

Unknown Territories

The strategy of social media usage by law enforcement agencies

Azi Lev-On

School of Communication
Ariel University
Israel
e-mail: Azilevon@gmail.com

Gal Yavetz

Department of Information Science
Bar-Ilan University
Ramat-Gan, Israel
e-mail: Gal.yavetz@gmail.com

Abstract— The article explores the perceptions of senior police officers concerning the place of social media in the current media ecology, and the desired mode of operation of the police within them. The study demonstrates that the different forms of social media are perceived as significant arenas in the contemporary media landscape, which are "here to stay" and the police has a "duty of presence" in them. Still, this presence should focus primarily on information-providing and image-enhancing activities, avoiding "confrontations" about contested issues.

Keywords- *Social Media; Police; Public Administration.*

I. INTRODUCTION

New media, especially social media, enable government agencies to communicate with citizens and disseminate information fast and directly, recruit people and organize collective actions. Such uses may have implications for the character of relationships between citizens and governments, as well as for how citizens perceive government agencies' image.

One of the public institutions that are constantly in contact with citizens is the police. The main research question in this paper is how senior police officers perceive the use and impact of online social media. For this purpose, 15 semi-structured interviews were conducted with police officers in the rank of Major General and above, who finished their service in the Israeli police from 2006 onwards.

The Findings demonstrate that the interviewees recognize online social media as a centerpiece of the contemporary media landscape, with significant possibility to impact the image of the police. According to the interviewees, the police digital strategy should focus primarily on information-providing and image-enhancing activities, while avoiding confrontations on contested issues.

Section II of the paper presents the theoretical background and research literature on the adoption and use of social media by public agencies, especially law enforcement agencies such as police, and the advantages and implications of using such environments. Section III presents the main research goals and questions. Section IV presents the method. Section V reviews the preliminary findings. Section VI concludes the paper.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Social media are becoming important intermediaries between public institutions and citizens [1]. The usage of social media by public institutions may enable them to disseminate and receive information quickly and efficiently, recruit people for various purposes, interact more closely with the public, and possibly improve decision-making and problem-solving processes [2]. Still, public institutions are often known for their rigid hierarchical structures and bureaucratic red tape, and less for their excellence in service provision and adaptation to new technologies [3]. Hence, no wonder they are considered late and limited adopters of new and, particularly, social media.

The use of social media *by the police*, like its usage by other public institutions, can have many advantages. Information can be sent quickly to many people without mediation, such as information on missing persons [4]. Information can also be efficiently received from people and organizations, including complaints against the police or against private individuals, or information on crimes and suspects [4][5]. Social media can also assist in mobilizing the public and enable public participation in planning processes. These uses can significantly improve the work of the police, improve its contact with the public, and also contribute to its image [6]. But while significant literature addresses the usage of social media by the police, there are very few studies that address the perceptions of decision-makers in the police about the place of social media in the current media ecology, and the desired mode of their operation.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How do senior police officers perceive social media? Is it a passing phenomenon or a permanent component of the current media ecology?
2. According to the senior officials' perception, what should the goals of the police activity on social media be?

IV. METHODOLOGY

In order to answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policemen from the rank of Major General and above, who finished their service in the police from 2006 onwards. This study only deals with senior

police officers, due to their broader and more in-depth perspective on the organization's needs and the factors influencing the police-citizen relationship. The officers were selected based on their year of retirement. Since Facebook (the main social platform in Israel) has only been open to the public since 2006, only the policemen who served in the police this year onwards dealt with the question of relations between the police, social media and citizens.

15 senior police officers were interviewed. Most of the interviews were conducted in person, in a location chosen by the interviewees. In only a few cases where there were technical difficulties or unwillingness of the interviewees to hold a face-to-face meeting, telephone interviews were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of 15 questions and lasting between 40 minutes and 2 hours. Interviews were used to present the phenomenon through the participants' perceptions and their own words [7]. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. A thematic categorical division of these transcriptions was performed, in order to identify, evaluate and report prominent themes [8].

V. PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

Many of the interviewees made it clear that in their opinion, social media activity should be an important and strategic goal for the organization, and that more resources should be invested in it. Interviewee I-1 declared that social media are significant tools for building public trust:

"Improving service to the citizenry is critical for your ability to generate trust, and we should definitely use the new media platform [for this purpose]"

Interviewee I-6 described social media as important sources of information for the police to convey to citizens:

"The police is disseminating all kinds of messages on Facebook, and we have to do this systematically and correctly. Both extract information and disseminate information..."

This kind of two-way communication and information streams require investment and proper resources, as interviewee I-6 said:

"It cannot be that there is a social conversation on social media and the police are not involved, the organization has to invest in it. Investing means getting more people, teams, standards and enacting new policies."

Despite the statements about the importance of police activity on social media, most respondents expressed reservations about bi-directional and dialogical behavior, and believed that the activity should mainly be with an emphasis on providing information and positions [9] rather than conducting conversations with the public. They argue that brief and practical responses are sufficient without waiting for a response from the public or addressing such responses further.

Interviewee I-5 argues that it is desirable for the police to respond to such public concerns but only briefly and only in its page:

"You cannot run after anyone who posts something in any Facebook group about you. Maybe in some exceptional cases an official police representative, needs to intervene in the discussion, and provide a link and tell everyone, 'Guys, come on read the facts'".

However, most of the interviewees did not see even such a minimal response as useful. For example, Interviewee I-9 does not see the need to participate in any discussion with the public about police matters:

"I would present the position of the police in a very solid and precise manner and let time do its work. I would not participate in the conversation itself.... This discourse will exhaust itself sooner or later, and the fact that we react and participate in this discourse, that is the fuel for the fire."

VI. CONCLUSIONS

The paper studies perceptions of senior police officers about the place and usage of online social media, in the contemporary media ecology. Findings show that the interviewees recognize online social media as a centerpiece of the contemporary media landscape, with significant consequences in terms of the abilities to send and receive information, which can impact the image of the police. At the same time, there is a clear concern about the possible fallbacks of entering long conversation with citizens, where officers prefer a minimal response approach in such cases. Future studies can examine the perceptions of senior decision-makers in other public organizations regarding online social media, and also investigate the 'customers' side: What are the citizens' perceptions of this activity, and how exposure to it influences opinions and attitudes towards the police.

REFERENCES

- [1] R. Sandoval-Almazan and J. R. Gil-Garcia, 'Are government internet portals evolving towards more interaction, participation, and collaboration? Revisiting the rhetoric of e-government among municipalities', *Gov. Inf. Q.*, vol. 29, pp. S72–S81, Jan. 2012.
- [2] G. F. Khan, B. Swar, and S. K. Lee, 'Social Media Risks and Benefits: A Public Sector Perspective', *Soc. Sci. Comput. Rev.*, vol. 32, no. 5, pp. 606–627, Oct. 2014.
- [3] O. Serrat, 'Social Media and the Public Sector', in *Knowledge Solutions*, Singapore: Springer Singapore, 2017, pp. 925–935.
- [4] Ministry of Public Security, 'Social Media and an Interactive Police Force – Police 2.0', 2012.
- [5] A. Meijer and M. Thaens, 'Social media strategies: Understanding the differences between North American police departments', *Gov. Inf. Q.*, vol. 30, no. 4, pp. 343–350, Oct. 2013.
- [6] J. Crump, 'What Are the Police Doing on Twitter? Social Media, the Police and the Public', *Policy Internet*, vol. 3, no. 4, pp. 1–27, Jan. 2011.

[7] A. Shkedi, Words that try to touch: Qualitative research theory and practice. Tel-Aviv: Ramot, 2003.

[8] V. Braun and V. Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', Qual. Res. Psychol., vol. 3, no. 2, pp. 77–101, 2006.

[9] I. Mergel, 'Social media adoption and resulting tactics in the U.S. federal government', Gov. Inf. Q., vol. 30, no. 2, pp. 123–130, Apr. 2013.