

Assessing police social media practices through a democratic policing lens

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Abstract

Academic interest in police use of social media has proliferated in the past decade. Much of this research has centred on police adaptations of social media. Yet, little is known about what these practices signify from a democratic policing outlook. This is despite the fact that there has been considerable debate on the extent to which the internet has democratised government and public institutions more broadly. Accordingly, existing evidence relating to police use of social media was assessed with close reference to Marenin's six principles (Marenin O (1998) The goal of democracy in international police assistance programmes. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management* 21(1): 159–177). In doing so, we put forward two original contributions. First, true democratic policing online is being thwarted by both the ways in which social media is organised within police organisations and the nature of social media more broadly. Second, although Marenin's model provides a useful starting point for analysing police social media practices, greater attention must be afforded to police and citizens' readiness to engage with each other online.

Keywords

Democratic policing, e-democracy, police engagement, digital policing, social media

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Introduction

The number of people using both the internet and social media platforms has increased rapidly in the past three decades (Statista, 2022). At the same time, scholars have attempted to understand whether and how the online world has democratised the state and public institutions. Concepts such as participation, co-production, citizenship, empowerment and democracy are being reassessed in a digital world characterised by e-government and e-service. For Diamond (2010), information and communication technology (herein referred to as ICT) are 'liberation technology' in that they have provided a more accessible avenue for citizens to hold the state to account. Similarly, Ellison and Hardey (2014) suggest that social media

provides renewed hope for civic engagement and enables the state to reach out to what they describe as 'real' citizens and a more diverse demographic. However, the authors also suggest that civic engagement necessitates a state that is both willing and active in its attempts to engage meaningfully with citizens online. Equally, Tucker et al. (2017) contend that social media platforms have allowed a greater number of people to engage in political debates than were previously able to do so via earlier forms of the media, including television and the printing press.

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Furthermore, Swigger (2013) asserts that social media is changing people's beliefs about freedom of speech and that those who use social media are less concerned about their own privacy online.

Although these studies point to the need to consider democracy online, to date few have considered the direct links between social media and democratic policing. A study by Odeyemi and Obiyan (2018) examined the use of digital technologies by the Nigerian Police. The researchers studied democratic policing in terms of the relationship between the police and citizens and the extent to which the police were accountable to citizens online. At the time of writing, they reported that the police in Nigeria had traditionally been characterised by top-down accountability with an overcentralised police organisation that had historically dominated decision-making linked to police practices and tackling crime. However, digital technologies, and in particular ICT, were found to enable officers to speak directly to and with citizens. Online platforms were also found to enhance accountability and transparency because citizens could get a greater understanding of police work. Nevertheless, the researchers also reported that to achieve its maximum potential, greater access to ICT and training was required across the organisation and that leadership changes should not be to the detriment of police digital practices. In other words, consistent prioritisation of ICT among current and future leaders in the police was needed. This serves to remind us that it is important to consider the context in which policing operates and the value that is afforded to digital technologies across police organisations internationally, an idea we return to later.

This article builds on these discussions and illustrates police social media practices from a democratic policing outlook. To do this, existing evidence was reviewed with reference to Marenin's (1998) six democratic policing principles. Marenin's framework was selected because it provides clear criteria for assessing police use of social media, and further, it incorporates much of the existing democratic policing scholarly work, as shown in the next section. As Marenin (1998: 169) argued 'there may be a need for temporary trade-offs, but all principles are the ultimate standards by which democratic performance can be judged'. The studies referred to in this article are by no means representative of all the research conducted on police use of social media, and many of the examples we use are from the United Kingdom (UK). However, this offers a starting point to examine democratic policing online and in contexts in which policing by consent is the ultimate goal. Our article provides two original contributions to democratic policing in a digital era. First, although in theory social media enables the police to speak instantaneously with a greater number of people, democratic policing online is being curtailed by the nature of a social medium

itself and issues relating to the structure and culture within police organisations. Second, building on Marenin's six principles, we wish to underline the importance of both police services' and citizens' readiness to engage with one another.

The structure of the article is as follows. The next section delves further into Marenin's (1998) six principles of democratic policing, and this is discussed with reference to additional democratic policing models. Afterwards, each of the six principles outlined by Marenin is analysed in connection to the existing evidence on police use of social media. This in turn illustrates whether and how police social media practices contribute to democratic policing. To end, the article discusses the significance of what is known about police use of social media in relation to developing both democratic policing practices and Marenin's (1998) model.

Marenin's six principles of democratic policing (1998)

Marenin (1998) devised a model of democratic policing based on six equal core principles. The six principles include effectiveness, efficiency, accessibility, accountability, congruence and general order. Effectiveness relates to maximising the use of resourcing to deliver optimum results. In this respect, clearly stated measures, goals and outcomes should be continuously reviewed to ensure service delivery provides ongoing adherence to norms and laws, while simultaneously extracting the maximum possible benefits of policing to citizens. Efficiency suggests that fiscal and personnel resources provided to policing should be used for specific purposes, and not devoted to areas that do little to enhance the delivery of policing. Accessibility denotes the extent to which policing is available to individuals and groups who require the assistance and support of policing services. This means that the police should also provide fair and consistent resource distribution where there is an established need for police attention, especially so within a democratic system. Accountability ensures that police operations and service delivery are transparent, both to citizens through impartial, non-partisan behaviour, and also through democratic oversight, governance and scrutiny of police power. Congruence speaks to the relationship and intersection of cultural, societal and legal norms and characteristics, and police behaviour related to this. Policing thus must ensure it is reflective of the people it serves, while appreciating how police culture and organisational norms fit within the context of the local societal conditions in which it resides. General Order at the organisational level is about maintaining adherence to the rule of law, while ensuring that coercion is repressed to minimum levels at the 'street' level to

ensure citizens' compliance with legality, and stability (Marenin, 1998).

Further scholarly contributions to this field share many of the democratic features found within Marenin's (1998) model. T Jones et al. (1996) put forward a hierarchical list of seven abstract values which they argue are necessary to ensuring democratic policing: equity, delivery of service, responsiveness, distribution of power, information, redress and participation. However, their prioritisation of equity as the most important value may be seen as idealistic given the unequal nature of societies (Manning, 2010). To this end, Manning (2010) proposed another model of democratic policing, containing five equal principles: ensuring procedural fairness with citizens, responding effectively to citizen complaints, using coercion appropriately, guaranteeing officers receive organisational justice within the organisation and having accountability procedures in place. Manning's (2010) model also pays considerable attention to competition between public policing and the military, and is therefore not as applicable to studying police social media practices. Aitchison and Blaustein (2013), however, based their model on two critical prerequisites for democratically responsive policing: equity and the ability to provide a minimum threshold of security. Although this model focuses attention on police responsiveness, the inclusion of broad categories does not lend itself to the focus of this article, which is about methodically deconstructing police social media practices without placing emphasis on certain democratic policing standards over others.

Marenin's (1998) model, therefore, provides a useful starting point for assessing the democratic credentials of police use of social media on account of its clear and specific framework. Marenin's distinct set of criteria can be applied to studying police practices online, as shown next without imposing which principles take priority. This is particularly useful, given this study is one of the first to examine the democratic nature of police social media practices. Yet this model is not without its drawbacks. We expand on this in the Discussion and in doing so put forward a case for enhancing the model by introducing the principle of 'readiness' to ensure that the priorities and desired engagement methods of citizens are considered (Manning, 2010) prior to the police attempting to embed the other six previously established principles.

The following sections provide greater detail and clarity around the meaning of the six principles (Marenin, 1998). Importantly these sections scrutinise police use of social media by applying the six principles of democratic policing. Given the importance and relevancy of social media for police engagement with communities, it is imperative that analysis is undertaken surrounding the democratic context in which social media is purported to reside.

Principle I: Effectiveness

A central reason that police organisations across the globe have invested resources in using social media links to the notion that it allows them to carry out their role more effectively. This argument often follows that through communicating with users on social media, the police can in turn deliver core policing goals linked to order maintenance and tackling crime and disorder. This idea was reported in research by Bullock (2018: 254) as 'the potential to generate information that might promote the enforcement of the criminal law or promote other police relevant outcomes represented the real organisational value of investing in social media'. Existing research has highlighted several ways in which social media has assisted the police. Broadly speaking, this involves the police using social media to either 'push' or 'pull' information (see, for example, Meijer and Thaens, 2013). 'A push strategy' is one-way communication and involves police accounts pushing information to users. For example, this could include police accounts sharing guidance and advice in an attempt to keep people safe or to deter people from committing crime. On this note, Meijer and Thaens (2013) researched police use of social media use in three North American police departments and found that in Boston, the police used Twitter to control crowds with those participating in large-scale events encouraged to act responsibly. Further research by Heverin and Zach (2010) looked at Twitter use by police departments across the US and similarly found that they regularly divulged information relating to emerging threats and risks in an attempt both to educate citizens and prevent victimisation. Furthermore, research has shown that police organisations have used social media to obtain public assistance in relation to ongoing police investigations (Fallik et al., 2020). By contrast, 'a pull strategy' is when the police attempt to pull information from citizens. This approach adheres to the long-established idea in the policing literature that 'citizens are the eyes and ears of the police' and can thus make a valuable contribution to the delivery of policing with their knowledge, proximity and awareness of local people and incidents. Research has reported that the police have sought to pull information from users in relation to apprehending suspects or offenders (Meijer and Thaens, 2013) and finding missing persons (Ferguson and Soave, 2021).

However, other studies illustrate that what police accounts share on social media is ultimately influenced by citizens' perceptions. Within the organisation, officers have been told to avoid talking about sensitive and contentious topics and to instead take a measured approach (Crump, 2011; Melekain and Wexler, 2013). This can further be seen in relation to a study conducted by Ralph et al. (2022) on police use of social media in England

during the Covid-19 pandemic. The researchers found that at the beginning of the pandemic, the police played a key role in relation to divulging information on how to keep safe and within the law. However, soon after, they reported that these types of messages were generating disagreements and conflict among their audience, and that this had the potential to damage trust and confidence in the police. Consequently, they stopped talking about the pandemic and instead focused their social media efforts on other aspects of police work. Similarly, Mayes (2021: 903) reports that police 'social media content reveals efforts to delicately balance crime-fighting and community-oriented identities'. In other words, the police need to promote an image online that shows a commitment to apprehending offenders, while engaging positively with law-abiding citizens. Taken together, these studies bring into question how much the police can use social media to deliver core policing goals, and the extent to which police effectiveness on social media is shaped by public reaction. These studies suggest that the relationship between the police and citizens online is somewhat delicate and that as a result, the police pay considerable attention to what they share online. The following section delves further into these opportunities and challenges, and focuses on whether and how social media is an efficient use of police time.

Principle 2: Efficiency

A key advantage that is often proclaimed both inside and outside policing circles is that social media is virtually free for the police to use (Denef et al., 2012; Police Foundation, 2014). This, of course, assumes that there are minimal costs linked to opening and operating accounts on social media platforms, and that police organisations therefore must take advantage of a win-win situation that will see them enhance policing 'with relatively little effort and financial investment' (Denef et al., 2012: 17–18). This according to Ruddell and Jones (2013: 65) is an even more 'appealing method of managing an agency's public messages in tough economic times'. Proponents of this perspective argue that social media platforms allow the police to communicate directly with a large audience, and instantly because a message from one police account can be shared with many users (Denef et al., 2012; Heverin and Zach, 2010). Others have argued that social media have given the police the power to decide what content and information is shared with their audience and that in doing so they now rely less on the traditional media who may or may not share police and crime-related stories (Cheng, 2021; RC Mawby, 2010; O'Connor, 2017).

On the other hand, research is starting to show that social media requires considerable resources as well as time and effort by those utilising police social media accounts.

In the beginning, police use of social media across the globe was hampered by poor, outdated ICT equipment (Ralph, 2020). This often meant that uploading content to social media platforms via police ICT took significant amounts of time, and in some cases, poor ICT prevented police employees from accessing social media platforms altogether (Ralph, 2020). Research by Bullock (2018: 251) showed that police personnel in England believed that police ICT was 'chronically under-resourced'. Dekker et al. (2020) too argued that a significant structural barrier that the police have encountered historically relates to resourcing both the ICT equipment and the police personnel to use it. More recent investment by police organisations into hand-held device for officers in some parts of the world (Bullock et al. 2021) has, in theory, brought the digital world closer to (some) officers on the front line. However, the extent to which this has resulted in greater use of social media by officers remains in question given that some police organisations are now scaling back their social media presence. For example, in March 2021, North Yorkshire Police reported on Twitter that they were preparing to close their local police social media accounts and that only those accounts covering a larger area would remain active (North Yorkshire Police, 2021). Research has yet to capture why this might be the case; however, this casts doubts on whether and how local officers will be able to talk with their local audiences online at a time when, peculiarly, their access to mobile phone devices is greater than ever before.

Principle 3: Accessibility

To understand whether and how social media have made the police accessible to citizens, it is relevant to first consider police engagement that existed prior to the advent of social media. This has been carried out in person with people in the same physical location through, for example, community meetings and during foot patrols. In 1998, Loveday noted that foot patrol was often the first point of contact for citizens and enabled them to both interact with and pass on vital information to the police. In addition to face-to-face contact, the traditional media have also enabled police organisations to reach a larger audience, although studies conducted before the new millennium often reported that media companies played a pivotal role in deciding what information was released (RC Mawby, 1999). When social media platforms emerged in the 2000s, there was huge optimism within policing and scholarly circles that these would help to strengthen the relationship between the police and citizens. As Bullock (2018: 245) put it 'Social media have been heralded as a way of engendering openness, transparency and citizen participation in public policing'. One perspective is that social

media have made the police more accessible to a greater number of citizens who can, in theory, be located across geographies (Ralph, 2022). Along these lines, the police would be able to speak with hard-to-reach groups and those who otherwise would not pick up a daily newspaper or attend a local police community meeting (Ralph et al., 2022). In this vein, Wood (2020) notes that the use of humorous memes by the New South Wales Police in Australia was intended to both expand and increase their following.

Despite these opportunities, the scale of social media has also presented a considerable challenge for police organisations. Proponents of the police engaging with users on social media have argued that social media in theory enables citizens to have meaningful dialogue with the police (Patrick and Rollins, 2022). From a community policing outlook, it is argued that social media can bring the police closer to citizens, and in doing so citizens can contribute to identifying and tackling crime and disorder (Brainard and Edlins, 2015). However, there is scant evidence of any police social media account across the globe regularly engaging in dialogue with users. Instead, existing research overwhelmingly shows that much of police communication on social media is one way (Brainard and Edlins, 2015; Patrick and Rollins, 2022; Procter et al., 2013). One reason for this is that police organisations have struggled to cope with the demand on social media, and that opening up a conversation with users can be time-consuming (Ralph, 2020). This has resulted in police social media accounts often adding the tagline ‘not monitored 24/7’ in their bio to discourage users from sending social media posts to the police (O’Connor and Zaidi, 2021). Other police accounts have attempted to get around the time constraints linked to dialogue by holding occasional two-way events, whereby users can ask the police questions (Ralph, 2020). Altogether then, social media have largely facilitated one-way engagement and a flow of content from the police to citizens, however meaningful dialogue has not been achieved.

Principle 4: Accountability

To understand accountability, it is relevant first to examine police transparency in a digital world. Police use of social media has, for some scholars, provided citizens with greater knowledge of police work. In this vein, it is often argued that when the police regularly divulge information, citizens will, in turn, better understand crime and policing in their local area. This of course contrasts the mainstream media and the role of journalists who have the power to influence what is broadcasted and in doing so can focus their attention on sensationalist headlines (Guffey, 1992). Instead, through social media, the police hold the power

in deciding what information is transmitted (Colbran, 2018). The police can share content relating to ongoing investigations that otherwise would not be picked up by the mainstream media. One way in which police organisations have sought to be transparent about police work on the platform Twitter is through ‘Tweet-a-thons’. This typically involves the police divulging information about all reports received within a specific period on social media (Denef et al., 2012). From a policing perspective, this serves to educate citizens on both the nature and extent of calls made to the police, as police organisations themselves grapple with demand. Although there are examples of the police internationally engaging in ‘Tweet-a-thons’ (Denef et al., 2012; Hofmann and Feltes, 2020), there is no evidence at present to suggest that these are conducted frequently.

However, absolute police transparency on social media is being currently curtailed by a growing focus within the organisation on reputation management. Recent research suggests that police communication on social media is becoming increasingly corporate in its approach, and that those using social media accounts are being encouraged to share content that will bolster the police image among citizens. Ralph et al. (2022) found that the police attempt to carefully manage this process online by talking exclusively about subject matter that will invoke a positive response, and that they further avoid talking about anything that may lead to criticism of the police. Further studies have revealed police presentational strategies on social media in relation to using gifs, memes (Wood, 2020), humour (Wood and McGovern, 2021) and visual content more broadly (M Jones et al., in press). Above all, these studies signify a concerted effort within the police to humanise police work and to strengthen their legitimacy among citizens. As Ralph (2022: 829) puts it ‘the police continually seek legitimacy from citizens and attempt to maintain this over time on social media’ by way of communicating and reconstructing their legitimacy whenever this is challenged by users.

Principle 5: Congruence

Studies are beginning to offer an insight into citizens’ perceptions and expectations of the police on social media. Understanding this is of course crucial to gauging both fairness from a citizens’ perspective as well as how the police gain legitimacy online. The evidence suggests that there are several things that the police can do online that will enhance their relationship with citizens. To start with, research has highlighted that citizens look for the police to provide regular updates on crimes and other subject matter that directly impact them, including for example road closures (Dai et al., 2017). In addition, it is important that citizens get a sense of localism from the police on social media. This

necessitates that the police discuss issues that are specific to local areas, and thus affect people locally (Ralph, 2020). However, if police services continue the emerging trend of closing local police accounts and instead having fewer accounts that cover larger areas (see Chief Constable Gavin Stephens recent blog, NPCC, 2021), this brings into question whether and how they will be able to maintain localism online. This echoes recent concerns around the loss of localism offline that is linked to shifts towards centralisation within many police services in Europe, including in Austria, Denmark, Finland, Scotland, Sweden and the Netherlands (see Terpstra and Fyfe, 2015).

From a police perspective, congruence also means understanding the perceptions and experiences of those working within the organisation. This requires recognising how fairness is perceived by those utilising police social media accounts. In some ways, social media has given officers and staff greater agency and power to voice their perceptions and experiences of crime and policing. Studies such as Burnett et al. (2011) and Pedersen et al. (2014) have revealed that those using social media often feel that it enables them to talk publicly about the challenges that they routinely encounter in their everyday police roles. Williams and Hesketh (2017) posit that canteen culture is moving ever more online, as officers look to social media to share their thoughts and feelings. However, this is being challenged by increasing oversight and regulation of social media, as they look to close accounts that are not endorsed within the organisation (see Ralph et al., 2022, for a breakdown of the different types of police social media accounts that exist at present). Over time, police policies have specified that those with official police social media accounts are required to share their passwords (Police Service Northern Ireland, 2017; West Yorkshire Police, 2021). Furthermore, there appears to be considerable fear within the organisation towards social media (Pedersen et al., 2014) and this point is perhaps best illustrated by a participant in a study by Ralph (2020: 176) who likened social media to 'the Devil's work' on account of its links with online offending and the exploitation of victims. Taken together, social media represents a double-edged sword for officers. On the one hand, it can allow them to talk candidly about policing, and on the other hand, this may result in being disciplined within their organisation.

Principle 6: General order

In connection to general order, Marenin (1998) tells us that the police occupy a unique position on account of their role in both protecting people and applying the law justly across society. This means that although citizens can expect the police to keep them safe, they can also expect to have

their human rights upheld and just treatment afforded. Since the mid-2000s, there have been isolated incidents, whereby police use of social media has been met with criticism by the traditional media. This includes for example Tweets by Coventry Police aimed at tackling 'house walk-ins' by posting images of officers in unlocked homes in 2016 (Eleftheriou-Smith, 2016) as well as Police Scotland's 'grab bag' campaign in 2019 that was adjudged in the press to spread fear and alarm (BBC News, 2019). For Goldsmith (2015) social media leave a digital footprint for the police and when posts are wide of the mark, this in turn contributes to 'disgracebook policing'. Goldsmith's play on the words 'Facebook' and 'disgrace' here suggests that the online world brings considerable risk and embarrassment to the police. Bullock (2016) also contends that social media posts by the police that are intended to be comical are 'ill-advised' given that the police operate in a professional setting.

However, studies have highlighted police attempts both to eradicate inappropriate use of social media as well as posts that may hamper their relationship with citizens. Police organisations internationally have sought to achieve stability and uphold their relationship across communities on social media through advocating communication that is neutral and apolitical. Schneider (2014), for example, reported that officers in Toronto Police would attempt to remain politically neutral, although they would contribute to discussions linked to police work. Equally, police participants in a study by Ralph (2020) reported that it was important to be fact and not opinion driven. They also believed that the police should avoid being seen to favour any political parties or sports teams. A further examination of police social media policies highlights the importance placed within the organisation on neutral communication (New South Wales Police Force, 2022; Northamptonshire Police, 2020; Sussex Police, 2021). Along these lines, the Sussex Police social media policy in 2021 stated, 'Content published from official Force social media accounts must be apolitical unless there is an agreed Force position which has been already made public'. However, it is important to note that this guidance relates only to official accounts. There is some evidence to suggest that individual officers operating 'unofficial' accounts and who choose to conceal their real identity, at times talk more openly about policing (see, for example, Pedersen et al., 2014).

A further example from the literature that demonstrates police attempts to achieve general order and maintain stability can be seen in relation to how the police used social media during the Covid-19 pandemic. As already mentioned, the police adjusted their approach online because content related to the Covid-19 pandemic was identified within the organisation at the time as being both a

political issue and detrimental to their relationship with citizens. Ralph et al. (2022: 774) reported that ‘Rather than being an executive arm of the state online, the police instead wanted to be at arm’s length from pandemic-related content’. This serves to remind us that although the police did play a role during the pandemic internationally, by for example implementing government directives linked to enforcing lockdown rules (Grace, 2020), in the end they commented sparingly about this online (see also Nikolovska et al., 2020) to distance themselves from the government and to achieve stability with their audience.

Discussion

This article provides an assessment of police practices on social media through a democratic policing lens and with close reference to Marenin’s (1998) six principles. Our focus now is twofold as we assess the utility of Marenin’s model, and at the same time discuss the significance and implications of existing evidence relating to democratic policing online. To start with, Marenin’s (1998) model provides an effective starting point for scrutinising police social media practices. The model has sufficient breadth to allow for an initial analysis of police use of social media within a democratic lexicon, while each principle provides specificity and has applicability to the subject under study. Given the breadth of the model, it encompasses many of the approaches proposed by other scholars in the field of democratic policing (Aitchison and Blaustein, 2013; Bayley, 1997; T Jones et al., 1996; Manning, 2010), and as identified within the previous sections of this article, much of the academic literature, study and evidence on the subject of social media resides within the six principles.

In relation to Marenin’s (1998) principle of efficiency, social media has enabled police organisations to share and receive information with citizens, in theory at the click of a button (Meijer and Thaens, 2013). However, given research reports that police technology is often outdated, under-resourced (Bullock, 2018; Ralph, 2020), and that there is a lack of trained personnel involved in managing social media accounts (Dekker et al., 2020), social media cannot be said to make a seismic contribution to the delivery of policing. Going forward, it is thus imperative that social media and digital devices are afforded a significant budgetary allocation to meet the principle of efficiency within a democratic framework. Furthermore, in connection to Marenin’s (1998) principle of accessibility, it is essential that training is offered to managers of social media account(s) and that this is consistent, proactive, flexible and responsive to changing citizen needs, while being designed to maximise police time in relation to public information sharing and participation. Affording citizens greater access to policing through social media may mitigate some

of the geographical challenges associated with traditional forms of engagement (Robinson, 2021). The relative closeness that social media may foster between the police and communities may aid citizen input around community policing initiatives to reduce crime and disorder (Brainard and Edlins, 2015). Social media may also build on traditional forms of engagement such as community meetings (Myhill, 2012), which have been criticised for a lack of democratic accountability (Hughes, 1994), and limited demographic representation (Brunger, 2011). However, although social media are premised on the idea it is more democratic and can incorporate harder to reach groups (Ralph et al., 2022), there is limited research that considers the experiences of those who engage with police content to support this currently.

Much of the stated potential of social media is based on an assumption that such platforms are simply another tool for the police to have in their itinerary to further their outreach activities with citizens. However, this is premised on the notion that there is a demand from citizens for such forms of engagement, which appears to be a deterministic argument made without consultation with citizens on methods of consultation they desire. It is important that social media are used to genuinely improve accessibility and availability of information and participation related to policing, and not as this paper reports to only promote the reputation of the police. As the evidence has demonstrated, social media communication from police accounts often appears to be one way and from the police to citizens (Brainard and Edlins, 2015; Patrick and Rollins, 2022; Procter et al., 2013). Thus, social media may have inadvertently opened police accessibility to the point at which the service cannot cope with such demand (Ralph, 2020). Although Marenin (1998) stresses the importance of accessibility, this requires that the police are both willing and ready to engage. If capacity and resourcing do not match demand, then social media may not provide the capability for forces to deliver democratic policing.

Although we have identified areas in which the model devised by Marenin (1998) may be useful in assessing the veracity of police use of social media in democratic ways, it is not without limitations. Marenin (1998: 171) acknowledges this and states that ‘none of these (six) principles and their extended definitions translate easily into practice’. Marenin (1998) also recognises that for police officers to respond in the same ways all the time is inherently difficult, subjective and has practical application issues. In this respect, if we apply such commentary to social media, it may be difficult for police users of social media accounts to act in a consistent, fair and just manner related to situations that may arise and when judging whether these are worthy of police attention. It is difficult for police social media users to decide how and when they should engage

to ensure a democratic system. Training, therefore, needs to be accessible (Odeyemi and Obiyan, 2018), and representative of local needs given the variance among different communities, which may themselves evolve over time. Yet, the potential for individual officer subjectivity, and discretion over the use of social media in engaging with citizens, does not lend itself well to a democratic system. Although Marenin (1998) is acutely aware of this problem, the model does not take into account how this can be mitigated against, other than to suggest training is provided and that this should be grounded in a sense of realism over the extent of the policing role, and what can be achieved through training (Marenin, 2004).

Marenin (1998) focuses almost entirely on the actions, behaviours and ethos that underpin the six principles. Yet this attention is specifically directed towards what the police can do to ensure a democratic system of policing, with little focus devoted to how citizens could, and should, be involved in shaping service provision and delivery. In addition, there is an implicit assumption that citizens are already engaged with the police, and there is little reflection on the necessity of informing and consulting with citizens prior to the delivery of service. It is crucial that consideration is given to whether and how citizens want to engage with the police. This is particularly pertinent to social media platforms, which are associated with a significant number of users but may also inhibit interaction with people from lower socio-economic backgrounds as well as the elderly who may have lower rates of internet access (Smyth et al., 2010). Consequently, police engagement on social media cannot be representative if access to the online world is limited (Rowe and Frewer, 2000). Police officers as professionals may assume that citizens are informed, educated and knowledgeable about ways in which to interact with the police, which may result in an erroneous notion that rational, active choice around non-participation has been made (Robinson, 2021). Should citizens be made aware of the methods through which to engage with the police and other institutions, and how to vocalise their views, then greater participation, and democratic input is likely. Although apathy may be an individual's democratic choice, it is unwise to make assumptions of citizens' unwillingness to engage, as doing so may amplify and elevate the purported priorities and 'voices' of those who appear willing, ready and able to engage. If policing is to be democratic, then it needs to not only hold the consent of citizens, but also to ensure that public consultation is an ongoing activity, not solely an initial steer or confirmation of decisions already taken (Hughes, 1994; T Jones and Newburn, 2001), or a reactive evaluation of prior police practice. It also needs to ensure that representation is equal, with various local communities able to have an awareness of the methods through which to

participate, and the ability to undertake such participation that is accessible to them.

True democratic policing means that social media must sit alongside other methods of civic participation and that it offers genuine democratic engagement. At individual ward-level community meetings, the police need to go above and beyond speaking to tens of residents, given the acknowledged limitations of this approach in regard to representation (Brunger, 2011; Gasper and Davies, 2018; Robinson, 2021). Equally, questions remain as to the extent to which attendees have the right to appear and present as representatives of the local community (Stone and Ward, 2000). Propositions such as these are equally applicable to engagement in person through traditional means, and outreach from the social media realm. A central lure of social media for the police that we have considered is that it has the prospect of reaching a wider audience than traditional engagement approaches such as the aforementioned local community meetings. Yet the scope, and instantaneous nature of social media, although evidently attractive for police organisations during periods of austerity in relaying information through push methods (Meijer and Thaens, 2013), has not been shown to translate to automatic improvements in responsiveness to citizens' views (Walsh and O'Connor, 2019). Nor does social media in and of itself provide for an effective and genuine democratic space, unless it is managed and used with public engagement in mind. Although literature on democratic policing places various levels of importance on responsiveness (Aitchison and Blaustein, 2013; Bayley, 1997; T Jones et al., 1996), it is imperative that information sharing (T Jones et al., 1996) and participation are proactive elements of responsiveness, and not exclusively a form of retrospective, reactive engagement.

Beyond those using social media within the police organisation, it is important to recognise 'the police voice' online in a much broader sense, including for example the role of governance actors. In England and Wales, Police and Crime Commissioners (PCCs) were introduced within the governance structure of local police organisations in 2012. Marenin's (1998) model significantly predates this shift in accountability arrangements, and although the model acknowledges that political norms, cultures and structures may also influence the six principles, it is apparent that the insertion of party-political PCCs into the realms of local policing matters may have significant consequences for democratic policing. PCCs are democratically elected politicians in England and Wales and are part of the tripartite system of police governance including the Chief Constable and Home Secretary. PCCs have the remit to oversee the strategic direction of their local police force with a particular focus on setting the force budget (Brain, 2014; Rogers, 2013), responsibility

for locally managed victim services (Lister, 2013; RI Mawby, 2016), and contentiously having the legal authority to hire and fire the Chief Constable (Davies and Johnson, 2016; RI Mawby and Smith, 2017). Most pertinently to this article, PCCs are required to engage with citizens in formulating their Police and Crime Plans (Gravelle and Rogers, 2011; McDaniel, 2018). Such plans are strategic documents that provide the means by which the Chief Constable may be held to account by their respective PCC (Lister, 2013; McDaniel, 2018; Raine and Keasey, 2012; Rogers, 2013).

How PCCs choose to engage with the public over social media may have implications for how the police choose to utilise social media themselves. Thus, in regards of democratic policing, there is the potential for a blurring of the lines between operational police engagement with citizens, and strategic police engagement from the PCC with citizens, which may be diluted by the designation of voluntary, community and private organisations as resident ambassadors (Robinson, 2021). The use of partners as ‘informed participants’ (Hojnacki and Kimball, 1998) may deprioritise citizens’ views beneath insider knowledge (Coen and Richardson, 2009). Previous research has found that when lobbying groups have direct access to policymakers, they significantly influence policymaking (Adam and Kriesi, 2007; Bouwen, 2002). In this way, tensions may not only exist between methods of engagement utilised by police practitioners and civilians working within the Office of the Police and Crime Commissioner, but also surrounding the outcomes of such engagement, especially when competing narratives are established, with citizens’ perceptions, lobbying influence and electoralism potentially contrasting with the reality of crime, disorder, and public safety (Robinson, 2021). Marenin (1998) thus does not account for the impositioning of a powerful actor within the scene of local police governance, who may not find the process or outcomes of democratic policing conducive to electoral success. Given the importance of PCCs in setting the strategic direction of policing, future democratic policing models need to consider the spectre of such a powerful actor within local policing realms.

To strengthen Marenin’s (1998) model, we propose that ‘readiness’ through the proactive participation of citizens prior to service delivery should be considered a prerequisite for democratic policing. In this way, we recommend that models of democratic policing, and police practice itself give greater prominence and attention to the notion of readiness. We think of readiness as being an opportunity for police organisations to take stock of prior practice, and mechanisms around engagement, particularly through a social media lens. Yet, the concept of readiness is not only an opportunity for organisational learning and development, but a practical method that can ensure the

representation of citizens, as a key tenet of democratic policing. This will ensure that local police service delivery is designed with a clear knowledge and awareness of local people’s views and is situated alongside internal police expertise linked to specific policing approaches and responses. Indeed, citizen input should be framed as having inherent value to policing and broader civic participation, and this should be a moral requirement, irrespective of any potential outcomes (Weber, 1919).

As identified earlier in this article, there have been occasions whereby social media outreach in engaging with citizens may be viewed as an instrument of police efficiency, with a clear sense of focus on the ends through one-way dialogue (Patrick and Rollins, 2022), rather than a consideration of outreach design to ensure representation and increased participation. Police organisations must then ensure that social media is accessible to citizens by first ensuring capability and resourcing are sufficient to cope with demand, while devising social media services in conjunction with citizen views on this form of engagement. Readiness then, ensures that democratic frameworks around participation and community engagement are established prior, rather than after such engagement has taken place. It is imperative that police organisations first consider how citizens wish to be engaged and consulted, rather than forcing technological developments as a solution to the participation vacuum created by poor levels of attendance at local community meetings. Future research needs to consider the extent to which police organisations demonstrate readiness through the use of social media to engage with citizens. This will, in turn, deepen understandings and knowledge of whether social media fits the criteria for democratic policing.

Lessons learned

Before delving further into the key lessons, it is important to first recognise that this article provides a snapshot of existing evidence, with much of this from the UK, as the central focus was to put forward a case for critically analysing police social media practices through a democratic lens. Until now, little was known about whether and how social media contributes to democratic policing. Having set this groundwork, we believe that there is merit in conducting a systematic review of the policing and social media literature using democratic policing as a framework. This will provide further assessment of each of the principles studied in this article and will also show to what extent police use of social media is democratic over time. At present, the evidence indicates that police use of social media aligns with several democratic principles. In terms of making a difference, and contributing to police effectiveness, social media has allowed the police to speak

immediately with a larger audience. In doing this, police services have been able to share messages relating to current and future risks that have the potential to keep people safe. Social media has granted police services the power to communicate directly with citizens, because they have, in turn, been able to circumvent traditional media communication channels that may or may not broadcast police stories. In connection to accessibility, social media has also enabled the police to speak with new audiences who seldom engage with the police in face-to-face settings, although caution must be considered here, given that citizens may choose to not interact with the police online.

However, to enhance democratic policing online it is important that police organisations pay attention to several internal and external factors identified within this article. Within the police, those using or attempting to use social media have had their endeavours hampered by poor ICT over time and as a result, police services need to make sure that the online world is accessible to those on the front line. This will enable the police to maintain relationships with citizens in an increasingly digital world. As well as this, there has been an increasing focus within the police organisation on reputation management, and this raises questions about the utility of social media for maintaining order. Police services appear to be focusing more on safeguarding their reputation rather than using social media to make an instrumental difference in the delivery of policing. This has also coincided with police organisations imposing tighter control of social media within the organisation as police practices are increasingly formalised and officers are prevented from freely using social media. This, in turn, challenges notions of police accountability and transparency, especially if what is shared by police accounts centres on protecting their image online and not making a difference to core police functions. Given that effectiveness and efficiency are also key principles within democratic policing, police services, therefore, need to ensure that social media contributes to law and order goals. This means granting frontline officers more power within the organisation to use social media effectively as part of their efforts to both engage with citizens and combat crime.

Outside the police organisation, the nature of social media, including its sheer scale and popularity, has also made it difficult for the police to sustain meaningful dialogue with their audiences. Nevertheless, social media and the digital world are an integral part of everyday life today and thus, social media needs to be an integral part of everyday policing. Therefore, it is imperative that police organisations strive to speak with and not to citizens on social media. This is not only a key feature of democratic policing, but also integral to policing by consent. Again,

this points to the need to devolve police social media practices to the front line and especially to officers whose role is about understanding and engaging with local communities. These officers are ideally placed to manage local perceptions and expectations of the police. If the police continue down the path of closing local police social media accounts in favour of having fewer accounts that cover larger areas, then it is difficult to see how two-way communication with citizens can be facilitated online. Instead, empowering and trusting local officers to use social media based on their local expertise will bolster police–citizen relations and democratic policing in the longer term.


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