Book Review

Review of Schneider, Christopher J. 2016. *Policing and Social Media: Social Control in an Era of New Media*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books.

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Christopher Schneider's *Policing and Social Media: Social Control in an Era of New Media* offers an innovative look at how social media has influenced policing practices in Canada. Over the past decade, police forces in Canada and across the world have embraced social media as a tool. The rise in digital technologies and social interaction through online media is an increasingly influential and crucial component of police work. Social media platforms such as YouTube, Facebook, and Twitter have transformed not only how people and institutions interact, but also the ability of police to control narratives about incidents of crime. As a result, police agencies are compelled to adapt to a changing media environment, which has had implications on police legitimacy, image work, and social control strategies.

Schneider's ground-breaking book tracks the origins of police flirtation with social media in Canada as early as 2006 and traces the policy and institutional developments in the following years. For example, major police forces now have dedicated full-time social media officers, tasked with developing and maintaining social media accounts in support of department priorities. Applying media logic as a theoretical framework, Schneider argues that media influences and transforms social institutions. Schneider expands this approach by contending that social media alters police practices, emerging as the "primary form that contributes to recognizable institutional changes in public forms of policing" (25). This is evident in how police now "tailor their content, messages, and emerging institutional strategies to conform to a new logic of social media" (25). The logic of social media demonstrates how police have adapted to changing media landscapes to attempt to exert social control strategies.

Police have traditionally used media—in particular television—to control public perception and to assert legitimate authority. Schneider argues that policing institutions' interest in social media serves to expand social control efforts through "new ways of conditioning the public and cultivating self-promotion" (1). To reproduce police legitimacy, social control is contingent on the ability to define social situations increasingly impacted by social media interaction. At the same time, social media platforms enable an often-unmediated questioning and challenging of police narratives, claims, and legitimacy.

Contributing to a budding scholarship on social media and policing, Schneider's work is unique in the diversity of approaches comprising the case studies. Schneider cleverly examines three different social media formats and their impacts on two of Canada's largest police forces in three concise and critically analyzed chapters. Schneider tackles the case studies using qualitative media analysis, a methodological framework that focuses on themes, meanings, and perspectives. Here he collects, examines, and critically analyses thousands of documents (i.e., posts) collected from various social media platforms to better understand transformations in social interaction and policing.

The early chapters lay out the theoretical, methodological, and conceptual frameworks and track police reaction to the rise in online social networking. The purported rise in cyber-crime (Crime 2.0), which followed the social networking advent of Web 2.0, drew reactionary police involvement to MySpace over widespread fears of sexual predation. Facebook, however, has witnessed police embracing a more active role and, Schneider contends, became the most popular site among police agencies as the logic of social media became increasingly embedded within law enforcement institutions.

Schneider contends that the 2011 Vancouver hockey riot changed the dynamics of how police use social media in Canada. While convincing, this case study would have been well twinned with a closer examination and comparison of the Winter Olympics protests or the G8/G20 summits in Toronto. Certainly, the reactionary hostilities emanating from segments of the population were similar, and the police narratives targeting anarchists spilled over from the 2010 protests to the 2011 riot. The Olympics resistance was also the first large protest movement in Canada in which activists used social media strategies. In particular, the Vancouver Media Co-op (VMC) was infiltrated by at least two police officers, which conveys the importance of media to police. A few months later, G8/G20 summit protests rocked Toronto. A few hundred protesters caused extensive property damage, torched police cruisers, and targeted the Toronto Police Service' (TPS) headquarters. In retaliation, police carried out a wave of indiscriminate violence, including the largest mass arrest in Canadian history. It is surprising that Schneider did not investigate these events to determine if they impacted how police view and use social media.

In another chapter, Schneider points to the significance of tweets—both from police and civilians—as having the ability to either boost or erode public perception of police, creating the “legitimacy conundrum” (91). Schneider also exposes the ridiculous and often-unmediated nature of TPS tweets, where for example officers using official twitter accounts discuss sports or employ self-deprecating donut humour. For Schneider, this represents a “rhetorical move that distances police officers from their authoritarian roles” (93).

Twitter has now become one of the most used social media sites among Canadian police agencies, with the TPS leading the way. However, at the time of the police shooting of teenager Sammy Yatim on a Toronto streetcar in 2013—the subject of chapter 5—the TPS not only were silent on social media in the immediate aftermath, but they also lost control of the narrative as the incident was recorded and immediately uploaded to YouTube.

Yatim was shot nine times by Const. James Forcillo on July 27, 2013. Schneider's book went to press before Forcillo was sentenced to six years in prison on July 28, 2016. In his decision, Justice Edward Then described the video footage as “powerful evidence” that refuted Forcillo's original account of events—that Yatim was trying to get up after being shot three times (*R. v. Forcillo*, 2016 ONSC 4850). Although Forcillo would only spend one day in protective custody before being released on bail the following day, the conviction was precedent-setting as Forcillo was the only police officer in Canada to be charged and sentenced with attempted murder, according to media reports. Yatim's family lawyer Julian Falconer deemed the sentencing an exception to the rule, saying it is “close to impossible” to convict a police

officer in the absence of video evidence and demanded police be forced to wear body cameras (Hasham 2016).

The Yatim shooting demonstrates the institutional implications inherent in the logic of social media. The Ontario government invested \$500,000 in a pilot program to equip 85 TPS officers with body cameras in 2015. Media reports and polls showed that body cameras were viewed as a measure to increase police accountability in police-public interactions. Schneider posits that the increased use of body cams will enable police to regain control over the crime narrative, in an era where police shootings are increasingly being filmed, uploaded, shared, and contested in the streets and in the courts. Indeed, the police report emanating from the body cam pilot program recommended that all 3,200 frontline officers be equipped with the cameras. The aftermath of this case study, the most profound in Schneider's book, is the starkest example of social media changing the landscape of policing. Schneider's research demonstrates the role of social media in challenging the once-enjoyed police monopoly to make claims, define situations, and control narratives.

It is worth examining the implications of the Vancouver Riot and the Yatim murder in greater depth, as they are the most compelling of the case studies and raise important questions moving forward in the realm of social media logic. Significantly, both case studies demonstrate the loss of control of police image work, claims-making capabilities to define the situation, and thus challenges to police legitimacy. Vancouver riot vigilantism bolstered police image while the Yatim shooting did the opposite. Even though social media reaction was favourable to police—a form of vigilantism that routed out and exposed rioters in a perverted seeking of justice—it demonstrated alongside the viral video footage of the Yatim murder that in these instances police had lost symbolic control over crime matters.

Schneider's book is the first to trace the origins of social media influence on policing strategies in Canada and raises questions about the long-term implications that social media will have on police conduct and transformations in police work. Further research could include imagining resistance to social control strategies, as well as how police strategies have evolved to use social media as a surveillance tool. The “new visibility” (14) enabled by social media creates both opportunities—for public engagement, boosting positive perceptions of police, and creating new social control strategies—as well as challenges—loss of control over narratives and perception and public challenges to its legitimacy—for police. An important lesson for those seeking to challenge police hegemony and instil greater accountability measures is the understanding that social media contributes to rendering “police increasingly vulnerable and publicly accountable” (93).

References

- Hasham, Alyshah. 2016. Const. James Forcillo sentenced to 6 years in Sammy Yatim shooting. *Toronto Star*, July 28.
R. v. Forcillo, 2016. ONSC 4850.