

Motivations for police blogging and how fear of being 'outed' can force a blogger to cease

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Abstract

There is an expanding literature on the police use of storytelling, but very little has been written in a policing context in relation to the contemporary practice of blogging. Consequentially, this paper reports on an ongoing research project into the UK police use of blogging. In dealing with motivations for starting and stopping the authoring of blogs this article makes an incremental contribution to the literatures of blogging and of police storytelling by articulating reasons given by respondents as to why they stopped blogging. These include fear of being outed; fear of professional loss of face and collateral damage to careers. We argue that blogging has educational and therapeutic values and should be encouraged by the Service for these reasons. An agreed code of practice could reduce the climate of fear.

Keywords

blogs; blogging; police; motivations; censorship.

This paper reports on one aspect of a wider project that was established to investigate the phenomenon of police blogging in the UK. The focus of this paper is on the motivations for both starting and ceasing to write a police blog. ‘Work-bloggers’ may face disciplinary action if they are discovered to be blogging about their employers and fellow employees. A number of high-profile cases have demonstrated to potential work-bloggers the risks they may be running. In particular, potential police bloggers must be aware of the fate of bloggers such as *NightJack*, who was outed by a journalist, disciplined by his superiors and whose blog was deleted. Given such risks, this project set out to investigate what attracts police bloggers to blogging and whether the fear of being ‘outed’ as a blogger eventually overcomes the satisfactions of blogging and causes a police blogger to cease blogging.

Review of current literature

Police blogging is part of the wider phenomenon identified by Richards (2008) as ‘work-blogging’. For all bloggers there can be friction between the act of blogging itself (often done in private or anonymously) and its reception in the public sphere, and this can be exacerbated if the blogger is posting about his or her work. There have been quite a few high-profile cases in recent years concerning bloggers being dismissed for blogging at or about their employment – the *Urban Dictionary* reminds us that the term ‘dooced’ was coined to describe the fate of blogger Heather B. Armstrong, sacked for blogging about her workplace and co-workers in her blog *dooce*.

The public fates of bloggers such as Armstrong and Ellen Simonetti, whose blog *Queen of the Sky* featuring shots of her in her air hostess uniform led to her dismissal, have made bloggers more aware of the penalties that may be imposed on them if their employers become aware – and disapprove – of their blogging. For police bloggers in particular this concern was brought home to them in 2009 when the anonymous author of the blog *NightJack* was outed by a *Times* journalist as Detective Constable Richard Horton of the Lancashire Constabulary (Gibb, 2009). The *NightJack* blog offered its readers an insight into frontline policing but also included Horton’s strong views on

social and political issues. In April 2009 it was awarded the Orwell Prize for political writing. However, despite Horton seeking a legal injunction to stop the newspaper revealing his name, Mr Justice Eady ruled that the blogger could have no reasonable expectation of anonymity because “blogging is essentially a public rather than a private activity”. Although Horton changed details such as the names of people and places as he posted, once his identity was known it became possible for the actual cases he was writing about to be identified. He was issued with a written warning by his superiors and his blog was deleted. As will be noted later, police bloggers are very aware of Horton’s fate and several in this study ceased blogging at around the same time that *NightJack* was deleted.

Why start to blog and – in particular – given the fact that blogging about your place of employment might jeopardize your livelihood, why would someone be a work-blogger? Previous research in the area of motivations for blogging has identified factors such as “perceived usefulness, commitment, trust, self-efficacy and outcome expectation” as motivators for starting a blog (Zhou, 2011, 69). Pedersen (2010) identifies a variety of motivations ranging from the perception of blogging as creative writing, as citizen journalism or as a work tool, to blogging as a way to raise money or for therapy. She suggests that the majority of bloggers will have more than one motivation for starting to blog and that motivations for blogging may change over the lifetime of the blog.

Other researchers have suggested that certain personality types may be more open to blogging than others. For example, Guadagno et al (2008) suggest that people who are high in both openness to new experiences and neuroticism are more likely to be bloggers. They may start to blog from loneliness and an attempt to reach out and form social connections with others. The work of Baker and Moore (2008) on the way in which distress and dissatisfaction with their current group of associates motivates some people to start blogging also agrees with these findings. Thus one motivation for work-blogging can be a desire to establish a community of like-minded individuals with similar experiences who can offer a support that the blogger might not find in his or her immediate vicinity.

Communication with readers and other bloggers can also be a spur to blogging. Nardi et al (2004) found that many people started blogging at the urging of their friends, who were already bloggers and wanted company that they already knew in the blogosphere. Miura and Yamashita (2007) suggest that communication with readers who give the blogger positive feedback is a major factor in encouraging bloggers to continue to post while Richards (2008) found that some work-bloggers blogged to keep in touch with friends, family, colleagues and similar professionals.

What do work-bloggers post about? Richards (2008, 100) reports that “the most common theme involves employees documenting the reality of the jobs they do week in and week out”. Such blogs are typical journal blogs, which have been shown to have similar motivations to diary-writing such as self-exploration and self-expression (Serfaty, 2004; McNeill, 2005; Pedersen, 2010). Other work-bloggers, however, want to make people think or even to change their behaviour, for example McClellan (2004) reported that the author of *Diary of a Fast Food Life* was of the view that “If visitors read my blog and ... decide to be more polite when dealing with staff in service industries... I’d consider that an achievement”. Other common themes that have been identified include “exposing management stupidity” (McClellan, 2004) and the release of “work-related frustrations” (Richards, 2008, 103). In one of the earliest studies of the motivations of bloggers, Schiano et al (2004) identified the need to vent and let off steam as one of the main motivations for journal blogging.

This need to let off steam about work-related issues might be particularly strong for those working in the emergency services who, by the very nature of the job, might be limited in their ability to discuss their work in the outside world. Research into the use of storytelling in the emergency services suggests that stories can provide a psychological outlet for emergency service workers (Tangherlini, 2000) – and many blog posts can take the form of such storytelling.

Work-bloggers may also blog in order to influence or educate both insiders and outsiders to the profession (Richards, 2008, 102). This touches on the knowledge-sharing aspects of this medium of communication. Ojala (2005) argues that there are two important aspects of blogging that make it particularly useful for knowledge sharing – a blog’s community and its archives. She suggests that blogs are an

inexpensive way in which an organisation can encourage employees to share knowledge. Williams and Jacobs (2004) agree that informal systems like blogs can be easier to implement and maintain than formal knowledge management systems. Again looking at the literature on storytelling within the emergency services, Tangherlini (2000) suggests that police officers and other members of the emergency services recount stories to each other to warn or educate others about situations they have come across. In addition, Ward and Sbarcea (2001) suggest that there has been an increase in the use of stories as carriers of knowledge in organisations in recent years.

This desire amongst some work-bloggers to educate their readers might also be related to what might be described as the ‘citizen journalism’ motivation – the desire to make their opinions more widely known, to offer an alternative to the mainstream media, to influence thinking of others and to engage in debate (Gillmor, 2006). It is these elements of blogging in particular that have led blogs to be described as similar to newspaper opinion columns and editorials or newspaper letters columns (Pedersen, 2010). Blogging can thus demonstrate a desire on the part of the blogger to redress perceived distortions or failures in the mainstream media, with commentators such as Gillmor (2006) seeing bloggers at the forefront of a revolution whereby a new breed of grassroots journalists is taking the news into their own hands, communicating directly with the public without having to go through gatekeepers such as editors (Shirky, 2008).

While motivations for starting to blog have been investigated in some depth, the reasons for bloggers ceasing to blog have not received such scrutiny. As Miura and Yamashita (2007) point out, most blog authors make only one or a few entries in their blog and then stop writing in it. However, what of those bloggers whose blogging stops after several months or even years of blogging – why might their motivation to blog have disappeared?

There has been some limited, and usually anecdotal, research into this issue. Nardi et al (2004) discussed the phenomenon of ‘blog burnout’ where a blogger stops blogging for a time because they have nothing more to say, but suggested that this tends to be a temporary pause rather than abandoning blogging forever. Kim (2007, quoted Cammaerts, 2008) discussed the cases of two Korean bloggers, both of whom ceased blogging, at least for a short period of time, because of hostile comments and online

intimidation campaigns on their blogs. However, again, neither of these case studies actually stopped blogging forever. The first blogger, a Korean immigrant blogger living in New York, stopped blogging for a month and then switched to another (non-Korean) blog-hosting service. The second disabled his comments function for a short while and then reinstated this function but no longer replied to comments. Similarly, Pedersen (2010) found examples of British bloggers who stopped blogging, or at least made their blogs private, after feeling threatened by readers' comments and one blogger who reported having to close down her blog after it was used in evidence against her at a divorce settlement hearing.

Of course it is much more difficult for researchers to access bloggers who have ceased to blog, but an analysis of even a small group of blogs that have been abandoned might offer some clues as to the motivations for stopping blogging, particularly if the group shares certain characteristics, such as working in a particular profession. In addition, in the case of police bloggers the fate of *NightJack* offered a concrete and recent example of what might happen to a police blogger who lost his anonymity.

Methodology

A representative sample of 64 British police blogs was identified using a combination of searching blog directories and through the blogrolls of other police blogs. Since the archives of the blogs were equally as important in determining motivations for starting – and sometimes stopping – blogging, the sample was not restricted to current blogs, although blogs with fewer than one entry were excluded. Following the methodology of Herring et al (2004a and 2004b) and Pedersen (2010), blogs in languages other than English were excluded from the sample, as were photo and audio blogs with little text. The blogs selected were all written by someone who identified themselves as serving in the British police force. As part of a wider study the blogs were then subject to content analysis in order to ascertain the motivations behind them (stated and observed), the main subject matter of the posts, who appeared to be reading them, and what kinds of comments were being added.

The research was carried out in July and August 2011. At the same time, a research blog was set up by the project team and all bloggers studied were contacted and invited to contribute to the study through the blog. The existence of the blog helped to establish the credentials of the research team within the blogosphere and also assisted in promoting the research and its results.

The lifespan of the blogs in the sample varied from under a year (18 blogs) to over five years (5 blogs). Some blogs were updated every few days while others had more infrequent posts. As of September 2011 17 blogs were still current and 47 had seen no posts at least since May of that year.

While it was not possible to identify the rank of the majority of the police bloggers, 28 offered enough information in the 'About Me' section of the blog or in the blog name for the following ranks to be identified: ten constables (including detective constables); six sergeants, three inspectors, three special constables, two retired from the force, one mounted police, one probationer, one dog handler and one dog (presumably written for him by his handler!). In addition, three bloggers were identified as female and two bloggers identified themselves as being from ethnic minorities. This overabundance of male bloggers is interesting. Fletcher (1999) argues that the police use of storytelling is embedded in masculine forms of storytelling practices and that accomplished police storytellers are primarily men, with women officers having trouble casting themselves in the role of organisational storyteller in such a masculine environment as the police force. Perhaps women are also discouraged from such storytelling by the gendered division in policing (Silvestri, 2007).

Motivations for starting to blog

The majority of the police bloggers studied stated their motivations for starting to blog, usually at some point early in the blog's life. There was frequently more than one reason involved and five bloggers in fact gave multiple reasons. Figure 1 below gives a broad representation of these.

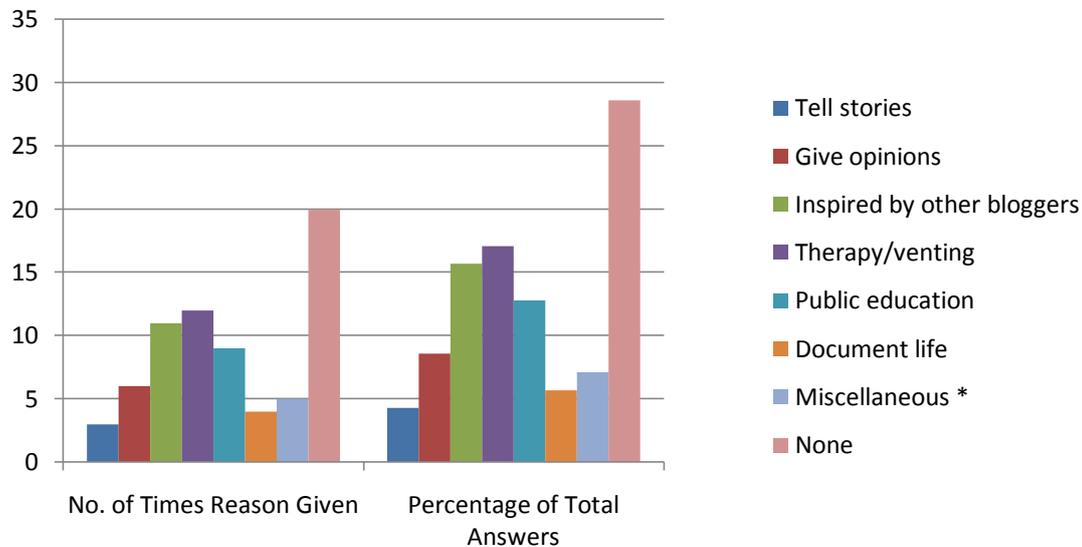


Figure 1 – Stated Motivations for Starting a Blog

As can be seen, almost 29% of the studied bloggers gave no specific reason for starting blogging, but of those who did, the most commonly stated motivations were venting, therapy, encouragement from other bloggers and public education – where a blogger wished to reveal to the public the nature of policing and what is involved. For example, “*to speak out, anonymously, about issues the public should know about*” (*anothercopper* 10 May 2007); “*to paint an honest picture of the kind of crap that we and the officers I am in charge of have to deal with day in, day out, without recognition or reward*” (*SergeantSimon*, 10 August 2006).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the most common motivation was the need to “blow off steam” about work-related issues, either in the form of venting anger or as a more therapeutic writing-down of feelings and frustrations about work. Even the names chosen for some of the blogs illustrate their authors’ emotions about their work: *Constable Confused*; *Disgruntled Cop* or *World Weary Detective*. Of the 63 sampled blogs, only nine did not overtly use their blog as a safe place to let off steam. The main objects of frustration were bureaucracy, senior management within the force, the public and the criminal justice system.

Hate sitting in an office while the airwave is going nuts, being spat at, seeing crims get pathetic sentences. Also getting bored of being told my family should die of cancer. Not the biggest fan of clowns or of people who subscribe to the belief that rank equals knowledge. Which it doesn't.
(*Metcountymounty*, 'About Me')

Comments on the blog associated with the research project also emphasised this motivation for police blogging, explaining that the nature of the job made it difficult for police officers to unburden themselves to their partners. Sharing frustrations with other officers could also be problematic because it might result in problems with Professional Standards departments – one respondent noted “if you vent at work your card is marked and you are seen as a trouble-maker” while another suggested that the anonymity of the internet allowed police bloggers to “*truly let it all out and relieve themselves of their troubles*”.

This “relief from troubles” demonstrates the therapeutic effects of blogging acknowledged by several police bloggers. Blogging about a problem at work could help them work their way through that problem, with several specifically using the word ‘therapy’ in their discussion of their blogging. For instance, *Stressed Out Cop* explained “*This is just online therapy for me*” (About Me) while *One Man and His Plod* stated “*This helped me get over a few issues both at work and my personal life*” (14 February 2010). One of the police dog-handlers wrote an emotional post describing his feelings about having to have a dog put down due to illness, which attracted a large number of comments, support and advice. *Bigfellaiblue* noted that he had been helped “*in my stress battle by those who have visited and taken time to comment*”, thus finding not just the process of expressing his stress to be helpful, but also the reader support from the community of which he was a part.

The support received by others in comments on these blogs also demonstrates another frequently stated motivation for starting a police blog – encouragement from other bloggers and a wish to join the community of police bloggers. The police bloggers quite often mentioned other police bloggers as having inspired their own blogging and several stated that they started blogging after being readers of other police blogs and

finding that they had more to say than could be put into a comment on someone else's blog. This emphasizes the strong community links in this area of blogging.

Having for some time now, lurked, posted and like most others been inspired by Coppersblog and other excellent Police bloggers I have overcome my self-induced lethargy to offer my own rambling views on Metropolitan Life and ..er stuff... (Tales from the Metropolis, 4 November 2006)

The other most frequently given motivation for starting to blog was to educate the public and possibly correct false impressions of the police given by the media. So, for example, the author of *Coppersblog* explained that he “*just wanted to narrow the gap between the public's perception of what we do all day and what we actually do all day*” while *CSI UK* stated that he was trying to “*give people an insight into a great job and dispel a few myths generated by popular TV shows*” (22 June 2009).

A comment on the project blog confirmed

I love the blogs as they try to give the public an insight into the realities of Policing... The public have a very negative view of the police and the blogs try to address that and show that it's not purely down to police officers that people don't get the results or service they expect.

Posts with the aim of educating the public might give advice on issues such as the need to comply with warrants to attend court or attempt to explain why the police act in the way they do and the regulations and systems by which they are constrained. Frequently such advice might be tongue in cheek, such as the posts on what not to say to an officer if you are stopped or *A Non Mouse's* “*my top ten list of SFQs [Stupid Fu**ing Questions] not to ask us. Please.*” (6 December 2005). Tangherlini (2000) suggests that emergency services workers such as paramedics have a deeply cynical and self-deprecatory storytelling tradition. They present themselves as anti-heroes to dispel the popular myth of themselves as silent heroes. They resort to sardonic quips and black humour as a form of protective resistance and to manage their tactical engagement with others, including police officers.

Why cease to blog?

As noted in the literature, some blogs had long hiatuses when no posting occurred, usually for some months. When the bloggers returned to blogging they sometimes offered explanations for this break. For example, *UK Police Sergeant* noted that he had been forced to post more infrequently due to time constraints. Others had taken a conscious decision to stop blogging but later returned – the blogger of *You're Nicked!* explained that he had decided to stop blogging but returned three months later in exasperation at the attitudes he saw in the media – “*Prison officers need to be nicer – it's this kind of cobblers that has prompted my return to the blogosphere*” (27 November 2007). Again, this provides evidence of police-bloggers being motivated by a desire to offer an alternative version of events to those presented in the mainstream media.

Of those that had stopped posting, 28 bloggers simply stopped and offered no reason. However, 19 bloggers gave reasons for stopping blogging. The range of reasons given is shown in Figure 2 below.

The miscellaneous column in Figure 2 represents one blogger who retired, one whose blog had been set up to raise awareness about a particular campaign and finished when the campaign ended, and one who felt too betrayed by politicians to continue:

Well I think we've reached the pinnacle now ladies and gents. Jackie [the Home Secretary Jacqui Smith] took our back pay, they all took our ability to do the job and we find that a large portion of these people see fit to claim unbelievable expenses paid for by you and me. You all know the examples, ride on mower maintenance, cat food, tellies.....oh I'm just so bloody angry. I think it's futile to write anymore. Vent your anger at the ballot box. (Sensible Policing 12 May 2009)

Reasons for Cessation

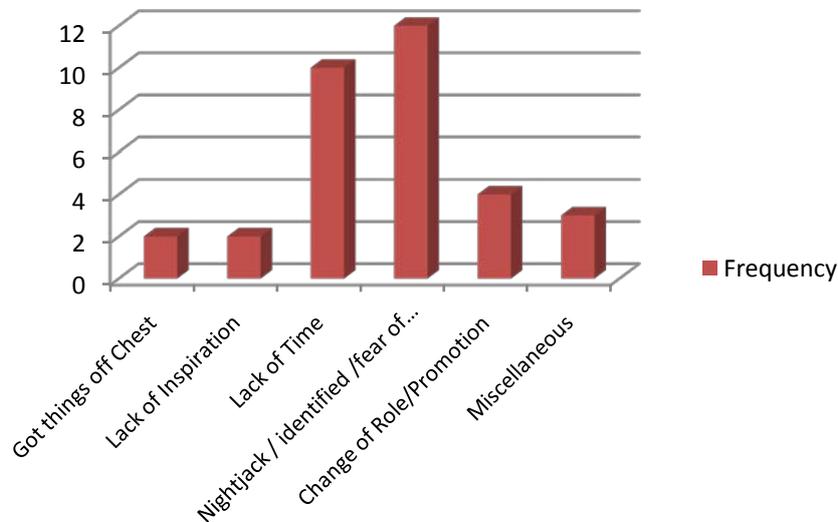


Figure 2 – Stated Reasons for Ceasing to Blog

Here the blogger evidently felt that blogging was no longer sufficient as an outlet for his anger and instead urged his readers to take direct action and to “vent their anger” at the forthcoming elections. Although they did not specifically cite it as a reason for ceasing to blog, two other bloggers who stopped posting also mentioned that they were disillusioned with their blogging because it did not seem to have had any effect on policies, with one making a specific connection between his need for anonymity and this impotence:

I don't think that the blog is achieving much, I made a conscious decision at the start of the blog of making sure I couldn't be identified, so I don't write about cases I've dealt with or people I've worked with. Not even in general terms. (You're Nicked 18 July 2007)

Again, this blogger felt that he needed to move on to other, more direct, forms of action, stating that he felt he could have more input and influence in the Police Oracle forum. This forum is a more officially sanctioned and edited form of computer-mediated discussion, which would not open the blogger to the same risks of being outed

and disciplined. It should also be noted that this blogger was promoted to Inspector during the course of writing his blog and noted “*I know this isn’t the sort of thing that prospective inspectors are supposed to do*” (18 July 2007).

One frequently cited reason for ceasing to blog was simply lack of time (nine bloggers), and this might also be related to the five bloggers who stopped blogging because of a promotion or change in role. *Disgruntled Cop* found that he was better valued when he moved roles, which led to him being less disgruntled and ceasing to blog. However, a decision to stop blogging once promoted might also be linked to the most common reason given for stopping posting and cited by 11 bloggers – the fear of being identified and disciplined. This was partly as a result of the highly-publicised case of *NightJack*, which several bloggers mentioned, and in at least three cases because this had already happened to the blogger.

Well the time has finally arrived, just unexpectedly. I was invited to see top brass today in their office and presented with their opinion about my blog. It seems the blog needs to end completely now. (Semper Fi, 4 December 2006)

Given the current climate on the Police blogging world, the fact I have a mortgage, a Xbox 360 addiction and the overwhelming need to keep my job, I have decided to cease blogging on the world of CSI... Unfortunately my anonymity is no longer guaranteed, also I’m sure that some of my previous posts could be construed as misconduct or disrepute if you looked closely at the wording of some force policies. To sum up it’s not worth the risk. (CSI:UK, 22 June 2009)

In an email to the research team, one blogger stated: “*It is clear that senior officers with UK forces actively discourage the practice, for fear that the truth may actually be brought to the surface. Officers fear that their career progress will be halted or even worse.*” He also cited the case of one of the earliest police bloggers, Stuart Davidson, who used to blog under the *nom de plume* PC David Copperfield and also authored *Wasting Police Time*, which was published by Monday Books in 2006 and serialised in the *Daily Mail* newspaper. Again, under pressure from his force, Davidson ceased his blogging activity, subsequently left the force and is currently a serving police officer in Canada.

However, not all cessations can be identified as being related specifically to the blogger's role as a police officer. Some bloggers simply ran out of things to say. While the blog written by his handler on behalf of a police dog lasted just under a year, with educational posts on the training of the dog, it evidently became more and more difficult to make stories written from the viewpoint of the dog different enough from each other to continue writing. Another blogger (*The Thinking Policeman*) felt that he had said all that he wanted to after a period of some months, but then handed his blog over to another blogger to continue.

Discussion

The majority of police bloggers stated at least one motivation for starting to blog: the most popular being to let off steam or vent, inspiration from other bloggers and a wish to join the police blogging community, and to educate the public about policing. Of course, stated motivations do not necessarily coincide with the observed motivations during the lifetime of the blog, and – in line with previous studies – the motivations for blogging can change during the life of the blog and can be different from the original intentions.

The use of a blog to work out work-related frustrations and stress was very common in our sample, with police bloggers finding both relief in the act of venting and also support from like-minded others within their community who had experienced similar frustrations and could provide support, understanding and often advice while also being there as a non-judgmental audience.

The study showed that the main subjects of frustration and venting are bureaucracy, senior management, the criminal justice system and the public. But politicians, management and the public were also the targets of those blogs that had educational aims. Such aims are focused on explaining the realities and constraints of British policing, and direct comparisons are made to the depiction of the police in the media, thus also incorporating the citizen journalism motivation of wishing to present an alternative point of view to the mainstream media. This is done in a variety of ways – documenting day-to-day activities; explaining the systems and regulations that govern

them; and the storytelling of situations that have occurred and the blogger's emotional response to these situations. More direct methods include advice to the readers on how not to behave towards the police – mostly given in a humorous way but no less seriously intentioned for all that.

Thus the motivations of police-bloggers were very similar to the general motivations outlined by the literature, but with a specific focus on educating the public about the realities of UK policing. In addition, the venting/therapy motivation of blogging was particularly valuable in a high-stress profession where much of what was said in the blogs could not have been verbalized either at work or at home.

The most common reason identified for ceasing to blog was the fear of being identified and the professional consequences that might follow such identification. What happened to *NightJack* had a knock-on effect in the police blogosphere with several bloggers ceasing to blog or making their blog private. We found that many who closed their blogs also deleted them – a testament to the worries they had about possibly losing their jobs.

Another reason for ceasing to blog was lack of time – either because of workload or family commitments. An increase in workload because of promotion at work might also lead to a blogger ceasing to blog – although this might also be affected by the concern that a promoted officer should not be blogging anyway.

While motivations for ceasing to blog are not as well researched as motivations for starting a blog, the most common general reason for ceasing to blog appears to be a lack of time and motivation – simply not having anything to post about and not finding any satisfaction in blogging. There was evidence in our study of some police-bloggers ceasing to blog because of time pressures or a lack of interest in the blog. However, work-bloggers have an added fear of being outed to their employer, which might lead them to be forced to cease blogging – as happened to at least three bloggers in our sample. Worries about this happening to them led several more to cease to blog without receiving any formal warnings, particularly once they had been promoted into a position of authority, although promotion might also lessen some of the feelings of anger or impotence that had led to the blogging in the first place. In addition, some of our sample, particularly those who had been motivated by a desire to change attitudes, felt

disillusioned by a perceived lack of success and stopped blogging because they no longer felt it was a useful tool.

Conclusion

We conclude that blogging is a socially mediated activity that spans the spheres of work and creativity in a useful way for some police bloggers. The current climate of fear is counterproductive and unhelpful. There is much evidence of frustrated communication in the blogs. We suggest that there is a need for a negotiated code of practice or officially sanctioned guidelines for what can and cannot be communicated. Blogging is a useful form of narrative therapy. It acts as a valuable organisational safety valve and, provided there is no ill intent on the behalf of the authors of the blogs, the blogs serve to humanize the face of the service and educate the public about the nuances of police culture and practices. Organisational venting is a healthy activity not a deviant behaviour. As an activity it should be regulated and encouraged (or at least not discouraged). We argue that it is a creative and expressive medium. The automatic sanction of discipline is oppressive and contrary to the freedoms that the police themselves protect.

This paper (and the ongoing research project of which it is a part) makes an incremental contribution to the literatures of blogging and police storytelling. Despite the fact that the blogging activity is predominantly unofficial and thus deniable it is not overtly counter cultural or anti-establishment. Granted there is evidence of humour, irony and sarcasm but these are necessary linguistic tropes. An organisation that cannot laugh at itself lacks a human face. Blogs allow frustrated officers to rail against the system and not the individual.

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