

Familiarity breeds consent: getting to know my local police

Kate Lloyd looks back at her experience of the London riots and argues that social media can be harnessed by the police in order to improve relations and communication with urban communities. The unique features of Twitter, which allows for two-way dialogue, will go a long way to breed familiarity and thus improve understanding and respect for policework.



Police officers have said to me: 'the public criticise us, but they don't understand what we have to deal with'. That this is obviously right (the public know little of the complexities, risks and uncertainties of operational policing), but also self-defeating (it drives an 'us' and 'them' wedge between police and public), was brought home to me, literally, during my year away from policing policy. My time as a member of the public – as a consumer rather than a designer of policing services – also gave me reason to hope that people and local police forces are finding their own ways to bridge the gulf of mutual suspicion and misunderstanding that divides them.

We live in Haringey. Luckily, we were away the first night of the August riots. Our neighbours say it was frightening. Our road was teeming with people, many with scarves covering faces, running from the High Street and with their arms filled with loot. Goods that didn't end up in waiting vans were tossed into wheelie bins, as front gardens were used as 'swap shops'. Presumably, there was an operational decision to focus police resources on the more serious disorder up the road, in Tottenham. But the lack of police in Wood Green left many locals feeling isolated and afraid.

There was much discussion afterwards about the role of social media and how it helped large numbers of people to organise quickly. There were calls from some quarters to 'turn it off' (whatever that would involve) when it became clear that social media was being used to orchestrate large scale disorder. I didn't feel that way at all. On the contrary, I felt that if I had been home (or on my way home) that night, I would have appreciated the ability to get live up-dates on the situation, to understand why certain operational decisions were being made, and to get advice about what and what not to do.

Her Majesty's Chief Inspectorate of Constabulary's (HMIC) [review](#) of the police response to the riots included a discussion of police use of social media. It focused mainly on the need to improve the police's ability to gather and analyse information from social media channels, but it also pointed to examples of police forces using it to inform and reassure communities during the disturbances.

The Met also realised it was time to harness, rather than curtail the power of social media. Their own [strategic review](#) into the disorder identified social media as a way to engage with communities more effectively during riots – particularly to counter information they understood to be incorrect. The report included a commitment to launch individual Borough social media accounts, and in February 2012 the [@MPSHaringey](#) Twitter account was born.

[@MPSHaringey](#) 'tweets' details of incidents, arrests and charges, and crime prevention advice. 'The Real Bill' (#TRB247) tweets give followers glimpses into policing shifts across the borough (e.g. [response](#)). It also allows officers to provide 'on the scene' updates and rumour control during major incidents, and to answer direct questions from the public. During a recent incident on a road near us the residents association asked [@MPSHaringey](#) what was going on. They replied: "A man has been arrested on suspicion of affray & possession of offensive weapon. Roads reopened. No injuries." The next day [@MPSHaringey](#) gave an update: "24y/o man to appear at court today charged with affray re incident in XXX Road yesterday." As a nosey neighbour I was pleased to know what had happened. As a policy wonk, it seemed to me a great example of how [more information can improve perceptions of the police](#).

The account provides insights into local policing activity, and helps local residents and businesses understand the complexities and uncertainties of operational policing. Using social media as a channel

for feeding information one way is a start, but Twitter can do more than this. Effective engagement is only possible if people feel they are being engaged with. It has to be a dialogue, not a monologue. What the account does so well is act as an avenue for residents to engage directly in a continuous, informal dialogue with local officers, as opposed to via formal consultation channels. An enormous advantage of using social media channels in this way is that it offers cost-effective opportunities for wider engagement, with constituencies, such as young people, who may not otherwise choose to engage.

Twitter could also help to counteract the public's built-in '[negativity bias](#)'. We tend to remember the bad service, not the good. Negative encounters with the police have more influence on levels of satisfaction than positive encounters, because we give more weight to them. There is, however, [evidence](#) that a series of positive encounters can have a positive impact on overall trust and confidence in the police. These positive encounters also have the benefit of enabling the public to give police officers instant and predominantly [positive feedback](#) that recognises the value of their work. Regular positive feedback delivered publicly is likely to be motivating for officers.

As long as it's use is sustained, Twitter (and social media channels more generally) can build on efforts to improve local accountability mechanisms by mobilising communities to identify local policing priorities. It also serves as a platform for officers to demonstrate that they are responding to them effectively. Other forces are already experimenting with the technology (such as in [Avon & Somerset](#) and [Surrey](#)), and all sorts of other as yet unimagined uses for this new and effective channel between the police and the public are likely to emerge.

Social media isn't good or bad. It just is. It can help rioters to organise whilst also helping police connect with communities. It isn't *the* answer to improving police-community relations, nor *the* mechanism by which the police should engage with the public. It is, however, an effective new channel for reaching people who want to understand and engage with policing in their areas.

With understanding comes acceptance that policing is complex, that trade-offs have to be made, that officers sometimes make mistakes, and that they are trying. Somewhere down the road, as tweeting becomes routine, this may well morph into a better relationship.

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About the author

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