Mediated Proximity: Community Policing in the Digital Age

Kira Vrist Rønn
Associate Professor, Department of Political Science and Public Management, University of Southern Denmark
kroenn@sam.sdu.dk
https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5860-4929

Abstract
The article addresses the digital transformation of policing in practice, with specific emphasis on online police patrols. Empirically, the study is based on participatory observations and qualitative interviews with Norwegian officers. It reveals a shared emphasis on localism and proximity when engaging with the public online. Despite the transforming potential of the online sphere for policing, online patrols reproduce the core scope of local and community policing in physical spaces, such as local anchoring in a specific community; specific local police tasks such as crime prevention and "everyday offences"; and certain ways of policing locally, for example, via building relations and public trust. However, some initiatives and activities by online patrols differ from the existing organisational logic when attempting to establish what I call mediated proximity in online communities characterised by shared interests rather than defined by geography. The article concludes with a discussion of the feasibility of building and maintaining public trust by means of online policing, which all of the interviewees identify as a critical aspect of their work.

Keywords
Online police patrols, digital transformation, proximity, localism, community policing

1. Introduction

As social media platforms have started to play an increasing role in everyday life, police activities have followed suit to ensure public order and safety online (Schneider, 2016). The growing use of social media by governments and official agencies has a diverse range of implications covering a variety of subfields and has been the subject of many studies in recent decades (Lee et al., 2013; Mawby, 2002; Schneider, 2016). Social media are often described as having unique potential to create new forms of engagement and interaction with the public (Schneider, 2016, p. 4). As a result, police engagement with civil society via social media is seen as having the potential to transform the relationship between "the public, the police image and police legitimacy" (Schneider, 2016; Lee et al., 2014). For example, police services worldwide have for decades used the new possibilities offered by social media to communicate with the public on various matters of concern (Lee et al., 2013). Infor-

mation and communication technologies are, therefore, quickly changing how the police conduct "image work" via social media platforms (Mawby, 2002, p. 177; Goldsmith, 2010). These technologies also provide greater opportunities for the public to reveal cases of police misconduct (Schneider, 2016). In other words, the technology makes it possible to affect public trust in the police in radically new ways due to the new types of "mediated visibility" of police activities (Ellis, 2021; Goldsmith, 2010; Schneider, 2016; Thompson, 1995). This article relates to these previous studies on policing and social media and how new information and communication technologies have affected police work. Nevertheless, the specific focus of the article is *online policing*. Online policing is an umbrella concept for a variety of operative police tasks involving Internet-related activities and actions designed to prevent or investigate crime (Bowling et al., 2019; Bullock, 2018; Gundhus et al., 2019). The emphasis is, therefore, on the perspective of police officers when engaging with the public via social media platforms in attempts to prevent and investigate both online and offline criminal conduct. Online policing takes multiple forms. According to the Norwegian scholar Inger Marie Sunde, a taxonomy of online policing would include behaviour that is either 1) *open and uniformed* – understood as work where the police are visible and recognisable actors. On the other hand, online policing can also be 2) *closed/undercover*, understood as clandestine intelligence gathering (Sunde, 2019). Online policing can also be either A) *active*, in the sense that the police are mainly proactive, initiate the work and address crimes occurring now or in the future or *B) passive*, in the sense that they are mainly reactive in response to events (Sunde, 2019). This article explores *online police patrols*. The purpose of online police patrols is most often articulated as general crime prevention. Using the taxonomy above, they are best described as an open, uniformed and mainly active presence. As outlined already, previous studies of online policing have focused mainly on social media as either sources of image work or sources of information in criminal investigations (Rønn et al., 2021; Schneider, 2016). Operational police work has become almost inseparable from the reputation management and image work of police forces, and as stated by Lee and McGovern, "the representation of policing *is* policing – or at least a simulation or simulacra of traditional policing" (Lee et al., 2014, p. 72). Hence, online police patrols constitute illustrative examples of this collapse between operational policing and image work. Despite, widespread political attention, operational, online police patrols aimed mainly at crime prevention are, however, still a new and under-researched phenomenon (Ralph, 2021).

Based on interviews and participatory field observations with Norwegian officers, this article presents empirical findings related to the core perceptions and performances of online police patrols. The study reveals that the officers involved share an emphasis on *localism* and *proximity* when engaging with the public in activities that mainly target crime prevention. Although previous studies on the impact of social media on policing have found that it has been transformed by the logic of social media platforms, for example, by adapting to the formats they take (Schneider, 2016), this study in the first part reveals how crime prevention, localism and proximity still mainly employ traditional perceptions and logic from within the police organisation. In the second part of the article, I suggest *mediated proximity* as a concept for describing how the online patrols also exploits or adapts to the promise and potential of social media such as being local and near in a non-geographical space such as on the chat platform Discord. The article concludes with a discussion of the way forward for online police patrols and the feasibility of building and maintaining public trust via them, which the officers involved generally see as a key aspect of their work.

To create an understanding of the specific context of the study, the next section recounts how online police patrols were established and have evolved in Norway.

2. Background: The rise of the Norwegian online police patrols

In 2015, the National Cybercrime Centre in Norway (NC3) set up a section for online policing.[1] They started out by creating a national Facebook account to post information to the public and receive chat messages. Even though various police districts had Twitter and Facebook accounts before this – mainly in communication departments – such channels for communicating with the public and doing operational and "real police work" online were new at the time. At first, both overt and covert police presence were anchored in the same section of the National Police, but they soon found that the necessary work and competencies differed significantly and they split into two sections. The online patrols became a part of an open section called Online Police Presence ("Tilstedeværelse på nett"). In 2018, all 12 police districts in Norway set up their own patrols ("Nettpatrulje"). In organisational terms, most of them fell under the auspices of sections for crime prevention. Each district operates on Facebook, and some are also on Instagram and TikTok to reach different audiences in different age groups. Currently, most of their work is articulated as 1) building trust, 2) preventing crime, and 3) receiving tips from local people and passing them on to investigative or intelligence units.

At a national level, the online police patrols in Norway are said to be moving into stage two, where the scope of the work is changing, for example, more proactive patrols that visit online groups on their own initiative, for instance on the chat platform Discord. This work is more like street patrols – letting people know they risk being caught if they break the law and emphasising that the Internet is not a lawless space.

The main focus of this study is on the perception and performance of online crime prevention and how online patrols in police districts see their role. However, it also covers some of the new initiatives involved when setting up proactive online patrols. Before moving on to the findings, the following section presents the study's methodology and research design.

3. Methodology

The study is based on three pre-interviews, seven semi-structured interviews (350 minutes in total) and approximately 40 hours of participatory field observation in 2021/2022. The three pre-interviews were with officers in Denmark and Norway to generate general background information on the set-up and scope of online patrols, i.e., how they differ from and overlap with existing initiatives on social media platforms. The seven main interviews were conducted in three (out of 12) police districts in Norway. The three districts are diverse in terms of geography and population size. I also conducted interviews at the National Cybercrime Centre (NC3). These interviewees were chosen according to the key informant strategy (Tremblay, 1957), the point of which was to identify interviewees with specialist knowledge of the subject, who would then help identify similar individuals in the organisation. Six interviewees were online police patrol officers – all trained as police officers in Norway (three males and three females of various ages and levels of professional experience within the police) – and one of the interviewees was a civilian manager in the national section for online police presence. All in all, the choice of interviewees was designed to elicit a variety of views about the role, focus and scope of online police patrols in Norway. The focus of the interviews was to gain police-centric and insider perspectives on perceptions

---

1. This background information is deduced from internal documents and the seven interviews included in this study and has been checked and approved by the head of "Online Police Presence" before publication.

and experiences of the patrols. Ideally, it would have been relevant to compare the police-centric perceptions of the role and mandate of online patrols with the perceptions and experiences of people who have been in contact with them. This was, however, beyond the scope of the study, and the article compares my findings with other studies, which include public perceptions of online police presence. The interviews were structured around the following themes: 1) the perceived purpose; 2) the operationalisation of the purpose (priorities and expertise); 3) the lines and types of communication with the public; 4) the success criteria; 5) the differences and similarities between online and physical police patrols; 6) competencies of the officers on online patrols; and 7) the future of online patrols. The National Police Directorate approved the study in January 2022, and participants gave their free and informed consent to participate. The author transcribed all interviews after the data collection, and the data material was then analysed using the thematic analysis method (Attride-Sterling, 2002). This method usually involves three broad stages, which include: "(a) the breakdown of the text", which often entails a familiarisation with and coding of the data; "(b) the exploration of the text", which includes the generation of general themes and the revision of these themes; and "(c) the integration of the exploration" which includes the definition of the themes and writing up the analysis (Attride-Sterling, 2002, p. 390). The first stage of analysing the data entailed the inductive coding of the transcripts (Tjora, 2021). In stage two, the interview material generated four general themes, which were addressed in all of the interviews: (1) online localism, (2) monologic vs dialogic means of online communication, (3) authority without power and (4) excluded expertise. This article reports only on the first theme (online localism). The empirical material about the theme was subsequently deductively coded, applying the sub-themes: (A) local anchoring; (B) local police tasks; (C) local ways of policing; (D) non-local online activities. The scope of this coding was to revise the general theme by identifying perspectives on the perceptions of the core scope of the patrols. The third stage entailed writing up these themes, as exemplified in this article by quotes illustrating some of the most central aspects of the themes identified. The participatory field observations took place in NC3 and in one police district in Norway in 2022. The field observations included attending meetings, sitting beside officers on online patrols while they performed their everyday duties, and taking part in a gaming event at NC3. Field notes were taken during these days and events, which are reported mainly as supplements to the interview material in this article. All quotes are anonymised and translated into English by the author and referred to as Interviewees 1, 2, 3 … 7 (I1, I2, I3 … I7). Translating empirical material into English entails potential validity pitfalls since the original meaning might be skewed (Nes et al., 2010). I have attempted to avoid this pitfall by only translating the relevant quotes and doing all the coding and analysis in the original language. In the next section, I present the main findings of the study about the core local scope and focus of online police patrols in Norway.

4. Online localism: Business as usual?

One of the main findings of the study is that *localism* recurs in the interviews as a cornerstone of the Norwegian online police patrols. The emphasis on localism is evident in both the organisational design of the patrols and in the work and methods deemed relevant by the officers involved. This section fleshes out the perception and performance of online localism and compares it to how localism is perceived and performed in other forms of policing. A central argument in the section is, therefore, that online localism, to a large degree, resembles the objectives of community policing. Before fleshing out this argument, I will

briefly sketch the crucial aspects of community policing and localism in recent scholarly literature.

Localism, or local policing in the Scandinavian context, has been articulated as a form of *community policing* (Diderichsen, 2022; Balvig et al., 2004). Community policing has developed as a strategy during the past decades (Manning, 2010). Originally considered a strategy to engage civil society in policing priorities and bring the public closer to the force (Moore et al., 2003; Sklansky, 2008), it has evolved into a synonym for policing in geographically local areas – at least in the Scandinavian context (Diderichsen, 2022; Balvig et al., 2004).

In recent Scandinavian policing literature, Adam Diderichsen (2022) articulates three common points about *localism*. These three specific features of local policing are A) local anchoring, B) specific local police tasks, and C) specific local ways of policing (Diderichsen, 2022, p. 17). *Local anchoring* refers to the proximity of the police to the public – understood as the geographical situatedness of the police in the physical community where the police work takes place. The *local police tasks* are specific types of police work traditionally considered "local", such as policing minor and everyday crime, for example, breach of the peace in the local community (Diderichsen, 2022). Specific *local ways of policing* are, for example, crime prevention and an emphasis on building relationships of trust with the public to make local people feel safe (Diderichsen, 2022). In the following, I will relate these three perceptions to how online localism is perceived and performed by online patrols. I will do this in order to identify how online policing relates to the traditional ways of performing localism when policing on the streets. When reporting on the study findings below, I focus mainly on activities initiated by the online patrols (e.g., by posting on social media – mostly Facebook, Instagram, and TikTok). However, I also relate it to communication between individuals and the police, which is usually instigated by the public via the chat functions on social media platforms.

4.1 Local anchoring

The first common aspect of localism is articulated as the local anchoring of the police patrols in the specific geographical environment of the local population. Interestingly, online patrols share this ambition of being physically close to the local communities. At organisational level, the aim of achieving local anchoring is reflected in the establishment of 12 online police patrols – one in each district in Norway. The logic behind this emphasis on being local is expressed by some of the interviewees as an organisational response to specific developments in the police force in Norway over the last decade. The most recent police reform in Norway ("Nærpolitireform" from 2015) and similar reforms in many other European countries have, paradoxically, resulted in a shift towards greater centralisation of police organisation (Diderichsen, 2022; Fyfe, 2019). In this sense, online patrols in Norway have been articulated as an organisational response to the lack of local engagement with the public due to this centralisation and the subsequent decrease in public trust and feeling of safety in local communities, as argued by Liv Finstad (2018, p. 136).

One interviewee expresses the role of the online patrols as follows: *"I do not necessarily think that the public regards us as a replacement for 'the local sheriff's office', but in practice we take over this role"* (I3).

Localism is, therefore, mainly perceived and practised in the same way as traditional community policing, in which the police engage with the local community in an area determined by the district's geographical borders. The assumption expressed via this logic is that the population of a specific police district is more interested in what is going on in their local community than elsewhere. It follows that online patrols should focus their interaction with

the people of the police districts on topics of local interest. For instance, in one of the interviews, this was exemplified by a case in which the online police patrol in a specific district would provide information on an increase in the theft of motors from boats in order to generate awareness and ideally prevent similar crimes in the future (I2). This type of crime was articulated as a specific topic of concern for people in specific coastal districts, whereas people in other districts would probably be more engaged and concerned with topics related to their geographical area (I2). Interviewee 1 expresses this assumption via a different case:

> Question from Interviewer: "Do you see yourself as the local police?" I1: "Yes indeed, and the reason for this is quite simple. Norway is very big, and that's the thing with local proximity and belonging. We think it's a really important way of involving our followers. To explain it more simply, it is more interesting for people who live up here to know that there is a tree branch on the road somewhere near them than that there was a riot in front of the parliament in Oslo. So local proximity and familiarity are important ways of facilitating public engagement" (I1).

In this sense, localism is understood as local anchoring of the online police patrols and as *local recognisability* and *proximity* of the activities relevant to the police in the specific area in which people live. Localism, recognisability and proximity are all concepts defined by the physical design of the particular local community and determined by geographical borders. As a result, localism, proximity and recognisability are translated more or less directly into online patrolling with little attention to the unique nature of the online and digital environment and the potential of social media platforms. This makes online police patrols a new method or source of traditional community-based policing of physical spaces.

4.2 Local police tasks

According to Diderichsen, the second common aspect of localism is emphasising certain police tasks in the specific local community. This aspect overlaps with the first one in terms of highlighting the local recognisability and proximity of the phenomena addressed by the local police patrols. As shown in the section above, online localism also entails placing specific importance on local crime phenomena to which the local community can relate. This is evident in the examples of the theft of motors from boats and fallen trees/branches on the road in specific police districts. The tasks considered relevant for the local online police patrols to interact with the local community are, therefore, closely connected to the physical design of the specific geographical area. In both cases, the focus of the online police attention is also community safety by focusing on everyday phenomena rather than interacting on topics related to more general, serious, harmful or organised crime.

Interestingly, as the examples above show, online patrols focus on everyday police activities in traditional physical spaces. However, they also address online crimes such as sharing sexualised photos without consent or identity theft. Despite the fact that these types of online offences are relevant and recognisable for everyone and not just the people of a specific local community, online patrols still stress the importance of local anchoring and communication with the public on such matters. Interviewee 7 explains the underlying assumption in more detail:

> People live somewhere. And I want to forge a link between online crime prevention and crime prevention in the community. We could just have a centralised online presence (…) But we need to focus on establishing relations online and offline at the same time (I7).

One of the main assumptions in this quote is that positive relations between the people and police are important for the public to react to and engage with the information and advice provided by the force. The assumption also builds on a conventional understanding of crime prevention that establishing relations between the police and public should (also) take place in face-to-face encounters between local officers and people. Importance is also placed on the assumption that the officers people encounter on the streets should be the same as the ones they meet online. Local recognisability or familiarity is also emphasised when it comes to establishing relations between the police and the public. It might be said that the online officer is seen in this regard as an extension of the traditional local "officer Joe" whose face and name are (or used to be) well known in the local communities, and this familiarity with the local officers plays a key role in the perception and performance of online policing.

Again, the main argument in this section is that the common perception of what constitutes local police tasks has been transferred more or less directly from policing of physical spaces. The local recognisability and familiarity playing out between the police and local people are expressed as pivotal to success – also in the online sphere.

4.3 Local ways of policing

Diderichsen (2022) articulates the third common aspect of local policing as specific local ways of working. Naturally, these local ways of working are closely related to the other two aspects of localism, and it is difficult to distinguish clearly between local anchoring, local police tasks and local ways of working. However, local ways of working adhere more specifically to the connotations associated with local policing, often articulated as crime prevention via positive relations to the public and via performing accessibility and proximity in order to build public trust in the police and generate a sense of safety in the local community (Diderichsen, 2022). In the section below, I relate the focus and scope of the online officers to these common connotations, i.e., the perceptions expressed by the interviewees of online crime prevention and efforts to build trust.

As demonstrated in the section above, crime prevention is considered a core part of online patrolling. However, crime prevention is understood in different ways by the online patrolling officers. Some of the interviewees perceive crime prevention as simply being present online so that the public knows that the Internet is policed and that the police are accessible online (i.e., I1 & I2). Others have a narrower idea of crime prevention as certain online activities such as informing the public about relevant matters, e.g. new types of offences, new online channels of violations as well as providing information that encourages the public to help themselves, for example by providing information about what to do if somebody shares sexualised photos of them without their consent (i.e., I3, I5, I7). In this sense, the understandings of what constitutes crime prevention are quite similar to the various conceptualisations of crime prevention in traditional policing (Gundhus et al., 2014). When asked whether there is a difference between conducting crime prevention activities online and elsewhere, interviewee 3 replies:

> Both yes and no. On the street, in the real world, we have so much more experience with what works and how we can control the situation and act when faced with different matters of concern. Whereas on the Internet, we need to try out new methods all the time and think in new ways (I3).

The scope of crime prevention is, therefore, considered the same online and offline, but the ways of conducting it are different due to the novelty of online policing and the lack of knowledge and experience of what works.

Throughout all the interviews, it is evident that one of the most important aims of online police patrols is perceived as building and maintaining public trust. As argued above, this makes the emphasis on building and maintaining positive relations between the police and the public the trademark of online patrols. This is evident in the explicit focus on "humanising" the police and showing officers from a humorous and soft side. Examples of building trust include TikTok videos with dancing police officers, liking photos of cute cats and dogs in local groups on social media or engaging in online small talk with locals. An explicit aim of such activities, as many of the interviewees point out, is to *"lower the threshold for the public reaching out to the police"* (i.e., I1 & I6). Such endeavours are founded on the assumption that if the public has a positive perception of the police and regards them as trustworthy, then they will tend to co-operate, assist and reach out to officers when something more serious occurs. Trust building by online patrols is part of the broad crime prevention and relationship-building activities in the local community. In order for online patrols to succeed in preventing crime and promoting safety, positive relationships with the public are pivotal. As interviewee 2 puts it: "*so if we want to create a feeling of safety, we will have to establish relations, so that we have something in common*" (I2). As presented in the previous section, the "common ground" when establishing these relations is very often articulated as shared geography or a local community, and this makes the locally anchored approach to the establishment of relations between the public and the police a recurring aspect of trust-building activities by online patrols.

The ways in which these trust-building activities are perceived and performed by online patrols are fairly similar to the ideal of local and community-based policing, as part of which promoting safety is stressed as essential (Diderichsen, 2022; Balvig et al., 2014). Highlighting community safety is also expressed in the following example. Interviewee 3 talked about an online patrol in a particular district, where an officer commented on a post in a local community group on Facebook. The original post featured a picture and a story about the poster's bike, which had recently been stolen. In this case, the local online patrol posted a comment asking whether she had reported the offence and informed her that they would ask the local (physical) patrols to keep an eye out for her bike (I3). The main purpose of such interaction is not articulated as attempting to solve that specific case, but replying is a way of communicating to the public that the police know and care about offences committed in local communities. As the interviewee said:

> We know that the chances of finding the bike are quite low. However, for the public, it means quite a lot. It is not so important if the bike is found or not, but they feel that their local police services are informed. In general, the public is very surprised when we do such things (I3).

Another interviewee expresses a similar purpose behind online interaction as *"giving the public a feeling of being heard and seen"* (I4). This type of interaction with the local public feeds into the underlying logic of community safety by building trust and creating a perception that the police are accessible in local communities. Interestingly, a final example of online patrols attempting to build trust via positive relationships with the public was to minimise asymmetry between the police and public. Interviewee 2 expressed the importance of interacting with the public in a non-admonishing way. Despite the obvious asymmetrical relationship between the online police and the public, the online officers represent an attempt to interact with the public as equals and not try to appear too instructive and better-informed (I2). The rationale behind refraining from a know-it-all attitude on the side of the police is also in line with the core ideal and emphasis on establishing positive and equal relations between the police and the public (Diderichsen, 2022).

As in the previous two sections, I argue that the perception of online patrols generally equates to the core scope of local and community policing as articulated in traditional policing strategies in physical spaces. In the section below, I will briefly relate this main finding to the existing literature on the transformative potential of information and communication technologies for police.

5. Online police patrols: Reproducing the ideal of community policing

As presented above, one of the main findings of the study is the emphasis on locally anchored, community-based policing logic in the expressed perceptions and performances of online police patrols by the officers concerned. Local recognisability and accessibility are also considered pivotal to online patrolling and the core ideal of community policing (at least in the way it is perceived in the Scandinavian context), where equal, positive, and locally anchored relationships are crucial, e.g. to successful crime prevention and general police activity (Diderichsen, 2022; Gundhus et al., 2014).

This tendency to replicate the established organisational logic of police organisation when faced with new challenges, strategies or technologies comes as no surprise when my findings are related to other studies by scholars such as Gundhus (2012) and Hestehave (2021). At the same time, the emphasis on localism and local anchoring may seem somewhat paradoxical given the global nature of the Internet and the international platforms used by online patrols, such as Facebook, Instagram, TikTok, Snapchat and Discord. Schneider also writes in his comprehensive work on policing and social media that policing is usually transformed and framed by social media and that forces tend to adopt the format and logic of the platforms when interacting with the public (Schneider, 2016). Despite the transforming potential of new information and communications technologies on police practices (Chan, 2001), the core scope and aim of online patrols generally remains unaltered despite the new potential for them. As a result, online police patrols become more of an extension, a supplement or an evolution of sources and methods of traditional policing in physical spaces rather than a revolution of police patrols in online ones.

In the section below, I will discuss other ways of perceiving and performing online police patrolling in ways that seek to exploit the core nature and transform the potential of the online sphere to a greater extent.

6. Exploiting online potential: Rethinking online police patrols

Online platforms have entered the public sphere with a promise of enabling dialogue between the police and the people and of generating greater public engagement with police work (Schneider, 2016; Lee et al., 2014). However, as also identified in various empirical studies on policing and social media, the police do not necessarily exploit the full potential of social media platforms. The British scholar Karen Bullock, for example, found that most police communication on social media in the UK was still one-way – sending information out to the public instead of engaging in dialogue (Bullock, 2018).

In the following, I will present examples of how online Norwegian police patrols also attempt to move away from the traditional conceptualisations of police patrols when working online.

The emphasis on local anchoring and presence in communities corresponding to the geographical borders of police districts might appear somewhat surprising, given the non-

physical nature of the Internet. Among other things, the Internet and information and communication technologies are characterised by a new "connectivity", i.e., between people who do not necessarily live in the same physical community (Schneider, 2016, p. 27).

A different way of understanding localism and proximity could be by emphasising police presence in local communities without geographical borders (Wahlquist, 2021), deploying instead the new lines of networked connectivity between people facilitated by social media. The local online patrols, as well as the national one in Norway, have recently begun to focus on these kinds of non-geographical local communities, and the online patrols visit and interact with people in these *interest-driven* communities, where the topics of mutual interest are detached from the design of the local, physical spaces. Such "local" communities exist, for example, in particular online communities on specific servers on Discord, where people meet up and chat about topics of mutual interest (field notes; I5, I6).

This kind of local and proximity-oriented online policing is evident, for example, when online patrols interact with the public via Discord or game and chat with youngsters in online sessions of games like Fortnite (the patrols engage in actual gaming and communicate through the oral chat functions). In both Discord and Fortnite (as well as other multi-player platform games), online patrols facilitate dialogue and are crucial in terms of what is considered acceptable communication and topics of interaction. On the online police patrols' Discord server, the police define the "rules of engagement" (which are specified when logging in): they can, for example, give a person a time-out in the online room for unacceptable conduct (field notes). The dialogue is not necessarily about crime-related topics and thereby does not necessarily have to fulfil the core ideal of community policing, i.e. of engaging the public in policing matters. Instead, these platforms are better viewed as online channels for everyday small talk between online officers and ordinary people. As such, this type of interaction might best be understood as part of the measures to build trust and relationships by online patrols – just not in a specific geographical setting. The aim of such activities is similar to the locally anchored policing activities of the traditional patrols, such as establishing relationships by "humanising" police activities (via gaming sessions) and emphasising proximity, accessibility and a feeling of safety among the "local" people in online spaces.

However, such online police patrolling activities create radically different opportunities in terms of creating a "shared common", which the interviewees express as the centre of communication between the public and the police. A new type of online police patrolling is slowly taking shape, which seeks to a greater extent to exploit the potential of the online nature and set-up of social media platforms. By introducing the term *mediated proximity*, I am suggesting a concept that will capture the scope of local and community-based policing but in a non-locally anchored setting. Mediated proximity refers to the scope of online gaming sessions and chatting on various servers, e.g. Discord, and the belief in building relationships, establishing trust between authorities and the public and facilitating crime prevention without physical meetings. Mediated proximity draws on a conceptualisation of greater "mediated visibility" of the police via various Internet-based platforms, as argued, for example, by Thompson, Myles and Trottier (Myles et al., 2017; Thompson, 2011). However, striving to achieve mediated proximity between the police and the public differs from the core visibility widely discussed when the police first started to use social media (Schneider, 2016; Lee et al., 2014). Mediated proximity refers to more than the typically one-way, online communication of the police services and reflects the core potential for the active engagement of the public in police crime prevention activities and for making people feel safe in online spaces.

These types of activities are very new and, therefore, little is known about outcomes,

impact and potential downsides. Some of the interviewees point out potential pitfalls related to the lack of experience with the online domain. Whereas street patrols often know every corner of the district, online patrols, know very little of the online landscape, which also constantly changes. Interviewee 6 expresses the challenge posed by the dynamic nature of the online architecture:

> It [the Internet] is so big. We need to set ourselves limits. But I think of it in the same way as in a local area or district. The more experience we have with it, the more we know about the various challenges faced in that specific area. It's the same on the Internet. (…) However, on the Internet, new "areas", "districts" and "cities" can arise overnight, so we constantly need to familiarise ourselves with new online spaces (I6).

The new possibilities and challenges associated with moving police work online are evident when we think about the sheer size of the Internet and the amount of possible online "street corners" and interest-driven communities the police could potentially visit. In addition to awareness of the size of this new police district, interviewee 5 also highlights awareness of not reproducing well-known anomalies of police discretion from police patrolling in physical spaces into the online sphere (i.e., stereotyping). As a result, I5 calls for awareness of the ability to provide good reasons and arguments for choosing a specific online focus area or "interest-driven community" when detaching online patrols from local anchoring at district level.

This section has presented new online pathways which are currently being explored as new channels for online police patrolling. In addition to serving as a supplement to locally anchored crime prevention in each police district, online patrols reflect an emerging tendency to initiate activities that strive consciously to establish *mediated proximity* vis-à-vis the public in interest-driven online spaces. In the next section, I will conclude with a discussion of the feasibility of mediated proximity and of the core ideal of building trust expressed by online officers.

7. Concluding discussion: Building public trust online

For decades, various types of media have played a key role in establishing and maintaining relationships between the police and the public (Thompson, 1995), and the explosive growth of social media has provided new opportunities and pitfalls (Lee et al. 2014). Manning's original distinction between "police work" and "image work" has collapsed due to the inherent focus on visibility in the "mass media society", as argued, for example, by Mawby (2002, p. 180). Online police patrols constitute an apt example of this collapse. They have a foot in each camp, and their work involves entangled elements of both police and image work. In this sense, online police patrols are adequate examples of so-called *simulated policing* where the immaterial and disembodied part of policing, which usually characterises the image work of police forces, have become integrated into operational policing (Lee et al., 2014, p. 72). This intersecting collapse is exactly also captured in the concept of *mediated proximity*, denoting the element of visibility and engagement potentially available online on the one hand and the ideal of proximity, localness, recognisability, and familiarity on the other hand, which are expressed in existing local and community and policing strategies in physical spaces.

Interestingly, a recurring theme in all the interviews for this study is the firm belief in the potential for online police patrols to build trust. As already pointed out, this belief is man-

ifested, for example, in the emphasis on establishing close relationships, signposting accessibility and underlining local recognisability of the activities which are addressed by the patrols. The underlying assumption expressed by the online officers is that if the police, in general, are considered accessible and approachable – including online – then it will affect the public perception of trust in the force. So, from the perspective of online officers, the predominant logic of their work is the feasibility of building trust vis-à-vis the public. Unfortunately, this study did not include the perspective of the public. However, the following relates my findings to other recent studies of online police patrols' potential for building trust.

Liam Ralph (2021) has conducted comprehensive studies of the online presence of the Scottish police. He found that the extent to which the online presence maintains and ensures public trust is rather doubtful. He uses wide-ranging studies, including interviews with representatives of the public who have had various forms of interaction with online patrols, to argue that the public perception of policing is dependent on the perception people have of the police service in their physical spaces: *"the current study shows that police legitimacy on social media changes depending on how people understand the role of the police in physical spaces."* (Ralph, 2021, p. 9). Ralph mainly addresses the implications of online police patrols for police legitimacy and not specifically for public trust. However, he defines legitimacy by referring to Bottoms and Tankebe's (2012) "dialogic" approach to police legitimacy, which posits that it is a constant negotiation between "power holders" and their "audience" (Ralph, 2021, p. 3; Bottoms et al., 2012). Public trust in the police is often used interchangeably with police legitimacy (Taylor, 2004) and generally entails similar dialogic dynamics as legitimacy. Public trust in police forces is usually also considered relational and refers to the good reasons on the part of the public to grant (or not grant) the authority or power their trust (Petit, 1995). In the context of policing, Tom Taylor's finding concerning the importance of *procedural* justice (rather than *material* justice) in the granting of public trust to police forces has become widely recognised in the literature on police legitimacy and public trust (Tyler, 2004). The emphasis on procedural fairness is also reflected in the importance expressed in the interviews of the online police patrols, making sure, for example, that the public is seen and heard, as argued above. However, the strong belief in the potential of online policing to build trust may also have limitations, as argued below.

According to Ralph (2021), online police patrols would not themselves be capable of changing the public's perception of them since the public's perception of trust in and legitimacy of the police reflects how it perceives the police in general, which is based on physical encounters with them.

If this argument is transferred to the case study in Norway, the online patrols would not by themselves be able to build or reinforce public trust since this is determined by predefined perceptions of the police in general. The interviewees in the Norwegian case, however, express a solid belief in the possibility of affecting public perception positively via online presence. As one of the interviewees puts it:

> I have confidence in our ability to build public trust because of who we are and what we do. We [the online police patrol] can build and maintain trust on behalf of the force as a whole (I4).

This strong belief in the ability to build trust may be due to a high degree of perceived *self-legitimacy* amongst the "power holders", i.e., the online officers, as expressed by Ralph (2021). The interviewees express a strong belief in the basic assumption underpinning online police patrols in Norway, which is the ability to exert a positive influence on the relationship between the police and the public via an online police presence. An interesting

variable to take into account in this regard is whether the public's response would be different depending on which population groups are asked. The reply to the question of whether online patrols are better at building and maintaining public trust may, therefore, depend on the audience. In Norway, the main target audiences for the online police patrols are children and young people, even though the police also operate on Facebook and Instagram, which appeal mainly to people aged 30+. Many of the young people who encounter online patrols (i.e., in gaming sessions and on Discord) do not necessarily have any (or very little) previous experience with the police from the physical world. The online patrols might be or become (over time) a natural part of their perception of what the police are, as opposed to the perceptions of older generations. This difference in audiences could be articulated as the distinction between "digital natives" and "digital immigrants" (Bennet et al., 2008, p. 776–777; Wahlquist, 2021), where the natives would be more inclined to consider online patrols as their main source of encounters with the police. The audience-sensitive approach to the feasibility of building and maintaining public trust via online patrols is mere speculation on my part and calls for further studies of the influence of online police patrols on trust building with specific target groups.

Gundhus and Larsson (2014, p. 278) on the other hand argue that the increased digitalisation of the police generally leads to a greater distance between the police and the public, mainly due to the technical mediation of police work (via apps, iPad, etc.) instead of face-to-face encounters. In line with the claim above about the need for audience sensitivity when making claims about public trust, a relevant question is whether this digital distancing and the perception of physical encounters as "the gold standard" holds true for all parts of the public. As argued above, a main function of the online Norwegian police patrols, as expressed by the interviewees, is to provide the public with a feeling of online accessibility, proximity and safety. Whereas scholars working on the role of social media in policing have in the past emphasised the mediated nature of visibility in the context of policing, which is increasingly taking off in connection with the police's use of social media (Schneider, 2016; Lee et al., 2014), my study reveals another endeavour, which I suggest represents an effort to strive for *mediated proximity*. The main aim of mediated proximity is to guarantee public trust in the police via online encounters. An interesting question to pose in future research would, therefore, be whether the attempt to provide *mediated proximity* is perceived differently by digital natives and immigrants simply because of the naturalness of online interaction. Additionally, it would be interesting to conduct comparative studies with online police endeavours in other countries. Hence, it might be the case that the strong belief in the feasibility of building trust among the online patrols in Norway is founded in the general high level of trust in public authorities compared with other European countries, and the cultural setting of the online police affects the feasibility of enhancing trust vis-à-vis the public. Finally, organisational scholars have highlighted the importance of "perceived proximity", which insists on the importance of differentiating between subjective feelings of closeness (virtually or physically) rather than normative understandings of what constitutes proximity (Wilson et al., 2008; Kolb, 2013). Pursuing this approach, the striving expressed in the interviews for virtual or mediated proximity by the online patrols in order to establish and maintain trust vis-à-vis the public might work with certain types of audiences. However, I will leave this point for future studies of the feasibility of mediated proximity to debate.

Lastly, a point of attention and a response to this optimistic and strong belief in the feasibility of providing mediated proximity of the online police patrols might be found in Rob Mawby's comprehensive work on police communication and legitimacy (2002). Generally, he found that the image work done by police forces via, for example, social media pres-

ence, often "supports and demonstrates" police legitimacy (Mawby, 2002, p. 190). However, he also argues that the image work via media channels might have a flipside, "masking" or "compensating" for a lack of public trust and police legitimacy (Mawby, 2002, p. 190). Since police work is increasingly mediated by various media (Schneider, 2012), online police patrols have a major responsibility in terms of not simply showing themselves from an over-exaggerated positive side in order to establish and maintain a flattering public image (Mawby, 2002). Hence, awareness of the responsibility and of the potential flipsides, i.e., compensating for a lack of trust by engaging online, might trigger reflexive awareness in the Norwegian patrols and their efforts to generate trust.

References

Attride-Sterling, J. (2002). Thematic networks: an analytic tool for qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*. https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410100100307

Balvig, F. & Holmberg, L. (2004). *Politi og tryghed: Forsøg med nærpoliti i Danmark*. Jurist og Økomomforbundets Forlag.

Bennet, S., Maton, K. og Kervin, L. (2008). The 'Digital Natives' Debate: A Critical Review of the Evidence. *British Journal of Educational Technology*, 39(5), 775–786. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8535.2007.00793.x

Bottoms, A., and Tankebe, J., 2012. Criminology: beyond procedural justice: a dialogic approach to legitimacy in criminal justice. *Journal of criminal law & criminology*, 102 (1), 119–170.

Bowling, B., R. Reiner & Sheptycki, J. (2019*). The Politics of the Police*, (5th edition). Oxford University Press.

Bullock, K. (2018). The Police Use of Social Media: Transformation or Normalisation? *Social Policy & Society, 17* (2), 245–258. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1474746417000112

Chan, J. B. (2001). The technological game: how information technology is transforming police practice. *Criminal Justice*, 1(2), 139–159. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466802501001002001

Diderichsen, A. (2022). *Samfundspolitiet*. Samfundslitteratur.

Ellis, J.R. (2021). *Policing Legitimacy: Social Media, Scandal and Sexual Citizenship*. Springer.

Finstad, L. (2018). *Hva er politi*. (1. Utg.). Universitetsforlaget.

Fyfe, N. (2019). The changing ecology and equity of policing: some implications of reconfiguring boundaries in an era of police reforms. In N. Fyfe, H.O.I. Gundhus & K.V. Rønn (eds.) *Moral issues in intelligence-led policing*, 246–262, Routledge.

Goldsmith, A. (2010). Policing's new visibility. *British Journal of Criminology*, 50 (5): 914–934: http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/bjc/azq033

Gundhus, H. O. I. & Larsson, P. (2014). Fremtidens politi. In Larsson, P., Gundhus, H. O. I & Granér, R. (eds.) Innføring i politivitenskap. (1. Utg). Cappelen Damm akademisk, 273–302.

Gundhus, H., Talberg, N. & Wathne, C.T. (2019). "Politiskjønnet under press" in *Det Digitale er et Hurtigtog*, 83–116. Fagbokforlaget.

Gundhus, H. O. I. (2012). Experience or Knowledge? Perspectives on New Knowledge Regimes and Control of Police Professionalism. *Policing, 7*(2), 178–194. https://doi.org/10.1093/police/pas039

Hestehave, N. K. (2021). *Coppers Chasing Usual Suspects. A Sociological Search for the Drama of Proactive Investigation and the Detective Métier*, PhD Thesis, Aalborg: Aalborg University, Department of Sociology.

Kolb, D.G. (2013) Virtually There: The Paradox of Proximity, in R. L. Morrison & H. D. Cooper-Thomas (eds.) *Relationships in Organizations: A Work Psychology Perspective*, Palgrave Macmillan: 171–192. https://doi.org/10.1057/9781137280640_8

Lee, M. & McGovern, A. (2014). *Policing and Media. Public Relations, Simulations, and Communication.* Routledge.

Mawby, R. C. (2002). *Policing Images. Policing, communication, and legitimacy.* Routledge.

Moore, M.H. & Braga, A. (2003). The 'Bottom Line' of Policing: What Citizens Should Value (and Measure!) in Police Performance. *Police Executive Research Forum.*

Myles, D. & Trottier, D. (2017). Leveraging Visibility, Gaining Capital? Social Media Use in the Fight Against Child Abusers: The Case of The Judge Beauce. *Social Media and Society*, 3 (1): 1–12 https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305117691998

Nes, F., Abma, T., Jonsson, H., and Deeg, D. (2010). Language Differences in Qualitative Research: Is Meaning Lost in Translation? *European Journal of Ageing* 7(4): 313–316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10433-010-0168-y

Petit, P. (1995). The Cunnings of Trust, *Philosophy and Public Affairs,* 24(3), pp. 220–225. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1088-4963.1995.tb00029.x

Ralph, L. (2021). The dynamic nature of police legitimacy on social media. *Policing and Society, 32*(7), 817–831 https://doi.org/10.1080/10439463.2021.1956493

Rønn, K. V., Rasmussen, B., Roer, T.S. & Meng. C. (2021). On the Perception and Use of Information from social media in Investigative Police Work. *Policing: A Journal of Policy and Practice*, 15 (2): 1262–1273, https://doi.org/10.1093/police/paaa028

Schneider, C. J. (2016) *Policing and Social Media. Social control in an era of new media.* Lexington Books.

Sklansky, D.A. (2008). *Democracy and the Police.* Stanford University Press.

Sunde, I.M. (2019). Patruljering på internett. In Sæther, K.E., Kvande, K.A, Torgersen, R. og Stridbeck, U. (eds.) *Straff & frihet – Til vern om den liberale rettsstat.* Gyldendal, 597–608.

Tjora, A. (2021). *Kvalitative Forskningsmetoder i praksis – 4. utgave.* Gyldendal.

Thompson J. B. (2011). Shifting boundaries of public and private life. *Theory, Culture & Society*, 28, 49–70. https://doi.org/10.1177/0263276411408446

Thompson, J. B. (1995). *The Media and Modernity: A Social Theory of the Media.* Polity Press.

Tremblay, M.-A. (1957). The Key Informant Technique: A Nonethnographic Application. *American Anthropologist, New Series*, 59(4): 688–701. https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1957.59.4.02a00100

Tyler, T. (2004). Enhancing Police Legitimacy. *ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science,* 593 (1): 85–99. https://doi.org/10.1177/0002716203262627

Wahlquist, H. (2021). *Pålogga politi En studie av muligheter og utfordringer med digitalt forebyggende politiarbeid,* Masteroppgave Institutt for Kriminologi og Rettssosiologi, Juridisk fakultet, Universitetet i Oslo.

Wilson, J. M., O'Leary, M.B., Mitiu., A, Jett, Q. R. (2008) Perceived Proximity in Virtual Work: Explaining the Paradox of Far-but-Close, *Organization Studies*, 29 (7): https://doi-org.proxy1-bib.sdu.dk/10.1177/0170840607083105