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Tales from the police: Rhythms of interaction with mobile technologies

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Abstract

There is a need to understand and conceptualize the relationships between work activities, the context of work, and the use of mobile technologies because of the widespread diffusion of mobile information and communication technologies within organizational settings. The police have, since the advent of radio communication systems, deployed mobile technologies to support officers in conducting their jobs and offer an exemplary domain for studying the use of mobile technologies. This paper applies the theory of virtualization as a means to characterize the use of mobile technologies for operational policing. The paper suggests the concept of rhythms of interaction as a method of characterizing the alternation in intensity of communication through and with mobile technologies and the intricate relationships between physical and virtual contexts of work.

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1. Introduction

Mobile technologies such as the mobile phone (cell phone in North America) and the laptop have gained an immense success in many organizations as means of supporting geographically distributed work. Whilst the access to organizational

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information and communication with distant colleagues though mobile technology is an emerging phenomenon in the business world, the police have a long tradition of supporting geographically distributed work through the employment of state-of-the-art mobile technologies. Communication technology has transformed police practices. From the introduction of the telegraph in the late 1800s to the usage of two-way radios and computer-aided dispatching during the 1900s (Agar, 2003; Standage, 1998), information and communication technologies have radically changed the organization of police work and, with it, the expectations of various police services. This paper investigates the use of mobile technologies for the support of a particular aspect of police work, namely operational policing, which is time and safety critical work based upon officers attending incident sites by car, often in response to calls from the public (Clarke and Sykes, 1974; Manning, 2003). Operational policing is the core of policing and is highly geographically distributed (Manning, 2003). It involves the use of multiple mobile technologies across a range of activities in a variety of situations, which require some sort of reactive action either initiated by citizens' calls or by a police officer's observations.

Within the general study of mobile technology use in work settings, there is a need for as theoretically informed analysis of the relationships between the situational aspects of work, the institutional context of work and the use of mobile technologies supporting work. This is also the case within studies of police work in general and operational policing in particular. To study such a setting, we have adopted a particular theory on virtualization as one perspective informing our inquiry. This paper, therefore, investigates the question: *How can the theory of virtualization inform the study of mobile technologies applied for operational policing?* We explore this question through analyzing extensive data from a seven-month observational study of operational police work within a British constabulary. In particular this paper presents and discusses Response Vehicle's (RV) and Traffic officers' use of mobile technologies as means of assessing risk and coordinating work around scenes of incidents. The application of the theory of virtualization highlights the issues of coupling and decoupling of mobile technologies and we suggest the concept of *rhythms of interaction* as a characterization of the alternation in intensity of communication through and with mobile technologies.

The next section presents current research on policing and mobile technologies, and outlines our focus on operational policing. Section 3 presents the perspective of virtualization as a means for analyzing the use of mobile technologies. Section 4 outlines the ethnographic research approach chosen. Section 5 characterizes two operational policing roles, and illustrates their work through two tales from the field. Section 6 analyses the findings of the study in terms of rhythms of interaction. Section 7 discusses the findings, and Section 8 concludes the paper.

2. Understanding operational policing in the UK

What are the police? As argued by Klockars (1985), multiple perspectives can be adopted, depending on the observer's background and experiences. However, most

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