

Written Evidence to the
Independent Police Commission

Police and Social Media

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About the Author:

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Purpose of the paper:

To identify the current use of social media by the police service in England and Wales, to outline the pros and cons of social media and to identify areas of good practice which may be duplicated.

1. Introduction:

With the rapid expansion of social media websites such as Twitter, LinkedIn and Facebook it is clear that the police service needs to modernise and utilise these new methods of communicating a message to businesses and the public. The police service needs to be using these free engagement tools in order to communicate quickly and effectively whilst ensuring that they are getting the correct message out to the public that does not in anyway impede on a criminal investigation or appeal.

We have seen over the last few years and particularly within the last year the rapid increase in the number of police officers using social media to communicate and interact with the communities they serve. Neighbourhood policing teams are either using or looking at using Twitter or Facebook to provide short updates to people within their neighbourhood on what is happening where they live.

There are of course pros and cons to the police using social media, however with the right guidelines in place and the right safety nets the pros far outweigh the cons. It is particularly important for the police service to ensure no information is released via social media feeds that may well jeopardise an investigation.

Every police force within the United Kingdom is on Twitter and a majority of forces have a Facebook page which people can 'like'. This means that the police service can get a message out far faster than releasing a press release or calling a press conference. A recent example of the police using social media to appeal for information is the abduction and suspected murder of 5 year old April Jones in Machynlleth, Wales.

It is worth remembering that social media is not a replacement tool for the police; traditional methods of communicating a message such as the print press and television need to continue to be used. Social media may be incredibly popular but not everybody understands it. Figures from 2011 show that those within the age bracket 18-24 use social media least whereas those aged between 35-44 use it the most.¹ Many people simply don't understand what social media or Twitter is and it is those people and those without the internet or a Smartphone that need to be reached out to by alternative means.

2. Police Use of Social Media:

2.1 Twitter: Twitter is one of the most popular social networking sites in the world and has over 500 million users; it allows users to post short messages which are no longer than 140 characters. Users can 'follow' certain people or organisations to subscribe to these messages. Every police force in England and Wales is currently on Twitter, and every force has a link from their force website to their Twitter feed.

Twitter is a quick way of ensuring that the force can post messages directly to the public and update them with information that is relevant to them. Whilst every police force within England and Wales has a main force Twitter account, a considerable number of police

¹ <http://wallblog.co.uk/2011/07/12/how-different-age-groups-interact-across-the-social-web-infographic/>

forces have individual neighbourhood policing Twitter accounts which the local neighbourhood Inspector has control of. In the event of a major incident or investigation the force corporate communications team can take control of local neighbourhood accounts to ensure that messages posted online are in line with the messages and updates which are being provided by the force.

At the time of writing this report over 600 police officers, neighbourhood policing teams and PCSOs have personal Twitter accounts. 22 million people within the UK currently use Twitter and that number is set to rapidly increase as more and more people look to using social media as a quicker and cheaper way of communicating.

Twitter in my opinion is the best social networking website; it allows greater communication and further interaction. The Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police and other Chief Constables regularly hold Question and Answer sessions linked between the force website and Twitter. This means that people can ask the Chief a question on Twitter or Facebook and simply use a particular hashtag, such as #AskTheChief. Those clicking on this hashtag can then see what other users are saying or asking.

On 14th October 2010 Greater Manchester Police launched a 24 hour social media campaign which meant GMP would Tweet brief details from every 999 call they received within a 24 hour period. I obtained some information about this campaign from the communications team at GMP.

In my personal view the GMP24 campaign was a great success, it allowed the public and politicians to witness the sheer number of calls the police receive and the types of calls they deal with on a daily basis. One of the problems with using Twitter to continuously Tweet is that each Twitter account is limited to how many Tweets can be posted within a certain time period, and due to the overwhelming number of Tweets and indeed 999 calls GMP received the GMP Twitter accounts were sent to 'Twitter jail' during GMP24.

GMP were able to quickly identify a solution to this problem and they created more GMP24 accounts and then linked them all together. This meant the stream of 999 calls continued to appear on the GMP website and as soon as one Twitter account was temporarily blocked they could use another account to continue the stream.

In terms of legal obstacles for this campaign, the communications team sought guidance from legal advisers in regards to data protection and freedom of information laws. The 3 members of police staff who worked on the GMP24 campaign in shifts ensured there was a time delay in posting the Tweets and refrained from Tweeting information that would identify locations such as schools. Additionally they refrained from Tweeting details that would identify a caller or a location before officers arrived at the scene.

There are additional examples where the police have used social media as a tool for interaction, this includes during the riots in August 2011 across England. In the aftermath of the riots the police used Twitter and other social networking sites to post pictures and appeal for information which would request information leading to the identification and arrest of those suspected of rioting. This new way of interacting meant that a number of suspects handed themselves into the police before they received a knock at their door.

There needs to be clear guidance about when or if an officer or member of staff favourites or retweets something on Twitter. It is worth noting that most police forces clearly state on their Twitter profile that retweets (RTs) are not an endorsement. But we have to be clear in that Twitter is a good broadcast medium whereby we need to have a dialogue and the police need to use it as a way of reaching out to customers.

2.2 Facebook: Facebook is the world's most used and most popular social networking website with over one billion users worldwide. Facebook allows users to post pictures, messages and interact with businesses and other users. The majority of police forces within the UK currently have a Facebook page whereby the police can post updates about cases, appeal for information and hold question and answer sessions with the public. If a Facebook user 'likes' the police page then news that is posted onto the police Facebook page will be shown in the news feed of the user. Whilst there is one main force Facebook page there are some police forces that have separate Facebook pages for each of their boroughs such as GMP who have separate pages for Bolton, Salford and Royton. Forces need to ensure that information they post on the Facebook page is interesting and engaging. Rather than simply appealing for information use it as a tool to interact and ask those who 'like' the page for their thoughts and ideas. Post pictures of behind the scenes at the police station and run competitions. Yes it is a police account but that doesn't mean it has to be dull and uninteresting.

2.3 LinkedIn: LinkedIn is more of a business and networking tool than a social networking site *per se*. From my research for this paper only a few police forces within England and Wales use LinkedIn as a way of interacting and communicating. Whilst only a few police forces use LinkedIn there are some police related organisations such as the Police Superintendents' Association that use LinkedIn as a discussion forum. LinkedIn allows users to discuss ideas and to connect with each other. It also allows users to update their profile with a status, work history, what they're reading and what their specialities are.

2.4 YouTube: YouTube is the world's leading video sharing website which was established in 2005. YouTube enables the police to post videos which can be viewed by the public, this means that the police force can directly post videos and footage to help them solve crimes, appeal for public information or to give the public a behind the scenes insight into the police service. All forces use YouTube to post a video appeal to appeal for information and unlike Twitter there is only one force YouTube account rather than individual accounts for each Neighbourhood Policing Team.

2.5 Flickr and Instagram: These social networking sites allow users to upload photos; Flickr is used much more than Instagram as it allows the user to post pictures in an album which can be easily accessed. Instagram allows users to comment on pictures and 'like' them. Furthermore, Flickr has an automatic picture copyright system in place which saves the corporate communications team time.

2.6 Audioboo: Audioboo is a website and downloadable mobile application which allows users to record and share sound. Users of this application are restricted to recording three minutes of sound, unlike other applications which allow more recording time. This app may be used to record a very short message online which can then be shared via other social media feeds. This app has potential and is used by the police but I think the 3 minute restriction needs extending. For example should the Chief Constable want to record a message then s/he would be better recording a podcast which allows greater flexibility. However this is a decent app which can be used to post short recordings such as a brief statement or clip from a press conference which can then be listened to online or on a Smartphone. Users can follow each other and receive alerts when new recordings or 'boos' as they are called are posted. From my research into this app there are only a handful of police forces that currently use Audioboo as a way of recording audio.

2.7 Pinterest: Pinterest is a website which allows users to post or 'pin' pictures and news online. It is not as well known in the UK as it is in America but this could be the next big thing. It is the third most popular social media site in the US and it is already used by some police forces in the UK to post pictures online of wanted suspects. Nottinghamshire Police were the first force in the UK to join Pinterest and they have used the site to post pictures of campaigns and community news pictures. Users can pin or like pictures that are on the website and as with other platforms users can follow each other.

2.8 Google+: Google+ is a social media application which allows users to put each other in their 'circles' such as family, friends and colleague. It also means that should a user post a picture or status they can limit who can see that particular update to a circle. Such as for example I post a status which I only want my family to be able to see, I then limit that to only those within my family circle on Google+. Users can post pictures, link to videos and update their status. This platform is much like other social media platforms; the only difference is that users can also video call each other directly without using Skype. I'm not a fan of Google+ and I know a lot of friends and colleagues simply don't bother using it anymore because it is complicated and offers nothing new. That said there are pros to it in that some people do use it to connect and interact so it may be worth forces using it as another way of interacting. Users can add also +1 a picture, video, news story or website which shows that they recommend it. My advice would be for forces to use the main two platforms (Facebook and Twitter) rather than Google+.

2.9 Blogging: Blogging has been around for a number of years, with a rapid increase from 2005 onwards; more and more police forces have been including a blog on their websites and a number of NPTs have a joint police and public blog - an example being the Runnymede Residents Blog in Surrey. Blogs are a great way of informing people and particularly the community about news and incidents relevant to them. As an avid blogger myself I have a great amount of experience in this field and I hope to see more and more police forces and NPTs joining the blogosphere. A user can virtually subscribe to a blog by using RSS which means they will get a notification when new content has been added. Another way of getting the community involved would be to get them to write blogs about their area, why people should visit their community and what makes them unique. Blogging gives people a voice to air views and concerns.

2.10 QR Codes: I know from speaking to Inspector Roger Nield from Surrey Police that the Home Office are currently looking at using QR codes as a method of reporting ASB directly to the police. A QR code is small barcode which is able to be scanned in on a smartphone. QR codes are currently used by a number of businesses as a way of allowing customers to easily access their website or view details of a special offer. For a QR code to work the user simply has to install a QR reader on their device from the application store and then take a picture of the code using their Smartphone this can be done in a matter of seconds and downloading a QR reader is completely free of charge. The benefit of using QR codes is that the code can be put on an advert and the viewer simply has to take a picture of the code and they are straight onto the website, which means no more writing or typing web addresses down!

3. Crime Maps:

Street-level crime maps were set up by the Home Office in 2011. The Police UK website gives people access to a crime map which allows the viewer to see crime street by street. The street level crime map means for the first time the public can see exactly what category of crime is being committed in their neighbourhood (such as ASB).

In addition to showing the crime figures for the previous month the website allows the viewer to pull up details of their police force including how to keep updated with the work they do via social media such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube. The website gives information about who their local beat officers are, what the priorities are in their area and details of the next community meeting.

According to the Home Office *“Police.UK is a key part of the government’s wider policing and justice reform agenda which seeks to increase the transparency and accountability of the Criminal Justice System.”*²

Police.uk is a fantastic website which enables the viewer to see what sort of crime is being committed in the community where they live. The website also allows the viewer to compare a particularly category of crime such as burglary to previous years which enables the reader to see clearly whether crime has risen or fallen. The website proved to be popular when launched and had around 75,000 visitors a minute thus caused the web servers to crash, however since the launch the website reaches an average of 150,000 hits per day.³

4. Police Apps:

Tayside Police, Surrey Police and Sussex Police currently have a smartphone application in place which integrates social media and crime maps. Surrey Police were the first police force in the UK to use the mobile phone app and they have led the way in using social media within an app to interact with the community. The app consists of; an option to view monthly crime (NPIA Crime Data) including a break down into different categories such as ASB, an option to report crime online or to contact Surrey Police at the touch of a button, the option to connect with the police on social media sites such as Twitter, Facebook, Flickr and YouTube. The app also allows the user to view news from the local community or from the entire police force.

The Surrey police app has been downloaded around 15,000 times and has interest from the fire service and police forces both inside and outside the UK. The app went from idea to first iteration in just 4 months and it is available free to the public on apple and android and is automatically updated via the app stores. The app was developed by Multizone (www.multizone.co.uk) which is based in Surrey. In terms of how much of the budget was allocated to creating and developing this police app, Surrey started with £20,000 for creating the app and this included purchasing 500 smartphones. They also allocated £5,000 to training their neighbourhood teams on how to use the software and how to ensure that the information they Tweet is within force guidelines.⁴

² <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/police/street-level-crime-maps/>

³ [Ibid](#)

⁴ NIELD, R. RE: Police App. (Online). Message to T SCHOLLES-FOGG. 20 OCT 2012. Personal Communication.

5. Facewatch:

Facewatch is a fantastic idea in which partnerships is fundamental to its success. Established by Simon Gordon and in partnership with the Metropolitan Police, Facewatch enables businesses to share images, CCTV and report crime. The idea came about when Mr Gordon's family business fell victim to crime. Facewatch has proved to be successful in reducing crime, increasing conviction rates and helping victims of crimes by providing an instant crime reference number. According to a pilot conducted by Facewatch and the Met Police, Facewatch saved 2 hours when reporting a crime through Facewatch, the circulation of CCTV images was 2 weeks faster than normal and there was a detection rate of 8.8% rather than 5.1% (a 73% increase).⁵

Due to the success of Facewatch as a tool for reporting crime and increasing identification of suspects a new version was launched at the beginning of 2012. Facewatch and Partners provide image sharing and crime reporting facilities free to all businesses within the UK. We know that Facewatch works because the test pilots have proven statistically that the innovation works. Because of its success Crimestoppers came on board as did other police forces.

In addition to Facewatch for businesses there is a Facewatch ID which was launched in September 2012. The app allows the public to view images of people wanted by police and identify them or send information anonymously to the police which may lead to their identification and arrest. The app also allows police forces to work in partnership with Facewatch and enables police CCTV control room staff to upload and update images of suspects who are un-identified.⁶

6. As a crime fighting tool:

When one thinks of social media one automatically thinks of communication and interaction however social media is also used for something else – solving crimes. Whenever we log onto Facebook, post our location on Foursquare or upload a picture on Flickr we leave pieces of evidence and traces of our daily lives and what we do. Add all these pieces of data and evidence up and it adds to one big picture. An example is on Flickr, when a user posts a picture their GPS and phone details are automatically recorded. This means all photos are open data when you upload them so the police could trawl through pictures looking for offences with a range of options should a picture showing an offence being carried out be spotted. The police can then send the individual a letter from the local policing team or take the necessary action. Such offences may be drivers who are using their mobile phones whilst at the wheel. The next step could be to get detectives on board and work across national boundaries and jurisdictions.

When I was doing my training at University within the Criminal Investigation module and indeed when I have visited police forces across the country and spoken to officers, I have seen just how important social media is in fighting crime. There are some terribly foolish criminals that use social media to brag and boast about crimes they have committed and this is where the police are getting smart and indeed ahead of the criminals. Police forces need to ensure that uniformed officers as well as detectives are trained in using social media to detect crime.

⁵ <http://www.info4security.com/story.asp?storycode=4128725>

⁶ <http://facewatch.co.uk/cms/app-police/>

Whenever somebody wants to trace an individual they quite often only have to type their name into the internet for pages of information to come up onto their screen. This data ranges from links to their social media profiles and in many cases their address from the unedited version of the electoral register.

You will have noticed from reading this paper and from your own experience that the way we communicate is fundamentally changing. We live in an age whereby we can post a message or picture on the internet within a matter of seconds and from anywhere in the world. The police are no longer relying on telephone boxes or police boxes to telephone the police station and report back information. Modern police have modern equipment; they have moved with the times and are embracing the social media revolution.

Officers are using social media to interact with the communities they serve and they are using smartphones to directly access the Police National Database. As we continue to embrace social media we have to try and look to the future in order to be one step ahead. Many of those who participated in the August 2011 riots shared information on their BlackBerry Messaging services; this is where the police have limited access and without the help and co-operation of the mobile phone companies 'BBM' will continue to be used as a way of sending secure private content. The police have to remain focussed and ensure they have teams of highly trained staff and officers who are able to use social media not just as a tool for interacting and communicating but also as a tool for preventing and solving crimes.

7. Policing Social Media:

People are starting to report crime on Twitter and Facebook, but how can the police ensure they can effectively respond to the social media revolution? An example of this was during the Olympic Games in London when a 17 year old youth abused the swimmer Tom Daley via the social networking site Twitter. There were dozens of complaints and after establishing which force area the suspect lived in he was arrested for trolling. The police service simply doesn't have the resources to police the online community and as more and more people break the law online the traditional role of a police officer is changing. Police investigations are lagging behind; yes the police investigate online 'bullying' but they are not proactive enough. As there is no existing legislation surrounding policing the web, the Crown Prosecution Service is currently holding discussions about how to police social media and aims to publish guidelines by Christmas 2012.⁷

8. Examples of good practice:

There are several excellent examples that show good practice when it comes to police using social media. Greater Manchester Police led the way with the GMP24 campaign and this enabled people to witness in almost real time the calls the police receive on a daily basis and the dangers police officers face when responding to calls. Officers quite literally respond knowing that they may not finish the end of their shift alive.

I particularly like the flow chart provided in the social media guidance forms within Greater Manchester Police and with the permission of the Greater Manchester Police Corporate Communications team I have included a copy of this flow chart at the back of this report.

I visited Surrey Police in late 2011 and saw some of the initial planning of the police app, they have utilised social media and led the way with the mobile app which integrates Tweets

⁷ <http://uk.reuters.com/article/2012/10/10/uk-britain-twitter-guidelines-idUKBRE8990TQ20121010>

from police officers including the police helicopter. The Tweets were integrated into the app so that the community could keep informed about incidents as they were unfolding.

The FaceWatch app created by Simon Gordon is an ingenious idea as it allows those with smartphones to anonymously identify wanted suspects without having to make a call to Crimestoppers or the police. This app is quite limited to London, Surrey and Sussex and I would like to see police forces from across the UK come on board and promote the app. It has taken something as important as identifying a suspect and utilised social media which enables people to identify a suspect within seconds.

9. Pros of the police using social media:

- Reaching out to people within the community who use social media rather than simply using old methods of communication such as newspaper adverts and appeals.
- From a time saving perspective social media is a tool which reaches the public directly which is a lot quicker than calling a press conference or relying on the local media which has set deadlines.
- Ability to respond quickly and effectively to customers via social networking websites.
- The benefits of having separate NPT Facebook pages is that it allows those who live within the particularly community to like the page and receive updates about their community straight to their Facebook news feed.
- Facewatch ID allows the public to identify wanted suspects anonymously and on their Smartphone devices.
- The police are able to solve crimes using social media and in some cases the police are able to identify the location of a suspect based on information on Twitter and Facebook.
- By the police using social media it sends out a clear message to criminals and that message is that 'we are monitoring social media and we will get you if you break the law'.
- Social media is an excellent way of ending speculation and rumour, an example being that after a road traffic collision on a busy motorway some motorists were using social media to give a commentary on the incident. Police and the emergency services were then able to use social media to quickly end speculation and rumour and get factual information to the public.
- Using numerous communications channels reaches more people who can multiply the 'reach' by further sharing the information.

10. Cons of the police using social media:

- Legal obstacles such as the Data Protection Act 1998, the Freedom of Information Act 1998 and ensuring that private and confidential information remains private.
- Some serving officers have used Twitter to post their own private thoughts about current affairs and cuts to the police service. This needs to be closely monitored to ensure officer impartiality.
- Members of the police family may intend on using social media to send a private message however the message may accidentally be Tweeted or posted rather than being sent as a private or direct message.
- Police unable to effectively monitor BlackBerry Messenger (BBM) which was used to plan crimes during the August 2011 riots.

- With police budget cuts how can forces ensure that officers and staff are highly trained in dealing with customers via social media websites and ensuring there is a decent budget for staff training?
- Currently the police are unable to effectively police social media without clear guidance from the CPS, HMIC or Home Office. However the CPS will be releasing some guidelines at the end of 2012.
- Police users of social media need to be extra cautious about what messages are Tweeted and posted online. A message can be posted online within a matter of seconds and if something is posted that isn't meant to be it will be almost impossible to remove it permanently. This is because it is possible for people to 'screen grab' a Tweet or status and this is something can be potentially damaging.
- Crime maps currently aggregate information (and whilst accepting that some offences might be deemed too sensitive for broadcast,) they could be improved by using point data.

11. Conclusion:

The police need to be swift and ready to respond to the online community so that when a major incident breaks the police can lead the social media community rather than there being mixed messages on social networking websites. However that will require forces to have a team of social media gurus on standby. Whilst police forces up and down the country are currently doing an excellent job using social media and integrating it into their force website there are some concerns and recommendations namely;

- Ensuring police officers follow a clear and easy to understand set of guidelines to ensure that no information is posted that may reveal the identity of an individual or a location before officers have attended an incident.
- To follow clear guidelines on how to respond to comments that come into the police via social networking platforms (the GMP model is best).
- To ensure that the integrity of the police service is maintained and that officers and staff respond and engage with the public in a clear and positive manner.
- The creation of one single mobile application where the public can report crime, view and identify wanted suspects, view Tweets and posts from police forces and officers, and view videos posted from a police force. I believe that with one single application where people can engage with the police and keep informed and updated with policing in their local communities we can see additional bridges being built between the public and their local police service.
- The police need to work more closely with BlackBerry in order to effectively police BBM as with other networking websites and applications. Users must continue to have confidence that messages they send remain private, however in the case of the 2011 riots the police need to be able to monitor key words just as GCHQ do.
- Social media gurus in the force control room to have pre-written Tweets and messages for the social media community in the event of a major incident. These would be editable and tailored. These message may come across as automated but they should really be used as guidelines as to what to say rather than Tweeting and posting word for word.
- Continue to promote the force on social media and in the blogosphere and actively encourage people to communicate with NPTs and the force on social networking platforms.

12. Appendix

Responding to comments on social media Greater Manchester Police

