Police in social media: To protect and share?

by Azi Lev-on and Gal Yavetz

Abstract
This article explores how senior police officers perceive the presence of the police on social media. While interviewees argued that the police have a “duty of presence” on social media, they also reported that it should focus on information-provision and image-enhancement on the police’s home turf, avoiding confrontations in “external” social media arenas. In addition to its contribution to understanding perceptions of social media in public organizations by collecting data from “elite interviewees,” this paper also makes a theoretical contribution by introducing internal and external social media arenas as significant variables that assist in understanding public organization social media usage. Building on Mergel’s (2013) model of modes of operation of public organizations in social media (representation, engagement, and networking), this study demonstrates that representation prevails in internal social media arenas, while networking is more characteristic of external social media arenas.

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Introduction: Social media in public service

Social media is an increasingly important intermediary bridging public organizations and the general public (Sandoval-Almazan and Gil-Garcia, 2012; Charalabidis and Loukis, 2012). It enables public organizations to disseminate and receive information quickly and efficiently, interact more closely with individuals and publics, recruit people and resources, and potentially improve decision-making and problem-solving processes (Linders, 2012; Khan, et al., 2014; DePaula, et al., 2018). Still, public organizations are known for their rigid hierarchical structures and bureaucratic red tape, and less for their excellence in adaptation to new media and their use in service provisions. It is no wonder they are considered late and limited adopters of new media, and particularly of social media platforms (Serrat, 2017). Of all social media platforms, Facebook is the most popular worldwide and is the focus of this study (Statista, 2017).

Public organizations have hardly adapted in communicating with the public through their official Web sites,
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and, all of a sudden, social media usage for public communication has become all but imperative. Public organizations worry about establishing social media presence due to concerns of harsh critiques, bad publicity, and more (Mergel, 2013; Mossberger, *et al.*, 2013; Rodriguez Bolívar, 2018; Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). A broad literature has described how public organizations adapt to the Internet, long before extensive penetration of social media. Notably, Fountain (2001), who studied the emergence of a federal government portal, argued that policy-makers tend to avoid the adoption of new technologies that “brings stakeholders closer” to a given organization, due to cultural and societal barriers (Fountain, 2001). Similar conclusions were reached by Peixoto (2013), who studied parliamentary Web sites, and Arduini, *et al.* (2013) as well as McLoughlin and Cornford (2006), who studied local government Web sites. Models have also been developed for how public organizations negotiate social media. Bryer (2011) used Fontaine’s model of technology enactment to examine the adoption processes of new and social media. Notably, Mergel (2013) distinguishes three types of social media usage by organizations:

- **Representation**: Uses Push strategy on social media channels to inform the public, for example, about procedures and policies. This method is characterized by broadcasting of messages, while the government often does not respond to queries raised about this information. A secondary purpose is to improve an organizational image.

- **Engagement**: Uses Pull strategy for bilateral interaction between citizens and government. Governments pass on information to citizens, while giving them opportunities to respond. In contrast to the Push method, the organization, in addition to transmitting information, also uses social media as a source for extracting information from the public.

- **Networking**: Based on listening, where the public is the source of information, while the government collects the information. This method is sometimes used to access information about populations that government organizations find difficult to reach in other ways.

Although public organizations can improve their image through social media activities on their ‘home courts’, ‘internal’ arenas, typically there is extensive public discourse about them that takes place on ‘external’ social media groups and pages; that is, where these organizations have much less control.

In the case of using and implementing social media in Israeli public organizations, several studies have been conducted, focusing on social media in local municipalities (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2016, 2015) and social media usage in national ministries (Yavetz and Aharony, 2020). This is the first study to examine the strategies and usage of the police in the Israeli social media sphere.

Our case study for analyzing social media strategies of public organizations is the police. Recently, Black Lives Matter (BLM) emerged as an influential social movement advocating for justice for African-Americans mostly in the United States, who perceive themselves as subject to unfair racially-biased treatment by law enforcement agencies, highlighting cases of police brutality and even deadly violence toward this population. BLM has proven effective in documenting and sharing cases of police violence, leveraging social media in their social justice cause (Ince, *et al.*, 2017). Since the police, like any public organization, tend to closely monitor social media activities, they can promptly learn about conversations about them in ‘external’ social media arenas. However, the question to be asked is: Would it be wise to respond to accusations made against them on channels outside of their ‘home court’ advantage?

This study focuses on how high-ranking senior police officers perceive the ideal social media presence for police departments. In addition to its contribution to understanding perceptions of social media in public organizations, this paper also makes a theoretical contribution by introducing internal and external social media arenas as significant variables that shed light on perceptions and usage of public organizations concerning social media. Building on Mergel’s (2013) model that differentiates between three modes of operation in social media environments (representation, engagement, and networking), this study demonstrates that representation prevails in internal social media arenas, while networking is more characteristic of external social media arenas.
Police and community in Israel and elsewhere

The attitudes of senior Israeli police officers regarding how they should engage with the public (in social media or otherwise) cannot be viewed in isolation from more general trends in the policing world.

Over the past few decades the police in the Western world have, overall, moved away from the traditional, “professional” model of policing (in which the police see themselves as able to do their job on their own, without any assistance or involvement from the public), to a community-oriented model, improving the relationship between police and community requires the implementation of organizational changes within the various police departments, as well as declaring it as a strategic goal of the police (Weisburd and Braga, 2006; Skogan, 2006).

Studies demonstrate that the image of the police among residents is related to crime levels and the presence of policing within a given community. Exposure to violence and crime in a community harms the trust of residents in the police. Yet, improving the connection between the police and the community can strengthen and rebuild the trust and support of the community in the police (Weisburd and Braga, 2006; Ren, et al., 2005). Beshears, et al. (2019) demonstrated that in social media arenas as well, people preferred interactive communication with the police, and an ability to engage through social media with law enforcement agencies beyond top-down information transmission.

It has frequently been argued that while resembling many police agencies in the Western world in terms of its main functions and restraints, the Israel Police (משטרת ישראל) is often considered a more centralized, quasi-military agency (there are many reasons for this, including being a single, national rather than local agencies, and its obligations in terms of internal security). Thus, in many ways, the Israel Police have not embraced a community-engagement philosophy, and its mode of operation still resembles a “professional” policing model (Perliger, et al., 2009; Weisburd, et al., 2010; Jonathan-Zamir, et al., 2014). Despite the fact that the organization is centralized in terms of its management structure, the workforce consists of police officers who come from diverse backgrounds that relate to different population groups. As an organization that includes 30,000 police officers who come from diverse backgrounds and various training programs (Shahar and Hazzan, 2020), the Israeli Police still face difficulties and controversies that have developed from the intersection of the media, police, and public. One can state two salient examples from recent years. The first example deals with the way in which social media was used among young Israelis of Ethiopian descent during social protests and demonstrations against a number of high-profile cases of police violence against members of that group. In a recent study, it was evident that members of the group used Facebook mainly to create online groups to organize off-line protests against police violence and policies (Keynan, 2020). Another prominent example is the Facebook group, “The Whole Truth about the murder of Tair Rada and the Zadorov case”, The group protested against perceived institutional wrongs and miscarriage of justice, focusing on the Israeli case of Roman Zadorov, who was found guilty in the murder of Tair Rada (13) over a decade ago. This is the third-largest group on the Israeli Facebook, with more than 250,000 followers (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2020). The group became a focus of anti-establishment activities, targeting the failures and corruption of the establishment, especially the Police, in the context of the case for which it was established as well as other issues (Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2020).

Social media at the service of the police

The use of social media by the police, like other public organizations, can offer many advantages.
Information can be sent quickly to many people without mediation; for example, about missing persons. Information can also be efficiently received from people and organizations, including complaints against the police or individual police personnel, as well as information on crimes and suspects. Social media can assist in mobilizing and enabling public participation in planning processes. These uses can significantly improve the work of the police, especially regarding its contact with the public (Crump, 2011; Meijer and Thaens, 2013).

However, social media can also be a mixed blessing for the police, since social platforms attract criticism and even insult. For example, the New York Police Department (NYPD) asked users to upload images of police officers with civilians by using a dedicated hashtag, #myNYDP. Shortly after, it was flooded with pictures of police officers using excessive force against civilians. The case was widely quoted in the news media, and may have ultimately achieved its exact opposite goal — damaging the image of the NYPD (Jackson and Foucault Welles, 2015). Coping with such difficulties thus requires skilled communications abilities and extensive resources.

Presence on social media may be more significant for the police than for other public organizations. Police are at a close point of contact between citizens and law enforcement. However, this contact typically occurs under stressful conditions; for example, when stopping drivers for traffic violations, intervening in violent altercations, preventing criminal activity or even when citizens file complaints at local stations. Since people encounter the police at such unhappy occasions, their reactions to it may be more negative than to other service-based public organizations they encounter (Fishman, 2006). Furthermore, citizens can go to social media to express their criticism (Crump, 2011).

At the same time, social media allows police to interact with citizens in less negative contexts. Studies show that the relationships between the establishment and citizens through social media may have a positive trust-building effect (Tolbert and Mossberger, 2006). Therefore, if the police effectively engage in social media activity, their image and relationship with the public may benefit.

However, the challenges of the police in establishing and operating their social media platforms are greater compared to other public organizations. This is also because the police tend to be more hierarchical and authoritarian, with a culture of centralization of information and knowledge (Meijer and Thaens, 2013). The logic of social media, which is arguably related to peer sharing, interaction, and openness, is fundamentally different from what is often perceived as the organizational logic and culture of the police. Therefore, listening, learning, and implementing lessons based on public responses, and providing appropriate feedback to complaints originating from social media, may encounter larger organizational obstacles than in other public organizations (Meijer and Thaens, 2013; Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016). In addition, like other public organizations, the challenges posed by social media require personnel and other resources that inevitably have to come at the expense of other goals that the organization may be interested in promoting in a given community (Mergel, 2016).

Research on the adoption of social media by the police has shown that, like other public organizations, police organizations understand that they cannot ignore the new media landscape, and they must adopt social media in a way that can serve their strategies and goals (Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016).

Studies have demonstrated that the adoption of new media by police departments have been influenced by the size of a given organization, existing technological knowledge, and resources allocated for this purpose as well as the size of the population which the police serve (Anderson, et al., 2015).

There have been several key strategies for using social media by the police in different countries and cities around the world (Brainard and McNutt, 2010; Crump, 2011; Meijer and Thaens, 2013). A study that focused on a large police organization in North America was conducted by Brainard (2016), who examined the conduct of the District of Columbia’s police. Contrary to the police stating that the use of such media was primarily intended to promote dialogue with citizens, Brainard found that, in practice, the main activity was dissemination of information by the police to citizens. Studies by Hu, et al. (2018) in the United States,
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and by Dwyer (2020) in Kenya, found that the police have used social media especially for image-enhancing activities. Still, Meijer and Thaens (2013), who conducted a comparative study of the social media strategies of three large metropolitan police organizations in large urban areas in North America, found that each organization used different digital strategies.

Manager perceptions have played an important role in implementing new technologies and changing organizational culture. Managers with positive perceptions of technology and media tend to promote the adoption and use of online platforms (Zhang and Feeney, 2018; Lev-On and Steinfeld, 2020). Hence, directors, commanders, and heads of public organizations may have a far-reaching influence on implementing and shaping the character of the usage of technologies in their organization, particularly in reference to adopting and using social media. Therefore, we chose to study the perception of social media through interviews with senior decision-makers. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first study to examine this question through interviews with senior police decision-makers.

Research questions

1. How do senior police officers perceive social media? Is it a passing phenomenon or a permanent component of the current media ecology?

2. In their view, should police be present in this arena?

3. According to perceptions of senior officials, what should the goals of police activity on social media be?

4. Should the police be active on social media only on its ‘internal’ ‘home channels’, or should it respond in ‘external’ arenas that it does not control?

Methodology

To answer the research questions, semi-structured interviews were conducted with policemen from the rank of major general and above, who finished their service in the Israel Police from 2006 onwards. This study only deals with senior police officers, due to their comprehensive and in-depth perspectives on the organization’s needs, and on factors influencing police-citizen relationships. In addition, senior officials are experienced in making decisions relevant to shaping the use and conduct of police in social media. The officers were selected based on their year of retirement. Since Facebook (the main social platform in Israel) has only been open to the public since 2006, only officers who served in the police in that year and beyond dealt with the relations between the police, citizens, and Facebook as a key social media arena.

Focusing on this special population, a list of 42 retired commanders was received from an organization of retired police offices. The list was composed of retired police officers with the ranks of major general and inspector general [commissioner]. The list of officers was composed based on the understanding that familiarity and activity with social media will vary according to the type of activity of the unit. Thus, the interviewees’ last position in the Police was in units that reflect various aspects of police activity, i.e., they were commanders of various main operational and logistical units of the police. Note that the officers who were interviewed moved between different positions during their service, so it is reasonable to assume that their perspective is extensive beyond their last position.

Of the 42 commanders, 15 were recruited using a snowball sampling which helped us to establish a
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connection to new interviewees. Overall, our sample was of a total of 15 interviewees, included a retired chief commissioner (inspector general) and 14 other major generals. The interviewees fulfilled various positions throughout their careers in the police, from strategy, compliance, human resource and spokespersonship, which it all had different point of view and effect on social media work by the organization. The age and gender distribution of the interviewees were similar to those of the entire population. Interviews were conducted in person, in a location chosen by the interviewees. In only a few cases where there were technical difficulties or unwillingness of the interviewees to hold a frontal meeting, telephone interviews were conducted. The interviews were semi-structured, consisting of 15 questions and lasting between 40 minutes and two hours. Semi-structured interviews were used in order to present the phenomenon through the participants’ perceptions and their own words (Shkedi, 2003). The questions addressed the interviewees’ career in the police, personal usage and perceptions of the Internet and social media, familiarity with the presence of the police on the Internet and social media and engagement with them, actual and beneficial strategies of police social media usage, general advantages of social media usage for law enforcement agencies, distinctions between strategies and activist in “internal” vs. “external” social media arenas, and more.

The interviews were recorded and transcribed with participants’ consent. A thematic categorical division of these transcriptions was performed for the purpose of identifying, evaluating, and reporting prominent themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Findings

Social media is here to stay

Social media are viewed as valued resources by the interviewees, who recognized their information and communications significance. They understand their contemporary relevance to a large segment of the public, and understanding that they are ‘here to stay’. The interviewees were ambivalent about the use of social media, evaluating its advantages and disadvantages.

As noted by Interviewee I-1, a former Israel Police chief commissioner: “The police have set up its spokesperson unit ... and try to keep pace with the events that are taking place. They are still one step behind ... but they make significant efforts”.

Interviewee I-2 addressed the changing media landscape, and emphasized the immediate reaction which is required in this new media ecology: “The print press is passé, the television is almost pass, because they cannot keep up with the pace of events [online]. We must adapt to the social media era, to understand the threats but also the opportunities”.

Interviewee I-4 emphasized the ability of social media to influence the mainstream media agenda. He argued that online discourse is shaping traditional media channels and not the other way around: “When you look at the news broadcasts of the Israeli media today, you see that they are based largely on what is happening on social media”.

Significantly, most of the interviewees referred to the inclusive character and wide reach of Facebook, for better and worse. According to interviewee I-5: “Today, everyone can raise questions and express their opinion about everything and can react within minutes to events that happen worldwide. No doubt, this creates a significant pressure on decision-makers in democracies”.

As Interviewee I-7 put it, this state of affairs forces the police to operate in a much more transparent mode: “Today, nothing is hidden. If it does not get out today, then it will the next day or a few days later [...]. Your working assumption should be that everything will be out there and everything is transparent”.

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Interviewee I-2 described the dangers and threats arising from the constant need to react to events reported in ‘external arenas’, where the police are always ‘one step behind’: “As [a member of] an organization, I continuously face the need to react. I am always one step behind. Because you are in a hurry to react, you see that the ground is already burning, then you react inadequately”.

Another interesting aspect of the wide reach, inclusion, and transparency facilitated by social media is that the police no longer need the traditional intermediaries (such as journalists), and can instead communicate directly with an online public. The transition from face-to-face debriefing to the large and ‘faceless’ crowd of the Internet is challenging. As Interviewee I-3 noted: “There is a fundamental difference between being a station commander who can communicate with journalists and field reporters face-to-face, and this mass communication of social media”.

Although social media entails diverse expressions of opinions and voices, its consequences can be problematic. In the words of Interviewee I-6: “An individual person can start an entire commotion online [...] it can cause good things on the one hand, but on the other hand can bring new dangers”.

**Duty of presence**

According to most of the interviewees, social media is where police efforts to improve its image and create renewed public trust, improving contact between Police and civilians, should take place. As interviewee I-11 put it:

> “Anyone who wants to promote awareness regarding himself, his image, his abilities, his acquaintances, etc., cannot do it without social media, period. We have to be there, we have to learn it, we need to analyze it, we have to be partners with it, we have to bring them closer [the citizens] — we have to respond”.

Still, interviewees recognized that for the police to effectively use social media, trained experts are required — to some extent, digital ‘natives’. Relying on police spokespersons trained in a pre-social media communications era would amount to a flawed strategy: “Today’s policeman is not tomorrow’s policeman. Things are changing, and you have to adapt”.

**Improving image ‘at home’ while avoiding ‘external arenas’**

Many of the interviewees made it clear that social media should be an important and strategic goal for the organization, with more resources invested in planning and operation of organizational social media platforms. For instance, Interviewee I-6 described the police’s social media presence as an important information source for citizens: “The police is disseminating all kinds of messages on Facebook, and we have to do this systematically and correctly. Both extract information and disseminate information ... ”.

This kind of two-way communication and information stream requires investment and proper resources, as Interviewee I-6 noted: “We cannot afford a situation in which there is a social conversation on social media and the police are not involved; the organization has to invest in it. Investing means getting more people, teams, standards, and enacting new policies”.

Interviewee I-1 added that social media is a significant tool for building public trust: “Improving service to the citizenry is critical for our ability to generate trust, and we should definitely use the new media platform [for this purpose]”.

Even so, most respondents expressed reservations about bi-directional and dialogical behavior, and believed that social media should mainly be used with an emphasis on representation (Mergel, 2013) rather than conducting conversations with the public. They argue that brief and practical responses are sufficient,
without eliciting responses from the public or further addressing responses. This is especially true of social media arenas in reference to activities that refer to the police outside of their Facebook pages. To make the question concrete, we presented interviewees with the example of a Facebook group “The Whole Truth about the murder of Tair Rada and the Zadorov case”, The group protests against perceived institutional wrongs and miscarriage of justice, focusing on the Israeli case of Roman Zadorov, who was found guilty in the murder of Tair Rada (13) over a decade ago. A large majority of Israelis thinks he is innocent. Due to its size and influence, we chose this group as a case study of attitudes on social media towards the police to illustrate the positive and negative associations with which law enforcement must contend when operating outside its ‘home territory’.

Interviewee I-5 argued that it is desirable for the police to respond to public concerns on social media, but only briefly and only on its home territory:

“You cannot run after anyone who posts something in any Facebook group about you. Maybe in some exceptional cases an official police representative needs to intervene in the discussion and provide a link and tell everyone, ‘Guys, come on read the facts’”.

However, most of the interviewees did not see even such a minimal response as useful. For example, Interviewee I-9 did not see the need to engage in any discussion with the public about police matters:

“I would present the position of the police in a very solid and precise manner and let time do its work. I would not participate in the conversation itself ... This discourse will exhaust itself sooner or later, and the fact that we react and participate in this discourse, that is the fuel for the fire”.

Helplessness

According to the interviewees, social media contributes to the viral spread of negative coverage of the police. Police departments are limited in their ability to manage, much less repair, their image due to lack of budget and, to some degree, expertise. According to Interviewee I-1: “The police produce a new event every minute ... The traditional media does not report the positive activities on a daily basis, it reports the mishaps”.

Other senior officers expressed frustration concerning both traditional and online social media. They claimed that the media passes over police achievements, focusing exclusively on negative coverage. Interviewee I-3 emphasized his disappointment in lack of positive police coverage, which is worse on social media than on traditional channels:

“When you do a good job and you are still slandered, it leaves a very bad taste. For example, I once came across a homeless person. He was hungry and I took him in the police car and bought him falafel. Situations like this happen daily, and no journalist will ever report these cases. Which cases are published in the media? Mistakes that get us ‘fried’, and it’s only worse on social media”.

According to the interviewees, the fast pace required for providing effective responses to waves of social defamation and condemnation, does not align with the slow pace required for conducting investigations. The time-consuming character of investigations is not compatible with the fast pace of online information exchange culture. According to Interviewee I-8:
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“The general atmosphere is such that you only hear one side all the time, the organization’s side does not exist. Why? Because it is busy collecting evidence, conducting trials and prosecuting properly, and we do not speak with the media all the time. This is a problematic reality which leads to the strengthening of anti-establishment discourse, which is reflected on Facebook and forums”.

Interviewee I-7, who was personally hurt by online shaming, noted that such online negative coverage does not necessarily refer to the entire organization, but sometimes has a ‘personal face’ (i.e., it targets individual officers):

“You have no control when something goes viral. By the time you realize it, it has already gotten to so many people ... It’s terrible, as someone who has experienced it personally. As a commander, I do not have the ability to respond properly, the system does not provide me with tools that I can use to come and monitor the activity on Facebook or Twitter [as this should be the first step to dealing with it].”

The general feeling of the interviewees is that the police do not have enough tools to cope with social media. In the words of Interviewee I-1: “The police put a sailboat in the ocean and it should put a destroyer”. That is, the flood of social media assaults against the police demand a robust and durable response mechanism, with which the police are currently not equipped.

Discussion

As social media becomes essential for information dissemination, recruitment, and networking, it is increasingly utilized by various organizations that adapt their communication strategies accordingly, either in their “internal online arenas” or in “external arenas”. In many cases, organizations find it difficult to negotiate the new media environment and strike the appropriate balance between existing media strategies and new goals and modes of operation dictated by the logic of online social media.

A number of themes emerged from the findings of the current study. The first demonstrates the interviewees perceived the significant role of social media in the current communications and messaging landscape. They understand that the police should learn to excel in the social media domain for its own benefit, agreeing that it should be fully integrated into organizational operation. These findings are not surprising given that the imperative for police to adapt to new media was noted in earlier studies (Meijer and Torenvlied, 2016). However, increasing the presence of the police on social media increases the risk of damage to their image due to online criticisms and attacks (Israel Ministry of Public Security, 2012).

The second theme concerns the perception that the police has a ‘duty of presence’ on social media. However, the third theme qualifies this imperative as most of the interviewees thought that the police should settle for formal responses in their own social media arenas. This finding is consistent with Mergel’s (2013) representation strategy, i.e. they should use social media to send information to citizens, without creating an outlet for in-depth dialogues. While social media was perceived as an important information providing tool for citizens, interviewees did not support its use as a conversational tool (Mergel, 2013).

Mergel (2013) presented two other modes for public organizations to negotiate social media use: (1) engagement based on bilateral dialogue between public organizations and citizen; and, (2) networking in
which the organization collects online information, without posting or responding (Mergel, 2013). While *representation* refers to senior officer preferences in social media usage on their home turfs, *networking* refers to their preferences in negotiating ‘external’ social media arenas. That is, they should limit their social media responses to relevant issues in which there is no ‘added fuel to the fire’ and which offer no clear benefits, image-wise or other, to the police.

The fourth and last theme raised by the interviewees was a sense of helplessness. Social media enables users to instantly share anything they want with minimal fact-checking and censorship. On the other hand, policemen are subject to rules and procedures, and are thus constrained in how they can properly address institutional, and even personal, criticism. While social media tends to exacerbate a phenomenon which has always existed, it can generate a massive ‘wave’ of biased information that some interviewees lament is overwhelming for the police and its current capabilities.

**Conclusions**

This study focused on how senior police officers perceive the police presence on social media and which social media best practices they think would most effectively advance their role and strategies in the contemporary media ecology. Social media is characterized by *wide reach* and *inclusion and transparency*, long understood as a double-edged sword for public organizations. On one hand, sending and receiving information, recruiting resources and people, and engage with the public is now faster and more efficient. On the other hand, users have direct, and sometimes viral, means to aggressively criticize public organizations on their ‘home turf’ or in ‘external arenas’ — without a corresponding increase in the organization’s ability to respond.

In order to examine the ways in which the Israeli police operated on social media, semi-structured interviews were conducted with senior officers who completed their service with the rank of major general or higher during the past decade. Our findings show that the interviewees recognize online social media as a centerpiece of the contemporary media landscape, with significant possibilities to both disseminate and receive information, as well as impact the image of the police. At the same time, there is clear concern about the possible drawbacks of entering into long conversations with citizens, especially in ‘external’ social media arenas. Commanders thus tend to prefer a minimal response approach in such cases. Despite these concerns and lack of resources that may sometimes lead to a sense of futility, it is clear that the police continue to try and adapt to social media and develop best practices for this environment.

In addition to its contribution to understanding perceptions of social media in public organizations, this research also makes a theoretical contribution by introducing *internal* and *external* social media arenas as significant variables. Building on Mergel’s (2013) model that differentiates three modes of social media operation (representation, engagement, and networking), this study demonstrates that representation prevails in *internal* social media arenas, while networking is more characteristic of *external* social media arenas.

This research is unique both in terms of research population and research method that allows for understanding police perceptions of social media and its desired modes of operation in ‘internal’ and ‘external’ social media arenas. This research is not without its limitations. First, our work focuses on the perceptions of senior high-ranking police officers. More work should cover the perceptions of current commanding officers in the organization. Also, additional studies need to examine the perceptions of lower-ranking officers, specificity of those who patrol and protect the population on the field.

Future studies can examine the perceptions of senior decision-makers in other public organizations regarding online social media, and also investigate the ‘citizenry side’: How do citizen perceive police social media activity and how does exposure to it influences opinions and attitudes towards the police?
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