(Re)presenting ‘order’ online: the construction of police presentational strategies on social media

Abstract

Embedded in Goffman’s (1959) concept of impression management and drawing on interview data this article examines cultural and organisational features which come together to shape how police officers construct presentational strategies on social media. The article explores how in presenting an image institutions and individuals must give engaging expression which concurs to a dominant cultural script whilst, simultaneously, avoid giving off expressions which threaten individual and institutional efficacy, reputation and legitimacy. In so doing, it is argued that officers face, and must come to negotiate, a series of challenges. This article considers the nature of these challenges, the ways that institutions and individuals have responded to them and implications for the construction of ‘order’ online.

Key words

Community policing, presentational strategies, Goffman, Social media, Twitter

Introduction

This article explores dynamics that inform the nature of police communication practices on social media and how these dynamics come to structure the appearance of ‘order’ online. In so doing it draws on Goffman’s (1959) concept of ‘impression management’. These introductory passages set out Goffman’s framework, consider the nature of police presentational strategies together with the role that social media play within them and reveal the research design of the present study.
**Goffman and impression management**

For Goffman (1959) the process of impression management is understood as a performance fashioned to influence those who observe it. Goffman (1959) analysed the manner by which actors present themselves in bounded social settings. He was concerned with identifying common techniques employed by actors to sustain impressions and with the challenges that they faced when presenting in front of audiences. Impression management, under Goffman’s rendering, comprises two kinds of sign activity: the expressions which we intentionally give and those which we unintentionally give off (Goffman, 1959: 14). Actors seek to manipulate these two sets of prompts in order to project the desired impression. This process is allied to Goffman’s notion of the ‘front region (stage)’ – ‘where the performance is given’ (Goffman, 1959: 110) – described as ‘that part of the individual’s performance which regularly functions in a general and fixed fashion to define the situation for those who observe the performance’ (Goffman, 1959: 32). The ‘front’ stage stands in contrast to the ‘back region (stage)’ ‘a place, relative to a given performance, where the impression fostered by the performance is knowingly contradicted as a matter of course’ (Goffman, 1959: 114).

The ‘front’ provides a lens through which an audience interprets and makes sense of a performance based on the role assumed by the actor or cast. In order to produce a convincing ‘front’, the normatively understood roles and responsibilities, characteristics and qualities and activities and actions of the specific actor/s must be effectively portrayed to an audience. ‘In their capacity as performers’, writes (Goffman, 1959: 243), ‘individuals will be concerned with maintaining the impression that they are living up to the many standards by which they and their products are judged’. Performances are guided by the norms and goals of specific social settings. In this sense, a successful performance carries with it a moral claim; that is, a claim to the specific status which is conferred to, sanctioned and reinforced by the role being portrayed. For Goffman (1959: 24):

we must not overlook the crucial fact that any projected definition of the situation also has a distinctive moral character [....] Society is organized on the principle that
any individual who possesses certain social characteristics has a moral right to expect that others will value and treat him in an appropriate way.

Whether a performance is successful or otherwise is, at least in part, the function of whether that performance concurs with the expectations of its audience and their understandings of a particular social role. For Goffman (1959: 20):

When we allow that the individual projects a definition of the situation when he appears before others, we must also see that the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of the lines of action they initiate to him.

In sum, through impression management actors seek to control the perceptions of their audiences. Goffman (1959) was interested in how actors present themselves to audiences based on the wider values, norms and expectations associated with the character that they were aiming to portray. The process of impression management is embedded within wider social contexts and structures and is shaped by the reactions and expectations of the audience to whom one is performing. As such, impression management interlinks the performer with his or her audience and, more generally, interlaces the individual with wider society.

The police, image management and social media
That the police engage in ‘image work’ has been well-documented (Manning, 1978; Ericson et al. 1991, Manning 1992; Barlow and Barlow, 1999; Mawby, 2002; Terpstra, 1991; Loader, 1999; Chermak and Weiss, 2005; Manning, 2008; Mawby, 2010). Such image management, it has been argued, serves to promote the identity of the institution, manipulate its appearance and control the behaviour of its audience and in so doing underscore its authority and legitimacy (Manning, 1992). As Manning (1992: 144) put it: ‘ceremonies, visible daily activities, props and symbols, and special knowledge and techniques constitute resources by which police can mark, claim, display, defend, and reaffirm their mandate’. Aspects of dramatization are often delegated to specialists who spend their time expressing
the meaning of a task rather than actually doing that task (Goffman, 1959: 43). Indeed, it is clear that policing institutions are concerned with polishing and shoring up their image utilising both ‘old’ and ‘new’ media via their extensive professionalised communications and public relations (PR) infrastructure (Lee and McGovern, 2013: 103). Historically, news media were central to police impression management (Ericson, 1995; Ericson et al. 1987, 1989, 1991; Ericson and Haggerty. 1997; Fishman, 1980; Graber, 1980; Chermak and Weiss, 2005; Mawby, 2002; Mawby, 2010). The role of news media in police impression management has been radically altered by the growth of digital technologies and social media (Mawby, 2010; Lee and McGovern, 2013). Social media extend communication from physical spaces into mediated, virtual social spaces (Lipschultz, 2015) and are now a primary means through which constabularies and actors therein seek to shape the police brand. This article is concerned with exploring factors that shape the nature of content on social media used by officers in the course of their official duties and so with their impression management strategies. Let us consider first the research design and methodology that frames the current study.

Research design and methodology

The article draws on data generated from interviews with thirty-two officers and police staff in five constabularies in England. The interview strategy drew on the concept of ‘key informants’ (Parsons, 2008). ‘Key informants’ are individuals who are known to have experience and knowledge of the matter that is under investigation. In this case officers and staff who considered themselves to have experience and expertise in the field were invited to participate. These participants fell into three broad and to some extent overlapping groups. First, ‘super users’ of social media (N=10), officers and staff who had made extensive use of social media over an extended period of time. Many had been ‘pioneers’ in

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1 Constabularies in the UK spend upwards of £36m a year on PR and communication at the time of writing [http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-police-forces-spend-more-%C2%A336m-year-pr-and-communications](http://www.pressgazette.co.uk/uk-police-forces-spend-more-%C2%A336m-year-pr-and-communications) (15/5/15)

2 Whilst it is beyond the remit of this paper to discuss this in detail, it is worth noting that participants in the present study indicated that it was not uncommon for traditional news outlets to be bypassed altogether as communications teams concentrated on controlling the release of information through channels of social media.

3 Whilst many officers and staff use social media in their private lives and some content – especially as it ‘crosses over’ into work related matters – is the cause of debate and contention, these accounts are not the focus of this article (to illustrate see HMIC, 2011; Goldsmith, 2015).
their constabulary. That is to say, they were early users who had experimented with and played a role in raising awareness of social media. Second, officers and staff who held ‘oversight’ and managerial roles related to the police use of social media at the local or national level (N=10). Some of these participants had produced guidance, others had responsibility for the management and administration of community policing, community engagement and/or social media. Third, communications and PR professionals, generally police staff rather than officers, who worked in a communications and PR directorate and had a specific remit for managing physical and virtual communications with citizens and for developing the infrastructure to do so (N=12). The intention was that these ‘key informants’ would reveal their own attitudes and experiences. Through their far-reaching involvement in the field, however, they would also provide wider observations about the attitudes and experiences of others within their constabulary and beyond. Participants were identified through a two-fold approach. First, through ‘snowball sampling’. Snowballing is a non-probability technique where existing participants nominate additional participants from among their networks of colleagues and connections (Chromy, 2008). Second, through an advert which was placed on a College of Policing online collaboration tool that enables knowledge and information sharing across constabularies in England and Wales.

A focus of the interviews and subsequent analysis was on the use of social media by community policing teams. Although social media could be (and is) used by many different actors within constabularies to facilitate different outcomes, the explosion of police expression on social media should be understood within the context of the deployment of community policing teams in the UK and around the world (Crump, 2011). Community policing aims to facilitate interaction between police officers and citizens, to co-opt citizens into the enactment of crime control and to marry policing and community priorities (Manning, 1991; Barlow and Barlow, 1999; Maguire and Wells, 2002; Bullock, 2014). External communications are central to the enactment of community policing (Maguire and Wells, 2002: 40). Certainly, for Manning (1991: 29) ‘the rhetoric of community policing, a

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5 Estimates suggest that there are some 2,174 official police Twitter accounts in England and Wales of which about half are community policing accounts [http://lesscrime.info/policetweets/stats/](http://lesscrime.info/policetweets/stats/) (14/1/2016)
new appeal to the community and an additional basis for claimed legitimacy, whatever else it might be, is a tool for shaping public opinion’. In this sense ‘image-management’ is integral to community policing (Barlow and Barlow, 1999: 665).

It is worth noting that the original intention was to generate insights across the range of platforms that might be used by constabularies, such as Facebook, Twitter, YouTube and Snapchat. It soon became clear, however, that Twitter was the primary platform utilised by officers and staff at the time the research was conducted and accordingly it forms the focus of this article. Twitter is a social networking service which allows its users to disseminate short-messages – ‘Tweets’ – of no more than 140 characters and to Follow those messages disseminated by others. The configuration of Twitter leads to the formation of complex networks with unidirectional and bidirectional connections between individuals and organisations (Weller et al, 2015). Schmidt (2013: 5-6) describes how Twitter exploits articulated social connections to establish sender-audience relationships. The basic guiding principle of Twitter use is ‘Following.’ Although users can respond to those that they Follow, being a Follower is similar to being subscriber – updates are received from those that you Follow but the Follower-Followee relationship need not be reciprocal (Schmidt, 2013). Twitter affords the formation of relationships between users and texts through the use of hashtags (the symbol#) followed by words or phrases which are searchable and by the interface and function to connect Tweets from users who have no present Follower/Followee relationship (Schmidt, 2013). Twitter forms a communicative space which is partly stable (e.g. the connections between Followers and Followees) and partly dynamic (e.g. the use of a popular hashtag) (Schmidt, 2013).

The ‘analytical strategy’ involved sorting data manually into themes which were simultaneously informed and interpreted by Goffman’s framework, set out above. Goffman considered the dynamics of interaction in co-presence, however, since actors have the desire to control the impressions formed by audiences in all types of social interaction the framework is potentially useful in shining a light on the dilemmas experienced by actors performing on social media. ‘When an individual appears in the presence of others’ writes Goffman (1959: 16) ‘there will usually be some reason for him to mobilize his activity so that it will convey an impression to others which is in his interests to convey’. The precise
impression that the actor will seek to convey will inevitably depend on the social situation that they find themselves in and it follows that as new forms of media are developed, social interactions will evolve (Meyrowitz, 1997). Nevertheless, social media are observable, socially embedded settings which invoke the expectations of others and accordingly generate concern with impression management. In fact, for some observers the sifting, organizing and manipulation of information enabled by social media enhances image management in ways that the tweaking of tone of voice, conduct and decorum relied upon in face-to-face settings cannot (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010). Indeed, Goffman’s framework is often applied in studies of impression management on social media and studies of how social media supports identity presentation (see, for illustrations, boyd, 2007; Ellison et al, 2006; Hogan, 2010; Krämer and Winter, 2006; Marwick and boyd, 2011; Mendelson and Papacharissi, 2010; Lewis et al, 2008; Quan-Haase and Collins, 2008; Schroeder, 2002; Tufekci, 2008). Some have applied Goffman’s framework to police presentational strategies on social media (e.g. Goldsmith, 2010; Schneider, 2014). We will return to this literature throughout this article as the findings of the present study are interpreted. We turn now to consider how the police institution, and actors therein, seek to construct ‘order’ on social order, to reveal the dilemmas that they face in doing so and the implications for the nature of police impression management.

**Constructing ‘order’ on social media**

**Adopting and adapting social media**

Viewed as a way of facilitating citizen participation, opening up the institution and engendering transparency and accountability, social media have come to occupy an integral part of communicative practices for many community policing teams. Reflecting this, there was a very clear acknowledgement by participants in the present study that a footprint on social media has become essential and is inevitable for constabularies at the current time. As one participant put it ‘Yes, yes, and I mean I do think our communities expect to be able to find us [...] It would be very odd, it would be very out of step if we weren’t represented’ (INT2). For another:
It is perhaps not expected that our teams would use Twitter. But it is certainly desirable. For those in certain teams, certainly those in neighbourhoods, it is desirable (INT1)

It is desirable, rather than a prerequisite, because constabularies and actors therein face risks when presenting the police institution on social media. These risks, considered in the forthcoming sections, can leave actors ‘cynical’ about the role social media might play in impression management.

Social media undoubtedly offer new mediums on which to promote the image of constabularies, conversely, they also offer new platforms on which to undermine it. To illustrate, during the period that the research described in this article was being conducted, officers from the Bordesley Green Neighbourhood Policing Team in West Midlands Police were referred to the Professional Standards Department of that constabulary with regard to a Tweet posted on a community policing Team Account. The Bordesley Green Tweet showed a female car passenger being gagged by a seatbelt whilst the male driver drove on under the header “New Seatbelt design: 45% less car accidents!!” It was captioned by the author: 'A car designer has won an award for designing a seatbelt which helps to cut down on vehicle noise pollution #IwantOne’. The Tweet was widely condemned as offensive by local politicians and campaign groups and it received (negative) exposure in the mainstream media6. These kind of scenarios, branded a ‘nightmare’ and ‘a headache for everyone’ (INT13), give off damaging impressions. The Bordesley Green Tweet is informative because it illustrates how online performances can ‘disrupt’ the presentational strategies of organisations and undermine the impression they are trying to give. As Goffman (1959: 231-232) notes, ‘[s]ometimes disruptions occur through unmeant gestures, faux pas, and scenes, thus discrediting or contradicting the definition of the situation that is being maintained.’ (Goffman, 1959: 231-232). One participant, who was frustrated by the Bordesley Green Tweet and its consequences, stated:

6 The Bordesley Green Tweet can be seen here http://www.birminghammail.co.uk/news/bordesley-green-police-twitter-cartoon-7469583 (13/4/2015)
It just indicated that constabularies don’t understand their communities properly. You know, it just reinforces values that the service is trying hard to demonstrate that it no longer has (INT16)

This participant was drawing attention to how the Bordesley Green Tweet had functioned to disrupt the presentation of constabularies as inclusive and reflective of their communities. Indeed, as is no doubt clear, this Tweet functioned to give off the impression that officers were sexist, a charge that constabularies have long faced (Brown, 1998; Loftus, 2009) and which they have been trying to rebuff. Social media then generate risks for organisations. They can also generate risks to individuals. As Lipschultz (2015: 211) wryly observed, ‘some consider social media a sword with two edges that when combined with snarky comments may lead a user to be suspended or fired from work or worse’. It is perhaps not surprising that periodic disruptions and their ramifications, as the Bordesley Green Tweet indicates, render individuals anxious about the consequences of giving off the wrong impression on social media. Whilst the consequences of periodic disruptions appear to be limited to the individual performer, the implications can resonate widely. Certainly, under Goffman’s interpretation the embarrassment of one erring individual shapes the ability of others to perform a particular role and/or influences the success of a particular form of interaction (Goffman, 1959). ‘The mythology of the team’, notes Goffman (1959: 232), ‘will dwell upon these disruptive events’. Indeed, reflecting on how officers ‘dwell upon these disruptive events’, one participant stated: ‘If I say this, it could get me into trouble, if I say that it could get me into trouble. No one wants to take the risk’ (INT2). The myth of the disruptive character of social media may be especially acute for the constables and auxiliary staff who comprise community policing teams. Whilst these actors are undoubtedly highly visible on social media, as we have seen, they typically occupy the lowest rung of the occupational ladder both in terms of rank and status (Bennett, 1998; McConville and Shepherd, 1992; Tilley, 2008; Bullock, 2014). This may function to leave them exposed if they give off the wrong impression, as this participant indicates in respect to Police Community Support Officers (PCSOs):
They are at the bottom of the food chain. They’ve got everyone looking at them but they can’t go too far on the personality troop and they can’t answer back (INT16)

An outcome of periodic disruptions, embodied here by the Bordesley Green Tweet, is that neither constabularies nor officers have wholeheartedly embraced social media or straightforwardly incorporated them into presentational strategies. Indeed, in successfully representing the organisation on social media institutions and individual actors face challenges. Challenges which have to be understood, negotiated and resolved if performances on social media are to be successful, matters to which we now turn.

**The dramatic representation of the police task**

The direction of performances on social media are perennial issues. Giving a successful performance on social media necessitates a change to the nature of the direction of police communicative practices. Social media are inherently open and inclusive. It is well documented that it is not easy to control who uses them, when they are used or the nature of their content. Relinquishing control, however, has been challenging for constabularies as it has been for many public and private organisations (Fink and Zerfass, 2010; Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). For one participant:

> The nature of policing is that we like to be in control of situations and events and social media is changing this. It’s been a real challenge but we need to adapt systems and processes. We cannot be King Canute (INT10)

That challenge, whilst omnipresent, may be especially acute for constabularies, the communicative practices of whom have traditionally been hierarchal, top-down and tightly controlled (c.f. Brainard and McNutt, 2010; Lee and McGovern, 2013). Given that social media cannot be easily controlled, trying to hold back the tide of expression on social media is foolhardy even within the context of working cultures and practices oriented towards controlling situations, as the participant who invoked King Canute indicates. Nonetheless, in light of nervousness, constabularies may seek to exert control to minimise the risk of performances giving off the wrong impression, through restricting access to the stage, observing performances and providing a script, matters to which we now turn.
Constabularies restrict who has access to the stage. Restricting access to official accounts is a primary way that constabularies seek to control officer and staff expression on social media. Broadly speaking, three types of official Twitter accounts are used by constabularies in UK policing at the time of writing. ‘Force Accounts’ are operated by communications and PR professionals centrally. From community policing teams, to air support units, to firearms squads, to mounted branches, to dog support units, ‘Team Accounts’ are operated by collections of actors who represent a myriad of operational policing teams. ‘Individual Accounts’ are scripted by identifiable representatives of constabularies who may be allied to specific roles or responsibilities. These different accounts accord the institution more or less institutional control but generate rather different impressions.

Largely controlled by communications and PR professionals, by and large Force Accounts are relatively straightforward to structure, monitor and regulate. Whilst Force Accounts can certainly generate large numbers of Followers, they were viewed by many participants in the present study to be overtly controlled and manipulated. Focused on pursuing police-oriented institutional aims and with ‘ticking a corporate box’ (INT18), for many super users and some managers and communications officials in the present study, Force Accounts did little to give an engaging performance. To illustrate:

They’re just irrelevant. The community can get that from other sources. People want to know that they are getting value for money [...] they want to feel safe in the community they live in and they want to get involved. They want to see we are working in the community [...] social media should be about making people feel safe, not just about the force line (INT14)

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7 Though, it should be stressed, central communications teams are not immune from giving off the wrong impression. One staff member left his position with Merseyside Police after he posted inappropriate jokes regarding rape on Twitter [http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/02/merseyside-police-staff-member-leaves-force-over-twitter-joke](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2015/nov/02/merseyside-police-staff-member-leaves-force-over-twitter-joke) (19/1/2016). Again, this Tweet served to give off the impression that the constabulary was not taking seriously accusations of rape – something constabularies have been long charged with.
The participant is invoking Goffman’s notion of ‘contrived performances’. That is, performances, ‘painstakingly pasted together, one false item on another, since there is no reality to which the items of behaviour could be a direct response’ (Goffman, 1959: 77). Participants revealed that the self-consciousness of Force Accounts removed them from the reality of police work that social media ought to portray and did little to draw in the audience. Indeed, as the extract above suggests, expression on community policing Team and Individual Accounts, penned by officers and staff who are close to the communities they represent, were considered more likely to draw in the audience. Certainly, the nature of expression on Force Accounts was thought to contrast with that on many Team Accounts and, especially, Individual Accounts. One participant observed:

Look at the tone of the main account. It is corporate and it is supposed to be. It has to be and there will be corporate things, national campaigns, supporting those. Look at the local accounts they are a lot more informal. They will be having chats with people. Look at the university account [...] it’s been Fresher’s week, officers doing selfies with the students, that’s really good. Those guys are the experts so they know a big pub crawl is coming up they can put stuff up [...] We would never do that so yes there is a big difference (INT2)

Such ‘real performances’, embedded in the police task that the actors were seeking to convey, were considered more likely to give the desired impression. For one participant:

People want to hear what we have done that improves their lives [...] Also activity in the immediate area is very important. People like quick information. Crime which happened the day before. And honesty as well [...] discussion of both the good and the bad (INT3)

The reflections of this officer, which highlight the importance of candid, immediate and neighbourhood specific information, mirror those of social media specialists who tend to agree that spontaneously expressed views are more authentic and credible than centrally distributed and controlled organizational communication (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012). Nevertheless, whilst spontaneous and immediate expression might function to give the
desired impression, it is hard to control and this generates nervousness at the organisational level. For one participant:

The police service is keen to uphold the image that they think the public expects. Keen to conform to stereotype. Whiter than white, professional at all times. But the public want to see the human face of policing and this is something that the service tries to hide. They don’t have a sense of humour and don’t allow human side. Though there is variation. Some forces work this well (INT5)

In response to this conundrum, constabularies are more or less risk adverse, as the quote directly above suggests. Some constabularies relinquish control, generally reflecting the above made points that local teams and officers understand their neighbourhoods best, that citizens would prefer to engage with local officers and that these accounts are, at least potentially, more responsive than Force Accounts. One participant stated:

Different forces do different things. We are not prescriptive. We are a massive force in terms of area so what suits [one named city] wouldn’t suit some remote village. So our approach has always been to support what suits local areas. So in [named constabulary] you can follow teams but if for whatever reason an officer wants their own account we would support that and we would welcome that (INT2)

Other constabularies, however, are unprepared to relinquish control in the context of concerns about giving off expression that results in reputational damage. For a another participant:

We all have our opinions but the difficulty we have is that when those opinions are formalised with a [named constabulary] badge next to it. Well, any of that type of communication has to be corporate. Any opinion you have when you are a police officer and employed by [named police service] then it shouldn’t be detrimental. It’s a reputational risk to [named police service] (INT1)
One outcome is that constabularies use social media in different ways with implications for the tone and content of the material.

Constabularies may also seek to stage-manage through observing performances. Reflecting its open nature, social media facilitates surveillance by organisations of their employees (Trottier, 2012). Constabularies may, in principle, observe the performances of officers and staff on social media and, in so doing, react to unwarranted improvisation and negative audience reviews. Nonetheless, whilst monitoring has been deemed essential by communications and PR specialists, it is clearly only patchily undertaken by most organizations (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012) and, following this, proactive monitoring of official accounts by constabularies would seem to be unusual. Participants drew attention to how constabularies typically respond reactively in the event of specific complaints (c.f. HMIC, 2011). One noted: *It’s not actively monitored but what I will say is our Professional Standards Department [...] if there are any complaints from the public or internally they will take that up* (INT1). We should be careful not to overstate this matter. Whilst the Bordesley Green Tweet reminds us that problems can and do arise, by all accounts they are unusual, especially taking into account the sheer scale of officer use of Twitter. Recounting the number of problems he had encountered in his career as a communications manager, one participant revealed: ‘I could count the number of problems on one hand [...] maybe two hands!’ (INT2).

Either way, constabularies do not respond to bad reviews of online performances straightforwardly. Participants in the present study indicated that constabularies appear to have accepted that they have responsibility to respond efficiently to concerns that might be raised internally or externally8. One participant insisted ‘we can’t just ignore it. In the same way if officers were rude, aggressive or what have you on the street [...] we couldn’t simply ignore it’ (INT 29). Complaints are usually resolved locally and informally through, for example, giving management advice, training or issuing an apology to the complainant (c.f. HMIC, 2011). It has been suggested that this ‘light touch’ approach results from the ‘novelty’

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8 Although it should be noted that it is not necessarily the case that constabularies respond to citizens’ concerns. See, for example, debates about communication on one well-Followed Metropolitan Police Service account [http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/11/met-police-helicopter-service-twitter-abuse-critics](http://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2014/jul/11/met-police-helicopter-service-twitter-abuse-critics) (13/4/2015)
of the medium and it may be that systematic systems to robustly monitor officer and staff use of social media together with procedures for dealing with breaches of protocol are established in due course (HMIC, 2011). Conversely, reflecting studies which have demonstrated that social media specialists tend to accept that expression on social media cannot be controlled (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012), participants in the present study drew attention to the limits of institutional control. There was an acceptance that from time-to-time officers and staff inevitably would give off the wrong expression. Since constabularies were encouraging officers to engage with social media, albeit some more enthusiastically than others, participants tended to argue that users should be supported rather than disciplined:

We need to be human and allow officers to say daft things and to make mistakes. Rather than react by saying it is a bad thing and telling officers not to use it we say it is a good thing but help them with mistakes that have been made and a better presence online (INT10)

Even so, that participant went on to acknowledge that ‘it’s a fine line between that and causing embarrassment or worse undermining criminal processes’ (INT10), we return shortly to the ‘fine line’.

Providing a script is final way that constabularies might stage-manage online performances. Reflecting other research which has demonstrated that professionals have had to learn first-hand how to fit social media into their day-to-day routines (Macnamara and Zerfass, 2012; Avery and Graham, 2013), officers and staff learn how to express themselves on social media experientially. That is, with relatively little formal input. Training packages and guidance are available, however, it may be that producing a screenplay is neither possible nor desirable. On the one hand, participants drew attention to how it was advantageous to avoid strict instructions which officers and staff might faithfully follow leading to monotonous, tedious and ‘corporate’ communication. Drawing attention again to the matter of ‘contrived performances’, one participant stated ‘what you don’t want is a network of accounts with the same messages’ (INT12). On the other hand, participants referred to the flexible and ever-evolving nature of social media which confounds the
creation of clear guidelines. For one participant, social media are, ‘still a fairly new medium and whilst there is definite dos and don’ts there is a lot of grey areas around what makes a good account’ (INT10). In discussing whether or not the provision of guidance would assist officers and staff, another participant observed that, ‘things change quickly. The minute you set rules things change so we find the best approach is to be flexible’ (INT2). In the context of periodic disruptions, represented here by the Bordesley Green Tweet, officers do ask for instructions, however, any formal direction will only ever partially assist them in navigating the social media environment. The dominant uses and norms of Twitter have been created over time, not just by the company, but by third-party developers and users themselves (Weller et al, 2013). The rules and cultural expectations which frame communicative practices on Twitter are implicit and invoked in the context of misunderstandings, failed communication and other conflicts between users (Schmidt, 2013). In line with these observations, participants tended to suggest that learning how to express yourself on social media is inevitably a matter of trial and error. ‘It’s intuitive, you have to find your way through it by using it’ (INT17), one participant explained. Actors then learn how to express themselves on social media through doing. Social media have, however, interrupted conventional presentational strategies. Fundamentally, social media obscure conventional presentational strategies because it is difficult, if not impossible, for the ensemble to control access to the performance and because it is difficult for performers to directly observe, monitor and respond to the reactions of their audiences, matters to which we now turn.

The ensemble cannot control access to the performance or monitor the reactions of the audience in online settings. In noting ‘it goes worldwide, you have no control over the audience, you can be talking to anyone, you may not have any idea who you are talking to’ (INT3), this participant is revealing how social media disrupts techniques of ‘audience segregation’. For Goffman specific performances may be given to specific audiences, a form of segregation which functions as a device for protecting fostered impressions (Goffman, 1959: 57). In contrast to the bounded audiences that generally witness performances in physical settings, performances on social media may be observed by anyone. The unbounded nature of the audience interferes with any capacity of the performer to tailor performances to the specific needs and expectations of an audience. Inability to do so ‘leaves the performer in a position of not knowing what character he will have to project
from one moment to the next, making it difficult for him to effect dramaturgical success in any one of them’ (Goffman, 1959: 137). Such ‘context collapse’ is a feature of social media (boyd, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Context collapse generates tension because it is very hard for the cast to adjust the pitch of a performance to fit the expectations of the multiple social contexts and/or social groups that might be observing it (boyd, 2008; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Users of social media may take ‘clues’ from the online environment and so ‘imagine’ their audience in technology mediated interaction (boyd, 2007; Marwick and boyd, 2011). Certainly, participants in the present study drew attention to how aspects of the configuration of Twitter, noted in the introduction, give officers and staff indicators about the composition of their audience and described ‘lurking’ – the practice of observing content without contributing to it (c.f. Preece et al, 2004) – to learn the habits and etiquette of social media contributing to it. Lacking visual (and other) pointers about the precise composition of their audience/s, however, officers can misjudge the expectations of those with whom they are communicating, which helps to explain the eruption of periodic disruptions. Indeed, it is the precise problem of ‘context collapse’ that led one participant in the present study, one who reflected in some detail on the Bordesley Green Tweet, to suggest that officers and staff need to be ‘discerning’ when thinking about their communicative practices (INT17). By this the participant meant that officers and staff need to be aware of the potential diversity of their audience, to recognise potential differences in audience expectations and to show sensitivity in communication. Demonstrating such discernment in collapsed contexts is, as this participant put it: ‘the space between the rock and the hard place or the rock and the fluffy place’ (IN17). Let us turn our attention now to how officers occupy that ‘space’ between the ‘rock and the fluffy place’.

Participants in the present study suggested that representing the police task on social media was more or less challenging. Participants drew attention to how aspects of the police task are well suited to dramatic representation. Indeed, Goffman was specifically referring to the police task when he observed that ‘since some of the acts which are instrumentally essential for the completion of the core task of the status are at the same time wonderfully adapted, from the point of view of communication, as means of vividly conveying the qualities and attributes claimed by the performer’ (Goffman, 1959: 41). Consider the following extract:
There is a fascination with what police do – especially with the visuals from traffic [...] Neighbourhood policing is different as it is not so fast time, not so visual. It is slower and less visual [...] It doesn’t always have impact that other strands do. It is difficult to get across what neighbourhoods do on a social media platform (INT5).

In referring to the ‘fascination with what police do’ this participant is drawing attention to the representation of police work in media and popular culture, something which becomes embedded in citizens’ habitually understood perceptions of the nature of police work (Reiner, 2008). Although it is not evident in the quote, the participant was specifically referring to how ‘reality’ policing shows, which draw heavily on edited footage derived from police surveillance technologies or from direct observations of policing teams, particularly road traffic teams, have blurred factual and fictional television programming (c.f. Mason, 2003). Typically incorporating exhilarating elements of the ‘chase’ and ultimately the apprehension of criminal suspects, these shows have sparked citizen interest and, much reflecting the media representations of police work which have been observed for some time, function to foreground the courageous, dangerous and action focused features of the police task and to assure citizens that crime is being controlled (Leishmann and Mason, 2003; Dowler, 2002; Mason, 2003; Reiner, 2008). It follows that the dramatic representation of police work on social media is eased where actors can draw on such footage and use it to prop up their performances. This ‘fascination’ with ‘fast time’ policing then at once feeds and shores up the idealised image of the officer as law enforcer and defender of the ‘thin blue line’.

In other sets of circumstances such dramatic realisation is more problematic, as the extract above indicates. The extract is drawing attention to how the tasks associated with community policing – uniformed foot and cycle patrols, attendance at meetings with citizens and community representatives, consultation with other statutory agencies, working with schools and young people, organising Neighbourhood Watches – are less well

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9 It is not always the visual representation of ‘fast time’ crime control that sparks interest. Reflecting the love the British public have for their pets one participant noted ‘then we have some special interest accounts – dogs, mounted section people love those two’ (INT15)!
adapted to dramatically conveying the qualities and attributes claimed by the performer. Part of this is symbolic. The tasks of community policing, embedded in the somewhat nebulous pursuit of building police-citizen relationships, fostering community capacity and improving quality of life, sit uneasily and certainly not equally, with the aforementioned idealised image of police work as the tenacious and perilous pursuit of justice. Part of this is practical. Participants, represented again by the quote above, noted that officers’ scope to visually display the work of community policing teams was somewhat limited, certainly in comparison to the visual representation of ‘fast time’ policing, and this functions to undermine the effectiveness of performances which seek to represent community policing teams.

It is not just the ability to dramatically represent the police role but also the tone – the pitch, timbre and ambiance – of the performance which at once presents challenges for the actors and cast and influences how it is received by an audience. An overriding theme in the accounts of participants in the present study related to ‘tone of voice’. Specifically, it related to the challenges that officers face in constructing a communication style which balanced the formal and the informal with the personal and the public. As one participant put it ‘we have to find a balance between water cooler chit chat and a corporate message board’ (INT4). For another participant:

You’ve got to be impactive. Also you’ve got to be professional [....] shouldn’t be slang or jokes. You’ve got to separate Twitter in the civilian world from twitter in the professional world [....] There’s reputational risk (INT18)

As the extract directly above indicates, the boundaries of public and private are critical to understanding police communicative practices on Twitter (c.f. Murthy, 2012). It is this observation which underpins the aforementioned challenge of ‘tone of voice’. Twitter affords a particular kind of communicative space – ‘the personal public’ – where the strict separation of sender and receiver is blurred and, moreover, where the selection and presentation of information of personal relevance is emerging as a shared rule and expectation (Schmidt, 2013: 8). Actors then need to give the sorts of personal, informal and honest expression which conform to cultural expectations on social media and generate
engaging content whilst at the same time avoiding giving off damaging expression. In so doing, actors apply both ‘defensive’ and ‘protective’ tactics (Goffman, 1959: 12). Such defensive and protective practices, as we will come to see, help to safeguard the impression fostered by a performer. Negotiating a balance between the personal and professional is, however, not easy. Let us consider then aspects of this challenge in more detail.

In constructing a credible impression on social media officers and staff must give honest – truthful, straightforward and open – expression which presents the nature of the police task frankly whilst avoiding giving off expression which discloses boundaries to the competence of officers and the capacity of the institution to control crime. For one participant:

They want to be positive and upbeat but it is not always good news. Generally we have difficulty communicating honestly. But actually being honest about what I can do, what I can’t do can give credibility (INT19)

Communicating the occasional negative story has been seen to be important for maintaining credibility on social media (Lee and McGovern, 2013), as the quote above suggests. Underscoring Goffman’s argument that ‘a performer tends to conceal or underplay those activities, facts, and motives which are incompatible with an idealised version of himself and his products’ (Goffman, 1959: 56), officers and staff do not always want to communicate candidly. ‘Normally it’s all positive.... the last thing you would want to do is put negative stuff out there!’ (INT9), exclaimed one participant. The desirability, or otherwise, of underplaying ones products was then a source of disagreement amongst participants in the present study. Rank may play a role in determining the extent to which officers and staff are prepared to present the institution openly. Participants observed that the expression of senior officers could be more contentious – certainly more ‘political’ – than that of rank and file users. For one participant:

The senior officer ones are senior and personal. They are political figures not specific to local areas of areas of business. They’re trying to get policing seen and supported [...]

neighbourhood policing should be more about what we are doing for local people in their area (INT20)
It has become common for constabularies and senior officers to use social media to draw attention to the diverse and complex make-up of the police role in order to raise awareness and appeal for resources\textsuperscript{10}. As the quote indicates, such political ends may not be what community policing teams will be seeking to achieve. This reminds us that whilst many in the organisation seek to maximise their impressions in order to gain control over an audience, the nature of the performance itself will vary depending on the position of the actor within the institution (Manning, 1978).

In constructing a convincing image officers and staff may feel that they need to give an informal – a relaxed, non-ceremonial, unofficial – performance. Such natural performances appear to represent a change for some constables whose traditional communicative practices have been characterised as neutral, impersonal and authoritative (Skolnick, 1966; Holdaway, 1977; Reiner, 2000). For one participant:

> There is a trace of the old stereotype. The impartial officer who doesn’t give too much personality away, is authoritative and does not engage in a personal or humorous way (INT16)

‘The old stereotype’, participants tended to agree, is incompatible with authentic expression on social media. Instead, ‘human’ – social, individual, creative – expression was thought to give a positive impression. Participants suggested that using first names, generating content that speaks to current sport, cultural or news events and being ‘humorous’ were all important in giving a human impression (c.f. Schneider, 2014; Meijer and Torenvlied, 2014). Humour is clearly seen as an intrinsic part of the construction of a successful performance on social media. ‘Humour is really important’, noted one participant ‘demonstrating that you are human, to hook people and keep them’ (INT3). However, as the Bordesley Green

\textsuperscript{10} Most notably, perhaps, on October 14–15, 2010, the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) published a short message about every incident notified to their control room over that 24-hour period to, according to the chief constable, raise awareness of the diverse and complex role of policing, explaining how much time officers spend with non-crime matters (Crump, 2011). This contributed to the public debate about police funding and the impact of the Government’s 2010 spending review (and increased the Following of that account from 3,000 to 17,000) (Crump, 2011).
Tweet yet again reminds us, comic performances – from black comedy, to satire, to parody, to screwball, to scatological or race humor – can all function to give off the wrong impression. Since humour can cause offence; erode the authority those who use it; and, undermine any reputation that an actor has for good judgement (Lyttle, 2006), employing humour in professional settings is potentially ill-advised. It is easy to see why constabularies and actors therein are anxious about how humour might be interpreted in collapsed contexts, a point we return to shortly.

Taken together then officers and staff face challenges when performing on social media. Some of the tensions emanate from the nature of the police task, which is more or less suited to dramatic representation, some from inability to observe, understand or control the audience and some from performing on a stage which traverses the public and private arenas. As Goffman (1959: 25) described, in constructing online performances actors utilize certain props – ‘defensive and protective practices comprise the techniques employed to safe guard the impression fostered by an individual during his presence before others’ – to manage impressions. They may conceal or down play certain information and promote other information. They might restrain or facilitate the release of personal information. They may make more or less judicious use of humour. They may also play to the ‘lowest common denominator’ (Hogan, 2010: 377). Participants in the present study drew attention to the ‘banality’ of many official community policing accounts. Many accounts were characterised as predicable, dull and containing trivial information: ‘so many [...] just awful, so boring [...] retweets from the BBC, from the Force Account [...] I wonder why they bother!’ (INT21) Humour, as stressed, is a particular source of tension for officers and staff given its disruptive qualities. Participants explained how it is not always clear ‘what can you laugh at and what you can’t laugh at’ and that ‘it might be safer not to laugh at all’ (INT16). ‘Banal’ accounts then might well be the function of the tensions associated with performing to collapsed audiences and balancing communication styles which span public and private spheres and so minimising the risk of giving off the wrong impression.

Conclusion
Technology mediates relationships. Social media, which are exploited by chief officers, communications officials and numerous teams within police organisations, are most likely changing the nature of the relationships between citizens and police organisations. At the time of writing these processes are not well understood. This article sought to add to the modest but growing volume of evidence related to police impression management on social media. Utilising Goffman’s framework and following many others who have used it in studies of offline and online impression management, this article has considered the nature of the challenges faced by constabularies and actors within them when presenting their activities on social media and identified techniques employed to generate and sustain positive impressions. In so doing it has examined the processes through which social media are manipulated to manage the expressions institutions and officers intentionally give and those which they (un)intentionally give off. Let us now summarise and reflect on the findings of this study.

The character of any performance is guided by the norms and goals of the social settings that actors seek to represent (Goffman, 1959). A successful performance will embody a moral claim. That is, a claim to the status which is normatively associated with the role being portrayed. Guided by the culturally understood roles and responsibilities of the police institution and the qualities which its ambassadors idealistically symbolize, actors within constabularies seek to establish a ‘front’. A ‘front’ which serves to invoke and embody customarily understood notions of the efficiency of the institution in bringing offenders to justice, and so in controlling crime, and the nature of the professionalism of its representatives. Of course, actors are concerned not with actually realizing these standards but with engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized (Goffman, 1959: 234). This concern with impression management explains aspects of the institutional and individual dilemmas that this article has set out in detail.

In light of periodic disruptions, disruptions which undermine impression management strategies, police institutions have sought to direct online performances. Exerting organisational control – restricting access to the stage, providing a script and observing performances – is potentially a way of providing overall direction. We have seen, however, that performances on social media are intrinsically unsuited to such stage-management;
that is, they are very difficult to assemble from behind the scenes. Much of this relates to
the peculiarities of social media settings which tend to be fluid and ever-evolving.
Moreover, perhaps, such direction can serve to undermine a successful performance in the
context that cultures of communication on social media tend to embody freedom and
openness of expression. Constabularies must then balance the competing sign activities of
openness and control in managing impressions on social media. In this sense, organisational
direction, or lack thereof, becomes an intrinsic part of the ‘front’ functioning to frame the
very nature of any performance and how it is interpreted by its audiences.

Indeed, as Goffman (1959) described, the realization of an effective performance is
ultimately contingent on how it is interpreted by its audience/s. Actors seek to ensure that
performances concur with normatively understood expectations of the nature of the role
they are seeking to convey. The precise nature of the script will then vary depending on the
position of an actor or cast within the organisation. Whilst ultimately seeking to contribute
to the macro level goals of promoting crime control and furthering organisational
legitimacy, we have seen that the micro level tasks associated with our protagonists,
community policing teams, can sit somewhat uneasily with the tasks normatively associated
with police work. This may serve to undermine the dramatic realization of the community
policing role, complicating the process of generating the desired impression. In presenting a
positive impression, actors further seek to ensure that performances draw on normatively
understood modes of communication. Cultures of communication on social media demand
that performers are personable, humorous and honest. Such mores present challenges for
actors in the policing milieu, as they do for those performing in professional contexts
elsewhere, because they shift the boundaries between the professional and the personal
realms. Nonetheless, what appears, on the face of it, as the encroachment of personal
information and informal communication styles into the public and traditionally formal
setting of official police communications represents less a blurring of ‘front’ and ‘back’ stage
and more a strategic attempt to present a particular image (c.f. Marwick and boyd, 2011).
Of course, actors are well aware that deploying such props may ‘disrupt’ and undermine the
accomplishment of a successful performance. Actors in the police organisation, like those in
many public and non-public organisations, must then juxtapose and learn to balance
conflicting sign activities. Any reflexive processes are obscured, however, in the context of
the ‘collapse’ which characterises the audiences of performances on social media. It is difficult for actors to tailor their performances to the specific needs and expectations of discreet audiences and so to directly manage and manipulate the impression they give and give off. Mindful of these pitfalls coupled with their visibility on social media and their relative lack of status within the organisation, it is perhaps not surprising that many actors representing community policing teams actually crave a script. Paradoxically, overtly directed performances are unlikely to give the desired impression. The outcome may be that a successful performance necessitates that actors must themselves write the script, manage the scenery and coordinate the props.

Goffman (1959: 78) famously observed that ‘All the world is not, of course, a stage, but the crucial ways in which it isn’t are not easy to specify’. Police organizations have long deployed techniques of impression management. Propelling image management from the physical to the virtual, social media have provided constabularies with new stages on which to perform. Community officers, whose raison d’etre is to engage with citizens, have been cast in leading roles. Blurring the boundaries between the audience and the actors and the actors and the stage-managers and directors, social media have ruptured traditional communicative practices. This rupturing has shifted the direction of the performance and in so doing presented dilemmas for actors in the organisation. Whether it alters the dominant script, however, remains to be seen.

References


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