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A New Canteen Culture: The potential to Use Social Media as Evidence in Policing

Abstract

Whilst the use of research in policing is not new (Reiner, 2010), there is currently a strong drive towards a more scientific research context to be applied to policing. This forms part of a wider professionalisation agenda from the College of Policing. That said, the debate around what constitutes knowledge and evidence in policing is highly contested, as are the modes of data collection. This paper proposes that the methods utilised by academic researchers should be dependent on the research question, and the nature of the phenomenon being explored. At a time when police morale is reportedly low (Hoggett et al, 2014; Weinfass, 2015) and officers are not typically willing to openly discuss their thoughts on the current state of policing, this article explores and posits a role for social media and police blogs as a method to capture practitioner experiences, thoughts and perceptions of policing.

The use of Social Media by police officers is experiencing a burgeoning interest throughout the service. Usage ebbs and flows in volume and popularity, and it seems this is ostensibly dependent on the interpretation of information through mainstream news channels. This 'private' space offers an anonymous forum for officers to voice their observations and concerns about contemporary policing issues. Notwithstanding, these forums provide researchers with a new opportunity to investigate key issues and challenges for policing (Wilkinson and Thelwall, 2012), or garner additional evidence to complement ongoing study.

This paper suggests that these private narratives offer both the research community and students of policing a new form of knowledge capture and creation, and one that allows insight into the changing nature of the policing sphere. This paper er explores and promotes

both the importance and the implications of innovative practices in relation to the use of social media as police knowledge, offering two examples to support the proposition.

Introduction

The use of social media by the police service is a topic that has attracted a huge amount of attention, both across the service and in the public arena (Goldsmith, 2013). Hardly a day goes by in the UK without mainstream media mention of police and policing on social media, though it is apparent that the majority of commentary seems to portray it's usage in a negative light (OfCom, 2016). Whilst Mawby (2010) suggests that the police use of new forms of media are in need of research, the focus has predominantly been in the context of the police using social media to communicate with the public. However, this paper is concerned with the gap in social media's role in offering an innovative method to expand the evidence-base for research. This is achieved by considering the way police use it to communicate with each other about current police issues.

Sherman (2013) argues that research in policing can facilitate the transformation of the police into a more professional organisation that will also be considered more legitimate. Critiques of this approach suggest that such methodologies focus on crime prevention, are politically motivated and ignore the voice of the practitioner (Punch, 2015). Therefore, although the '*what works*' agenda is hugely important to policing, particularly during austerity, so is '*what matters*' (Van Dijk et al., 2015), particularly if considered in parallel with the argument about '*what counts*' This at a time when issues such as mental health, wellbeing, child sexual exploitation and vulnerability in general are high on the priority list. Whether the scientific methods, which are predominantly utilised for the '*what works*' research agenda, can facilitate knowledge growth in the complex environment of police demand has been widely debated. Indeed, as Punch (2015) argues, the 'pure' applied science approach of police research does not always reveal the complexity of the variables involved, particularly the experiences of the human actors.

Two small vignettes are provided in this paper. One involves a small-scale survey, which was disseminated via Twitter and aimed at exploring officers' personal reasons for using the forum. The second provides insight into an on line community which opens up police debates via the Twitter handle @wecops. In relation to the latter, every two weeks an 'expert' in a given policing subject area will host a debate on an ~~that~~ dimension of police work, or a contemporary issue that effects the police. This host provides a briefing narrative and over the debate poses three questions to anyone on the forum wanting to get involved; without restriction.

Greene (2015) posits that what police research needs is a range of methodologies that give meaning to the sterility of the data provided in a randomised control trial alone.

Whilst this method is considered, by some criminologists, as an infallible method to test the validity of truth (Hope, 2004 pp 290), the meanings and values of those actions need to be understood, given the complexity of the policing world (Greene, 2015). Twitter debates provide important and regular insight into this world.

Whilst the authors draw on this example for the development of the argument presented in this paper, it is acknowledged that the conceptualisation is applicable to a wider range of scenarios, both within policing and outside of its realm. This paper proposes that such knowledge sharing could be an appropriate means to further close the gap between researchers and police practitioners, whilst also acknowledging that these relationships have not always been straightforward (Reiner, 2010; Dawson and Williams, 2009).

Policing has reached a cultural turning point, driven largely by a combination of a period of austerity, and technological breakthroughs, that have conspired to make the occupation one which is unrecognisable to that of just a few years ago. Described as a world of volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity, these descriptions, coined as VUCA by Casey (2014), seem appropriate to apply to modern day policing. Initiatives such as the drive for increased volunteering, input from the private sector and changes to career structures, such as direct entry, fast track and apprenticeships provide examples of this.

Furthermore, Policing has traditionally been considered as a vocation. The new thinking is that it is now transforming, and perhaps maybe being considered more as a short-term occupation. One where officers will potentially enter, leave and re-enter at varying ranks for varying periods. The private space of social media can provide both officers and police researchers a place to debate and explore such thinking, and the practicalities thereof.

The production of knowledge and the relationship between academia and the police

The use of social media as a method to collate 'police knowledge' can offer a new way of both assisting researchers with information for research, and for encouraging practitioners to search for evidence to inform their practice. Lievrouw (2010) highlights that the options for sharing information on social media can have important consequences for scientific communication between the researchers and the users of the work.

Therefore, it can transform the delivery of research, "*from a relatively straightforward process of gatekeeping, publishing and targeted search and retrieval, into a multi-layered, socialized arena for commentary, amendment, collaboration, critique, argumentation and recommendation*" (pp 3). In this context social media can provide a means for officers to become more involved in both knowledge creation and in the research design and outputs themselves. Indeed, there is even scope for practitioners to offer feedback on the application and implementation of that knowledge, perhaps an area that remains considerably under-researched in the current climate (Punch, 2015). This involvement and engagement of practitioners in research is fundamental to officer buy-in and further commitment to implementation of any recommendations offered (Wood, Fleming and Marks, 2008). This opportunity for frontline practitioners to engage cannot be under-estimated; particularly in light of the impact positive and effective engagement has on officer wellbeing, potentially leading to increases in discretionary effort (Hesketh et al, 2016). Given the concerns raised by scholars about the detrimental affect on officers who perceive reform to be non-participatory, top down and prescriptive (Sklansky, 2008), an easily accessible forum where officers can contribute to and feedback on research outputs seems worthy of some consideration. Additionally, for the academic community, these methods can break down what many academics involved in research into police

culture have called the 'secret veil' of policing (Reiner, 2010), offering real insight into contemporary police issues that exist in real time.

Fyfe and Wilson, drawing on Goldstein's work, develop this argument, asking, "*what different types of knowledge could be used to inform police policy and practice?*" (Fyfe and Wilson, 2012 pp 316). The use of the phrases such as *evidence*, *knowledge* and *research* are descriptions of what could theoretically amount to the same thing in this context. The terms have different meanings to different researchers, but they are generally used interchangeably to describe 'things' that inform practice, the main tenet of the proposition presented here. Gibbons et al (1994) argue that in contemporary society there is a need to consider a new mode of knowledge production, which moves beyond that of the work created in universities. They suggest that the problems and projects that practitioners experience and focus on offer new knowledge that is actually cited in the real, applied context of the researched environment. This offers a more reflexive type of knowledge from the perspective of the practitioner.

The relationships between academia and police organisations have not always been easy (Fyfe and Wilson, 2012). This has, at times, been impacted by police perceptions of academics in 'ivory towers' discussing theoretical concepts and rarely aligning their work to practical outputs (Dawson and Williams, 2009). During what Reiner (2010) defined as the 'conflict stage' of police research in the 1970's and 80's, researchers were seen as yet another layer of, what was then, growing accountability in the police. There was a clear sense of researchers as 'spies' (Brown 2006; Dawson and Williams, 2009) who were there to reveal wrongdoing, rather than assisting with organisation learning and change. These already established barriers that existed between the police and academia are perhaps compounded by some officers' perceptions of feeling ignored in the research process, and that research is primarily aimed at developing policy over understanding their perspective as an active participant in that environment. Therefore, despite the visible increase in police collaborative work through police/academic partnerships, there remains a sense that current research is delivering for management over and above the needs of the front line (Thacher, 2008).

Policing and the role of social media

The micro-blogging site *Twitter* was only launched in July 2006, just 10yrs ago. Twitter claims to have the mission of giving everyone the power to create and share ideas and information instantly, without barriers (Twitter, 2016). As of June 2016, according to *Twitter*, there are 313 million active users every month, in over 40 languages (Twitter, 2016). 73% of internet users have a social media profile (OfCom, 2016), and so the application clearly has immense potential for information-sharing; fast-time. Whilst in policing social media has largely been used for neighbourhood intelligence gathering, particularly in relation to tension indicators (Williams et al., 2013), there has been little written about the use of social media to provide research evidence. Whilst there is currently a huge drive to promote evidence-based policing (Neyroud et al., 2015), it seems that in this field most of the debate is currently focussed on whether or not the police use of social media actually causes harm to the service (Police-Foundation, 2014). It is worth noting that social media policies are varied both in and between forces, and this undoubtedly presents another layer of complexity for officers, relating to perceived fairness around its use. Indeed, concerns were raised in the @wecops conversation (referred to later in this paper) about potential disciplinary procedures should something be discussed that conflicts with the subject organisation's standards of professional behaviour (Archbold, 2013).

There has been some previous resistance from the police about the use of changing technology, for example see Cope (2004) for work on crime analysis and James (2016) on police intelligence systems. However, if we consider the use of social media in the context of the police as being '*knowledge workers*' (Ericson and Haggerty, 1997), such enhancements in technology offer the police a real time forum to collect, analyse and disseminate a wide range of information to multiple audiences; including academics. Its growing use undoubtedly represents a huge opportunity for the service, and as a medium it is growing exponentially.

As with any data set, there will always be concerns about the validity and reliability of any information that might be gleaned from social media forums. Indeed, in discussions around evidence-based management, a similar debate unfolds about what constitutes

reliable knowledge (Briner et al., 2009). In this context discussions focus on whom, in what context, and when, research amounts to usable ‘*evidence*’ that is reliable enough to inform practice. Similar to this argument, it is suggested that social media presents a multi-faceted set of options for researchers and practitioners alike. In support of this Rousseau (2006) suggests that the failure of managers to identify evidence and make it a fundamental part of their own practice ought to be of some concern, and arguably in policing this is magnified when set against a backdrop of risk, harm, vulnerability and threat; so-called 'thrive' models. To contextualise further, social media is immediate, often subjective and context-sensitive. Clearly therefore, there will be a requirement, as with any data set, to conduct some amount of cleansing, sorting, sifting and so on before it can contribute credibly to practice. This paper does not argue for its use *as is*, rather the authors suggest that social media may be a useful source of information to provide knowledge, both for academics and officers themselves, and to help share and further inform practice.

Testing the hypothesis

The ‘canteen culture’ often referred to by academics (Reiner, 2010; Loftus, 2010), is where ubiquitous conversations were prevalent in so many police environments. To expand, these were informal conversations, often carried out over refreshment breaks in police canteens between police officers in different departments and functions. These would include a whole manner of information and intelligence sharing and dissemination, as well as discussions about society, life in the police, social events, new entrants, matters of affairs and other 'miscellaneous' discussions; and which were popularised as the 'canteen culture.' These opportunities to socialise in a relatively safe internal environment have consequentially been removed by austerity measures; that is, the large-scale closure of policing canteens across the country. Social media provides a virtual, environment for officers to have open public facing debate on policing. Additionally, and crucially, it offers a private, anonymous forum for police to use as a form of informal social support. Waddington (1999) for example, suggests that the police canteen can act as a ‘repair shop’ for officers, offering them a space to discuss and recreate events that are usually invisible to their colleagues when they are operating on the streets (pp 295). Such encounters can provide reassurance, self-esteem and collective support for action. It

essentially gives meanings to action and has a specific purpose rather than it simply 'existing' within the police occupation. To some extent, social media can also provide that space for policing.

In 2015 a short survey (XXX) was sent out to police users of Twitter to assess the reasons for using the forum. A tweet asking for interested parties to get in touch was used to identify respondents and the survey was subsequently sent to those officers who made contact. A strong theme arose from the survey relating to the support network it provided, away from the canteen, which they indicated negated feelings of stress and anxiety. Twitter, therefore, may provide both a virtual space for officers to discuss their experiences openly and supportively, and a more open environment in which to garner evidence that is useful for policing research. Twitter offered respondents a supportive, anonymous arena where they could disclose their concerns away from an environment they considered as unsupportive. This is important. The survey was in no way representative of the police service as a whole, however its findings offered insight into the restraints of an internal culture that denies officers the opportunity to talk about their anxieties. Further investigation of such issues can be useful for providing support for officers, and for driving change within the service, for example in relation to sources of stress. Despite limited validity, the findings were developed into a useful blog, offering ~~an~~ offering an example of how social media can be used to explore contemporary police issues, instigate new research and raise questions about the ability of officers, in this case, to gain support from the organisation and each other.

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In order to consider more widely the arguments about the use of social media in research from a practitioners' perspective a *Twitter* debate was hosted (@wecops, 2016). The debate posed three questions, however it is the first two that are discussed in this paper:

1. How do we gain evidence about policing practice through social media?
2. How do we put that evidence to good use?
3. What are the barriers to using social media for knowledge creation?

The debate provided a compelling narrative in relation to both the questions posed, and the broader world of policing. As such, it offered practitioner opinion on the use of social

media in research. This opinion, though discursive, can provide valuable insight into practitioner attitudes, perceptions and feelings about detailed subject matter; and as such could be considered as evidence for researchers. In support, Nardi and Engestrom (1999) argue that knowledge and workplace information is often invisible to all but the practitioners involved. Given the challenges described earlier of encouraging policing practitioners to become engaged with evidence-based policing, social media could facilitate this by opening up conversations both between officers themselves, and between them and the academic community. The @wecops debate (2016) clearly illustrates this.

Analysis of the debate identified three main themes:

1. Concern about officer anonymity and force inconsistency about the use of social media
2. The importance of being discrete about what is disclosed regarding tactics and sensitive details, especially in relation to local communities
3. The role of social media in starting conversations about important issues, putting people in touch and allowing leaders to be more transparent and explorative in their approach to the frontline

These points all fundamentally relate to communications, a key term often used by officers negatively in their discussion around many issues. These included their sense of disengagement from leaders, their perceptions of the poor decisions made about organisational change, understanding of research, recent policy development and local decisions that impact on them and yet fail to consider their voices (Thacher, 2008; Hoggett et al, 2014). In any situation involving reforms or even basic change programmes, communication is very often the key to success. It matters inside the organisation to staff, as found in the research on organisational justice (Bradford and Quinton, 2014), and participatory leadership (Cockcroft, 2014; Sklanksy, 2008). As well as outside the organisation to the public, as found in procedural justice and public confidence (Myhill and Bradford, 2011; Bradford, 2013); and public value research (Hartley and Hesketh, 2016). Considering this in the context of Twitter as a research tool, there is evidence to suggest value in its use as a method of communicating with people

about the issues affecting them and to understand the social reality of their experiences.
Indeed Twitter can offer officers both a forum to share knowledge about the reality of their world and glean knowledge from research and other officers.

Furthermore, a lot of the conversation focused on officers' fears of both using social media and being criticised and/or sanctioned by their forces for discussing issues live in an open forum like Twitter. To a certain extent the traditional canteen environment was invisible to leaders, the public and other areas of the organisation. Moreover, it has not been easy for researchers to either gain access to or develop trust within such police environments where they can consider the lived social reality for police officers (Dawson and Williams, 2009). One of the most recent ethnographic works in policing was conducted by Loftus (2010). She concluded that whilst some behaviours and actions may have changed within policing, the underlying culture and characteristics within it remained. These factors can subsequently be recreated and affirmed in these 'private' canteen conversations. Therefore, whilst one could assume that Twitter might be a threatening environment for some non-anonymous police accounts, particularly at a time when police leaders are attempting to evidence cultural change in their forces, it can offer the research community a relatively simplistic method of exploring this social world from the perspective of the practitioner themselves.

In the context of the professionalisation of policing agenda (May, 2014), listening to the professionals within any given profession is vital. Professionalism is about recognising expertise, allowing for its use, and listening to that experience. It is not leaving the most important asset, that being the staff, feeling like a unit of production. The key aim of research is to seek the truth, and it is therefore incumbent for the research community to hear and acknowledge an abundance of unreal false positivity when trying to create a picture of officer realities; for example, see what Collinson (2012) termed *Prozac Leadership*. This is exactly why Twitter is such a useful tool. It starts such investigative conversations, it raises new issues, it captures information that many current en-vogue methodologies can miss; and provides real insight into practitioners. Indeed as described above, if it is the case that the police are now using this virtual arena to discuss work issues with others, and indeed, gain support around issues they cannot discuss openly within their workplace, it might be that this space is becoming the forum where police

culture becomes reconstructed and, likewise, officers' identities within that culture. Furthermore, it might be that the analysis of this space could provide a real insight into what Reiner (2010) identifies as the policing social world and officers' role within it. To understand the meanings given to, and the context of police actions, it is crucial to observe this in the practitioners natural setting (Bittner, 1967).

Many officers tweet anonymously, via a '*private*' account about their own concerns in policing, and maintain a separate work profile to provide information to their local publics. Interestingly, one thing that emerged from the debate was that the information provided by these officers is not simply useful for the research environment; it also provides an important insight for police leaders when considering the health of, and perceptions of, frontline staff. As @HelenKingMPS tweeted, "*I see it as a way of keeping in touch - social media can lessen the barriers created by rank.*" (2016)

In an environment that is attempting to improve organisational wellbeing and the working environment (Hesketh et al 2015), paying attention to the voices contributing to Twitter can contribute to this support. Interestingly, this was one of the first aims of @wecops. [What has occurred subsequently, through blogs created following the debates, is that vast amounts of information are captured about the specific topic under debate.](#) By trusting officers and allowing them the space to be honest, but in an informed and careful way, surely [a range of audiences can make good use this information, including the academic community.](#) [Indeed police blogging is an excellent example of disseminating police based knowledge to other audiences.](#)

Academics have used officer blogs to expand [their student's](#) knowledge on a subject, from a practitioner perspective. In some [cases](#) this can be the [most effective](#) method to make research and theory feel real for police students, to bring it to life. For example, lecturers have referred to blogs in sessions, they have promoted presentations from police bloggers in conferences, and many papers are often more widely published in police-related magazines, on-line publications and journals. They were identified in the @wecops debate [\(2016\)](#) as excellent sources of information. [The proposition is that this](#)

input does, indeed, amount to evidence. It provides context that other standalone more sterile methods miss.

Issues of anonymity and concern about what you can and can't communicate to the public are, to a large extent, to be expected. Drawing from the debate, what is clear is the broad recognition of Twitter as a tool for better communications, for leaders, the public, the research community, and for the police. It facilitates the link with people with similar interests and ideas, and provides a forum for leaders to observe current feelings from those on the frontline; it is undoubtedly a huge opportunity to grow a network, a critical mass; or 'a social movement' as described by Schillinger (2014). What is also clear is the current concern about reprisal for sharing certain 'evidence' openly. Interestingly for researchers, this is evidence in itself. It seems the officers who use Twitter remain unclear about what they can share, with whom they can share it, and with and what will happen to them as a result; the boundaries of operation. The caution here is that until this is clear the research agenda has the potential to remain skewed by one-dimensional evidence that can ignore voice and context.

Conclusions

Twitter and social media should be welcomed as a way of helping to capture this, starting research conversations, questioning the current evidence base, or at least providing another view on it, and assisting with creating an environment that maybe more conducive to, in the longer term, sustaining and embedding the use of research in the practical world of policing, and thus reducing the theory-practice gulf. Loftus (2010) concluded from her research on police culture that the core characteristics that thread through the literature on this subject remain constant. "*The timeless qualities of police culture endure because the basic pressures associated with the police role have not been removed*" (pp 20). To truly understand this in context the secretive veil needs opening further, and this may well offer a way in.

The use of evidence garnered from social media conversations may well constitute the practitioner voice, and could be viewed in a similar way as other more traditional qualitative approaches for eliciting information from the police. Eliciting practitioner

expertise and/or experience in this way may be wholly appropriate as a way of searching for knowledge available at a moment in time. This [thought piece simply introduces the notion and is somewhat limited, however the issue seems worthy of further exploration.](#) This may [yield](#) a number of positive consequences for both the landscape of evidence-based policing, practitioner involvement and participation in research, and in the identification of creative and innovative practice in police work. In other [industry](#) sectors for example, research shows that employee productivity and organisational survival is linked to innovation and creativity (Sigala and Chalkiti, 2014). Creativity and learning, the research argues, can be enhanced through the use of social media both via the use of collecting new evidence and knowledge from academia and other practitioners, but also co-creating it with them.

Research conducted in the financial industry by Leonardi (2014) concluded that internal social networks used for the purposes of sharing knowledge had a range of positive benefits. These included a growth in innovation, reduced work duplication and increased trust between workers. [Exploring wider communication methods in the context of the policing world, both for academics and practitioners, is in need of more consideration.](#) Moreover, there is perhaps added value in thinking about the further learning and knowledge it can provide officers themselves. Experiential learning has traditionally developed via active face to face communications. [However, if the risks attached to discussing some of these issues within the canteen culture are a reality for some, or is not a physical option \(i.e. there is no 'canteen!'\), this virtual world might provide an environment for the creation of metaknowledge via the process of vicarious learning \(Ren and Argote. Cited in Leonardi, 2014: 799\).](#) This can [effectively](#) occur through the use of social media by [both](#) officers and policing academics.

[Finally,](#) there is enough evidence available to highlight the importance of engagement with, and inclusion of staff when attempting to change organisations and culture (Bradford and Quinton, 2014). The use of social media for this [purpose](#) seems like a [practical](#) place to start. [If parts of the police canteen culture are being recreated in the virtual world of social media this may offer 'virtual' researchers a new facility whereby they can undertake a form of virtual ethnography.](#)

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