Can police organizations be transparent? Opportunities and challenges of social media

Panel: Transparency and open government

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Abstract:

Recently, rapid developments in the field of ICT have had a major influence upon police work. Technological innovations turn out to change the organizational environment in significant ways. For police, ICT play a twofold role: new technologies can support police work but also provide new opportunities for offenders to commit crimes.

Research conducted within COMPOSITE (Comparative Police Studies in the European Union), a FP7 project which looks into large scale change processes in police forces of ten European countries, has shown that there are a number of themes that describe current trends for ICT at European police forces: integrating systems, increasing mobility, surveillance technology, digital biometrics, user acceptance, and social media.1

In particular, the use of social media is an issue that is making its way onto the strategic ICT agendas in several police organizations (Kaptein, 2012). In this respect, social media serves three main purposes (Denef et al., 2011): 1) to increase public trust in the police by raising accessibility and transparency, 2) to distribute information to the public regarding security issues (therefore, enhancing preventive police tasks), and 3) to improve operational efficiency by broadening public participation in criminal investigations.

However, while police forces in some European countries, such as the Netherlands and the UK, have already made recognizable progress in adopting social media as an effective communication tool, police forces in other countries consider social media as the most important topic still coming. In the case of Spain, only specific forces, such as the national police force (Cuerpo Nacional de Policía), have a well defined social media strategy and are actively using Twitter, Facebook or Youtube, to give a few examples. The majority of police forces are only shyly starting to open accounts and post information.

Given this context, this exploratory paper will describe the current situation of social media use by police forces in Spain. One main question will be tackled: how are police forces using social media in order to become more transparent? We start from the premise that transparency does not involve divulging privileged information. Instead, being transparent means empowering citizens with information so that they can understand, appreciate and trust their police force to do the right things for all citizens in their community. Therefore, the mere use of social media does not always result in more openness and transparency (Picazo-Vela et al., 2012; Crump, 2011; Bertot et al., 2010a; Bertot et al., 2010b).

Methodologically, the paper will use the results of the analysis of 2,079 social media police accounts as well as of 150 in-depth interviews with police officers conducted across ten European countries.

References:


