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## Policing through social media

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*Document Version*
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**Title:** Policing through Social Media: A Qualitative Exploration

## Introduction

The phrase 'social media' is used to describe a group of computer-mediated and open-sourced networking platforms, such as Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat, Twitter, WhatsApp, and YouTube. Consumers of these platforms often reference them daily and most use them multiple times a day (Pew Research Center, 2018). As a result, the general public tends to receive most of their insights into current affairs from social media. Moreover, citizen knowledge of the justice system and crime are often shaped by social media consumption (Intravia, Wolff, & Piquerp, 2018). Consequently, the virtual areas inhabited by these platforms have come to be regarded as a "significant public space" (Omand, Barlett, & Miller, 2012, p. 803). As guardians of public safety, therefore, social media presents a new frontier for law enforcement.[1]

Unfortunately, highly reported use-of-force incidents have weakened law enforcement legitimacy and resulted in a decline in public cooperation with police. Likewise, these events have led to a new form of public protest and digital activism (Intravia et al., 2018). Nowhere is this more apparent than the social media pages calling for the condemnation of law enforcement officers. Though much has been said in news and social media about these efforts, little is known about how law enforcement perceive or use social media for their purposes. The paucity of empirical research in this area is surprising, given how social media has permeated nearly all aspects of contemporary society.

To address this gap in the extant literature, we draw upon an ethnographic approach and report insights from officers in three law enforcement agencies in a Southern American state. In doing so, we use field observations and semi-structured interviews with law enforcement on the extent to and ways in which they use social media. Prior to getting into the data, however, we

firstly situate this study within the empirical literature on law enforcement legitimacy, social media, and policing. Second, we describe the methodology employed in this study and then thematically present the researcher's field notes and officer insights from the interview data. Fourth and finally, we discuss the implications from these findings, in terms of the changing approaches to policing and make recommendations for police practice and research.

**Law Enforcement Legitimacy and Social Media**

In the spring of 2014, Michael Brown was shot and killed by Ferguson (MO) police officer Darren Wilson. Outrage over yet another unarmed, young, black, male dying at the hands of law enforcement prompted peaceful and violent protests in Ferguson. Pubic protesters were mobilized in social media events of decent and documented their confrontations with a highly militarized police force (Bonailla & Rosa, 2015; Auston, 2017). Relating to the former, the multivocal nature of Twitter allowed the public to simultaneously, "read what protestors were tweeting, what journalists were reporting, what the police was announcing and how observers and analysts interpreted the unfolding events" (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015, p. 7). Bonilla and Rosa (2015), in their hashtag ethnography, found that protests on-the-grounds of Ferguson were strengthened through social media, which contributed to public campaigns for justice and the emergence of the *Black Lives Matter* (BLM) movement (Auston, 2017). To that end, Maguire, Nix, and Campbell (2017), in their pre-/post-Ferguson analysis of officers killed in-the-line-of-duty, reported that Michael Brown's death launched "a new civil rights movement" aimed at issues of race and police brutality (p. 740; see also Fox & Holt, 2018).

Moreover, subsequent police use-of-force incidents were viewed with a more critical eye. Social media, in particular, has been used as a form of police surveillance (or "watching from below") and has been performed by self-described "police accountability" activists (Owen, 2017,

p. 688). "Cop watching," as it is also known, followed incidents like Ferguson and typically includes the, "incidental, happenstance documentation" of police activities by local citizens (Brucato, 2015, p. 48). Brucato (2015), in his analysis of police accountability activists, believes that cop watchers see themselves as producing a "new popular power" of citizen journalism (p. 49; see also Bonilla & Rosa, 2015).

With more than half of the American population carrying a video-enabled smartphone, unflattering images of police-public contacts have come to the forefront of the Nation's consciousness and the growing spotlight on policing has called into question law enforcement integrity (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015). Though these events can trend on social media and become viral phenomena, they often represent sensationalized aspects of police work as most officers will go their entire career without using their service weapon in-the-line-of-duty (Walker & Katz, 2013). Mischaracterizations of police work on social media, nonetheless, impact the public's assessment of law enforcement legitimacy. To that end, Todak (2017) suggested that law enforcement are facing a "legitimacy crisis" (p. 250).

In the face of anti-police sentiment, Tyler (1988), in his seminal work on *Why People Obey the Law*, argued that public trust in law enforcement is best sustained by decision-making and police practices that are fair, respectful, and just. The philosophy of procedural justice, as it is more commonly known, has garnered a lot of empirical attention in recent decades. Generally speaking, procedural justice has been found to instill public trust and confidence in the police (Myhill & Bradford, 2012), an obligation to follow the law and orders from law enforcement (Tyler & Fagan, 2008), and a sense of community between the police and public (Kochel, 2012). Procedural justice has also been found to have benefits to law enforcement. Donner, Maskaly, Fridell, and Jennings (2015), in their review of the procedural justice extant literature, found it to

be positively related to organizational commitment and job satisfaction, while negatively

associated with police misconduct.

Unfortunately and in spite of these findings, the response from law enforcement has not

been in kind. Many officers, for example, fear becoming the next star of a career-ending viral

video, which has resulted in their reduced willingness to be proactive in their face-to-face

engagements with the public. This depolicing phenomenon, brought on by additional social

media scrutiny of police work, has led some to claim the existence of a 'Ferguson effect' on

policing. Here, it is suggested that crime has increased due to law enforcement's withdrawal

from potentially contentious situations (Pyrooz, Decker, Wolfe, & Shjarback, 2016). Though the

evidence of this has been mixed in the extant literature (see Maguire et al., 2017 for contrary

results), officers are certainly feeling pressure (Deuchar, Fallik, & Crichlow, 2018).

**Police Use of Social Media**

Despite the alleged disengagement of law enforcement from contentious encounters with

residents, police agencies appear to be increasingly engaged in their use of social media

(Thorburn, 2014). In fact, in 2015 the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP)

reported that 94% of American law enforcement agencies had implemented some sort of

Facebook related strategy. Social media strategies, according to Meijer and Thaens (2013) in

their analysis of three law enforcement agencies in North America, include "push", "pull", and

"networking". "Push" strategies are used to broadcast information to citizens, whereas "pull"

strategies seek to attract users to information. Once a user is engaged, "networking" strategies

seek to provide interactive engagements between the agency and public. Push, pull, and

networking strategies are used primarily to craft a public image and aid criminal investigations

(Meijer & Thaens, 2013; see also Heverin & Zach, 2010; Hu, Rodgers, & Lovrich, 2018).

Relating to the former, police are viewed as a somewhat monolithic group. Agencies have, therefore, experienced local consequences for the use-of-force public relations blunders of far way agencies. To strengthen the image of police, more contemporary agencies are bypassing scorned, yet established media outlets and using social media to self-promote their good deeds. In an analysis of 4,915 Facebook posts by American law enforcement agencies, for example, Herevin and Zach (2010) found that most law enforcement social media engagements seek to share information with the public. In fact, Lieberman, Koetzle, and Sakiyama (2013), in their study of the 23 largest police departments' Facebook pages, found 31% of the information shared to be public interest stories. These stories, according to Hu et al.'s (2018) analysis of large American police departments Facebook postings, tend to prompt an image of police as crime fighters. This, according to Reiner's (2003) discursive framework for understanding policing and the media, "involves the continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation of the nature of policing as matters of social order, conflict, and authority change" (p. 106). To facilitate this undertaking, Lee and McGovern (2013) noted the development of public relations units in policing organizations. The hope from these endeavors is that law enforcement agencies are able to regain public trust and build better long-lasting relations with the public (Williams et al., 2013).

Despite this objective, most research finds these efforts to be largely symbolic. Williams et al. (2013), for example, reported that two-way communication between the police and public was rare on social media platforms, in their analysis of the 2011 riots in England that followed the death of Mark Duggan. In fact, Lieberman et al. (2013) found that law enforcement were most likely to receive interactions from the public on social media pages when agencies directly interacted with a specific user, and among stories involving officers hurt or killed in-the-line-of-

duty. Substantively, law enforcements public imaging efforts can be seen a presentation strategy to the public to overcome negative publicity.

In addition to crafting a public image, several incidental and retrospective case studies suggest that law enforcement use social media to facilitate criminal investigations. In doing so, detectives often take advantage of social media users' narcissism, as even those with something criminal to hide often share their lives with other platform users (Trottier, 2011). For that reason, Thorburn (2014), in his analysis of the 2012 Quebec student strike for reasonable college tuition, reported that preliminary investigations often begin on social media pages because they contain information otherwise unavailable to police, they are cheap, and are low-risk to law enforcement and civilian safety due to a detective's ability to remain anonymous while sleuthing for evidence. As an investigative tool, Williams et al. (2013) found that detectives use social media platforms to identify people, discover criminal activity, and gather evidence. This is accomplished, according to Trottier (2011), through undercover approaches and utilization of criminal informants/snitches that have direct access to criminal peers. In this context, Marwich (2012), in his ethnography of American social media use, found that law enforcement are increasingly drawing upon social media's potential for "social surveillance", particularly relating to information about real or potential criminal activity (p. 279). Though social media platforms present an opportunity for law enforcement intelligence gathering, most social science research questions the abilities of law enforcement to use it in real-time (Omand et al., 2012). Police can be said, nevertheless, to be monitoring social media platforms (Owen, 2017).

Despite the growth of technology and increasing use of social media, there is still much to learn regarding how law enforcement use these tools. Though the prior literature highlights some opportunities and challenges for law enforcement, research overwhelmingly portrays how

law enforcement outwardly represent police work through social media postings on a limited

number of platforms (i.e., Facebook and Twitter). Similarly, research exploring more clandestine

operations has primarily been incidental and retrospective. Though case studies are important,

they often represent non-systemic and anecdotal information. Moreover, missing from this body

of literature are the voices of law enforcement and a behind-the-scenes look at how police use

social media. This is all the more critical, due to, growing public outrage for police questionable

police conduct in the post-Ferguson era. Measured against this complex backdrop of a legitimacy

crisis in a post-modern era of oppositional social and political movements, and a renewed

emphasis on public accountability  (Bonilla & Rosa, 2015), the stakes for these analyses could

not be higher.

**Methods**

In this study we focused on exploring the extent and ways American police organizations

use social media and explore the following question: to what extent and in what ways do police

organization use social media? An ethnographic approach was adopted to illuminate officer

personal perspectives and experiences (Hamersley, 2006). Information from a Southern

American state was collected from three law enforcement agencies that serve approximately 1.6

million residents. These agencies are somewhat contiguous (within 100 mile radius of each

other) and include county and city municipalities (hereafter and collectively referred to as

Sunshine City). Residents of Sunshine City had an average household income just below

$50,000 and somewhat mirrored national estimates for the racial and ethnic demographic

characteristics during the data collection period (Census Bureau, 2017). Crime, in the observed

areas, is lower than the national average across all index crimes and, in some instances, was half

the national rate during the observational period (i.e., during the spring of 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016).

The core of this ethnographic approach centered on field observations that were facilitated through existing police-academic partnerships in the gatekeeper tradition. Building a rapport was critical to this qualitative approach and was gained over time and through word of mouth. As a testament to the mutual trust that existed between the officers and the researcher, subsequent experiences were facilitated by officers who often vouched for the researcher. This referral system allowed for multiple perspectives to be seen/heard and continued untill data saturation was reached (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Saturation was determined based on the repetitive nature of the responses and absence of novel answers. During the field observations, the researcher was transparent with the participants about the intent of the study, which was expressed in a mutually signed informed consent form retained by both parties. Furthermore, the researcher adopted the participant-as-observer role (Gold, 1958), whereby he shadowed officers during all aspects of routine deployments. This included (but was not limited too) riding along with officers as they responded to calls for service, accompanying officers on rest breaks, attending agency briefings, observing outreach events, and witnessing covert surveillance work. With each of these experiences, the researcher was treated as a "marginal native" and sought to strike a balance between being a stranger and colleague to the officers (Hammersley & Arkinson, 2007, p. 89; see also Deuchar, 2013). Individual observations varied from half and whole day contacts and were primarily in the afternoon or evening hours.

Throughout the researcher's field observations, informal dialogs with officers were captured in field notes, which included 'jottings' or snippets of conversations that occurred during police-citizen contacts and during direct conversation with the officers while they were on

duty (Emerson, Fretz, & Shaw, 1995, pp. 31-32). In addition to observations, the field notes

reflected personal feelings and impressions that provide a broader contextualization of the

conversations and events as they unfolded. Immediately following each field observation, the

researcher typed-up and filled-in pertinent information, while the experience was still fresh. The

over 40,000 word field notes analyzed in this study presented a rich description of the

approximately 75 hours of observations that occurred during a four month period (January –

April, 2017).

To explore the field observational data in more depth, 20 of the observed officers were

queried within semi-structured interviews, which were typically held in the officers' or authors'

working environment but secluded from people passing by. Questions were individualized and

focused on the impact of officer confidence, morale, and policing strategies emerging from high

profile news/social media coverage of events such as those occurring in Ferguson. To guide the

interviews, however, an interview protocol was developed. Many of the interviews with officers

led to conversations about police-citizen interactions in face-to-face and digital forums, though

these encounters were not necessarily with officers directly responsible for maintaining their

departments social media pages. The information officers provided was given freely and without

repercussion. In fact, officers could withdraw from the study without penalty, though none did.

All participating officers were snowball sampled. The bulk of interviewed officers were

law enforcement in the same county (n = 17, 85%) but differed widely in rank and

responsibilities. Most, in fact, were assigned to specialized units (n = 16, 80%) or leadership

positions (n = 9, 45%), including two chief executive administrators. Participating officers also

varied in their length of service, with two decades of law enforcement experience being the

average ($\bar{x}$ = 20.1, Min. 4, Max. 46). The overwhelming majority of interviewees were white (n

= 16, 80%) and/or male (n = 18, 90%). Racial and gender concentrations, however, are

consistent with National rates, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics (2013).

Interviews with the officers were audio recorded and lasted, on average, just under an

hour. Audio files were subsequently transcribed, producing 130,000 words of dialogue. A non-

positivist approach was chosen to analyze the field notes and interview data. The authors first

listened to the audio files and read the field notes line-by-line. Despite the research having a

broader focus, the prominence of social media content during this initial review led to

subsequent discussions among the authors. A more systematic isolation of relevant content in the

field notes and interview transcripts was achieved in this analysis through the following search

terms: "social", "media" (excluding news media references), "Facebook", "YouTube",

"Instagram", "Twitter", "hashtag", "#", "share", "view", "post", "online", "film", "record",

"watch", "teck", "video", and "internet". From this inductive approach emerged a full study that

we analyzed in more depth for the extent and ways officers made use of social media for

enhancing public relations and investigative purposes.

This subsample of data was again inductively scrutinized for patterns and themes using

axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). References were fairly overt and without vailed

meanings, and, therefore, are presented with little interpretation among the identified themes.

Themes are arranged in the findings section using grounded theory in narrative form, which was

based on our knowledge of the existing extant literature on policing through social media

(Charmaz, 2006). This approach to data analysis is most suited for our privileged participant

perspective and is consistent with the interpretative paradigm. Finally, field observation notes

and interview data were anonymized with pseudonyms in keeping with the agreed upon

informed consent.[2]

**Findings**

Interviews and field observations indicated that the influence of social media on the policing profession was widespread. In fact, all of the officers discussed social media during the course of their interviews and many brought it up during the researcher's field observations. The most prominent social media platforms discussed were Facebook (including Facebook Live), Instagram, Myspace, Periscope, Xbox Live with Friends, and YouTube (in alphabetical order). Social media content fell into four themes: 1. bringing attention to the agency, 2. prospective criminal investigations, 3. retrospective criminal investigations, and 4. ongoing challenges of policing through social media.

**Bringing Attention to the Agency**

Many officers commented that they used social media, on behalf of their agency, to bring attention to their actions (Lee & McGovern, 2013). Jennifer, for example, told the researcher that they "put out in social media their positive influence". Emily, however, was quick to dispel notions that the officers are self-promoting their activities; rather, they are caught in social media posts simply making their everyday civic contribution. To this effect, she proclaimed,

> *[It's] not that they're doing it to get their picture on Facebook but because that's what that family needs. They needed that support. They needed something positive and they [the officers] go and they do it on their own. And usually it's another officer standing next to them getting a picture of it going, "Caught you doing something good."* – Emily, Police Chief

Some officers were more proactive in seeking to chronicle positive community events. The researcher's field notes document one such instance when an officer suggested taking a photo with the researcher and posting it on the agencies social media page:

> *We walk further over and there is another group of cops. One of the officers there is responsible for media relations. He greets me and asks if he can take a photo of me with the team. He states, "We want to put some positive messages out on Twitter like this – the police working with a researcher from REDACTED. It helps to reassure the public that we are here and there are positive things happening." I find it interesting to think that the police are using this proactive approach and that I am at the center of it.* – Researcher's Field Notes

In addition to promoting community engagement, Daniel (a police Sergeant) reported that social media was used to disseminate crime-related information when he declared that his agency "puts out in social media the arrests we made". In many ways, these comments suggested that social media was used by our participants as a public relations tool, focused on both 'pushing' positive news stories of community engagement approaches, and 'pulling' citizens towards the agencies in order to share information about crime fighting strategies and achievements (Meijer & Thaens, 2013, p. 344).

**Prospective Criminal Investigations**

Social media was also found to be used by law enforcement for more covert purposes. Several officers, for example, talked about proactively surveilling citizens through social media to collect information for threat assessments. Daniel discussed an instance of this in the researcher's field notes:

> *Daniel shows me one young man whose girlfriend was recently shot and killed because members of her family were members of a rival gang. He says that, "The young man has been posting recently that he is completely confused and 'f\*\*\*ed up' and 'doesn't know what he will do.' As he scrolls down the young man's social media site, I can see that in a recently added photo that he is blatantly posing with a gun.* – Researcher's Field Notes

By patrolling social media pages, Kevin reported that officers were able to observe patterns of escalation that were communicated to street level officers. He said,

*we can be relaying that core information out to officers. Or checking social media to see what he's posting. "Hey, he had a 9mm Glock last week. Now, this week, he's got an AK-47". So, if I got guys out there physically hunting for this person then they need to have that information, as well. – Kevin, Sergeant*

The reconnaissance that was collected from social media pages could be subsequently used for proactive, intelligence operations, as Jack described,

*If they're talking about some type of gathering [on social media] that's going to be going on and we know a bunch of gang members will be attending, we will pretty much put some type of operation [together] where we'll go there and monitor any activity. Even if it's a non-violent gathering, it's still a tool that we use when we gain intel […] and then if there are any other crimes being committed by these individuals then we have gained the intelligence to identify potential suspects down the line. […] Social media is key right now with us. – Jack, Detective*

In this regard, several officers professed that citizens did not know that they were being monitored on social media. To this point, Officer Jonathan commented that "a lot of times kids are so oblivious. They don't realize that we are monitoring them". Likewise, Daniel reported that,

*These young men don't realize, they sit in their bedroom on their cell phone and they put stuff on social media thinking that just their friends are seeing it. But it's public, you know. It's made public and we all see it. – Daniel, Sergeant*

Surveillance work on social media platforms was often accomplished without detection in what detectives referred to as "ghosting". John, for example, stated "we all have Facebook accounts because you need to be prepared to be a ghost". Law enforcement were able to avoid detection by posing as attractive females and friending and/or following suspected criminals' social media pages. The researcher's field notes captured this phenomenon as an officer sought to develop a better understanding of a criminal network:

*Daniel explains that he has infiltrated his and another young men's sites by going undercover and posing as a young female who the young men then befriend. He can now go into each of their pages and examine the links they have with each other. – Researcher's Field Notes*

Ghosting was necessary, officers communicated to the researcher, because if criminals knew their social media pages were being surveilled, their activities would go further underground. Jonathan illustrated this point when he disclosed to the researcher that,

> *They are so oblivious. They don't realize that we are monitoring them. So, you like kinda play. […] You have to do it in a sense that it doesn't really expose our efforts here because at the end of the day this can be our downfall, as well. So, we don't want to provide too much information but at the same time, you know, doing in a way that it doesn't really expose us.* – Researcher's Field Notes

Law enforcement, throughout the interviews and field observations, identified several types of information that they collect from social media posts, including the identification of people and/or associates, weapons, vehicles, gang signs, tattoos, graffiti, and their connections to one another. Officers, however, seemed most sensitive to postings with guns. This was evident by the frequency in which officers referenced pictures and videos of citizens with guns. Michael (a Detective), for example, described the urgency of one of his investigations by noting that the citizen was "flashing a gun on Facebook". Others, like Gabriel (a Special Agent in the Violent Crimes Division) and Calvin (a patrol officer), were most interested in photos and videos on social media depicting assault rifles. Known felons in possession of a firearm prompted perhaps the greatest investigate attention. Michael recounted how these occurrences were handled in one of his cases.

> *I just did a case last week where the police officers have watched this guy they know. He's a gang member. He's a convicted felon. He posts to Facebook holding guns. So, I looked at the pictures up close and it's a real gun: they're not toys. Well they know where he lives and it's a recent picture. We can't arrest him but we can maybe get a search warrant […] to get in the house, which we've just done last week. So, they got a search warrant, got into this gang member's home, and they got an assault rifle and a Glock pistol and this person was a multi-, seven time convicted felon. So, we took him. He went to jail.* – Michael, Detective

Officers were clearly using social media regularly as an undercover investigative tool in order to identify people, locations, and criminal patterns (Trottier, 2011).

**Retrospective Criminal Investigations**

Additionally, officers discussed how social media could be used retrospectively when something happens. Officers, for example, would reference social media posts made around the time of the incident by people they believed are involved, which was observed in the researcher's field notes:

> *He then looked across all the significant events that the young men had been involved in together, such as the shooting of a child who was caught in the crossfire from their gang shootings. Andrew shows me some film of a recent gang shooting, where 80 rounds of AK-47 ammunition had been used in a shoot-out. As I watch, I can see the bullet rounds emerging.* – Researcher's Field Notes

This often contributes to law enforcement understandings about how events were promulgated. In a joint interview with Detectives Owen and Joshua the researcher asked the officers about a fight that had taken place at a high school football game. Owen explained that it was "one of those incidents that was on social media before we even got it under control. It was already on Facebook while we were still dealing with it. It helped because the videos they put on there". Then Joshua added," Yeah, great videos. They became evidence. It was awesome".

Daniel divulged that he uses the information he procured from social media pages as a baseline check for the fidelity of a suspect, witness, or victim's statement, when he said, "I know they can't lie to me, so I find that rewarding when they try to lie to me, like I call them on their lies and then they don't know what to do." The importance of social media, as an investigatory tool, was later emphasized by Owen who expressed, that "there's a long-standing joke that, you know, basically if it doesn't happen on Facebook, it didn't happen". Substantively, social media

is a tool that law enforcement use to understand trends in criminal behavior and build criminal

cases (Williams et al., 2013). Unfortunately, however, Gabriel suggested that criminals were

becoming wise to these investigative tactics and were, therefore, keeping a "more low profile" on

social media.


**Challenges**

The utility of social media for law enforcement, however, was not unabridged, according

to several officers. Luke, an outgoing Police Chief, for example, expressed concern for

measuring the impact of social media when he was interviewed:

> *Everybody wants to look at things now in the Twitter age [...]. You want to put a*
> *number on things. So, I don't know how that values. I don't know what it's going*
> *to equate to but I don't think that there's anything wrong with it or any downside*
> *to it.* – Luke, outgoing Police Chief

Several other officers lamented that law enforcement were often behind the technological

curve of criminal activity (as detected by Omand et al., 2012). To this point, Andrew [a

Detective] reported that some messages on social media still "can't be intercepted". Many

officers observed, however, that advances in technology and social media were not slowing.

Case in point, Noah [a Sergeant] proclaimed that "technology is going to get better" and Police

Chief Emily confirmed that "it's always changing".

Being slow to catch on to criminal activities in the digital age made some officers

concerned that the offenders who were getting caught in social media investigations were low

hanging fruits, while more serious offenders remained undetected. Luke articulated this point in

his more broad criticism of police when he said,

> *there's a saying with police that we only really catch the stupid ones. [...] You*
> *would think that, you know, a lot of them they're kind of the periphery guys or*
> *something like that. But the hard core ones that have some sense and knowledge*

*they'll keep it a little bit more low key than posting stuff.* – Luke, outgoing Police Chief

Finally, several officers reflected on how social media investigations impacted their work-flow. Some officers, for example, suggested that monitoring social media increased investigative efficacy (Trottier, 2011). In support of this contention, Andrew explained, "I may be sitting at my desk now watching six locations […] but it is] actually better because you can get so much more done". Similarly, Ryan noticed that investigations on social media were "just much more cost-effective". Nevertheless, several officers commented that social media investigations were inconsistent with the action-packed crime fighter image fueled by the need for the immediate gratification of arrests. Rather, such operations were characterized by more long-term desk investigations. Detective Andrew articulated this issue in the researcher's field notes when he stated that,

> *"Most cops need that instant gratification of getting a result on the streets and putting the cuffs on someone. In this side of the work, you may need to wait 18 months to get a result. But if you wait long enough, you get bigger and better results than on the street. One guy we were watching got 30 years […] but most guys can't do this job, you know. We are used to being 'hound dogs' – if it moved, we chased it out on the street – but the guys we were chasing were minions compared to those we are looking into now. We've progressed to detecting the organized, sophisticated gangsters."* – Researcher's Field Notes

On the one hand, it seemed that the use of social media in policing was clearly viewed as undermining the traditional 'hard charger' image of frontline policing, characterized by a preference for aggression, confrontation, and enforcement. On the other hand, officers clearly valued it as an effective long-term investigative tool that ultimately generated better law enforcement results (Williams et al., 2013).

**Discussion**

In an era of unprecedented technological advancement, behavioral norms have changed dramatically and ushered in new challenges for industry leaders. The field of law enforcement is no exception, and this phenomenon is an indelible part of discussions on contemporary policing. Although researchers have explored the public's engagement with social media in the post-Ferguson era, the current study explored law enforcement perspectives regarding the use of interactive online media and its impact on policing. As Wolfe and Nix (2016) suggested in their study of police willingness to engage communities, the voices of law enforcement are critical to discussions during times of increased police scrutiny. Although there are limitations to the generalizability of these findings (particularly related to the snowballed data collection), the rich narratives and perspectives provided by this qualitative inquiry are noteworthy. Furthermore, these findings help to provide access to the views of law enforcement in an environment of mixed public sentiment toward police.

Several themes emerged pertaining to the utility of social media as well as challenges to the effectiveness of policing in this new social context. Participants believed that social media is useful as a public relations tool and, in this regard, policing must follow the lead of other industries. While social media can be used to 'push' (Meijer & Thaens, 2013) routine information on transportation delays, recent arrests, and sharing suspect information, there is also potential for getting the message out on salient policing initiatives with the aim of building trust in the community. Local agencies must also deal with negative public perceptions that stem from the alleged conduct of officers in other jurisdictions, especially in the post-Ferguson era. Where there is hostility toward police, justified or not, it can be especially challenging for local agencies to promote their own achievements, and increase awareness of positive efforts to engage the

community, along with new crime reduction approaches and the rationale behind them (Meijer &

Thaens, 2013).

Participants also found social media to be an effective tool for acquiring intelligence. The

use of social media, in this regard, allows police leaders to shape their priorities in ways that

reflect the needs of the community. If the use of social media were part of an agency-wide

policing strategy to 'network' (Meijer & Thaens, 2013) with the community in a meaningful

way, this could yield dividends for criminal investigations later on. Many of America's large

urban centers, for example, experience youth violence and delinquency issues. These areas could

benefit if police were to proactively use social media to develop more syncretic and culturally-

informed approaches that resonate with youth (Williams et al., 2013). The New York City Police

Department (NYPD), for example, along with other large agencies across the country, have

found social media to be one of the simplest and most effective ways to connect with residents

(Mueller & Singer, 2015). Intentional use of online platforms in this manner could sustain an

open dialogue that can potentially bolster community-oriented approaches and reduce violence

(Shead, 2017).

Another theme that emerged, closely linked with the notion of gathering intelligence, is

that social media can also be a basis for prospective and retrospective criminal investigations.

Regarding the former, a number of participants highlighted the importance of surveillance and

threat assessment. Such approaches allow law enforcement to get information on potential

crimes without being detected by their targets. Information found on social media, including the

identification of people and/or associates, weapons, vehicles, gang signs, tattoos, graffiti, and

their connections to one another, can greatly assist criminal investigations and can also help

direct police resources and assets more efficiently. For retrospective investigations, officers can

engage in online sleuthing and fill in the gaps when building crime-related timelines by looking

for information that was posted around the time of the incidents in question (Trottier, 2011).

The usefulness of social media in advancing investigations, that may have otherwise been

difficult to develop, was also highlighted in the findings. This benefit has not only been achieved

in large metropolitan agencies. Smaller departments have reaped similar rewards. The Hot

Springs (AR) Police Department, for example, reported that their social media campaigns had a

95% success rate in apprehending the most dangerous offenders. They also claimed that their

online "crowdsourcing" approach, along with an initiative called "Warrant Wednesdays," were

successful 'pull' (Meijer & Thaens, 2013) strategies for finding individuals with felony warrants

that had evaded police (Fox 16, 2018).

In spite of these merits, social media could also pose a challenge to police work.

According to respondents, many of the individuals who were caught as a result of social media

investigations might be deemed as "low hanging fruits," as the more serious offenders remained

undetected. It is believed that police are not sophisticated users of technology and that tech-

savvy criminals tend to be several steps ahead of the police. This potential shortcoming

underlines the importance of creating inter-agency partnerships, like fusion centers, which can

help strengthen the capabilities of law enforcement in terms of sharing information and

resources. Such partnerships are particularly important as deepfake and digital double

tecknology/software evolves. In the future, law enforcement will have to parce real and

augmented digital content to maintain the efficacy of their criminal investigations.

Moreover, law enforcement should be mindful of the unintended consequences of

ostensibly spying on the public in digital spaces. While posing of as an attractive young female

to ghost suspects may be legal, law enforcement risk alienating the public they need to solve

crimes with this somewhat ethically questionable tactic. A deliberate balance must be struck between the public's expectation of privacy and public safety and expressed in agency policy. This degree of transparency will promote a more thoughtful exchange, which is especially needed in the post-Ferguson era.

**Conclusion**

It is estimated that almost 3 billion people use social media, with approximately 200 million users in America (Statistica, 2019). Social media platforms are so entrenched in everyday life that industries have had to adopt new strategies in order to stay relevant and engage effectively with a dynamic community of consumers. Police departments are also adapting as demonstrated by the use of new technologies such a body-worn cameras, biometrics for data security, rapid DNA technology, and providing training to officers for these advancements. Law enforcement agencies should, therefore, be lauded for their willingness to use available technology to enhance public relations, community engagement, and criminal investigations.

Still, as we contemplate the future of law enforcement, there is concern that Constitutional rights are not given fair consideration by police when it comes to criminal investigations on social media (Raleigh, 2018), and that the infrastructure of police accountability must be redefined in order to address the changing needs of society (Walker & Archbold, 2014). Furthermore, it is a belief held by a growing number of users that if the Fourth Amendment protects citizens from warrantless searches where there is a reasonable expectation of privacy, that this should also apply to clandestine investigations on social media pages (Lee, 2018). Sensitivity to these issues were heightened by the Facebook-Cambridge Analytica scandal. Cambridge Analytica, a political consulting firm that closed operations in 2018, was

accused of using and secretly keeping data from 50 million Facebook users without their permission. This led to widely reported investigations in America and the United Kingdom regarding the dealings of the company, and the leaders of Facebook and Twitter being called to hearings on Capitol Hill to answer questions on potential ethical violations (Sherr & Nieva, 2018).

In the aftermath of such breaches, there is a need for broader discussion on ways to ensure that social media companies protect user data from intrusive and unreasonable forms of social media mining (Lee, 2018). While the mining of user data by private companies is beyond the scope of this research, it is still important to determine what is a "reasonable search" when it comes to police use of social media for investigative purposes. Indeed, the Community Control Over Police Surveillance laws that were passed in states such as California and Maine may be a step in the right direction (Lee, 2018). Such laws seek to empower residents to determine how surveillance technologies should be used. These issues, however, are by no means settled and it is clear that law enforcement agencies must navigate a whole new world when it comes to social media in the post-Ferguson era.

**Notes**

1. In the United States of America, the term 'police' is used in reference to local providers of law enforcement services. The more broadly defined 'law enforcement' can include all forms of law enforcement services, including municipal, county, state, and federal agencies. In this manuscript, they are used as they are discussed in the extant literature or based on the generalized population.

2. These procedures were assessed and approved for ethical and social responsibility with the researchers' institutional review board.

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