Police patrolling social media

December 10 2012

Credit: David Adams

From the city's mean streets to Facebook, the police are responding to ever-changing developments and have expanded their beat from the streets outside our door to the virtual pathways of social media, and in so doing, making sure that people are kept safe and criminals apprehended. A new report discusses in detail how social media can be used to support police work - from compiling criminal profiles based on their 'Likes', to communicating with the general public. The study is an outcome of the COMPOSITE ('Comparative police studies in the EU') project.

The report, 'Best Practice in Police Social Media Adaptation', is based on in-depth analyses, interviews and group discussions with information technology (IT) experts and officers representing the police forces of 13 European countries. The report reveals that, used in the right way, social

media can help to improve trust and understanding between the people in an area and their police. This is COMPOSITE's second report on technology adaptation and it effectively brings together the experiences of the pioneers and early adopters of social media among the European police forces. One example from the United Kingdom reveals that many police stations actively use social media as a regular part of their normal business. The police officers act as their own press office and use the social media to keep the people in their constabulary informed about their activities, and publish warnings or search warrants.

Project coordinator, Dr Sebastian Denef, from the Fraunhofer Institute for Applied Information Technology (FIT) explains that moving into cyberspace and using these social media platforms is in part inevitable, and that positive outcomes can be achieved if properly embraced.

'Police work in general and specific incidents are discussed in the social media anyway. Therefore, the question is not whether the social media are appropriate for police topics, but how the police forces get involved and reap the benefits. If the police is not active, others fill the void,' remarked Dr Denef. One example is an unofficial Facebook page offering news on the Berlin police, with more than 15,000 fans. And in the Dutch region of Haaglanden, a Twitter channel of a self-appointed police fan has some 2,500 followers. The lack of a trustworthy police presence in the social media can thus provide a fertile ground for rumours, speculations and misunderstandings.

Another outcome of the report in favour of social media is revealing that traditional communication platforms such as newspapers, TV and radio are not effective channels communicating with the younger segments of the population, groups that are very important for many aspects of police work. Social media also proved to be very useful in exceptional situations like a terrorist attack or a disaster. In a major crisis, social media are a proven means of communication to keep people informed

independent of the police IT infrastructure.

The report examines case studies, one of which was conducted during and following the 2011 United Kingdom riots and allowed the researchers to add insights from a situation where British police forces used social media during a crisis situation. The researchers can see social media as new public spaces - where the police must be present and visible. Another example occurred in April 2011 when the Helsinki police assigned three officers full-time to the task of producing a virtual police station on a number of social media platforms. In the first few months alone, they received about 250 reports from the public. The Netherlands, too, already has virtual police stations in operation.

In spite of the potential benefits, important questions still remain to be answered; for Germany there are legal issues, while in other countries, such as Great Britain or the Netherlands, the legal hurdles appear to be lower. A major legal and procedural issue for the police forces is cooperation with service providers like Facebook or Twitter, private companies that are based abroad, under foreign jurisdiction. Here, the police forces will have to collect and evaluate additional experience. However, these efforts are seen as worthwhile against the potential benefits of social media use for the police, which are described in the report.

  More information: www.composite-project.eu/
www.fit.fraunhofer.de/content/ … ia-best-practice.pdf

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