

Digital evidence at risk of being missed because of fragmented police training and coordination, study warns

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There is a risk of crucial digital evidence being missed or misinterpreted because of a shortage of adequate skills and knowledge in police forces, a new study warns.

The findings highlight the need for the on-going training for [police officers](#) who routinely draw upon [digital evidence](#) in their investigations.

A lack of national coordination in the implementation of the recently introduced Digital Media Investigator role to advise on the use of digital evidence has led to ambiguities over the remit of the role, fragmented training provision, and rushed recruitment into the role.

Experts also found increased demand in the processing of digital evidence and the isolation of digital forensic units from operational policing units can lead to few opportunities for sustained collaboration or sharing of expertise between officers and digital forensic practitioners.

The study, published in the journal *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management* was conducted by Dr. Dana Wilson-Kovacs and her team from the University of Exeter, who used ethnographic interviews and observations to collect testimonies from digital [media](#) investigators, digital forensic practitioners, investigating and senior officers and forensic managers.

Digital media investigators have specialist capabilities in telecoms, open source, CCTV and mobile phone analysis. They investigate digital crime in a budget restricted policing landscape and a rapidly evolving technical environment. The participants spoke about the challenges of being a digital media investigator, including organisational tensions regarding the collection, processing, interpretation and use of information from digital devices for evidential purposes.

The study shows there are tensions between the widespread recognition of the investigative potential of this work, and the difficulties of coordinating activities and raising digital technical awareness among rank-and-file officers. Some digital media investigators have to juggle their existing workloads with acquiring and maintaining technical skills, and this can result in a patchy provision of digital expertise.

The analysis focused on four out of the 43 forces in England and Wales, covering a large rural area, a metropolitan zone and several cathedral cities.

Participants observed how early recruitment "pushed" officers into the role and described forces as keener to fill in the number of training slots provided by the Home Office, rather than rigorously test candidates. This resulted in some opting into the scheme to acquire digital expertise for their own cases, and withdrawing from digital media investigator duties afterwards because of work pressures and a lack of career guidance and further training support. In some forces, budgetary pressures meant using a digital media investigator had to be justified on a case-by-case basis.

Many interviewed said they hoped the entire workforce could upskill to cope with the demands raised by the digital aspects of investigations. Issues which prevented this included: a shortage of training, unease about digital processes and reluctance to engage with digital

technologies, a lack of senior support and in some cases a preference to continue working within traditional lines of enquiry.

Most of those interviewed welcomed the idea of an accreditation process for DMI activities, believing it would help set standards and formally recognise their achievements.

Dr. Wilson-Kovacs said: "The growing need for digital expertise in crime investigations means this work cannot be solely confined to the specialist digital forensics service support. While the introduction of the digital media investigator role is an important and much needed step, a more systematic approach is required to consolidate understandings of where digital evidence can be found, what it may entail and the mechanisms through which it can be extracted and interpreted. Sustaining the professional development of the digital media investigators requires targeted and coordinated support at local, regional and national levels."

More information: Dana Wilson-Kovacs, Digital media investigators: challenges and opportunities in the use of digital forensics in police investigations in England and Wales, *Policing: An International Journal* (2021). [DOI: 10.1108/PIJPSM-02-2021-0019](https://doi.org/10.1108/PIJPSM-02-2021-0019)

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