



Proper interactive communication of the police as a(n e-)trust-building strategy Introducing the term policing digilect

Správna interaktívna komunikácia polície ako (n) stratégia budovania dôvery Zavádzame pojem policajná práca digilect

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Abstract

Media channels play an indisputable role in the credibility and accuracy of information about security risks and deficiencies in the world around us. Social media sites as media channels are also being paid much attention nowadays. These community websites are applied by organisations, institutions and businesses to inform their clients and customers. Law enforcement agencies in England, Finland and Slovakia also use these sites daily and intentionally. The police forces of these countries have been trying to exploit the real values of these social networking sites, inform and engage citizens on a regular basis. In Hungary there have been several attempts aiming to reach the members of the communities in an easier, simpler and direct channel, and to gain and build trust of residents. It would only be possible if partnership was built between the Police and the locals, but to that end, police units must develop their communication skills and improve their willingness, for which social media offers great potentials. The study deals with proper law enforcement communication as a trust-building strategy and introduces the terms law enforcement digilect and policing digilect.

Keywords: *community policing, digital communication, partnership, trust, policing digilect*

Abstrakt:

Mediálne kanály majú nespochybniteľnú úlohu v dôveryhodnosti a presnosti informácií o bezpečnostných rizikách a nedostatkoch vo svete okolo nás. V súčasnosti sa venuje veľká



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pozornosť aj webom sociálnych médií ako mediálnym kanálom. Tieto komunitné webové stránky používajú organizácie, inštitúcie a podniky na informovanie svojich klientov a zákazníkov. Denne a zámerne používajú tieto stránky aj orgány činné v trestnom konaní v Anglicku, Fínsku a na Slovensku. Policajné sily týchto krajín sa snažia využívať skutočné hodnoty týchto sociálnych sietí, pravidelne informovať a zapájať občanov. V Maďarsku sa uskutočnilo niekoľko pokusov zameraných na ľahší, jednoduchší a priamy prístup k členom komunity a na získanie a budovanie dôvery obyvateľov. Bolo by to možné, iba ak by sa vybudovalo partnerstvo medzi políciou a miestnymi obyvateľmi, ale na tento účel musia policajné jednotky rozvíjať svoje komunikačné schopnosti a zvyšovať svoju ochotu, pre ktorú sociálne médiá ponúkajú veľký potenciál. Štúdiá sa zaoberá správnou komunikáciou v oblasti presadzovania práva ako stratégiou budovania dôvery a zavádza pojmy vynuucovanie práva digilect a policing digilect.

Kľúčové slová: komunitná polícia, digitálna komunikácia, partnerstvo, dôvera, policing digilect

Introduction

Law enforcement is one of those scientific fields that have undergone significant changes in recent years. Not only law enforcement as a whole, but its subfields, such as law enforcement communication, sociology or even the development of professional foreign language competencies have been highlighted as well. [1,2]

Media channels play an indisputable role in the credibility and accuracy of information about security risks and deficiencies in the world around us. Trust and the media seem almost incompatible. *'In international comparison, the inhabitants of the post-communist countries of Central Europe, and especially Hungary, belong to a group of highly distrustful people. [...] The intergenerational and societal transmission of mistrust, the close relationship between trust and trustworthy behaviour'* can also be observed [3].

One of the notorious examples for the loss of trust in security news was the Chernobyl disaster in 1986. Although the Soviet Union tried to withhold the fact of the tragedy, and naturally any information, the world was learnt about the nuclear accident the very next day. The post-explosion period resulted in 100-200,000 miscarriages and abortions in Western Europe, partly due to misinformation and partly due to fear, generated by media [4].

The responsible authorities also failed to provide credible information on the Fukushima nuclear accident in 2011. In an article titled *'Shameful Media Panic is Slowing Down'*, correspondent Lewis Page penned the following sentences: *'I would like to apologize on behalf of my profession for the incredible levels of fear and misinformation that came out this week. I've never been so ashamed to call myself a journalist.'* Since then, the article disappeared even from the Internet. These examples could serve as deterrents, since there is no doubt about the role of media in providing credible and accurate information on the well-being and sense of security of the public.

About the credibility of media, Péter Zsolt writes the following in a note for law enforcement journalists: *'Journalists can easily gain a greater degree of trust, as not only the title written next to their names, but the use of language itself can govern it. Their use of language must be an unravelling of concepts, the ability to interpret more complex things, and countless other motifs may be indicative of the expert's character. If this is accompanied by some personal trust on the part of the consumer, we can*

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already say that the influence of a specialized journalist will be stronger than that of a simple journalist and, of course, his or her responsibility will be greater' [5].

In our case, the specialized journalist mentioned in the quote can be replaced with a law enforcement expert who communicates on social media platforms on behalf of the organisation, and the above statements can be applied to him as well. Trust between law enforcement agencies and the people they protect and serve is essential to the stability of communities, the integrity of our criminal justice system, and the safe and effective delivery of policing services [6].

It can be stated that the police as the largest professional law enforcement organization in Hungary, also play a huge role in building trust. So, the question arises: How is it possible to develop open and credible communication and problem-solving cooperation between the police agencies and the members of the community?

In 2010 the police announced a change of culture in theory and practice in Hungary. Since then, significant changes have taken place in the professional and structural system of the organisation, for example the Communication Service of the National Police Headquarters as an independent branch of service was set up in 2013. Despite the strict hierarchical structure of the police, and a fairly centralised national police force in Hungary [7], almost exclusively independent positions appeared in the field of communication (from the territorial organisations as well) and were directly channelled to the high commissioner of the Hungarian Police [8].

Democracy also means the establishment of the most effective police force possible, and it also includes proper communication. Several experts have argued in recent decades that the relationship between the police and the community is also determined by the quality of communication. [1,9] Regarding offline and online interfaces, the number of attempts is increasing where there is a real opportunity for two-way direct and open communication. One of the innovative methods is called Police Café that has been practiced in Hungary for six years in 2020, and its first research findings prove its effectiveness [10].

Modern times require modern policing techniques. Because society has become mobile and people are on the go, they rely on technology for day to day communication; the methods police use to communicate with the public has changed too. Considering the police agencies in the United Kingdom, the United States and even the Netherlands, we cannot talk about fully decentralized police. In these countries keeping touch with the general public through social media is recognized as one of the most important achievements of the 21st century, furthermore it is a regular and good practice at the same time. Although, there are also police forces with significant results in Central Europe. The communication of the Slovak police force on social networks is also positively perceived by the general public as well as by the professional public. Its presence and communication have been awarded several times, and the Force possesses one of the most followed social media accounts. The philosophy and practical operation of community policing are applied through these new media channels. Therefore, the primary goal is to generate content that reaches the population quickly and provides them with accurate information.

This study focuses mainly on outward communication and the possibility of establishing partnership through SNSs. Similarly, to the real world, there are

influencers on SNSs that can influence and manipulate the opinions of other users [11]. The operators of the SNSs have to pay attention to their negative attitude and learn how to respond appropriately. The research also extends to the presence of influencers in police communication on community sites and the manner they might influence the image of the police.

The purpose of communication by law enforcement agencies in social media is partly the same, but the style is fundamentally different from their traditional messages, in which the primary aim is to inform the general public in an objective manner. Online community interfaces are different in the manner of communication, because social media platforms intend to provide community information. In this case, the news of law enforcement agencies is not aimed at a specific target group, like in the areas of commerce and sales, but the police want to reach every member of the community with their messages. In fact, they need to find a style that is clear and comprehensible to the widest audience possible. Their aim is to create an image of a loving and trusted police officer, and police agency image in the minds of the members of the public.

Of course, the best way would be if the organization itself were open to the community and to the problems of its members. If we talk about trust, whether it is a strategy-building method or mutual trust, neither of them is a month or two-month long project, but they are long and carefully planned procedures. When law enforcement researches began in the 1960s, several experts realised that police could only function properly if there were a trusting relationship within the police and the community members, and public trust on the side of the citizens [12].

The real meaning of trust was interpreted in many ways. The misinterpreters of community approach might think that the community governs the work of law enforcement, but that is not really the case. Instead, it is much easier to carry out law enforcement work if police officers have local response to the local problems. In this form, it is inevitable that there should be a direct link between the police and the civil society, if the community assists and supports the police as a part of their daily lives. Additionally, the police, due to their expertise, carry out the security-related tasks entrusted to them by the community. Proper communication is an essential part of this process.

1. The popularity of social media

In the first part of the study, the relationship between community policing and law enforcement communication was presented. The next part of the study examines the content and the features of two policing SNSs. Before describing their specific features, we tracked the popularity of SNSs. By achieving this level of popularity, these sites necessarily have an impact on society as a whole, they alter social, and cultural processes, including communication taking place there as well [13].

Nowadays, the popularity and importance of social media websites must be obvious, although the popularity of different sites is age-grouped and interoperable, since many users are active users of multiple SNSs at the same time. These sites have almost 2.09 billion users and analysts predict 3.09 billion users by 2021. In accordance with the predicted numbers, experts suggest a more increased popularity of these websites rather than their fading popularity. This number implies an unprecedented mass

of people (and of course, social power) that has never been experienced on any platform in human history [14].

The other necessary background data to complete this study was to find out about the number of the active users of the most popular community websites. In 2019, Facebook was still the most popular SNS worldwide. Its active user population is about 2.375 billion, which means that almost every third person in the world uses this platform on a regular basis.

According to Nordby, interactive communication is '*a type of communication mediated by digital technologies*' [15]. Several researchers tried to examine and analyse the special language of interactive communication and introduced the terms for this new language variant, e.g. netspeak, virtual literacy and secondary writing. [16, 17, 18]

Agnes Veszelszki, a Hungarian new-media researcher and linguist called this new language variant as digilect, as it is the lect of different text genres in digital communication [19]. The researcher collected the special traits of interactive or computer-mediated communication (abbreviated as CMC) [20]. For the reasons set out above, our sample selection focuses on the content, the frequency and the structural features of the posts of two policing SNSs on Facebook.

2. Research questions and hypotheses

In order to complete the research, the following questions were formulated:

- (1) How much does the appearance of SNSs serve the members of the community?
- (2) How much does the content of SNSs serve the members of the community?
- (3) Is there law enforcement/policing digilect on SNSs?

During our research we tried to test three hypotheses based on the researches of Jakusné and Veszelszki. Therefore, our hypotheses for the research questions are as follows:

- (1) Digital culture is transforming the relationships of individuals, societies, and organisations, including their communication processes with incredible rapidity.
- (2) Utilising the 'instant' or immediate response capabilities, law enforcement organisations deliberately use the content of these sites to reach the members of the community as quickly as possible. By doing so, they are about to inform them, prevent emergencies and raise other local issues affecting the life of the community.
- (3) There is a more informal language variant on SNSs, the policing digilect, which is closer to verbalism in its style features and which, after a while, has its own language variety [21].

3. The presentation of the research – sample selection

In this part of the study, the research methods are presented. Primarily, the method of content analysis was applied to complete our study, as '*content analysis is simply the study of recorded human communication*' [22]. In our case, in the first

phase of the sample selection the Facebook SNSs of a foreign and domestic law enforcement organization was examined [14]. The method has proven to be particularly suitable for the analyses of the frequency and quality of communication and for examining ‘*who says what, to whom, why, how, and what effect*’ [22]. During the survey, two law enforcement community sites of the capitals in these countries (Hungary and England, UK) were analysed over a period of nearly two months (N = 116 entries). During this period, the activities, the contents of the posts, and the willingness to contact these law enforcement networking sites were analysed. The frequency of the entries, the content of the entries and the interactivity associated with them were also examined through over a hundred entries.

Systematic sampling was used to analyse these units. There are two possible ways of analysing content: when encoding the (1) manifest (surface) content or (2) the latent content of a message that ‘*encodes its underlying meaning*’ [22]. In our research, both methods were used; in addition to content analysis, we also presented latent content analysis, in which the underlying meanings of the communications became more comprehensible.

Taking advantage of the opportunities provided by the SNSs, law enforcement organizations have appeared on these platforms and are looking for a more direct relationship with members of society and their organizations.

3.1. The presence of the Hungarian Police on a social networking site (SNS)

On the crime prevention SNS of the Budapest Police Headquarters (abbreviated as BRFK in Hungarian) no post has appeared since January 20, 2012. It can be said that the Information Portal of the same agency was more active during the examined period. According to the information on the site, it was created in 2014, and the agency has 53 followers. As a contact, a central, landline phone number was given, but the national emergency telephone number has not been added. There is no information about the date of the establishment of the agency and its leader. In the sampling period, 46 entries were posted, although the platform does not have the features of SNSs in terms of content or activity. In many cases, the entries consist of only a single photo and an adjacent short line, e.g. ‘job’. In more than 20 cases, neither a title nor a description can be found next to the shared images. So, it comes as no surprise that no comments were received to the shared images.¹ Among the entries there were 6 in which the police asked for help or thanked the members of the public for their effective contribution. There were also 6 job posting entries on the BRFK community site during the sampling period. There were only 2 posts about Christmas, while private ones were not published by BRFK. The appearance of 112, the emergency telephone number in the posts is definitely a cultural feature.

Based on the sampling period, it can be stated that the activity of the Hungarian police on the Facebook site was very low, there was little update, and there was no interactivity among the users. The agency has already recognised the need for the

¹ The main features of effective entries will be described in a following study of the author.

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presence in social media, but has not yet developed and implemented a well-functioning strategy.

It is important to mention that with the launch of the Facebook site 'Become a Police Officer!' on October 11, 2019, the Hungarian police increasingly keep seeking to maintain a continuous online presence and connect with the public on the Facebook community site. In addition, the Instagram site (police.hu) launched by the Hungarian Police on July 3, 2019 also has more than 43 thousand followers, but the presentation of these pages, the analysis of their content and language register will be a subject of a next study.

3.2. The presence of the Metropolitan Police Service on a social networking site (SNS)

The other SNS of our analysis was the Facebook profile of the London Metropolitan Police Service. The organisation's home page provides key information, such as its establishment in 1829, some contact information, including 101 and emergency number 999. The site was created in 2011 and it has approximately 230 thousand followers. When examining the MET community site during the sampling period, we found that 70 entries were generated during the two-month period. The most common topics in the entries were Christmas (12 posts) and celebrating MET members in recognition of their decades of work in the police service (10 posts). As a consequence of the social network, it can be stated that the boundaries between private and professional life are increasingly being blurred. This may explain the fact that we could even find an entry about a marriage proposal and Valentine's Day.

Being a law enforcement community site, the number of crime prevention posts was higher, but there was also some law enforcement news communicated to the community members in a simple, factual and casual manner, but using proper law enforcement terminology. Vocabulary also reflects current issues of our time, as we can also read about drone security threats and counter terrorism awareness. We also found a *terminus technicus* (technical term) that is not used in our culture, e.g. *female genital mutilation*, abbreviated as FGM. Not only is there a different cultural explanation for this, but also an intercultural one. In addition to the visible content, the entry contains a latent reference to the nationality of the offender. It can be assumed that the members of the population in London include those who brought these customs from their original culture, as the terms of *witchcraft* and *nailed cow tongue* were also in the same entry.

The MET are well aware of their corporate social responsibility (abbreviated as CSR): during the sampling period, they launched campaigns to help cancer patients, sick children and the homeless. Entries include requests for help from the general public for those who are in need, and there are some entries thanking the public for their effective involvement. In a Christmas greeting, they report the results of their Christmas charity campaign ² and they also informed members of the public that 19

² It should be noted that campaign news on fundraising and distribution to the needy have been a significant part of the communication of the Hungarian police on

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thousand gifts and 29 thousand pounds had been collected and were presented to children in need or to victims of crime. The site is visually active and social both in its content and style, and partnership and an effective communication strategy can be experienced between the police and the members of the community.

According to Domján, sharing too much content in social media can be bothersome and dangerous as it can simply be unprocessed and burdensome for citizens. On the other hand, taken the law enforcement activities of the police into account, crime news can create an unnecessary sense of danger. When it was asked how many weekly posts are considered optimal for the community on the organization, the results of the questionnaire showed that it is worth posting only 3-5 times a week [23].

It should be mentioned that gaining attention has become one of the key elements of online space, and it is crucial to channel ‘automatic’ attention to ‘controlled’ attention, *the type of attention we intentionally steer towards a particular direction*’ [24]. So, if there is no current news in the life of the community, then it is worth raising a topic that fits in the interest of the target audience.

4. Validation of hypotheses

After data analyses, and in response to our hypotheses in the beginning of the study, it can be stated that our first hypothesis has undergone minor modifications. There is deliberate use of the Facebook site of the Metropolitan Police Service for dialogues towards the members of the community. The agency clearly recognised its importance, and fulfils the philosophy of community policing on this media channel to a high standard. At the same time of the sampling period, there has not been a specific strategy for Budapest Police Headquarters yet, bilateral and partnership communication have not been implemented.

In addition, we have assumed that police organizations use these community sites to reach the public directly, inform them and prevent emergencies by utilising their immediate response potentials. They concentrated on the holidays, so the content of the pages could trigger the attention of only some members of the community. However, the proof of the first part of the hypothesis requires further investigation in a more casual period and requires a similar period of observation. Thus, we can conclude that our second hypothesis has only partially been proved.

Finally, the third hypothesis was proved by the tone and vocabulary of the examined entries. There is no doubt that technology has had a significant impact on language in the last 10-15 years. As a result of the continuous development of new communication technologies, it has an impact on oral transmission and literacy. Similarities can be explored and collected through analysis of law enforcement

the community pages during the time of manuscript production (April, 2020), but not in the sampling period. Available from: <https://bit.ly/2se9m3j> and <https://bit.ly/2NcZ9v9>

community dialogues and the terms *law enforcement/policing digilect*³ can be introduced to describe the language variety used in policing SNSs.

Conclusion

The main indicators of effectiveness are the number of people reached by the organization directly, and the intensity of the dialogues.

The purpose of our research was to recognize the growing need to establish and maintain online relationship between the police and the members of the communities. Of course, several posts cannot be expected from law enforcement organizations on SNSs on a daily basis. The MET, in the spirit of their community policing philosophy and CSR, make the most out of the opportunities offered by community sites. We do not claim that this is the only reason for the acceptance of the organisation among civilians, but it is true that their vital online presence contributes greatly to support it in the 21st century. The Hungarian police still have a room for improvement in this area, but the beginnings reviewed so far have provided a good basis for trust.

At the same time, citizens and organizations moving on online platforms in the digital society and culture need to learn how to use and utilise the strategic potential of these platforms [25]. Thus, the development of these skills and abilities must increasingly be reflected in the content of education, both in public education and in higher education, including teaching foreign languages as well. [26, 27]

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³In a following research the author aims to observe whether the two emerging language variants (law enforcement digilect and policing digilect) used by the police are the same, and whether the idioms refer to the same concept or not.

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