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## Police Use of Twitter: 21st Century Community Policing

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# **Police Use of Twitter: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Policing**

By

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THESIS

Submitted to the Department of Criminology  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree of Master of Arts Criminology

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## *Abstract*

With the advancement of social media platforms like Twitter increasingly being woven into the everyday activities of society members, police services, in an attempt to stay relevant and reflective, have begun adopting Twitter into their work initiatives. The present study examines the perceptions Canadian police officers regarding their use of Twitter as a community policing tool. Through semi-structured interviews with police officers and administrative staff operating official police Twitter accounts, and constructivist grounded theorizing, this research provides an in-depth examination of the perceptions of police officers who use Twitter as a part of community policing initiatives. Specifically, the study explores the experiences officers have had with adopting and learning to use Twitter, revealing an individualized and decentralized nature reflective of community policing, and also its value for intelligence gathering. Additionally, this research demonstrates how police perceive Twitter to function as a boundary object that transcends physical, geographical and cultural boundaries in order to develop relationships with various community groups. Further, through exploration of officers perceptions and experiences, this study uncovers how Twitter can be challenging for officers do to the lack of training and organizational support, which results in officer having to rely on self-governance and compensate for a lack of service resources. This research contributes to policing literature by providing a rare vantage point from the perspective of officers utilizing Twitter for their work.

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Chapter One: Introduction.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>Chapter Two: Literature Review .....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Defining Community Policing.....</b>	<b>8</b>
<b>Perceived Strengths &amp; Weaknesses of Community Policing.....</b>	<b>11</b>
<b>Funding Community Policing.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Social Media and Community Policing.....</b>	<b>13</b>
<b>Police Use of Twitter.....</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>Researching Social Media and Policing.....</b>	<b>17</b>
<b>Chapter Three: Methodology .....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>20</b>
<b>Qualitative Media Analysis .....</b>	<b>21</b>
<b>Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews .....</b>	<b>22</b>
Development of Interview Guide .....	23
Ethics .....	24
Gaining Access.....	24
Interviewing Participants .....	25
<b>Data Analysis.....</b>	<b>26</b>
Coding .....	26
Memoing.....	29
<b>Reflecting on Research Challenges .....</b>	<b>30</b>
<b>Chapter Four: Adopting &amp; Using Twitter .....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>32</b>
<b>Adopting Twitter as a Tool for Police Work .....</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Controlling the Narrative, Accountability and Transparency.....</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>Twitter for Intelligence Gathering and Community Policing.....</b>	<b>40</b>
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>43</b>
<b>Chapter Five: Boundaries.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Boundary Objects.....</b>	<b>45</b>
<b>Building Relationships by Crossing Cultural Boundaries.....</b>	<b>48</b>
<b>Crossing Virtual and Physical Boundaries.....</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Information Sharing and Collaboration Among Police Services .....</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>Transcending Work &amp; Home Boundaries .....</b>	<b>56</b>

Discussion .....	59
<b>Chapter Six: Organizational Challenges.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Police Technology .....</b>	<b>60</b>
<b>Implementing Twitter and Evaluating Training .....</b>	<b>63</b>
<b>Social Media Policies and Self-Governance .....</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Compensating for the Absence of Organizational Resources .....</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Discussion .....</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion .....</b>	<b>74</b>
<b>Appendices .....</b>	<b>80</b>
<b>References .....</b>	<b>92</b>

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

On July 30, 2018 in Williams County, Texas, police officers were notified about an abandoned child at a community swimming pool (Kendall, 2018). When traditional investigation techniques like speaking with witnesses and reviewing security footage failed to identify the boy or his father, the police turned to social media for answers (*Ibid*). Within 15 minutes of posting a photo of the boy on Twitter, the police obtained the address of the father and detectives were on scene speaking with him. As a result of police use of Twitter, this story had a quick and happy ending with the boy being reunited with his family. This is but one example of the way police services are turning to Twitter to solve crime and other community problems.

The use of Twitter by police is relatively new; however, the concept of adopting new strategies is not. Police organizations have historically evolved to meet the requirements and expectations of the communities they serve. As society changes and adopts new practices, such as online communication, there is an expectation that the police will also evolve. In order for police to continue to reflect the population they serve, they must constantly adapt to the changing communication landscape. In the past several years, the advancement of electronic devices and the Internet has caused large amounts of communication and information exchange to occur online. Social media applications, such as Twitter, have become a staple in the lives of many people across the world. Twitter, which launched in 2006, is used every day across the globe as a means of online communication for roughly 328 million monthly active users (Twitter Usage, 2016). Social media are defined as “websites and other online means of communication that are used by large groups of people to share information and to develop social and professional contacts” (Social Media, n.d.a).

Twitter, one example of social media, operates as a micro-blogging service that allows users to post short messages containing up to 140 characters as well as photos, videos and links to other websites. These messages can then be retweeted and receive reply tweets by other users. Users are also able to subscribe (follow) other users in order to see what they are posting; which appears on their “twitterstream”. An important component of Twitter is the hashtag function; when tweeting, users can place a ‘#’ before a word or phrase and a link will be created. Users can follow that link to see other tweets that have used the same hashtag. Access to Twitter occurs either via the Twitter app on smartphones and tablets or on their webpage. Vast amounts of information are shared with over 500 million tweets posted daily (Twitter Usage, 2016).

In order to keep pace with the communities they serve, police departments are implementing official police Twitter accounts into their policing strategies. Digital technologies like Twitter arm the police with enforcement and investigative tools that enhance information sourcing and effectiveness (Odeyemi & Obiyan, 2018). The nature of Twitter makes it a good fit for any officer within a police service because of its design (Goldsmith, 2015). This is unsurprising as the creators of Twitter modeled its design after existent police emergency dispatch technologies (Schneider, 2016). The first appearance of police on Twitter in Canada occurred in 2008 by the Toronto Police Service (TPS), who continue today to be one of the most prominent and active Canadian police departments on Twitter (*Ibid*). The information shared by police on Twitter serves a multitude of purposes, such as informing the community of on-going events, details about local crimes/ investigations and eliciting help from the community (Schneider, 2016; O’Connor, 2015; Crump, 2011). Despite the growing use of social media by police, there is little research available on how police use social media, especially in Canada (Schneider, 2016).

As Twitter continues to grow and be adopted by Canadian police services (Brianard & McNutt, 2010; CBC News, 2013; Van de Velde, Meijer & Homburg, 2015), it is imperative to gain an understanding of the influence and effect this new development has on how police are able to serve the community. The objective of this research was to understand how police perceive their use of Twitter when dealing with the public in solving crime and other community problems. This objective was accomplished through 13 semi-structured interviews with police officers and administrative staff who have access to official police service Twitter accounts. Using a social constructivist framework, the present study sought to understand how police perceive their use of Twitter and the value they feel its use brings to their community policing work. The research was organized around three primary research questions:

1. How do the police use Twitter?
2. How do the police perceive the way(s) in which Twitter has impacted their relationships with the public?
3. What, if any, organizational challenges or benefits do police perceive their use of Twitter to create for police services, and the police officers who use it?

To date, much of the literature available on police use of Twitter has focused on how officers use Twitter via examination of tweets, and has rarely covered the Canadian context (Schneider, 2015; O'Connor, 2015). Further, the lived experiences and perceptions of police officers using Twitter has been largely ignored. The present research addresses these gaps in knowledge by providing one of the first in-depth examinations of Canadian police officers' perceptions and experiences of the use of Twitter for frontline policing.

### Chapter Outline



*Chapter Two: Literature Review* begins by providing an introduction to community policing by defining the term and outlining its origins as a policing practice before moving into a review of the available literature on social media and policing. Literature regarding how police use Twitter, such as types of tweets and the use of Twitter during crisis, are also discussed.

*Chapter Three: Methodology* provides an overview of the processes of data collection and analysis. This chapter begins by describing the theoretical framework of “constructivist grounded theory” (Charmaz, 2006) that was used to frame the research project. The chapter then details the processes of data collection and analysis, along with reflections on the challenges faced while in the field.

*Chapter Four: Adopting & Using Twitter* details the many ways in which police officers use Twitter and their experiences with learning and adopting the social media platform into their frontline work practices. The chapter illustrates how adopting Twitter is an individualized experience, wherein officers perceive the value of Twitter to be its ability to not only help promote a positive image of the police, but also to assist in collecting police intelligence and sharing information. Also discussed in this chapter is how police perceive the value of Twitter for demonstrating transparency and accountability.

*Chapter Five: Boundaries* discusses how Twitter acts as a “boundary object”, which is a theoretical concept that explores how information is used and shared by different groups through an artifact they have in common (Star & Griesemer, 1989). Twitter, as a boundary object, facilitates community policing by transcending boundaries in order to build and repair relationships between the police and the communities they serve. This chapter illustrates how Twitter enables police to cross cultural, virtual and physical boundaries in order to develop stronger working connections with the community.

*Chapter Six: Organizational Challenges* details how the adoption of Twitter by police has been a challenging process, with police services struggling to implement policies and procedures and officers having difficulty in following them. This chapter discusses how officers have had to compensate for the lack of service resources by taking responsibility for Twitter use by breaking organizational rules and using their own personal devices.

*Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion* provides a summary of the key findings from each of the three findings chapters and discusses what contributions this research has made to the fields of community policing and Twitter research. It concludes with suggestions for future research on policing and social media.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review**

### **Introduction**

Beginning in the 1980's police relations with the community became strained, and in response to growing police-public tensions, police services began shifting their organizational strategies towards a more community-involved initiative (Parlow, 2012). What follows is a literature review on community policing research starting in the late 1980s to present day. Topics addressed include definitions of community policing, the emergence of community policing, its strengths and weaknesses, funding for community policing and the adoption of social media as a community policing tool. Due to the relatively new development of social media, literature available on police use, and specifically Canadian police use, is limited. The research that is available explores social media's impact on community policing strategies, police use of social media, and the challenges of police using social media. I will discuss each of these in detail below.

### **Defining Community Policing**

A review of community policing literature reveals that there is no universal definition for the concept (Palmiotto, 2011; Williamson, 2005; Parlow, 2012; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990; Wilson, 2006). That said, there are several working definitions of community policing. One framing sees community policing as a form of proactive policing through which police work within the community in order to prevent the occurrence of crime (Miller & Hess, 2005). Another definition views community policing as a theoretical and practical approach that focuses on crime prevention, order maintenance and partnership with the community to achieve these goals (Parlow, 2012). A third working definition is that community policing is a management strategy that promotes the joint responsibility of citizens and police for community safety, through working partnerships and interpersonal contacts (Stipak, 1994).

While there are no agreed-upon definitions of community policing, they all emphasize collaboration among the police and their communities. The philosophy behind community policing relies on the organizational strategy of deploying line officers permanently in beat areas so that they can develop strong connections with members of the community in order to acquire their formal and informal impact (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). As such, citizens are given an opportunity to help set local police priorities and come up with creative solutions for problems faced by the community.

### *Emergence of Community Policing*

Community policing emerged as a popular policing strategy when changes were occurring in large cities, specifically as a result of politics and racial tensions (Newburn, 2004; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). Groups that typically had hostile relations with the police gained political force in both large and small cities. African-Americans and Hispanics in particular had an interest in crime but also in tackling police abuse (Newburn, 2004). The televised beating of Rodney King in 1991, along with other riots in the 1990s, led politicians to consider the reactions of racial and ethnic minorities when hiring police administrators. The community policing framework is favorable in this sense to politicians because it means police officers who want to rise through the ranks must be progressive and innovative while being sensitive to racial tension if they are to be considered for leadership roles. In both the UK and the US during the 1990's there was a shift in police practices that withdrew the reliance on the state for crime control mechanisms and placed this responsibility on a local/community level (Crump, 2011). It was realized that higher level state institutions were inadequate at producing crime control and that there needed to be a move towards more independent control mechanisms via community level state involvement. By doing so, police work became smarter, as they were

more attuned with the individual and unique demands of local circumstances (Crump, 2011). At the same time, there was a shift from reactive to proactive policing (Miller & Hess, 2005).

Part of the trend toward “proactive policing” was the organizational shift toward “community policing” and “problem policing”. In the new organizational approaches to policing, the police work with the citizens to prevent crime as well as apprehend criminals in order to improve the overall quality of life within the community (Xu, Fiedler & Flaming, 2005). Community members want to see crime prevention so that they are spared from becoming a victim (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). In this sense, if the police work with the community to develop constructive relationships- especially with youth- they should be able to reduce the social conditions that produce crime, create fear and deteriorate neighborhoods (Xu, Fiedler & Flaming, 2005). Police are given the opportunity to work directly with youth before problems develop in severity to the point that arrest and incarceration are unavoidable (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). This means working with local volunteers, organizations and businesses to develop a crime control network with an emphasis on crime prevention. This shift demonstrates a move towards more proactive policing via community policing initiatives.

Another changing element during this time was the emergence of well-educated and sophisticated administrators at the top of police departments (Newburn, 2004). By having university education in management, law, research and social sciences, they were more receptive to pressures for change. Policing scholars also began to publicly question previous policing strategies (Miller & Hess, 2005). For example, Goldstein’s (1979) critique on problem-oriented policing, and Wilson & Kelling’s (1982) critique of broken windows policing argued that neither approach reduced crime or fear of crime and both suggested new approaches were needed. Moving forward, scholars turned towards the concept of community policing.

### Perceived Strengths & Weaknesses of Community Policing

Community policing has the potential to remedy eroding public confidence in the police by enhancing legitimacy via improved responsiveness to the concerns and demands of the community (Rosenbaum, Graziano, Stephens & Schuck, 2011). Advocates for community policing argue successful policing requires the trust and interaction of the community with the police service (Thomas, 2016; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). Community policing requires partnership, problem solving and prevention (Thomas, 2016). Through community policing, the community is able to express their needs, fears and expectations of the police, while at the same time, the police are able to gain valuable information and intelligence. Whereas traditional policing practices focused on reducing crime by making arrests that could demonize anyone living in high-crime neighborhoods, community policing practices work to empower the community by making them an active partner in the prevention and control of crime (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). Having average citizens directly involved in the police process makes them partners in bettering the community. Supporters of community policing argue that it can help prevent misuse of police powers for racist purposes (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). A study in Flint Michigan during the 1970's, for example, found that foot patrol experiments drastically improved race relations between foot patrol officers and minorities (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990). This improvement is credited to delivering high quality decentralized and personalized police service at the grass-roots level (*Ibid*).

While community policing has increased communication and fostered mutual trust and respect between the police and the community (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990), it has been found to have only made marginal differences in crime rates (Newburn, 2004). For example, the Chicago community policing experiment in the 1990s showed a positive impact on crime

problems and neighborhood conditions. Police were trained using a problem-solving model and were given access to tools and resources from city agencies to tackle community concerns such as graffiti. The experiment involved police-resident meetings where residents could voice their concerns and have an input on setting police priorities, as well as marches, prayer vigils, petition drives and citywide rallies. However, despite the positive impact on crime, the experiment did not succeed in involving the local Hispanic community (Newburn, 2004). Thus, the experiment showed promising improvements for citizen involvement in problem solving with the police; however, not all ethnic communities responded equally.

More skeptical research argues community policing is romanticized and unrealistic because it produces an impractical image of policing (Newburn, 2004). This unrealistic, ideal image of the police cannot be achieved because police are a non-negotiable coercive force that use strength to maintain power (*Ibid*). Miller and Hess (2005) argue that community policing is but only one factor that has contributed to decreased crime rates, and that other factors, such as a robust economy, an aging population and fewer youth have also contributed. Further research has highlighted the problematic elements of community policing, such as illegal and inequitable policing practices (Palmiotto, 2011). These concerns focus on the possibilities for illegal policing. One concern is that officers may become more responsive to local norms rather than legal constraints. Also, inequitable policing may occur, where some in the community benefit more than others such as white property owners compared to black renters (*Ibid*). Another concern is the politicization of the police, for the close connection to the community may tempt some officers to use their power to advance their political objectives. Other problematic elements relate to corruption occurring when police are in close connection with business people or residents as well as police intrusion into private arenas of the community.

### Funding Community Policing

A significant cause for the popularity of community policing was the vigorous support it received from the federal government during the Clinton Administration (Vaughn Lee, 2010). During that time, community policing initiatives received nearly unprecedented federal funding (*Ibid*). In fact, between 1994 and 2005 the federal Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) gave approximately \$11.3 billion to local police agencies (Wilson, 2006). Successful implementation of community policing is dependent upon the availability of federal funds. The costs of community policing require significant funding as the tactics call for officers to become very familiar with the communities they serve (*Ibid*). Reluctance towards adopting community policing stems not only from a general resistance to organizational change, but also because people-intensive initiatives are more expensive than high-tech ones (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990; Miller & Hess, 2005).

Following 9/11 and entering into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, support for community policing has waned, and funding priorities have shifted away from community policing toward homeland security (Vaughn Lee, 2010). A case study conducted in Long Beach California found that police departments are now tasked with counterterrorism initiatives, such as intelligence gathering, instead of community policing tactics, such as foot patrols (*Ibid*). As a result, community relations divisions are now working closely with military and intelligence agencies to provide surveillance on communities rather than working with the communities.

### Social Media and Community Policing

An important, yet underdeveloped, area of research for police use of Twitter is the impact the social media application is having on community policing efforts. Social media has become an integral part of communications for community policing teams (Bullock, 2018). Social media



platforms like Twitter, are used by more than 95% of US police agencies to help with investigations, improve their image and strengthen community policing (Odeyemi & Obiyan, 2018). The International Association of Police Chiefs survey found that 83.5% of agencies in the US found social media improved police-community relations (*Ibid*). Practices on social media incorporate previous community policing strategies aimed at improving police image in the community (Newburn, 2015). Social media platforms, and their ability to reach large audiences at a fast rate, have been found to support community policing efforts in ways traditional in-the-field officers cannot because it requires relatively low investments of time, money and labor (Williams et. al., 2018).

Many elements of community policing have adapted and transferred over to social media. For example, police officers use Twitter as a way to foster trust with members of their community through a decentralized decision-making basis (Newburn, 2004). This means that frontline officers are in charge (to an extent) of making decisions about what to say and do with community members. By becoming more decentralized, officers are more entrenched in the lives of the people they serve. Decentralization efforts have created a shift in the hierarchical, top-down narrative that has traditionally shaped police communication with the public. Previously police departments were organized in a manner that policies and practices were made at the top and flowed down the ranks (Newburn, 2004); now, frontline officers have increased direct communication and discretion with the community they serve via their Twitter accounts (Schneider, 2016).

In the United Kingdom, police recognize the importance of social media for increasing public confidence and trust in police and thus use social media as part of their community policing initiatives (Crump, 2011). For example, the police used survey information to determine

what was most concerning to the people, such as antisocial behaviour, and then used social media to address these concerns. Through this initiative, the police found public confidence to be enhanced by publishing information on crimes, people's concerns about crimes, as well as the response by police (*Ibid*). Further, police officers are encouraged to use Twitter to engage in interesting dialogue with their followers by publishing tweets that include pictures, videos and community stories (*Ibid*). Thus, social media use by the police allows for citizen participation, opening up the institution and encouraging transparency and accountability (Bullock, 2018; Rosenbaum et. al., 2011).

Additionally, O'Connor (2015) found that police in the US rely on both online and in-person partnerships with community members to solve community and crime issues (see also Rosenbaum et al., 2011). These findings are similar to Schneider's (2016) research on the Toronto Police Service use of social media for community policing. By using Twitter, the police have accomplished two-way communication with the public that encourages information exchange at the same time as providing highly visible online police presentational strategies (Schneider, 2016; Bullock, 2018). While this two-way communication strategy is not new to community policing, social media has enabled police to reach a larger and vaster audience (Fielding & Caddick, 2017).

### *Police Use of Twitter*

The extent to which police departments are using Twitter is indicative of the relevance the social networking app has for law enforcement. Heverin & Zach (2010) found that over half of the police departments in large US cities have active Twitter accounts; while Crump (2011) reported 140 UK neighborhood police teams in 2010 had Twitter accounts. By 2016, the International Association of Chiefs of Police found 96% of US police departments surveyed used

social media in some capacity (Survey Highlights, 2016). Generally, there are three different types of accounts police have on Twitter (Bullock, 2018). The three types include “Force Accounts” operated by communications and public relations professionals, “Team Accounts” operated by multiple members of police teams and “Individual Accounts” operated by identifiable representatives of the police force (Bullock, 2018). Of the three types of accounts, Bullock (2018) found that citizens prefer to engage with local officers and their individual accounts more so than they do with the force or team accounts. Research available on police use of social media has identified a plethora of uses, including emergency preparedness, daily communications and crime prevention.

Police use social media to provide information to the public, especially during times of crisis (O’Connor, 2015; Procter et al., 2013; Heverin & Zach, 2010; Crump, 2011; CBC News 2013; Newburn, 2015; Williams et. al., 2018; Fowler, 2017). An example of such practices can be seen during the August 2011 riots that took place across UK cities for five days. These riots saw thousands of people looting and burning buildings and cars following the police shooting death of Mark Duggan. While the UK has experienced numerous riots over its long history, the 2011 riots were significantly difficult for the police to manage, because the advancement of mobile phones changed the nature of the disorder (Newburn, 2015). While social media did not cause the riots, it was used as a recruiting tool for rioters by providing mass communication and rapid spread of information (Baker, 20112). During and after the events, police from local departments used Twitter as a tool for communicating to the public by providing situation reports, general information and riot clean up event information (Crump, 2011; Procter et al., 2013). Advances in technology, therefore, both helped and challenged the police.

During the 2011 Vancouver Stanley Cup riots, the Vancouver police used Twitter to encourage police support and condemn the rioters (Schneider, 2016). Canadian police have even created Twitter accounts for the purpose of citizens confidentially providing information on suspected rioters (Procter et al, 2013). Crowd-sourcing CCTV footage and mobile phone video recordings of the riots made identifying suspects easier. Crowd-sourced policing during the 2011 Vancouver riot demonstrates a clear desire of the public to use social media to gather, repost and respond to photos, information and other evidence in an effort to scrutinize and persecute fellow citizens suspected of criminality (Schneider & Trotter, 2012). During the 2013 flood in Calgary, the Calgary Police Service (CPS) swiftly took to Twitter to get information out to the public about the flood. In fact, the CPS tweeted so much that Twitter froze their account; leaving citizens to tweet ‘let CPS out of Twitter jail’. Interestingly, this led Twitter to work on changing their policy for first responders.

Police also use Twitter on a daily basis for communicating with the public (Burrows, 2012; Williams et. al., 2018). For example, police share updates on their activities, traffic problems and public service announcements. They tweet information about crimes and investigations and solicit information from the public to help with investigations (Procter et al., 2013; Crump, 2011; Heverin & Zach, 2010). Additionally, they tweet information about crimes, investigations and other police work (Heverin and Zach, 2010). Further, they also produce community-engaged tweets aimed at developing closer bonds to the community (O’Connor, 2015). Aside from informational tweets, police post interactive tweets to elicit conversations with the community (O’Connor, 2015). This includes asking the public to attend events so that there can be face-to-face interactions with the police during community events.

### *Researching Social Media and Policing*

Much of the research available on police use of social media is based in the US and the UK, with significantly less known about Canadian police service's use. Of the research available, it is argued that police use Twitter almost exclusively for information reasons (Crump, 2011), and when used during emergencies, they do not use it to its full potential (Procter et al., 2013). More recent research by O'Connor (2015), however, argues that Twitter is far more complex and nuanced than what existing research has shown, and he argues that Twitter is an important tool for police to engage in image management and community building.

Existing research has also looked at the challenges and drawbacks and has found that with the increasing presence of police online, they run the risk of losing legitimacy (Schneider, 2016). For example, officers attempting to use Twitter to connect to the community by posting tweets about local events could post content that members of the public find offensive. Schneider (2016) discusses the difficulty members of the TPS have in balancing a professional yet personable police Twitter account. He argues that there have been a number of instances where officers have posted content that has been viewed as inappropriate/ offensive to members of the public and/or police organizations (see also Goldsmith, 2015; Bullock, 2018). Further, police officers who use their social media accounts while off duty have faced criticism in terms of indiscretion (Goldsmith, 2015). Indiscretion in this context entails unlawful or inappropriate release of information (Goldsmith, 2015). In one instance, during a court trial, the arresting officer from New York had his social media history -which included a post about feeling "devious" and a status about brushing up on proper police procedure by watching the 'Training Day' a movie about police corruption- used by the defense and jury to acquit the defendant of his weapons charge (Goldsmith, 2015). While these acts of indiscretion are most often accidental, they can cause harm to operational effectiveness and damage the reputation of the officer and the

service more generally. Another example of such indiscretion and embarrassment occurred in 2010 when multiple Waterloo Regional police officers were discovered to be sharing graphic and inappropriate photos of crime scenes, including the victims and offenders (Wood, 2013). The officers were charged and found guilty during a police disciplinary hearing of discreditable conduct, deceit and insubordination. Additionally, some of the officers also faced criminal charges and suspension, demotion and dismissal.

Finally, using Twitter as a tool for community policing may have an unintended risk. By presenting personal information on Twitter, police develop bonds with the community but they also open themselves up to having that information used to locate and identify them, their families and their friends (Goldsmith, 2015). It is clear that balancing a professional and personal appearance can be difficult as a police officer on Twitter. Because of these drawbacks and challenges, police officers and their institutions have resisted fully embracing social media into their presentational strategies (Bullock, 2018). Yet, these challenges need to be better understood and negotiated in order for police to reach higher levels of success with incorporating social media into their strategies. As such, the present study sought to address this gap in the literature by exploring how police officers make sense of their use of Twitter in their everyday policing practices.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology**

### **Introduction**

My interest in how Twitter was being utilized by Canadian police services, and, how, if at all, it was being used for community policing purposes, stemmed from reviewing the tweets posted by the Toronto Police Service (TPS). Reviewing TPS twitter posts allowed me to gain a general understanding of the types of posts made by TPS. Yet, a review of the posts did not allow me to understand how police perceive social media, specifically Twitter, to impact police / community relationships. As such, I chose to conduct in-depth interviews with police officers. Drawing on Charmaz's (2014) constructivist grounded theorizing, I interviewed thirteen police officers to understand how they make sense of, and use, Twitter in their everyday work activities. Constructivist grounded theorizing prioritizes the experiences and perspectives of the participants over pre-determined theoretical concepts. It consists of systematic yet flexible guidelines for data collection that allow theories to emerge from the data. The term 'constructivist' is used to acknowledge the subjectivity of the researcher's involvement in data construction and interpretation, and to recognize that the researcher does not enter the research with a blank mind, or "tabula rasa", but instead brings to any research project ideas that have been informed by previous research.

I used a social constructionism framework for conducting this research. Social constructionism is a theoretical perspective that understands that humans create social reality through individual and collective actions (Charmaz, 2014). This approach looks at how people construct meaning about what is real. Thus, studying police perspectives of Twitter is guided by the framework that officers construct meaning around Twitter through their interactions with the social media application and the individuals they interact with on it.

I adopted an inductive, comparative and open-ended approach to data collection and analysis. By following this approach, throughout my data collection, I remained open to possible patterns within the data. Only when I had collected a large enough amount of data, did I then look at the patterns within the data to develop a theory to explain what the data were showing. By doing so, the data in a sense were allowed to “speak for themselves” without the imposition of a previously decided theory, as would be the case with deductive research. In what follows, I describe my research process. I begin by discussing my qualitative media analysis of TPS tweets. I then explain how my analysis of these tweets led to the development of new research questions and methodology. Next, I describe my data collection and analysis, and conclude by reflecting on my experiences in the field and the challenges and limitations I faced.

### **Qualitative Media Analysis**

Initially, I was going to conduct a qualitative media analysis (Altheide and Schneider, 2013) of the community policing themed tweets posted by the TPS. TPS was chosen because it is one of the most active police services on Twitter in Canada (Schneider, 2015). The TPS is also a recognized leader among Canadian police departments for developing and incorporating social media into their existing police strategies across the service. As Altheide and Schneider (2013) describe, the process for conducting a qualitative media analysis for tweets includes becoming familiar with the process and context of the information source. In order to select TPS tweets focused on community policing initiatives, I conducted an advanced search focusing on key words such as wanted, missing, assistance, sought, request and seeking. These key words, among others, were selected because of their connection to community policing practices of seeking assistance from, and working with, the community. I started by reviewing tweets with a community policing theme to see what words were incorporated. From there I cultivated a



selection of words most often included in tweets dedicated to community policing initiatives. I then reviewed all of the tweets containing these search terms in order to gain an understanding of the conversation occurring between the TPS and the community.

I used my analysis of the tweets to inform the development of my initial three research questions:

1. How does the TPS use Twitter to seek public support in solving crime?
2. What types of crimes or problems are the TPS posting on Twitter?
3. How do the public respond to these Twitter posts?

It became apparent that the TPS uses Twitter in an attempt to seek help from the public by posting content about missing / wanted persons or details about a crime that had occurred and then asked the public to provide information to help solve the issue. Generally, the TPS tweeted about missing and wanted persons, thefts, and robberies. As I continued to collect and analyze tweets, it quickly became apparent that TPS tweets were not eliciting and/or fostering conversation online with community members. While I was analyzing the tweets, I was also immersing myself in the literature on police use of Twitter and I quickly realized that my analysis was not generating new knowledge. It was at this point that I decided to move away from an analysis of tweets, and instead, look at officers' understanding and uses of Twitter.

### **Semi-Structured, In-Depth Interviews**

In order to capture officers' experiences, I decided to conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews. The purpose of conducting a qualitative interview is to elicit narrative stories from the participants that reveal the meanings they give to aspects of their life relevant to the research topic (Warren & Karner, 2015). I chose to conduct interviews because they allowed the officers to explain their experiences, feelings, definitions and attitudes about Twitter, particularly about

how they perceive Twitter to impact, or be useful as a community policing tool (van den Hoonaard, 2015).

Now that my object of analysis had changed from ‘tweets’ to ‘officers’ perceptions’, I revised my research questions. My revised research questions became:

1. How do the police perceive their use of Twitter to seek public support in solving crime?
2. What types of crimes or problems are the police posting on Twitter?
3. How do the police perceive the public’s response to these Twitter posts?

### *Development of Interview Guide*

The development of my interview guide was informed by the tweets reviewed during my initial qualitative media analysis, and by my revised research questions. The first step I took in formulating my questions was to list the broad categories of interest for my research (van den Hoonaard, 2015). The three broad categories were informed by my research questions and included: 1. How their service is using Twitter, 2. Their particular experiences using Twitter and 3. Their experiences with the public in reaction to their use of Twitter. Using these three categories, I developed 43 open-ended questions (**Appendix A**). In following the guidelines discussed by Warren and Karner (2015), the easiest questions came first in order to develop rapport between the participants and myself so that they would be more willing to answer difficult questions later on in the interview. The first series of questions established the profile of the participant, including their job position and work history, as well as determining their experience using Twitter (both personally and for work). This section also covered the organizational structuring for the service’s use of Twitter. The second section examined individual experiences using Twitter for policing purposes, while the third section looked at the relationship the police have with the public through Twitter.

In some instances, new questions were added or omitted depending on the situation, as van den Hoonaard (2015) explains, rearrangement of questions may be needed to suit a particular interview. For example, after conducting the first couple of interviews, it became apparent that the relationship between police and traditional media outlets had been affected by Twitter. In order to understand how Twitter had affected this relationship, I added a question about the officer's experience and relationship with traditional media. During the process of the interview, I would often add probing questions in order to acquire clarification or further explanation. I closed the interview with questions that sought their recommendations or closing comments, thereby allowing the participant to add anything that they thought was important for me to know, but had not been covered in the interview (van den Hoonaard, 2015).

### Ethics

Before I was able to recruit participants or conduct interviews, I had to apply for and receive ethical clearance from Wilfrid Laurier University's Research Ethics Board, (REB#5542). Because of the close-knit community of policing, there was minimal risk that informed observers might surmise the identity of other participants from my publications. In order to maintain confidentiality, I assigned a number to each of my participants ranging from 1 to 13, as well as redacted any officers' names, service names and other identifying information that may have been said during the interviews. All data were kept on a password protected laptop, and the informed consent sheets were kept in a locked in a filing cabinet in a locked room.

### Gaining Access

For my research, I needed to find participants who could provide the greatest insight into my topic (van den Hoonaard, 2015), thus my recruitment was aimed at police officers and administrators who had intimate experience with social media and media relations for their

service. In order to access participants, I first reached out to the instructor of the Bachelor of Arts in Policing program at Wilfrid Laurier University to see if he would be willing to distribute my call for participation and recruitment poster to his students who are active police officers (**Appendix B and C**). He agreed to assist me by uploading my recruitment materials to the program's website. From there, someone forwarded my call for participants online to the Ontario Media Relations Officers Network (OMRON) through the Ontario Association of Chiefs of Police (OACP).

Additionally, because the nature of qualitative research design is emergent (van den Hoonaard, 2015), new ideas on who to interview arose during my research process. Based on a review of different Canadian police services Twitter accounts, I began to identify officers who regularly posted tweets and I directly reached out to them through email. I also engaged in snowball sampling (van den Hoonaard, 2015) by asking initial participants if they knew of any colleagues who they believed would be interested in participating in my research. Lastly, I reached out through email to the media relations departments of a couple of police services with well-known Twitter presences to seek their help in recruiting participants (van den Hoonaard, 2015). These departments then distributed my call for participants to potential interested parties. Any officer or administrative staff interested in participating emailed me to arrange an interview.

### *Interviewing Participants*

In total, I conducted thirteen interviews with police officers and administrative staff members from six different Ontario police services. Of these, eleven of the interviews were held in-person in offices or boardrooms at their police service. Two of the interviews were conducted by telephone. Of all the participants, eleven were sworn police officers and two were civilian administrative staff members in charge of their service's corporate Twitter accounts. Nine

participants were male and four were female, with ages ranging from late twenties to individuals in their sixties. Before beginning each interview, participants signed an interview consent form (**Appendix D**). Although I had initial concerns about whether or not police officers would be interested, and/or willing to participate in my study, these proved unfounded as the response to my call for participants was more than satisfactory. In fact, due to time and resource constraints, I had to conclude my interview process even though there were still interested parties. All of the interviews were digitally voice-recorded and transcribed verbatim. I also wrote occasional fieldnotes during interviews to remind myself of things I wanted to question or probe further. Directly after the interviews, I left the station and found a nearby coffee shop where I participated in memo writing so that I could record any thoughts I had during the interview.

## **Data Analysis**

### **Coding**

Using a constructivist grounded theory approach (Charmaz, 2014), I thematically analyzed and coded all of the interviews by hand. Following Charmaz's framework, instead of beginning with a predetermined theory, my theoretical insights were driven by my data collection and analysis. By focusing on my participants' experiences, and remaining open to all possible theoretical directions, I was able to have the theorizing to emerge from the data. Constructivist grounded theory coding consists of two stages: initial and focused coding (Charmaz, 2014). I began by systematically coding, line by line all of my interview transcripts in order to define what was happening in the data. Through this process, I began to shape the analytic frame from which I built my analysis (Charmaz, 2014). For example, the following initial codes were identified:

1. Describing Presentational Strategies on Twitter

2. Identifying Needed Social Media Improvements by the Police
3. Evaluating Twitter's Ability to Build Community Relations

By conducting a close reading of the texts and engaging in initial coding, I generated thirty-four codes. I then reviewed my initial codes in order to determine themes running throughout. Next, I conducted focused coding by condensing and sharpening my initial coding through highlighting what I found to be important for my emerging analysis. I performed focus coding by printing my initial codes document and going through each line, highlighting with three different colours. Each of the three colours represented my research questions. If an excerpt was related to one or more of the research questions, it was coloured accordingly (please see **Appendix E** for an example). By organizing my initial coding using focused codes, my data were grouped thematically (Charmaz, 2014). Grouping my codes allowed me to gain a better sense of the direction of my analysis, and informed my choice of theoretical concepts to make sense of the data.

After focused coding, I engaged in axial coding, which relates categories to subcategories in order to sort, synthesize, and organize data (Charmaz, 2014). Further, axial coding works by identifying the relationships between the codes previously generated. Axial coding is a way to “link categories with subcategories, and asks how they are related (Charmaz, 2014 p.148). For example, I linked the category of “presentational strategies” to the code “using humour in tweets” as I saw that the police use humour as a presentational strategy. By comparing and contrasting my focused codes to one another, I was able to draw connections between them and demonstrate their relationships to each other. Through this practice, the three main findings of my research emerged.

The analytic insights gained through coding the data led me to once again revise my research questions. The new questions became:

1. How do the police use Twitter?
2. How do the police perceive the way(s) in which Twitter has impacted their relationships with the public?
3. What, if any, organizational challenges or benefits do police perceive their use of Twitter to create for police services, and the police officers who use it?

After revising the research questions, I then reorganized my codes based on their fit into each of the research questions. Some codes were applicable to more than just one research question, such as the code “evaluating the Service’s use of Twitter”, which contained data that helped to answer all three research questions.

Once I had established the general groupings of the codes for each of the research questions, I then created a concept map with each section, which depicts suggested relationships between the concepts and ideas in order to organize and structure the information. Figure 1 shows the connections and relationships between the three main topics and their subsequent subtopics. A concept map helped me to physically see the connections between each of my sections with my codes by drawing out words, themes and ideas and seeing how each connected or related to the other on a whiteboard. By doing so, I was able to move from coding to theorizing. This concept map outlined the themes, organization and direction that each of the empirical chapters would follow.

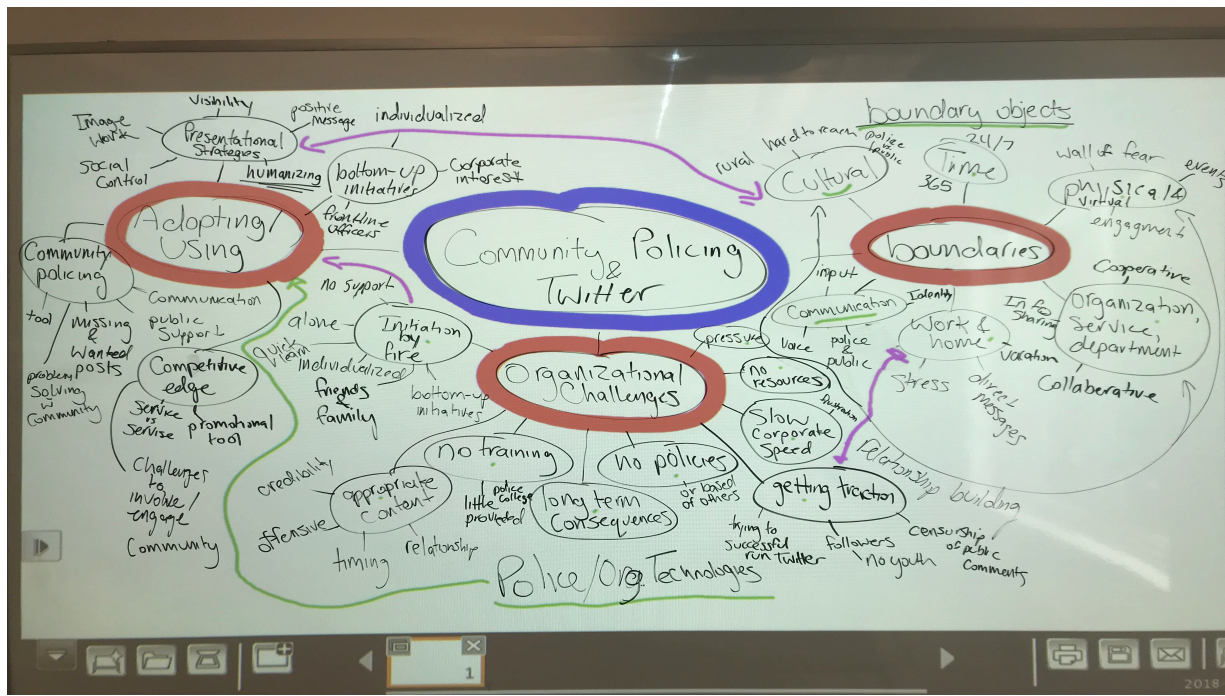


Figure 1 Concept Map

### Memoing

In order to make sense of the concept maps, and to explain the relationship between and among codes, I engaged in analytic memoing (Charmaz, 2014). As Charmaz (2014) explains, memo writing is a way to create an interactive space for discovering new ideas, emerging categories and crystalizing the directions to pursue. Memoing was important throughout the entire data collection and analysis process. For example, upon completing the first interview, I began analytic memoing by writing down in a notebook all of the thoughts and impressions I had during the interview process in an informal, free and flowing manner. This allowed me to draw connections between the participants' answers and the themes beginning to appear. To Charmaz (2014), "writing successive memos throughout the research process keeps you involved in the analysis and helps you to increase the level of abstraction of your ideas" (pg.162). I continued this process after each interview by leaving the station and going directly to a nearby coffee shop to record any and all ideas and thoughts about the interview and participant. This is also where



the early forms of analysis took shape. Following Charmaz's framework, I continued this analytic memoing process throughout the transcription and analysis portion of my research as well. By doing so, I was able to catch the meanings of my codes and define the links between them.

### **Reflecting on Research Challenges**

The first challenge that occurred during the process of my research was a change in topic and direction. As discussed above, the lack of data resulted in a switch from a document analysis of tweets, to interviews with officers operating Twitter accounts. What I expected to find on Twitter was discussion between the police and the public via the comments section; however, it became apparent that if there was conversation occurring it was not through this format and I needed to find another way to gain access to this data. By conducting interviews with the police officers operating Twitter accounts, I was able to get a sense of these conversations through their perspectives and recounts of situations.

At times, gaining access to the police officers was challenging. Organizational control- especially by police services- presented challenges for the timeframe of the research project. While the thirteen interviews I conducted followed the process described above, other officers who expressed an interest in participating were unable to participate with their services' consent. Some services, for example, required separate contractual agreements to be made. These contracts were based on freedom of information and protection of privacy policies that required: detailed explanations of my research process, personal background checks, and a series of contractual agreements such as: not contacting any participants without written authority from the institution, providing a draft of the final manuscript wherein I would need to consider the institution's comments, and that I compensate the institution, officers and any other employee for

any costs or liabilities as a result of the research. These were just a few examples of the extensive requirements put forth by the police services requiring separate contractual agreements.

Unfortunately, although I agreed to the contractual agreements, and began the process of crafting and signing them with three different services, the time it would take for the whole process to be completed proved to surpass the amount of time allowed for me to conduct the interviews. While I was able to acquire in-depth insights into officers' experiences with, and use of, Twitter, my samples size is still relatively small and I believe a larger sample size would provide a wider range of perspectives and experiences which could provide greater theoretical insights. Further research should look to see if officers' experiences with social media vary based on geographic location and cultural and community differences.

In what follows, I discuss at length the three main findings of my research as a result of the methods used above. First, through speaking with officers, it was revealed that officers perceive the value of Twitter to lie not only in solving crime and other community problems, but in its ability to provide police transparency and accountability, ultimately increasing public trust. Second, Twitter as a boundary object, facilitates the ability of police to cross physical, organizational and cultural boundaries. Finally, police have faced challenges in using Twitter, including a lack of organizational resources, resulting in officers having to compensate with personal devices.

## **Chapter Four: Adopting & Using Twitter**

### **Introduction**

Twitter has provided the police a powerful tool for communicating and connecting with the public. By utilizing Twitter to showcase police work and develop lines of communication with the public, the police have fostered new forms of interaction. Drawing on officer's experiences adopting and using Twitter, I show how the lack of organizational training has led officers to adopt Twitter in different ways. Further, I illustrate how Twitter has been adopted to complement community policing initiatives and for image management.

As discussed earlier in the literature review, community policing is a philosophy that endorses the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to address issues related to public safety (Williams et. al., 2018). Community policing involves collaborate work between police and the public in reaching common goals to better the safety of their communities. A key element to community policing is the decentralization of officers, wherein they are given flexibility to build ties and work closely with members of the particular neighborhoods in which they work (Newburn, 2004). With the advancement and reliance on social media, Twitter has become a vital part of community policing (Bullock, 2018). Police use Twitter for community policing by tweeting proactive messages such as safety tips, to inform the public about their daily activities and to seek public support (O'Connor, 2015; Burrows, 2012). Another aspect of community policing are police presentational strategies (Bullock 2018; Schneider, 2015). Police officers have been able to utilize Twitter as a means to improve and control their image through using presentational strategies (Bullock, 2018; Schneider, 2015). These presentational strategies serve to endorse the identity of the institution, influence its appearance and regulate the behaviour of the audience (Bullock, 2018). For example, community

policing teams will post photos and information about their daily activities in order to showcase the work they are doing to protect the community (*Ibid*).

Following the Police Services Act of Ontario, the police must maintain an apolitical and professional demeanour while on-duty, this requirement also applies when using Twitter (Schneider, 2015). Yet, maintaining a professional presence does not exclude officers from using humour to connect with the community and deal with the stress of their job. However, officers must not be offensive with their humour as they are highly visible on Twitter and if not careful, can get in trouble. For example, Schneider (2015), details a particular tweet that was troubling wherein an officer joked about the appearance of a woman he had arrested. In this case, the officer apologized for the tweet and stated he deals with work stress with humour (Schneider, 2015). Proper use of humour and personal tweets, however, have helped to present officers to be perceived as personable and relatable members of the community (Schneider, 2015). For instance, officers will tweet about their favourite sports teams and make jokes relating to events in their personal lives, which members of the community may also experience and relate to. This helps to develop a bond between officers and their communities. This bond is yet another reason why Twitter is perceived to be a valuable tool for community policing. Through Twitter, the police can enhance their work on public safety, public service, public trust, improve internal communication and reach an extensive audience (Schneider, 2015).

Just as community policing works to decentralize the traditional command structure of policing by enabling officers more flexibility in how they engage and interact with community members (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990), so too does police use of Twitter. Twitter provides officers the flexibility to choose how they communicate with the public. It provides a platform to make the voices of individual officers unique, so that the community members are able to

recognize the personalities of specific officers, ultimately heightening the relationships with members of the community by going beyond the generalized facade of police. Finally, in following suit with classic elements of community policing, the adoption of Twitter by the police has followed a bottom-up, decentralized approach with frontline officers pressing for its use (Schneider, 2015).

My participants' experiences and perspectives regarding their adoption and use of Twitter reflect much of the research available on community policing and Twitter. In what follows, I begin by describing how officers came to adopt and use Twitter. I then outline how officers have come to use Twitter as a tool of image management, intelligence gathering and community policing.

### *Adopting Twitter as a Tool for Police Work*

There was unanimous agreement among my participants about the importance and value of Twitter for police work. Officers noted that they are happy with it (*Participant 11*), that it has been a positive tool and powerful tool (*Participant 10*), that has high value (*Participant 5*) and made a huge impact on police work (*Participant 6*). As a result of adopting Twitter, officers spend large amounts of their shifts, sometimes up to 50% of their time - especially media relations officers - (*Participant 6*), thinking about and monitoring Twitter for comments and redirecting those comments to the appropriate channels and people.

As many officers explained, Twitter provides a voice for police officers to create their own "narratives" (*Participant 2*) and tell their own stories to their communities.

We don't have to rely on anybody to tell our story, we can tell our own story, we can create our own narrative on policing in the sense that we do a lot of good things. I'll be honest I think the mainstream media isn't always interested in good things (*Participant 2*)

When speaking with police officers about their experiences adopting and using Twitter, the majority described a bottom-up scenario wherein frontline officers approached upper management requesting to join Twitter. For example,

I approached management about the use of social media and how it can be used... social media was a bottom up affect, if you know what I mean. It wasn't management saying you need to use Twitter, it was the other way, constables in general, not just me saying you know, we should really tag onto this and use it (*Participant 6*)

Here, the officer describes the experiences of most officers who, through their own initiative, adopt Twitter for their police work. Thus, the officer above shows how the adoption of Twitter was decentralized, with many officers asking their superiors for permission to use it. The quote above also shows the hierarchical chain of command within policing. As the following officers explain,

They have to ask permission for it and there has to be a justifiable reason. It would go through me as the public information officer, the request would come to me, I would then discuss it with our Chief and then ultimately it would be the Chief that has the decision whether that individual should have a social media account or not (*Participant 6*)

Whenever you ask for a social media account it has to go through corporate communications, so they will approve all of the accounts, so the member is supervised (*Participant 7*)

Once an officer is granted permission, the account is created, with management retaining ownership of the account and access to the login/ username and control of the password (*Participant 2, 6, 8, 9*).

Because of the large decentralized approach to the adoption of Twitter, the structuring of police organization Twitter accounts varies. Some services choose to have multiple accounts under the service name, representing different detachments; while others may elect to sustain

only a main account and then some officers may share an account. The diversity of organizational Twitter accounts is illustrated in the quote below:

We are broken up physically into regions...each one of those has one Twitter account and then communications, like the com-centre we call it, has another Twitter account  
*(Participant 1)*

We have kinda focused on a main account...that becomes the mainstay of news information sort of the official account of the services but we've been rolling out a series of personal accounts for members. So trying to highlight the different things, for example we have all of our school resources officers are on social media and that's really designed to you know provide information to school based students. The social media accounts are also our community resource officers that deal with community issues, community challenge, community groups and then we also have a couple of units, so we have our K9 unit shows the life of a K9 officer you know, we are trying to grow that as we carry around to bring a sense of personality to the various areas *(Participant 2)*

There are two of us, I have a partner and I have our corporate communicator, so the three of us... actually um do the social media aspect of things. Our corporate communicator more so responds to questions and she'll do the odd tweet. Planned tweets, major events, she handles that. Day-to-day, its myself or my partner and then I probably do 75% of that  
*(Participant 11)*

The above quotes each describe the different ways in which police organizations may choose to structure their Twitter accounts. Twitter is a relatively new endeavour for the police, as such, experimentation is needed in order to establish a best practice. Depending on the characteristics and needs of a particular organization, different practices are needed in order for the service to optimally use Twitter. Also represented are the unique characteristics and personalities displayed through officers' Twitter accounts, "Twitter can be so individualized" *(Participant 10)*. Usually, officers are given free rein in terms of the tweets they publish (as long as they comply with the service's conduct standards), which allows them to display their own personalities in their tweets (see also Schneider, 2015). As the following officer explains,

Her tweets are always different from our tweets. Like she put up a tweet about these cars saying what's the difference between a cruiser in urban and rural? And the rural one had

like mud all over it, it was awesome. But her tweets are more prone to what's going on in rural areas which is kinda cool to see (*Participant 8*)

The quote above illustrates the decentralized and individualized nature of Twitter and how officers can use Twitter to give personality to elements of their work, such as the muddy cruiser described above.

### *Controlling the Narrative, Accountability and Transparency*

Twitter has provided the police an avenue for officers to show the positive elements of policing. Police are able to use Twitter as a source of “free advertising” (*Participant 7*) to promote themselves and connect with the community. For example, one officer actively tries to incorporate positivity into his/ her tweets on a regular basis:

My whole focus generally is creating some positivity and some happiness in the world. I was always trying to promote the good things that we were doing, the good things that our members were doing, promoting community events, those types of things (*Participant 2*)

The quote above illustrates that the police use Twitter to project a positive and good image and to combat negative police publicity. As the following officers explain,

We have a media relations department and I use them a lot. I leverage them, I leverage them for instance, for media releases, we do something good, I want a media release sent out about it because there is a lot of negative publicity of policing and my goal is to be more positive (*Participant 7*)

I think in the new generation of policing and community policing, I think it's pretty high value. I think everybody has a cell phone, everybody has some shape or form of social media so why not engage the public in that sense? I mean there's not always the positive reflection on the police. So I think if people understood more about what we do, that we are not just about enforcement but that we are also there, you know, attending community events and things like that, they would probably have a better understanding of what we do (*Participant 5*)

Here, the quotes describe how the police use Twitter to control the narrative around policing. By doing so, the police are able to send the message to their communities that they do more than just



enforce laws. In fact, by highlighting positive police activities, officers are working to combat negative publicity. By doing so, the police try to make it appear through Twitter that they are improving the way they serve the community, by showcasing positive representations online, when in fact their daily routines may not have changed at all.

Twitter was perceived as a “powerful tool” (*Participant 1*) that allows police to tell their own story without being reliant on traditional media outlets:

Its instantaneous and so I think that the value for us is that we don't have to rely on anybody to tell our story, we can tell our own story, we can create our own narrative on policing in the sense that we do a lot of good things. I'll be honest, I think the mainstream media isn't always interested in good things. You know? So we have to find avenues of how do we promote some of the positive policing, you know policing is highly regulated, highly governed (*Participant 2*)

Twitter, therefore, provides police with the power to control their own narrative and “showcase what [they] are doing” (*Participant 12*).

While Twitter was valued by all participants for providing a platform to control the media narrative, it was also perceived as invaluable for “show[ing] another side of policing - a human side of policing” (*Participant 2*). Officers tweet about personal experiences and activities outside of police work that the community can relate to, “it's more or less, letting people know that we are normal and... [we do] human things...” (*Participant 11*). Twitter, officers argue, provides a medium for community members to relate to them. By displaying mundane everyday police activities on Twitter, police believe they become relatable to their communities, and in turn, build stronger bonds with their communities.

I think it keeps you more of a positive role, it shows the human side. I am using that word because it keeps you connected... it shows that human side that you are more relatable (*Participant 9*)

It kind of eliminates you know, that traditional policing model of the police are just, they are not human beings. So by using Twitter, what happens is that the students, mostly

community, can see that you're more than just the police officer who responds to your 911 call (*Participant 12*)

Twitter was also perceived as an important tool for demonstrating “transparency”, a concept that is generally valued as important for positive police-public relations.

One of the things that we strive for is we want to be as transparent as possible and that's a directive of the Chief. Accountability and transparency so I put out the major incidents but I also post what can be considered some of the minor incidents, but I think it's important to show the community that this is what we are doing (*Participant 6*)

It holds us accountable which we need to be, it keeps us transparent which we need to be and um it just helps to ensure our integrity because once you've lost your integrity as a police agency you might as well shut the front door, you are done (*Participant 3*)

You have to be human before professional or else you are just a robot and too long have police hid behind this black veil of secrecy and roboticness that has separated police and people. There's been such you know, a black veil is the best way to describe it, keeping the separation between the police and the public and now we are trying to fill that gap between by being human (*Participant 1*)

Twitter, as shown above, is perceived as a valuable tool for demonstrating transparency and police accountability in a way that best suits the image police organizations want to portray. By portraying certain activities on Twitter, the police manufacture transparency by constructing a particular image of policing and police work for their communities. Although officers state their use of Twitter increases transparency their tweets favour positive representations of the police and therefore problematize the notion of complete transparency. After all, one of the goals of using Twitter is to improve the image of police work, so if officers were to tweet about controversial police activity, this would be counterproductive to their mandate. Thus, officers choose representations that increase their public approval. For example,

...this is the number of cars we checked, I want you to say how many arrests, how many warnings you gave and if we had nothing, zero, I think that is great. If you run 500 cars through and you get nothing, we need to let the public know that. It also lets the public know that we are out there, we are being proactive (*Participant 7*)

The above quote demonstrates how the police use Twitter to highlight the work they do in order for the public to be made aware of the smaller events that might not typically make an appearance on traditional media outlets, such as the news. Additionally, by sharing the number of cars checked, the police portray an image of being busy in a proactive manner rather than just being reactive. This display of work is an attempt to demonstrate that the police do not just respond to problems and chase criminals but are actively working to find them. In turn, officers believe the public acknowledges that the police are actively working to serve and protect the community:

We're receiving positive comments in the form of 'wow, you guys are busy', 'holy another busy weekend'. Things like that, and I think that leads to a positive sort of relationship, where you know, people don't think that we are just driving around, randomly right? They know that we are actually doing things (*Participant 6*)

Here, the officer describes how displaying certain police work on Twitter has made the community aware of and appreciative of their efforts. Through choosing particular information to share with the public, the police are able to appear transparent about elements of policing they choose to show. This manufactured "transparency" portrays an ideal image the police want to show the public through "presenting" positive police work, with the goal of increasing public approval.

### *Twitter for Intelligence Gathering and Community Policing*

Officers, as described above, perceived Twitter to be beneficial for advancing community policing initiatives by providing them with a tool to demonstrate accountability through increased transparency. They also saw Twitter as invaluable for fostering communication with the community (for similar arguments see also Schneider 2015). Twitter, officers argue,

compliments community policing by opening up channels of communication and reaching “...a wide range of demographics” (*Participant 2*). As one officer explained,

Twitter has affected community-policing initiatives because it’s usually [one of the] top three tools that are used to assist in the community policing initiatives (*Participant 6*)

Twitter’s immediacy and wide-ranging audience makes it a great tool for spreading information to the public, it is “use[d] to help inform the public in terms of their safety” (*Participant 3*).

Police use Twitter in a number of ways for community policing which “has proven for us to be extremely successful solving crime, getting safety messages out, connecting with the community, like building relationships and trust with them” (*Participant 8*). The success in solving crime can be attributed to the response from the community when the police publish a tweet asking for public assistance. For one police officer, the police credit twitter for acquiring fast community assistance in solving crime:

The amount of arrests that we’ve been able to do through social media is astounding because the community connects with us they appreciate it, they take part in it, they send us so much information that we never would be able to get in any other way and it’s been extremely helpful and successful... I’ve gotten messages on a Saturday from the sister of a suspect saying that’s my brother in that photo.... They take part in it, they send us so much information that we never would be able to get in any other way and it’s been extremely helpful and successful (*Participant 8*)

A key component of Twitter’s success as a community policing tool is that members of the community can access the social media platform at anytime and anywhere:

Specialized services have realized ‘oh yeah we can reach a mass audience, *we can get into people’s homes without a warrant, you know we can ask for help without having to jump through hoops* because you know everybody’s got Twitter on in their bathroom, they got it on in their bedroom, they got it on the living room so um the units, the specialty units are now seeing the benefit of it (*Participant 3, emphasis added*)

Here, the officer describes the far reaching ability of Twitter, and how police are able to leverage this to access members of the public that would have previously required judicial approval. In this way, soliciting information and gathering intelligence has been made easier for police because of the open access they have to a large portion of the public. Whereas, traditional canvassing for information would take longer amounts of time and resources because it required officers to physically track down witnesses and informants, Twitter provides direct access to a massive reservoir of potential information sources. This has been enormously beneficial in speeding up the process of getting information from members of the public to help with “community issues, crime issues, traffic issues, missing people, whatever the issue” (*Participant 3*).

One of the most prominent uses of Twitter for the police is seeking the community’s assistance in finding missing and wanted persons. When an individual goes missing or is wanted by the police, the service will publish a tweet containing information on the person. Missing person tweets include such information such as age, gender, clothing, last known location and a photo. This strategy, as the following officer explains, has proven successful,

The crime unit and the traffic unit are the same, we are solving crimes and incidents because we are getting immediate feedback on this missing person as soon as I tweeted it out the detective inspector said the Chief’s already getting calls on that. Like she was surprised, I wasn’t surprised I knew that would happen (*Participant 3*)

The success of Twitter helping find these individuals can be credited, in part, due to the fact that information spreads far, rapidly. For example,

Things are solved very quickly or people are found very quickly because either they see themselves on social media, or they turn themselves in because they’ve seen themselves there, or their friends have started sharing it and tagging them (*Participant 13*)

Twitter creates a new visibility that assists police in seeking and gathering intelligence from the community. When a photo is posted by the police of someone they are interested in finding, there is a quick response because tweets can be shared among multiple communities instantaneously. The police, are therefore able to reach a massive audience to gather intelligence from. Intelligence is often gathered as a result of the person- or people familiar with that person- realizing there is a large audience aware that they are being sought by the police. The police also acknowledge the good-willed nature of the community in coming together to help each other. As two officers explained,

[tweets], ones with missing people, that's probably our big one. People want to help and that's an easy way for them to feel like they're helping, by spreading the word [on Twitter] (*Participant 13*)

[Twitter] can rally people. For example if somebody is missing, a missing person, generally when we post that, it rallies a sense of community and belonging to help find the person. It rallies people to come help with the search (*Participant 2*)

As illustrated above, by posting requests for help in finding people, the police feel that they evoke a sense of comradery from the public. They perceive members of the public as having a desire to help problem solve and be a part of bettering their community. They see the desire to help in this manner as a key element to the success of community policing, which requires partnership between the police and community members in order to reach common goals (Thomas, 2016; Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990; Miller & Hess, 2005).

### Discussion

As discussed throughout this chapter, police perceive Twitter to be a valuable tool for enhancing community policing initiatives. Because of Twitter's decentralized nature, each service and officer adopts the platform in their own unique way, which has contributed to the different organizational structuring and uses of Twitter. Echoing previous research (Bullock,

2018; Schneider, 2015), police view Twitter as complementing community policing due to its decentralized, individualized nature, which officers feel has humanized them in the eyes of the public. For the police, Twitter is perceived to be a valuable tool for enhancing their accountability by increasing their visibility and transparency around certain elements of their work. This manufactured “transparency” they feel works to increase the positive image of police by highlighting what the police want to show – it does not produce true transparency as officers and their services control exactly what is show and what is kept out of view. They also perceive Twitter as valuable for more than just a tool for community policing, in that they see Twitter serves as a great resource for intelligence gathering. Finally, officers believe they have been able to work closely with community members to address neighborhood problems through two-way communication via Twitter. According to the perspectives of the participants, Twitter has been able to bring together a wide reaching, large audience to collaboratively work together with police in solving problems, in a manner not seen previously.

## **Chapter Five: Boundaries**

### **Introduction**

As demonstrated in the earlier chapter, Twitter is perceived by participants as a powerful tool of communication that facilitates collaboration while simultaneously making policing more transparent and, by extension, accountable. Twitter has been adopted by police services as a tool for community policing. While the previous chapter demonstrates how police have come to adopt and use Twitter as a tool for community policing, the present chapter explores how and why Twitter facilitates, and as some argue strengthens, community policing initiatives. Twitter enables officers to share information and connection with community members across physical, cultural and organizational boundaries. In this way, Twitter acts as a ‘boundary object’ (Star & Griesemer, 1989) that facilitates community policing by transcending boundaries for the purpose of building and repairing relationships between the police and the community.

### **Boundary Objects**

Social media platforms, such as Twitter, I argue, act as boundary objects that enable and foster information sharing and establish collaboration among distinct social worlds, such as police services and community groups (Star & Griesemer, 1989). A boundary object is a theoretical concept that explores how information is used and shared by different groups through an artifact they have in common (*Ibid*). Boundary objects are defined as abstract or physical artifacts that have the capacity to bridge perceptual and practical differences among communities and facilitate cooperation by facilitating mutual understanding (Bresnen, 2010; Huvila, 2011; Star & Griesemer 1989). Boundary objects have both symbolic and instrumental qualities that facilitate interaction and communication with interpretive flexibility, allowing different groups that are involved in assorted practices to engage each other in a process of sharing and transforming their knowledge (Bresnen, 2010). For example, construction teams using



engineering sketches and drawings so that team members have tangible definitions to help create a common ground of understanding (*Ibid*). Boundary objects act as translation devices that shape and maintain coherence across communities, working as a precondition for communication, cooperative work and reaching mutual goals (Huvila, 2011). For example, a museum exhibit provides opportunity for collaboration between communities of practice, including collectors, scientists and administrators by providing an object wherein each party can contribute and exchange knowledge on the subject (Lee, 2007).

Boundary objects can also be used jointly to transform knowledge by proposing alternative views. For example, conferences and workshops bring together large numbers of various actors to discuss and exchange knowledge in common information spaces about particular fields of research or topics (Bresnen, 2010). With conferences, participants gather within a physical space to share their perspectives on a subject, ultimately transforming the participants' overall knowledge on that given subject by enlightening them to over perspectives, without requiring them to agree with each other. This example illustrates how in social forms like conferences, boundary objects can act as common information spaces for interaction and coordination without requiring consensus or shared goals by functioning as resources to form and express social identities (Bresnen, 2010; Huvila, 2011).

In order for a boundary object to serve its purpose, it must operate at the center of interaction between different groups and can only become central once the groups decide to make it central (Styhre & Gluch, 2012). That is, in order for the boundary object to properly function it has to be used by all parties and all parties have to agree to use it in order for it to facilitate communication. Socially enacted and constantly subjected to negotiation and controversy, boundary objects are never fully stabilized but are always at stake; meaning, that a

boundary object is always subject to change and adjustment but remains important (*Ibid*). As time passes and the object becomes more institutionalized, boundary objects become less disputed.

Fox (2011) states that boundary objects enhance the capacity of ideas, theories and practices to transcend across physical and culturally defined boundaries. Boundary objects have been used in a variety of other disciplines and substantive areas to understand the various ways knowledge is shared, incorporated and produced across boundaries of different groups engaging in collaborative activity. For example, boundary objects have been used to show collaboration within engineering management, technology information systems, social manifestations and now within criminology (Bresnen, 2010; Huvila, 2011; Styhre & Gluch, 2012; Fox, 2011).

Twitter, I argue, acts as a boundary object that contributes toward community policing initiatives by crossing physical and cultural boundaries for the purposes of information sharing and collaborative action. Twitter has established a shared language for different communities to represent their knowledge, provide the capacity for individuals to communicate their concerns and questions across boundaries, as well as empower different communities to transform their knowledge as a result of the innovation or idea. Thus, it provides a forum wherein people from various groups can engage in knowledge sharing and learning. As a boundary object, it facilitates discussion and information sharing between and among police officers, police services and various communities. In what follows, I will discuss how the police are using Twitter for the purposes of building new relationships and repairing existing damaged ones. Next, I illustrate how Twitter enables police to cross virtual and physical boundaries to facilitate information sharing and collaboration. Lastly, I show how Twitter has created new complexities to policing by blurring the boundaries between work and home.

## Building Relationships by Crossing Cultural Boundaries

Police perceive that their presence of police on Twitter has created an opportunity for community members to have access to them in ways they didn't before. Community members can observe police officers' activity without having to have direct contact with them. For example, the following tweets illustrate how Twitter provides community members with a new form of access to police.



As demonstrated in the tweets above, Twitter has been used as a communication medium to foster relationship building by breaking down physical boundaries by allowing people to become familiar with the police from a distance. It provides a space for police to present different images of themselves that may not be traditional of policing. For example, in the tweets above, the services show images of officers teaching about road safety, and officers getting ready for Gay Pride celebrations.

While police officers and police services perceive Twitter to cross physical boundaries to build relationships, they also view Twitter as a way to enable them to cross cultural boundaries in order to facilitate relationship building and cooperation among communities that do not

normally connect with police. As the following officer explains, Twitter allows the police to break down cultural divides among their communities.

There is no doubt that there is a certain subset of the population that doesn't feel comfortable around police and that could be from a range of issues. Ranging from you know, maybe a country they came from or past experience they had with police in their family and so it is an *intermediate step* that they can use to connect with the police officer (*Participant 12, emphasis added*)

The above quote demonstrates how police perceive Twitters to connect them to various groups within the community – without a community's fear or apprehension – that would not normally wish to engage with the police. This ability, in turn, has helped police believe they can- through Twitter- foster community policing initiatives by strengthening the connections among historically disparate groups.

As the following officer explains, Twitter is seen by the police as a shared communication tool that facilitates collaboration among social worlds that previously did not connect. For example many police officers discussed how they felt their use of Twitter, specifically the comment section on Twitter posts, allowed them to develop rapport and relationships with community members.

People ask a question and let's say either their tone is a little snarky and you're responding to them with a factual and informed response and they're like 'okay great thanks'. I think they honestly don't think that we see the messages coming in or that we won't actually reply to them so they seem genuinely happy when we do (*Participant 13*)

Twitter was perceived to provide the opportunity for different groups to build relationships and share. In order for the police and the public to work together to reach common goals, prevent crime and address neighborhood problems, there must be communication and coordination between the two groups and Twitter was perceived to facilitate this process by providing an easily accessible avenue for police to answer the questions from the public.

Twitter was also perceived as assisting in repairing tenuous relationships with various community members. As one service explained,

Through the engagement route, I know our organization is doing that... so it was black history month, I've got a black officer who has done an amazing job as a school resource officer and establishing really good relationships in some of our communities where we didn't have that before (*Participant 4*)

As the above quote illustrates, through this officer's use of Twitter and his social location- as a black police officer – he felt that he had been able to develop a rapport with members of the community. By using Twitter to share what the police are doing to celebrate black history month, the hope by the service is that they will foster and nurture positive lifelong relationships with youth, and specifically black youth.

Officers described their use of Twitter as a way to cross the cultural boundaries of other more reclusive members of the public, such as rural communities and Mennonite populations. For example,

Another officer reached out to the rural areas. So she came to me, probably about six months ago wanting to start one [Twitter account]. So we hooked her up and she's being doing phenomenal and she's really got the rural areas to come together... she's been instrumental in bringing a lot of the rural communities onto Twitter. There's a lot of Mennonite people out there and stuff right that may not be into technology and I think that her presence out there is kinda letting them see that 'hey lets follow her'" (*Participant 8*)

Above, the officer explains how, under her own initiative, she found a way through Twitter to cross the cultural boundaries separating the police from typically reclusive communities. By doing so, she felt that she had been able to foster a relationship to communicate and bond with rural communities in a way that was not previously possible.

### *Crossing Virtual and Physical Boundaries*

Twitter was not only perceived to transcend cultural boundaries, but it was also perceived to transcend virtual and physical boundaries- enabling officers to engage, inform, share and communicate with a range of people across their communities. For example, officers can post tweets with photos and information about the activities they are involved in with different communities- such as high schools and LGBTQ+ communities - and share these so others can become informed about the positive relationships and community engagement activities they do. From the officers' perspective, Twitter, works to transcend virtual and physical boundaries to foster relationships. As one officer explained,

They love it you know and they are now to the point where they will make little jokes about coffee and donuts (*Participant 3*)

The above quote provides an example of how the public uses humor through Twitter as a way to interact with and relate to the police. Although the joke is about the police, it demonstrates the public's interest in developing a bond with the police by using cultural stereotypes. For another officer, Twitter was described as fostering relationships with members of his community "to the point now where people will comment 'good morning' and they will call me by my first name" (*Participant 3*).

Twitter was also regarded as a way to provide a voice for the public. Officers often discussed how members of the community would reach out to them through Twitter. For example,

Interactivity with students, interactivity with the public. So, stuff a cruiser campaign, I had people commenting on that asking questions about [it], asking if we could do it at their school and so it creates that dialogue (*Participant 12*)

[People] will send me pictures too and make sure that I see it (*Participant 10*)

As the above quotes indicate, Twitter is being utilized by the police but also by the public to show and communicate about their initiatives.

While boundary objects facilitate discussion among disparate social worlds, they do not always result in mutual understanding or agreement. The decentralized nature of Twitter means anyone can post on it- both positive or negative comments. Officers discussed how some people will use Twitter as a way to perpetuate negative feelings or to question the legitimacy of the police. For the officers using Twitter however, this is a positive component that drives them to improve and/or address these frustrations. As one officer explains, when he receives or sees negative tweets he may

send them a direct message, you know here is my phone number call me up we can have a conversation... what can we do, help me to understand what you are saying  
(Participant 7)

Twitter, therefore, provides a platform for identifying community problems. It provides a space where the police and community members are available to connect.

The virtual relationships being built on Twitter are also seen as transcending to the physical world by fostering a sense of familiarity and trust between the police and the public. As the following officers explained,

It evolves, everything is changing... being visible and letting them know *I am there for them*...so you go from seeing a wall of people [who] don't want to approach you, to, you're part of the community, they're part of the community, *it's a mutual respect* and everything just sort of flows from there right?... I find that, that has been really positive in the fact that people will approach you (Participant 9, *emphasis added*)

I think it opens up kind of an avenue to where people, if they are on the street, now they see me and they are like 'ah you are the Twitter guy right?' Like you're the school resource officer, they *feel comfortable bringing their kids over* and it's like 'hey can they sit in your car?' for a second while they take a picture, they know that we are approachable (Participant 10, *emphasis added*)

The above quotes demonstrate how the police believe Twitter has enabled shared communication between the police and the community by crossing geographic and cultural boundaries. Through Twitter, police officers feel that they become approachable and recognizable. Not only are the police using Twitter to reach the public, but members of the community in turn, are also using Twitter to communicate with the police. For instance:

We have had people see a photo or a video and it has prompted call-ins or similarly, people will use Twitter to share information. So, rather than phoning the police, people are using Twitter or Facebook to voice a concern or a speeding complaint or an issue in their neighborhood (*Participant 2*)

As described in the above quote, police believe community members also recognize the power of Twitter as a tool to work with the police to solve neighborhood concerns. According to the participants, community members want to be involved with helping the police solve problems in their neighborhoods. In turn, from the perspective of the police, a greater relationship has been fostered between the police and the communities they serve.

### *Information Sharing and Collaboration Among Police Services*

Twitter was also perceived as being valuable for enhancing communication and information sharing among police departments and police services. Twitter was valued by police officers for enabling them to communicate with each other in a public forum and to facilitate inter-agency collaboration. For example, well-established Twitter accounts with high numbers of followers can retweet and share information put out by a smaller account to boost its visibility and to spread awareness about different police initiatives, such as crime prevention. For example,

Between us and other services when we, we will tweet it out obviously they'll piggy back and retweet and so it gives us multi-agency opportunity to spread out through our followers right? To get the information out there (*Participant 11*)



The above quote demonstrates how police believe Twitter helps connect them with multiple police departments and services. In this way, the police perceive Twitter to serve as a boundary object that establishes collaboration and cooperation among different police services. This police perception of a collaborative nature also applies to other organizations that work with the police such as MADD, Crime Stoppers as well as shelters, for example,

We will get calls in the Crime Stoppers where there's an anonymity piece but they will say they saw the video and I am calling about the tweet you did yesterday, it's so and so in the video you should follow up with them (*Participant 2*)

When you share or share content or like content from... just various community organizations, so kind of like grassroots diversity related organizations, you tend [to] *build stronger partnerships with them because you're all speaking the same language* (*Participant 13, emphasis added*)

As demonstrated above, Twitter provides the opportunity for different services and agencies to come together on one platform to share information and collaborate together. As the following officer explains:

It's kind of like a technical high-five and so if you are sharing information you're giving them a nod that you're in agreement with what they are saying, you are behind them, you're supporting them (*Participant 13*)

The above quote demonstrates the perception that Twitter fosters between services and organizations. It is a tool for them to establish common goals and work towards achieving them. Each agency has limited time and resources and by working together they combine their resources to amplify their reach. Sometimes, these conversations spread across a wide geographical area, crossing jurisdictions and even national borders.

For example, officers spoke of the great assistance Twitter provides for solving crime, especially for missing or wanted persons. Sometimes when a crime is committed or someone goes missing, the person does not stay within the geographical boundaries of the police service.

Thus, Twitter allows the police to transcend geographic boundaries as well. Further, Twitter allows services to cross organizational boundaries by enabling officers to freely share information in order to spread awareness and assist in crime control. This was the case of a suspected murderer who fled to the United States. The local Canadian police used Twitter to reach out to the police services and agencies in the area they believed the person had fled to. As the following officer explained,

I'd like to say social media was responsible for his arrest but it wasn't, but it helped, I am sure it helped raise awareness (*Participant 8*)

While Twitter only provided assistance in the homicide case, officers do credit Twitter for being instrumental in locating other missing or wanted individuals who travel outside of their jurisdictions. Sharing photos through Twitter, for example, has enabled the police to crowdsource for information. Crowdsourcing is the process of collecting information on a particular subject from a large number of people online (Williams, 2013).

The police perceive Twitter to also allow officers to connect with members of their organization that they do not normally have the ability to connect with. Twitter, for example, allows for more interaction between the Chief and lower ranking officers.

It makes it pretty accessible to the Chief and stuff too right? So if I didn't have social media, if I wasn't on Twitter, it would be very hard for him to see what I am doing on a daily basis. I know that when I tweet stuff out or when a school tweets at me, he's liking every one of them so he is seeing it, it kind of benefits the officers as well (*Participant 10*)

As demonstrated in the above quote, the police perceive the decentralized nature of Twitter to offer an opportunity for officers to bypass the rank and file order of the service to receive recognition by their chiefs. Officers cannot bypass this system in the physical realm but they can however, challenge the boundaries on Twitter by tagging or mentioning their Chief in their posts,

so that the Chief is made aware of some of the special initiatives they are doing in the community.

While some officers see great value in Twitter for individual recognition, others are wary of this type of use. As one officer explains,

You have some officers who are about promoting themselves instead of promoting the [service]. I think that's dangerous... it should represent the [service] not an individual officer (*Participant 3*)

The above quote demonstrates how officers using Twitter also have the potential to create tension within the police organization. Traditional procedures and roles have been challenged by the incorporation of Twitter and the opportunities it has created for officers to express their individuality and perhaps enhance their opportunities for promotion, instead of representing the service as a whole. As I will discuss in the next chapter, procedures for using Twitter vary among the different services, with some services opting to only have a small number of official accounts operated by a select number of officers, while other services allow individual officers to have their own separate account through which they personally identify themselves. For the services who allow personal accounts, a unique issue has arisen in which the popularity of the individual officer, through their presence on Twitter, has overshadowed the service they work for. There is a perceived risk that if an officer gains too much of a celebrity status on Twitter, they could use that power to promote themselves when they should be using it to further the initiatives/ goals of the service. Thus by using Twitter, individual officers have been able to step outside of the boundary that presents a united, harmonious front of the service.

### *Transcending Work & Home Boundaries*

Finally, the boundaries separating work life from home life have been blurred as a result of Twitter's 24/7 nature. No longer are police officers able to finish their shift and leave work at the

station; instead, through their use of Twitter, work now transcends into their homes and on their vacations. Officers who operate an official police Twitter account hold the responsibility of monitoring their account. Officers receive direct messages from members of the public who are either trying to report information or are in need of help. As one officer explains,

You now have this responsibility that somebody has to be checking this on a regular basis to make sure that something isn't emergent, isn't falling through the cracks (*Participant 13*)

By using Twitter, officers now have a new type of responsibility that transcends traditional working hours. For example, one officer described an incident when he was on vacation and he received a message from a man threatening suicide, the officer had to get in touch with his service who then had to get in touch with the service from where the man actually lived so that they could go to his assistance.

I've had people that have been suffering from mental health problems who've sent me direct messages on Twitter showing pictures with them with ropes around their neck and I've been able to call, it wasn't even from our policing area. One was while I was on a holiday...sitting on the beach where I see this message come up, and it's like go make a phone call, get the police service there and they are able to interject and get them the help they need. So there's so many different levels that are impacted with policing being available on social media (*Participant 4*)

This is just one example of how police use of Twitter has blurred the boundaries between work and home- requiring officers to always be on the job. As the following officer eloquently explains,

...when I am off duty I am still, you still have to sort of monitor social media. Whereas you know, if you are a constable on the road, your end of shift is your end of shift, you get to spend time with your family and not even think about work. So I would say maybe that's kind of a negative (*Participant 6*)

As such, the integration of Twitter has made it increasingly more difficult for officers to separate their work and home lives, because for officers to develop a well-established social media presence they must dedicate time towards working on it.

Further, the individualized nature of using Twitter means that the police believe the public often develops relationships with the officer operating the Twitter account instead of developing that bond with the service as a whole. As a result, officers believe the public may only want to deal with that particular officer if they have a problem that requires help, instead of going to the service in general. Because of this, officers with a high following on Twitter find that members of the public reach out to them for help with matters that they should actually take to the police station. As the following officer explains,

You can't go anywhere without people saying 'oh I saw you on Twitter or I saw this tweet or that tweet'... we are always on, because we are known for what we do in our communities so that's a downside really, there is no privacy. When people have domestics in your neighborhood they come to you they don't call the station (*Participant 3*)

As illustrated in the quote above, officers see the success of police on Twitter as having come at a cost to their personal lives, resulting in lost privacy and the inability to maintain boundaries between work and off-duty time. Furthermore, they feel that the public's personal connection to an individual officer can have implications for that officer in that the officer, rather than the service, is called upon. While the police perceive using Twitter as having helped them become more connected with the community by making them more readily available to interact with both on and off line - this new availability comes at a cost.

I said no, no I want to get off the grid, I just want to get my life back because you become very well-known you become a public figure and everywhere you go you know other police officers, they get to take their uniform off and hide into the anonymity of the public, I can't (*Participant 3*)

The separation between work and home have disproportionately affected officers based on their individual experiences with the social media platform. Although there is a general agreement by officers that believe Twitter has been beneficial for improving communication and cooperation with the public, there is a loss of privacy for individual officers who become recognizable through Twitter.

### Discussion

In conclusion, in alignment with Star and Griesemer (1989), from the perspective of the police, Twitter as a boundary object has helped to establish cooperation and collaboration among different work processes across different social worlds related to community policing. The police believe their use of Twitter has contributed towards community policing initiatives by transcending cultural, physical and organizational boundaries. From providing the community a voice to weigh in on police matters, to providing a common language for police and other organizations to communicate with each other, officers view their use of Twitter to function as a boundary object connecting a wide array of groups in the community. According to the police, their use of Twitter has also blurred boundaries relating to geographical limits, organizational structuring, individual versus organizational notoriety and the lines between work and personal lives. Police believe their use of Twitter has reshaped existing relationships and created new bonds and routines that previously were not experienced by the police or the community.

## **Chapter Six: Organizational Challenges**

### **Introduction**

Within the past two decades, the advancement of, and dependence upon new technologies such as internet-connected devices like smartphones, has grown significantly across the world. As these devices become common place within society, there is an expectation that police organizations keep pace and also adapt in order to enhance their efficiency and effectiveness. In fact, new devices are regularly pitched and sold to police organizations on the premise that they will reduce costs while enhancing organizational effectiveness; whether or not these claims are true has been the subject of great academic debate (Haggerty, 2004).

### **Police Technology**

Police work is increasingly being driven by changes in information technology. Haggerty (2004) argues police are at a historical turning point in terms of their technological response to crime, citing the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001 as having accelerated the trend (see Darroch and Mazerolle, 2012). With increasing reliance on technologies to enhance efficiencies and effectiveness, there is a need to examine how new technologies- such as a social media- are adopted and integrated, and what effects (both intended and unintended) these technologies have on frontline policing (Willis et al., 2017). Further, as Chan et al (2001), Manning (2003), and Sanders and Henderson (2013) have shown, it is important to study how these technologies are used in practice, because technologies designed for one purpose can be reconfigured and used differently when adopted and appropriated in practice (Whitten and Collins, 1997). Twitter, as discussed earlier, is perceived to be a valuable tool for police officers to connect, communicate and build relationships with members of their community. Yet, not unlike the challenges police services face in adopting and using other types of information communication technologies,

police services and individual officers have struggled to implement and follow appropriate policy and procedure when using Twitter.

The growing body of ethnographic and qualitative research available on police use of technology has shown how police technologies both shape, and are shaped by, existing organizational practices and structures (Mastofski & Willis, 2010; Haggerty, 2004; Sanders & Condon, 2017). Lum et al. (2016) argue that information technologies, such as body-worn cameras and license plate readers are employed in ways that support traditional police structures and practices that follow a reactive, response-oriented, incident-based approach. For example, officers used mobile computer systems to run quick criminal history checks on persons they were interviewing in the field or to determine the domestic violence history of a location they had been called to (*Ibid*, see also Sanders and Hannem, 2012; Sanders and Henderson, 2013). While the literature has shown how police technologies are appropriated and used in line with traditional policing practices, it has also shown how these technologies create more administrative work and monitoring of police activities (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997). For example, the adoption of radio dispatch systems in patrol vehicles created the development of using response time as a measure for police success, ultimately creating more work for the officers (Haggerty, 2004).

The research available on police technology and organizational change has also identified a number of factors that shape the adoption of new technologies, such as the size of the organization, administrative arrangements and bureaucracy in supporting innovation (Darroch & Mazerolle, 2012; Morabito, 2010). Common throughout the policing literature is a recognition that the adoption of new technological devices has not been a smooth process, and has often been met with resistance (Manning, 2003). Police services regularly face system performance issues,



such as freezing, crashing and slow systems, difficulties accessing software and hardware and inadequate equipment availability and power, when using new technologies (Chan et. al., 2001). Moreover, there is a lack of knowledge, time, financial resources and training available that creates challenges for user capacity (Williams et. al., 2018). Officers, for example, are unable to completely memorize all the procedures and features in order to operate devices to their full potential (Tanner & Meyer, 2015). The lack of organizational training, guidelines and policies surrounding these new devices have led officers' to be frustrated, as they feel the department's unclear and insufficient strategies for adopting new technology has left them unable to keep up with the modern fast-changing world. Pressure to meet performance expectations, coupled with a lack of clear regulations regarding use of new technology, has left officers to be creative in selecting and using devices- including personal devices (Tanner & Meyer, 2015).

When the organization cannot, or is unwilling to, support the adoption of new devices on the ground of financial, legal, or technical reasons, officers have been found to bring in their own devices to get the job done. Much of the research available on police use of technology, however, has focused on the organizational investment and adoption of technology. A significantly smaller amount of literature is available on police use of personal devices for policing purposes. A seminal ethnographic piece by Tanner and Meyer (2015), argue that officers cope and respond in different ways to the rapid technological developments occurring in society- with many officers investing in and using personal security devices (i.e., body cameras and cell phones) for work purposes without organizational consent or regulation. The discretionary use of personal devices is connected to what Tanner and Meyer (2015) refer to as compensation logic. In order to solve organizational deficiencies, officers must compensate by providing their own equipment so that they are able to more effectively serve citizens. For

example, once access to information has been deemed a priority, the service leaves the majority of the responsibility to achieve this goal to the individual officers through their use of technology devices, which often end up being private devices. Shifting responsibility away from the organization and onto the individual officer is an optimal solution for the organization as it reduces organizational costs and liability if any accidental or voluntary misuse of the device occurs. As a result, officers experience a new kind of vulnerability that is reinforced by the lack of clear organizational directives (Tanner & Meyer, 2015).

Much in line with Tanner and Meyer's (2015) work, my analysis of police use of Twitter has revealed similar trends in organizational challenges. Police feel that their use of Twitter, like other information technology devices discussed above, has created challenges for police services and individual officers in performing their jobs. Specifically, they note that police services have had a lack of organizational training, policy and resources that result in officers using their own personal devices to complete work related matters. In what follows, I discuss the organizational challenges that using Twitter raises for officers around their initial adoption, the lack of training, poor policy development and best practices. Further, officers talked about the organizational deficiencies of work-issued cellphones result in them compensating with personal devices.

### *Implementing Twitter and Evaluating Training*

The adoption of new technology for police organizations has historically been a slow process; the adoption of Twitter by police is no exception. Officers frequently complained about the slow speed that services moved at when deciding how many, and whom, should be allowed to use Twitter. Similar to Darroch and Mazerolle (2012), size was a contributing factor in determining the speed at which Twitter was adopted by a service. Specifically, if the service was larger, adoption of Twitter took much longer. For example,

The good thing and the bad thing about an organization of this size is that it moves at glacial speed in terms of accepting new ideas... The bad news is, is that it moves at glacial speed too...we have to move cautiously because when we make a decision to use a social media it requires that everybody is on board (*Participant 4*)

As the officer above explains, when the police organization is a large size, the process of implementing new technology moves at a slower speed. Needing a large number of individuals to be on board with change can be difficult to achieve, and can ultimately delay the adoption of new technology that other, smaller services are able to adopt and implement. This delay in adoption of Twitter is not without consequence and the officers acknowledge the lost potential. For instance,

I think we are missing the boat because of the glacial speed at which this organization makes decisions in terms of social media but that said, I also think they are on the right track because they want to do it right. They have seen other big police agencies fall and screw it up and our commissioner does not want that to happen (*Participant 3*)

Above, Participant 3 explains how the slow speed to adopt social media may be costing the organization in terms of keeping pace with cultural advancements but at the same time, the officer rationalizes the decision by discussing how slow and careful use is important to prevent damaging the credibility of the service. The tension between frontline officers wanting quick adoption and corporate level's resistance, and/or slow adoption, can be explained by the desire to stay relevant but also maintain credibility. For example,

We have 15 right sized detachments and I have 15 trained media officers at those detachments. I would love for them to have Twitter accounts and Facebook accounts for their detachments because I think it would enhance the community placing of that given detachment. I spoke with Chief Superintendent [name] about that, he echo's my feelings but at the corporate level, there is major resistance...I am still frustrated by the speed at which they allow others to use within our organization (*Participant 3*)

As this quote explains, there are significant differences in opinion between lower and upper levels in the police organization. The resistance of higher levels is a reflection of their desire to avoid any public embarrassment. However, this resistance impacts the service's ability to move forward with society's trend towards social media use. Frontline officers are able to see the benefits of Twitter to help make them more relatable to the communities they serve but struggle to convince corporate levels that the benefits outweigh the potential risks of misuse.

For services that have adopted social media, officers often described the learning process as one of initiation by fire. Much like the findings from previous ethnographic studies on police use of technology (Manning, 2003; Chan et. al., 2001; Tanner & Meyer 2015), officers described being left to their own devices in regards to learning how to operate their Twitter accounts. With the absence of clear guidance from the organization, officers came to rely on their own initiatives and prior knowledge when first setting up and operating their Twitter account, including establishing a profile biography, selecting an appropriate profile photo and experimenting with publishing their first tweets. As one officer explained,

Everything that I've done has been self-taught or you know, other officers, my equivalent counterparts across the province discover something and we share it with each other and we utilize it (*Participant 3*)

Nearly all participants discussed how they had to independently develop technological skills for using Twitter.

Its stuff we have just developed ourselves. It wasn't put together for us formally but *we are responding to you know, the needs and kind of a niche that social media is* and its obviously not going away (*Participant 13, emphasis added*)

Without organizational training or policy, officers often turned to other colleagues, family members or friends for using the platform. As the following officers explain:

It's been a learn as we go kind of thing to find out what other services do and stuff  
(Participant 8)

Twitter was this big monster, and you know, you are talking about coming in from scratch. I had to tap in with my kids to start figuring out what was going on and do a lot of that background work. But I learn stuff every single day so it was definitely a big monster to tackle (Participant 11)

A lot of the training is by the seat of your pants and going on and asking questions and finding out from friends. For my purposes, it was talking with university level students who are dialed in on it, and my own kids who are College and University educated just to you know "how do I do this?" and you get that roll of the eyes and you know "dad you are so stupid," right? But at least I am trying right? (Participant 3)

For many of the officers, training for Twitter was almost non-existent, leaving officers to reach out and observe how others -both within and outside policing- use the platform. As evident from the discussion above, not only is there a lack of support for officers during their initial adoption of Twitter, there are very few organizational guidelines and policies to inform officers on how to use the social media platform.

I have maybe a better understanding of it because I personally sought out more direction on it (Participant 7)

It was my initiative and then I realized yes we do have guidelines and so I then reached out to [media relations] in terms of finding out the specifics of it, in terms of what we needed to just go over that again (Participant 9)

Thus, many officers were self-driven in their adoption and use of Twitter.

For most of the services that participated in this study, they offered no training in house but as one officer explained, "...the training I get is from the Ontario Police College" (Participant 6). Another avenue through which officers can receive training is the Social Media in Law Enforcement Conference (SMILE). Officers can attend the conference to learn about Twitter and receive some training. However, management does not always allow its officers and staff to go. For example,

I am trying to get my boss to let me go this time, but they said every second year I could go  
(Participant 8)

In line with other research on the integration of technology (Tanner & Meyer, 2015), police participants reported that their services have few resources available to send people to training courses.

When officers do receive training from the service, there appears to be an unequal distribution of training among the different police departments. Officers whose roles place them in frequent contact with the community, such as high school resource officer, did receive some training.

As a high school resource officer, you'll go through a couple days of training on topics that are unique to schools and maybe one or two hours will be spent on Twitter (Participant 12)

The organization recognizes the importance of using social media to develop connections with youth. The popularity of social media among youth means high school resources officers need to be familiar with their operation in order to be more relatable to the youth. Because of the officer's close proximity to youth, he received specific training. However, this was a rare occurrence.

As a result of the lack of training and available organizational resources, officers feel they have been prevented from using Twitter to its maximum benefit. Without receiving guidance and support, officers may never learn about specific applications and functions of Twitter, or if they do, it may take longer than it would if given proper training, for example "we don't do a lot of hashtags and that also could be because I am not primarily versed" (Participant 11).

### Social Media Policies and Self-Governance

Beyond training, there is also a concern among officers over the lack of policy in place to guide their use of Twitter. A large majority of the services included in this research do not have a specific policy dedicated towards social media, or if they do, the officers who participated in the interviews were unaware of it. The following quotes illustrate the lack of knowledge around organizational policies and guidelines for using Twitter:

I don't think there is an official policy in terms of people engaging in their official capacities. There was a talk that happened in terms of you know, just being professional like you would in any other setting (*Participant 10*)

I don't know what the corporate policy is on that sort of stuff (*Participant 1*)

We don't have anything in writing as it pertains to social media yet, that's going to be coming down the pipe but the guidelines are don't screw up... don't do anything that would embarrass the [service] (*Participant 3*)

As the above quotes show, many officers are either unaware of organizational social media policies, or their service has no policy governing social media use. In some cases, officers, such as Participant 10, receive informal guidance. Interestingly, for many officers, the informal guidance they received often focused on not 'embarrass[ing] the service' (*Participant 3*).

For some services, instead of waiting for a specific social media policy, they have come to draw upon existing policy from other areas to inform officers' use of Twitter. In this way, policies developed for conduct and behaviour have been reshaped or made to fit the new adoption of technologies like Twitter. For instance,

So there were policies in relation to internet, which would cover social media. There have been some slight changes, anything else was covered off in different areas. So, I know some places have gone to great lengths to try and define policy and I don't think there's any more or less success. I don't really know where you put a policy on it, other than negative things right? But they are actually covered under our police services act already (*Participant 4*)

We would have an IT policy, so when we get our, when we get issued cell phones and in certain positions there is an IT policy you have to follow, and so that would be under the

broad category of you know IT policies and that's how. We don't get a separate thing just for Twitter per say (*Participant 12*)

As the above quotes demonstrate, some services have “just revamped” (*Participant 6*) existing policies – such as IT policies and behavioural policies outlined in the Police Services Act. Yet, officers expressed concerns about the grey areas around procedures and policies for Twitter.

When I asked officers about organizational guidelines and policies that govern their social media activity, the common response provided centred around self-governance. As one officer explained, “I don't need a policy to spell it out” (*Participant 4*). Instead, officers noted the importance of governing their own behaviour. For example,

Our commissioner has been pretty good in that, they have kinda given us free reign but there will be policy, there has to be policy and we have sort of self-governed ourselves too in terms of what we show at crashes (*Participant 3*)

We didn't have a lot of parameters, we didn't have a procedure, we didn't have rules, but we were just trying to see where we were going (*Participant 2*)

Above, both officers describe how the absence of policy has prompted the individuals to implement their own unofficial procedural guidelines. Although there is the promise of policy to be implemented, the lack of its current existence forces officers to figure out on their own what they should and should not do. Thus, similar to Tanner and Meyer's (2015) analysis of the use of personal devices in policing, officers are encouraged to use social media platforms, such as Twitter, without being provided any guideline or framework for its use while being warned to not embarrass themselves or the service. Thus responsibility for technological sophistication has been transferred from the organization and placed onto individual officers. Officers, therefore, are left vulnerable to any mistakes that may occur in their use of Twitter, as their service has



placed responsibility onto them to ensure that a positive image of the organization is maintained during any instances of indignity.

### *Compensating for the Absence of Organizational Resources*

In order to utilize Twitter as a tool for community policing, officers must have a smartphone device in order to login in to Twitter and tweet from location. As a standard police policy, officers must use official work issued cell phones for any police related business. However, despite this official policy, services have yet to issue official police cell phones to all of the officers who have official Twitter accounts. Thus, similar to Tanner and Meyer's (2015) study, officers felt as though they are faced with a situation in which they are instructed to only use official police equipment (work issued phones) yet are not provided the tools and resources necessary to do so. As the following quote demonstrates, the lack of agreement between what officers are officially expected to do and actual practices is a source of frustration for officers:

At this point right now our service has a policy procedure regarding social media and regarding using your phone for social media *which also doesn't necessarily promote officers doing social media work*. So you are not allowed to use your phone, your own personal phone for [police related] social media... You can use it for your own social media but not for police related, so while on duty you can't use your phone for social media stuff (*Participant 11, emphasis added*)

Above, the officer describes a situation in which the strain generated by the organization failing to provide proper equipment has caused resistance amongst the officers for adopting Twitter. While services do not always provide the correct technology, they do "monitor" what is being done by maintaining control of usernames and passwords for the Twitter accounts (*Participant 9*).

Because work-issued phones are only provided to a select number of officers, "there are [only] a handful of people that can actually post through social media on behalf of [service

name] police” (*Participant 11*). This disconnect between organizational policy and practice does not provide an opportunity for officers to legitimately explore using Twitter on the job. For example,

We are quite a large service but I would love to see other officers taking part in it and doing live streaming and stuff like that. We just don’t, you know, have the money for that (*Participant 8*)

Although services do not always have enough mobile devices to provide everyone in their service, many officers choose to break regulations and use their own personal cell phones in order to use Twitter. As one officer explained:

There are people who do it, who do not actually have a service-issued phone. So that is an area that we are currently re-evaluating our policy and procedures (*Participant 11*)

As explained above, services are aware of the fact that their officers break policy to use their own personal devices for engaging on social media, as they are “currently re-evaluating” their policies and procedures. Interestingly, despite the clear breaking of service policy and procedure, officers who do use their personal phones for police related social media do not receive any penalty or discipline. As the following officer explains,

Right now there is no penalty for the people that are designated to do that. They have [work issued] phones but they may not have the capabilities in their phones to do, like if you want to put a picture on Twitter, you want it to be a high quality picture (*Participant 11*)

As the quote above describes, officers use their personal phones to tweet when the service does not provide them with a phone of high enough quality to meet the technological requirements of Twitter. Similar to Tanner and Meyer’s (2015) ‘compensation logic’, officers who use their personal cell phones for sending tweets compensate by bearing the responsibilities of providing the technical devices required for the job. This compensation logic once again benefits the

organization as responsibility for properly using Twitter has been shifted into the hands of the officers using their personal cellphones for work. However, this leaves the officers vulnerable to long-term consequences. For example,

You gotta keep all your files and every picture that I've ever taken since 2009 could come back to court. So yeah, you gotta be mindful of that so I am careful not to tweet everything and take every picture because it would just be crazy (*Participant 3*)

As the officer above explains, all of the data and information the police shared on Twitter must be stored in the event that they are required to provide it in court. Depending on the amount that an officer tweets, this could result in a large amount of time and effort to properly maintain records. This requirement applies to work issued phones but there is even greater vulnerability and risk for officers who use their personal cellphones for Twitter as they may be forced to hand over their personal phones via subpoena. For example,

In policing you are very reluctant to use your personal phone for anything, the moment you use your personal phone for anything, it could be subpoenaed in an investigation and so your entire personal phone could be disclosed (*Participant 12*)

As this participant explains, officers have been put into a very difficult situation in which they risk their personal lives being examined and intruded upon as a result of the organization shifting the responsibilities of adopting Twitter onto them.

### Discussion

As demonstrated throughout this chapter, police organizations face difficult challenges in the adoption of Twitter. Officers are faced with an initiation by fire, by being left to figure out Twitter on their own without any clear guidance from the organization. Echoing Chan et. al. (2001), the lack of training and having to rely on colleagues and friends for support, indicates the minimal initiative the organization has towards providing officers with proper training. When

training is provided, it is often done so disproportionately, thus preventing officers from advancing their skills. Furthermore, officers' self-governance, through lack of organizational policy, leaves them vulnerable to making mistakes without the reassurance of organizational protection. The organizational resistance at corporate levels to adopting Twitter is in confrontation with the desires of frontline officers wanting to expand the adoption into more departments. In line with the findings of Tanner and Meyer (2015), officers must compensate for the lack of support and resources provided to them by the organization by using creative innovations such as using personal devices to complete their work. Although officers view Twitter to be a beneficial tool for community policing initiatives, the challenges that come with its use can negatively impact their feelings about their employers. Tensions over the operation of Twitter can strain the relationship officers have with their service.

## **Chapter Seven: Discussion and Conclusion**

### *Introduction*

Social media applications, like Twitter, continue to grow in importance for communication among police and the public. As more police services join the social media ‘bandwagon’ in an attempt to stay relevant among the communities they serve, it is imperative to gain an understanding of their views regarding the use of Twitter. The objective of this research was to better understand how police perceive their use of Twitter when dealing with the public in solving crime and other community problems. In order to reach this objective, three questions were answered: (1) How do the police use Twitter?; (2) How do the police perceive the way(s) in which Twitter has impacted their relationships with the public?; and (3) What, if any, organizational challenges or benefits do police perceive their use of Twitter to create for police services, and the police officers who use it?

To date, research on police use of Twitter has tended to rely on examining how police use Twitter through content analyses of police tweets. While these previous studies have provided valuable insights into police image work and presentations strategies (Schneider, 2016; Crump, 2011; O’Connor, 2015), they have neglected to provide empirical insights into officers’ perceptions, experiences and uses of Twitter. Further, previous scholarship, although arguing that social media, such as Twitter, is a valuable tool for community policing, has not illustrated why it is useful for community policing, and how it facilitates and enables community policing initiatives. The present research, therefore, went beyond analysing tweets to look more carefully at officers’ perceptions of, and experiences with, Twitter for their frontline work practices. Conducting semi-structured interviews with 13 officers from across Ontario, the study illuminates how: (1) officers have come to adopt and use Twitter for both community policing

initiatives *and* intelligence practices; (2) officers view Twitter as facilitating and enabling community policing by acting as a ‘boundary object’ that enhances communication sharing and collaborative action among police and their various communities; (3) Twitter has been adopted and implemented in services through a “compensation logic” that redistributes responsibility for community policing away from the organization and places it onto the individual officers. In the following paragraphs, I further explain how this research has contributed towards the understanding of police perceptions regarding Twitter, and I provide an explanation of the significance of my findings. Lastly, I outline the limitations of this research and provide suggestions for future research.

#### *Twitter and Community Policing- the New Virtual Community Policing*

The shift towards a more community-involved policing approach in the past few decades has been further advanced as a result of police adoption of Twitter. Police use of Twitter as a tool for community policing has influenced the ways in which officers view their interactions, engagement and relatability to the communities they serve. As demonstrated in Chapters *Four: Adopting and Using Twitter* and *Five: Boundaries*, Twitter is perceived by police as a way to help them develop better relationships with the public through increased flows of communication and understanding. Police perceive Twitter as providing a way for services in large cities and small towns to connect with communities who previously did not trust nor want to work with them, resulting in new developments for community policing initiatives.

#### *Police Adoption and Use of Twitter for Community Policing and Intelligence Gathering*

The participants’ uses of Twitter reflect much of the available literature (O’Connor, 2015; Bullock, 2018; Schneider, 2015), such as using Twitter for image management and communicating police information to the public. The literature addresses the ways in which

police tweet proactive messages such as safety tips, to inform the public about their daily activities and to seek public support (O'Connor, 2015; Burrows, 2012). The literature also describes how, through the use of Twitter, police enhance public safety and public service, and improve public trust, and internal communication (Schneider, 2015). Like previous research, the current study also found that Twitter's decentralized nature is seen as aptly suiting community policing by allowing officers to present a human side of policing through tweeting personal experiences, ultimately increasing public trust. Also supported by previous research (Trojanowicz & Bucqueroux, 1990), this study found that police perceive using Twitter to provide officers more flexibility in how they engage and interact with communities. Through Twitter, officers believe they are able to control the narrative by showcasing the positive work they do in their communities. Moreover, they believe their use of Twitter holds value in enhancing police accountability through increasing their visibility and manufacturing transparency regarding certain issues they choose to acknowledge. Police also view Twitter to serve as a great resource for intelligence gathering. Twitter provides the police access to a substantially large audience, from which they can gather intelligence. The perspectives of the police regarding their use of Twitter seems to influence the ways in which they experience their work. By viewing Twitter as a positive tool for enhancing their job, officers are more willing to take on the added work required, like learning to use Twitter and planning each day what to post and taking time to respond to comments. Depending on the commitment of the officer to maintaining a Twitter presence, which requires daily maintenance, it is likely that using Twitter has helped officers feel a closer connection to the communities they work in, ultimately increasing job satisfaction.

*Transcending the Boundaries Between the Police and the Public*

Officer's perceptions of Twitter reveal how they believe using Twitter provides a space where the police and different community groups can connect, communicate and collaborate together transcending cultural, physical and organizational boundaries. This research extends Star and Griesemer's (1989) work by providing an understanding of how officers view their use of Twitter as a boundary object. Boundary objects act as translation devices that shape and maintain coherence across communities (Huvila, 2011). Similar to the findings of previous research (Huvila, 2011; Bresnen, 2010), police perceive Twitter to establish a shared language for different communities to represent their knowledge and provide the capacity for individuals to communicate their concerns. Comparable to Bresnen's (2010) examination of boundary objects in the construction industry, police believe their use of Twitter works to transform knowledge in policing by proposing alternative views. For example, the ways in which proactive tweets can be interpreted differently by community members. Boundary objects enhance the capacity of ideas, theories and practices to transcend across physical and cultural boundaries (Fox, 2011).

Police also regard their use of Twitter to empower different communities to transform their knowledge by providing avenues through which they can learn about police perspectives and initiatives. There are many different social worlds embedded within a community, the police have traditionally faced challenges in connecting with these various social worlds but police believe their use of Twitter has provided a means to overcome these challenges and transcend these various physical and cultural boundaries by fostering an avenue of communication between the groups. Finally, police use of Twitter has created a new type of responsibility on officers that transcends traditional working hours. As a result, the boundaries between work and home have weakened with officers having to monitor and maintain their Twitter accounts even when off-



duty. Officers who choose to work on police related Twitter during off-duty time, are demonstrating a willingness and dedication to going beyond the traditional requirements of their job. By doing so, these officers view Twitter as an important and valuable tool - even though it can be challenging at times - that is worth the effort of transcending into their personal lives.

#### *Organizational Challenges: Compensating for the Lack of Resources*

During the course of this research, it became clear that police use of Twitter is not without its challenges. Prevalent throughout previous research on police technology, is that adoption of new technological devices has not been a smooth process, and often times is met with resistance (Manning, 2003). Previous ethnographic studies on police use of technology (Manning, 2008; Chan et. al., 2001; Tanner & Meyer 2015), found officers had to learn on their own how to operate their new devices, just as participants in this study had to with Twitter. Further, there is a lack of resources and training available, which creates challenges for officers to perform as expected (Williams et. al., 2018). By examining the perceptions of officers, a more comprehensive understanding of the organizational challenges was gleaned, such as lack of policy and training, which forces officers to compensate for the insufficiencies with their own personal measures. The lack of organizational guidance and support has left officers frustrated, as they feel they cannot keep pace with the changing demands of society. Similar to existing literature on police technologies (Tanner and Meyer, 2015), the adoption of Twitter by officers is predominantly driven by self-governance, wherein responsibility for proper use is shifted away from the institution and placed upon the individual. Through exploration of officer's experiences, it became evident that police services were interested in exploring the potential benefits of Twitter but were unwilling to accept responsibility for any potential risks associated with exploring new avenues of police technologies. As a result, officers felt vulnerable to making

mistakes without the reassurance of organizational protection. The lack of support from the organization has the potential to negatively impact the willingness of officers to explore the use of Twitter. The frustration demonstrated by participants towards their service regarding the slow pace of progress is evidence of the negative feelings officers harbor, which may increase tension within the workplace.

### Limitations and Future Direction

Despite the contributions of my research, there are a small number of limitations that exist. Namely, the sample size of the study (N=13) is not large, with individuals from only six police services participating in the study. Limited time and resources prevented a more diverse range of participants, and a wider range of participating police services would provide a richer context. Further research of this nature should attempt to encompass a broader geographic scope, for a cross-country sample would allow for an examination of factors that play a role in the experience of police officers using Twitter in various parts of Canada. As social media continues to grow in importance as a tool for police officers to connect and collaborate with the public, it is imperative that research continues to explore the ways in which platforms like Twitter influence police officers' perceptions of their use of Twitter, and how they see it influencing their work experiences.

*Appendices*  
**Appendix A: Interview Guide**

Interview Guide

As a relatively new area of research, studying police use of Twitter has much to offer in terms of better understanding the complex relationship between the police and public. The goal of my research is to examine how the police use Twitter as a communication tool in order to work with the community in solving crime and other neighborhood problems. In doing so, new insights may be revealed that will enhance our knowledge on the ever-evolving dynamic fostered between citizens and those who have sworn to protect them.

For the purposes of my research community policing is defined as: police officers working with community members to problem solve and reach community goals.

Interview Questions

*Does your service use Twitter to seek public support in solving crime?*

1. Could you tell me how long you have been with your police service, and what positions you have held?
2. What types of social media does your service use?
  - a. For what purpose(s) are social media used?
    - i. PROBE: Can you provide some examples of how it has serviced those purposes?
3. Does your service provide social media training to its officers? If so, what does the training entail? If not, why do you think that is?
4. In your opinion, does social media- such as Twitter- assist with your community policing initiatives?
  - a. If yes, could you explain how it assists?

- b. If no, why, in your opinion, does it not assist?
- 5. In your opinion, what value does social media have for policing?
- 6. Do you feel your service uses social media, such as Twitter, effectively?
  - a. If so, can you provide examples of its effective use?
  - b. If not, how do you feel it is not being used effectively? How might you improve that?

*I am particularly interested in the use of Twitter in policing. At this point, I am going to ask you a few questions that are specific about your, and your service's use of Twitter.*

- 7. Do you have an official Twitter account for your work?
- 8. When did you first join Twitter in an official police capacity?
- 9. What (if any) was your previous experience with Twitter beforehand?
- 10. What were your initial expectations, thoughts, concerns about using Twitter as a part of your work?
- 11. How did you feel Twitter would be useful for you in your job?
  - a. Have you found it to meet these expectations? Could you provide some examples?
- 12. How would you describe the impact your use of Twitter has had on performing your duties?
- 13. How and in what ways do you feel Twitter has impacted your community policing initiatives and your connection to the community?
- 14. How would you describe your sense of connection to the community?
- 15. How would you evaluate Twitter's ability to build community relations between the police and the public?

16. How would you describe the impact Twitter has had on your relationship with traditional media outlets?

*What factors enable or constrain the integration and use of Twitter?*

17. What has your experience been like so far using Twitter?

18. How has your use of Twitter been positive? Can you give any examples?

19. How has your use of Twitter been negative? Can you give any examples?

20. When you were first approached to use Twitter what were the organizational goals/objectives of using Twitter?

21. Were you given training or is there on-going training?

22. Were you provided organizational policies or guidelines around the use of social media, if so can you describe them or provide a copy?

23. How would you describe the guidelines, instructions given to you by the organization regarding proper Twitter procedure?

24. Reflecting back, do you feel these are being met?

*What types of crimes or problems are the police posting on Twitter?*

25. What types of Tweets are you frequently posting?

26. What information do you find is important to include in a post?

27. Do you use it more frequently for crime prevention, crime solving/control, community policing? Do you have any examples?

28. What different ways do you post information?

29. Have you seen Twitter to impact (positively or negatively) community policing?

30. Have you seen Twitter to impact (positively or negatively) solving crime/ problems?

31. Have you seen Twitter to impact (positively or negatively) crime prevention?

32. What types of community policing tweets do you most frequently post?

*How do the public respond to these Twitter posts?*

33. What has community response been like to your presence on Twitter?

34. Does the service evaluate or assess public understanding of your Twitter use?

35. What have the responses to your posts been like?

36. What types of post receives the most amount of feedback in your experience?

37. Have these responses had an impact on your use of Twitter?

38. Have public responses changed or effected how the organization understands and uses it?

39. In what ways has or hasn't public response on Twitter been valuable for you?

40. In your experience, what impact has your use of Twitter had on your connections or relationships with the community?

41. Do you have any suggestions or recommendations that could help improve the use of Twitter in terms of community policing? What are they?

42. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about?

43. Do you have any questions for me?

## **Appendix B: Call for Participants**

### **Twitter and the Police: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Policing**

Social media has had a huge impact on policing. Applications such as Twitter have allowed police to connect with members of the community who previously were unreachable. Now, more than ever, people have the ability to communicate instantaneously regardless of geographic boundaries. Applications such as Twitter have allowed for police to connect with their community, in ways that allow for more direct and relatable exchanges. Twitter as a community policing tool has the potential to unite community members with police officers in order to better the lives of citizens by working together to problem solve. That said, there is little research thus far that has examined police use of Twitter as a community policing tool.

The goal of this MA thesis research is to understand how Twitter facilitates, and or constrains, the collaboration between the police and the public in solving crime. Specifically, it seeks to identify (1) how the police use Twitter to seek public support in solving crime; (2) types of crimes or problems that the police post on Twitter, and (3) how the public responds to these Twitter posts. The study is being carried out by Nicole Coomber (MA Candidate Wilfrid Laurier University).

To acquire an in-depth understanding of how Twitter facilitates and or constrains community policing initiatives, **I am looking for police officers to participate in my thesis research project. Specifically, I am looking to conduct interviews with media relations and social media officers.** From these interviews, I will examine how officers adapted Twitter into their community policing initiatives, what factors enable or constrain the integration and use of Twitter, and training and ethical and professional standards shape the practice of community policing via Twitter. From these interviews, I hope to gain a better understanding of how police officers use Twitter on a daily basis for community policing, the guidelines and regulations put in place to help guide officers in their use of Twitter, as well as, the perceptions of the officers on how the public responds to their posts.

#### **Are You Interested in Participating?**

If you are is interested in participating in this important research project, or wish to hear more about the study, please contact Nicole Coomber by email [coom5360@mylaurier.ca](mailto:coom5360@mylaurier.ca) or by phone 905-973-1862. Officers who participate in the study will receive a final research report upon request, as well as access to publications arising from the research findings.

#### **Potential Benefits**

As more police departments adapt Twitter into their community policing initiatives, it is vital to gain a better understanding of the influence this communication tool has on crime and problem solving within the community. This research will provide much needed empirical evidence on the relationships fostered between the police and the public through community policing initiatives on Twitter.

If you have any questions about the study or your participation, please do not hesitate to contact me via email [coom5360@mylaurier.ca](mailto:coom5360@mylaurier.ca) or by telephone 905-973-1862. This research has received ethical clearance (REB#5542) by Wilfrid Laurier University Research Ethics Board and is being supervised by Dr. Carrie B. Sanders ([csanders@wlu.ca](mailto:csanders@wlu.ca)) and Dr. Chris Schneider ([schneiderc@brandonu.ca](mailto:schneiderc@brandonu.ca)).

Thank you very much for considering my invitation and I look forward to hearing from you.

Regards,

*Nicole Coomber*

Nicole Coomber, M.A. Candidate  
Department of Criminology  
Wilfrid Laurier University



## Appendix C: Recruitment Poster

Department of Criminology

Wilfrid Laurier University



# **PARTICIPANTS WANTED**

Criminology Master's Candidate, Nicole Coomber, of Wilfrid Laurier University is looking for volunteers to take part in a study of social media officer's use of Twitter for Community Policing.

As a participant in this study, you will be asked to participate in an interview that would last approximately one hour and all information will be strictly confidential. The interview will take place at a time and location that are best for you.

The interview will explore how Twitter facilitates/ constrains collaboration with the public in problem solving.

REB#5542

For more information about this study, or to volunteer for this study, please contact:

Nicole Coomber  
at  
[coom5360@mylaurier.ca](mailto:coom5360@mylaurier.ca)

## **Appendix D: Interview Consent Form**

### **Police Use of Twitter: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Policing**

#### **Letter of Information /Consent for Interviews (REB#5542)**

##### **Principle Investigator:**

Nicole Coomber

Master's Candidate, Criminology, Wilfrid Laurier University  
905-973-1862 coom5360@mylaurier.ca

##### **Thesis Co-Supervisors:**

Dr. Carrie B. Sanders

Associate Professor, Criminology, Wilfrid Laurier University  
csanders@wlu.ca

Dr. Christopher Schneider

Associate Professor, Sociology, Brandon University  
schneiderc@brandonu.ca

##### **Research Objectives**

The goal of the project is to understand how Twitter facilitates, and or constrains, the collaboration between Canadian police services and the public in solving crime. To acquire an in-depth understanding of the role Twitter has on community policing initiatives, I will be conducting interviews with fifteen social media officers from Canadian police services. From these interviews, I will examine how Canadian police services structure their social media strategy, as well as the perceptions social media officers have on using Twitter as a community policing tool. Specifically, I hope to answer the following questions: How do Canadian police services use Twitter to seek public support in solving crime? What types of crimes or problems are police posting on Twitter? Finally, how do the public respond to these Twitter posts?

##### **Procedures involved in the Research**

I would like you to participate in an in-depth interview, either face-to-face, via Skype or over the telephone, at a place and time convenient to you. With your consent the interview will be digitally voice recorded for transcription and analysis by me. The interview will last approximately one hour. I will invite your open-ended responses to several questions about your work in policing and your perceptions towards and use of Twitter. I may contact you a second time with follow-up questions or with questions of clarification. You may, at your choosing, review the transcript of your interview. You may also choose to participate and not have any of your quotations utilized.

##### **Potential Harms, Risks or Discomforts:**

There are no physical risks to participation in this study. Although the topics covered during our interview are within your areas of professional expertise, you may face psychological risks by discussing various past criminal situations that you have had to deal with. These risks could be

the result of difficult situations that you recall during our discussion. Furthermore, while I will keep your identity and information confidential because of the close knit community of policing there is a minimal risk that informed observers might surmise your identity or involvement from my publications. This could have negative peer or professional consequences.

Throughout the study, your information will remain anonymous, all identifying material will be kept separate from your data, and will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in the office of my supervisor Dr. Sanders, with data stored on a password protected computer accessible only to myself and Dr. Sanders. All data and identifying data will be kept until the completion of the study (i.e, data collection) and will then be destroyed. The supervisors will not utilize the data for other research purposes.

### **Potential Benefits**

This study is unlikely to provide direct benefit to you. The benefits will be mainly to society as the proposed project will advance research in an understudied area while producing knowledge that is highly relevant to policing.

### **Confidentiality:**

Interview data will be audio taped and transcribed for later analysis by myself. You should know that if you agree to participate in this interview, you are not required to answer the questions if you do not want to, and you can end the interview at any time. You can choose to participate in the interview but choose not to be voice recorded, instead hand written notes will be taken. If you decide to withdraw from the study at the end of the interview or at a later date, you can choose to have your responses destroyed to that point if you wish. I am assigning a number to this interview rather than your name, and all your answers will be held in strict confidence. This consent form will be kept separate from the data set and destroyed at the end of the study. Your audio-recorded responses will also be assigned a number and will not be identifiable in any results presented. These tapes will be kept secure in a locked cabinet. The digital voice recording will be deleted immediately after transcription. If you choose to withdrawal from the study you can choose to have your audio-recorded interview destroyed if you wish. Anonymity will be maintained for research subjects through anonymous quotation in the final report and in all presentations and publications, unless consent to reveal identity has been given.

### **Participation:**

Participation in this research study is entirely voluntary. You are free to withdraw at any time and without prejudice. If you decide to withdraw before the interview is conducted, the interview will be canceled. If you withdraw during the interview, the interview will stop and the recording will be destroyed. If you decide to withdraw after the interview, but before the final study report is written, you may contact me to do so. All your data will then be destroyed unless you specify otherwise. You will receive a copy of this consent form for your records.

### **Rights of Research Participants:**

If you have questions or require more information about the study itself, please contact me, Nicole Coomber, by phone 905-973-1862, or via email [coom5360@mylaurier.ca](mailto:coom5360@mylaurier.ca)



Witness

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Researcher or

## Appendix E: Focused Coding Example

Initial Coding

Coomber

to use social media which most people do. Um and the reason its connected to uh the school resource officers is there's a belief that that's how we were to connect with students right? And so I push back on that, that's not how I connect with students, I connect with them through social media just not Twitter. Twitter is decent for connecting to the community for sure. I12, 1

sure I think um, anything that would follow with any of our interactions with the public they ultimately have to be professional right? And that's main focus I12, 4

yeah, so if people are going to be engaging in social media where, they are clearly identifying themselves as a member of the Ottawa police service, we do a little, quick training with them. And kind of go over the main points of our social media policy just in terms of like how they're expected to conduct themselves on social media and we even um we started giving social media training to all the new recruits that come in, and that's largely around like the importance of engaging with the community via social media and how they're very helpful in terms of solving crime and spreading word and education and awareness. And its also umm.. educational for them in terms of what they can expect as a police officer going forward in their career. So somebody takes um you know a quick snapshot of you, maybe not in your best moment um and how something like that can go viral and the impact that that has on the entire organizational or alternatively if you know, something... is captured by a video or a photo and for a good reason and it goes viral, then those are... being in the public eye, in a public uniform they have to have somewhat of an expectation that their image and uh themselves will be shared on social media. I13, 1

yeah and its stuff that we have just developed ourselves. It wasn't put together for us formally but we are responding to you know, the needs and kind of a niche that social media is and its obviously not going away and we need to adapt how we communicate with the public because the public is adapting how they're communicating with us. I13, 1

and a lot of individual accounts um may wish to keep their direct messaging on because lets say its our um direct action response team they're just establishing their twitter account right now but, they would welcome people contacting them. They want tips of where there is guns or where there is criminal activity so they want people contacting them through that but the part of what we cover in our training is that okay you now have this responsibility that somebody has to be checking this on a regular basis to make sure that something isn't emergent isn't falling through the cracks and you need to respond to it like you would any other call that you receive any other day of the week. I13, 3

### **Organizational Structuring of Social Media**

I am not sure how the other services work but our Twitter feeds, the OPP obviously it's a service of 6,000 members so it's quite large. It has more police officers than Toronto. We are broken up physically into regions, we have West region, Central Region, East Region, North-East region, North-West and the GTA regions. Each one of those has one Twitter account and then communications, like the com-centre we call it, has another Twitter account which is your instantaneous "hey road whatever is closed" I1, 3

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