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**“Had to pause the TV to read all the #VicPDLive-tweets”¹:
A Critical Analysis of Police Live Tweet-Alongs**

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Abstract

Since the middle to late 2000s, there has been a steady rise in the use of social media platforms by police departments across Canada and internationally. Studies conducted on policing and social media conceptualize police use of social media platforms in three ways: instrumental (i.e., used as tools); representational (i.e., used to strengthen image work); and technosocial (i.e., used to mediate the perception of, relationship to, and engagement with crime and justice). In proposing a case study of live-tweeting, using the live-tweeting hashtag of the Victoria Police Department (#VicPDLive), we are hoping to show that while image work remains a core motive for using social media platforms, police departments are also experimenting with new high-engagement practices that require closer analysis. We begin the paper by briefly summarizing the literature on policing and social media, and providing an overview of research specific to Twitter. Then, we turn to the case study and introduce three vignettes problematizing live-tweeting of what we call “health work,” “crime work,” and “justice work.” Finally, we combine our disciplinary perspectives to analyze the broader implications of live-tweeting and identify practical concerns related to privacy, transparency, and accountability.

Keywords: case study, police, policing, social media, Twitter

Since the middle to late 2000s, there has been a steady rise in the use of social media platforms by police departments across Canada and internationally (O’Connor & Zaidi, 2021). The work conducted by

¹ Anonymous quote taken from a news story written by Coles (2018) for Saanich News. The original quote included the Twitter handle of the Victoria Police Department (VicPD). For clarity, the Twitter handle was replaced by VicPD’s live-tweeting hashtag, which is what the quote was referring to in the news story.

police departments on social media is not new, but how they engage in this work is. As former Toronto Police Deputy Chief Peter Sloy explains, social media enables police departments “to do old business in newer ways” (Schneider, 2016a, p. 13). Social media platforms used by police departments include Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Reddit, Snapchat, Substack,² and TikTok. To populate their preferred social media platforms with tailored content, it is now common practice for police departments to hire law enforcement officers and sometimes civilians as social media officers (O’Connor & Zaidi, 2021; Schneider, 2016b; Walsh & O’Connor, 2018). Some departments have their own social media teams tasked with generating high-engagement content (Wood, 2020; Wood & McGovern, 2021). Hiring “image workers” (Wood, 2020, p. 53) or police projecting an inaccurate but favourable image of police work to the public (Manning, 2006) is not a new practice in policing (e.g., Walsh & O’Connor, 2018). What is new, however, is how image work is conducted on social media and, more specifically, how “it is shaped by the logic, format and affordances of the medium it occurs through” (Wood, 2020, p. 53).

Police departments’ use of social media platforms, and in particular Twitter, has been the object of several studies in Canada and internationally, many of which are cited and summarized in this paper. Across these studies, three ways of conceptualizing social media platforms have emerged. Social media platforms can be seen as instrumental, serving as tools in police work (e.g., missing persons investigations, mass surveillance). As noted above, they can also be viewed as representational and studied for their role in supporting image management. Finally, they can be understood as powerful technologies that mediate the perception of, relationship to, and engagement with crime and justice (for more on this, see Powell et al., 2018). In proposing a case study of live-tweeting, we are hoping to show that while image work remains a core motive for using social media platforms, police departments are also experimenting with new “technosocial practices” (Powell et al., 2018, p. 22) that require closer analysis. This is consistent with recent work by Wood (2020), which

² For a description and analysis of “newslettering” on Substack, see “Cops on Substack: How Police Are Using PR to Combat Criticism” (Rutgers, 2022).

suggests that emerging social media practices are explicitly designed to generate and “weaponize” (p. 52) affective responses.

This paper analyzes #VicPDLive, the live-tweeting hashtag of the Victoria Police Department (VicPD). To our knowledge, live-tweeting in the context of policing has not yet been studied nor critically analyzed despite giving rise to new issues and implications. We posit that live-tweeting generates a new form of what Powell and colleagues (2018) describe as “digital spectatorship” (p. 8) and “digital engagement” (p. 10). In their book on digital criminology, they call on scholars to expand “understandings and acknowledgements of the intersections between technologies and the social” (p. 4) by turning to the digital — thus recognizing that our everyday lives, perceptions, and experiences are mediated through technology (including social media platforms) (Powell et al., 2018). Our paper is informed by their analysis of live-tweeting as a technosocial practice used by citizens to report and respond to crime events in real time (Powell et al., 2018). However, it is also distinctively different because live-tweeting by police departments is not a response to crime events unfolding but rather a deliberate and organized production of tweets that, once consumed, create an immediate and immersive experience designed to generate a desired affective response and active engagement (Powell et al., 2018).

To set the stage for our paper, it is important to note that live-tweeting cannot be dissociated from modern policing and more specifically, the need for police departments to feed information to the public as part of bolstering their image and legitimacy, making their work visible, and seeming transparent and effective (Ericson, 1982; Manning 1995; O’Connor & Zaidi, 2021). As such, any effort to understand live-tweeting in this context cannot be separated from the legitimacy crisis currently faced by police departments amid police violence and abuses, systemic racism, funding of police as frontline responders to mental health, housing, and substance use issues as opposed to health, social, and community services, and calls to end school liaison programs (Cummins, 2022; Madan, 2016). It is also important to recognize that live-tweeting answers a demand for a digital police presence by ‘concerned citizens’ (i.e., citizens who are not the object of policing) who are connected to their technological de-

vices and expect these devices to enhance access to crime and justice news as well as access to police work in real time. In turn, these devices and the social media platforms they host shape how ‘concerned citizens’ understand crime and justice in their community, assess their own safety risks, and perceive the work of (and need for) police officers. Finally, it is helpful to understand live-tweeting as a new way of doing old business — the business of turning policing into entertainment (akin to the TV reality show *Cops*) and producing ideological, symbolic, affective content for audiences to consume, internalize, and act upon (Doyle, 1998).

The paper begins by briefly summarizing the literature on policing and social media. We provide an overview of research specific to Twitter and detail basic Twitter features that are helpful in understanding how live-tweeting works. Then, we turn to the case study and introduce three vignettes that set the stage for our analysis. Finally, we combine our disciplinary perspectives to analyze the live-tweeting of “health work,” “crime work,” and “justice work.” We believe this paper addresses an important gap in research on policing and social media and identifies potential avenues for interdisciplinary scholarship in digital criminology. Our hope is that the proposed case study contributes to documenting and analyzing emerging social media practices used by police departments and shows the added value of using qualitative approaches to study social media practices. Moreover, we hope that our interdisciplinary work will encourage other scholars to collaborate in furthering inquiry into technologically mediated policing within a society that can no longer be conceived as separate from the digital (Powell et al., 2018). What happens on social media platforms is the *social* and becomes part of the *social* (Powell et al., 2018). For this reason, it is imperative to pay close attention to the role of social platforms and the (technosocial) practices made possible by and mediated through these platforms in the study of crime, criminality, justice, risk, and policing.

Policing and Social Media

Scholarship on the relationship between the police and traditional media is an important starting point to understand the appeal of using social media platforms. Scholars have described this relationship as symbiotic because police departments hold information that is valua-

ble to the media and police departments need media to communicate with the public (Lee & McGovern, 2014; Schneider, 2016a). However, this relationship is not simply about the exchange of information for the purpose of communication (Lee & McGovern, 2014). For police departments, the media offers powerful discursive tools to convey the importance and effectiveness of police work while also preserving social order and positioning policing as an essential service for all things related to social disorder (Lee & McGovern, 2014; Schneider, 2016a).

As Lee and McGovern (2014) explain, three intersecting logics have traditionally informed how and why police departments engage with media: 1) risks and responsabilization; 2) trust and legitimacy; and 3) image management. As such, engagement with media has little to do with fighting crime (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997; Manning, 1992) and more to do with representational strategies (Schneider, 2016b). Media is useful to police departments because they offer a powerful conduit for constructing and communicating risk while also fostering a heightened sense of individual responsibility (e.g., reporting suspicious activity) and responsible (active) collective participation (e.g., prioritizing funding for public safety) (Lee & McGovern, 2014). This logic intersects with another one: image management (image work). By deciding what, how, and when to share information with the media, police departments can control the narrative about their work. For example, it is common practice for news releases to be sent directly to newsrooms and then used in news stories and/or published/cited word-for-word (Lee & McGovern, 2014; Schneider, 2016a). Finally, the logic of trust and legitimacy comes into play. Through media representations, public trust, satisfaction, and perception of accountability, transparency and efficiency can be maintained and, most importantly, managed in the face of legitimacy crises (Lee & McGovern, 2014; Mawby, 2012).

Literature on the relationship between the police and social media is emerging, but many gaps remain. Based on existing research and scholarship, we know that social media platforms allow police departments to do media work in new ways — using the same logics described above in a faster, more impactful and engaging, and less formal way (Schneider, 2016a). These platforms also allow police

departments to bypass traditional media to “encourage and facilitate communication, interaction, and the creation and circulation of content within virtual communities” (Walsh & O’Connor, 2018, p. 2). Moreover, they allow for greater diversification and engagement because each platform hosts its own virtual community and includes features that can be leveraged for increased visibility and reach (Walsh & O’Connor, 2018). As Schneider (2016a) points out, it is important to investigate how and to what extent social media platforms are changing “institutional police public practices” (p. 2). Research on this topic is limited in Canada. However, studies conducted in recent years (which we summarize next) suggest that social media platforms are indeed changing these practices.

In a comparative case study of police departments in the United States (Boston and Washington, DC) and Canada (Toronto), Meijer and Thaens (2013) noted that all departments shared the common goal of using social media platforms to “increase the effectiveness and legitimacy of their own organization” (p. 348). However, they identified differences in social media strategies, which translated into different technological choices (i.e., which platform to use), organizational tasks, objectives, and organizational arrangements (Meijer & Thaens, 2013). The ‘push strategy’ was used by the Boston Police Department by first centralizing information that reflected positively on their image in *BPD News* and then ‘pushing it out’ directly to the public via social media platforms (Meijer & Thaens, 2013). The ‘push and pull strategy’ was used by Washington’s Metropolitan Police Department to share and gather information about police investigations with the goal of “engaging citizens as eyes and ears of the police” (Meijer & Thaens, 2013, p. 348). In contrast, the Toronto Police Service opted for a decentralized ‘networking strategy’ by using social media platforms separately and encouraging officers to do so as well in order to build rapport with citizens (Meijer & Thaens, 2013).

As pointed out by Meijer & Thaens (2013), not all police departments adopt the same social media strategies and this is reflected in their choice of social media platforms. Each platform comes with a unique logic, format, rules (formal or informal) and practices, and technological features including different design, algorithmic, and engagement

features. The popularity of Twitter among police departments has been noted by several scholars (for example, see Ferguson & Soave, 2021; Kudla & Parnaby, 2018; Meijer & Thaens, 2013; O'Connor, 2017; Schneider, 2016ab, 2021; Thomas et al., 2022; Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). Schneider (2016b) points out three reasons why that is. First, Twitter aligns with the need for police to communicate with the public and engage citizens in various ways, ranging from passive consumption to active participation (Schneider, 2016a, 2016b). However, it is important to specify that features allowing for “two-way” communication (e.g., replies) is not why police departments turn to Twitter (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018; Schneider, 2016b). We will return to this point in the next paragraph. Second, it meets a public demand for and expectation of an online (or digital, as noted above) police presence (Schneider, 2016b). Third, its design and functionalities are familiar to police departments because they are modelled after dispatching technologies (Schneider, 2016b). In his paper on police use of Twitter in Canada, Schneider (2016b) quotes the co-founder of Twitter explaining the influence of dispatching on the creation and design of the platform:

The idea came from my colleague [Twitter co-founder and CEO] Jack Dorsey, who had long been fascinated with the idea of dispatch. He used to write software for taxicabs and ambulances ... he wondered if the simple concept of “status” that is so prevalent in dispatch could be applied in a social way. (p. 132)

In the Canadian context, there is a body of research looking specifically at policing and Twitter (Ferguson & Soave, 2021; Kudla & Parnaby, 2018; O'Connor, 2017; Schneider, 2016ab). We turn briefly to this research before concluding with an overview of Twitter, tweeting, and live-tweeting.

The most comprehensive Canadian study of policing and Twitter was conducted by O'Connor (2017) and included 27 police departments. This study revealed two categories of tweets: informational tweets (e.g., information about crime/investigation, police work, traffic, and community events) and interactive tweets (e.g., asking the public to attend an event, answering a call for something, and submitting questions or information). Furthermore, it found that police departments used Twitter for “a combination of image management and commu-

nity building” (O’Connor, 2017, p. 908). Schneider (2016b) came to similar conclusions when he analyzed more than 100,000 tweets on the (decentralized) Toronto Police Service (TPS) accounts. He noted that “police professionalism” (e.g., appearance of political neutrality, abstaining from commenting) and “community policing” (e.g., humanizing police officers, sharing stories) were the most common representational strategies used by TPS-related accounts. Interestingly, in their analysis of tweets about and from TPS, Kudla and Parnaby (2018) found that police–citizen interactions were limited and more likely to take place if tweets offered praise or information on community events. As such, they did not see evidence of increased dialogue and confirmed that image management (image work) remained the main focus (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018).

Understanding how Twitter works is necessary to understand how and why police departments use Twitter — and why live-tweeting is different and merits closer analysis. Launched in 2006, Twitter allows users to micro-blog by posting updates, sharing real-time information and opinions, and relaying or responding to other posts in the form of a tweet (a post of 140 characters or less before 2017 and 280 characters or less since) (Murthy, 2018; Weller et al., 2014). It is a “platform for everyday and extraordinary, personal, and public communication” that generates colossal amounts of content and allows for this content to be analyzed by outside parties, including researchers (Weller et al., 2014, p.xxxvii). It also fosters decentralized networking, connecting citizens with public figures and public accounts in ways that are not possible with other social media platforms (Murthy, 2018). Twitter includes three layers of communication (Bruns & Moe, 2014). The “default layer,” according to Bruns and Moe (2014, p. 16), is the *meso layer* and is made up of follower–followee networks (i.e., tweets flow from accounts and their followers). At the *macro layer*, hashtagged spaces are created and followed (Bruns & Moe, 2014). Placing the symbol # before a word, name, or statement automatically links users (and their posts) and acts as a powerful discursive and political tool (for example, see Lamont Hill, 2018). The *micro layer* is where reply conversations take place using the @ symbol (Bruns & Moe, 2014).

Live-tweeting engages all three layers of communication described by Bruns and Moe (2014), but it relies heavily on the hashtag function to group individual tweets. Without this function, the individual tweets would lose their context (i.e., why the tweets are being posted now and their relevance), their effectiveness at communicating police work in real time (i.e., what each single tweet is describing and how they come together), and their capacity to engage users by signalling that there is a hashtagged space opened up and tweets to be followed (i.e., viewed, shared, replied to). As we explain next, #VicPDLive offers an interesting case study of live-tweeting and expands beyond Twitter research conducted to date, which has predominantly focused on meso and micro layers of police activities on Twitter.

Case Study Methodology

Comparative research conducted in North America suggests that while police departments have common objectives and use common strategies, they engage with social media in ways that reflect organizational culture, strategic priorities, and branding (Meijer & Thaens, 2013; O'Connor, 2017, Walby & Wilkinson, 2021). For this reason, it is helpful to conceptualize each police department as a unique case, “a bounded system” that contains a unique set of people, practices, discourses, and features (Stake, 1995, 2005). Case study research starts from a simple yet complex question: “What can be learned from the single case?” (Stake, 2005, p. 443). For example, the Toronto Police Service (TPS) has been a helpful case study to understand how police departments use Twitter (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018; Schneider, 2016b). It is the largest police department in Canada and it was the first police department to use Twitter. In less than a decade, TPS’ social media presence grew to more than 100 social media accounts, and its social media strategy has served as a blueprint for other police departments joining social media (Schneider, 2016a). TPS and its early adoption of and use of Twitter is what case study researchers call an instrumental case study (Stake, 2005) — a bounded system that can help us understand how and why police departments use Twitter. In other words, instrumental case studies are useful because we can learn from them and achieve a deeper level of understanding about a broader phenomenon — such as the role of social media, and digital technologies more broadly, in shaping policing and

public engagement with police departments and the content they produce.

In this paper, we draw from the VicPD Twitter account to propose an instrumental case study of live-tweeting, a practice that is not new to the Twittersphere but one that can facilitate our understanding of policing on Twitter as well as the implications of evolving tweeting practices. As an early adopter and active user of live-tweeting, VicPD represents a useful case study to analyze what Wood (2020, p. 53) describes as the “transcoding” of image work into social media strategies that increase engagement. It also offers an important opportunity to critically analyze how live-tweeting (as a technosocial practice) allows for new forms of consumption and engagement. To situate the case, we drew from a range of data sources to including online documents and data, media sources, policy documents, reports, and so forth. We also conducted a search of tweets generated under hashtag #VicPDLive and archived tweets that were originally posted under this hashtag and later deleted by VicPD for reasons we explain below (see Vignette 1).

Our search was not intended to collect all tweets nor conduct a systematic analysis of the tweets. Tweets that could be instrumental in understanding live-tweeting and its implications were selected and grouped into three vignettes that we describe next. This approach is consistent with qualitative approaches to social media research (Marwick, 2013) in that it prioritizes a close reading of certain tweets that could generate new insights into the phenomenon rather than work with the entire data set of all tweets posted under this hashtag. Limitations to this approach include the inability to identify patterns at the level of the data set and generalize based on quantifiable findings. However, as noted by Marwick (2013, p. 118–119), “While the ‘big data’ approach [to Twitter-based research] has advantages, it also has limitations. Identifying large-scale patterns can be useful, but it can also overlook *how* people do things with Twitter, *why* they do them, and *how* they understand them” (emphasis in original). Opting for a close reading allowed us to keep the following questions at the forefront: What is the purpose of live-tweeting? How is it different from regular tweeting? What is showcased and in what context?

What discursive strategies (e.g., words, pictures, videos, additional hashtags) are used and to what end?

The Case: #VicPDLive

Our case study of live-tweeting starts with the Twitter account of the VicPD, and more specifically the live-tweets generated under their hashtag #VicPDLive. As mentioned above, we selected this case because VicPD is an early adopter of live-tweeting and uses this practice enough to produce a useful set of tweets to work from. VicPD is also an active user of social media platforms and digital technologies. It uses four social media platforms, namely Facebook (> 20,000 followers), Twitter (~ 70,000 followers), YouTube (~ 1,500 followers), and Instagram (~ 10,000 followers). It also recently released VicPD Connect, an app that provides notifications, options to report a crime or submit a tip, news and updates on VicPD programs and positions, and direct access to VicPD social media platforms. This is how VicPD describes the app on their website:

Fight Crime from your Pocket with the VicPD Connect

Want to be notified when a child goes missing or there's an ongoing public safety incident in your Victoria or Esquimalt neighbourhood?

Need to report a crime where the suspect is unknown and the loss is less than \$5000?

Want to stay connected with all VicPD's social media notifications in your hand?

The VicPD app connects all VicPD channels into one single, mobile friendly, ready application. (Victoria Police Department, 2020a).

The VicPD website also hosts a Community Dashboard, which provides up-to-date and interactive information on community safety report cards, community surveys, crime maps, workload (e.g., case-load per officer, response times), and other initiatives such as the VicPD Block Watch program. Launched in 2020 as part of a strategic plan called "A Safer Community Together," it describes the Community Dashboard as follows:

an integral component of the VicPD Strategic Plan is that it shares data and other information about our work as the police service for the communities of Victoria and Esquimalt. Through this proactive and interactive sharing of information, it is hoped that citizens can learn more about VicPD and how we currently deliver policing services, while perhaps starting conversations about additional opportunities and challenges that deserve greater attention (Victoria Police Department, 2020c).

VicPD also runs a Block Watch program that is connected to VicPD Connect (Victoria Police Department, 2021). It currently includes 182 Block Watch groups across 14 neighborhoods. Each Block Watch group includes a Captain and a group of participants made up of people in the neighbourhood. Block Watch signs are displayed in participating neighbourhoods. Block Watch groups work with the VicPD Block Watch Coordinator and are provided with “guidance, information, advice, crime prevention tips and support” (Victoria Police Department, 2021). This complex community-engagement network and communication infrastructure are important to understand because they provide a context for live-tweeting.

To further contextualize VicPD’s community engagement and communication practices, it is important to note that VicPD is funded to police the city of Victoria (population size: 91,867) and the township of Esquimalt (population size: 17,533). The other municipalities that make up the Greater Victoria region, known as the Capital Regional District (CRD), are either policed by their own municipal force or the RCMP. In 2018, the City of Victoria and the Township of Esquimalt both spent a little over 37% of their annual budget on policing, ranking first and third among municipalities spending the highest percentage of their annual budget on policing in British Columbia (Cardoso & Hayes, 2020; McElroy, 2020). VicPD’s budget has been rising every year, totalling \$69.5 million in 2023 — up 6 million from 2022 (Basu, 2023) and 17.5 million from 2017 (Derosa, 2017). VicPD’s budget approvals have been contentious over the years and attempts by city councils in Victoria and Esquimalt to refuse or reduce requested budget increases have been overturned by the provincial government (e.g., Buffam, 2019). In addition to budget-related concerns, other concerns have been raised about VicPD in recent years regard-

ing workplace culture, racial discrimination, use of excessive force, and lack of transparency and accountability (e.g., Marlan, 2022; 2023; Basu, 2022; Craig, 2020; CTV News Vancouver Island Staff, 2020; Schachter, 2023). The influence of VicPD on local news outlets owned by Black Press was also called into question by *Canadaland* (Canada Land, 2021) after a story about the negative experiences of young Indigenous land defenders who were arrested at a peaceful action in solidarity with Wet’suwet’en land defenders got taken down, edited (e.g., words changed and content removed), and reposted with a new video featuring a statement from VicPD’s chief countering the initial account (Coles, 2018; Grossman, 2019; Victoria Times-Colonist Staff, 2016).

Of all its social media platforms, Twitter is where VicPD has garnered the most followers (~70,000 followers). Assuming these followers reside in the city of Victoria or the township of Esquimalt, this would represent 64% of the population policed by VicPD. In addition to regular tweets, VicPD has adopted the practice of live-tweeting under #VicPDLive, the hashtag used to group tweets under the same thread and signal to followers that consecutive live tweets will be posted during a particular shift or intervention. In essence, #VicPDLive replaces the old ‘ride-along’ with a new virtual ‘tweet-along’ experience where police calls or actions are captured in 280-character tweets and then connected together using the hashtag #VicPDLive. VicPD has been using this tweeting practice regularly for a few years now. On busy shifts, they will post a first #VicPDLive tweet inviting their followers to join their officers for a shift as they answer calls or carry out a special operation (e.g., Coles, 2018; Grossman, 2019; Victoria Times-Colonist Staff, 2016). These ‘tweet-alongs’ generate high engagement from VicPD followers and media coverage, thus amplifying the reach of each tweet (Victoria Police Department, 2022a). This is important to keep in mind as we present our three vignettes. As mentioned, these vignettes were selected because they help us to understand live-tweeting and allow us to analyze its implications.

Vignette 1: Live-Tweeting “Health Work”

On February 22, 2019, #VicPDLive was underway when police officers responded to a mental health call at a social support agency. The tweet mentioned the gender of the person experiencing a mental health crisis. It included details related to a previous mental health crisis for which this person had been brought to the hospital, held briefly, and then released. When VicPD posted this tweet, the person became identifiable to several healthcare and service providers in the city who immediately reported it on Twitter. VicPD later deleted it.

Vignette 2: Live-Tweeting “Crime Work”

On May 27, 2022, officers from the Youth Violence and Vandalism Interdiction and Engagement Response Team shared a video of a group of youth running away as police approached along with a #VicPDLive tweet that read, “Here’s what it looks like as we approach a group of youths who are drinking.” This tweet was part of a series of operations live-tweeted by VicPD. In their press release, VicPD announced that “it will once again be conducting a VicPD Live Tweetalong on [the] VicPDCanada Twitter account, starting at 6 p.m. tonight as part of a high-profile deterrence to violence and vandalism” (Victoria Police Department, 2022a).

Vignette 3: Live-Tweeting “Justice Work”

On June 4, 2020, VicPD announced they would be live-tweeting a special operation with the following tweet: “VicPD’s Strike Force team continues to focus on property crime. This morning we’ll again go behind the scenes for a tweet-a-long as they conduct another search warrant targeting property offenders. #VicPDLive #whosnext #yyj” (Victoria Police Department, 2020b). Subsequent tweets under #VicPDLive detailed a fencing operation bust, resulting in the arrest of two people and seizure of stolen property (Victoria Police Department, 2020b).

Live-Tweeting “Health Work”

In British Columbia, and across the country, police officers have become the first responders of the mental health system (CMHA, 2018). Three major factors have contributed to this phenomenon: 1) major gaps in services resulting in a broadening of the scope of policing; 2)

integration of police officers on healthcare teams; and 3) increased reliance on the *Mental Health Act* and crisis interventions (Adelman, 2003). To put this into context, the most common calls received by VicPD officers are social order calls and assist calls (Victoria Police Department, 2022b). Thus, mental health-related calls represent a significant portion of day-to-day policing work. In addition to this, VicPD officers are involved in four mental health initiatives: mobile crisis response team; assertive community treatment team; crisis negotiation team; and PTSD-specific outreach for veterans. As mentioned in the tweet, VicPD officers are also responsible for apprehending people under the *Mental Health Act*. Broadening the scope of policing to include “health work” means that police officers collect and use personal health information (PHI). However, unlike regulated healthcare providers, police officers do not have the same level of regulatory oversight when it comes to social media usage and disclosure of PHI — in turn, this can increase the risk of unauthorized disclosure.

Live-tweeting during a shift inevitably means that at some point, police officers will tweet about mental health calls. This practice raises several concerns related to how people who experience mental health crises are represented and perceived, how mental health is framed through the lens of dangerousness and criminality, and how escalating interventions come to be justified by putting forth a certain narrative about perceived risks and police actions. There are also privacy concerns³ that merit further considerations, starting with the risk of not recognizing that information tweeted constitutes PHI. Under the British Columbia *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA), PHI falls under personal information and includes information about a person’s health (mental or physical) and healthcare (OIPC, 2015). The tweet described in Vignette 1 included four types of PHI: 1) information about the type of housing; 2) information about the nature of the health situation; 3) information about the care previously received by the person and when that care took place; and 4) information about the intervention required (i.e., apprehension under the *Mental Health Act*). To meet the test under FIPPA, this in-

³ Privacy concerns related to the privacy features of the social media platform itself and the laws that apply to its activities (e.g., geographical location where Twitter is hosted) should also be accounted for here.

formation must be “reasonably capable of identifying a particular individual either alone or when combined with information from other available sources” (BCIPC, 2012, para 82). Furthermore, that information “need not identify the individual to everyone who receives it; it is sufficient in a case such as this if the information reasonably permits identification of the individual to those seeking to collect, use or disclose it” (BCIPC, 2012, para 82).

The PHI included in the Vignette 1 tweet meets this test because it is reasonably capable of identifying the person (indeed, it did). It also combines multiple types of PHI to create what is known as the ‘mosaic effect’. The mosaic effect is widely recognized in privacy law. According to BC’s Information and Privacy Commissioner (IPC), this effect results from a situation “where seemingly innocuous information is linked with other (already available) information, thus yielding information that is not innocuous and, in the access to information context, is excepted from disclosure under [FIPPA]” (BCIPC, 2001, para 40). The IPC adds that the mosaic effect applies when “disclosure of one piece of the puzzle may disclose everything” (para 44). If we look at the Vignette 1 tweet as a puzzle, it is fair to say that each piece of information separately does not reveal much about the person. However, when all the pieces come together, they “disclose everything” by providing clues about who the person is, where they live, what health issue they suffer from and its severity, and what care they received before the call and when.

In some situations, FIPPA may authorize the disclosure of PHI. However, none of the conditions outlined in section 33 (1) authorize the public disclosure of the information outlined above, including conditions specific to law enforcement (e.g., protection of public safety). Here, it is important to go back to the purpose of the disclosure in the context of live-tweeting. VicPD officers use live-tweeting to “give the public a sneak peek into their jobs” (Coles, 2018). As such, it is a communication and public relations tool. VicPD officers do not need to post on Twitter about their work, nor is it something that people who call 911 for a mental health crisis consent to. Rarely is tweeting a tool for police work; when it is, privacy is paramount. To illustrate this, a good comparative social media practice is the disclosure of PHI on social media in missing person investigations (Fer-

guson & Soave, 2021). As stated in the BC provincial policing standards for missing person investigations:

Going missing is not in and of itself a crime. People go missing for many reasons. A right to privacy must be balanced with police responsibility to ensure the safety and well-being of a missing person. Police must scrutinize what information is conveyed to the public about a missing person, what information is shared with concerned persons, and what information is retained in police files. (British Columbia, n.d.)

Here, the need to balance the right to privacy with the responsibility to ensure safety and well-being is justified by the lack of consent from the person identified in the disclosure and the potential impact of the disclosure itself. Live-tweeting posts may not reveal as much as missing person alerts, but they reveal enough (without consent) to balance the right to privacy with the desire to present an image to the public by sharing their day-to-day work. We would argue that the privacy implications of live-tweeting are enough to end the practice and police should find alternative strategies to engage with the public. This is consistent with research suggesting that police presence on and use of social media comes with potential risks (O'Connor & Zaidi, 2021). This is particularly true when social media practices are “less bureaucratic than police services are used to, constantly changing, and at times unpredictable” (O'Connor & Zaidi, 2021, p. 336). Given that police officers have positioned themselves as *de facto* healthcare providers, and considering the sensitive nature of the information they collect and the lack of regulatory oversight on their use of PHI more specifically, live-tweeting by police officers about “health work” poses a significant risk of privacy breaches that cannot be justified by police image work.

Live-Tweeting “Crime Work”

As Lee and McGovern (2014) point out, “official press releases, delivered via email and social media among other mediums, are the bread and butter of police media work” (p. 87). It is common practice in Canada (for example, see Schneider, 2016a) and internationally for media outlets to reproduce these press releases. For example, when McGovern and Lee (2010) conducted a study of Australian media

outlets, they were able to identify that “a large percentage of crime news were simply reproduced, often word for word, from the New South Wales (NSW) Police Force press releases” (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 88). This practice can also be observed in Victoria. For example, *Victoria News* — the same news outlet discussed in the *Canadaland* investigation detailed above — regularly publishes stories relaying the same information provided in VicPD news releases with some minor changes in wording.⁴ These stories list “Victoria News Staff” as the author as opposed to an individual reporter. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, VicPD posted and shared an average of 220 press releases (referred to as “community updates”) per year. In 2020, that number more than doubled to 507 and remained consistent throughout 2021 at 517 (Victoria Police Department, n.d.). With the constant flow of press releases, social media platforms offer an alternative tool for communicating crime news directly to the public:

In today’s environment, police now have the capacity to control these stories in ways that their predecessors could only have dreamt of. And with the expansion of police media activities and more proactive approaches to communications, what does not make the news will almost certainly be disseminated through police social media. (Lee & McGovern, 2014 p.105-06)

In addition to official press releases, VicPD produces its own visual content, including videos and pictures shared on their social media platforms. The tweet included in Vignette 2 offers an interesting example of using live-tweeting about “crime work” and linking press releases to live-tweeting as evidence of accountability, transparency, and efficiency.

In April 2022, VicPD introduced a new Youth Violence and Vandalism Interdiction and Engagement Response Team following a number of incidents in Downtown Victoria involving groups of youth. The team was deployed on weekends and their interventions were live-tweeted as part of #VicPDLive. Ahead of the weekend, VicPD typically issued a news release to provide a summary of recent criminal activities, announced their plan for the weekend, and warned that:

⁴ For a side-by-side example, see news release by the Victoria Police Department (2023, January 25) and story published by Victoria News Staff (2023).

“VicPD will once again be conducting a *VicPD Live Tweetalong* on our *VicPDCanada Twitter account* starting at 6 p.m. tonight as part of a high-profile deterrence to violence and vandalism” (Victoria Police Department, 2022d, italics indicating where hyperlinks are embedded). Another news release was then issued after the weekend detailing the work of the team and linking to #VicPDLive as evidence of their “crime work” (Victoria Police Department, 2022c). The live-tweets typically ranged from text only to text accompanied by a picture (e.g., ambulances, police vehicles, knives, equipment used to smoke cannabis, alcohol bottles and cans, broken windows) or a video (e.g., pouring out seized alcohol, groups of youth running away from officers). These live-tweets generated high engagement from the public, with the majority of tweets thanking VicPD officers for their work and for keeping the community safe.

The tweet shared in Vignette 2 was posted six weeks into the introduction of the Youth Violence and Vandalism Interdiction and Engagement Response Team. Throughout their weekend patrols, the team had reportedly “conducted 60 investigations and arrested 24 youths on charges that include public intoxication, possession of weapons, assault, assault with a weapon and mischief” (Fagan, 2022). This tweet, which included a video of youth running away from officers, generated the highest engagement of all the live-tweets posted by the Youth Violence and Vandalism Interdiction and Engagement Response Team. To date, the video has been seen more than 179,000 times. The tweet has been liked, re-tweeted, or quoted approximately 800 times. That tweet caught the attention of *The Tyee*, an independent online news magazine based in BC. In a piece entitled, “Why Critics Slammed a Police Viral Video of Young People,” *Tyee* reporter Emily Fagan (2022) highlights several concerns including privacy issues and the unfair portrayal of youth.

While privacy concerns are also relevant here, we are most interested in the concerns raised about the live-tweets feeding into a narrative of increased youth-related criminality, which in turn changes the perception of crime and safety and warrants more police presence and interventions. Police are increasingly shaping how and what the public thinks and consumes about crime. The rise of social media and the general decline of traditional journalism has only exacerbated this

issue (Grygiel & Lysak, 2021). Most importantly, live-tweeting when done by the police is not unbiased news but instead a highly curated version of police work. For example, the topics they choose to live-tweet often focus on the vulnerable (e.g., mental illness, youth) rather than, for example, white-collar criminals who are known to cause substantially more damage to British Columbians — in fact, money laundering cost BC residents an estimated \$7.4 billion in 2018 (Maloney et al., 2019). This selective focus lends credence to moral panics about increasing youth crime (Schissel, 2006) while misrepresenting actual crime work done by police, which mostly involves documenting their work (i.e., report writing, data entry) (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). In turn, the public consuming the live-tweeting by police is provided with the impression that police are effective and thus more police and funding are needed. Again, this is a selective demonstration of police “crime work” that equates police presence and ‘doing something’ with crime reduction and public safety. However, there is little attention paid or evidence provided as to whether these interventions are indeed effective, a topic we return to in the discussion.

Live-Tweeting “Justice Work”

As mentioned above, research conducted in Canada has shown that police departments use social media for image management (image work). In his analysis of Twitter accounts run by 27 police departments in Canada, including VicPD, O’Connor (2017) found that image work was “more than simply maintaining appearances” (p. 908). This is consistent with the work of Mawby (2012) who conceptualizes image work as encompassing:

all the activities in which police forces engage and which project meanings of policing. These include overt and intended image management activities such as media and public relations work, but also unintended, the mundane practices of police work which communicate images of policing, and through which the social meanings of policing is produced. (p. 1)

In this sense, image work is inextricably linked to community policing on social media platforms because these platforms allow the public to get to know and engage with their police department in ways

that were not possible before. Gone are the days when police departments had to develop points of contact in the community. Now, they create virtual communities with direct 24/7 connection and post content aimed at fostering trust, increasing the perception of accountability, championing community events, encouraging public participation, controlling the narrative, and demonstrating that police officers are actively working to fight for justice in the community (O'Connor, 2017). The social media presence of VicPD reflects this shift. To end the analysis portion of the paper, we turn our attention to the tweet included in Vignette 3.

The tweet in Vignette 3 is similar to that of Vignette 2 because it was part of a broader effort to live-tweet the activities of a special unit: the Strike Force, a covert investigation and operations unit dedicated to property crime offenders that runs on tips from the public. It was also used to complement news releases about the activities of the Strike Force and evidence of its work in bringing justice to the community. For example, on June 4, 2020, VicPD tweeted a news release detailing a fencing operation bust led by the Strike Force (Victoria Police Department, 2020b). The tweet encouraged members of the public to “Check out #VicPDLive for the play-by-play. #yyj.” The tweet we included in Vignette 3 is the first of that “play-by-play,” describing the plan for the day. The subsequent tweets detailed the approval of the warrant, the steps taken prior to executing the warrant, the actions taken once onsite including “a slow and methodical search” for stolen property (including pictures), the neighbourhood targeted by the Strike Force that day and why (i.e., increased property crime in recent weeks), and information about fencing operations. Throughout this live-tweet thread, the hashtag #whosnext appeared next to #VicPDLive.

This type of live-tweeting and hashtagging signal to members of the public that VicPD is hard at work and looking for property offenders in the community. In other words, they are getting justice for victims. Because the Strike Force relies on tips, the hashtag #whosnext also poses a question to members of the public and enlists them in their “justice work.” It suggests that the police are always watching, which aligns with the police’s turn toward more clandestine surveillance techniques in recent years (e.g., surveilling social media to gather

intelligence, the use of big data) (Brayne, 2017; O'Connor, 2017; Trotter, 2012). Thus, live-tweeting “justice work” accomplishes several things. First, it responsabilizes the community for managing crime and that they must help to reduce their own risks (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). Second, utilizing tips from the public demonstrates to the community that police are responsive to their concerns (O'Connor, 2017). It also calls on the public to become active participants in watching, reporting, and even deciding “who’s next” — all of which show support and trust in the police (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). Finally, live-tweeting helps position the police as the lead experts in overseeing “justice work” in comparison to other potential social services. It positions the police as expert “risk communicators” (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997) and their live-tweeting of “justice work” is used to provide evidence to the public of their expertise and effectiveness (O'Connor & Zaidi, 2021). For example, displays of stolen goods help to demonstrate a job well done and that risk was alleviated due to police “justice work.”

From Ride-Alongs to Tweet-Alongs: Why New Forms of Consumption Raise New Questions

Our case study suggests that curating immediate and immersive hashtagged content for public consumption, in this case live-tweeting, helps to manage VicPD’s image online while also creating new forms of “digital spectatorship” and “digital engagement” (Powell et al., 2018). The digital spectatorship that comes with being able to watch police work as it happens would not be possible without the distinct logic, format, rules (formal or informal) and practices, and technological features of Twitter. This social media platform allows for the work (i.e., health, crime, justice) to come to life in the *digital* and become part of the *social* (i.e., this is what crime looks like in my community). In reality, the thread is highly curated. Yet, it is consumed by Twitter users as a real-time feed. This is why focusing on both the production side and consumption side of this content is particularly important. Live-tweeting also generates a new form of digital engagement, and it does so in two ways. First, it brings Twitter users along for the ride by inviting them to be active consumers (i.e., drop what you are doing and stay on Twitter to view our tweets, as the title of our paper alludes to) and to be participants in the experi-

ence (i.e., help us decide who's next and keep your community safe). Second, it ensures that Twitter users are emotionally engaged. This is a distinctive feature of high-engagement content (Wood, 2020; Wood & McGovern, 2021). They generate emotions and, in turn, shape perceptions of safety, risks, policing, and police work (i.e., health, crime, justice).

Unlike regular tweets, hashtagged tweets that are posted in real-time generate high engagement. This is true of hashtagged tweets posted by citizens who are documenting events as they unfold (e.g., protests, natural disasters) (see Powell et al., 2018). It is also true of hashtagged tweets posted by police departments, especially if they include pictures and videos, because they are known to increase engagement (Wood, 2020; Wood & McGovern, 2021). For example, the number of times the video included in Vignette 2 was viewed and then subsequently noticed and analyzed by media helps to illustrate the reach of high-engagement tweets. However, it is important to reiterate that the concept of engagement in this context does not refer to the idea of *engaging with* but rather *keeping an audience engaged*. This distinction has been noted by other scholars who found that Twitter did not necessarily lead to more engagement with users in the form of dialogue, consultation, and replies to questions, concerns, or criticisms (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018; O'Connor & Zaidi, 2021). Interestingly, Kudla and Parnaby (2018) found that the centrality of image work in the Twitter activities of the TPS “preclude[d] meaningful forms of engagement with citizens on Twitter” (p. 1). As such, and as noted above, *keeping an audience engaged* primarily refers to an active connection with and consumption of content followed, ideally, by active participation (e.g., re-tweeting, submitting a tip), but that is not always necessary for it to count as engagement.

Shifting to more practical concerns, the use of high-engagement practices such as live-tweeting raises several issues that have only recently been noted by scholars studying policing and social media (for example, see Wood, 2020; Wood & McGovern, 2021). If, as we posit, police social media practices are now increasingly being driven by how much engagement they can generate online, it is unclear how one can go about documenting and measuring this phenomenon. For example, how did the popularity of the video discussed above of

youth running away from police shape subsequent interventions by the police? Unfortunately, there is no way for us to answer this question, but the police should. Police agencies have access to in-depth data on why certain crimes, people, and/or places are chosen for live-tweeting as well as how their social media posts have performed. For example, Twitter, in addition to public replies, likes, and retweets, provides non-public data on the overall reach/performance of each tweet (i.e., impressions and engagements) and breaks down the different ways the public is engaging with that tweet (e.g., link clicks, profile clicks, hashtag clicks). They can also use features such as muting or blocking users, deleting posts, and soon, editing their posts⁵ to silence users or escape accountability. It is our position that Twitter data, rationales for tweets and tweeting strategies, and all live-tweeting events should be made (and remain) public. This would allow independent researchers to study police departments' practices and, in particular, how previous live-tweeting influences police work and interventions. It would also allow the public to report such practices to authorities such as the privacy commissioner or the police commissioner. After all, if the purpose of social media use by police is to educate the public on the true nature of their work as they claim (O'Connor & Zaidi, 2021), transparency in how they are using social media is necessary.

There also does not seem to be any mechanism in place to hold police accountable for their use of live-tweeting and possibly social media more generally. As we have illustrated, live-tweeting presents a high risk of privacy breaches. In particular, the very nature of live-tweeting means that personal information, including PHI, will continue to be posted. There also appears to be little consequence for police when these violations occur, other than maybe deleting the post, but even this decision is often left up to the police and does not have to be communicated publicly. Given that police departments are venturing into the use of high-engagement strategies that leverage algorithmic features of Twitter, there needs to be more independent oversight of police social media use. The police have access to too much sensitive information for it to be left to their discretion as to

⁵ Twitter recently announced its edit feature for Twitter Blue users: <https://www.wired.com/story/twitter-edit-button-finally/>.

what is acceptable to live-tweet. At a minimum, given the amount of “health work” they are involved in, their institutional practices should be held to the standards set out under privacy acts (e.g., FIPPA in BC). Technically they are, but enforcement is lacking. Without clear standards in place, the police are also given an unfair advantage to demonstrate to the public why they should receive more funding than other social services by using information they should probably not be using. For example, regulated healthcare professionals such as social workers, nurses, and doctors all have to adhere to social media standards and would not be allowed to live-tweet their hospital shifts. However, these standards do not seem to apply to the police. Unlike other public bodies, the police seem to set their own standards. Overall, there appears to be a need for more oversight in and regulation of how the police use their social media accounts — and an equally urgent need for public bodies tasked with police oversight (e.g., police boards, such as the Victoria Police Board) to be able to engage in this work.

Moreover, it is also unclear in what way police live-tweeting and social media use more generally is a good use of public funding. The curated information included in tweets, which are primarily driven by image work, do not constitute evidence of effectiveness nor should they be used as such when making public-funding decisions. We have made the case that VicPD uses live-tweeting to create particular narratives about their effectiveness in helping people in mental health distress, at-risk youth, and victims of property crimes that privilege police reactive interventions over other proactive community responses. Other social services and programs might be doing a much better job at dealing with these issues but are limited by legislation in what they can live-tweet about (and rightfully so) and do not have the infrastructure, resources, or social media following to tweet their work in real time — nor do they see themselves as needing image work. Instead, to receive funding, these social services often must evaluate their programs, demonstrate impact, and conduct independent research. This standard does not seem to apply to police, despite the push toward evidence-based policing in Canada. For example, it does not appear as though VicPD has independently evaluated the effectiveness of their social media use, weekend interventions, or special-unit responses. Nor has quality data been made available to

the public and researchers that would allow for an examination of whether VicPD is effectively doing what they claim on their social media accounts.

Given that Wood (2020) and Wood and McGovern (2021) found that the police were using memes in their social media accounts to stay relevant in a crowded online environment where keeping an audience engaged is difficult, we are not surprised by the uptake of other high-engagement social media practices such as live-tweeting. In addition to the concerns expressed here, we also want to point out that in seeking higher engagement, police departments are venturing into the realm of providing entertainment and using strategies akin to those used by media companies. Examples of entertainment-like strategies identified in our case study include providing teaser announcements (i.e., much like movie trailers) through press releases to entice the public to follow along and scheduling live-tweeting on weekends or statutory holidays knowing that Twitter users will be more receptive and inclined to engage. As we alluded to in our introduction, police-based entertainment like the TV reality show *Cops* is not new. What is new, however, is the introduction of social platforms that blur the traditional boundaries between entertainment and reality (Schneider, 2019). If live-tweeting by the police is analogous to the strategies used by media companies to garner attention, then the police only require that people watch, like, click on links, and re-tweet. This means that if police can convince the public through their social media platforms that they are doing good work (i.e., health, crime, and justice work) and are keeping communities safe, genuinely crafting policing strategies with and listening to the public would no longer be seen as necessary from a police standpoint. Nor would having to present rigorous evidence of effectiveness and responsible use of public funding. For this reason, we believe that live-tweeting points to an urgent need for more independent oversight of police social media use.

Conclusion

As we have attempted to demonstrate from our case study, the police seem to be live-tweeting to create an appearance of effectiveness, accountability, and transparency rather than spending time actually working to accomplish these things. The technological practice of

live-tweeting allows police to transmit an affective message to a receptive public (i.e., ‘concerned citizens’ who are unlikely to be the focus of police attention) who already consume a range of pro-police content (e.g., television shows) or ‘copaganda’ (Shantz, 2016; Schneider, 2021). This digital spectatorship and digital engagement are designed to be immersive for the public (Powell et al., 2018). Given the entertainment-like nature of the content, live-tweeting only requires superficial engagement from the public. It does not need to be meaningful engagement (e.g., listening to and conversing with the public about their policing tactics).

Live-tweeting is used to present a curated digital image to the public that emphasizes that the police are effective and keep the public safe. It also provides a tool for police to legitimize potentially harmful policing approaches. This approach may in the end leave the police to be perceived by the public as little more than public-safety influencers who lack credibility. Following online trends to garner public attention is at best a short-term solution to a larger police image and credibility problem. Calls to defund the police and for the “end of policing” (Vitale, 2018) have raised legitimate concerns about who the police target for intervention and for the police to show they are making things better for people, not worse. If live-tweeting is part of the police’s response to the legitimacy crisis in policing, they appear to have doubled down on image work rather than rethinking how policing should be conducted. As Manning (1995) notes, when police are unable to meet their mandates (e.g., keeping the public safe), they instead resort to bolstering their image for the public.

While our case study is limited in that it only looked at one police service in one country, working interdisciplinarily for this paper has helped advance the literature on police social media use. However, more interdisciplinary scholarship is needed as this topic touches on several diverse scholarly areas (e.g., policing, social media, health, justice, social control, media consumption). As police double down on image work, it becomes imperative to join forces to do the critical work of rethinking what public safety looks like and for whom. Another limitation of our study was that we were unable to systematically analyze how the public received and responded to VicPD’s live-tweeting (e.g., there could have been much resistance from the pub-

lic). However, any resistance from the public would not have necessarily lessened the impacts of live-tweeting. Working together across disciplines and with leaders, groups, and communities of people most impacted by policing presents a potential way forward to achieve a redesign of public safety while also developing strategies to demand greater accountability and pushing back against the narratives circulating on social media platforms (and underpinning strategies). Understanding the inner workings of police social media use is part of this work; without it, it will be difficult to even begin to have an honest conversation about public safety when police are using their social media accounts to direct the conversation in their favour. Thus, it is our hope that others continue to add to the digital criminology literature by examining live-tweeting and other areas where the police have entered the digital realm.

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