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

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*I*nformation 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.

*C*ommunity-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.

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

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Social media has changed policing in the past years. Community-oriented policing in post-conflict settings can benefit from these developments.

New technologies are no magic bullet for the policing of communities. More traditional forms of community-oriented policing remain important for the provision of security.

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. The idea behind is to shift community-policing activities from the streets to the Internet and by that taking a virtual approach to COP.[1]

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

No matter how skeptical police agencies are towards these developments - and a lot of them 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 that is what the social media advocates say. What, however, does this mean exactly? How can COP really benefit from social media? And what potential risks does it bear for the police and for the 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 searches and identification of criminals or missing people.

Police agencies use these platforms for that purpose. The Manchester and the 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 increase transparency, the police wants 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 where citizens can get directly in contact with them. This list could go on.

'Do It Yourself' Policing

While more and 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 in their own hands.

People use special apps to collect and analyze information and organize emergency assistance themselves. A good example are the 2011 riots in England where, in the aftermath, the massive engagement of citizens via social media helped arresting over 4000 rioters. In the USA, large networks have formed to match people from missing lists to unidentified corpses.

Medi@4sec, a sister project of ICT4COP, calls citizens engaging in DIY policing the "new Sherlock Holmes."[3] However, and as dismissive as this may sound: DIY policing is a serious problem as much as an opportunity for COP.

An ambivalent example of DIY policing are 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 people were involved in posting and analyzing thousands and thousands of photos and videos of the events. Apparently, even the Boston police retrieved some useful information for their investigations from this platform, information that eventually led to the arrest of the perpetrators.

The downside of this mass engagement was misinformation on suspects and widely circulated online rumors – some of them even 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. Sexual reporting apps crowd source data to create publicly available heat maps of incidents.

Co-Creation of Security

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

Nevertheless, these developments cannot be reversed or even 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.[5] A police app available since 2013 allows citizens to easily and quickly contact the police and their local police officer as well as receive push notifications on national or local incidents. It also allows sending 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 means for COP in post-conflict settings? Here the situation is even more complicated. ICT environments are less developed. Smartphone and computer density is not as high as in developed countries. User rates of social media platforms are considerably lower.

> 66 *Where police performance is weak DIY policing has been on the rise for years*

This doesn't mean that social media cannot be used as a tool for collective action. In fact, where police performance is weak DIY policing has been on the rise for years. 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.[6] 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 stock outs in Malawi, Uganda and Zambia, and the monitoring of elections in Mexico and India.

In Kosovo, a sexual reporting app crowdsource data to create hot spot maps of sexual harassment incidents.[7] The maps are made publicly available to give women a clearer picture of harassment hot spots in the country. A similar principle is used for the detection of illegal dumping sites.[8]

Via a mobile app, dumpsites can be geo tagged and even photos uploaded. Safetipin is a map-based safety app developed for New Dehli based providing crowdsourced safety scores for certain places in a city including information on street lighting. It is available in a number of cities, such as Jakarta, Nairobi and Bogota.[9]

The Ushahidi Platform Photo: afromusing via VisualHunt.com / CC BY

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 not only in developing countries. Information provided on social networks can be used to incite violence and to promote conflicts.

The riots in England 2011 were largely organized through social media platforms. In Haren, The Netherlands, a public Facebook invitation to the sixteenth birthday of a girl in 2013 resulted in mass riots with over 4000 youngsters. But the ambivalence of its potential was demonstrated in the aftermath: after these events a social media campaign engaged hundreds of citizens to clean up Haren.

The same occurred in England where the cleanup campaign was supported by over 60 000 people even organizing charity and fundraising events to support small business owners that suffered massive damage to their properties.[10]

Conclusion

There is no doubt: social media has a great potential for COP. This is true for police agencies in more developed countries as much as in post conflict settings.

Nevertheless, the challenges, problems and threats are real. The question for police agencies is not if they deal with them but rather how. Nettipoliisi could be one answer. But it is not the only one. In the USA, for example, a campaign was launched called 'coffee with a cop'.[11] The idea is to a have coffee with a community police officer in a relaxed setting, face-to-face. 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 when it comes to post conflict countries. Or as Mancini and O'Reilly puts it: "Even if you crowd source your hammer, not every problem is a nail".[12]

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 in their own hands*
• *The situation in post-conflict areas is more difficult; social media user rates are considerably lower*
• *Yet, where policing is weak, people act through social media to secure themselves also in post-conflict settings*
• *The question for police agencies is therefore not if they deal with social media but rather how*
• *And as long as face-to-face interaction between the police and communities remains possible, moderate approcahes to the use of social media for policing can be effective*

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://connectedcops.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) See https://www.ushahidi.com/
7) See http://iwalkfreely.com/
8) Available at http://opendatakosovo.org/app/illegal-dumps/ the app called Trashout can be viewed here 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/

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.

The Norwegian University of Life Sciences is the project coordinator.

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