Social media, local justice, and citizen-led digital policing

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In 1996, Bayley and Shearing declared that 'the police cannot successfully prevent or investigate crime without the willing participation of the public, therefore police should transform communities from being passive consumers of police protection to active co-producers of public safety' (Bayley & Shearing, 1996). Almost 25 years and more than a decade of austerity later, the drive from police and governments to 'responsibilise' citizens to take on some of the burdens of safety and security for their neighbourhoods and communities has never been stronger (Garland, 1996, 2002; Nalla et al., 2018; Neyroud, 2001; Terpstra, 2008; van der Land, 2014). This drive has been facilitated by the development of digital technologies and in particular social media, with platforms such as Facebook and Nextdoor allowing frontline police to communicate directly with citizens at the level of the neighbourhood, and vice versa. At the same time, the possibilities for proactivity and innovation offered by such platforms mean police have found themselves struggling to control the local security agenda, and indeed to constrain the increasingly proactive and controversial measures adopted by these newly 'responsibilised' citizens. This short intervention introduces the concept of 'citizen-led digital policing' to analyse this phenomenon, and highlights some of the opportunities and challenges it poses for the authority and legitimacy of policing.

The proactive use by citizens of digital platforms is becoming a staple feature of contemporary security provision—with examples ranging from 'citizen journalists' like Bellingcat, who crowdsource evidence to undertake open-source investigations, to digilante group Anonymous which doxed KKK members in the USA and, most controversially, to 'paedophile hunters': members of the public who pretend to be children online in order to 'trap' paedophiles and ultimately shame them or bring them to justice. Well-established conceptualisations such as neighbourhood policing (Terpstra, 2008) 'pub-

lic-citizen schemes' (Sharp et al., 2008), 'co-production' of security (Chang et al., 2016) and 'civilian policing' (Huey et al., 2012) fail to capture and describe many of these new initiatives, because of the enduringly central role they allocate to police. Instead, we should recognise a distinct category of 'citizen-led digital policing', in which citizens self-organise to choose which security and safety issues to pursue, as well as deciding how and when they will involve the police in their activities, rather than the other way around.[1]

Rather than being passively 'responsibilised' by the authorities, citizen-led digital police are driven by their own sense of justice to act where they perceive the authorities are falling short. Rather than being 'enrolled' by police, they define and shape their own security agendas and priorities. Rather than being 'enabled' by police, they take advantage of technological opportunities to develop skills and expertise in the performance of policing tasks normally considered the exclusive prerogative of those authorities (Campbell, 2016). And rather than deriving legitimacy indirectly through authorisation by police, they appeal directly to the 'public' via social media such as Facebook and YouTube, claiming a democratic mandate from the number of 'likes' and supportive comments received (Hadjimatheou, 2019).

Citizen-led digital policing poses a challenge to a model of security governance that relies on the maintenance of clear distinctions between authorised security agencies and those they protect, by blurring the lines between the police and the public, and between responsible citizens and dangerous and unaccountable 'cyber-vigilantes' (Huey et al., 2018) 'digital vigilantes' (Trottier, 2017) or 'digilantes' (Nhan et al., 2017). Nowhere is this challenge better illustrated than with the case of paedophile hunters. Such groups are proliferating around the world, driven in part by the recent shift towards online communications driven by the COVID lockdowns. There are currently an estimated 90 such groups active in the UK alone[2] with others operating in the USA, Germany, the Netherlands, Canada, Australia, and Cambodia (Hadjimatheou, 2019).

At a time in which the UK has recorded an annual figure of over 10,000 online child sexual abuse harms (NSPCC, 2020), and in which senior police admit that they 'cannot cope' with the 'tsunami' of child sexual offences online (BBC News, 2017), such groups seem to be addressing an important gap in the safety of children. In 2018 alone, paedophile hunters contributed to the conviction of 254 sex offenders in the UK courts. Yet their activities have also led to numerous suicides (Burke, 2019) and even murder. In the Netherlands a 73-year-old teacher was beaten to death in October 2020 after a group of teenagers looking for something to do during lockdown 'trapped' him online posing as an underage boy looking for sex, arranged to meet him, and then attacked him (BBC News, 13 Nov 2020).

What began as ambivalence by law enforcement towards such groups has recently hardened into active hostility, with police releasing public statements urging existing groups to cease their activities, and sometimes even seeking their prosecution (BBC News, 2020; The Guardian, 2019). They accuse

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1   The extent to which this category is new (rather than just distinct from those prevalent in contemporary models of policing) is open to debate. An anonymous reviewer of this article asserts a continuity with the police-civilian collaboration in brutality and lynching in 20th century USA, which Skolnick and Fyfe argued was carried out in response to the perceived inadequacies of legal routes to dealing with crime or other social 'problems' (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1993, p. 24). In my view, these vigilante collaborations diverged from much contemporary paedophile hunting both in their explicit embrace of illegal and violent methods and in their use of such methods to enforce social norms (e.g. against miscegenation) that were no longer reflected in the criminal law. However, I cannot defend this position fully here.

2   A rise of 15 on 2018 (see Carter, 2020; Milne, 2018).

paedophile hunters of using poor evidential practices that might undermine the success of prosecutions, of assaulting suspects, of being more interested in personal notoriety than justice, and of prioritising the naming and shaming of suspects and their families over objective investigations.

Yet while these accusations are not unfounded, they could also be levelled at police themselves. For social media appears to exert the same irresistible pull to glorify personal successes and humiliate the failures of others on police as on paedophile hunters. In the UK, community policing teams themselves routinely use neighbourhood pages on Facebook and Nextdoor to name and shame offenders by posting photographs of them online, alongside their names, misdeeds, and place of residence. These posts often also celebrate the skills and ingenuity of named local officers in bringing these dangerous criminals to justice. Instead of expending precious time and resources contesting the authority of those citizen seeking security – or 'policing the boundaries of policing' (Trottier, 2017, p. 64) – police should reflect critically on their own practices and conceptualisations of justice in a social media era. Criminology, too, would profit from a shift of focus away from the identity of security actors and towards the nature of contemporary security practices and the social and technological conditions that shape them.

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