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Entitlement to tell on police Facebook sites

Zoe Walkington, Graham Pike, Ailsa Strathie, Catriona Havard, Virginia Harrison
& Hayley Ness
The Open University

Author Note

Zoe Walkington, School of Psychology, The Open University

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Home Office.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Zoe Walkington, School
of Psychology, The Open University, Gardiner Building 025, Walton Hall, Milton Keynes,

MK7 6AA, Tel: 01908652172

Contact: z.walkington@open.ac.uk

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Abstract

Despite the increased use of social media by the police, little qualitative exploration has been carried out regarding how online spaces such as Facebook might be important sites for Police Force identity. This study qualitatively analyses a popular story told on the official Facebook site of a rural police force. It analyses the story which is co-created by both the police, and the public, and looks at how identity is created for the police through this online activity. The research finds that entitlement to tell particular stories is hotly challenged by the community and raises important questions regarding the perceived ownership of experiences in the criminal justice system. It concludes that Facebook posts might be important sites of feedback for police forces. Additionally such sites may play an important role in trust-building and community engagement, but to realise this opportunity may require significant investment in terms of resources.

Entitlement to tell on police Facebook sites

Introduction

Police use of social media in the UK has increased since 2008,¹ and there are many examples of how digital technologies have improved information sharing between police and citizens. One example was during the English riots in 2011, when social media allowed the police to reassure the communities they were serving.² With the police increasingly seen as service providers³ needing to measure quality beyond arrest figures,⁴ the potential of digital media to build trust and indicate how police identity is viewed by the local community also exists.

Identity research within digital communities recognizes that online identity is both dynamic and revisable.⁵ The affordances of social media mean that stories told there are often co-authored,⁶ so that identity is shaped not only by initial posts⁷ but also invites audience participation into the telling through commenting.⁸ In online spaces the trace of identity work lingers⁹ and the potential heterogeneity and scale of online audiences is vast⁶ meaning that sharing a digital story on Facebook allows, and indeed invites, a potentially infinite audience to participate in the telling.¹⁰

Research into digital identity within individuals (rather than organizations) has found that in anonymous settings non-normative or negative identities are expressed, or sometimes tried out with people taking on identity roles different to their own embodied identity.¹¹ However, in settings where people's digital and offline identities can be linked, socially desirable versions of self are curated.¹¹ Some researchers suggest that identity on Facebook may in fact present fairly realistic self-presentation.¹²

Corporate digital identity is an emerging area for investigation, with research suggesting that human-like and relatively informal interpersonal interactions are capable of building a positive organizational identity online.¹³ However this research has not, to date, considered identity built by police forces online.

With engagement online increasingly seen as an important way to interact with stakeholders,¹³ police forces should be interested in the amount of engagement their stories attract. The tellability of stories (i.e. what makes certain things “worth telling”)¹⁴ alongside the way story telling can allow re-categorisation of experiences¹⁵ are therefore both worthy of attention.

With digital stories involving co-creation, and blurred authorship, Shuman’s¹⁵ notion of ‘entitlement’ (i.e. who has the legitimacy to tell certain stories) is potentially important organizationally because it casts an explicit focus on the power relations between people. As Shuman argues, challenges about ‘rights to tell’ raise questions about who owns experiences, also suggesting that storytelling creates an opportunity for subverting dominant narratives by posing counter narratives, allowing “suppressed voices to be heard”¹⁵.

It is possible that the emergent negotiations between community members about the stories posted by police are therefore an important source of feedback for police forces seeking closer relationships and greater understanding with the community. This research aims to explore how police identity is shaped through the analysis of a popular story posted on a Police Facebook site.

Method

Permissions were obtained to access Facebook postings from a rural force's official Facebook site. A sample of one weeks postings were collected. The dates sampled were checked to ensure that they did not coincide with any significant events that would represent an "abnormal" week of postings.¹⁶ The force controlled all postings on the site (i.e. visitors could comment on police initiated posts but could not initiate their own posts). The force made 43 postings in the sampled week (32 of which were commented on by community members).

The Facebook thread that generated the most public engagement (calculated as the total number of comments, reactions and shares) was selected. The story related to the seizure of a vehicle. There were 615 comments made by 426 different people about the thread. After the initial police posting, all further comments were made by the community rather than by the police.

A methodological approach based on ideas drawn from Michael Bamberg and his collaborators^{17, 18, 19} was selected because it considers how stories emerge between people, and because it encourages consideration of how identity is positioned both in the told story, but also in how the story is told. This approach encourages both analysis of micro (between interactants) and macro (relating to wider societal discourses) processes. Bamberg's 5 step process of analysis has been outlined elsewhere,¹⁸ and has also been described when applied to an online setting.²⁰ For brevity the results reported in this paper focus on issues that arose from the analysis regarding police (as opposed to suspect) identity, entitlement and tellability.

Analysis

The police post – analysis of the characters in the told story

The initial posting was “Last week we told you about officers seizing a [performance car] after numerous reports of antisocial driving on [road name, town]. This morning the driver of the same vehicle was arrested on suspicion of drug driving after providing a positive roadside drug test after a collision with another vehicle on [road name].” [Police post, 6 June 12.09]

The police posting only named three characters, the driver, the officers, and the people behind the numerous reports of antisocial driving. The inclusion of the community reports of antisocial driving suggested the police and the community were positioned together, against the problem driver, whilst describing the repetitive nature of the crime, served to position the officers’ persistency in dealing with the offender. As such the Master Narrative portrayed was of the police as organized in the fight against persistent offenders. This was achieved using a neutral tone and non-emotive language.

Community responses to the story told in the police post

This narrative was resisted by some commentators who re-categorised the police story, and suggested alternative reasons as to why this was ‘tellable’ by presenting a counter-narrative of the police as untrustworthy and conspiratorial. The suggestion of a vendetta against the high performance car driver was one way this was achieved. “I think this is someone's personal vendetta rather than enforcing the law simply. I mean... They just got someone who's gonna bomb the euro matches in France, and you're after [performance car]? Come on... Serious stuff happening out there, real crimes.” [Username 33, 6 June, 20.46]. Other commentators suggested a police conspiracy by arguing with the police story. “How did this [performance car]

make that size dent in the [brand of car]...And I thought this car was seized the other week?"

[Username 36, 6 June 12.58] This suggestion of a conspiracy was taken up, and directly refuted by another contributor adopting an authoritative expert tone.

"Ummm ok. Huge 20 inch wheel with the tire torn off and black rubber marks on the [brand of car]. Looks like the [performance car] hit the [brand of car], the wheels collided and the [slang name] rode up on the tyre raising the [performance car] wheel and causing the tyre to come in contact with the bodywork of the [brand of car], that would account for the torn up [performance car] tyre and the messed up [brand of car] bodywork. No conspiracy just logic."
[Username 23, 6 June, 13.10].

This comment provides a narrative about what happened that appeared technically plausible, and which supported the police version of events.

How the story was told

The Facebook community engaged in a lot of resistance to the police story. Many commentators were directly critical of the editorial decision to post this story about these cars in particular.

"Regardless of what they did or how bad it was or wasn't the most pathetic thing is all the [name of force] Police Facebook has been going on about is these two [performance car]'s, has the entire force been circling corpa just waiting to take the cars? Why are there no photos

or any other cars? Other crimes? You would think the police force would act like adults but no they're acting like a bunch of 7 year olds." [Username 24, 6 June 13.59]

This posting positions the police as selective in both their editorial decision and policing strategy. The following comment does similar work but the phrasing suggests a macho conflict between the police and, presumably, the driver of the performance car.

"The only issue I've got with this is that you're not showing photos of every car seized and every driver who has tested positive for drug or drinking offences. Keep doing your job, that's great but keep the pissing contest off social media." [Username 15, 6 June, 14.34]

However, this positioning of the police as selective in their editorial was refashioned by a commentator who argued that the story had not been selectively told.

"Completely see where you're coming from, except that if you have a little browse on [name of force] Police's Facebook page you can see various photographs of cars that have been seized for a variety of different reasons including positive roadside drug and drinking tests. But for obvious reasons this car and the orange one are receiving much more publicity than the others" [Username 31, 6 June 14.50].

Other commentators used a competitor story to position the story selected by the police as being comparatively trivial. "Tell us something new [name of force] police. This is old news

now. Try going after the poor lady that's missing near [location] there's only 2 officers looking” [Username 28, 6 June 14.38].

In these ways the selection of stories for the Facebook site were discussed by members of the public, and the discussion provided both challenge of, and support for, the police.

Discussion

Despite the neutral story posted, the Facebook discussion extensively revised police identity. The police position, presented only through their initial story, fixed their master narrative as being organized in the fight against crime. However, various counter-narratives of vendettas and conspiracy were introduced by the Facebook community. Other community members resisted these counter-narratives, supporting the police positioning. The range of positions achieved in the told story was creative and continuously navigated through the Facebook chat.

The post-hoc discussion of the editorial decision to post that story in particular was a key pre-occupation of the Facebook community. This critique can be viewed through two lenses, both the editorial selection of the story, and more broadly the direction of police resources. Despite these challenges some commentators gave evidence of even-handed editorial coverage on Facebook by the police as well as reiterating legal aspects of the crime in this story to develop a position of support to the police force.

It is clear from this analysis that, for this force, entitlement to tell a particular story was, in itself, a hotly challenged issue, and that editorial decision in turn invited inferences from the community about policing priorities, as well as shaping police identity. Facebook allows the

police an informal insight into how their identity is viewed, supported and challenged by the community they are working within. It is clear that the complexities of managing identity in online environments are myriad, require further exploration, and may also require significant resource to be directed at their management.

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