from these developments. But new technologies are no magic bullet. Traditional forms of interaction remain important for the effective policing of communities.

This brief gives a number of examples of how social media is used by police agencies around the world. It examines the question of how these tools can be best implemented in the policing of post-conflict settings.

Nettipoliisi - the word may be difficult to pronounce, but it could stand for no less than the future model of community-oriented policing (COP). It is the Internet police of Finland; a community-policing unit specialized in social media. Its underlying concept: to shift community-policing activities from the streets to the Internet and, in doing so, take a virtual approach to COP.¹

Walking the beat through cyber neighborhoods has become reality for police officers across the globe. Such opportunities must seem intriguing to everyone who knows anything about the time efforts, manpower and frustrations the policing of communities can bring. On the web, various tasks can be handled simultaneously, stretched over different geographical locations by only a single officer and all without him or her ever leaving the office.

No matter how skeptical police agencies are towards these developments - and many are - there is no way for COP officers to avoid social media. And why should they? Social media offers police organizations the opportunity to connect with people in an innovative and unique way (at least, so say the social media advocates). What does this mean? How can COP benefit from social media? What potential risks does it bear for the police and its users?

ENGAGING THE POLICE ON SOCIAL PLATFORMS

Roughly three main categories of police engagement on social media can be identified:

- Providing information
- Engaging with communities as a tool of image building
- Collecting intelligence and data

In reality, these categories often overlap. To illustrate: Facebook, Twitter and Instagram have proven to be effective tools for searchers and identification of criminals or missing people.

Police agencies use these platforms for that purpose. The Manchester and Berlin police departments both conduct so-called 'tweetathons' regularly. For 24 hours, all emergency calls that reach the control room are posted on Twitter. Besides raising awareness about the complexity of police work and increasing transparency, police aim to inform people about the misuse of emergency call lines.

“There is no way for COP officers to avoid social media”

The police of Hagen, Germany, have a similar campaign. In their 'Facebook Patrol', police officers post information and photos from their patrols. In Whitby, UK, the police introduced the so-called 'Virtual Community and Police Meeting',² a chat room in which residents interact with their COP officer and raise issues affecting their neighborhoods. In the Netherlands, most COP officers have a personal Twitter or Facebook account that citizens can directly content - and the list goes on.

'Do It Yourself' Policing

While more police agencies see the potential of social media platforms, another development, so-called 'do-it-yourself' (DIY) policing, has appeared. This is when people actively support police investigations, identify suspects and even take traditional police tasks into their own hands.

People use special apps to collect and analyze information and organize emergency assistance themselves. In the 2011 riots in England, a massive engagement of citizens utilized social media to aid in the arrest of over 4000 rioters. In the USA, large networks have formed to match people from missing lists to unidentified bodies.

Medi@4sec, a sister project of ICT4COP, calls citizens engaging in DIY policing "the new Sherlock Holmes",³ yet DIY policing is as much a problem as it is an opportunity for COP.

One example of this can be seen in the Boston Marathon bombings of 2013.⁴ In the aftermath of the attacks, an unprecedented manhunt ensued via the social news platform Reddit. Thousands of users were involved in posting and analyzing thousands of photos and videos from the events. Eventually, the Boston police were able to retrieve some useful information for their investigation from the platform that led to the arrest of the perpetrators.

However, this mass engagement also resulted in the wide circulation of online rumours and misinformation about potential suspects - some of which were picked up by the press. Several alleged suspects were incorrectly identified, putting them in serious danger of becoming victims to vigilantism from an emotionalized online crowd.

But DIY policing is not reduced to mass incidents only. Private Facebook searches for stolen goods like bicycles are conducted on a daily basis. Neighborhood watch groups are coordinated via mobile apps to prevent burglaries. In Kosovo, sexual harassment reporting apps crowdsource data to create publicly available heat maps of incidents.⁵

Co-creation of Security

Police agencies must ask themselves how best to handle these developments. The initial reflex of rejecting them as an intrusion into core competencies of law enforcement is understandable, especially in consideration of the potential risks. How best to deal with false suspicion and information reported and distributed by private persons? How to deal with self-administered justice and vigilantism? Most police organizations struggle to provide clear answers.

Nevertheless, these developments cannot be reversed or suppressed. The Dutch police have adopted a strategy of actively encouraging and seeking the assistance of citizen investigators to co-create security jointly with them.⁶ A police app available since 2013 allows citizens to easily and quickly contact the police and their local police officers as well as receive push notifications on national or local incidents. It also allows for the sending of tips to the police on wanted or missing persons, including photos or videos on suspicious situations. It provides direct contact to COP officers of the user as well as an update on the officer's Twitter news. It even allows for complaints about police controls.

Social Media in Post-Conflict Settings

What does all this mean for COP in post-conflict settings? These areas tend to have lower use of smartphones and computers, which leads to lower use of social media platforms.

This doesn't mean that social media cannot be used as a tool for collective action in post-conflict areas. In fact, DIY policing has been on the rise for years in areas where policing is weak. Ushahidi, for example, is a website created after the Kenyan presidential elections in 2007 to collect eyewitness reports of erupting violence in the aftermath sent by email and text message.⁷ Collected data was used to generate 'heat maps' of violence. Ushahidi has since been used in a number of areas and countries, including the mapping of violence in South Africa and Congo, the tracking of pharmacy stockouts in Malawi, Uganda, and Zambia, and the monitoring of elections in Mexico and India.

Mobile apps can also be harnessed to detect illegal dumpsites,⁸ through tagging and allowing for photo uploads, or to provide crowdsourced safety scores for areas of a city based upon streetlighting.⁹

The Downside of ICT

Nevertheless, it is important to keep in mind that ICT is not a magic bullet. It can be a serious threat to security in developing and developed countries alike, as information provided on social networks can be used to incite violence and promote conflict.

In Haren, The Netherlands, for example, a public Facebook invitation to a girl's sixteenth birthday resulted in mass riots with over 4000 youngsters. Conversely, the following cleanup efforts, which engaged hundreds of citizens, were also assembled by a social media campaign. The same occurred after the aforementioned riots in England, where a cleanup campaign was supported by over 60,000 people to organize charity and fundraising events to support the small business owners that suffered massive property damage.¹⁰

Key Points

- Social media offers police organizations the opportunity to connect with people in an innovative and unique way
- Increasingly, through social media, people actively support police investigations, identify suspects and even take traditional police tasks into their own hands
- The situation in post-conflict areas is more difficult; social media user rates are lower
- Where policing is weak, people act through social media to secure themselves
- The question for police agencies is not if they deal with social media, but how
- As long as face-to-face interaction between police and communities remains possible, moderate approaches to the use of social media for policing can be effective

Conclusions

There is no doubt: social media has a great potential for COP. Nevertheless, the challenges, problems and threats are real. The question for police agencies is not if they deal with them, but how. *Nettipoliisi* could be one answer; in the USA, a similar campaign called 'coffee with a cop'¹¹ allowed for face-to-face interaction with an officer in a relaxed environment. The revolutionary part of it: mobile phones and radios have to be switched off.

Social media remains an ambivalent technology when used for COP; moderate approaches can be effective, particularly in post-conflict countries. Still, as Mancini and O'Reilly put it: "Even if you crowd source your hammer, not every problem is a nail."¹²

Notes

- 1) http://www.poliisi.fi/finnish_police/police_in_the_social_media
- 2) *NPIA: Engage: Digital and Social media engagement for the Police Service*, 15. The document can be found here: <http://connected-cops.net/wp-content/uploads/2010/04/engage.pdf>
- 3) *Media4Sec: Report of the state of the Art Review*, 18. Retrieved from <http://media4sec.eu/publications/>
- 4) *Media4Sec: Report of the state of the Art Review*, 19.
- 5) *Media4Sec: Report of the state of the Art Review*, 20.
- 6) Available at <http://opendatakosovo.org/app/illegal-dumps/> the app called *Trashout* can be viewed here
- 7) See <https://www.ushahidi.com/>
- 8) See <http://iwalkfreely.com/>
<https://www.trashout.ngo/>
- 9) See <http://safetipin.com/>
- 10) *Media4Sec: Report of the state of the Art Review*, 24.
- 11) See <http://coffeewithacop.com/>
- 12) Mancini, O'Reilly 2013: *New Technology and the Prevention of Violence and Conflict*, 4. *Stability International Journal of Security and Development*. Available under <http://www.stabilityjournal.org/articles/10.5334/sta.cp/>

Author Bio

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The Project

The ICT4COP research project seeks to understand human security in post-conflict settings by researching community-based policing and post-conflict police reform.

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