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Requests for further information should be directed to Zoe Walkington, School of Psychology, The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. z.walkington@open.ac.uk

**Are you talking to me? How identity is constructed on police-owned Facebook sites.**

Zoe Walkington (z.walkington@open.ac.uk), Graham Pike (graham.pike@open.ac.uk), Ailsa Strathie (a.strathie@open.ac.uk), Catriona Havard (catriona.havard@open.ac.uk), Hayley Ness (hayley.ness@open.ac.uk), & Virginia Harrison (gini.harrison@open.ac.uk). The Open University, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes, MK7 6AA. This research was supported by a Police Knowledge Fund grant from HEFCE and the Home Office.

Police use of social media has increased in the United Kingdom since 2008 (Crump, 2011), yet there has been little qualitative exploration of how police-owned Facebook sites work to shape the identity of forces. This study explores the action orientation of small stories on the Facebook site of a UK metropolitan police force. The research considers the collaborative ways in which stories are positioned and constructed collectively by multiple narrators (both formal police posts, and the commenting public). Given the ability of social media to enact identity through interaction, this research explores how the identity of the police force is positioned, and repositioned, by social media activity. It concludes that both the opportunity for dyadic interactions that may underpin effective community policing, and the potential benefits of

harnessing the opportunity for effective identity work, are currently being under utilised on police Facebook sites.

**Keywords:** identity, positioning, small-stories, police, Facebook, social media

Police forces in the UK have increased their use of Twitter and Facebook since 2008 when the use of social media was endorsed and encouraged by the Association of Chief Police Officers [ACPO] (Crump, 2011). A body of quantitative evidence suggests that members of the public are keen to engage with police departments via social media. For example, in 2011 a three-day flood crisis in Queensland, Australia acted as a catalyst for 150,000 new followers of the relevant police Facebook site (Kelly, 2014). In 2010, Greater Manchester Police tweeted about every incident coming into their control room for 24 hours, increasing Twitter followers from 3,000 to 17,000. In 2012 the NYPD Facebook site posted a picture of an officer giving a barefoot homeless man a pair of shoes he had bought him, and this picture obtained 12,000 likes and 48,000 comments, and within one day increased the force's Facebook following by over 30,000. Internationally therefore, there is evidence that community members are keen to follow police departments through social media and that an engaging story or initiative can be sufficient to increase followers significantly and rapidly.

Beyond the numerical increase in online engagement between the police and their communities, there is also the potential for positive outcomes of communicating via social media that might not always be possible with traditional communicative methods. For example, the social media presence during the English riots in August 2011 allowed police forces to provide the public with real-time reassurances and accurate information regarding what was, and also crucially what was not, happening (Crump, 2011).

Another proposed advantage of social networking is the ability for police forces to bypass any bias or "frame" which traditional media might use to report information regarding policing, allowing the forces themselves to directly control the type of information released and therefore

avoiding rhetorical positioning by politically motivated third parties (Lieberman, Koetzle & Sakiyama, 2013). Despite the potential offered by social media for forces to actively control the construction of their own identities, research has not, as yet, explored the identity work achieved through this medium.

The strategy outlined in ‘Engage,’ a guide to digital and social media created by the National Police Improvement Agency (NPIA, 2010), makes clear that police social media use should prioritise responsiveness, creating a dialogue with the public, and advising that it is desirable to, “wherever possible respond to content posted by others, whether positive or negative” (p. 7). That said, a consistent finding from the limited published research into this domain suggests there is very little evidence of continuous dialogue between the police and the public. Brainard and Edlins (2015) found that of the top three social media networks used by 10 American police departments (Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube) the most dialogic was Facebook. However, they found very limited evidence of interaction, in part due to the non-responsiveness of police departments themselves. Similarly, in Australia an analysis of ‘Eyewatch’ (a form of Facebook-mediated neighbourhood watch initiative) suggested that police departments tended to use new media as if it were old media, i.e. to predominantly disseminate information in a similar fashion to press releases, rather than to genuinely engage with the public (Kelly & Finlayson, 2015).

Alongside the benefits of social networking, there are also perceived risks. The main concerns for policing organisations centre around the potential for employees to damage the force’s reputation by posting inappropriate content, and the possibility that forces will be held accountable for posts made by members of the public, or representatives of other organisations, on police managed web pages (Kelly, 2014). The perception from within forces that there is

insufficient resource to manage such risks adds an additional layer of reticence to engage (Kelly & Finlayson, 2015).

There are, therefore, potential advantages as well as perceived risks to police engagement with communities through social media. This paper aims to investigate what identity work is done when the police initiate a dialogue with the community via social media, and to explore the ways in which the community contribute to shaping, developing and revising the stories the police tell.

### *Stories as identity work*

The idea that stories are shaped not only by the teller, but also by the audience that receives them, is not a new one. Anthropological approaches to story-telling in face-to-face contexts (e.g. Goodwin, 1986) recognise that the meaning of a told story is not solely in the hands of the main story teller. Instead, audience members collaborate and offer competing ways in which the story can be interpreted and positioned. Through such collaboration audience members can both participate in the story interpretation, but additionally negotiate and test out positions vis-a-vis other audience members (Goodwin, 1986).

For example, if a person tells a story about being in a fist fight they can position themselves in a number of ways (e.g. as a passive victim of drunken attackers, or conversely, as a hero stepping in to defend a friend who was being assaulted). This rhetoric can achieve a particular identity position. However, a network of others can react to the told story, and reposition the person through their comments, questions and responses. People reacting to the story might state “it sounds like getting involved was an unnecessary risk” or ask, “so had

anything happened to provoke the fight?” Thus, while the speaker has set up a particular position, this position can be challenged and co-constructed by multiple others, allowing the story, the initial speakers identity, and the identity of those contributing to be revised and refashioned.

### *Digital story-telling*

In online environments audience participation in story telling is potentially more complex than in face-to-face settings (Page, 2012). Online audiences can be heterogeneous in ways that cannot be seen by the person making the initial posting, and chains of online comments allow contributors to align with, or position themselves counter to, others online (Perrino, 2017). These chains of comments then remain visible for other audience members, who may, or may not, have been the initially imagined audience (West, 2013).

In terms of identity work achieved by online stories, Facebook in particular offers opportunities for varied strategies regarding self-presentation (Kim & Lee, 2011). It is set up in a way which actively encourages people to share moments in their life as events unfold (Georgakopoulou, 2017). The audience help to shape these stories either through reactions, shares, or chains of comments (West, 2013), perhaps even re-contextualising them through lifting them from one social media context and placing them into another (De Fina & Gore, 2017). As such the online audience for this identity work is essentially infinite. Sharing stories on Facebook or other social media platforms therefore means embracing a central point about the practice of digital story telling: that circulating a digital story essentially involves inviting the audience into participating in telling (De Fina & Gore, 2017).

On police sites the public are therefore afforded the opportunity to co-create the police's story and become active participants in the telling. Given the police agenda to reassure the public and increase trust (Kelly & Finlayson, 2015) it seems likely that co-created stories are an opportunity for engagement that should not be missed.

### *Narrative practice and small stories*

Traditional narrative research in psychology focuses on “what” people say in research interviews, prioritising the story they tell when asked about their life. Such an approach suggests that identity is somehow within a person, and if asked the right question, they will be able to give an account which will reveal their identity to a researcher (Bamberg, 2016).

In contrast, a narrative practice approach (the stance taken in this paper) moves away from analysing solely the told story and instead studies “how” people tell stories (Holstein & Gubrium, 2011). In such an approach narratives are not just tools for reflection (i.e. exploring the self, positioned as a character in the story), but are also functional in the creation of positions vis-à-vis the conversational partner (Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008). In this way researchers can observe individuals creating, and then reworking, identity positions that can be tested, challenged and contested within the interaction, in both face-to-face and online conversations (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011; Georgakopoulou, 2017).

Recent turns within narrative analysis (e.g. Bamberg & Georgakopoulou, 2008) have focussed on “small stories”, with an emphasis on how the often fragmented, co-created, and mundane stories of naturalistic everyday interaction are told. These everyday narrative activities



can develop in many different sorts of media such as social networking sites, as well as face-to-face interaction (Georgakopoulou, 2017).

By studying people engaged in giving narrative accounts, it can be seen that people cannot just choose a particular identity position, but have to negotiate them with the other interactants. Working from an analysis of both (1) the characters in the told story; and (2) the interaction between people during the act of telling, feeds into (3) a more global situated-ness (i.e. how people are already positioned in society) by referencing, or orienting to, social positions and discourses beyond the here and now of the story being told. This then allows analysis of how narrators simultaneously position themselves, and are positioned in an interactive setting.

The desire to be understood and heard in a particular way is likely to be of importance to those posting on police Facebook sites, both from the point of view of the force and the other interactants. It is hoped that exploration of identity within police-owned social media sites might contribute to understanding how police forces achieve, and fail to achieve, credibility and trust in the eyes of the communities they serve. Through a focus on small stories, and audience co-creation, this research will consider how force identity is positioned and repositioned by online activity on Facebook.

## **Method**

Permissions were sought to access Facebook postings from the official Facebook site of a metropolitan force based in the UK. A sample of one week's postings were collected from Monday 6th – Sunday 12th June, 2016 using the Netvizz Facebook app for data extraction. In

order to capture an everyday set of interactions a week was selected that did not coincide with any disasters or major events that might be likely to unusually impact the communication from the force (Kelly & Finlayson, 2015). Data were only captured if they related to postings initiated that week. Posts were captured from the main police-initiated area of the screen, and a less prominent visitor posting area. The force stated explicitly that their site was not monitored 24 hours a day and should not be used for crime reporting.

There were 44 police postings during the sampled week and 30 of these posts received comments from community members. Visitors made 24 postings and 11 of these postings were commented on by community members. Engagement with each posting was established by summing the number of comments, reactions and shares as a measure of follower responsiveness (Lierberman, Koetzle, & Sakiyama, 2013). The post with the greatest engagement was selected for analysis in this paper.

#### *Description of data set*

The tables below give an overview of the most popular Facebook posts during the sampled week, and the level of engagement each elicited. Table 1 shows the police-initiated posts, and Table 2 shows the visitor-initiated posts. Postings made on the police-owned stream were engaged with to a much greater extent than those on the visitors posting area, which generally received very little engagement.

@@ insert table 1 here

@@ insert table 2 here

Visitors' postings during the week were categorised according to whether or not they were made by members of the public or news/community groups. Whilst force postings would not typically be posted on the visitor stream, one post issuing an apology was. The breakdown of who made the visitor postings and the amount of engagement with each source is given in Table 3.

@@ insert table 3 here

In terms of dialogue, the police did not comment further on any of the stories they initiated; nor did they respond to news or community group postings. However they did respond to two visitor postings, but none of the news or community group postings.

#### *Analytical procedure*

The procedure of analysis follows the five-step analytical approach to examine small stories as a way of "doing" identity outlined by Bamberg and Georgakopoulou (2008). While their 2008 analysis was performed on a discrete telling of one small-story, recently other researchers (e.g. Thulfiqar, 2015) have applied this method, and small-story research more generally (Georgakopoulou, 2013, 2017), to the analysis of social networking sites.

The five step approach considers three different levels of positioning. The first level looks at what the narratives are "about", exploring how the characters within them are positioned. The second level examines the co-ordination of the conversation and considers two concurrent processes: first, how the speaker positions themselves, and second, how the speaker is positioned by other interactants in the online space. The third level looks at how the speaker positions a sense of self with regards to master narratives (also known as dominant discourses)

allowing orientation to social positions beyond the here and now. These levels are explored using the following five steps:

1. Analysis of how the characters (in the told narratives) are positioned in relation to one another (this will explore level one, and focuses on what the talk is about)
2. Analysis of the accomplishment of narrating within the interaction (exploring level two)
3. Analysis of how the speaker is positioned within the flow of interactional talk (level two)
4. Analysis of how the relations between the interactants are managed (level two)
5. Analysis of how interactants position themselves (and one another) with regard to master narratives (level three).

It is hoped that taken together these stages of analysis will thoroughly explore the use of narratives within police social media sites, considering not only the content of the narrative activity, but perhaps more importantly, how they are used functionally to attempt to negotiate and navigate credibility.

## **Analysis**

The thread selected for analysis generated the most public engagement during the sampled week. There were 224 comments by 179 different people about this thread which reported that a missing person had been found. After the initial police posting there were no replies by the police to any of the comments made by the public, so all subsequent discussion was between public members of the Facebook community.

*1. Positioning of the characters in the narrative*

This step considers the positioning of the characters in the story that is told. The initial post by the police represents both breaking news (Georgakopoulou, 2017) and an ending to an ongoing story (Georgakopoulou, 2013) rather than a full narrative:

[name of missing person] has been found safe and well. Thank you everyone for sharing  
[Police post, 12 June 18.44]

To give some context, the missing person was a woman in her mid-twenties who was reported missing whilst attending a festival, which had received negative publicity for the previous year for a variety of reasons including a murder.

The only characters referred to by the police in their story ending are the missing woman herself, and the community who shared the original posts about her. Interestingly the police avoid any direct mention of themselves as characters in the story. The positioning by the police about the missing woman is very neutral, in fact they almost avoid positioning her altogether. We are only told that she has been “found” (suggesting she did not come forward herself) and she is “safe and well” which provides an evaluation. Evaluation can be a powerful rhetorical aspect of narrative, often guiding the audience as to the significance of the story, or the narrator’s world view (De Fina & Georgakopoulou, 2011). Here the evaluation “safe and well” can be compared with other possible, much more negative outcomes. In so doing this evaluation makes it clear, without boasting, or indeed using first person pronouns, that this is a positive policing outcome. The police story avoids commenting directly on how she was found (i.e. in what circumstances

was she found, and why she was missing) allowing them to avoid attributions of responsibility for the missing person's situation.

The use of a passive voice in the post removes agency about who exactly found her (e.g. the police, the community, or someone else), and the decision to thank the social media community portrays the community (or "everyone") as a helpful and positive group. As such, the police position the search as successful policing that has a positive outcome, but achieve this in both a neutral and collaborative way, which includes those on social media who assisted.

While the narrative in the police posting lacks detail, the provision of hypothesised narratives about what might have happened in this story is taken up by the commenting public who position the woman in various roles and emotional states, and as variously blameworthy or blameless. The commenting public also introduce a cast of other characters into the narrative, including the police themselves. As Georgakopoulou (2013) suggests, the selection of characters included in narratives can constitute a form of implicit evaluation, and reveal the commenter's position. In this case, the commenting public expand the relevant actors to include the woman's parents, other festival goers, and the police force, allowing them to consider the antecedents to the story and why it might be newsworthy. While the comments made up numerous narratives that positioned the woman, and other protagonists in various roles and emotional states, the following analysis addresses some of the overarching patterns that emerged in the data.

The first over-riding preoccupation of the commenting public is the missing woman's position with regard to passivity and agency. Several comments position her as active in her own choices to be a "drug taker" or "party girl". Most of these comments are not judgmental, in that they do not present her behaviour as inappropriate, but rather imply a narrative around drug taking, and portray this decision as being her own choice as an adult:

How many Garys did she have? [Username, 12 June 20.48]

she was in a ket hole [Username, 12 June 19.45]

Yeh why she's probs been off her head met people house party fell asleep or all day

bender nothing to do with [name of festival] she's responsible for herself [Username, 12 June 19.41]

In these comments the clubbers rhyming slang of “Gary” Ablett meaning ecstasy tablet, and the other slang term “ket hole” meaning the dissociation experienced after taking too much of the anaesthetic drug ketamine, serve to position the missing woman as someone who may well use drugs recreationally but that this is her choice to make.

Other commentators position her as having been the passive victim of an inappropriate search and social media campaign and imply culpability for the search lies with those who have initiated it:

Adults don't need to report back on every movement we make! Jesus not like she not been heard from for a week it was less than 24hours. So why dont u show her sone [sic] respect as being a grown woman [Username, 12 June 19.10]

I have to say I was shocked to see the headlines on [Location] evening news and thought exactly the same, it's been less than 24 hours, she's obvs just on the razzle somewhere or she'd pulled! [Username, 12 June 19.38]

These comments re-iterate the short period of time that the woman has been missing for, and this reiteration of the time frame, as well as her status as “a grown woman” both work to undermine the necessity of the search. In positioning the missing woman as a victim of inappropriate searching, the story is repositioned from its initial starting point as a “successful police search”, to a much more negatively valenced “inappropriate use of police time”. While the public do not go so far as to directly suggest this, the comments given above imply this without being directly critical towards the police force.

Other members of the public are more supportive of the actions of those involved in the search and tell “second stories” (Sacks, 1992) drawing comparisons with other stories linked to the festival to position the woman as the potential victim of a serious criminal incident:

Don't really think anybody has overreacted here at all! That's a stupid comment to make. With the murders of young males in rivers etc what's to say this couldn't of [sic] happened to her!! If it was your daughter you'd want everything to be done ASAP! So glad to hear she has be found safe and well!!!! [Username, 12 June 19.09]

Whilst all the above-mentioned narratives talk about what might have, or has, happened in the past, other narratives hypothesised about how she might feel in the future, suggesting a variety of emotional states that she might have as a result of the missing person search:

Glad she's safe and well, the embarrassment of the police involvement and massive social media involvement is punishment enough, she will be mortified for a good while [Username, 12 June 22.10]



Rather than being positioned as embarrassed about her behaviour others positioned her as being likely to be angry about the social media campaign:

Bet she's fuming [Username, 12 June 19.04]

While the police story is professional, neutral, concise and focussed only on the present, comments from the public reposition the woman and those searching for her, achieving a set of stories which navigate the search as either appropriate for a caring society or unnecessary and overly protective. The comments from the community both expand the temporal focus of the characters to include past, present and future considerations, and thicken the story regarding the characters involved.

## *2. The accomplishment of narrating within the interaction*

This stage is the first of three stages which look at the level of analysis regarding how identity is created in the here and now of the telling, and how speakers position themselves and are repositioned by others in the talk. For this reason, the analysis moves away from the characters in the told story and instead analysis is of the speakers use of story to do particular things in the interaction. This particular stage is focused on how story is achieved or accomplished within the interaction, for example considering how people obtain the floor with credibility, or how they introduce other stories into the talk.

Many commentators chose to simply add an evaluation to the end of the story provided by the police, commenting that they were happy that the missing woman had been found e.g.:

lovely news, its great its good news for a pleasant change [Username, 12 June 23.11]

Great news better safe than sorry. Good work [Name of force] [Username, 12 June 19.05]

This minimal form of engagement (over and above the least effortful method of simply “liking” a post) (Page, Harper & Frobenius, 2013) evaluates and emphasises the happy ending to the story and appears sympathetic to both the missing person’s situation and supportive of the police story.

Other commentators went beyond providing an evaluation of the narrative provided by the police, and themselves chose to tell a related story about a different incident. Whilst this story did not directly add to the narrative the police were telling, it made a case for why that commentator had the right to give a particular view on the case:

I went out and didn't return for nearly 24 [hours] I came strolling in the house like nothing was wrong to find a police officer sat in my living room... Since then seeing how terrified my mother was because she didn't have a clue where I was I always make sure she does and I certainly don't go out for 24 hours anymore!!!! So no her family and friends aren't over reacting what I did was selfish and would never do it again!!!

[Username, 12 June 19.18]

While this story is not that of the missing woman, the author makes a clear connection between her behaviour and their own former attitude. This enables them to make a case that their own personal experience gives them the authority to argue that the woman's family and friends were right to report her missing. Whilst falling short of calling the woman selfish, the authors story serves to make that point, but in a way which appears positive, pro-social and non-accusatory. As such, the use of a narrative here, rather than a direct evaluation of the missing woman, is used as a way of both claiming the right to the evaluation "so no her friends and family aren't over reacting" whilst avoiding being directly critical of the woman by saying "what I did was selfish".

Other commentators used their own stories of prior investigations relating to the same festival to claim authority for their evaluation of the story.

I sort of get where you're coming from here but from a parents and friends point of view it can be very worrying. 2012 I helped in searching for [name] who was separated from his friends and sadly his body was discovered in [location] canal. The police are still in search of the killer of a young lad who was murdered 2 years ago. Both at [Location]. As a mum myself .. I wouldn't rest till I knew they were home and safe. Its far better for this girl to be embarrassed than being yet another statistic. [Username, 12 June 19.36]

The commentator here tells two stories relating to the same festival, both about individuals who were killed. Whilst the first story relates to another young person who went missing, the second relates to an un-named individual who was attacked in front of a lot of other people, and thus has less immediate relevance to the present case. However, the commentator makes clear the geographical link. As such, the location of the story is used as justification that this is a place

where this kind of story can happen. By telling two stories which ended in death, the commentator illustrates how the missing woman's story might have ended similarly. These stories, having made the news, could be seen as examples of Georgakopoulou's (2007; 2017) "shared stories" i.e. stories which refer back to common knowledge or that refer back to participants' shared history. As Page, Harper and Frobenius (2013) suggested, shared stories can be used to connect with the current narrative, allowing the commenter to use the shared news to evaluate the current events reported on the Facebook site. It is interesting that this commentator also draws on her right to comment because of her role "as a mum myself" showing why she has the right to her final evaluation, "Its far better for this girl to be embarrassed than being yet another statistic."

Narrative is therefore achieved in a variety of ways, from a minimally effortful evaluation of the police story, through to the telling of first person directly relevant, or related stories. The function of these stories achieves authority for the speaker in holding a valid informed opinion and allows the navigation of blame without direct criticism of the characters, as well as the ability to authoritatively draw attention to more sinister alternative endings that may have been the outcome of this story.

### *3. Speaker positioning within the ongoing talk*

This stage of analysis is the second which (along with stage two) looks at the here and now of the telling, and the positioning and repositioning attempts in the ongoing talk. This step integrates the narrative content (step one) with how the narratives are introduced (step two) in

the flow of interaction on the social media site. In this analysis, the rhetorical work done by the network of commentators to reinforce or undermine the police posting can be clearly seen.

The police posting directly addresses the audience, including them in the success of the story ending.

[Name of missing person] has been found safe and well. Thank you everyone for sharing.

[Police post, 12 June 18.44]

In directly thanking the Facebook community, the police include them in the resolution of this case. This is taken up by two commentators who reinforce the position that the social media campaign is what helped to solve the situation:

The power of social media great news. X [Username, 12 June 18.57]

Such good news- probably with the help of social media – job well done [Name of force]

[Username, 12 June 19.02]

The above comments select elements of the narrative that embellish the inference that the sharing has helped resolve the case. Both comments give the social media campaign additional prominence in the resolution of the case, over and above that which was given by the police initially in thanking the Facebook community.

No-one else in the Facebook community argues against those comments directly. The only negative comments about the social media campaign are about its necessity, not its effectiveness. For example:

Not heard from for 15 hours as a 26 year old gets a [Name of force] Facebook post.

[Username, 12 June 19.15]

This is an interesting contribution as the narrative strips all of the context, and thus the skeleton version of the story is used to suggest that the Facebook campaign may be an over-reaction. Given the amount of direct and explicit argument seen elsewhere between commentators (to be covered in step four below) it is noteworthy that the police story, which is at least in part positioned as thanking the Facebook commenters, is not more directly challenged. Whilst speculative, it is possible that by including as wide a community as possible as having agency for resolution, the police posting has avoided inviting more direct challenges.

In terms of interactional flow, because the police post is not followed up by any further comments, repositioning, or narrative elements from the police, no police-initiated revisioning is carried out. Instead all the re-contextualisation of identity is carried out by the commentators. In this way, the relationship between the initial post and ensuing comments is quite markedly different to the literature which considers informal, non-corporate Facebook accounts (e.g. Georgakopoulou, 2017; West, 2013) where the audience tend to coax further information from the teller in their comments, leading to more information being forthcoming.

While some commentators merely take up and reinforce the police position, using “narrative pickings” to suggest particular elements have a more central role than the police state (e.g. highlighting the role of the social media campaign), other commentators more directly reformulate the facts of the story, stripping out the relevant context, and this activity does powerful rhetorical work to undermine the validity of the social media campaign.

#### *4. Management of the relations between interactants*

This stage of analysis is the third which (along with stages two and three) looks at the positioning and repositioning attempts in the ongoing talk in the here and now, with this stage specifically focusing on how the interactants relate to one another. While on this posting there is very little direct argument with the police “story”, there is direct argument amongst commentators about how they wish to position both the missing woman and the decision to report the incident (and thus the police involvement). As an example, the following excerpt rapidly descends into personal argument between members of the Facebook community.

Participant 1’s initial posting on the thread is the one mentioned in step one:

Adults don’t need to report back on every movement we make! Jesus not like she not been heard from for a week it was less than 24hours. So why dont u show her sone [sic] respect as being a grown woman [Ppt 1, 12 June 19.10]

and the ensuing argument sequence below is picked up later on the Facebook page.

Ppt 1 – Excuse me its you lot commenting on my post not the other way around. If you dont like it dont put it all over social media. Jesus its like the womens institute have ganged up on me. Over night is still only a few hours she wasnt even gone for 24 she a grown woman she can go out party n not call home [Username, 12 June 19.17]

Ppt 2 I went out and didn't return for nearly 24 days I came strolling in the house like nothing was wrong to find a police officer sat in my living room with a photo of me my mother had to describe all the tattoos on my body to him he turned and told I would of been on the tele if I hadn't come back home when I did!!! Since then seeing how terrified my mother was because she didn't have a clue where I was I always make sure she does and I certainly don't go out for 24 hours anymore!!!! So no her family and friends aren't over reacting what I did was selfish and would never do it again!!! [Username, 12 June 19.18]

Ppt 3 thought that would be the case [Username, 12 June 19.18]

Ppt 4 No one has ganged up on you, you are making ignorant comments without any knowledge on the situation. [Username, 12 June 19.19]

Ppt 1 Not saying i do know anything about her but i know reporting her missing after a few hours is over-reacting . Esp as she is safe and well. [Username, 12 June 19.19]

Ppt 5 Good work NAME OF FORCE !! Glad shes been found and it's a positive outcome! [Username, 12 June 19.20]

Ppt 1 Yea ok [username deleted] gimp [Username, 12 June 19.20]

The positioning here is rapidly revised and contested. Ppt 1 positions themselves as the victim of a group or category of others, in this case - the “women’s institute”, and accuses this category of contributors of “ganging up” on them. This reflects Perrinos (2017) positioning via alignment with, or opposition to, others online. Ppt 4 contests this version of events very quickly “no one has ganged up on you” and very directly evaluates the comments made as “ignorant”. From there



the argument turns to direct insult. It is hard to imagine the lack of politeness shown in the Facebook conversation happening if the participants were face to face in the same room.

Ppt 1 utilises the conventions of Facebook as an institutional medium to position the Facebook comments themselves as an entity i.e. “you are commenting on what I said, I am not commenting on what you said.” In this way, the conventions of the medium are used to justify entitlement to a particular position or opinion. In this example, and in several others, the relations between commentators are not handled sensitively, and tend towards contributors quickly taking hostile positions with regard to one another.

In summary, while there is little argument directly with the police (albeit some implied critique), relations between the contributing community quickly descend into personal insults and the use of categorisations to form groupings of “others” from which contributors see themselves as differing. The conventions of the medium of Facebook are also used to negotiate relations through the conversation.

##### *5. Self-positioning of the interactants with regard to master narratives*

This analysis will now turn to consideration of how the police and Facebook community position themselves vis-a-vis master-narratives or dominant discourses in society. This step allows exploration of how identity positions are understood and achieved beyond the here and now, by referencing wider social positions and discourses.

The first master-narrative that is negotiated is that of a happy ending. The police posting that the missing woman has been found safe and well hints at this master-narrative, and this is picked out and made more prominent by a member of the Facebook community

we like happy endings x [Username, 12 June 18.53]

It is interesting that this commentator has clearly oriented to the police posting as a story with a “classic” or fairy-tale ending. Many other commentators also add an evaluation to the happy ending outcome, but in a much less explicit way, simply by saying they are glad she is safe, or saying that it is good news. In this way, the resolution to the case is portrayed as being largely a positive, and this contributes to the master narrative of the police being a source of safety and protection within society.

Counter to this narrative there is also an alternative narrative posited suggesting the police and the community it serves were being over-protective. For example:

Jokers u lot, best get to Boots cos sounds like y'all running low on cotton wool.

[Username, 12 June 19.28]

Cant even put ya self on the missing list for a day anymore with out ya face being all over social media . #OverReacting. [Username, 12 June 18.59]

This counter-narrative of being over-reactive, or too protective, is of course negotiated by commentators responding after the woman has been found safe, so can be seen as containing something of a hindsight bias.

The navigation of these master and counter-narratives enable commentators to construct both themselves, other commentators, and the police force as having a particular identity and role. The notion of the police as a positive force, that provided a happy ending is supported by some commentators, but is also repositioned by others as being over-protective and controlling.

## **Discussion**

This analysis has explored how identity work is done by both the Police and the community members that follow them online, by exploring three levels of analysis. The analysis of the characters in the told story, along with the sense of self that is positioned, and re-positioned in the here and now of ongoing talk online, both feed into the wider social positioning seen in discourses in society regarding policing.

Analysis suggests that while the story told by the police was tightly controlled and concise in terms of cast, the cast of characters was expanded by the commenting public, allowing a variety of identity work to be achieved. An important strategy in this regard was the extensive temporal expansion of the story by the Facebook community, regardless of the temporally tight and present focus of the told story in the initial posting. This temporal extension allowed the Facebook community to expand the story and hence expand the accompanying positions regarding the cast of characters and their agency regarding the search.

When considering the way in which speakers positioned one another and were positioned in the telling, whilst the police avoided explicit evaluation in favour of presenting a neutral and professional account, a common minimally effortful way of engaging with the narrative by the commenting public was to simply add a positive evaluation. This type of engagement, which was frequently used by commentators, often comprised just a few words and tended to be supportive of the policing story.

Other commentators engaged in more effortful engagement including: telling related stories (to obtain power or authority as a speaker, and/or allowing identity navigation whilst

avoiding direct criticism of the story characters, and instead evaluating those in the second story); providing alternative narrative endings (to justify the gravity of the police response); using narrative “pickings” (such as emphasising and extending particular narrative elements that justified a particular version of events) and refashioning the story thread by retelling the same story.

Relationships between commentators on the site often became impolite rapidly, with frequent approaches to argumentation involving the use of simple insults, and categorising commentators into outgroups of “others” who could then be portrayed as having an obvious bias or angle on the story which could then be discredited.

The analysis of this case suggests that the narratives functioned to allow the Facebook community to position themselves as speakers, but also to develop positions regarding the police force in question. The Facebook community were able to harness master and counter narratives to navigate police identity as being at times safe, organised and trustworthy, and at other times as being overly controlling.

One thing is very clear from examination of this site: story, or news, is no longer formed of simple linear sequences. The network of narratives on police Facebook sites mean the story is fragmented, at times argued over, and “mapped” from fragments from many contributors. Regardless of the concerns of police forces about their engagement with social media, this is how identity work is actually being realised. How researchers and the police can best present, understand, and utilise this new way in which police identity is being achieved is still unclear.

Additionally, the analysis carried out for this study suggests that while the police engaged with Facebook regularly over the sampled week, the engagement was not truly dialogic or coproduced (Brainard & Edlins, 2015). Rather, the police force provided a story, which was then

embellished, revised and repositioned by multiple tellers from the commenting public. There can be little doubt that the commentators were co-constructing the story, but interestingly this co-construction was simply left to happen amongst the commenting public. This finding differs to research on Facebook in more informal, personal settings where posts are commonly expanded upon by the person making the initial posting (e.g. Georgakopoulou, 2017; West, 2013).

The story sampled in this research supports the suggestion of researchers in other countries (e.g. Brainard & Edlins, 2015; Kelly & Finlayson, 2015) that new media still has a tendency to be used as if it were old media. For this reason, it can be argued that whilst the advantage of avoiding the bias of traditional media (such as print and broadcast media) has been gained by using social media (Lieberman, Koetzle & Sakiyama, 2013), the framing and repositioning role has now simply been passed over into the hands of the Facebook community. It is suggested that both the opportunity for truly dyadic interactions that may underpin effective community policing, and the potential benefits of harnessing the opportunity for effective identity work are currently being under utilised on police Facebook sites.

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## Tables

Table 1

The Most Engaged With Comments Posted by the Metropolitan Force on their Facebook Page and the Amount of Engagement with These Posts (names and locations have been redacted so as not to reveal the identity of the police force)

Posting	Amount of Engagement
[name of person] found safe and well. Thank you everyone for sharing.	4181
Police have released a CCTV image of a man they wish to speak to in connection with a vicious assault at a nightclub in [location]	2051
Police have released images of a man they would like to speak to in connection with a rape at a nightclub in the city centre	195
Rock and roll aint noise pollution for these horses patrolling last night s [name of band] concert	193
Great work from officers in [location].	174



Table 2

The Most Engaged With Comments Posted in the Visitors Stream of the Metropolitan Force's Facebook Page, and the Amount of Engagement With These Posts

Posting	Amount of Engagement
A [name of force] PCSO who nearly died after he was stabbed in the neck whilst on duty will receive an MBE in the Queen s Birthday Honours	177
An area has been cordoned off by [name of force] (link to "residents left in the dark over serious incident in the street")	68
Statement from [name of person] following use of [location] photo on internal [name of force] poster	8
[name of force] have released a compilation of dash cam footage	6
Does the 101 number work in [location]? I'm trying to report a mobile phone theft	5

Table 3

The source of the Visitor Stream Postings in the Metropolitan Force, and the amount of engagement with those comments

Source of Posting	Number of Postings	Amount of engagement
Member of Public	15	15
News or community group	6	253
Force	1	8