

What Are the Police Doing on Twitter? Social Media, the Police and the Public

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Abstract

This article examines the growing interest since 2008 of UK police forces in the use of social media as a basis for engagement with the public. This interest is set in the context of a political agenda for increasing public trust and confidence in the police and enlistment of the public as jointly responsible for crime reduction. An ambitious national police agenda led by the Association of Chief Police Officers has promoted the use of social media to engage groups previously uninvolved in discussion of local policing, and has envisaged its use as a basis for deliberation about priorities. This article investigates how successful this endeavour has been, and how far a hierarchical organisation - the police service - has been able to exploit the networked characteristics of social media and the potential of user created content. The paper analyses the police use of one particular platform, Twitter, including the structure of networks and the content of the messages. The article concludes that the constraints of police culture have meant that Twitter has been used cautiously and as a reinforcement for existing means of communication. It puts forward key issues which need to be addressed if the more ambitious aims for social media are to be achieved.

KEYWORDS: Twitter, social media, police, government

Author Notes: The research for this article was carried out when I was on leave from the National Policing Improvement Agency and a Visitor at the Oxford Internet Institute (OII) and at Nuffield College, University of Oxford. I am grateful to former colleagues in the police service and the NPIA for their time in discussing their work, to the staff of the OII for their advice and to the Warden and Fellows of Nuffield College for their hospitality.

Introduction

Police forces in the UK began experimenting with social media in 2008, initially on the basis of initiatives by individual officers and subsequently with varying degrees of official support, including the eventual sponsorship of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO). Two events in 2010 and 2011 demonstrate the extent to which social media have come to be considered as something to be taken seriously by police forces.

On October 14–15, 2010, the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) published a short message about every incident notified to their control room over a 24-hour period using the social networking site Twitter. They tweeted about 3,025 incidents in all, using the identities @gmp24_1, @gmp24_2, and @gmp24_3, and the hashtag #gmp24.¹ By the end of the exercise, the number of followers of GMP's Twitter account had increased from 3,000 to 17,000. GMP considered that the aim of the exercise, which according to their Chief Constable, Peter Fahy, was to "raise awareness of the diverse and complex role of policing, explaining how much time officers spend with non-crime matters," had been achieved. Press coverage was largely favorable, although the Taxpayers' Alliance, a voluntary association which campaigns for reduced taxes, denounced the activity as wasteful.² The GMP24 exercise showed a police force contributing to the public debate about police funding and the impact of the Government's 2010 spending review.

The outbreak of looting in London, Birmingham, Manchester, and other English cities between August 6 and 10, 2011 has further demonstrated the extent to which social media has become incorporated in contemporary policing.³ It was quickly alleged that groups of looters were coordinating their activities using the

¹ Twitter accounts take the form "@username," the name being chosen by the user, subject to availability. A user may have multiple accounts. A hashtag is an identifier taking the form "#word," where the word is chosen by the user. Twitter messages can be searched by the hashtag, so a user can see all the messages tagged in the same way. For a fuller discussion of the use of hashtags in police contexts, see Stevens (2011).

² The experiment was extensively covered in the UK press. See, for example,

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-manchester-11549069> and

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/oct/14/manchester-police-twitter-experiment>.

For a personal account by the head of GMP communications, who managed the exercise, see <http://amandacomms1.wordpress.com/2010/10/15/how-gmp24-happened/>. For the Taxpayer's Alliance, see <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/843943-police-incident-tweets-wasting-public-money>.

³ There are numerous press postings describing the events. Two sources of timelines, eyewitness accounts, etc. are <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/london> and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/> (both downloaded on August 14, 2011). An analysis of the growth in followers and the level of activity on four forces' Twitter accounts has been published by Ben Proctor at <http://www.benproctor.co.uk/blog/2011/08/22/a-tale-of-four-police-twitter-accounts/>.

Blackberry messaging service (BBM).⁴ Meanwhile, Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Flickr,⁵ and hyperlocal message boards served to provide highly localized information about what was going on. Police forces used Twitter in particular to make public service announcements, notably to refute ill-founded rumors of supposed incidents, and in doing so, to reassure the public. In the aftermath of the incidents, Facebook and Twitter were used by ordinary citizens to organize clear-up operations and to establish a presence in order to reclaim the streets. The police appealed for photographs and videos to be sent in to complement their own material, much of it gathered from CCTV, and they crowd-sourced identification by posting images of looters on Flickr or on their own websites.⁶ Throughout the events and in their aftermath, social media provided a forum for popular debate about police tactics, the motives of looters, underlying social issues, and the nature of the political response. Social media were also a rich source of information for the established media, including both print and television.

Social media themselves also became a focus of political debate and proposed legislative action. In statements made to the UK Parliament on August 9, 2011, the Home Secretary said that she would be meeting representatives of Facebook, Twitter, and RIM (the owners of Blackberry) to discuss how social media companies could support law enforcement on future occasions.⁷ The Prime Minister said that the Government would look at provisions for banning access to social media for those who were suspected of planning disorder,⁸ and a backbench Conservative MP argued for powers to suspend whole social media networks at times of public disorder. Needless to say, these proposals were forcefully opposed on grounds of open information and practicality.⁹ Crucially, police forces

⁴ <http://eu.techcrunch.com/2011/08/08/how-blackberry-not-twitter-fuelled-the-fire-under-londons-riots/>.

⁵ <http://www.flickr.com/groups/uk-riots/pool/>.

⁶ For example, http://www.met.police.uk/caught_on_camera/index.htm (downloaded August 14, 2011).

⁷ The Home Secretary told Parliament: “This is not the first time that criminals with plans to disrupt life in our towns and cities have used technology to plot their crimes. Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter and messaging services like Blackberry Messenger have been used to coordinate criminality, and stay one step ahead of the police. I will convene a meeting with ACPO, the police and representatives from the social media industries to work out how we can improve the technological and related legal capability of the police. Among the issues we will discuss is whether and how we should be able to stop people communicating via these websites and services when we know they are plotting violence, disorder and criminality.” <http://www.homeoffice.gov.uk/media-centre/speeches/riots-speech>.

⁸ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2011/aug/11/david-cameron-rioters-social-media>.

⁹ For example, the Canadian *Globe and Mail* editorial, August 11, 2011.

<http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/opinions/editorials/david-camersons-counterproductive-attack-on-social-media/article2127047/>.

expressed the view that social media had been an essential part of their communications and reassurance strategy during the disorder.

During the August 2011 events and in their immediate aftermath, social media created an enormous volume of material for further analysis. By August 10, tweets using the hashtag #ukriots were being created at the rate of hundreds per minute. Social media researchers as well as criminologists will be occupied for some time in forming an accurate picture of what went on. The true significance of BBM will only be understood when the court cases involving those accused of using the medium for organizing criminal activity are heard and when such material as RIM make available to the UK authorities has been analyzed.

The research for the present article was carried out in October and November 2010. The article sets out to understand the strategy for exploiting social media led by the National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) on behalf of the ACPO, and to test whether there is evidence for its success. There had been a growing awareness in the police service, and indeed in the public sector more generally, of the potential of social media to provide new channels for public engagement.¹⁰ The ACPO strategy as set out in the guidance document *Engage* (NPIA 2010) outlines the ways in which social media, particularly Twitter and to a lesser extent Facebook, can be used in support of local or neighborhood policing. The emphasis is on openness, accountability, and a kind of engagement that envisages a dialogue between citizens and their local police.

There is an obvious contrast between the large-scale, news focus of the GMP campaign and the communications focus of much of the police use of Twitter in the August 2011 riots on the one hand, and the aspiration to more continuous, low-key, and consultative interaction in the *Engage* strategy. This article aims to address three main questions:

- How are police forces using social media as part of their engagement strategy? The evidence for this is sought in an examination of the size and density of police Twitter networks and the nature of the content.
- What evidence is there of success and, in particular, is the police use of social media creating new forms of engagement with the public? This entails looking for evidence of meaningful discussion, the diffusion of messages through networks, and resulting impact on policing practice.
- Is the use of social media disruptive of existing culture and organization in police forces or does it tend to reflect or even reinforce them? The evidence here is drawn directly from interviews with a small group of practitioners.

¹⁰ For an example of the use of Twitter as a vehicle for a simple campaign in an adjacent emergency service, see Briggs (2010) discussion of Norfolk Fire and Rescue Service.

There are at least four significant areas of police interest in social media that were outside the scope of the *Engage* guidance document. In exposing social networks to more or less public view, social media are a source of intelligence for policing—this is particularly the case when such media are used to organize public protest. Secondly, social media are a source of real-time information about safety issues, such as road accidents or continuing emergencies such as floods. Thirdly, social media are of interest to those in the police such as the Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre (CEOP) who are directly engaged in protecting the public from harm on the Internet. Finally, social media can be tools for knowledge sharing within policing organizations. These deployments of social media all deserve consideration in their own right, but are beyond the scope of this article.

Recent statistics for police use of Twitter, and the number of their followers, reflect both the efforts of police forces to encourage the use of social media and the very dramatic impact of the August 2011 riots. Police forces now have much more experience of using social media, and the public and the media are much more interested in their use of it.¹¹ The data collection for this article was undertaken at a time when followers were fewer and networks sparser than is now the case, and when there was far less political, popular, and senior officer concern with use of social media in policing. The critique of the objectives of the *Engage* document, and its suggestion of a need for more detailed analysis of the impact of social media use in local policing nevertheless stand. Indeed, the recent rise in concern about social media and policing provides an opportunity to carry out the kind of evidence-based assessment of how the medium works in relation to public engagement that is called for here.

This study looks at Twitter partly because of the relative ease of accessing publicly available data about networks, but also because of the clearly stated aspirations of its advocates in the police force. The empirical basis of the study is analysis of Twitter accounts operated by police forces and their neighborhood policing teams, and individual neighborhood officers. It was not within the scope of the study to examine directly the impact of the police use of social networking on local communities, which would require surveying members of the public. It is also worth noting that other media, notably YouTube, provide a more promising basis for joint problem solving or accountability than seems to be the case with Twitter (Sayre 2010). Police forces use YouTube extensively to post videos of incidents, for recruitment and for other promotional purposes, often tweeting

¹¹ See, for example, “Bobbies on the tweet: how police across the country embraced micro-blogging,” Daily Telegraph, August 24, 2011.
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/twitter/8718433/Bobbies-on-the-Tweet-how-police-across-the-country-embraced-micro-blogging.html>.

references to them, but the *Engage* document does not discuss the use of YouTube as a basis for engagement.

Both *Engage* and guidance by individual forces promote Twitter as a means of making contact with citizens who are not usually reached by police engagement efforts, and almost all UK forces and many local policing teams have set up Twitter accounts with a view to achieving these benefits. That Twitter should be seen as a channel for engagement and dialogue is interesting in itself. Twitter is easily accessible both for police officers and for the general public, and the cost of entry is minimal. By the same token, it creates platforms that demand very little effort to set up and relatively little to maintain. The importance of weak ties for innovation and the acquisition of new ideas is axiomatic (Granovetter 1973), but not all weak ties are necessarily channels for the diffusion of new ideas. Hogan and Quan-Haase (2010) remind us of the transient nature of social media as a communication medium, itself a challenge to an organization such as the police service whose mission is to maintain social stability. Huberman, Romero, and Wu (2009) warn that we should not be deceived by the apparent density of Twitter networks:

“Many people, including scholars, advertisers and political activists, see online social networks as an opportunity to study the propagation of ideas, the formation of social bonds and viral marketing, among others. This view should be tempered by our findings that a link between any two people does not necessarily imply an interaction between them. As we showed in the case of Twitter, most of the links declared within Twitter were meaningless from an interaction point of view. Thus the need to find the hidden social network; the one that matters when trying to rely on word of mouth to spread an idea, a belief, or a trend.”

The question therefore remains of whether Twitter is the best format with which to address these challenges. Twitter lends itself to use as a broadcasting tool (e.g., for sharing press releases, publicizing meetings, or sending out notes about incidents). It is less conducive to serious deliberation and activism. Gladwell (2010), commenting on Shirky (2009), points out that what he describes as “serious activism” is a strong tie phenomenon. The benefit of social media, and especially Twitter, is in supporting loose ties. He asserts that weak ties rarely lead to high levels of activism. Indeed, the way that social media increase participation is by reducing—and we could add in the case of Twitter, minimizing—the level of commitment needed to join in. It follows that networks are suitable for increasing some kinds of engagement, but not for fundamental change, for which more committed styles and methods of leadership are needed. This is a recurring theme of the discussion in this article.

Local Policing and Public Engagement

The police service's use of these new engagement channels needs to be understood in the context of government's emphasis on neighborhood or local policing, a trend prevalent in the UK and US since the 1990s (Skogan and Hartnett 1997). In England and Wales, there has been a common approach towards the delivery of neighborhood policing informed by research sponsored by the ACPO, driven by the policy of successive Home Secretaries and supported by a central program managed first by the ACPO and then by the NPIA. The initiative began with concern about the gap between declining crime rates and static measures of fear of crime, resulting in the National Reassurance Policing Programme (Tuffin and Morris 2006). On the basis of this program's evaluation, the ACPO's neighborhood policing program was established. Subsequently, the Metropolitan Police Authority and then the national government committed to providing resources for a dedicated neighborhood policing team for every ward.

The characteristic elements which came together in the UK over the 2002–2008 period included a commitment to partnership working, a style of policing that was grounded in public engagement, public accountability, and shared agenda setting, a focus on quality of service, the use of auxiliaries in the form of Police Community Support Officers in neighborhood teams, the enlisting of volunteers as special constables and other roles, and a commitment to publishing information about crimes and people's concerns about crime and the police response. There was a strong focus on addressing antisocial behavior, which surveys were telling police forces most concerned members of the public—but there was also a desire to link good community work to the addressing of crime problems through the development of community intelligence. The initiative's success was to be measured by an improvement in public confidence. By 2009, the British Crime Survey was showing improvements in confidence and falls in rates for most types of crime and in the fear of crime (Scribbins et al. 2010), although the extent to which this is directly attributable to neighborhood policing is uncertain.

Reflecting on the changing overall role of criminal justice agencies and governments in addressing crime problems in the context of rising crime rates after 1970, and wider social and economic changes, Garland (2001) describes a transition in the 1990s as a process of relocating and redefining responsibilities as government authorities in western states came to realize not only the inadequacy of state institutions to the task of crime control, but also the need to harness crime control mechanisms that are independent of the state—that is, by relocating crime control in the community. Garland describes how “community policing and community crime prevention sought to enlist the support of voluntary agencies, businesses and residents groups, harnessing the social control efforts of these bodies and aligning them with the efforts of the official crime control agencies.”

In order to achieve this, the state aimed to create a *network* of more or less directed, more or less managed crime control.

Governments have identified and enlisted those with the competence to reduce criminal opportunities. Their methods have included publicity campaigns targeted at the public as a whole, and police engagement with, and support for, residents and citizens' self-help groups such as Neighbourhood Watch. As part of the new crime control apparatus, policing has become "smarter," more targeted, more attuned to local circumstances, more responsive to public pressure, and more willing to work with the community and emphasize prevention. Garland (2001) notes that this new sector occupies an intermediate, borderline position, poised between the state and civil society, connecting the criminal justice agencies with the activities of citizens, communities, and corporations. Not all commentators are even this sanguine about the nature of the change in policing. Mastrofski (2006) cites research that demonstrates how disappointing engagement has been in the United States—even in Chicago, which was the pioneer in many of the techniques of community policing. He notes that beat meetings may have established themselves as a regular means of engaging the public, but that the public has shown little enthusiasm for self-help criminal justice outcomes—attendees went to the meetings as places to lobby for service delivery, not to participate in co-production. Other studies have been even less positive, and there has been a tendency for the police to use engagement as a device to secure community conformance to police structures and priorities. Not even in Chicago were the public given the "will, skill and resources" to reduce crime and improve the quality of life in their communities.

Police forces in England and Wales have found themselves under political pressure both nationally and locally to engage with the public through contact on the street, partnership working, and the provision of information as a basis for accountability. Evidently more remains to be done in winning public trust in policing. Selsdon (2009) notes that in spite of the rising confidence in the police as measured in the British Crime Survey, the reputation of the police for trustworthiness is still low. In his view, incidents such as the Stephen Lawrence murder (Rollock 2009), disproportional arrests of members of ethnic minority communities since 9/11, the Menezes shooting (IPCC 2009), and the handling of the 2009 G20 protests (HMIC 2009) have undermined confidence that the police agenda is aligned to the public interest. He also believes that there are "legitimate concerns about the tendency to close ranks in the face of internal criticism."

The 2010 UK General Election brought to power a Conservative–Liberal Democrat coalition government with an agenda (the "Big Society") founded on local initiative, voluntary activity by the public, and a facilitative approach by public service professionals. The emphasis on local policing has been carried forward, boosted by the proposal for a democratization of local police

accountability through the replacement of appointed police authorities by elected police and crime commissioners for each force (Home Office 2010). The police services' interest in the use of social media as a tool for engagement is to be understood in this wider context of a political imperative to engage with the public in order to increase confidence.

Most police forces in England and Wales use social media in their communications strategies. Thirty-six police forces had corporate Twitter accounts by October 2010, as did 140 neighborhood or other local police teams.¹² Police websites generally use YouTube and Flickr to publish videos and photographs, and many have Facebook pages. Increasingly, forces are hosting webcast meetings, sometimes simultaneously in a physical location and online. Alongside these locally driven initiatives, successive national governments have promoted policies that require the police to make geocoded crime data available to the public. Crime maps were first published in the UK by the Metropolitan Police in 2008 and by a number of other forces soon after.¹³ A national crime mapping system was established in 2009, which supported all forces and which could be accessed directly or through their websites.¹⁴ The National Policing Improvement Agency (NPIA) released an API (Application Program Interface) for local policing data in March 2010,¹⁵ and more detailed crime maps—with data displayed down to street level—were launched by the Home Office in 2011.

An evaluation by the NPIA of the impact of crime maps on public confidence found a positive effect on perceptions of the local police and of the safety of the local area, without increasing people's feeling of being personally at risk (Quinton 2011). Police forces have also worked with community sites for public engagement, and third-party providers such as MyPolice have developed sites that enable the public to provide feedback on the service they have received from the police.¹⁶ In August 2011, the Surrey Police sponsored an application available through Apple's iStore for use on smart phones that aimed at both information giving and some element of joint decision making. They announced that:

¹² This information was derived from examination of the lists managed on Twitter:

<https://twitter.com/#!/nickkeane/uk-police-force-tweets> and

<https://twitter.com/#!/nickkeane/ukcops-who-tweet>.

¹³ http://www.theregister.co.uk/2008/08/15/london_crime_maps/.

¹⁴ <http://data.gov.uk/dataset/england-national-crime-mapping>.

¹⁵ <http://data.gov.uk/apps/police-api>. The NPIA is an executive agency of the Home Office, established in 2007 to provide services to police forces in the UK.

¹⁶ <http://pistnputs.com> and <http://kingscrossenvironment.com>. See also a discussion of the engagement of police on the site Haringey Online in Flouch and Harris (2010) vol. 3, pp. 17-20. For MyPolice, see www.mypolice.org.

“The interactive smartphone app Surrey Police Beat allows people to see where their Safer Neighbourhood officers are and what they are working on as well as giving them the opportunity to vote on their policing priorities.”¹⁷

Although there has been media interest in the use of social media by the emergency services and police intelligence gathering using social media,¹⁸ and police agencies have begun to create directories of users and guidance on good practice, there is little academic analysis of the police use of social media as an engagement tool, or an evaluation of its impact. An exception is a study by Brainard and McNutt (2010) into the use by police in Washington DC of Yahoo! groups as a means of promoting citizen engagement in the period 2005–2007. Their work is located in the field of eGovernment, and a similar approach is taken here. This is argued on the grounds that citizen engagement in discussions about local policing priorities is a form of eDemocracy, aiming to influence the decisions of public bodies. In this respect it is relevant that some Web 2.0 advocates conceptualize it as a set of fundamentally liberating tools that enhance the citizens’ right to communicate (Birdsall 2007) and their ability to participate in political processes. Chadwick (2009), on the other hand, is less sanguine about the impact of social media—in discussing eDemocracy, he characterizes Web 2.0 in terms of “low threshold coproductive behaviour.” While this may not live up to the “high ideals of the deliberative public sphere,” nevertheless it can have real value in consultation and policymaking.

Police Adoption of Social Media

Police forces have been using static websites for over a decade, but pressure to improve public engagement and share information with the public in new ways has led to experimentation with social media. The NPIA took the lead in developing best practice in citizen engagement for UK police forces when it was set up in 2007, and it took on a facilitating role as forces began a series of experiments.¹⁹

¹⁷ http://www.surrey.police.uk/neighbourhood/area_item.asp?area=12&itemID=14325. Downloaded August 25, 2011.

¹⁸ For example, <http://www.homeland1.com/Emergency-Management-Operations/articles/901421-Social-media-have-become-the-elephant-in-the-EOC/> and <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/facebook/8101744/Police-to-receive-Facebook-training.html>.

¹⁹ Based on an account given to the author by NPIA’s Digital Engagement and Knowledge Business Adviser, Nick Keane, on October 26, 2010.

A 2008 meeting with forces to discuss new initiatives showed that a number of forces, notably North Yorkshire and West Midlands, had begun to use Facebook and YouTube to share information about the work of some of their local policing teams. In an environment in which legally sound procedure and security are salient, there was some unease on the part both of the practitioners and of the ACPO about how this activity should be managed. In particular, there was concern about whether public access—and, perhaps more to the point, access by relatively junior members of the organization—to communications about policing activity could be contained within the existing approaches and procedures for information management and police force communications. This was at a time when the police service was preoccupied not only with long-standing issues about the validity of information for court proceedings, but also with the impact of the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and the need to implement the statutory code on the Management of Police Information (MOPI) 2005 and the accompanying guidance by the end of 2010.

With new practice emerging, the NPIA organized a further conference in October 2009 with the title *Policing 2.0*. Gordon Scobie, then Assistant Chief Constable of the West Midlands Police and now Deputy Chief Constable of Tayside Police, was the ACPO sponsor for the event. All 43 forces were sufficiently interested to send representatives to the conference—even those that had at this time made no efforts to use social media in their business or that in some cases were antagonistic towards it. The conference identified four potential areas of interest for the police, corresponding to established business areas. These were Crime and Intelligence, Media and Communications, Information Technology, and Citizen Engagements. A new portfolio was established, reporting to the lead on neighborhood policing—at that time the Chief Constable of Cambridgeshire, Julie Spence. ACPO agreed that the NPIA should support forces in the use of digital media but that the practices each used should be subject to each force's own guidance.

Guidance for practitioners issued by forces and by the NPIA reflects their confidence that the use of social media has a significant part to play in engagement with the public. Gordon Scobie has attributed to social media a central role in effective communication, and hence in increasing public confidence (NPIA 2010). In an interview in November 2010, he described the potential of social media as a means of engaging with the public and opening discussion around what the police are proposing to do and what the public thinks about it.²⁰ He went so far as to say that while there are risks involved in social networking, the greater risk is not engaging, since “if we don't engage with

²⁰ <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-tayside-central-11828502>.

people via social media they will move on without us and we will miss the opportunity to influence them” (NPIA 2010).

The NPIA’s guidance advises forces to adopt seven principles for effective communication. These are to be credible, consistent, responsive, inclusive, ethical, and personable, and for the police service user to be an ambassador for the force and the service. Leicestershire Constabulary’s unpublished guidance to its staff on the use of social media advises that:

“Good use of social media can help the police to better understand, respond to and attract the attention of specific audiences. Used in the right way by the organisation, social media enables real two-way communication with people interested in engaging with the police.”

The guidance claims that social media can enhance the reputation and accessibility of staff to their communities, communicate with the communities they serve, provide opportunities for increased public engagement, gauge the impact of police and partnership activity in tackling issues affecting the community, and serve as a channel to seek views from community members on issues affecting them. Police officers are encouraged to be interesting and engaging in their use of social media in order to stimulate interaction. The Thames Valley Police guidance, for example, suggests advertising the use of social media through conventional channels, using Twitter to engage in dialogue, not just to tell people what’s happening, but also to respond to specific questions, making sure tweets are interesting and relevant and making the experience interactive for followers by including links to pictures, videos, and community stories. There is also a suggestion that the way to be engaging is by using slightly more informal language than usual (while remaining professional), tweet between three and six times a day, retweet interesting local material, and link up with local partners, including hyperlocal sites, schools, and residents.

A Disruptive Technology?

The requirement for local police teams and police forces to make more information available to the public, and to engage in partnership working, has presented novel challenges that run counter to the established culture of ICT development in the police service. Policing is an information-intensive activity (Ericsson and Haggerty 1997), and the recent history of UK policing has included considerable investment in new information systems in response to perceived operational needs (e.g., Bichard 2004). However, that development has been problematic, time-consuming, and often expensive. It is not surprising, therefore,

that the use of social media has on the whole not been led by established IT departments, but by media departments and even individual neighborhood and other operational police officers. It is significant that ACPO chose to create a new portfolio in neighborhood policing to develop doctrine and good practice, rather than locating this in their established information management business area.

The priority given to openness rather than security, and to speed of development and organizational improvisation rather than more formal program management and planning is striking. It is of course also the case that the open availability of social networking tools, the very light requirement for bespoke programming, and the ease of use by end users all make for a very different information systems environment than the police have traditionally been used to. This light coupling between technology and organizational goals goes back to O'Reilly's discussion of perpetual experimentation in the public domain (O'Reilly 2005) and, as Chadwick (2006) observes, represents a value shift away from tightly managed development environments towards greater fluidity between developers and users.

There are of course arguments from a network security point of view as to why police IT managers might be reluctant to integrate social media using commercial platforms with force networks, and why they may urge caution on those in forces who want to use social networking at all. The combination of user-generated content and rapid spread of messages through networks may be taken as an invitation to attack (Zittrain 2010).

Data and Analysis

The Size and Growth of Police Twitter Networks

Police Twitter accounts were identified from lists kept by the NPIA,²¹ covering all the active accounts managed by the forces centrally, and all those managed by or on behalf of individual officers or teams working at neighborhood or local level. These two groups are referred to hereafter as “force” and “local” accounts. The oldest official account run by the force centrally and using the force name and branding is that of the West Midlands police. Its oldest returned tweet was sent in December 2008.²² Twenty-seven more forces joined Twitter during 2009 and nine

²¹ <https://twitter.com/#!/nickkeane/uk-police-force-tweets> and <https://twitter.com/#!/nickkeane/ukcops-who-tweet>.

²² The historical growth of the number of accounts was tracked by looking at the date of the first tweets returned from the Twitter API using NodeXL, an open source extension to Microsoft Excel 7. The oldest tweets were found for 126 of the accounts using this tool.

in 2010. Six had not joined by October 2010, and four of the established accounts were inactive.

One hundred and forty accounts were identified as those of local police officers and teams engaged in neighborhood policing. The oldest was that of the Sevenoaks local team (Kent Police) whose oldest returned tweet was dated February 20, 2009. Twenty-seven accounts were set up in 2009 and 99 in 2010. There was rapid growth to over 120 accounts by July 2010, with slower growth in summer 2010.

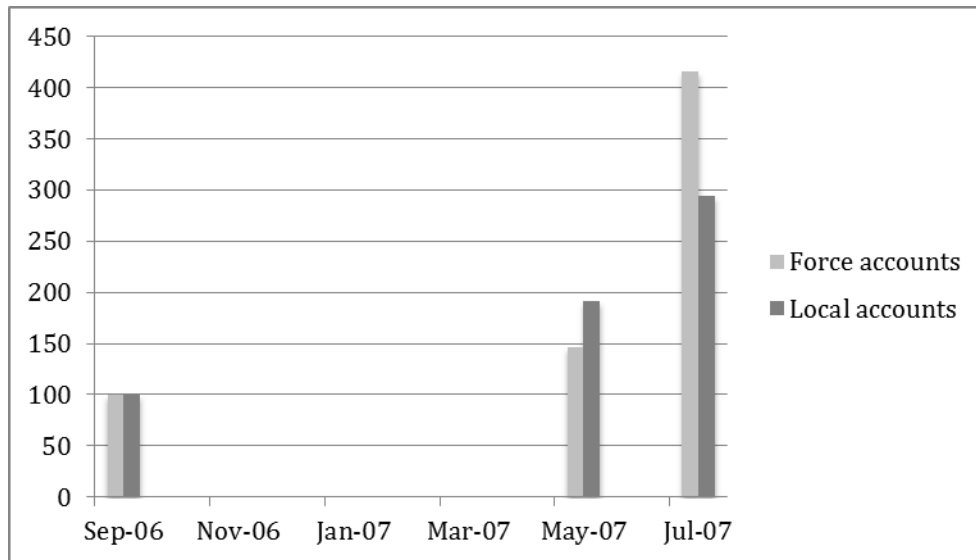
The Twitter API allows access to information about dates of oldest tweets, and Twitter pages record the number of people following and followed by each account. The graphing software tool NodeXL (Hansen, Schneiderman, and Smith 2010) was used as a means of downloading and graphing information about a small sample of accounts. The sample was chosen to include several of the most active Twitter accounts operated by local police officers and forces. In the case of the Staffordshire Police, accounts were included in the sample at the officer, city, and force level. Reading the content of messages on Twitter allowed a view to be taken of what the police were trying to achieve with Twitter. This observation of behavior online was augmented by interviews with practitioners in three police forces and the NPIA's lead on digital engagement.

Followers. Data on the number of followers per account were collected between October 22 and November 10, 2010. Further data on the number of followers were collected in June and August 2011, this time looking at all the active force accounts and all the local accounts that were active in both June and August. The number of followers was tabulated for each group. These data are summarized in Table 1, and normalized data for the number of followers for both types of account are compared in Figure 1.

Table 1. Followers of police Twitter accounts in England and Wales²³

	October 2010	June 2011	August 2011
Force accounts	(n=33)	(n=39)	(n=39)
Total	52,843	91,684	259,972
Mean	1,468	2,351	6,666
Index	100	147	416
Local accounts	(n=140)	(n=402)	(n=402)
Total	19,649	107,814	165,841
Mean	154	268	413
Index	100	192	295

Figure 1. Relative growth in followers in force and local accounts (baseline=100)



²³ The data show the aggregate number of tweets and followers in each category, as shown on Twitter account pages, on October 28, 2010.

In October 2010, the average force Twitter account had about 1,500 followers. Local police accounts had far fewer followers, averaging about 150. Table 2 shows skewed distributions for both types of accounts, with a small number of accounts with a large number of followers in each case.

Table 2. Number of followers per account (October 2010)

	Forces (<i>n</i> =33)	Local police (<i>n</i> =140)
1–500	5	133
501–1,000	11	5
1,001–1,500	10	1
1,501–2,000	4	1
>2,000	3	0

Table 3. Correlation between tweets, followers, and age of account in October 2010 (Pearson rank coefficient)

	#tweets/#followers	#tweets/account age (in days)	#followers/account age (in days)
Force accounts (<i>n</i> =33)	0.53	0.46	0.65
Local accounts (<i>n</i> =140)	0.6	-0.01	0.04

The data in Table 3 suggest that there is some correlation between the number of followers and the length of time the account has been active, and that the number of followers has a moderate positive correlation with the population of the force area and the number of tweets (a proxy for the level of activity on the account). The pattern for local officers is markedly different, with no significant correlation of the number of followers to the age of the account. There is however a moderate positive correlation between the number of followers and the number of tweets. More content is after all more likely to attract and sustain followers.

The incremental growth in the number and size of accounts from the earliest days to the summer of 2011 has since been eclipsed by the rapid growth in public interest at the time of the August riots. That this growth was specifically associated with the riots is demonstrated by Ben Proctor who shows the number of followers of four major force accounts increasing on a daily basis after August 6.²⁴ Examination of all 39 active police force accounts shows that the forces with the biggest growth include those where there was the most unrest—

²⁴ <http://www.benproctor.co.uk/blog/2011/08/22/a-tale-of-four-police-twitter-accounts/>.

Nottinghamshire, Leicestershire, Merseyside, Greater Manchester, West Midlands, and Derbyshire all show increases in the number of followers in this period of over 200 percent. So do Cambridgeshire, West Mercia, South Yorkshire, and Hampshire. The biggest growth has been in the Metropolitan Police, which was relatively late in committing itself to the use of Twitter. By August 11, @metpoliceuk had over 34,000 followers, compared with 2,900 in June. Of course, not all the 346,000 followers now following police force accounts in England and Wales are unique individuals—there is overlap between these groups. But the scale of the growth is striking. The experience of Greater Manchester Police from the GMP24 exercise suggests that these high numbers of followers will persist. As inspection of the follower lists shows, many of the followers of police Twitter sites are media organizations, and the publication of information through the site is a means for the police to feed their messages into a debate which goes wider than their immediate followers on Twitter. There was a more modest growth in the number of followers of the accounts managed by neighborhood and borough policing teams. Even so, some of them, such as @brumpolice and @suptpaynewmp, have gained several thousand new followers.

Accounts Followed via Police Accounts. There is a difference between police force accounts and local team/individual officer accounts in the ratio of followers of these police accounts to those who are followed by them. In October 2010, the average for force accounts was 0.15 followed per follower. For local accounts it was 0.97. This reflects policy choices on the part of those managing force accounts not to follow many people. The Met Police, for example, include in their published Twitter policy:

“If you follow us on Twitter we will not automatically follow you back. This is to discourage the use of direct messaging and so that you can easily identify other key Twitter users we think are relevant to our work and who we will follow. Being followed by us does not imply endorsement of any kind.”²⁵

Local officers on the other hand are encouraged to follow local people and groups. Thames Valley Police advise their officers that the way to get a following is to start following others and that they might begin by following local politicians, church and religious leaders, schools, businesses, councils/councillors/MPs, charities, sports clubs, and other police force accounts, the last as a source of good ideas.

²⁵ http://www.met.police.uk/webinfo/twitter_policy.htm (downloaded August 25, 2011).

What Information Are the Police Sharing on Twitter?

While Twitter imposes a restriction on the size of messages, police officers are nevertheless able to create a wide variety of messages, ranging from the dispassionate and carefully crafted messages of official notification, reports of incidents and requests for information about wanted persons, to very informal messages in reports of current local activity, conversational exchanges with other officers and members of the public. Few messages are direct responses to reports of crimes and antisocial behavior, since police guidance tends to discourage using Twitter rather than established channels for reporting crimes. This appears to be rooted in a fear that new media channels are less likely to get information to the right people in the force promptly. More messages respond to public enquiries about incidents—“why is the helicopter out?,” “What are your people doing in my area?”—or refute statements about police activity or public order incidents. Twitter is used to advertise meetings and announce crime prevention campaigns, to give advice about public safety, and to publish notices of local meetings and open days at police stations. Police officers create their own messages, but to a greater or lesser extent they also retweet official force messages, tweets by other police users and items they have picked up which they consider of interest to their followers. Tweets often contain links to press releases, force websites, YouTube videos, and other web resources.

To try to estimate the proportions of these widely differing uses, the output of 11 of the most active local accounts and a random sample of five forces over a six-week period from October 1, 2010 was coded into 16 sub-categories, aggregated into four main categories (some messages could fit in more than one category). The four categories were:

- **Patrol.** Reports of frontline policing activity, whether patrolling or carrying out follow-up action resulting in an arrest, the resolution of a situation, or the conclusion of a case.
- **Information.** Police requests for information *from* the public (e.g., about incidents, missing or wanted persons) and flows of information *to* the public, in crime prevention and public safety advice and general reassurance messages.
- **Partners.** The development and management of partnership relationships, either with other emergency services, local authorities, educational establishments and voluntary bodies, or with the public. This category included all exchanges with members of the public.
- **Other.** Messages that did not relate directly to any of the above policing functions. They were either about supporting issues (internal police business, whether official or informal) or about the mechanics of social networking, or

were about matters relating only tangentially to the business of policing (e.g., television programs, local celebrities, or national events which did not engage the local police).

Table 4 shows the breakdown of the different types of messages in the sample.

Table 4. Message content by category (October 2010)

	Tweets in sample	Tweets by category of content (%)			
		Patrol	Information	Partners	Other
Force accounts					
StaffsPolice	67	61	13	19	6
Avon and Somerset	60	42	32	27	0
westyorks	141	22	67	6	5
leics	125	19	44	31	6
NorthumbriaPol	203	12	39	45	3
Mean		31	39	26	4
Local accounts					
MHall5544WMP	220	53	7	31	9
echocharlie1871	69	49	26	9	16
hotelalpha9	105	44	10	35	11
policetango7	173	40	5	47	8
PCSO31115WMP	245	37	13	25	25
SgtPeterAllan	94	32	31	17	20
kentPoliceTwells	244	31	3	46	20
StevenagePolice	159	25	6	55	14
Campuscop	76	25	53	16	7
rogernield2703	279	16	4	24	56
pompeycupolice	102	15	27	27	30
Mean		33	17	30	20

Table 5 suggests a number of characteristics of police use of Twitter in terms of message content. This is a small sample, and there are clearly wide variations in practice. *Force accounts* are largely used to make announcements and provide public safety and other messages. In fact, several of them are largely used to publish links to the force press releases (with little or no reworking for the 140 characters of the Twitter format). In some cases this messaging is dominated by requests for assistance from the public but contains relatively few reports on the outcomes of cases or of previous requests for information with little in the “other” category, with little about internal force or other matters. *Local teams and*

officers devote a similar proportion to messages about patrol and partnership categories but less to information giving.

Exceptions in the sample are one local officer whose messages were dominated by crime prevention advice (he's a local officer for a university campus) and a local inspector who combined local community messages with extensive engagement with other police officers and social media experts on a range of subjects.

The Structure of Police Twitter Networks

Some indication of who follows the police on Twitter can be derived from the descriptions that account holders can choose to post on their Twitter home pages. In order to get a general overview, seven categories were used—business, media (i.e., accounts associated with broadcasters press, bloggers), voluntary sector, other police accounts, other public sector accounts (broadly defined to include central and local government, local politicians, health, education), and individuals, plus a separate category for those where no description was offered. Where a user gave several descriptions, for example combining information about their occupation, family, and cultural interests, they were classified as individuals. Similarly, if the details included a statement equivalent to “these views are my own,” they were included as individuals regardless of any apparent occupational affiliation. It is likely that the majority of the “none” category are also individual accounts if we assume that institutions would be likely to identify themselves and include further contact details such as website addresses. The names of almost all these accounts suggest that they are associated with individuals, and inspection of a number of the accounts suggests that this is indeed the case.

The business and media categories aggregate local and national (and indeed in some cases non-UK) business. A number provide policing and security-related services while others are local small and medium-sized businesses that may be more likely to have an interest in local policing as receivers of the service.

This coding was applied to the follower lists of @StaffsPolice, @policingstoke, and @policetango7 (a neighborhood account in Stoke) in October 2010 and in June or August 2011: in each case before the riots of August 6–11. The results are summarized in Table 5.

Table 5. Categories of followers (%)²⁶

	Business	Media	Voluntary sector	Police	Other public sector	Individual	None	Total
StaffsPolice								
Oct 2010	31	5	6	6	5	25	22	100
June 2011	20	7	4	6	4	29	30	100
policingstoke								
Oct 2010	13	6	4	3	1	47	26	100
Aug 2011	21	4	6	5	3	37	24	100
policetango7								
Oct 2010	22	10	12	16	9	19	14	100
Aug 2011	29	13	6	13	3	25	11	100

Without analysis of a larger sample of accounts of different types, it is of course not possible to draw any conclusions based on a comparison between the force and local accounts or attach significance to changes over time. What the data suggest, though, is that in each case the majority of followers are businesses or individuals, suggesting that the aim of establishing channels to the public is being met. In the case of @policetango7, the proportion of police followers is higher, but in each case the size of the group of interested fellow professionals in the police and other public service organizations is relatively small.

In October 2010, the majority of followers were singly connected within the network, that is, they followed the police account holder but no other members of the network. Analysis of clusters within the networks suggested that the police and media groups were over-represented among those followers who had multiple connections. Indeed, it seemed likely that there was a group of police “twitterati” who followed lots of other police accounts, so that most police accounts would have a similar sub-group of followers of this type. This accords with the advice cited above that the police should follow other police accounts in order to learn about innovative and successful practice. More recent analysis of interconnections suggests that the general degree of connectedness between followers has increased as followers have added to their personal networks. Hence by August 2011 the potential for Twitter networks to act as means of diffusing police messages has increased.

NodeXL also permits searching the graphs of so-called *mention* or *search networks*, that is, the network of people who have referenced a Twitter user (using

²⁶ Based on a 10 percent sample for StaffsPolice ($n=1,540$ and $3,610$) and policingstoke ($n=3,430$ and $2,310$) and 25 percent for policetango7 ($n=408$ and 504).

the @user term) in a tweet as a mention or reply to a third party. The significance of this is that one would expect a relatively dense network to be built up between users who were sharing and replying to police messages. Such a network might be an indication that the medium was being used as a platform for some sort of discussion or sharing of ideas within the community of active Twitter users, which would reflect effective engagement.

For each group, NodeXL was used to inspect networks whose links comprise the reply, or that mention a relationship signified by the inclusion of an @user tag in tweets. In this case, “user” was the account name of a police force or local police account, and the network also included replies or mentions between those who mentioned the user. The search comprised all 33 of the police forces with active accounts in November 2010 and the 50 local police accounts with the highest number of tweets (in the expectation that these would be most likely to be retweeted, and hence produce the densest networks). The search results were constrained by the data accessible via the Twitter API at the time of the search. The samples were taken on November 10 and 11, 2010 (for local and force accounts, respectively). No results were returned relating to tweets older than November 2 and 3, respectively. The results are therefore a snapshot of search networks over a period of eight days from the date of search. It follows that the data are likely to understate the density of these networks.

Of the 33 force networks inspected, 30 had one or more mentions or replies. Twelve had 10 or more. There were special circumstances for the two with the largest numbers in their networks. The GMP figure reflects the continued effect of their 24-hour twitter experiment on October 17, both directly (some of the tweets are about the day itself) and indirectly, given their much larger base of followers. The Sussex Police network during the period of the study is boosted by retweets of messages about the Lewes bonfire and reflects the force’s use of Twitter as a means of supporting their crowd control efforts at this annual event.

The evidence from search networks suggests that while we know from force guidance that a range of strategies is in play as a means of gaining more followers, there is little evidence that this is an effective strategy for broadcasting information beyond the initial group of followers. The number of mentions is very low in almost all cases. It is not possible to say from these data alone what value users get from the information they receive through Twitter, but there is not much sign that they choose to forward it using the @user or #user tags. The exceptions appear to be discussion among those with a particular interest in social networking, when there is an event of major local significance such as the Lewes bonfire celebrations or where there is a managed national event such as that carried out by GMP (and even then, the density of the search network is low a month after the event).

Finally, it is worth noting that exchanges with members of the public are not usually presented in such a way that both sides of the conversation are visible to third parties—unless they are following both parties to the conversation. Members of the public will generally only see the police response to a query on Twitter.

Implications for Practice

It is possible to propose some hypothetical strategies that police force users might employ in order to maximize the effectiveness of Twitter in support of their communication and engagement goals. Three possible models are:

Model 1: *Broadcasters* will seek to maximize the number of followers, especially those in their target audiences. They will be especially interested in followers who themselves have large numbers of followers, who tweet a lot and who are likely to retweet police messages.

Model 2: *Local knowledge gatherers* will maximize the number of people followed, especially in the local community. They will look to follow those who themselves follow a large number of people and who could therefore be more likely to retweet and mention others.

Model 3: *Community facilitators* will employ elements of both strategies and will encourage relatively dense groups within their networks as potential sources of comments on ideas and sharing news.

Neighborhood policing encourages local police officers to be community facilitators, but most accounts are used for broadcasting and elicit only limited feedback. Twitter is undoubtedly useful as a means of collecting information from local organizations, but there is less evidence of it producing more than occasional information from local people who are outside the usual channels of communication so far. There is also some confusion as to how Twitter feeds are used to communicate with specific communities, particularly when there is a tendency to interact with other people from outside the community who are keen users of Twitter.

Practical recommendations for how the police service could use Twitter as a truly social medium rather than only an additional broadcast channel might include:

- Encouraging retweeting and @ uses by followers by creating more inviting content. This challenges the very formal presentation of the news release and the appeal for information.

- Encouraging debate and engagement. There are formal issues with this: generally, because accounts don't include incoming messages in their feeds, and police responses often mean little to the wider audience.
- Encouraging feedback on how good the service is, and establishing a means of aggregating and publishing what comes back.
- Separating the discussion about the mechanics of social media on the one hand and internal police matters (including both references to organizational issues and light-hearted exchanges with colleagues) from the business of policing.

Police users might also consider what the balance is in talking about activity, such as patrol, resolving issues, and developing local priorities on the one hand, and appeals for support in respect of crimes on the other. Social media are distinctive because they are about feedback and response—so the police need to put more feedback into the system.

Conclusion

The UK police service has been experimenting with Twitter since 2008, and has hopes for its potential as a tool to meet its need to communicate and engage with the public. Its leading advocates are advising forces, and particularly local police officers, to enable two-way discussion of policing issues. As the discussion here of the political and criminological debates around neighborhood policing, public accountability, and trust shows, the police service has felt some pressure to develop new channels for communicating with the public. The drivers have included democratic accountability as well as operational issues. The achievement of this goal has been limited. An examination of a sample of some of the most active accounts suggests that exchanges within networks are infrequent and the nature of Twitter means that conversations are difficult to join (because they are only semi-visible). In many cases one-way broadcasting of requests for information dominates other comment.

These findings are closely aligned to those of Brainard and McNutt (2010) in relation to the use of Yahoo! Groups by the Washington DC Police in 2005–2007. As in their case, the conclusion to be drawn is not that this effort is wasted, but rather that there is a potential that can be realized through clarity of aims and methods. Even before the UK riots of August 2011, the use of Twitter was most successful in real time, operational situations such as the Lewes bonfire in Sussex or in support of what was in essence a marketing campaign at GMP. At the time of the riots, Twitter came into its own as a means of putting out very localized,

frequent news updates, refutations of rumors, public service announcements, and calls for evidence and information.

Police force use of Twitter has been largely non-transformational. Social media offer greater visibility for both senior and neighborhood officers and they are a means of advertising established media. On the whole, forces have used them most successfully as an extra channel for delivering messages, not as a means of enabling dialogue with the public. Advocates of the use of social media in policing aspire to more than this, but there is a tension between openness and engagement and more conservative approaches to communication with the public. Reputational risk is a salient concern. The Leicestershire force guidance, for example, notes as a benefit of the use of social media that you can “have a real interaction with the public—with the advantage that comments can be seen only by you, reducing the reputational risk.” Responsibility for managing reputational risk is generally devolved to the local level, but a number of forces have protocols in place which require officers to be authorized by the central media team before they can operate accounts which represent the force, and they reserve the right to intervene to remove content which is at odds with corporate policy. Officers are reminded of the need to protect the reputation of their force and not to say anything that would not be said at a public meeting.

Moving to a more open form of communication is inherently challenging. The medium itself will not bring about the cultural change needed to make genuine engagement possible. There is a particular challenge for police services. Brainard and McNutt (2010) observe that “asking officers to wear two hats—that of neutral, authoritative professional on the street and that of a facilitator and collaborator online, is asking a great deal.” The analysis of the use of Twitter accounts here supports this view. An enthusiastic and bottom-up model of development is intrinsic to the way that social networking technology has an impact. Nevertheless, the evidence examined here suggests that for all its apparent novelty in a hierarchical organization, Twitter has been most effectively used in support of the traditional roles of the police as a source of appeals for information and a broadcaster of announcements. By the end of 2010, Twitter was already showing its value as a way of getting timely and localized messages out to the public and of adding to the reach of traditional appeals for information. There was less evidence though of its forming the basis of the kind of dialogue that could truly be called *engagement*.

The difficulty in engaging is not just a product of the conflict between openness and reputational risk: it also relates to the nature of the platform itself. Twitter is for microblogging, and supports an asymmetric form of communication: police Twitter sites generally have much larger numbers of followers than they follow. Further, Twitter does not lend itself to the three-way conversations which Ferber, Foltz, and Pugliese (2007) see as the

transformational element in online communications. It is hard to see that Twitter will become a platform for discourse about neighborhood policing priorities. At the time that the data for this study were gathered, at least, the aspirations set out in the *Engage* guidance document (NPIA 2010) had not been met. But this does not undermine the real value that is being added to local policing in terms of being able to keep citizens informed of what is going on in their neighborhoods. At times of immediate concern such as riots, marches, accidents, and other emergencies, there is evidently public enthusiasm for using social media, including Twitter, to keep informed and, in the case of @riotcleanup, to organize.²⁷

As for accountability and engagement, it seems likely that Twitter's strength will be as a means of publicizing issues and conversations that will take place elsewhere, whether in other online fora such as virtual beat meetings, or perhaps on Facebook or in public meetings.

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²⁷ On August 9, 2011, on the morning after rioting in Clapham and other parts of London, citizens organized working parties to clean up the damage left from the previous night's events using Twitter and Facebook. <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-london-14456857>.

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