



Using social media as a means of improving public confidence

Abstract

The 'confidence agenda' poses important new challenges for crime and disorder reduction partnerships in general and the police in particular. To date, the police have made only limited use of new forms of social media and where they have been used, the police have yet to realise their full potential. New approaches are suggested that would increase their effectiveness. The challenge for the police will be to find a way to embrace the spirit of the new social media in such a way that the content that is developed is convincing and feels authentic to users.

Key words

Social media; confidence; crime; police.

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The confidence agenda

In a recent article in *Safer Communities*, Kirby & McPherson (2009) outlined how, in recent years, policy-makers and community safety professionals have increasingly become concerned with the question of how safe members of the community feel, as well as how safe they actually are. This is a concern embodied in *PSA Delivery Agreement 23: Make communities safer* (HM Government, 2009) and the single confidence target by which police forces are now measured.

The confidence agenda is, in part, a response to the so-called 'perception gap'. Despite the British Crime Survey suggesting that there have been substantial falls in crime over recent years, people's perception tends to be that crime is rising. One dimension of this 'perception gap' is the contrast between views of what is happening nationally and locally. There is a clear distinction between perceptions of changes in crime rates nationally and locally. Recently, the British Crime Survey has used new questions to measure perceptions of crime. Moon *et al* (2009) report the first results from analysis of the new questions and show that 46% of people think that crime levels locally have gone up, while 84% think that national crime levels have gone up. The perception gap between changes nationally and locally is greater for the more serious (and therefore rarer) types of violence and smaller for acquisitive crimes (Moon *et al*, 2009). Moon *et al* (2009) argue that these differences in perception suggest that personal experience is more likely to play a part in the perceptions of more common crimes, while perceptions of rarer crime types are likely to be influenced by media reporting, which tends to focus on the more violent crimes.

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Moon *et al* (2009) found that perceptions of increased national crime levels were higher than perceptions of increased local crime levels across all areas. Therefore, they concluded that there is no relationship between perceptions of increased national crime levels and the level of crime in the area of residence. However, perceptions of local crime were linked to local crime levels. Moon and colleagues' (2009) analysis of small area police recorded crime data showed a clear linear relationship between actual levels of crime and perceptions of the comparative level of crime in the local area. For example, they found that 28% of those living in areas with the highest crime rates perceived that they lived in a higher than average crime area compared with just one per cent of those living in the areas with the lowest crime rates.

The confidence agenda also addresses concerns about the public's relationship with criminal justice agencies, particularly the police. Underlying this issue is evidence to suggest that confidence in the police has eroded over time, and concerns about the impact that this might have on the legitimacy and hence effectiveness of the criminal justice system. As Mike Hough argues in the foreword to Duffy *et al* (2007):

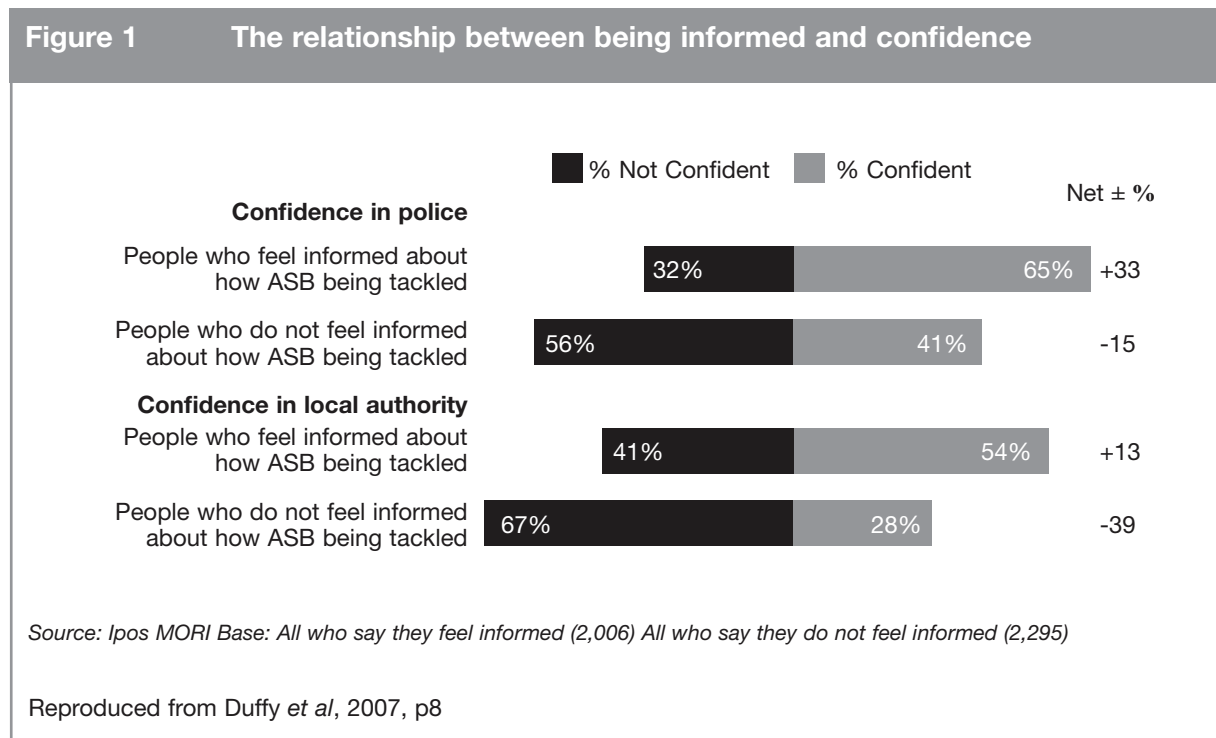
'Compliance with the law requires institutions of justice that are not only effective but are also able to command the trust and confidence of the public. Bolstering the legitimacy of the justice system is an important priority.'

Duffy *et al* (2007) contend that the police are highly trusted (especially when compared to other groups within the criminal justice system), although this confidence reduces after contact.

There is a widespread view that the police are potentially well placed to provide trusted information to the public. For example, Duffy *et al* (2007, p9) argue that:

'... a highly trusted but relatively untapped source of information within the CJS itself; the police themselves are among the most trusted but least cited as sources of information.'

Their evidence suggest that people who feel informed are more confident about the measures being used (see **Figure 1**).



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Similarly, Kirby & McPherson (2009, p25) suggest that:

*'... the Police appear in an excellent position to communicate information to the public on a wider range of issues, **if this can be delivered effectively.***

However, precisely how to do this is more complicated. Interventions based on media campaigns, newsletters etc sometimes appear to reduce fear, sometimes have no effect and sometimes increase it (Ditton & Innes, 2005). Duffy *et al* (2007, p9) suggest that:

'Clearly the police should publish more information and on a broader range of issues. Many already do provide newsletters or flyers and annual reports (and are in fact required to produce basic information), but these are not registering with people – and more targeted communications on key performance measures and local initiatives are likely to have a greater impact.'

Our contention is that the police should go much further than this. As well as producing more effective and better targeted communications for their local communities, the police also need to develop more interactive and participative communication strategies and, in particular, make more use of social media. There is evidence to suggest that there is a demand from the public for such an approach:

'There is a huge appetite for information about the action the police are taking to tackle local problems. There are over 3.5m searches every month on Google for information on the police. In fact the majority of the public (58%) say their priority is information on how crime and anti-social behaviour is being tackled in their area.' (Home Office, Undated: 2)

What is social media?

A good definition of social media is this one from Technology in Translation (2007):

'A new set of internet tools that enable shared community experiences, both online and in person. Social media allows people with basic computer skills to tell their stories using publishing tools such as blogs, video logs, photo sharing, podcasting and wikis (collaboratively edited web pages).'

So how can crime and safety organisations use this technology to create a different dynamic between the services they offer and the individuals and communities they serve?

On the Evolving Web blog, Jim Benson (2008) sums up the spirit of social media as follows:

'In general, social media operates by bringing people together and letting them do what we do best. Talk, complain, extol, laugh, make mischief, become enlightened, fall in love. In other words, it uses something as context to bring together people and things that fit in that context and then steps back.'

Ultimately, social media is about people and how they come together to work on projects or ideas, and although it is supported by technology it is fundamentally about groups. This was reinforced by Barack Obama's presidential election campaign, which used social media very effectively as a tool to engage with communities. Rahaf Harfous of mybarackobama.com (Felesky, 2008) summarised the campaign by saying:

'The campaign gave new media the opportunity to become an integrated part of the communications campaign... It helped to access a lot of people by giving them tools to organize, to create events, to connect with each others and giving them everything that they needed, so that when they went off-line they were fully equipped... to pass on talking points to neighborhoods and families... Everything that we did was to connect people, because it was a movement that was fundamentally about people.'

The key messages here are that social media was integrated into the marketing campaign and not seen as an add-on, and that it was essentially about people, who spread the message and created the content.

Why should the police make better use of social media?

We suggest that there are three potential advantages for the police in developing more interactive and participative communication strategies and in particular making more use of social media:

1. Research suggests that effective community engagement can have a positive impact on increasing the public's feelings of safety and on improving police community relations (Myhill, 2006). A prerequisite of effective community engagement is community engagement that is genuinely participative (Myhill, 2006). A communication strategy that integrates social media will provide opportunities not only for the police to reach groups of the community that they have traditionally found harder to reach, but also for the development of communication strategies that are more genuinely interactive and participative, thus supporting meaningful community engagement.
2. Effective use of social media will provide opportunities for the police to better understand the needs of some communities that have traditionally been harder for them to reach. This is information that can be fed into strategic assessments, problem profiles and local problem-solving work undertaken by crime and disorder partnerships.
3. There is strong evidence that the media plays a key role in the perception of rising crime rates, particularly national rates (Duffy *et al*, 2007). For example, when Duffy *et al* (2007) asked the public why they thought there was more crime now than two years ago, 57% stated that it was because of what they saw on television and 48% said it was because of what they read in newspapers. Effective use of social media will provide an opportunity for the police to develop a strong local media strategy to counter some of the effects of national media reporting.

How are police forces currently using social media?

A number of forces have used YouTube sites (see **Figure 2**), Facebook pages (**Figure 3**, overleaf),

Twitter and Twitter Pics (**Figure 4**, overleaf). Some have created blogs, mainly from chief constables. Most forces use some sort of RSS feed (RSS feeds allow web users to be kept up-to-date with the latest content from particular websites), and **Figure 5** (overleaf) shows an example of a RSS news feed from the Greater Manchester Police website. West Midlands police have developed PCTV (www.west-midlands.police.uk/pctv/index.asp), a series of programmes on police issues (**Figure 6**, overleaf). Some police forces already use their sites to promote general information, focusing more on content that is of general public interest rather than solely on crime related issues. A good example of this is [yglas.com](http://www.yglas.com) (www.yglas.com/think-u-know), which looks at internet safety.

Are these social media initiatives missing the point, however? They certainly get a message out. But the message is primarily one way – from the police to the public. The content, more often than not, is crime-focused. For example, in our brief and unscientific survey of RSS feeds from various police forces we found that the content was predominantly reports on recent crimes and appeals for information to help solve crimes and catch known offenders. Sites of the types described above are generally run by the police, which itself influences the perception of those who look at the site. It is also interesting to consider how the content is distributed, where the content

Figure 2 Example of police use of YouTube



Figure 3 Example of police use of Facebook



Figure 4 Example of police use of Twitter Pics



Figure 5 Example of police RSS news feed (on 2 December 2009)

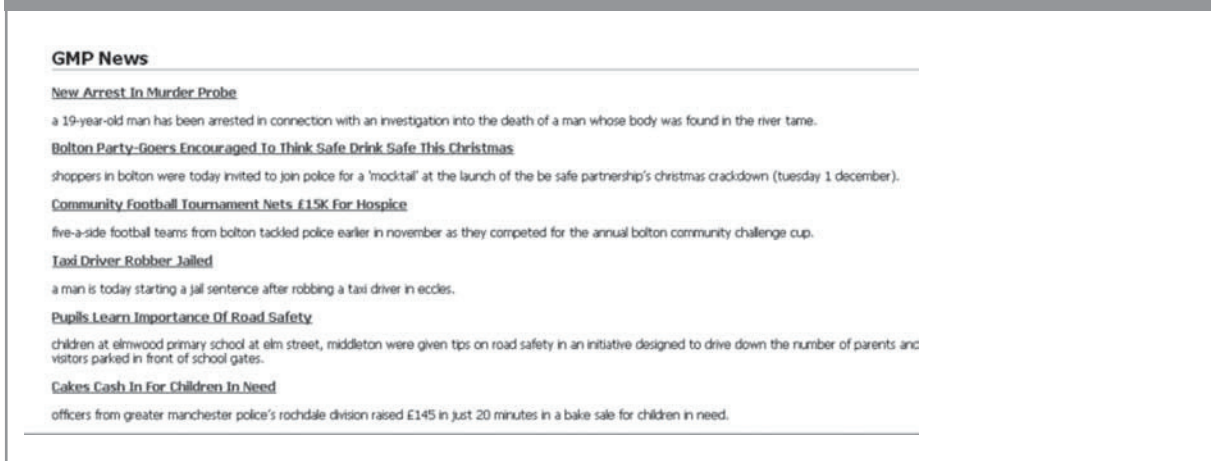
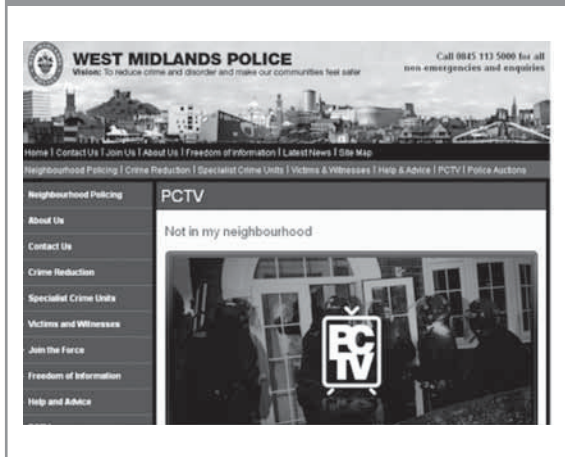


Figure 6 Example of West Midlands Police PCTV



is sent to, who is engaged in the production of the content and how much content is being distributed. In summary, are the police using these tools purely to 'push out' content, or do they also make use of its potential as an engagement tool?

We are not suggesting that better use of social media by the police will necessarily be straightforward for them, however; new social media also present the police with a number of challenges. The obvious one is the potential for a new form of police accountability. This was particularly noticeable during the G20 demonstration on 29 March 2009, when people participating in demonstrations used cameras on their mobile phones to make videos of police using excessive force with demonstrators. This is likely

to happen more as the technology becomes more available, and raises the possibility that some police actions in some situations might be scrutinised closely. Interestingly, the police perspective of the overall management of the event was hardly reported by the mainstream media, which largely ignored the possibility that positive policing work might have taken place at the event. Will the more effective use of social media provide the police with new opportunities to capture positive aspects of policing work and make this available to different audiences in new ways?

How could social media be harnessed to support the confidence agenda?

This presents a number of challenges, such as what content is required, who can produce it and how it can be made.

Our own experience of developing social media through our work with People's Voice Media illustrates some of the issues. People's Voice Media is a not-for-profit organisation that supports individuals to have a voice and create dialogue within communities. People's Voice Media has developed an accredited community reporter's programme that gives social media skills to local people and agencies to support them to develop the content. This could be to express their experiences, produce news stories or documentaries, or undertake a consultation exercise with local communities on a particular issue. Eileen Wattam, a PhD student from the University of Salford, recently undertook independent research on the community reporter's programme and found:

The Community Reporters Programme is centred on using technology to empower people by enabling participants to express themselves and tell their stories about their lives or about their local area online using a range of social media tools. The programme is benefiting and being benefited by people from a range of different backgrounds including people who may be categorised as digitally excluded within popular and political discourses including the unemployed,

asylum seekers, and people affected by homelessness, ill health and disabilities.'

She goes on to say:

'The development of political power ie. the power to voice opinions, to influence decision making and engage in collective efforts to bring about change is interpreted as lying at the heart of community empowerment and regeneration. Some Community Reporters referred to an enhanced capacity to express their viewpoints and Community Reporters also contribute to the potential development of political power through giving a voice to and promoting local community groups and events.' (Wattam, 2009)

This approach, using accredited community reporters who work with the police, or even training up the police to be community reporters, could provide new approaches to content development that are more democratic and that involve genuine partnerships between the police and the public. So is this an expensive way to produce content? In terms of money, the answer is no. People already have a lot of the technology in their pockets, including mobile phones, webcams, digital cameras and cheap video cameras (such as flip cameras costing around £80), and can upload video to a PC and then onto YouTube or a blog. A notebook computer, costing around £800, allows a user to produce podcasts and video very simply and there is a lot of open source technology (software that is made available for free on the internet) that allows users to edit audio content. There are free blogs, such as wordpress.com or Google's eblogger, which allow users to develop content at no or very little cost.

The costs for the police will come in managing such projects. Not only will there be a need to train and develop community reporters, but time and resources will be needed to link into existing community media networks and distribution channels. There are numerous community media channels that could be used to distribute the content. These include community radio and TV stations, internet radio and TV stations, community websites and

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community newspapers, as well as social networking sites such as Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Stumble Upon etc, which are ever-growing and developing. All of these could become part of the marketing mix for the distribution of content. In terms of community media, then, this already exists and might simply be about establishing relations with these organisations and offering capacity building or funding support to help them sustain themselves. However, this process of engagement will in and of itself provide the police with valuable opportunities to engage with so called 'hard to reach' communities.

The real challenge for the police will be finding a way to embrace the spirit of the new social media in such a way that the content that is developed is convincing and feels authentic to the users of social media. Part of this will involve the police surrendering the lead role in at least some social media projects. The benefit of doing so will be to allow the police to engage with traditionally hard-to-reach communities and use social media and online social networking sites to highlight the range of policing activities and promote dialogue around key issues. This could include highlighting success stories, community payback schemes, crime and disorder initiatives, victims' stories, ex-offender stories and the changing nature of neighbourhood policing.

Conclusion

Social media is an important forum for communication between people, in which we learn what others think and how they behave. Thus, social media conversations can develop, reinforce or persuade us to think differently about our attitudes and behaviours. Social media tools can be used to give voice to local police forces and the communities they represent by facilitating a dialogue between the two, and offer a chance to challenge attitudes and norms. There are a number of ways that organisations involved with crime and safety can use social media. There are many existing organisations that could be used not only to distribute content, for example from police forces, but also to produce content in conjunction with local communities. Technology is changing at an ever faster rate and what we term

'technology in the pocket' devices (ie. devices that everyone has at hand) are increasing the ability of people and organisations to develop content. It is simple and easy to produce content and distribute that content, and this is likely to become easier. This is something that will not go away. The question, therefore, is how can we use this technology, and in particular social media, to create a different type of public service and engage with the users and non-users of these services in a different way?

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