Police_hu as a best Practice: Online Reputation Management of the Hungarian Police on Instagram

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Abstract: The findings of studies carried out by Google show that 22 percent of the organisations and companies searched for themselves online in 2001. The figure was 56% in 2013, so it can be assumed that this proportion will be even higher in 2021. In the digital age a new concept, an essential professional and social skill is emerging – *online reputation management*. It is not indifferent what type of digital footprint has been left behind in online space, and it is not only true for citizens, but also for companies and organisations, and for the police as well, nowadays. The aim of reputation management is to make the overall picture of the organisation well-known and influence it positively. The use of policing social networking sites is applied between the police as a service provider organisation and the members of the community, and there is a chance for sharing and getting real time information. As a result, policing social networking sites bear utmost importance for citizens, journalists and press officers as well. Police officers not only seek to share information but persuade the citizens to cooperate. The limited importance of textual content can be seen and in parallel, the visual content has become more important. It can be stated that the members of community do not expect a quantitative, but a qualitative presence. Thus, it is the number and quality of comments that reveal how deeply users have been involved in the topic and its imagery content. This study deals with the Instagram profile of the Hungarian Police (police_hu) between July 3, 2019 and July 3, 2020. Applying the method of discourse analysis, the research characterises the most popular and most commented entries during the one-year period. As a result, it can be said that the process taking place on the Instagram of the Hungarian Police implements a kind of brand building, which can be considered a positive example of police communication, while the characteristics of *policing digilect* can be well observed and analysed.

Keywords: social media, Instagram, Hungarian Police, online reputation, policing digilect

1. Introduction

Social media sites are widely used as communication platforms in different areas of life, such as commerce, tourism and education, and people spend hours every day using these applications, interacting with each other and browsing for the latest news (Heravi & Harrower 2016). In recent years, studies and research have been investigating the role and potential of social networking sites, their beneficial and harmful effects (Heravi & Harrower 2016, Hall 2019), and a similar process can be witnessed in Hungary as these sites are used in several areas of life (e.g., marketing, education) (Veszelszki 2019, Barnucz & Uricska 2020). In many states of the United States, Finland and even in neighbouring Slovakia, law enforcement agencies use these sites on a daily and conscious basis to reach the members of the community. These interfaces are essential as they offer the possibility to share and obtain information in real time, making them central not only to inform the public, but also for journalists and press officers. Although Hungarian law enforcement organisations have not fully exploited the potential of these sites yet, the current results are encouraging.

In fact, a real paradigm shift is needed in this area in Hungary, but the ongoing reform of the organisation's communication strategy should not have to consist of a single campaign, a single decision and a single action, but gradual and continuous changes. As a consequence, the police can adapt to the expectations of the members of an ever-changing society towards the police (Molnár 2018). The fundamental issue of police reform is also the relationship between the individual and the existing powers, and in this context the quality of communication between the two parties is crucial, as described in detail by a domestic law enforcement expert (Less 2015) and by domestic and international law enforcement communication experts (Molnár 2018, Colbran 2020).

2. Theoretical background

With the emergence of information society, digital transformation is not a matter of choice, but an inevitable phenomenon that everyone must prepare for. This is confirmed by the government's decision and its legislative intent is reflected in the foresight. It says that no one can compete in the 21st century with 20th-century knowledge. The areas of intervention and transformation are no longer only in the fields of public education,

higher education and adult learning, including law enforcement training (Borszéki 2019), but they also affect the employment world (Pirzada & Khan 2013, Barnucz & Uricska 2021). The importance and the necessity of digital competences are underlined by the unexpected fact that from March 2021, Hungary has been officially infected with the coronavirus for about a year, and due to the pandemic situation, students in public and higher education studied at home, and adult workers also performed their tasks digitally, working from home.

The Hungarian Police – compared to law enforcement agencies abroad – have appeared on social media platforms relatively late, the police have had a Twitter account since 2016, the police_hu page was launched on Instagram on 3 July, 2019, and since 22 April, 2020 they also have a Facebook page. The later launch on social media may explain why the Hungarian police have not yet fully exploited the potential of these forums. The communication of police personnel is regulated by the Decree of the Ministry of the Interior No. 30/2011 (IX. 22.) on the Police Service Regulations. Section No. 73 *'Public appearance of the police officer'* sets out the framework for the public appearance of the police officer. This is a legal provision, and its violation may go beyond insubordination. The other public law regulating the use of social networking sites was adopted in 2019 with the Statement 41/2019 (XII. 13.) of the Hungarian National Police Headquarters on the use of social media and the Internet by the police. According to Section 37 of the standard, '*when expressing an opinion in social media as a private person, an employee who is a member of the Police staff shall respect the reputation and organisational interests of the Police.'* However, before the instruction came into force, it had already become common practice to undermine trust in the organisation publicly without any consequences, as there was no official resolution on this. Complementing the legal framework with other legal instruments to regulate organisations was essential, as the information that is published online about individuals and organisations and its impact on digital identity are not at all the same (Beduschi 2019).

The findings of studies carried out by Google show that 22 percent of organisations and companies searched for themselves online in 2001. The figure was 56% in 2013 (URL1), and it can be assumed that this proportion is higher in 2021. Nowadays, in order to explore business opportunities, to build and consolidate business relationships, or even to look for a job, it is common from both the employee and employer side to check the digital footprint of an individual, an organisation or a company on multiple online platforms (Micheli et al. 2018). The need for online reputation management is increasing, where individuals, public figures and even companies want to control their digital footprint. Although this is still a relatively young business and research area, a growing number of companies and experts (McDermott 2018, Micheli et al. 2018) are addressing this field.

Online reputation management emerged from the field of Public Relations (hereinafter: PR) in the 2000s with the increasing and continuous expansion of the internet and social media. The aim of the online process is, on the one hand, to establish continuous contact, communication or communication strategy with the customers and the interested parties (Stenger 2014); on the other hand, to influence the digital identity mentioned above. As discussed by Molnár (2018, p.11.), *'a strategy is a comprehensive concept that defines long-term goals, lines of action and tasks that can be an effective tool for achieving organisational goals.'* The aim of the strategy can be to promote either individual reputation or the digital reputation of an organisation.

Online reputation management can play a preventive, stabilising or even restorative role, which is mainly about producing positive information and disseminating it through the right channels. In general, online PR involves the publication of information and articles about organisations and individuals that try to portray them in a favourable light. While their short-term impact is typically positive, their long-term impact is difficult to measure. Once the life cycle of an article is over, the fact is that few people will find and read it.

Social networking sites exploded into this process and turned the media world on its head, because the organisations are directly represented on these sites, and communication professionals try to influence online presence in a positive direction (Markos-Kujbus & Gáti 2012). Reputation management is not just about marketing and online PR, and it is far from a one-off activity. It is more than that. The short-term result of the use of police social networking sites may be that the service nature of the police is becoming more prominent in these communication channels.

Whether on Facebook, Instagram or Twitter, the members of the organisation communicate with the members of the public in an informal manner, therefore it is extremely important that those who operate such platforms are prepared for the activity. On Instagram, the visual and textual elements exist together. Posts that are accompanied by a video and photos are popular. In fact, videos in which a famous person (URL2) or a 'celebrity'

(e.g., an actor [URL3], singer, priest [URL4]) lends their name to the work of the police are visibly more popular, as are images that are considered almost artistic and contain a latent reference in addition to the overt, explicit content, possibly with the user himself telling a story via the image (see research results). It can be said that the public expects a qualitative rather than necessarily quantitative presence on the web from the organisation (Uricska 2020a).

3. Research questions

In the autumn of 2006, unprofessional and disproportionate measures were implemented by the police with the citizens, therefore substantive measures had to be taken to decrease the power distance (PDI) between police officers and citizens (Éberhardt 2020) in Hungary. The employees of the professional law enforcement organizations should be aware that they are for society (Éberhardt 2020), more precisely, they are for protecting and serving the members of the society.

This study aims to present a new approach to police-citizen communication and relationship that is focused on image and reputation management. The verbal and visual content of the Instagram profile of the Hungarian Police is traced and analysed in the first year, which can be considered brand building and a positive example of police communication. The profile was launched on 3 July 2019, and in its first year the administrators created a high-quality platform in terms of both visual and verbal content that only a few public administration organisations could present in early 2021. Even the Government of Hungary appeared on Instagram more than a year later, on 17 September 2020 (URL5). When creating interfaces, it is important to harmonise several factors in order to ensure that the information shared reaches the interested parties.

There are different ways to enhance the reputation of an organisation or a person. One is appropriate communication, whether it is offline (Molnár & Uricska 2018) or online. *'Police have come to acknowledge how important managing and controlling their public image is, and how such activities are a significant step towards (re)building legitimacy in a landscape where police are at the same time less and more 'visible' to the public than ever before'* (Wood and Mc Govern 2021:309). To observe the importance of digital law enforcement communication (Veszelszki 2017ab, Istók 2018, 2019, Uricska 2020ab), the following research questions were examined:

> *RQ 1 Is there a change in the image of the police compared to the past (police jokes, news about police abuse)?*
>
> *RQ 2 If yes, what changes have been observed in the image of the police?*
>
> *RQ 3 If yes, what has changed the image of the police compared to the past?*

RQ1 asks specifically about changes to police image which is a very relevant question for police forces. The longitudinal approach allows a view into this question and the results aim to present the changes in them.

4. Research design and methods – Sample selection

In the study, the Hungarian Police's ten most popular posts (police_hu) created during the first year (3 July 2019 - 3 July 2020) on Instagram were analysed using the method of content analysis as *'content analysis is simply the study of recorded human communication'* (Babby 2002, p.352). During the sampling period (July 2019 - July 2020), the activity, the advertisements and willingness to communicate were examined through the entries (N=695). The study sample was n=10, where the units of analysis were the topic of the posts, the number of likes and the associated interactivity, as well as the number and quality of comments.

The posts were not obtained all at the same time, the material was collected and saved continuously (after 1 month), but reactions and engagement were also checked at the end of the sampling period as time spam could have influences on the number of reactions and engagements. As the comments can be checked as there is a date next to the comments when they were written, surprisingly, there were not so many extra reactions. The reason might be that on Instagram (and on other social media platforms) that the users have to roll back in the newsfeed, however new users of the site can roll back to see earlier posts as well. However, because of growth in the number of the followers could influence the engagements as well. Therefore, data was asked from site administrators as well, to check whether there is a correlation with the most popular post observed and the stored ones by them.

5. Results

Based on the willingness of the community members to cooperate and participate in dialogue (number of comments) during the period studied, the ten most popular posts could be divided into 3+1 themes in terms of content: 1) naming puppies; 2) policewomen, and recognition of femininity in the profession; 3) photos of the police spokesperson; 4) and finally, police cars. The research questions focused on assessing the image of police. The image was operationalised and measured through reactions and engagement as stated by Pokrócos (2019:124), *'police communication facilitates police action; it is a part of the culture of action. It can create a positive police image...'*

Table 1: The most popular posts in the first year of police_hu

The most popular posts topic	Date	Reactions	Engagement (comments, emoticons)	Link
Naming puppies (call-to-action post)	29 October, 2019	3600	930	https://www.instagram.com/p/B4M2XD1BPcB
Feedback to citizens about naming puppies	28 November, 2019	5600	110	https://www.instagram.com/p/B5bAZJ4h2fp
Promoting the police profession (police women)	26 February, 2020	5500	198	https://www.instagram.com/p/B9CxjKnhXDF
Police women	18 January, 2020	7300	100	https://www.instagram.com/p/B7eVB47hUON
A police woman (with handcuffs)	4 April, 2020	6800	140	https://www.instagram.com/p/B-hrUG1BVTB/
Kristóf Gál, the Spokesperson of the National Police Headquarters	11 March, 2020	2200	198	https://www.instagram.com/p/B9my1sZhxCk
Kristóf Gál, the Spokesperson of the National Police Headquarters and Cecília Müller, Chief Medical Officer of Hungary (a hug after the first phase of coronavirus epidemic)	18 June, 2020	6200	135	https://www.instagram.com/p/CBlXB77AkL0/
Police cars	21 April, 2020	3400	100	https://www.instagram.com/p/B_QClUsBtZ
Police cars	6 April, 2020	2600	130	https://www.instagram.com/p/B-phZv3hiCp
A police car (Audi)	7 June, 2020	4700	120	https://www.instagram.com/p/CBJOayzh9Ff

After the launch of the profile, it took several months to increase the number of followers who respond to posts by liking or commenting. The first successful post was in October 2019, when puppies had to be named. Although the topic doesn't seem to be related to the police profession (of course it is, as puppies become sniffer dogs), the post received a record number of comments.

It is an interesting fact that five of the top ten most popular posts were created during the first wave of the coronavirus epidemic (March 2020 - June 2020), which may be due to the fact that the internet browsing habits of the users changed and they spent more time reading social media sites (Aristovnik et.al. 2020).

5.1 Naming puppies

Figure 1: Naming puppies. Source: URL6.

The entry was created on October 29, 2019 (Figure 1). The post received 3600 likes, but the number of comments was more indicative as the call-to-action[1] post received 930 comments. This post can be regarded as a good practice, the members of the police force tried to encourage the members of the public to cooperate in naming the puppies. According to the creator of the post, two important things are reflected in this post. Firstly, it was necessary to identify and establish the right information channels with the different policing disciplines and then to find the professionals from whom the signal was received to present the story. This is how they got to the Police Education and Training Centre in Dunakeszi. On the other hand, an important principle is to engage followers in order to generate interaction that can strengthen the relationship between the police and civilians, which is one of the main goals of the Instagram profile of the Hungarian Police. The nearly 1,000 comments show that the direction is the right one, as people are receptive to the topics shared by the police when they address the followers of the page with a story which they can identify with.

5.2 Promoting the police profession

The entry was posted on February 26, 2019, and the photo shows six young policewomen in uniforms (Figure 2). The image originally appeared in Cop Magazine, and it was requested for use and posted by the administrators of the site. The post received more than 5,500 likes and around 200 comments. The ladies are appearing with their first name and their chosen profession, clearly promoting the police profession that they define not only as a job but also as a career. The administrator compares the organisation to the closest bonds of social life as the word *'family'* is used as a metonymy in the text of the entry. Its fundamental aim is to strengthen the feeling of 'we are a family' among the police personnel.

Figure 2: Police women. Source: URL7

According to the site administrator, the most important lesson for them was that there were a lot of trolls[2] who commented, and because of the comments, strict moderation was required. It is essential for them to stand up for their colleagues, as was the case here.

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[1] The term *call-to-action* (CTA) is used in the field of marketing and became a common practice with the popularity of social media. It refers to a content that targets readers, viewers or users and encourages them to take a specific action. A CTA content should be short, clear and convincing.

[2] In internet slang, it refers to a person who harasses an online community with sarcastic, hurtful and off-topic comments.

5.3   Kristóf Gál, the Spokesperson of the National Police Headquarters

The date of the creation of the entry is March 11, 2020, after the worldwide spread of the coronavirus and its appearance in Hungary (Figure 3). As Kristóf Gál was a member of the Operational Staff[3], temporarily there were no posts with his appearance on Instagram, because his daily, often overwhelming performance in the Operational Staff no longer allowed him to do so. Nevertheless, the calendar he promoted was one of the most popular posts of the sampling period, based on the number of comments received. His personal fame and recognition were never in question before, and now it is indisputable.

Figure 3: Kristóf Gál, the Spokesperson of National Police Headquarters. Source: URL8.

The administrators of the site have tried to take advantage of the popularity of the spokesperson Kristóf Gál in the past, as they are doing now, to reach their aims with their messages. His personal popularity is coupled with a personal recognition, as can be seen from the content of the comments. In several cases, he is compared to Pál Győrfi, the spokesperson of the National Ambulance Service, and in numerous posts the civilians congratulated the organisation on being able to place a credible and socially accepted police officer as the head of the organisation's communication. This demonstrates that subjectivity (citizens' perception) and credibility (Kristóf Gál's professionalism) can be attributed to the popularity of the organisation (the police).

5.4   Online reputation – highlighting a comment

Regarding Figure 4, it is already proven that not only the number of likes, but also the number of comments, and even more so the quality of comments are the indicators of the degree of identification with the topic and its visual content. The picture is part of one of the most successful posts in the first year of the Instagram profile of the Hungarian Police, so the highlighted comment photo is not a coincidence.

Figure 4: Police women – highlighting a comment. Source: URL9.

A user who wrote his comment with his name and face: „Én pedig a police.hu kommentjeit író értelmes és jó humorú egyént dicsérem most meg. 😊 csak így tovább…közelebb kerülhetünk egy kicsit a rendőrség emberi oldalával is." (The translation in English: 'And I praise the intelligent and good-humoured person who writes comments on police.hu. 😊 keep it up...we can get a little closer to the human side of the police.')
The comment has two relevant pieces of information. On the one hand, reading the comment sections in the first year (3 July, 2019 – 3 July, 2020), it is clear that members of the public appreciate and praise the

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[3] The Operational Staff for the Control of the Coronavirus Pandemic was established by the Government of Hungary on 31 January 2020, by Government Decision, Lex Covid.

communication style of the operators they see on police_hu. The humour used on a daily basis is clever, intelligent and although responding correctly to specific situations would be difficult for the site's followers, or even the citizens in general, this is not the case for the site's operators. At an international level, several police organisations have also made *'a strategic decision to employ humour on social media to increase community engagement with their content and manage their public image'* (Wood and Mc Govern 2021:305). On the other hand, the sampling period shows that the public is getting used to the presence of the police on this platform. Of course, there is no uniform opinion, since, as in all other cases, there are those who are surprised by the direct tone and style of the organisation's presence on the social networking site, compared to the authoritarian style of communication they experienced in the past. The facts confirm that the public welcomes the innovation, and it is visible in the increase in the number and quality of comments.

6. Discussions

The digital, verbal and visual content created on police_hu restructures the relationships among individuals, society and different organisations. This is evidenced by the fact that the communication practice of the Hungarian Police on Instagram led to a kind of rearrangement, and resulted in a positive change in the image and opinion of the police, based on the data of the online platform observed and analysed. By the conscious use of the site, the police organisation recognised the need for dialogue among the members of the public, at least those who have online access, Instagram accounts, and are curious about, or even follow the police on this platform.

The analysis of communication strategy was not a part of this study, but bilateral, partner communication with the target group was fully implemented during the sampling period. In other words, thanks to the high quality of the digital communication processes in law enforcement, not only the relations between different organisations (in this case the Hungarian Police), but also between individuals and a relatively well-defined layer of society seem to be reorganising.

Taking advantage of the possibilities of immediate response, the Hungarian Police strive to reach the population directly, to build trust and partnership, thus changing the perception of the organisation in a positive direction, and this is reflected in the feedback (content of comments, emoticons). However, it is worth correcting the misconception that negative opinions are moderated on social media. If someone expresses a negative opinion in a civilised way, without being personal or offensive, or without being political in their comments, then that content will not be moderated. Freedom of expression exists on social media, albeit the question is how the user applies it.

Based on the sampling period, it can be said that the content of the site is of great service to the members of the community. The quality of the visual and verbal content, the quality of the police's digital discourse, and the use of the more direct style of language, the *policing digilect* (Veszelszki 2017ab, Uricska 2020ab), also answered our third research question. Compared to the traditional channels of the police, for example television, radio, or even the traditional webpage of the Hungarian Police, www.police.hu, a more informal style and language variety exist on the site that can be mainly identified in the tone and the vocabulary of the entries examined.

7. Conclusion

The research results show that one-sided and formal communication is replaced by two-sided communication on Instagram. The right application of the possibility of two-way communication to gain the trust of the public is coming to the forefront. It defines a more personal and informal language, a new style of policing language. The site operators are well aware of this style of police terminology that is clear and comprehensible to the widest possible audience, thus helping to create a public image of the police based on trust and reducing the communication barrier between the police and the civilian population. As future steps, the research can be extended to other channels by the Hungarian police, (e.g., Facebook, Tik Tok), to surveys of the civilian population and police personnel, to interviews with communication experts and police personnel of different ranks, as well as to identification and abstraction of international best practices.

Andrea Kozáry, a Hungarian researcher also devoted two studies to the topic of trust, researching primarily the political-sociological aspects of the place and prestige of the police in the society, but also the importance of communication as part of this. Her reflections and quotation – *'Trust comes on foot and goes on horseback'* - are entirely appropriate here (Kozáry 2018, 2019).

The police have taken the first steps to build trust by adapting to the attitude of the social networking site with the application of *policing digilect*, a communication practice that has been overwhelmingly welcomed by the site's followers. This is confirmed by the fact that the site had been present for more than two years and created one thousand and two hundred posts at the date of submission of this manuscript. This fact shows that this activity is time-consuming, and requires a continuous and active presence. This kind of community building is not only a quantitative process, but also qualitative, and therefore a fragile one.

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