

# Policing as a Profession in Social Media from a Comparative Perspective

Edina KRISKÓ,<sup>1</sup>  Ágnes KOVÁCS<sup>2</sup> 

The need for publicity, transparency and accountability has increased as a pressure on police forces since the emergence of social media. But while initially the novelty and lack of experience with new tools excused police forces from uncertainties, shortcomings or mistakes in managing their profiles, a quarter of a century later, the police can be accountable for awareness and usefulness of their practice.

The main question of the research, based on social media monitoring, is how the different branches of policing, their specific activities and the content that highlights expertise and promotes and recognises policing to citizens are presented, beyond the organisational image-building function.

The applied method is the qualitative document and text analysis supported by computer software to analyse the Facebook activity of the Hungarian Police and a Hungarian (community) police officer in Canada. The sample included two different months' shared content for both profiles studied using purposive sampling.

The results show a strong contrast in terms of the direct law enforcement implications of the content. Hungarian communication is centralised, highly controlled, organisational and professional, but at a great distance from the day-to-day tasks, while Canadian communication is personal, semi-professional-layman and gives a direct insight into the working day of the police.

Our conclusion is that different policing models enable very different content along different practices, and the reasons are rooted in both regulation and culture. While the Hungarian legislation relegates the individual police officer to the background in order to strengthen the image of the organisation through propaganda, overseas it is the individual who brings the profession 'in the flesh' and gives it credibility and legitimacy.

**Keywords:** policing, social media, document analysis, comparative study

<sup>1</sup> Associate Professor, Ludovika University of Public Service, Faculty of Public Governance and International Studies, Department of Social Communication, e-mail: [krisko.edina@uni-nke.hu](mailto:krisko.edina@uni-nke.hu)

<sup>2</sup> Program coordinator, Ludovika University of Public Service, Faculty of Water Sciences, Department of Water and Environmental Policy, e-mail: [kovacs.agnes@uni-nke.hu](mailto:kovacs.agnes@uni-nke.hu)

## Introduction

In the early and mid-2010s, publications reported that police forces around the world were using social media for everything from issuing alerts to building organisational image.<sup>3</sup> Since then, this ‘everything’ seems to have altered a bit and some shifts in emphasis from the potential to support policing functions to image building are emerging.<sup>4</sup> Alongside (or often instead of) the strengthening of a culture of dialogue, we are also witnessing the preservation of old relations (one-way, often authoritarian, highly hierarchical communication).<sup>5</sup> In our study, we therefore contrast two different communication practices conceived in two different policing models (cultures). We will look at how the service side of the police, the individual officer and the organisation appears on social media and how much its appearance has a direct link to the practice of the profession. Why is this necessary? If we accept that organisational communication management is never an end in itself but is subordinate to the central objectives of the organisation, then we must start from the premise that the social media presence of law enforcement agencies (also) serves law enforcement purposes.<sup>6</sup> How does the Hungarian Police and the (Canadian Hungarian) community policeman in the study contribute to this triple function? To do so, we first review and detail the possible goals and challenges of police officers’ use of social media, and then turn to a deeper, qualitative content analysis of the content posted.

## Literature review

Andrew Goldsmith said in 2015 that new media had brought “new visibility” to law enforcement, creating new challenges and new vulnerabilities. The need for transparency and accountability has been coupled with the possibility of criticism, and new smart technologies have become a threat to the integrity of the police organisation and profession in many studies. User or lay content is an opportunity to shed light on and expose police abuses and destructive organisational practices. Moreover, as De Graaf and Meijer (2019) point out, social media also bring role and value conflicts into the lives of police forces, which are inherently characterised by secrecy and control, as they are now faced not only with the demands of transparency and accountability, but also with the imperative of visualisation.<sup>7</sup>

But the counterpart of this threat and challenge is the possibility for the police to contextualise the content and, as content creators, to come up with exclusive content themselves. With its own content, the police can strengthen its own legitimacy and social acceptance. However, this requires police forces and police officers to communicate on social media in a way that is appropriate to their cultural and organisational characteristics, and to avoid content and expressions that could damage the reputation of the

<sup>3</sup> VAN DE VELDE et al. 2015; KRISKÓ 2012; 2016.

<sup>4</sup> RALPH 2022; LIVINGSTONE 2022.

<sup>5</sup> CRUMP 2011.

<sup>6</sup> FINSZTER 2018.

<sup>7</sup> DE GRAAF – MEIJER 2019.

organisation, call into question the effectiveness of its work and thus undermine its legitimacy. There is therefore an opportunity for police forces (or even individual police officers) to build an image that reinforces their existence and their specific mandate.<sup>8</sup> Before presenting our own research, there is only one thing we need to talk about: the process of ‘legitimacy spillover’. This is the term used in the literature to describe the phenomenon whereby the legitimacy of an organisation, person or profession is built up through the action and communication of another actor, person or organisation. This is reported, for example, by Isaak and Walby (2022), who studied how police associations and unions or associations with multiple jurisdictions use social media. They found that the central purpose of police associations in Canada is to legitimise not only police officers but also the police as an institution and policing as a profession itself. They call this “horizontal legitimacy spillover”. This, of course, has repercussions for police communication and the use of social media by police forces. By analogy, this phenomenon is referred to as “vertical legitimacy spillover”, where the social media activity of an individual police officer reinforces the legitimacy of the organisation (police station or district).<sup>9</sup>

Going further in the literature, we see that in addition to the above, social media can be a tool for improving the (indirect) experience of the police,<sup>10</sup> for gathering information and evidence, and thus for detection,<sup>11</sup> it can also be a tool for professional public relations,<sup>12</sup> and it can be a means of control, a means of moderating discourse or even stifling dialogue.<sup>13</sup> In summary, social media can be seen as an interface for image building and establishing organisational legitimacy. The public relations activity of the police, on the other hand, is a process of transcoding, where the police adapt their communication to the medium that is social media.<sup>14</sup>

## Methodology

There is no detailed methodology for qualitative research on Facebook content, we work with adaptations of traditional methods in the online space.<sup>15</sup> Virtual and, increasingly visual interactions are multiplying very rapidly, making their capture and retrieval a rather cumbersome process, constrained by the various media platform providers. It is easier for the present research to investigate not the interactions between the Hungarian Police and the selected community policeman and the public, but the role of the communicator in the communication process, the messages sent out and their professional content. This is a much narrower cross-section of the triad of intentions, rhetoric and professionalism of the entries. The text corpus is formed by content created and directed

<sup>8</sup> BULLOCK 2018.

<sup>9</sup> WOOD 2020.

<sup>10</sup> HU et al. 2020.

<sup>11</sup> LIEBERMAN et al. 2013.

<sup>12</sup> LEE-McGOVERN 2013.

<sup>13</sup> CRUMP 2011.

<sup>14</sup> WOOD 2020.

<sup>15</sup> FRANZ et al. 2019.

by the Hungarian Police on its own timeline and on the profile page of the community policeman and together they form the basis of the analysis. We also look at user reactions (such as like, love, care, 'haha', wow or angry), comments and shares. We only engage with visual and aural content to the extent that its primary and central message has a clear law enforcement professional content (e.g. police dog in sunglasses is not included, but police dog at work as an embodiment of legitimate violence is included in the evaluation.) We conducted a passive analysis, i.e. we engaged as site followers by merely reading and not creating the content.<sup>16</sup>

## The sample

We decided to examine the central profile of the Hungarian Police and a profile of a police officer, the top and the bottom of the hierarchy. The latter, of course, cannot be Hungarian due to national regulations. The sampling is deliberately contradictory, with community policing on one side and continental policing on the other side, framing the communication strategy. Meanwhile, the sample is comparable, as both profiles target Hungarian audiences on policing related issues. The Canadian Hungarian practice represents the bottom-up strategy, while the Hungarian one represents the top-down legitimising or communication strategy.

In total, 211 posts were included in the analysis, totalling more than 230,000 characters. For both profiles, content from two different months was sampled.

*Table 1: The sample in numbers (posts and user reactions)*

	Hungarian Police April	Hungarian Police June	Zanati November	Zanati March
Number of posts	79	74	28	30
Number of reactions	106,831	96,678	18,682	27,476
Number of comments	5,973	7,411	1,715	2,039
Number of re-shares	4,923	12,242	1,783	341

*Source:* compiled by the authors

<sup>16</sup> WALLACE-LLEWELLYN 2025.

## Coding

Data analysis was carried out using the MAXQDA qualitative text analysis software. A mixed coding approach was used: first, the text was coded according to the research questions, i.e. research objectives and police service branches, followed by corpus-based coding. In this case, this means that the categorisation was based on Decree 30/2011 (IX. 22.) of the Minister of the Interior on the Police Service Regulation. The subcategories were created based on the service areas named in the regulation, and the main categories were created based on theoretical approaches to policing: prevention, patrolling, investigation, cooperation, private security, civil self-defence, legitimate violence, police power/force. Since we were performing a content structuring analysis,<sup>17</sup> in the next step we added new categories dictated by the text, such as non-policing, privacy, second jobs, etc. After the results of the double-blind coding were merged, redundant subcategories were removed, and the texts were recoded. The preliminary results of this process are presented in this conference paper.

## Results

The official Facebook page of the Hungarian Police was created on 22 April 2020. A community of 226,000 people is currently built around the profile.<sup>18</sup> This means that the page can deliver messages to roughly one in every 30 Hungarian Facebook users, as according to the latest statistics, there are 7.11 million Facebook users in Hungary.<sup>19</sup> At the start of the period under review, the number of followers was lower, 190,000 at the time of the first sample (April 2023). The user data shows that 63% of the total population has a Facebook account, with the gender sharing rate tending towards parity, but it is still more popular among women, with the most active age groups being 25–34-year-olds and 35–44-year-olds.<sup>20</sup> If we look at the messages sent through this channel and the responses and reactions to them, it is worth bearing in mind that the number of followers of a Web 2.0 platform does not only include the fans of the site. Certainly, the community built around the site also includes individuals who are antipathetic to the profile, ranging from experts to lay people, from supporters to competitors, to counter-patrons.

The contact details on the site contain adequate and up-to-date information, but there is only one link to the online presence ([www.police.hu](http://www.police.hu) – the official homepage of the organisation). The contact details do not include a link to any other social media platform of the law enforcement agency, although they have built up a large following on both Instagram and TikTok.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> SÁNTHA 2022.

<sup>18</sup> 20 October 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Statista 2025.

<sup>20</sup> Statista 2025.

<sup>21</sup> Instagram: 92,800 followers; TikTok: 154,500 followers.

The administrators of the site do not make use of the interpersonal contact facility that could be provided by the message button on the site. Nor is it allowed to express an opinion about the organisation in the form of a recommendation, so the Hungarian Police are not taking full advantage of all the opportunities Facebook offers to engage in multi-directional, interactive communication with their online community.

In terms of the visual identity of the site, both the profile and the cover image are of high quality and clearly identify the organisation. The profile picture shows the logo of the organisation, and the cover picture is thematically consistent. The content shared is free of spelling errors for the period under review. The periodicity of content sharing is well balanced, with an average of 3–4 posts per day, which suggests a high level of activity. However, this can be burdensome, especially when considering the volume of content shared. Users can be overwhelmed by content and distracted from truly relevant content to less relevant topics, or content can become a bland time-filler.

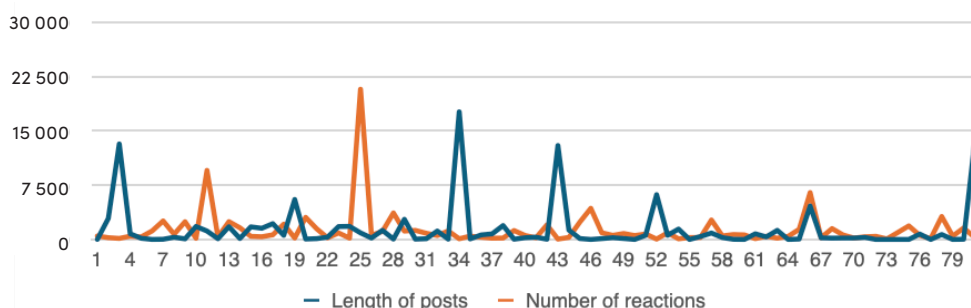
Research to help develop content marketing strategies for Facebook posts shows that the number of words of a post negatively affects the perception of the community. Long posts also reduce the propensity to respond, as long posts require more attention, which is less of a characteristic of the 21<sup>st</sup> century person's online presence.<sup>22</sup> The average length of the Hungarian Police's posts is around 1,085 characters, which means 8–10 sentence long reports. However, the deviation from the average length is 1,552, which means that they often share full-page texts. This is very far from the ideal and user-friendly length that is 40 characters, according to the relevant above-mentioned marketing research. The independent content production strategy of the Hungarian Police is not characterised by the production of extremely long posts. Self-written posts are often only one or two words, but as a result of the re-sharing of other police content, the site is cluttered with extremely long texts. They often include original posts from other police communication channels, such as full newspaper articles from *Zsaru Magazin* (Cop Magazine). This upsets the thematic and visual coherence of the site and makes it difficult to separate the audience reach volume of the site from that of other channels. (We are still in the process of cleaning up this data.)

The other profile under review was created in December 2019 by its owner, an Ontario neighbourhood officer, Balázs Zanati. The Hungarian-born Canadian police officer graduated from the Ontario Police College and has been a police officer since 2009, according to his profile. He now has about 37,000 followers. He is a digital content creator and official representative of the Toronto Police Department on Facebook. Other than his place of birth (Keszthely), there is no private information on his profile, although he regularly shares private content on his page. Visitors are reminded that his site is not for reporting purposes and is not monitored 24/7. For police reports, it provides the emergency phone number, 9-1-1, and an anonymous tip line. As our research shows, Officer Zanati shares content with his followers on a daily basis, and in most cases the content is self-produced, always with illustrations (pictures or videos). The cover image is a view of Toronto at night, perfectly matching the content of the page, showing the living environment and workplace of a community officer. The average length of posts is 335 characters,

<sup>22</sup> DROSSOS et al. 2024.

indicating that the site administrator is trying to adapt to the requirements of micro-marketing and the reading time constraints of digital content consumers. In this sample, the average deviation from the average length is 264. On an order of magnitude, we see that the Hungarian Police profile shares 3 times longer texts with their followers than the community police officer's. None of the videos posted by the neighbourhood officer exceeds 30 seconds. In contrast, the longest multimedia content of the Hungarian Police is a conversation of more than 41 minutes with the Canadian police officer we examined.

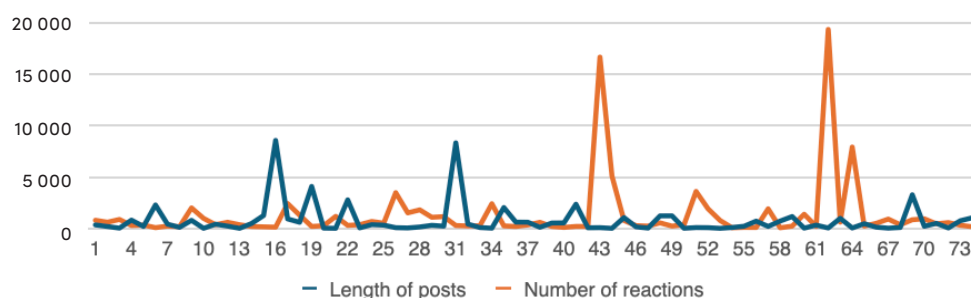
As can be seen in the figures below, long posts generate much less user activity than shorter content (see Figures 1 and 2).



*Figure 1: Length of content and number of user reactions*

*Source: compiled by the authors*

However, we also see that after a year, the content on the Hungarian Police profile page is shortening, almost halving in length (see Figure 2).



*Figure 2: Length of content and number of user reactions*

*Source: compiled by the authors*

In the case of the Canadian police officer, there is no significant change in the length of the posts (323 and 335 characters), but the user responses show increasing variation as can be seen in Figures 3 and 4.

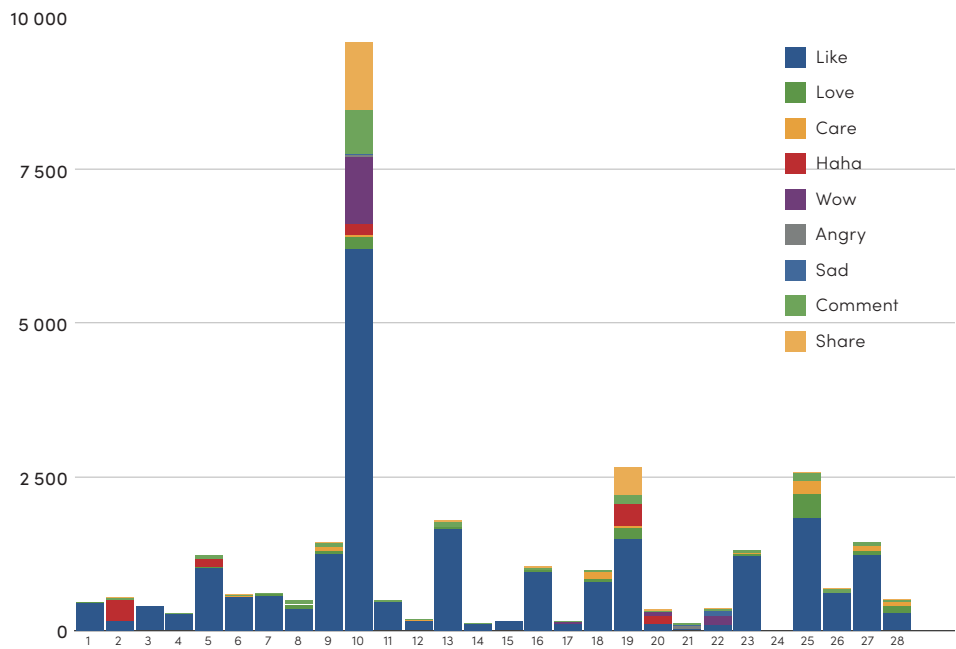


Figure 3: User reactions to the content – Zanati (November)  
Source: compiled by the authors

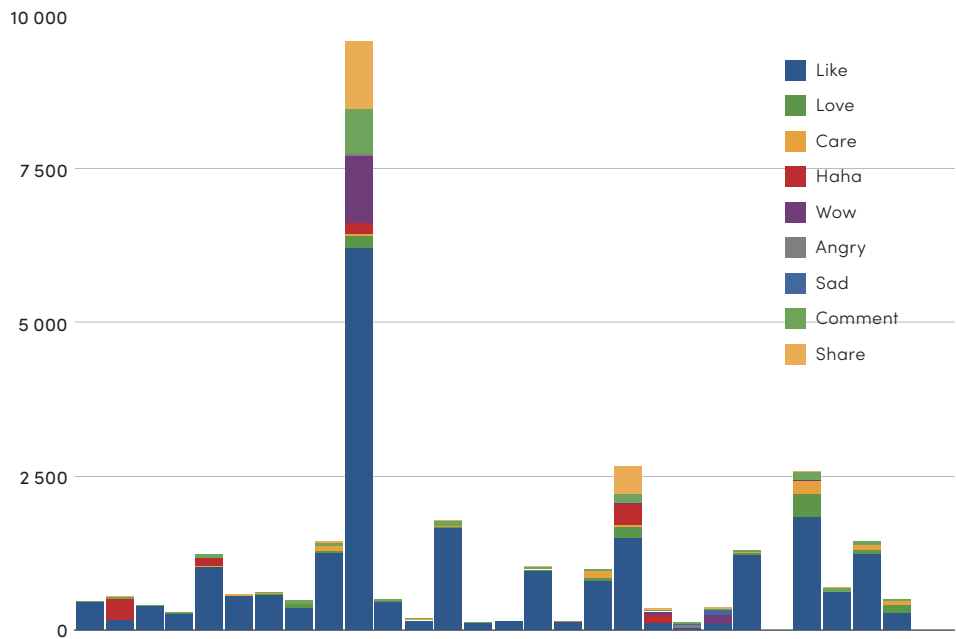


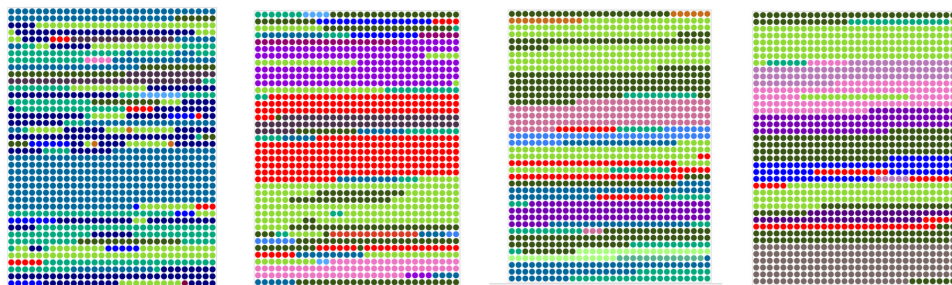
Figure 4: User reactions to the content – Zanati (March)  
Source: compiled by the authors



And maybe here we can see that the content producer gained his routine and has a stable audience.

We have also carried out a thematic comparison in terms of the content coverage of law enforcement areas. We found that in the case of the Hungarian Police, traffic policing topics received the most coverage in the first month of the survey, followed by some form of legitimate violence, and emergency response and direct lifesaving in the second month.

In the case of the community police, both months were dominated by the themes of prevention of danger and presence in public places (patrols), and, unsurprisingly, issues of private security were also prominent (see Figure 5).



*Figure 5: Thematic document portraits of the sample*

*Source:* compiled by the authors in MAXQDA 2024

The Canadian community policing profile clearly shows a greater thematic consistency than the Hungarian Police profile. However, it must be acknowledged that the Hungarian pattern is somewhat distorted by two significant events, one being the visit of Pope Francis and the other the European Football Championship. One of them has increased the entries on the subject of traffic policing, the other on presence and cooperation. At the same time, the purple units in the figure indicate the emergence of the theme of professional cooperation. A counterpart of this can also be found in the Canadian sample, in connection with Easter.

## Conclusion

As the study revealed, the Hungarian site ensures a continuous content sharing by re-sharing a lot of material from the county police forces and other policing channels. In contrast, the community policeman uploads almost exclusively self-produced material, which is rarely coloured by received posts and in that case, it has direct law enforcement content (CCTV and body-worn or security camera footage). The most shared post in both cases was about animals. The contents of the Hungarian Police with the highest audience reach are related to saving lives and a humorous Reels video. On the timeline of the community police officer, the most popular topics were the retirement of the service dog and a motorcycle chase. Both

profiles use the marketing tool of cuteness, which is proven to be effective in generating likes. The cuteness factor also communicates power relationships, power playfulness, brings in vulnerability, humility and weakness, which it then combines with dominance and control.<sup>23</sup> Cute things are disarming, and the armed forces benefit from this.<sup>24</sup>

The difference is striking in terms of everyday content. Here, we mean material that is not edited and created by a designated communication staff. The scene of the recordings is often the Canadian police officer's own office, his police car, his police station, his direct circle of colleagues and friends, his professional life and his direct experiences. As far as the publication times are concerned, in the Hungarian case we can observe a kind of mechanistic content production (content published at the beginning of the service, around 10 a.m. and at noon or before the end of working hours). There is no night and day content production or out-of-work coverage. Occasionally, public holidays take precedence over online users.

The content published is undoubtedly for public relations purposes and not for law enforcement functions. Education and promotion of safety awareness clearly take a back seat to the dominance of entertainment and reputation management. The popularity of fun and humorous content is also common in both profiles. Many law enforcement functions are not even marginally reflected in content on social media. We would definitely mention victim protection as a missing topic. But border management is also a missing issue, while Hungary has been in a crisis situation caused by mass immigration since 2015.

The results show a strong contrast in terms of the direct law enforcement implications of the content. The Hungarian communication is centralised, highly controlled, organisational and professional, but at a great distance from the day-to-day tasks, while the Canadian communication is personal, semi-professional-layman and gives a direct insight into the working day of the police.

Our conclusion is that different policing models enable very different content along different practices, and the reasons are rooted in both regulation and culture. While the Hungarian legislation relegates the individual police officer to the background in order to strengthen the image of the organisation through propaganda, overseas it is the individual who brings the profession 'in the flesh' and gives it credibility and legitimacy.

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<sup>23</sup> McVEIGH 1996.

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