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**Police Use of Social Media as Bureaucratic Propaganda:
Comments on State Violence and
Law Enforcement Use of Social Media in 2020**

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ABSTRACT AND ARTICLE INFORMATION

Police are recognized as primary producers of social order, and social media factor into the process of gaining the cooperation of citizens in ways that serve the interests of police. In this short commentary piece, I provide an overview of police use of social media and highlight some recent thematic examples from 2020 to illustrate how police use of social media is consistent with Altheide and Johnson's (1980) concept of "bureaucratic propaganda," the aim of which is to sustain the appearance of institutional legitimacy in the form of official information.

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The year 2020 has been called the year of protests. The story of the protests begins on social media on May 25, 2020 – the day George Floyd, an unarmed African American, was senselessly murdered by Minneapolis Police officers. A citizen-recorded video of Floyd’s death went viral online. Public outrage quickly followed, prompting worldwide protests against racialized police violence that lasted throughout much of the summer. Hundreds of instances of police violence occurring during the protests across 2020 were documented on video and shared widely on social media.

In one instance, video surfaced online of a 75-year-old man peacefully protesting who was violently shoved to the ground by Buffalo Police in riot gear. Officers were seen walking past his motionless body as he lay on the ground bleeding from his head. In another circumstance, police in New York City drove their squad cruisers into a crowd of protestors. The video of this instance was also widely shared online. These and other videos documenting police violence were spotlighted in national news reports and shared extensively across social media. Much of the attention to the intersection of policing and social media in 2020 focused on citizen recordings of police misconduct. But what about police *use of* social media during this period?

Police are recognized as primary producers of social order, and social media factor into the process of gaining the co-operation of citizens in ways that serve the interests of police (Ericson, 1982; Schneider, 2021; see also Kudla & Parnaby, 2018; O’Connor & Zaidi, 2020). In this commentary, I provide a short overview of police use of social media and highlight some thematic examples from 2020 to illustrate law enforcement use of social media that is consistent with Altheide and Johnson’s (1980) concept of “bureaucratic propaganda,” the aim of which is to sustain the appearance of institutional legitimacy in the form of official information.

Police and Social Media

In my 2016 book *Policing and Social Media: Social Control in an Era of New Media*, I suggest that the public facing police use of social media on sites like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube, and, more recently, on platforms like TikTok, has altered institutional police practices to include new ways of conditioning the public, self-promotion, and the general expansion of social control (Schneider, 2016). Law enforcement use of social media is consistent with the logic of social media even though the organizational logics of these institutions are at odds. Police organizations are hierarchical in structure, top-down and highly centralized, whereas the structural

logic of social media is very much the opposite - non-hierarchical, bottom-up, and decentralized (Schneider, 2016).

Strategic police use of conventional media remains consistent with the existing organizational police structure where a designated spokesperson (i.e., press officer) officially speaks on behalf of the organization. Similarly, is the circumstance with informational resources like police blogs and blotters that more typically provide the public with “ cursory information on crime incidents, such as the type of crime, the defendant, the victim, and the location” (Chermak, 1995, p. 27). However, the more recent use and incorporation of interactive social media has altered strategic elements of policing that compel the institution to confront and manage the decentralized nature of social media.

Police institutional activities on social media must be carefully organized to fit within the dominant structural logic of each platform (e.g., 280 characters in a tweet on Twitter or short videos of less than 60 seconds on TikTok). Social media platforms are each oriented to different media formats, such as images for Instagram or videos for YouTube. While users can post text, images, and videos across numerous platforms, how users both orient and perform on each format differs (Schneider, 2019a). Taking the perfect selfie, for instance, might be ideal for Instagram but less so for YouTube. Sharing emotive content (language, photos, and videos) on social media drives increases in followers (i.e., audience), likes (i.e., endorsements), the sharing of content and the ability to go viral, and the generation of user comments, all consistent with the logic of social media. Police use the immediate and emotive logic of social media to meet contemporary strategic objectives of law enforcement, with stressed importance upon media performance including status updates and emotive posts (see also Schneider, 2019a).

The story of public-facing police use of social media begins on MySpace in late 2005 at a time of increased (and exaggerated, see boyd, 2014) news media attention over online sexual predation. Early police use of platforms like MySpace included officers “friending” minors on the site in a proactive official police capacity in an effort to ward off would-be predators since a police officer would be publicly displayed as a “friend” on a minor’s viewable list of MySpace friends. By the end of 2006, police began using MySpace as a tool to assist in criminal investigations. MySpace was used at this time often in the absence of department protocols or policies that outlined best practices for law enforcement. As public attention shifted away from MySpace, police departments started launching official profiles on then rival site Facebook. Police profiles appeared in greater

numbers on Facebook from around 2010 onward, with department policies following as a result in order to reduce organizational risks to police (see, e.g., Schneider, 2019b). During this time, other platforms, notably micro-blogging site Twitter, also experienced growth in official use by police agencies. Twitter remains very popular with law enforcement primarily because the logic of Twitter is modeled after dispatch systems already familiar to police (Schneider, 2016). During this growth period, police mostly used social media in an investigative capacity and to generate and solicit crime tips and share safety information.

Police use of social media has since expanded considerably. In 2014, police agencies started using Snapchat in an effort to connect with young people. More recently, police have taken to TikTok, one of the most popular social media platforms, especially among teenagers. Most police agencies do not have official department TikTok accounts (exceptions include the Los Angeles Police Department [LAPD], which launched an account in 2018 posting its first video in December). Police use of TikTok is mostly limited to what individual officers unofficially post often using hashtags (#), first introduced as an official feature on Twitter in 2009. The use of a hashtag converts content into a searchable link so that others can identify and locate topics. #HumanizingTheBadge was among the more popular police officer hashtags in 2020 with TikTok posts featuring #HumanizingTheBadge viewed tens of millions of times.

Cross-disciplinary scholarship on the general impact that social media has had upon policing indicates that there is no unified corpus of knowledge concerning this relationship (Walsh & O'Connor, 2018). Nevertheless, what remains consistent across law enforcement use of social media is the paramount importance placed upon police image work, which refers generally to "all activities in which police forces engage ...[to] project meanings of policing," such as efforts to present police officers as the "good guys" (Mawby, 2002, p. 1). Police image work has taken various forms, and some notable policing scholars have used other names such as "repair work" (Goldsmith, 2010) and "presentational strategies" (Manning, 1997) to describe this phenomenon. However, what remains constant is that such work always exists in relation to the legitimacy of police or "the judgments that ordinary citizens make about the rightfulness of police conduct" (National Research Council, 2004, p. 291; see also Mawby, 2002).

In 2020, uniformed police officers were documented across North America kneeling and marching alongside citizens who had gathered together to protest against racialized police violence. Some police took to their official social media to

maintain and reinforce an outward public appearance of law enforcement interest in the expressed concerns of some community members, particularly in response to grievances aired by Black Lives Matter and its supporters. As a thematic example, we might consider a June 5, 2020, tweet by Mark Saunders, former Chief of the Toronto Police Service (TPS), one of the largest municipal police departments in North America: "My Command and I met protesters today and we took a knee. We see you and we are listening [...] We have to all stay in this together to make change." The official TPS tweet was accompanied by three photographs including one with Saunders kneeling with protesters. Similar tweets were shared by other law enforcement like the LAPD. The LAPD, while active on social media like Twitter, was largely absent from the popular platform TikTok having posted just one video in 2020 on March 7, two months prior to George Floyd's murder.

Tweets like these examples and other similarly shared police materials on social media across 2020 are consistent with image work strategies intended to humanize and personalize officers in order to make police appear more relatable and trustworthy. Social media posts that are not directly related to police work (i.e., understood as "crime work"; Ericson, 1982) are evolving examples of police organizational attempts at "bureaucratic propaganda."

Police Use of Social Media as Bureaucratic Propaganda

Bureaucracies produce propaganda in the form of official reports and records (Altheide & Johnson, 1980). Organizational reports and records can include an array of bureaucratically produced documents such as formal rejection letters from potential employers in which said organizations are "portrayed as meeting ideal norms of conduct" (Eckberg, 1984, p. 340). A new addition to bureaucratic propaganda includes social media content produced by organizations like police departments and their employees (police officers).

The origins of propaganda can be traced to 500 B.C. Greek city states (Altheide & Johnson, 1980). The emergence and growth of bureaucratic societies beginning in the nineteenth century onward laid the groundwork of modern propaganda, forever changing how public opinion is shaped (Jackall, 1995). In response to the rise of organizations and official information, Altheide and Johnson (1980) suggest in their book *Bureaucratic Propaganda* the necessity to rethink traditional propaganda to include "the strategic use of official information by virtually all formal organizations" (p. 10). The consideration of

bureaucratic propaganda produced by police agencies remains important and understudied.

Bureaucratic propaganda can act as a particular type of image work, which unlike traditional propaganda, targets “an individual, group, or specific segment of the population” who often do not recognize its “promotive character” (Altheide & Johnson, 1980, p. 14). The explicit aim of bureaucratic propaganda is to sustain the appearance of institutional legitimacy in the form of official information. According to Altheide and Johnson (1980), “the purpose of most official information is to maintain the position and interests represented by officials who sponsor and sanction the information” (p. 19). The sanctioned use of social media whether by individual on-duty police officers or from authorized police accounts is consistent with bureaucratic propaganda. All forms of bureaucratic propaganda seek to legitimize the police organization since the content is always intended to depict idealized norms of police conduct. “Even though all official information greatly distorts what actually occurs within an organization, the goals of an organization will shape the nature of official information,” including the police production of content on social media platforms (Altheide & Johnson, 1980, p. 42).

Individual police officers are also understood to represent the organization even while off-duty. Numerous police departments have social media policies that prohibit off-duty employees from posting certain materials such as discriminatory content (see Schneider, 2016). The content of personal police officer social media accounts that fails to meet idealized norms of police conduct can in fact bolster bureaucratic propaganda since information from personal officer posts may be used *strategically* and *officially* to hold individual officers accountable for their bad actions online. The basic idea is that individual members of organizations both conceive of and use “information in fulfilling their tasks as well as in promoting their activities to ‘outsiders’ such as officials, committees, and the public” (Altheide & Johnson, 1980, p. 36).

Police organizations that hold officers accountable for content on social media are consistent with bureaucratic propaganda since the core aim of bureaucratic propaganda is to sustain the appearance of institutional legitimacy. Consider again the example of #HumanizingTheBadge. The promotive character of police produced content on TikTok tagged with #HumanizingTheBadge is intended to portray officers as fun and relatable while preserving the status quo interests of the police organization. Therefore, any content (official or unofficial posts) that fails to meet idealized norms of police conduct might initiate a professional standards review, trigger formal

reprimand or censure, or result in officer terminations (see, e.g., Hoerner & Tulsy, 2019; Way, 2020). *All of the aforementioned formal police responses represent official organizational strategic actions that aim to reaffirm normative conduct and police legitimacy.* As an illustrative example, Shelby Abramson, an Orange County Deputy, was suspended from her police duties (for insubordination and unbecoming conduct) *because* of her humanize the badge TikTok videos even while insisting that the motive of her TikTok videos was “the humanizing (of) the badge... that we are not just this bad guy behind a gun” (DeForest, 2021, paragraph 4).

Let us consider a few additional examples of police bureaucratic propaganda on social media in 2020 to help illustrate the point. Police continued to solicit crime information from the public during protests using official social media accounts; this is neither new nor altogether surprising. Police also used social media platforms as an investigative tool and to share information with the public (e.g., traffic updates), each also long-standing law enforcement practices on social media.

A recent development in 2020, however, included police statements on social media of a more menacing tone. For instance, we can consider here those examples of formal official police-issued advanced warnings of arrest on social media, and, in some circumstances, even explicit threats of possible police violence. According to a June 8, 2020, Portland Police tweet, “More shaking of the fence, more lasers in officers’ faces. We are advising to stop or we will need to use force.” The threat of the use of force by Portland Police reinforces/reminds the public of the police monopoly on violence as presented by its officials (police) and its state sanctioned use against specific individuals (e.g., fence shakers). Police use of social media in this manner is consistent with bureaucratic propaganda in how it targets certain individuals.

Other police posts on social media appeared to set the stage for the pre-emptive use of force against protestors in 2020. The Columbus Ohio Police, for example, tweeted on June 1, 2020, an image of a bus suspected of “supplying riot equipment to rioters [and after searching the bus] found bats, rocks, meat cleavers, axes, clubs & other projectiles. Charges pending.” It was later publicly revealed that the colorfully painted “hippie” bus (apparently referred to as the “Buttercup”) belonged to a juggling street performer group. The array of tweeted possessions and other items such as cooking utensils retrieved in the police search of the bus were used for performances by the “Buttercup crew.”

On Facebook, the Clay County Sheriff’s office in Florida shared a short video on June 30, 2020,

in which Sheriff Darryl Daniels, alongside fellow law enforcement personnel, speaks, in part, to the camera: “look, folks, don’t fall victim to subjecting yourself to this, this conversation that law enforcement is bad [...] we have a great relationship with this community [but] if you threaten to come to Clay county [and] if we can’t handle you [...] I’ll make special deputies of every lawful gun owner in this county [...] *you’ve been warned.*” This official Facebook post as bureaucratic propaganda targets two specific segments of the population—would-be-protestors, perceived by police as troublemakers, and those groups that support law enforcement like the Blue Lives Matter countermovement to Black Lives Matter. What is a warning to the first group is a thinly veiled call to arms for the second and again underscores the police monopoly on state-sanctioned violence.

TikTok was among the more popular social media platforms used by individual police officers in 2020. The platform allows users to upload short video clips up to 60 seconds and to overlay and edit videos with music, text, and emojis. Police videos across 2020 on TikTok depict officers dancing, lip-syncing, engaging in humor, and providing officer perspectives on George Floyd’s murder. Consider, for example, Bryson “Nae-Nae” Lystrup, a police officer with the Lehi City Police Department in Utah, who is very popular on TikTok (First Responders Children’s Foundation, 2020).

The city of Lehi has a population of around 70,000; however, Officer Lystrup boasts more than 750,000 followers on TikTok (under the handle @officernaena). Elsewhere online, Officer Lystrup’s Facebook page is categorized under “comedian,” and his Instagram profile lists him as a “public figure,” which asserts, “all videos made off duty.” Police officers with large followings like Officer Lystrup are social media influencers, and the content that these individual police officers produce is bureaucratic propaganda that seeks to persuade specific segments of the population. Accordingly,

a social media influencer is a user on social media who has established credibility in a specific industry. A social media influencer has access to a large audience and can persuade others by virtue of their authenticity and reach. (Pixlee, 2018, paragraph 1)

On May 28, 2020, two days after George Floyd’s murder, Officer Lystrup shared a video to TikTok titled “George Floyd deserves justice!” In the video, Officer Lystrup is wearing a police uniform with a “thin blue line patch” affixed to his chest. The patch “is a sign of support for law enforcement that has amid Black Lives Matter protests come to signal opposition to the racial justice movement and support for white

supremacy” (Griffith, 2020). Officer Lystrup boldly asserts as he speaks directly into the camera: “To George Floyd’s family, I’m sorry this was not ok and I will do everything in my power to ensure that justice is served.” The video has been liked more than 426,000 times or more than six times the population of the city of Lehi where Officer Lystrup works.

While Officer Lystrup clearly indicates that he is a police officer across his social media accounts (Facebook, Instagram, YouTube, and TikTok), he does not specify where he is employed, so it remains unclear to his followers on social media how exactly he will “ensure justice is served” for George Floyd who was murdered in a different state (Minnesota) and jurisdiction (Minneapolis). Officer Lystrup’s status as a social media influencer then only enables him to leverage his personal celebrity to serve organizational police interests by encouraging symbolic support of segments of the population, mostly those not subject to the jurisdictional repressive police tactics of the Lehi City Police Department.

As one last example, and among the more sophisticated social media messages in 2020 in terms of overall media production, was Sergeant Henry Particelli’s “Your Name” music video. The professionally shot and edited video was officially released by Sgt. Particelli’s employer, the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNPD). *The MNPD officially released a song to the public!* According to a MNPD Facebook post on June 25, 2020, the “healing and heartfelt new song” was written by Sgt. Particelli “in the wake of the George Floyd murder in Minneapolis.” The post continued, “We just concluded a news conference to officially unveil the song to the world.” The Facebook post included the video and implored the public to “please watch.” The video was shared to other platforms such as YouTube and received coverage in news media.

Sgt. Particelli appears in the video wearing his police uniform and also appeared in uniform on national television to discuss his song, not as a civilian songwriter, but as a sworn officer of the MNPD. “Your Name” ends with the following words sung over an acoustic guitar that Sgt. Particelli is strumming: “I’m sure that you never wanted this fame, but I promise that we’ll honor your name.” Social control is a symbolically constituted and negotiated social process and videos like “Your Name” encourage acceptance of police narratives by seeking to reframe how police and publics are positioned in relation to one another (Goffman, 1959). A key distinction in self-promotion efforts such as the exploitation of George Floyd’s death on social media sites like Facebook, YouTube, and TikTok that distinguish law enforcement from other institutions and social actors involves the

reproduction of formal social control, most notably, the legitimation of the use of force.

The official police launch and endorsement of flashy music videos like “Your Name” on social media platforms like Facebook and the subsequent acceptance of such police practices by audiences sanitizes and romanticizes the very same coercive police practices that resulted in the death of George Floyd. Furthermore, music videos such as “Your Name” continue to blur the line between public understandings of police work as crime work and police work as entertainment with the MVPD operating as a kind of de facto publishing arm of the Nashville music industry. Police entertainment activities on social media act as bureaucratic propaganda that targets and shapes the opinions of segments of the public not limited by police jurisdictional boundaries, since music videos and the like are not necessarily specific to a time or geographical location, nor to a local community.

Conclusion

While police agencies used social media in 2020 in many ways, some not covered here, what remains consistent is that law enforcement use of social media platforms aligns with the immediate and emotive logic of social media, with an emphasis on police media performance, as the examples herein illustrate. Police use of social media ranging from entertainment (music videos) to innocuous posts like community crime updates all produce content consistent with bureaucratic propaganda. The core aim of bureaucratic propaganda is to sustain the appearance of institutional police legitimacy. The legitimacy of modern police relies on the micro-level (Ericson, 1982), and social media appear to fulfill this aim. However, the foundation of police legitimacy is impersonal authority (Miller, 1975) and personalizing police on platforms like TikTok (e.g., #HumanizingTheBadge) could result in the erosion of impersonal authority, and, subsequently, police legitimacy. Future research should explore this conundrum.

A limitation of this short commentary is that it has focused on a North American context and future research remains necessary to understand variations among international policing institutions to reveal differences in police practices online, social control strategies, and the official organizational use of social media materials as bureaucratic propaganda. One possible suggestion could include assembling an international team of researchers to explore police use of social media from a cross-cultural perspective. Another possibility might include investigating differences in idealized norms of police conduct and

how such differences factor into the ways in which law enforcement agencies use social media, regionally and internationally.

Police activity on social media has continued to evolve with each subsequent platform, beginning on MySpace in 2005 to the extended use of TikTok in 2020. The changing nature of social media (e.g., Facebook is different today than it was in 2004 when it launched) and the creation of new platforms and policies (e.g., amended privacy policies) has direct implications for police policy and practice that informs the development of guidelines that outline expectations of police practice at the organizational and individual levels, including what officers can say and do on social media like TikTok. While policies differ by agency, a recommendation by the Vancouver Police Department (VPD) serves as a thematic example of police social media policies: “When in doubt, if you wouldn’t do it in uniform, don’t do it online” (VPD, 2012, p. 9). Nevertheless, a policy like this that relies on individual judgements may not have been helpful for Shelby Abramson, the suspended Deputy who posted what she believed as humanizing videos to TikTok while in her police uniform. Additional research might include further exploring the disconnect in such situations between individual officers and idealized norms of police conduct according to police administrators and others.

Police use of social media has developed from a platform intended to provide information to a jurisdictional community into broader and lesser understood organizational attempts at bureaucratic propaganda, as an expansive type of police image work, intended to target segments of a larger non-jurisdictional public unaware of its promotive character. The few examples provided herein are intended to illustrate elements of bureaucratic propaganda in 2020 but are not intended for generalization. Future research continues to remain necessary to better understand this process as it continues to develop in relation to police legitimacy and in the interests of law enforcement officials who sanction it.

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About the Author

Christopher J. Schneider is professor of sociology at Brandon University. Schneider's research and publications have focused largely on information technologies and related changes to police work. He has written or collaborated on five books and has published dozens of articles, chapters, and essays. Schneider is the author *Policing and Social Media: Social Control in an Era of New Media* (Lexington Books | Rowman & Littlefield, 2016). The book has received acclaim from scholars, activists, police practitioners, and journalists in national news media and peer-reviewed journals. Schneider has received award recognition for his research and teaching. A recent award includes a 2020 Emerald Literati *Outstanding Author Contribution Award* for his keynote paper on the 21st century interaction order. The Award is given in recognition of "authors who have contributed something new or of significant value to the body of knowledge, either in terms of approach or subject matter." Schneider's writing (dozens of op-eds), research, and commentary have appeared in hundreds of news reports, including the *New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *USA Today*, NBC News, and Chicago's WGN-TV. Schneider previously held the Endowed Chair of Criminology and Criminal Justice at St. Thomas University (spring term 2019) and the Public Visiting Scholar position at Wilfrid Laurier University (fall term 2016).

Endnotes

- ¹ The second MNPD released song of 2020. Ten days before George Floyd was killed, on May 15, 2020, the MNPD published Sergeant Henry Particelli's song "Let's Do This Right" on its official YouTube channel.