Police social networking: Relying on cheerleaders to help moderate the Facebook trolls

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Abstract

Australian police organisations have been reluctant to adopt online social networking amid concerns about online security, legal constraints and reputation. Modern policing has for more than a century relied on face-to-face community engagement to prevent and investigate crime but technology has changed the nature of community from a geographic entity to one that extends into cyberspace. Online platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube can provide police with a presence in these online communities, much the same as having an officer on the neighbourhood beat, as well as enhancing policing in areas such as intelligence, public safety awareness, community relations, investigations and surveillance. Australian police organisations have trialled the use of Twitter, YouTube, blogs and other didactic social networking platforms but have demonstrated a reluctance to embrace dialogic platforms such as Facebook. Employees are subject to organisational rules and ramifications that generally cannot be enforced on outsiders, who might then feel free to post comments that are defamatory, private, offensive or damaging to the reputation of the organisation. Police organisations must weigh this risk against the benefits of engaging online. In April 2010, the NSW Police Force was the first Australian police agency to establish a Facebook site that genuinely promoted dialogic engagement with the community on a broad range of policing issues and events.

The shooting death of Constable William Crews in September 2010 led to a significant increase in the number of users accessing the NSW Police Force Facebook site. This paper uses computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) to qualitatively research seven threads of online dialogue stemming from postings on the NSW Police Force Facebook site about the death of Constable Crews, his funeral and the investigation. It suggests that the great majority of users on the site are supporters of the police, referred to as cheerleaders, and seeks to determine if the cheerleader presence is significant and active enough to mollify damaging comments from trolls that give rise to the concerns about defamation, privacy, offensiveness and reputation.

Introduction

Police officers have for more than a century relied on community engagement to prevent and investigate crime. While Australian police organisations have been reluctant to adopt online social networking amid concerns about security, legal constraints, reputation and resourcing, the proliferation of online communities has led to the need for police to engage with people in both the real and cyber world. Membership of the NSW Police Force Facebook site has grown to more than 38,000 in its first 12 months. This research paper uses computer mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) to qualitatively examine seven threads of online dialogue stemming from postings on the NSW
Police Force Facebook site about the 2010 shooting death of Constable William Crews. The case study analysis builds on earlier research into civil and uncivil behaviour on online forums and the impact of trolls. It seeks to confirm the hypothesis that the majority of the site’s participants are supportive of police and actively engaged in ensuring that discourse on the Facebook forum remains civil and troll free. The purpose of the research is to provide evidence to police social networking site administrators that their online forums are significantly self-moderated, reducing concern about online security, legal constraints, reputation and resourcing.

Background and literature review

This case study analysis borrows from a variety of research topics, including organisational communication, social networking, online trolling and community policing. A key theme is the benefit to an organisation of engaging in dialogic communication with customers, where the public is regarded as equal and active participants in a dialogue with the organisation (Leitch & Neilson, 1997). The establishment of a Facebook page by the NSW Police Force is consistent with the mission of modern police to prevent and control crime through the provision of a visible public presence (Walker, 1999). While a visible public presence and dialogic communication once meant meetings at the town hall, coffee shops, local churches or public squares, the internet has generated a new public sphere, one where there has been a fundamental change to community and communication (Holmes, 2005). It is expected that this kinds of social science research can lead to better policing by helping to understand what people want from policing, to identify how to better engage vulnerable and disadvantaged stakeholders, and by the application of research to policing practice (Stanko, 2010).

The experience from elsewhere in the world can help inform Australian police organisations about the best practice when adopting social networking. For example, in 2010 the Toronto Police Service instituted a social networking strategy ahead of the Canadian G20 summit for world leaders. Lessons learned from the event included: the value of having a social networking presence to balance the subversive nature of social networking sites run by activists; the utility of social networking in crisis management; its usefulness in intelligence gathering; the need to provide adequate staffing resources to monitor and manage the organisation’s social networking during peak periods; the importance of engagement with online social networking participants, whether they be trolls or cheerleaders; providing staff with realistic expectations about the use of social networking; and the value of establishing a social networking presence before you need it (Stevens, 2010). While most police chiefs accept the validity of adopting online social networking, financial and structural limitations have prevented the implementation of a proper social networking approach in many police organisations (Gerage, 2010). Law enforcement is lagging in this area because of concerns about liability, the lack of case law, lack of test cases, lack of expertise, resourcing and in some cases fear (Le Veque, 2010).

More than 677 million people worldwide, including 10 million in Australia, are subscribed to Facebook, of whom 50 per cent log on daily and connect to an average network of 130 friends and
80 community pages, groups and events (Facebook, 2011; Socialbakers, 2011). The number of NSW Police Force Facebook users is quite modest when compared to the Queensland Police Service membership of more than 186,000 and private companies such as Coca Cola, which have as many as 26 million followers. The January 2011 flood disaster attracted about 170,000 new users to the Queensland Police Service Facebook site as people went online in search of timely, accurate and reliable emergency management information. Similarly, two significant events have contributed to spikes in the NSW Police Force Facebook following. The first was the disappearance of six-year-old Kiesha Abrahams from her Mt Druitt home on August 1, 2010 and the second was the shooting death of Constable William Crews on September 8, 2010.

Social networking analysis originated in the 1930s and has been the focus of research in several disciplines, including psychiatry, anthropology, communications, psychology, mathematics, economics and sociology (Freedman, 2004). Modern social networking analysis focuses on the structural aspects of the network and the links between the members of the network, both online and elsewhere, including examining the geography of users (ibid). Today’s social networks are no longer linked to the geography of their potential membership. Rather people can use computers to multitask, create as well as receive messages and to network online with groups of people outside their traditional physical neighbourhood of contacts (Livingstone, 2006). Despite the removal of geographical boundaries social networks remain ostensibly ordered with a touch of randomness, where order is imposed by people because they don’t choose their close contacts at random, rather they are attracted because of culture, location and family (Bruggeman, 2008). Most people choose to join the NSW Police Force Facebook site because they are seeking to associate themselves with the police and supporters of the police.

Scholars suggest that virtual communities, such as those that exist in police social networking sites, are fairly homogenous in terms of values and viewpoints (Dahlberg, 2001). This paper hypothesises that the site’s cheerleaders will help maintain the forum’s homogeneity because they share the values and views of the site administrator. A cheerleader in the context of online forums is according to various web sources defined as an enthusiastic and vocal supporter (Merriam-Webster, 2010). While family and friends of police form a core group of supporters on police social networking sites, supporters from the broader community might also seek to link themselves with the police because they believe that the police are prototypical representatives of their own moral values (Sunshine & Taylor, 2003). It follows that the majority of members of a police social networking site, which is administered and moderated by the police organisation, would either be passive or active cheerleaders of the police organisation, its role and its membership. However, the homogeneity of an online community does not prevent those with opposite views and values from joining, as Herring, Job-Sluder, Scheckler and Barab found in their 2002 study of troll behaviour in a feminist online forum.

The term troll or trolling derives from a practice in fishing where a baited line is dragged behind a boat to catch fish. The online analogy relates to luring others into pointless and time consuming discussions but might more broadly include any activity that challenges the homogenous views of the forum (Herring et al., 2002). A recent study of the website Wikipedia concluded that trolls are motivated by boredom, attention seeking, revenge, entertainment and to create and flame conflict (Shachaf & Hara, 2010).
Cheerleaders and moderators each have a role in encouraging dialogue and maintaining civility in an online forum. Herring et al. (2002) concluded that in order to maintain social order in the feminist forum it was important for members to proactively intervene in the activities of trolls. In their study, a participant called Kent started posting antagonising messages and drawing other users into debates on feminism, and by definition trolling. Kent’s actions attracted more than 80 posts from cheerleaders, though this term was not used in the study, and eventually the site’s administrators banned him from participating in the forum. The site moderator has an important role in educating cheerleaders about how to respond to trolls in order to not inflame or encourage their activities, and in providing information about the lack of anonymity on the net, laws, policies and ways to inform and complain (ibid).

Civility is a key theme in this case study and the relationship between civility and public discourse can be traced back to Aristotle’s writings on civil society. It remains a significant topic of discussion among scholars and is a key factor in social interaction and political discussion (Farsangi, 2009). Civility in the online context has been defined as courteous and polite dialogue (ibid). This case study categorises dialogue from the NSW Police Force Facebook site to determine if individual entries are civil or uncivil with a view to addressing the research hypothesis that the majority of the site’s participants are supportive of police and actively engaged in ensuring that discourse on the Facebook forum remains civil and troll free.

Methodology

This case study’s methodology relies on computer mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), an approach to researching online discourse that emerged in the 1980s (Herring, 2004). CMDA is adapted from language-focussed disciplines such as linguistics and communication, and is essentially the analysis of logs or threads of interaction (ibid). The theoretical assumption of CMDA is that discourse will exhibit recurrent patterns (ibid). The key difference between CMDA and ordinary discourse analysis is the role of technology in the communication process. The internet provides a degree of anonymity and can serve to encourage an environment of permissiveness so far as incivility is concerned (Farsangi, 2009). Herring (2004) also suggested that the textual and anonymous nature of computer mediated discussion might facilitate behaviour from participants that would ordinarily not occur in face-to-face interaction.

Kushin and Kitchener (2009) used CMDA methodology in their study of the use of Facebook for online political discussion and in doing so identified four types of discussion: informational, productive argument, unproductive argument and miscellaneous. Informational refers to those entries that add new information to the thread of discourse. Productive argument involves postings that politely or constructively refer to the opinions of others. Unproductive argument involves postings that use opinion to offend or denigrate other participants. Miscellaneous postings have no clear orientation in their message, such as questions that might appear random or out of place in the sequence of postings on the thread. Farsangi (2010) used these categories in an analysis of Facebook
postings concerning the 2009 Indonesian presidential election, breaking them down one step further to identify unproductive argument as uncivil and the other categories as civil.

In this case study, seven threads of discourse were initiated by the administrator of the NSW Police Force Facebook site in relation to the case study topic – the shooting death of Constable Crews. CMDA is used to examine the dialogue posted in these threads by users of the site. Access to the site and the dialogue of users is open to any member of the public with a Facebook profile and while the researcher is also a registered user there was no interaction with the Facebook forum. Entries deleted by the site moderator or individuals themselves were not able to be accessed by the researcher but in some instances the deleted comments of trolls were able to be identified through the responses of others.

Each of the 311 comments posted by users in the seven threads was coded in one of the following categories: informative, productive, unproductive or miscellaneous (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009). The analysis then categorised the comments as uncivil or civil and belonging to a troll or cheerleader (Farsangi, 2010). An analysis of the discourse identified a number of patterns and attributed these to cheerleaders and trolls, from which a number of conclusions are made in relation to the hypothesis that the majority of the site’s participants are supportive of police and actively engaged in ensuring that discourse on the Facebook forum remains civil. A troll, for the purpose of this case study, is a user who engages in uncivil discourse and disrupts the social order of the group through the use of textual language that might be considered by other users to be derogatory, offensive or damaging to the reputation of the NSW Police Force.

The case study analysis

The following tables provides a numerical breakdown of the postings made by users of the NSW Police Force Facebook site in threads of dialogue initiated by the site’s administrator in relation to the death of Constable Crews.

There are six identifiable trolls among the multiple users of the site, all of which were either removed or left the site by choice; however they remain identifiable by the comments of other users.

A number of patterns were identified, including: almost all comments were sympathetic or neutral to police; moderators were quick to remove trolls, particularly after cheerleader requests for trolls to be removed; cheerleaders responded immediately and unanimously to the uncivil comments of trolls; the primary topic of the online forum influences the level of civility; the mainstream media exerts influence on the site content; terms like troll and flame are a common part of the online vernacular; and dialogue occurred at all hours.
Table 1: Response types

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Threads</th>
<th>Informative</th>
<th>Productive</th>
<th>Unproductive</th>
<th>Miscellaneous</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sept 9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 10</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 14</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 14</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 16</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sept 20</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>311</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>87.1%</td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Civility of entries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Trolls identified</th>
<th>Civil</th>
<th>Uncivil trolls</th>
<th>Uncivil other</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>292</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>93.9%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While earlier research has shown that participants are often ineffectual in their attempts to shut down a troll in an online forum (Herring et al., 2002), this study found that cheerleader responses either led to action being taken by the moderator to remove the troll, the troll absenting themself from the forum or the troll changing their behaviour and even apologising on one occasion. Herring et al. (2002) found that participants agreed that the troll was a problem and that his posts were a violation of the norms and values of the group. However, they were unable to agree on a course of action to resolve the problem. Some participants attempted to engage and persuade the troll, others called for him to be banned from the site, while others ignored him and called on participants to do the same. Similar entreaties were made by the subjects of this case study’s forum. Herring et al. (2002) suggested that several proactive interventions by the site administrator might protect against troll behaviour. These included the use of technology to identify, manage and filter troll comments, and the education of online participants by the site moderator about trolling. Moderator intervention was evident in this case study on a small number of occasions and while the vast majority of dialogue occurred without organisational interference, there is a suggestion that some
minimal input is needed from the moderator in framing the dialogue with an initial posting such as a video or media release, and in maintaining order when troll or uncivil behaviour threatens the homogeneity of the forum.

This case study analysis supports the notion that scholars have identified that the viewpoints and values of virtual communities are quite homogenous, with 93.9 per cent of comments classified as civil (Kushin & Kitchener, 2009; Dahlberg, 2001). This case study focussed on the death of a police officer and this was probably a factor in the resoundingly polite and courteous nature of participant dialogue. Farsangi’s (2009) case study analysis of the 2009 Indonesian Presidential Election found that 67 per cent of the online postings were civil, while the Herring et al. (2002) study of a feminist forum suggested that trolls seek out online platforms to inflame or bait groups with opposing viewpoints and values. Comparisons between these three studies would suggest that the topic of a forum might influence the prevalence of dissenting views.

The vast majority of responses reflect a homogenous pro-police attitude. The following is a typical example:

I just don’t understand why someone would come on a forum that clearly supports the police force and say crap like that. A keyboard warrior if I ever saw one – Karyn

The comments and reaction of the site’s users help inform new users of what might be considered socially acceptable and what might be considered inappropriate, as indicated by both the number and emotional nature of the responses. Unacceptable comments were removed by the moderator, often at the behest of the site’s users, while there were instances of trolls changing their behaviour because of adverse comments about them from cheerleaders. For example on 14 September user Inphamous apologised for his offensive comments after being attacked by multiple cheerleaders. The positive behaviour was reinforced by the group as follows:

Inphamous, despite the barrage you have received you were brave enough to come back and apologise, that is a good quality – Clint

Apology accepted Inphamous – Vonn

While online social networks are geographically dispersed, a 2006 study of social networking site Friendster by Boyd and Heer concluded that “birds of a feather” stick together. The Crews case study supports their conclusion that users of a social networking forum share more similarities than differences and people who fit the norm are more likely to be welcomed into the group. When a user who does not fit the social norm is identified, the group acts to alert the moderator and to attack the troll. For example, on September 20 John made an offensive comment in a thread initiated by a posting of a YouTube video of the Constable Crews funeral. He was removed by the moderator within 40 minutes, suggesting close monitoring of the site, and an undisclosed number of postings reacting to the troll were also removed. The removal of the postings was justified by the moderator as follows:
John . . . has been banned from this page. All comments relating to his posts have been removed, as reacting to people such as this user only seems to encourage them. Thanks for your support - NSW Police Force

Nevertheless, a number of cheerleader response made about the incident remain on the thread.

What???????????? – Christine

You missed it Christine. A John . . . was posting offensive comments, the gutless wonder has since deleted them thankfully – Amy

How disgusting and disrespectful - Rachel

Thankyou for acting NSW Police, all these trolls are really bad for my lupus. I react every time though sensibly I know I shouldn’t – Isabelle

I hope the police arrest that troll. One has to have a brick in their head to think that they could flame a Facebook page moderate by NSW Police – Carrie

Cheerleaders are often more offensive than the trolls but their behaviour appears acceptable to the forum community and often is not removed by the moderator. For example, on September 14 the site moderator removed Damien from the site:

The comments of Damien have been removed and this person has been banned for attacking other users and also for offensive language/comments

However, offensive cheerleader comments directed at Damien remain on the forum. Some of the less offensive comments were as follows:

I believe the moderator should delete the above post from Damien before someone, i.e. me, says something to the weasly fairy to put the mongrel in his place – Andrew

Damien is a moron, his page said it all, he is a disgusting idiot, he is just wasted space – Debbi Ann

Damien is a filthy troll and shit stirrer – Simone

The basis for removing trolls was on most occasions explained by the moderator to other users through a posting that reinforced the publicly available rules of the site. There were no references made by users to the rules of the site, which are posted as follows:

• Users of this site must not post or upload any content or links that are unlawful, or may defame, discriminate, offend, interfere with privacy or infringe copyright or other intellectual property rights
• Third party sites or profiles linked to this site are not controlled, maintained or endorsed by the NSW Police Force (with the exception of www.police.nsw.gov.au)
To the extent permitted by law, the NSW Police Force is not responsible or liable for any content posted on or uploaded to this site by a user or any content on third party sites linked to this site.

Enforcement of the site rules appeared to be at the discretion of the moderator as there were several instances where offensive comments that would not normally be acceptable to police in a public place were permitted to remain on the site. A rigid organisational culture can significantly affect the way in which external stakeholders or customers perceive an organisation (Clampitt, 2009), so while offensive language might ordinarily attract zero tolerance from a police officer in the street, some flexibility is afforded to online written dialogue. This might be attributed to the different laws governing online and public places, the textual nature of online content, or the personal values and morals of the moderator.

The mainstream media can also be seen to exert influence on the conduct of the site. For example, on September 10 user Grant discussed media reports that Constable Crews was shot by a fellow officer. Grant’s views on what was speculation at the time attracted the following rebukes and he too left the site.

*Hope the asshole gets what he deserves, no respect for police these days . . . today we should all say we respect and support police – Janelle*

*Grant, you have no respect and no right to comment on this page, disgusting – Linda*

*Why do the media seem hell bent on blaming another officer for this? . . . the media should just back off – Monica*

*It seems that not many people know what respect is these days (none of you on this thread just in general) – Rachel*

*Hey Grant, cop fault or not, theses scumbags are the ones who create the threat in the first place – Ben*

The active engagement of users on the site indicates the presence of a large social network that is genuinely interested in policing issues. The comments also show that terms like “troll” and “flame” are a common part of the online vernacular.

A conversation stemming from the comments of a troll identifying as Gloria provides examples of productive and informative comments:

*The police are only firing to stop the threat and protect themselves – Matt*

*Gloria, they say Constable Crews was shot accidently, do you know what this word means? – Annette*

*Yes, police have enough training, you cannot train for situations like these – Melissa*
We will never know what it is like to be in such a high pressure situation - Julie

When unproductive or uncivil comments occurred, cheerleaders showed a deep-seated desire to maintain and encourage social harmony and they will respond to the disruptive behaviour of the troll by attempting to shame or reason with them (Herring et al., 2002). Examples of this from case study dialogue involving a troll identifying as Imphamous include:

Imphamous, how can you say that the person is not to blame? Doesn’t matter if drugs were found or not. He fired at police. – Jenny

To Imphamous, . . . why did they have a gun? Why hide in the garage? Why fire the gun? - Cheryl

Imphamous, despite the barrage you received you were brave enough to come back and apologise, that is a good quality - Clint

The key theme or thread of dialogue in every instance was initiated by the moderator, meaning the organisation retained considerable control of the underlying topic of discussion. It did not prevent users from attempting to influence the course of the dialogue but the synchronistic nature of the dialogue, as it appeared on the screen, meant that contributors to the site were inclined to only access current or recent threads. The currency of the discussion is an asset for the site’s moderator as it allows them to easily and quickly monitor and address any issues of defamation, privacy, offensiveness and reputation. The tactic worked very well with the assistance of the cheerleaders, who on numerous occasions steered the conversation back to the primary theme of the thread.

Social networking is aided by technology that provides the freedom for users to access the web at anytime and anyplace. This is evidenced in the case study by the rapid succession of responses to each of the seven threads at all hours of the day. This is problematic for the site’s moderator when monitoring and removing offensive content. It means that the job of moderating becomes a 24-hour resource-intensive role. However, the demand on resources might be reduced to some extent if cheerleaders can be relied upon to identify and mollify the actions of trolls.

Conclusion

Postings from the six identifiable trolls in this case study attracted a determined and targeted response from the site’s cheerleaders. The responses acted as a safeguard by alerting the moderator to dialogue that might be regarded as defamatory, private, offensive or damaging to the reputation of the organisation. The identification and removal of trolls was easily achieved because of the synchronistic nature of the forum dialogue. It was shown that the presence of cheerleaders on the forum served both as a deterrent to negative behaviour and as a catalyst for supporting and protecting the police organisation’s reputation. The general implication of the case study analysis is that it can be shown that the cheerleader presence on the NSW Police Force Facebook site is significant and active enough to mollify the damaging comments from trolls that defame, breach
privacy, are offensive or damage the reputation of the organisation or others. However, there remains the need for a minimal level of moderator intervention when the rules of the site are contravened by a troll and other users.

The findings are useful to other police organisations that are considering adopting a dialogic social networking platform like Facebook because it demonstrates that participants can play a role in minimising the risk of trolls. It does not negate the need for an active moderator by any means but highlights some of the ways in which the site’s administrator can work with the online community to maintain a civil forum. The findings are limited to a single case and as such further research and case study analysis using similar methodology would further improve our understanding of online communities and their impact on police organisations.

References


