

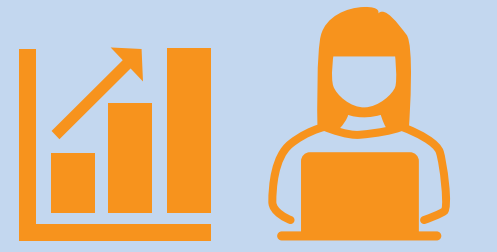
Digital Community Policing: citizen-focused policing in social media in the Lower Austrian police force

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I. Background

As the Internet has spread wider and wider in recent years and has become a daily companion, communication and the day to day life of the population are increasingly shifting to the digital space (Rüdiger, 2017). In 2020, 88 percent of the Austrian population was online, compared to only nine percent in 1996 (Statista, 2021). Almost 60 percent of internet users used social media during the survey period from April to December 2020 (Statista, 2020). As a result of this development, there is a need for action by the police to enable them to reach the population in the digital space and to use their presen-

ce there to prevent the creation of a legal vacuum (Ruediger, 2017). In other European countries, such as Germany, Finland and the Netherlands, police officers use personalized social media accounts to be able to communicate with the local population, to provide information and to strengthen trust (Cernak, 2020). This approach, known among other names as digital community policing, is intended to make citizen-focused police work possible in social media, in order to confer the increasing trust in the police to the digital space as well (Friesl, 2020).

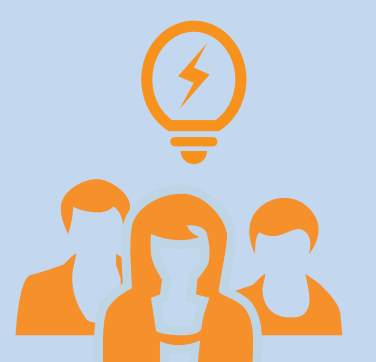


II. Research Question

Since GEMEINSAM.SICHER, the current community policing approach in Austria, has so far only been active via institutional social media accounts, the aim of this research was to determine how a digital community policing approach based

on the existing GEMEINSAM.SICHER structures consisting of safety representatives, safety councillors and safety partners could be implemented in the police force of the province of Lower Austria. The research question is therefore:

How could a Digital Community Policing approach be implemented by the Lower Austrian police?

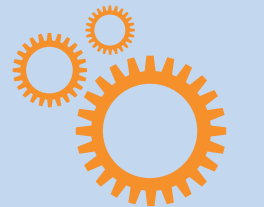


III. Methods

- Using qualitative research method, six experts from the department of the Federal Ministry of the Interior with expertise in community policing and dealing with social media were interviewed between January to March 2022.
- Semi-structured expert interviews were used to interview the experts. These represent a special form of qualitative data collection, since in this case re-

search-relevant data are collected in the process of oral communication (Misocho, 2015).

- The interviews were evaluated by means of a content analysis with inductive category development (Mayring, 2016).
- To conclude, an interpretation of the results was made.



IV. Results

First and foremost, all the experts stressed and emphasized the importance and potential of social media in the policing context. The professional experiences of the experts in dealing with social media were consistently positive. However, there

were diverse opinions on the current procedure with the central GEMEINSAM.SICHER accounts. While this approach does enable one to reach a larger number of followers, regional access to people is lost.

What opinions are there on Digital Community Policing?

- Requires affinity and extroversion
- It is important that the performance of the activity is voluntary
- Being in the public eye
- Person behind the account is also a risk factor
- Loss of control for organization possible

How could it be implemented successfully?

- Implementation by means of a pilot project
- Provide time resources
- Create particular structures
- Recruitment of younger employees



At which level of employment?

- Coordinators at district level as interface and hub
- Security officers at police stations close to the population



What are the challenges?

- Choosing the correct vocabulary
- Information sharing
- Exposure to the public
- Error management culture
- Emotionality
- Lack of continuity due to high staff turnover
- Recruitment of new staff

Which platform?

- Dependent on the users' age
- Facebook more popular with the older generation
- Instagram more popular among under 30s
- Twitter is less popular in Austria than elsewhere
- Combination of multiple platforms
- The aim is to reach as many sections of the population as possible



What competencies are required?

- Public relations
- Policing expertise
- Social media skills
- Technical understanding
- Confidence and authenticity



What alternatives are possible?

- The original approach but with regional institutional accounts
- Hybrid approach with various influencers and police officers communicating via institutional accounts
- Processing of inquiries and requests via the homepage and app



Source: Bundesministerium für Inneres, 2016

V. Conclusion

Due to the divergent opinions of the experts, they did not provide a clear concept on how a digital community policing approach could be implemented in the Lower Austrian police, but the results show important criteria (e. g. personal and systemic factors) that should be considered by the development of a digital community policing approach. In any case, the research project has shown that implementation based on the structures of the GEMEINSAM.SICHER approach

is possible and that any potential challenges could be ironed out. Although the alternative approaches appear limited at first glance, they should be included in future research projects. People with digital community policing experience from abroad should also be included in further research projects to compare these experiences with the local circumstances.