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**Venting, joining and educating: Motivations for knowledge sharing in the UK police
blogosphere**

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Abstract

This article examines motivations for knowledge sharing in blogs written by police officers. It draws on the findings of a research project completed in 2011 based on content analysis of 63 blogs.

Keywords

knowledge sharing, blogging, police, motivations

Introduction

As well as their function as a form of entertainment using a variety of different media, stories also provide a variety of other functions such as explaining, justifying, warning and informing (Gabriel, 2000, p.9). Within the contexts of policing and criminal justice, stories are used by experienced officers as vehicles for sharing their knowledge and experience with more inexperienced colleagues. Indeed, American research has found that many storytellers exist in the police force and that “storytelling is an essential part of the officer’s equipment” (Fletcher, 1996).

The subject of storytelling as a method of sharing narrative knowledge features heavily in policing (See McNulty, 1994; Fletcher, 1996; Fletcher, 1999). In the policing literature storytelling has been used to make sense of police culture (Wilson, 2000); violence and the politics of storytelling (Jackson, 2002) and police leadership (Rowe, 2006). One tool which police officers are using to enable storytelling is a blog. Blogs are usually defined as frequently updated, reverse-chronological entries on a single webpage. Ojala (2005) argues that there are two important aspects of blogging that make them particularly useful for sharing knowledge – their community and their archives. However, very little research has been carried out in relation to the motives for sharing knowledge through blogging by police officers. This paper presents the results of a research project, the aim of which was to identify and examine knowledge sharing motivations within the UK Police Service blogosphere.

Methodology

87 blogs were identified as a representative sample of blogs written by officers of UK police services. Blog directories were initially used to search for a sample, however only eight were

indicated on *blogcatalog.com*. As the blogs which were identified all had blogrolls identifying other police blogs, these were used as the basis of a snowball sampling technique to locate additional blogs. Since the archives of the blogs were also important in determining motivations, the sample was not restricted to current blogs, (although blogs with less than one entry were excluded, as were blogs not in the English language and non-text based blogs). The content of 64 blogs was analysed using a form of content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) to determine the (stated and observed) motivations for blogging.

Literature Review

There has been a great deal of research carried out on blogging in general, covering a variety of angles: from its inception and growth (Blood 2000; anthropological aspects (Reed 2005, Hevern 2004) and the dichotomy of privacy on the internet (De Laat 2008); to the phenomenon of 'workbloggers' (Richards 2008).

Nardi *et. al.* (2004) identify five major motivations for blogging: as life documentation, commentary, catharsis, muse and community forum. They suggest that for many bloggers, differing motivations are in play at different times. In relation to readers, Kaye (2005) suggests that users of weblogs tended to be white, well-educated males who have a variety of motivations. These include information seeking, convenience, personal fulfilment, political surveillance, social surveillance and expression & affiliation. Karlsson (2006) suggests that the ability to add comments to blog posts is particularly important, with 'the transformation of the figure of the passive reader to the active, creative reader' (p. 2). This ability thus helps to create communities: '[F]or many, Weblogs are unthinkable without comments and the community of readers that comments make visible' (Blood 2004 p. 55).

As Karlsson (2006) points out, blogs cannot be viewed as one general genre: 'blogs span a wide spectrum of uses (for both producers and consumers)' (p. 49). Blogging about work is a particular genre which has received a high degree of interest and notoriety in recent times. Schoneboom (2007) posits that they 'provide a type of ballast that helps anchor their identity and values outside of the organizational culture' (2007 p. 418). She also concludes that these types of blogs are often well-written and '...compelling because their authors are embedded participant-observers, reporting first-hand on office gossip, overheard conversations, meeting dynamics and corporate communications and transforming them into eloquent human comedy and drama' (p.420). Richards (2008) suggests there has been much criticism of the potential damage to employers' businesses or reputations resulting from workblogs as well as the alternate view, that they provide much-needed information, particularly in the public services (McClellan, 2004).

Motivations for blogging about work may differ from those for blogging about more recreational or social pursuits. While 'the most common theme involves employees documenting the reality of the jobs they do week in and week out' (Richards 2008 p. 100), some want to stimulate their readership, or provoke a positive reaction. E.g. the author of '*Policeman's Blog*' wanted to 'narrow the gap between the public's perception of what we do all day and what we actually do all day' (McClellan 2004 pp. 1-2). Other common themes are 'exposing management stupidity' (*ibid* p. 2), the release of 'work-related frustrations' (Richards 2008 p. 103), often known as venting (Nardi *et. al.* 2004, McClellan 2004, Brady 2006), while in Richards' research some popular reasons for blogging about work were 'keeping in touch with friends, family, colleagues and similar professionals' and 'to influence or educate both insiders and outsiders to their professions' (*ibid* p. 102). Richards disagrees

with the findings presented above by Schoneboom (2007), noting instead that 'the research findings point towards work blogging being a new and creative form of coping with work... rather than a forum for resisting the labour process' (2008, p. 107).

Results

Most of the bloggers included within the sample cover a range of topics in their posts which seems to fit with findings from previous studies on motivations of bloggers in general (e.g. Brady, 2006). The observed motivations of 34 blogs fall within four categories: diarising (including experiential storytelling); venting/therapy; referring to the community of police blogs; and discussing external news. Of the remaining 29, 15 cover all but the "community" category, i.e. they tell stories and diarise, discuss external topics (usually police-related news and events) and vent to some extent, but do not mention any of the other police blogs in their posts. However almost all the blogs have some of the other police blogs in their blogrolls, therefore are aware of them.

The differences between the blogs are therefore not major disparities in motivations but rather in the emphasis placed on each by differing bloggers, and in their writing styles. Some, such as *Inspector Gadget*, *PC Bloggs* and *The Thinking Policeman* concentrate more on external news stories and simply draw attention to them or give their opinions (in effect putting topics up for discussion) while others like *You want to be a hero?* and *Bawpc* are more reflective and personal.

Of the blogs examined, six do not exhibit typical characteristics. Four (*Georges Pocketbook*, *Blues and Twos*, *The Sleepy Policeman* and *Thin Blue Line UK*) are collaborative blogs,

which are more for storytelling or educational purposes, one (*This End Bites*) is written as if by a police dog (and while clearly for public education and story-telling, does not fit any of the other motivations) and one (*CSI UK*) has been shut down with only the last post remaining (thus making a detailed analysis impossible).

Venting is common motivation across the blogs. Even the names of some of the blogs illustrate their authors' emotions, e.g. *Police Camera Paperwork*, and *World Weary Detective*. Of the 63 blogs sampled, only nine do not overtly use their blog for venting. Of those nine, six are the above non-typical examples, leaving three (*PC Potshot* – pocketbookentry.blogspot.com, *Nightjack Archives* and *Inspector Guilfoyle*). *PC Potshot's* blog is a documentation of his experiences as a probationer. The others - *Nightjack* and *Inspector Guilfoyle* - seem to be written out of frustration with the policing system, but with a view to trying to change, as *Nightjack* says:

"I don't know if blogging changes anything. I do know that I am just a short lever in this world but it was worth a go on the off chance that there were people reading that could deploy longer levers." (5 April 2009)

while *Inspector Guilfoyle* states:

"I have a big problem with unnecessary bureaucracy, numerical targets and anything else that stops my officers from providing the best service they can" (About Me).

As an example of the differences in style, these two are interesting to contrast. *Nightjack* tells well-written stories which make his points while *Inspector Guilfoyle's* posts are clearly set out explanations of the way the overall systems work and the changes he would like to see made and why, being much more academic in approach and illustrating his stated motive "I aim to be informative, yet informal" (17 April 2011).

The main objects of frustration are bureaucracy, senior management, the public, and the criminal justice system. This is neatly encapsulated by *Metcountymounty*:

"Hate sitting in an office whilst the airwave is going nuts, being spat at, seeing crims get pathetic sentences. Also getting bored of being told my family should die of cancer. Not the biggest fan of clowns or of people who subscribe to the belief that rank equals knowledge. Which it doesn't." (About Me)

Sometimes the point of venting or letting off steam is to assist the blogger to work through their emotions about a subject. Some of the blogs specifically refer to this, e.g. *One Man and his Plod* states: "I used the blog last time to put my thoughts down somewhere, like a diary, this helped me get over a few issues both at work and my personal life." (14 February 2010) and *Stressed Out Cop* explains, "This is just online therapy for me and my own personal ramblings, in what appears an insane world, devoid of common sense." (About Me).

Community

During their lifespan, many of the blogs refer, *inter alia*, to other UK police blogs and bloggers both on their sites and in their posts (some regularly, some occasionally). However this is by no means a universal phenomenon; 23 of the sample of 63 blogs do not refer to other blogs.

Education

Education is a popular reason given for blogging although not always using that specific wording. This includes descriptive motives such as *Coppersblog* whose author stated “I just wanted to narrow the gap between the public’s perception of what we do all day and what we actually do all day” (McClellan 2004 p. 2), and *Sergeant Simon*’s motivation which is “to paint an honest picture of the kind of crap that we...have to deal with day in, day out, without recognition or reward” (10 August 2006).

Some blogs, like *You want to be a hero?* urge the public (or sections of it) to change their behaviour (“It’s not always a happy ending.....” 10 July 2010), while some, like *CSI UK*, “...try[ing] to give people an insight into a great job and dispel a few myths generated by popular TV shows.” (22 June 2009).

On a higher level, bloggers such as *Inspector Guilfoyle* go into detailed explanations of the systems at work behind the scenes and why they do not think they are helpful. Several, for example *The Thinking Policeman*, *Shijuro not George Dixon*, and *Stanstill*, refer back to the original tenets of British policing as set down by Sir Robert Peel and argue that these have been lost sight of.

Some bloggers specifically say that they want to be heard. *The Thinking Policeman* hopes that his blog gives an insight into the problems in policing and might thus help “influence in a very small way the future of policing.” (personal communication by email, 6 June 2011), although *Disgruntled Cop* admits in one of his posts:

“I have also begun to feel slightly deflated as to how little blogging, or at least the threats of protest about policing in the UK, have had such little effect on day to day life. The fact is I don't see any shift in attitude whatsoever... the readership of most of the police blogs seems to be mainly police officers (so they can post comments agreeing with the articles), people connected with the court system in some way (so they can blame the police for their problems) or people in the system who want to have a pop at the police as they are our regular clients.” (23 March 2007).

Documenting life

Five of the blogs have a slightly different perspective from the others sampled, although they encompass the same variety of subject matter as the others. These five, *The Thin Blue Line*, *Another Constable*, *This End Bites*, *Plastic Copper* and *Bawpc*, are more directly diarising. Obviously *This End Bites* is written from the imagined perspective of a police dog, whilst the others are written by trainees or probationary police officers. This may also go some way towards explaining why they do not start by articulating the levels of frustration presented by more experienced officers (although this can be seen to start rising as their probation continues).

Instead, these blogs are written for more personal reasons although they do still externalise experience, practice and sometimes frustration. *The Thin Blue Line* writes “I did this blog for personal reasons, mainly to look over how far I have progressed in the job and some times to point out interesting bits of law” (10 May 2008) while *Another Constable* says “A new world is opening up before my eyes that I would like to share. This is not the jaded view held by tired old police officers or of someone with a grudge against society, and those unfortunate to be on the wrong side of the law.” (About)

These examples are often more factually descriptive, listing in detail the days’ activities or duties together with the blogger’s thoughts – often in depth as they are looking at it with fresh eyes. In addition, several of the blogs also contain thoughts on the blogger’s life outside work as well, emphasizing the diarising aspects of blogging more generally.

Additional motivations

Although few bloggers state that they intend to utilise their blog to air their views and opinions on police-related (and sometimes not) news, life and events, it is one of the most common types of posts in almost all of the blogs. Some examples of this include *Disgruntled Cop* – “.. a journal of some type to ...give another opinion of the British Police Force.” (7 April 2006), and *A Non Mouse’s Blog of the Blogs*:

“I like to put across my point of view on the subject matter of the day, and like to hear of other people's points of view.”

Certain blogs are almost entirely made up of this type of post, adding a link to a news story with their opinions on it, including *Inspector Gadget* and *PC Bloggs*. This exemplifies the way in which motivations may change over the lifespan of the blog, often simply in reflection of the way the blogger feels at that time. Other observable motivations are controversial topics and comments which stimulate vigorous discussion with and among readers.

The act of storytelling itself is another reason which is little mentioned as a motive, yet is frequently seen in blog posts. There are various reasons stories are told – for example they can be part of a rant, a diary-type entry or explaining to the public how or why something is done. Often these types of posts invite or result in tales of similar or related experiences, either on other blogs or more often in the comments section of the post. This has been likened by one blogger to the kind of banter which was previously part of the “canteen culture”, described in his “Shijuro’s guide to Police terminology...” by *Shijuro not George Dixon* as “banter between shift members during break-times (when you get them) seen as subversive, sexist, racist etc.” (17 July 2010).

Four police bloggers have a “blook” - a book made of their blog – *Inspector Gadget*, *PC Bloggs*, *Michael Pinkstone* and *Coppersblog*. Pinkstone in fact has three although it is not clear if these are all based on his blog (which is shut down). Having a book published is mentioned in jest by some bloggers – indeed *Disgruntled Cop* specifically says of his blogging habits:

“Incidentally, I am fully aware that I do not update these pages on even near the same frequency as some of the more established blogs. My reluctance in doing so is the fact

that I am NOT looking for a book deal - I don't have that much interest in policing to write loads on it." (9 January 2008)

There are many examples of good writing, such as *Nightjack*, who received the Orwell Prize in 2009 for best blog and his writing is very good:

"Horton won the Orwell Prize for blogging because in an increasingly competitive field he offered such a distinct voice. And because it took you to the heart of policing in a gripping way: it was old-fashioned reporting but in the new time frame of an unfolding story. In particular it reeked of somewhere local, regional, a particular part of Britain as well as the particular place of being a policeman."(Seaton 2009 p. 1).

Indeed most of the longer-lasting blogs are well-written; this is probably necessary to achieve the readership that helps feed a blog and particularly these blogs, with their frequent desire to achieve change in the policing system.

As with all motivations, the initial intentions expressed tend to end up representing an emphasis rather than the sole use of the blog, as given a long enough time span, the bloggers tend to blog on a variety of subjects with different motivations presenting themselves at different times:

"I suppose filling a blog with all your personal thoughts about this and that, is as much a personal escape valve mechanism as it is a platform for your 'diary' or personal life

story. We may well share the funny stories and gaffs of our working lives but for many, blogging is borne out of sheer frustration.

The blog becomes a personal soapbox and a megaphone for those political and social issues that affect/annoy us.

My motivation is probably a combination of all the above and, if nothing else I find it relaxing, even when I'm *blowing a fuse* about the latest hair brained government initiative for the police!" (*Ashfordly Police Station* 21 August 2007)

Discussion and Conclusions

This paper presents the results of a research project, the aim of which was to identify and examine knowledge sharing motivations within the UK Police Service blogosphere. It aimed to build on the existing literature which posits that there are several key motivations for blogging, and these motivations may manifest themselves at different points throughout the lifespan of their blogs. Readers and reading other blogs tend to inspire blogging. Anonymous blogs and work blogs in particular can have a variety of uses, including documenting the work environment and putting the true picture to the public, while using the blog as a means to work through frustrations or let off steam.

This study shows that the three most popular reasons for blogging within the UK Police Service blogosphere are to let off steam (or vent), a wish to join the blogging community (having been inspired by other bloggers) and to educate the public on the world of policing, in that order. Of course, the reasons stated by the bloggers for blogging do not necessarily

coincide with the observed motivations during the life of the blog. In line with previous studies, the motives for blogging can change during the life of the blog and may in fact be different from the original intentions.

By analysing the subject matter of the blogs, these blogs appear to fall in line with the observations from previous studies regarding a mix of motivations. Most bloggers who post more than a handful of times end up covering a range of subjects and similarly exhibit a range of intentions in their posts. On the whole the observed motivations tend to match those stated, albeit with a wider coverage.

The blogs' use as a means to vent and release frustrations is extremely common. This can be from as basic as ranting about something that has happened or something the media or politicians have said, to a well-reasoned post on why the current system does not work or could work better. For many of the bloggers the goal is simply to work off frustration or stress – and this can be very effective, as *Bigfella in blue* mused when he restarted his blog “I used the blog last time to put my thoughts down somewhere, like a diary, this helped me get over a few issues both at work and my personal life.” (14 February 2010).

As well as the therapeutic value of the blogs evident in the release of frustrations, there is a more cathartic use of them in telling stories particularly evident in emotive subjects such as death. This is a common subject for tales, from *Which End Bites* expressing his grief at the loss of a particularly beloved police dog to *World Weary Detective's* use of expressive writing to convey his emotions upon a common police duty – advising families of a death. Such subjects also draw on the strong community of police bloggers and readers, who provide

support and understanding, often advice and additionally are simply there as a non-judgemental audience for the expression of difficult-to-process emotions.

The study shows that there are overlaps between venting, community and education. The main subjects of frustration and venting are bureaucracy, senior management, the public and the criminal justice system. Posts are particularly common on the subject of the police's "customers" – that part of society with whom they come into contact with in the course of their duties. These posts are often in the form of rants but also with some storytelling and there can be an exchange of experiences in the comments section between readers, who are often police themselves, and fellow police bloggers.

Another subject of frustration, bureaucracy, also involves an element of public education. In order to explain the level of paperwork and bureaucracy which the police are clearly (as evidenced by the blogs) subject to, they have to describe to their readers (who may not, after all, be police officers) the systems and regulations they must abide by while carrying out their duties. This more factual type of storytelling is augmented by some more direct advice given by some bloggers, for example on when to contact or not contact the police, what not to ask etc. There is an element of humour in this but it nevertheless is clearly meant seriously on some level.

The blogs are therefore being used for direct advice to the public and also to explain what actually goes on in the performance of their duties – as the author of *Coppersblog* explained to McClellan (2004) - “..to narrow the gap between the public's perception of what we do all

day and what we actually do all day”; a patent example of the use of storytelling for educational purposes.

The bloggers use their blogs to record their experiences and opinions about things they have seen and done in their lives, mostly as police officers. The intentions are multiple – entertainment, venting and catharsis, education of the public and (possibly) policy-makers, and expression of views and opinions on current affairs (usually police-related). They often read and comment on other police blogs and there can be seen to be a strong police blogging community online.

There is clear evidence of knowledge sharing in the blogosphere, based on the commitment of the bloggers' experiences and opinions to the blogs themselves. Although the conscious intention to share knowledge with other officers does not seem to be present in the police blogging arena, there is one way in which knowledge and experience is consciously shared. This is in the comments section of the blogs, where readers can and do share their thoughts and opinions on a post, offer advice and support and swap their own experiences as appropriate. There is also (depending on the number of readers and comments) an element of banter visible, with jokes and mock insults. However when genuinely negative or abusive comments are made, the other readers and the blogger often band together in either engaging with the negative comment to discuss the views expressed, or in condemnation of the abuse and protection of the abused – a clear indication of the strength of community felt between a lot of the police bloggers and readers.

There is a dearth of evidence of the intention to transfer knowledge to other professionals. The focus of the blogs appears to be more the recording of experience from an informative and entertainment viewpoint with a desire to influence the behaviour of the public and the views of policy decision makers. Whether the reading and learning of differing practices results in any internalisation of more incorporate practices (such as attitude or different ways of following the reader's specific Force practices) is difficult to ascertain.

The second most common reason given for starting a blog is the inspiration of existing bloggers. There is clearly an element of wishing to be part of "the gang". Many bloggers seem to start by reading and commenting on other blogs and then deciding that their views are too long to be comments on someone else's posts or that they wish to "do their own thing" and make their own contribution. It would appear that the ability to express their own opinions and frustrations within a community that understands the context is very persuasive.

The community aspects of blogging are apparent not only from the response to emotive posts but also in the frequency of cross-referencing between the blogs. Many are on each others' blogrolls; quite a few refer to other blogs and ongoing online conversations in their own blogs. The comments sections are particularly interesting, forming conversations (often including other bloggers), comparisons and banter. Upon the appearance of a troll, often ranks can be seen to close to engage with the troll or protect and defend the blogger (or whoever is the focus of the negativity). The same readers often comment on different blogs. The online community is strong and not necessarily exclusive – there are several non-police readers who regularly comment on various police blogs. Some have their own blogs (and are on a few police bloggers' blogrolls).

The informative aspects of police blogging are strong. Many bloggers state that their intentions when starting their blog are to “tell it like it is” and explain to the public what the police do and how. This is done in a variety of ways – documenting their day to day activities, explaining the systems and regulations that govern them (this includes venting on bureaucracy and paperwork) and creative or descriptive writing about situations they come across and their emotional response to those situations. In addition several provide glossaries of common police terms and slang. More direct methods include advice to the readers on how not to behave towards the police or in situations where they come in contact with them – mostly given in a humorous way but no less intentioned for all that. Accordingly this is a commonly observed behaviour throughout the blogs examined.

Knowledge sharing, whether conscious or not, is a critical element of the blogs. While the bloggers and readers often use the blogs to give their own views and opinions on police related news and issues, this is only one aspect of the blogs as a whole. Some of the blogs are used almost exclusively for this, with links to news stories and commentaries on them and the blogger’s views and knowledge e.g. of similar systems in different countries they have come across; however even these blogs do occasionally include other types of posts offering the bloggers own experiences.

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