

IVANA RADIĆ\*, ROBERT IDLBEK\*\*, NIKOLAJ LAZIĆ\*\*\*

## Croatian police in digital space – a model proposal for communication with the public via social media

### *Abstract*

*Social media use in police-public communication is a growing topic in the professional and scientific literature. There is an increasing need for digital communication channels with the public. Businesses use social media platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram to promote their brand, reach potential customers, and engage with current clients. Police departments use social media for information gathering, community outreach, and public safety communications. However, there are concerns about insufficient regulation of social media communication.*

*This research aims to assess police officers' attitudes and the environment in which the Croatian police operates, but also to give a proposal of an initial communication model applicable to current conditions. Primary research through focus groups was conducted to gain insight into the police officers' attitudes, while secondary sources such as scientific literature and best practices from other countries were analysed in order to allow further adjustments of the model to the conditions in Croatia.*

*The results of this paper suggest it is possible to propose a maturity-based communication model that will enable the Croatian police to increase their ability to open new communication channels via social media.*

**Keywords:** *social media, Croatian police, communication model, maturity model, gap analysis.*

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\* Ivana Radić, Požega-Slavonia Police Administration, PhD student at University North.

\*\* Assistant Professor Robert Idlbek, PhD, Polytechnics in Požega.

\*\*\* Professor Nikolaj Lazić, PhD, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Zagreb.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In modern time, which is characterized by globalization, mobility and digital technology, hardly anyone remains outside the changes that have shaped our lives so profoundly. Over time, various communication models supported by technology have been developed and are being developed. In general, they focus on improving skills in the use and communication or on understanding the effective mix of content and technological knowledge that also manifests itself as support for the integration of digital resources in business. This is why we often come across the terms *digital space* and *digital culture* in the literature. These are the terms we use to describe the technology-based culture of modern society, and in this context, the term digital culture also encompasses digital technology.

The digital space in which we live and work today also requires new competencies. Thus, it is shown that in addition to the current narrow focus on technological aspects, communication skills related to new technologies also require strengthening. Traditional approaches to developing digital capabilities in business and communication have focused on promoting digital literacy. The term was first introduced by Paul Glistler in 1997 when he defined digital literacy as a set of skills for accessing the Internet, finding, managing and understanding digital information and communication in a network (Glistler, 1997). Digital literacy, as the ability to use and evaluate digital resources, tools and services, is an important segment in education and lifelong learning. Since then, as new technologies and new applications have appeared, many of which have fuelled the ever-increasing need for Internet communication, the concept has become more complex. Digital competence today encompasses more than just knowing how to use devices and applications; it relates to communication skills using information and communication technology (ICT), as well as information skills. The use of ICT requires special knowledge and compliance with legal and ethical aspects of privacy and security, as well as an understanding of the role of ICT in society. The new possibilities brought by its application are based on the new communication environment and the redefinition of communication patterns used up until then in the communication between police officers and the citizens.

Communication is a fundamental term defined as the transmission of information from a sender to a receiver. When considered through its historical development, communication is associated with culture, social relations and the media used for message transmission. For years, verbal and non-verbal communication was the form of communication between police officers and the citizens, while today we are talking about modern communication patterns via diverse media and communication functions. By opening new communication channels, we are also talking about education and the need to adapt both message senders and receivers.

According to Broom (2010), organizations establish relations with their stakeholders, i.e. the public (citizenship), via public relations. This communication takes place through the processes of solving problems and responding to inquiries, and through emphasizing the responsibility of an institution and by placing focus on the public interest.

Operating transparently is one of the fundamental features of police activities in democratic states. This is why the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) is aware of the importance

of the role of public relations and continuously works on increasing communication quality and its adaptation to new challenges brought by the digital age by investing in manpower and technology, which is mentioned almost daily in the national media. This paper was prepared based on that. Since the structure of the Ministry of the Interior consists of several organizational units such as the General Police Directorate, the Civil Protection Directorate, the Police Academy, different Police Administrations of various categories and others whose jobs are interconnected, it is not possible to separate police communication from the communication of other components of the Ministry of the Interior. Accordingly, the communication experiences of all organizational units are included in this paper and the terms *the Ministry of the Interior (MUP) public relations* and the *police public relations* are applied uniformly.

The scope of activities of the Ministry of the Interior public relations officers can best be expressed using numbers. According to internal records, approximately fifty employees in the Public Relations Department within the Minister's Office and in 20 police administrations during the 2020 "crisis" answered more than 33.000 inquiries from the citizens and journalists. It is estimated that during this period the public was informed daily via more than 2.400 announcements and published news based on completed criminal investigations and other events of public interest. The news was published on <https://mup.gov.hr>, <https://policija.gov.hr> and <https://civilna-zastita.gov.hr> portals and on the websites of 20 police administrations, while the media were invited on site via SMS messages. Police public relations officers participated in a large number of local and national media radio and television shows.

The problem of better preparation of police officers for the effective use of ICT in communication is a permanent issue of education. Bearing in mind the aforementioned assumptions and observed problems, the aim of this paper is to propose a model and action plan for the police public relations via social media. The purpose of such a model is evident in the establishment of the necessary elements and the definition of the procedures and rights of competence of the Croatian police officers for communication on social media. Education is thus directed towards the use of technology and digital resources and the development of communication skills. Although this conceptualization acknowledges the relevance and importance of technical knowledge and skills, it takes a broader sociocultural context.

## **2. ANALYSIS OF THE SITUATION**

### **2.1. A brief overview of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia communication via social media**

The Ministry of the Interior uses several channels of digital communication, among which the websites of the Ministry of the Interior, the General Police Directorate, the Civil Protection Directorate, the Police Academy, Forensic Science Centre Ivan Vučetić, Police Museum, Police Solidarity Foundation, Directorate for European Affairs, International Relations and European Union Funds and 20 Police Administrations stand out. One of the major projects of the Ministry of the Interior in the field of communication with the community is the interactive portal on missing persons [www.nestali.hr](http://www.nestali.hr), introduced in 2011

within the project “National Records of Missing Persons (Croatian – Nacionalna evidencija nestalih osoba) – NENO“.

Since 2015, the citizens have been able to use the mobile application “MUP – Security and Trust” for e-reports of suspicious events. In addition, since 2016, a profile has been opened on *Flickr*, a social platform for sharing images and video content. A large number of e-mail addresses of the Ministry of the Interior’s organizational units and social media are used as a daily communication channel.

According to Table 1 below, an overview of social media and a post analysis on the official profiles of the Ministry of the Interior’s organizational units shows continuity only on certain Twitter and Facebook profiles, while posting on other profiles seems to lack a clear strategy.

New technologies in communication place an emphasis on new communication platforms, such as Telegram, whose share in the communication platforms market is strongly increasing alongside TikTok, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook and SnapChat, which are already popular in Europe (SensorTower, 2022). Therefore, the introduction of the Police Academy profile on TikTok during May 2022 and posting of a series of short video materials should be highlighted as a good attempt to animate a larger number of candidates for law enforcement profession.

*Table 1: Overview of profiles of the Ministry of the Interior’s organizational units on social media*

Social media	Profile name/URL link	Number of followers on 10.02.2023	Joined on
Facebook	Zaklada policijske solidarnosti@zaklada.policijske solidarnosti <a href="https://www.facebook.com/zaklada.policijske.solidarnosti">https://www.facebook.com/zaklada.policijske.solidarnosti</a>	1.990	January 2011
	Policijska akademija “Prvi hrvatski redarstvenik” @Policijska.akademija.MUP.RH <a href="https://www.facebook.com/Policijska.akademija.MUP.RH">https://www.facebook.com/Policijska.akademija.MUP.RH</a> Privatna grupa	30.372	March 2011
	Muzej policije@muzej.policije <a href="https://www.facebook.com/muzej.policije">https://www.facebook.com/muzej.policije</a>	2.200	March 2018
	Ravnateljstvo civilne zaštite MUP RH <a href="https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068824286368">https://www.facebook.com/profile.php?id=100068824286368</a>	24.000	February 2020
Twitter	MUP-RH@mup_rh <a href="https://twitter.com/mup_rh">https://twitter.com/mup_rh</a>	11.880	August 2016
	MUP-RH@RavnateljstvoCZ <a href="https://twitter.com/RavnateljstvoCZ">https://twitter.com/RavnateljstvoCZ</a>	7.381	February 2020

Instagram	DAN POLICIJE <a href="https://www.instagram.com/danpolicije/">https://www.instagram.com/danpolicije/</a>	765	September 2017
	policijska.akademija.mup.hr <a href="https://www.instagram.com/policijska.akademija.mup.hr/">https://www.instagram.com/policijska.akademija.mup.hr/</a>	4.419	May 2021
TikTok	pamuprh POLICIJSKA AKADEMIJA <a href="https://www.tiktok.com/@pamuprh?lang=en">https://www.tiktok.com/@pamuprh?lang=en</a>	16.100	May 2022
YouTube	Kanal MUP-a RH i policije / muptv192 <a href="https://www.youtube.com/user/muptv192/">https://www.youtube.com/user/muptv192/</a>	80.000	September 2010
LinkedIn		899	

*Source: drafted by the authors*

## **2.2. Analysis of regulations of the Ministry of the Interior in the field of public relations via social media**

The basic internal document according to which the Public Relations Department of the Ministry of the Interior operates is the Public Relations Strategy of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia (Borovec, 2011). The document briefly mentions social media as a communication tool, which is insufficient for today's important segment of communication. At the time the aforementioned strategy was drafted, ten years ago, social media were not expected to play a greater role in police operations. Since then, the development of technology and the global availability of the Internet has significantly influenced the development of social media as a global communication phenomenon. The strategy that emphasizes the intensification of communication and proactivity was adopted in accordance with a series of laws in force at the time: the Police Act (Official Gazette 34/11), the Police Duties and Powers Act (Official Gazette 76/09), the Criminal Procedure Act (Official Gazette 152/08, 76/09, 80/11), the Office for Suppression of Corruption and Organized Crime Act (Official Gazette 76/09, 116/10, 145/10, 57/11), the Youth Courts Act (Official Gazette 84/11), the Media Act (Official Gazette 59/04, 84/11), the Electronic Media Act (Official Gazette 135/09, 84/11), the Right to Access Information Act (Official Gazette 172/03), the Data Secrecy Act (Official Gazette 79/07), the Personal Data Protection Act (Official Gazette 103/03, 118/06, 41/08) and the Police Code of Ethics and the Civil Servants Code of Ethics (Official Gazette 40/11).

Furthermore, the document Guidelines of the Ministry the Interior in relations with the media (MUP RH, 2018), an integral part of the aforementioned Strategy, talks about the system of prompt reporting by SMS. In other countries worldwide, in recent times, this form of communication has been supplemented by communication via social media, with Twitter leading the way, which is particularly observable in crisis communication (Heverin and Zach, 2011; Sullivan, 2012; Shemberger, 2017; Nikolovska, Johnson and Ekblom, 2020).

The annual work plan of the Ministry of the Interior for 2022 (MUP RH, 2022) defines the development of responsible, professional and interactive communication through the measure Public Records of the Work of the Ministry and the Police, which can be

implemented with quality while strengthening communication via social media. An analysis of the available documents revealed that there are no prescribed norms, rules and procedures of the Ministry of the Interior related to the field of digital communication. This opens up a space for creating a proposal for a communication model, a model that would include available digital channels with a special emphasis on social media.

### **3. MODEL'S THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL SOUNDNESS**

Based on the mathematical theory of communication, the Shannon-Weaver model was created (Shannon and Weaver, 1964), which emphasizes the reduction of uncertainty and noise during communication. It represents the so-called linear model of communication that enables an understanding of how communication functions. Thus, the communication process contains the following components: sender, message, channel, receiver and feedback. Communication context, feedback and the issue of communication noise are also emphasized as highly important.

We can say that the model's aim is to deliver unchanged and as accurate as possible information sent from the information source to the destination with maximum reduction of the so-called noise in the channel. Technical noise occurs with media and channels, and semantic noise occurs with senders and receivers. These noises, naturally, affect the data transmission capacity. In the first case, they affect the successful transmission of messages, and in the second case, the successful message encoding, i.e. decoding. Naturally, the lower the noise, the lower the uncertainty surrounding information transmission, and the higher the noise in the channel, the higher the probability that the information will be transmitted incorrectly.

The aforementioned model of communication can also be used to understand communication via social media. The sender is a person sending the message, the message is the content that is published, the channel is a social media platform, and the receiver is a person receiving the message, while the feedback is the comment and/or reaction by other users.

It should be noted that feedback occurs in every interpersonal communication since it is impossible not to communicate (Watzlawick, 1967). Even when the feedback is silence, the communication process continues and is two-way in a sense that the receiver of the information becomes the sender. With this in mind, the Shannon-Weaver model helps to understand how communication functions not only in technical systems, but also on social media.

If the police are placed in focus as the basic generator of messages (source of information), it is unquestionable that the most accurate information as possible should be conveyed to the stakeholders. This process requires additional analysis of all aspects of communication, only some of which will be listed in this paper. A complete model of communication can only be created if all aspects of communication are taken into account, if a detailed analysis of potential noises and available human, organizational and technological resources is performed.

### 3.1. Foreign research as a basis for communication model proposal

The conclusions of many studies show that the strong application of social media is an area requiring additional focus due to its increasing importance, especially in crisis situations (Denef et al., 2012; O'Connor and Zaidi, 2021; Hu, Dong and Lovrich, 2022). It is necessary to approach this communication channel with caution, considering that numerous research results (Meijer and Thaens, 2013; Boateng and Chenane, 2020; Jungblut and Jungblut, 2021) warn of the necessity of a comprehensive strategic approach of the police towards communication on social media.

Research conducted ten years ago (Denef et al., 2012) emphasizes that law enforcement agencies throughout Europe should define and implement strategies for the use of social media in their daily work. Since then, it has become increasingly clear that the information available on social media can be an invaluable source of information for the police when conducting investigations. In this way, crime prevention can be improved and the number of potential criminal acts can be reduced. For the collection and possibility of applying information collected via social media, it is necessary to prepare a legal framework, not only technological and organizational procedures.

The analysis of digital communication channels, which also include social media, has become a financially justified model for the implementation of certain police procedures. This is supported by the increasingly developed analysis tools, as well as the increasingly high level of education of police officers. Naturally, there are also a number of problems arising from such a practice. One of them is the fact that the process of collecting information is different for each social media. This further complicates the preparation and education of employees for the implementation of data collection and analysis procedures. On the other hand, the fact that it is necessary to invest less time and financial resources to collect information from social media compared to collecting information directly in the field favours this practice. For this reason, the aforementioned authors group social media implementation strategies with regard to the purpose of application and identify the following categories:

- information source for the areas of criminal investigations
- police presence in the public
- information distribution
- community knowledge collection
- public contact
- police work in the community
- showing the human side of the police
- support to the IT infrastructure of the police
- effective police work.

The above represents a good basis for the development of the initial model of police communication with stakeholders, which was incorporated into the later proposed model. The mentioned categories need to be further analysed and potential problems and opportunities that are specific to our area should be explored within them. The proposal of the initial version of the model is a step towards the creation of institutional rules and a defined strategy, which

is a prerequisite for sustainable and positive management of digital communications in police work.

### **3.2. Primary research conducted in Croatia**

For the purposes of creating the initial model proposal, a qualitative research using the focus group method was conducted in November 2021 on a sample of six public relations employees of the Ministry of the Interior working for different organizational units. Given the high level of knowledge on public relations topic, many years of professional experience and experience with social media from a private and business aspect, the aforementioned respondents represent a valuable source of information.

The research was conducted with the aim of gaining a deeper understanding of the respondents' perception of the use of social media and digital communication channels as means of work of the Croatian police, as well as the possibility of using the aforementioned communication channels in everyday work and the procedures of collection and analysis of data obtained in the field. Furthermore, the goal of the research is to prepare for the implementation of a deeper analysis of the mentioned issue, which will be conducted on a larger number of respondents.

Preparation for the implementation of the research included the creation of a Protocol for a Semi-Structured Interview. The protocol was created based on the mathematical theory of communication (Shannon and Weaver, 1964) and the Shannon-Weaver model of communication, which emphasizes the reduction of uncertainty and noise during communication, and uses the above-identified strategies of implementing social media with regard to the purpose of application (Denef et al., 2012).

The protocol for conducting scientific research using focus groups included the following steps:

1. Defining a clear research question: *How can digital communication channels be used to achieve a better public relation, keeping in mind the technological, organizational and human limitations of the Croatian police?*
2. Defining the thematic units covered by the research: During the implementation of the focus group, the participants discussed communication and changes brought about by digital technology and police communication via social media. A great debate developed during the discussion about the organizational, technological and human preparedness of the Ministry of the Interior for communication via social media. The issue of how would communication via social media influence the legitimacy of the police, the citizens' trust in the police and *procedural justice* was also discussed, and at the end, concrete proposals for improving communication were provided.
3. Identifying potential participants: After obtaining consent to conduct a focus group, the selection of interlocutors was made based on their affiliation to a homogeneous group of approximately 50 police officers who professionally deal with public relations with the Ministry of the Interior and who communicate with the citizens on a daily basis. When selecting the six focus group participants, in addition to many years of

professional experience, care was taken to ensure that different organizational units of the Ministry of the Interior (Minister's Office, the Civil Protection Directorate and different police administrations of various categories) were represented and that the criterion of the gender structure of the sample in relation to the target group was met. Six participants, five women and one man, is the optimal size of the focus group, which allowed each individual to express his opinion and develop the conversation's group dynamics.

4. Preparation of the environment for the implementation of data collection via the focus group: Given that the research was conducted during the pandemic and the selected participants are members of different organizational units of the Ministry of the Interior and that they are located in different locations throughout Croatia, it was not possible to gather them in one physical place. For this reason, a meeting was organized via the available TCR (Teleconferencing Room) channel of the police, i.e. via video-streaming. The video-streaming of the focus group was recorded for later analysis using Bandicam screen capture software. Preparation for quality analysis of the results included video transcription performed using the Sonix online platform with specific corrections of incorrectly recognized parts. In addition to the transcript, when analyzing the results, the notes taken during the focus group were also used, and the non-verbal communication of the participants was monitored. Data from video transcripts were coded and compared using constant comparative analysis according to the Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The processing was done by sorting the answers according to the questions from the semi-structured interview, paying attention to their frequency, comprehensiveness, intensity, specificity, consistency and perceived importance. As a result of the processing and analysis, a written narrative report was prepared with citations of crucial ideas (Krueger & Casey, 2000).
5. Conducting the discussion: At the beginning of the discussion, the respondents were informed of the fact that the event was being recorded, to which they verbally agreed, and that the protection of the identity of the participants would be fully respected. They were also told that participation in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw at any time. The 90-minute discussion based on a semi-structured questionnaire was led by two moderators, encouraging the equal inclusion of all participants in the conversation.
6. Analysing and systematizing the results: The results obtained by analysing the transcripts show that there are a number of positive examples of the use of digital channels in the work of the Croatian police. Respondents can cite a number of examples of digital public relations and are generally optimistic about changes brought by technology and community development.

The results also indicate certain problems, the first of which is the lack of human resources for deeper acceptance of social media as a communication channel. The introduction of the so-called two-way communication in which the police would respond to questions and comments posted on social media is perceived by the respondents as a process that is impossible to achieve with the current distribution of work tasks and the number of people and without a

significant change in the way public relations services function. Respondents also believe that a stronger use of social media and digital communication channels would be a useful investment in increasing the legitimacy and efficiency of the Croatian police. They believe that through more frequent, planned and better information distributed via digital channels, the police can distribute accurate information to the public in a timely manner and thus reduce, or at least mitigate, the problems that are a consequence of sensationalism, which is a tendency of certain media. Adequately trained police officers could prepare materials for posts on individual social media depending on the target groups of their users, which primarily differ with regard to age. The respondents showed that they understand the issue of preparing texts and visuals for posts on different social media, but they are not familiar with the possibilities offered by tools for central and uniform posting such as Kontentino, HootSuite and similar tools.

The research participants share the opinion that with the help of a quality presence on social media, the reputation and positive public opinion of the police can be increased. However, without adequate training of public relations workers for the use of social media, the possibility of achieving a completely opposite effect remains. In addition to education, respondents point to the need to create and consistently apply standards for graphic preparation and clear instructions for creating posts on social media.

In addition to the aforementioned implementation measures, it is necessary to define evaluation criteria for statistics on post and post reach, as well as the level of stakeholders' social involvement with regard to post on social media. The metrics that are applied in the real sector, according to the respondents' conclusions, are not adequate for the public sector and the goals that the police should achieve.

In addition to the use of social media for police communication with the citizens, the results of the conducted research indicate the importance of the ability to collect information necessary for police work from posts on social media. The possibility of collecting information from the social community is recognized as a good reason for additional engagement in this direction. Furthermore, regarding the possibility of organizing the police to open communication channels via social media, the obtained results show that it would be desirable to have one organizational centre that would be the starting point for new forms of communication with the citizens. This centre should lead the administration of public profiles of the police on social media, have an advisory role and provide the technology and knowledge (education) necessary for quality public relations work.

#### **4. PROPOSED MODEL OF POLICE DIGITAL COMMUNICATION WITH STAKEHOLDERS VIA SOCIAL MEDIA**

Based on the strategy of implementing social media with regard to the purpose of application as suggested in the conclusions of the European Commission project (Denef et al., 2012) and the aforementioned conclusions of the focus group analysis as an initial source of information in Croatia, an initial model of digital communication of the police with stakeholders via social media was constructed. It describes the possibility of creating a strategic approach to managing social media for the needs of the Croatian police, as well as the possibility of creating proposals for processes and procedures for the implementation

of the aforementioned conceptual model in practice taking into account the aforementioned theoretical framework.

The GAP analysis and action plan proposal is based on the concrete specifics in which the police in the Republic of Croatia operate, considering legal frameworks and legislation. The specified specifics were further clarified during the dialogue with the focus group members.

The maturity model is a process used to assess and improve an organization's capabilities. It is a structured approach that evaluates the organisation's current state against a predetermined set of criteria or standards. The maturity model aims to identify gaps in existing capabilities and develop a plan to bridge those gaps. At the end of the proposed model, two maturity levels and a GAP analysis are proposed.

#### **4.1. Model's focus**

It should be noted that the model's focus was proposed based on the already mentioned scientific literature, considering public opinion, the level of crime, illegal behaviour and fear of crime. The proposed model implies the distribution of information in such a way that interest groups (stakeholders) are provided with information focused on several basic areas. Within each area, it is necessary to carry out additional collection of information by a larger number of respondents (focus groups, professionals) in order to precisely determine what form of narrative, i.e. reporting and/or communication is the most favourable within proposed topics. Suggested topics/areas are elaborated in the text under the following subheadings.

##### *4.1.1. Public opinion*

The satisfaction of the citizens with the police depends on their previously acquired attitudes, i.e. on how well the police perform their work, on their legitimacy and the application of fair procedures. An important segment is community trust, and social media can help as a two-way tool in building that trust. It is necessary to regularly and systematically communicate with messages in order to dispel rumours and correct misinformation, and to become a credible source of information for the media and the public during crises, which is also discussed in recent scientific sources (Hu, Dong and Lovrich, 2022).

##### *4.1.2. Crime rate*

Communication via social media should be used during police investigations and criminal investigations. In doing so, it is necessary to focus on criminal offenses and misdemeanours, missing and wanted persons, criminal offenses committed on the Internet, as well as crimes for which a photo or video of potential participants or observers of the event has been published, expressly taking care not to jeopardize transparency (Ruddell and Jones, 2013; Colbran, 2020). Furthermore, it is necessary to intensify communication with the community through advice on preventing crime by announcing necessary self-protection measures, regularly reporting on crime rates, responding to the citizens' inquiries sent via social media, etc.

#### 4.1.3. *Unlawful conduct and fear of crime*

The fear of unlawful conduct, crime and crisis situations often keeps people in their homes and in these cases the main source of information is the mass media and social media. The mass media have a tendency of sensationalism, which was perceived from the focus group analysis, which is why the institution's direct public relations via social media is a more objective way of communication. Police officers are in daily contact with the citizens and have professional knowledge and authority that can influence the improvement of the citizens' perception of safety. One of the important police strategies is the encouragement of police-citizen cooperation in which citizens contribute to solving problems. This simultaneously forms a more favourable attitudes about the police. Social media represent a good channel for the distribution of such information.

#### 4.2. **Model's target interest groups (stakeholders)**

The target interest groups are segmented based on the information collected by the focus group. This information refers to the concrete situation on the ground and the respondents' perception of whether it is possible to communicate in the same way with all stakeholders or recipients of the information. Campaigns on social media should target certain stakeholder groups (Ruddell and Jones, 2013), which is also confirmed by the respondents in the conducted research. Bearing in mind the different interest and age groups with whom communication is planned, it is possible to divide the groups into the following information consumers:

- children and the youth
- middle-aged people
- the elderly.

Within these target groups, it is possible to make further profiling of posts using the so-called *hashtags* (#). A *hashtag* is a tag that makes it easier to find information on a specific topic or content of interest. Once *hashtags* are defined, it is easy for users to search for content that interests them. Labels must be defined in one, central place and be pre-approved for use. In this way, it is possible to achieve an easier flow of information towards representatives of local self-government units, associations, potential partners in preventive projects etc.

Due to a large number of potential information consumers, it is necessary to take into account different levels of their education, information, experience and other possible limitations. To be more exact, communication that is simple and comprehensible to everyone should be applied.

#### 4.3. **Legal framework**

When adopting the Public Relations Strategy of the Ministry of the Interior of the Republic of Croatia (Borovec, 2011), digital communication channels were not described as channels that differ from classic communication channels. Today, twelve years later, it would be necessary to propose a methodological framework – a model that would be applicable to a system of this size.

The first step should be drafting the document Police Communication on Social Media Strategy, which needs to define goals and target groups, communication methods and tools,

processes and procedures when publishing information, and methods of evaluating the success of the mentioned communication channels.

The proposed document would be the basis for the development of a model of digital communication via social media with the aim of increasing the communication reach of the police towards the citizens and interested groups. The main reason for using digital tools is to increase the number of followers and, accordingly, to expand a quality and socially responsible community. The aforementioned community should have the possibility of one-way communication in its first phase, and two-way communication in the second phase. This communication should initially be applicable only to information distribution, initially without the possibility of reporting criminal and misdemeanour offenses by the citizens. For such procedures, there are already available mechanisms used by the citizens (for example, mobile application “MUP – Security and Trust” for e-reports of suspicious events).

The new channel of information distribution needs to be defined in other regulations as well, such as the *Police Code of Ethics* (NN 62/12) and the *Rulebook on Disciplinary Responsibility of Police Officers* (NN 141/11). It is necessary to define acceptable and unacceptable behaviour in connection with the personal use of social media by police officers. In doing so, it is necessary to take into account the individual rights and freedoms of employees when publishing content while balancing the potential negative impact that certain content can have on the individual’s employment and the institution as a whole.

All social media pages should contain a disclaimer with clear information that they are not constantly monitored by employees and that visitors should use already existing traditional means of communication for emergencies (such as calling 192 number or the already mentioned “MUP – Security and Trust” application).

#### **4.4. Information distribution platforms and tools**

Considering the different social media that should be the target place for information placement, it is necessary to apply available software tools that facilitate the management of posts and provide a uniform interface for interacting with social media. The use of such tools makes the posting process simpler, and the user (a police officer) does not have to know in detail all the characteristics of a particular platform. The tools that can be used are “in the cloud”, and some of the most well-known ones are Hootsuite, Kontentino, SocialPilot and ContentStudio. All tools provide a central place to monitor social media presence, plan and create posts, post approval system and reporting.

When choosing social media, it is necessary to focus on those with the greatest reach. According to the data published for Croatia by DataReportal (2022), the first place should be YouTube with 2.9 million users, followed by Facebook with 1.75 million users (limited to persons 13+ years of age), Instagram with 1.45 million users (limited to persons 13+ years of age), Snapchat with 555 thousand users (limited to persons 13+ years of age) and Twitter with 188.9 thousand users (limited to persons 13+ years of age). Considering Croatia is a tourist country, it is necessary to observe the number of users of certain social media at the world level, which indicates the potential of some other social media such as TikTok and Telegram (DataReportal, 2023).

#### **4.5. Content creation**

Creating quality content is important for the viral spread of information and for reaching a large number of readers. Social media base the reach of information mainly on viral sharing among users, but such an approach to creating content is not the one that should be applicable to the majority of the announcements that organizational units of the Ministry of the Interior prepare and publish. Therefore, it is necessary to categorize the published content and try to uniformly create the content of posts from several categories. More specifically, there should be news categories that are informative, news categories that are advisory, then those that serve to involve the community in police activities, various forms of warning to citizens and requesting information from citizens related to community events.

The process of creating content for social media differs depending on the targeted social media, so training is required for the individuals responsible for posting. Platforms that present the aforementioned uniform interface for posting (Hootsuite, etc.) significantly help in this, which is an additional help to police officers who prepare such posts.

#### **4.6. Human support**

It is necessary to create guidelines (manual) for employees who will create and place posts on social media on behalf of the institution. This would achieve uniformity in the visual presentation, dynamics and focus of the announcements. In addition, initial and continuous education of employees who participate in the creation of content for social media is necessary. The focus of education should be new technologies on social media, the psychology of posts and security mechanisms that enable safe access to user accounts. The initial part of the education should cover the basics of working on the chosen platform, i.e. the interface for uniform posting of information.

#### **4.7. Risk management**

Posting materials on social media via profiles representing public sector institutions is extremely sensitive, and social media managed by the police represent their most sensitive form. Due to the large reach of potential posts, the possibility of rapid and viral spread of information and the possibility of incorrect interpretation of the published information by the readers, it is necessary to focus great attention on risk management. Some risks directly result from the aforementioned posts, while some risks result from the implementation of the posting process.

Basic control points of the proposed model should focus on:

1. Posting sensitive information: Information important for the work of services, the processing of specific criminal and misdemeanour offenses and the prevention of unlawful conducts must be made public to a certain extent. Publishing more than the minimum necessary information is generally not desirable and represents a risk.
2. Reputational risk of the organization: Posts that are not appropriately prepared and timed can have long-term consequences for the reputation of the organization, primarily due to the viral possibility of spreading such information. Here, attention should also be

paid to posts that are created as comments or answers to public inquiries of citizens, and leave the possibility of banning.

3. Reputational risk of an individual: Posts that in some way disadvantage an individual, group, organization or group of people with regard to their preferences.
4. Reputational risk of employees: It is necessary to include police employees and to prescribe in the *Code of Ethics* the type of posts that are tolerated on private profiles of employees and what types are not.
5. Security risk in the implementation of the posting process: Competencies for information posting, access to technological tools for posting and the education of individuals who are posting are extremely important; the procedure of saving access data, the inclusion of two-factor authentication via YubiKey keys or other procedures to maintain a high level of security.

In the final model, for each of the listed risks, it is necessary to make an assessment and numerically express and describe it. Special attention should be paid to the General Data Protection Regulation (Regulation (EU) 2016/679), the so-called GDPR, when posting on social media. For this reason, employees should be continuously informed regarding the rules on personal data protection and the possibility of posting such data on social media, the necessary consents and other procedures in connection with the GDPR.

#### **4.8. Quality management system within the proposed model's framework**

The system for managing the quality of presence on social media should enable monitoring and evaluation of the quality of work and efficiency of the entire service in charge of social media. At the same time, it is necessary to establish such a work model that enables monitoring of the number of posts, defined rules, the number of potential users and the reach of posts, access to certain information by external consumers (the citizens), and the improvement of the system of posts and work in accordance with experiences from previous periods. Keeping in mind the frequent changes in the field of social media, constant concern regarding posting procedures and methods and monitoring technology is more than necessary. Within the quality management system's framework, it is necessary to define standard reports that will be delivered and presented to the police management in order to enable constant monitoring of this important communication channel.

Within the proposed model's framework, a continuous and long-term sustainable management system for the quality of presence on social media needs to be ensured by applying the *plan-do-check-act* (PDCA) methodology (Shewhart and Deming, 1939).

#### **4.9. GAP analysis**

Gap analysis is an analysis of the difference between the current state of an organization or process and the desired or desired future state. It is used to identify areas of improvement in an organization or system and to prioritize initiatives and resources to close the gaps between the current and desired states. Gap analysis does not typically provide specific solutions but instead identifies the areas that need to be worked on in order to achieve the desired state.

The subject of analysis is the digital presence of the police on social media. The analysis does not consider other aspects of police presence in the media, but its focus is exclusively on the communication channel based on social media, and does not include other forms of communication, even those executed via digital technologies (for example, “MUP - Safety and Trust” application).

The goal of establishing a digital communication channel via social media, i.e. the desired state of communication, was proposed based on the system of practices established in other countries and their police organizations. At the same time, professional and scientific literature, profiles on social media and materials available on the Internet were analysed, and based on the analysis, the desired state was proposed, as well as an action plan for reaching the desired state.

The transition from the current state of Croatian police presence on social media to the desired state can be described through several development stages, i.e. maturity stages. In the final model of communication, it is necessary to describe each of the phases through a series of conditions that are not fulfilled, are partially fulfilled or are fully fulfilled. Such an approach would enable self-assessment of the current level of maturity and, accordingly, provide guidelines for improvement.

The maturity model first appeared in the scientific literature in the 1980s, primarily as a means of analysing and comparing software development processes (Humphrey, W. S., 1988). It was initially proposed as a means of helping organizations to measure and improve their own development processes, but has since been applied to many other areas, such as project management and organizational change.

The maturity stages can be described through five levels, i.e. extremes. In this model, the first (1<sup>st</sup>) level of maturity is initial, and the final stage (5<sup>th</sup>) is optimized. After that, it is necessary to determine in which phase the presence of the police on social media is currently and in which phase is the desired state in which the Croatian police should be located. These two states are described as follows:

- a) **The current state** of presence of the Croatian police on social media, as previously stated based on the conclusions of the focus group analysis, is in the initial stage of development. The preferred forms and channels of digital communication via social media are not prescribed, there is no defined strategy and goals (what is to be achieved by posting on social media), and there are no defined activity and competence charts. Accordingly, no metrics have been defined to measure communication success, and no quality management system has been established in order to improve the functioning of the system.
- b) Based on the previously presented conclusions of the focus group, **the desired state** of the presence of the Croatian police on social media could be conceptualized as a state in which, in addition to the organizational units of the Ministry of the Interior at headquarters, each police department can have its own profile on social media (if it expresses the need for it). When creating posts, the strategy and mission and vision of the digital presence of the police on social media should be respected. Posts should

have the option of being reviewed by the central team, and there should also be simple instructions for post authors (writers), which specify guidelines for what is desirable and acceptable, and what is not desirable for posts. Published information should be directed towards one of the previously defined areas, and there must be clear performance metrics that should be discussed at police management meetings and reported to the public. The digital presence strategy, mission, vision and goals should change over time based on the data collected in the work of the teams in charge of social media.

An action plan is a tool that enables the transition from the existing to the desired state. In doing so, the existing and desired state must be based on some concrete and exact indicators, such as, in this case, the conclusions of the focus group. However, for precise planning, it would undoubtedly be helpful to have data from several sources, so table 2 presents an action plan that was developed within the framework of this limitation. The action plan constructed in this way contains a framework of activities for the project of introducing the presence of the police on social media. It needs to be further developed to describe all the activities in detail. In addition to the activities, it is necessary to define the time of implementation and competencies and responsibilities, for which there is no basis in the conclusions of the focus group.

*Table 2: Action plan for regulating police activities on social media*

No.	Activity	Activity description
1.	Draft a Police Communication Strategy on Social Media and the required action plans	Define basic documents and guidelines such as mission and vision according to which later posts on social media will be made.
2.	Set up a central team for managing presences on social media responsible for the implementation of all necessary activities and realization of the plan	Some of the activities carried out by the aforementioned team: detection and removal of private profiles that use the official insignia of the Croatian police, creation of profiles of individual police administrations and other organizational units of the Ministry of the Interior in accordance with requirements, helpdesk for police administration employees and organizational units that publish content, controlling and reporting by the management of the Ministry of the Interior, defining hashtags used by all organizational units and making proposals for improving the reporting and management system on social media.
3.	Draft and update the register of police public profiles and other organizational units on social media	Prescribe the procedure for creating the register and keeping records of web addresses, contact persons who maintain profiles, the reason for opening a profile and other information of interest.
4.	Create a new profile registration procedure on social media	Define the reason for opening a new profile, ideas and basic information regarding future posts.

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5. Create a procedure for appointing persons in charge of managing a profile	Define who can manage a profile on behalf of a certain police administration and other organizational units of the Ministry of the Interior and prescribe the procedure for naming and defining the tasks that an individual may and should perform.
6. Draft a training plan and conduct training in the field of social media management for appointed employees	Draft an education curriculum that trains employees for posting on social media (Hootsuite, Content Studio training, etc.).
7. Draft guidelines for the so-called good practices when publishing on social media and a book of graphic standards	Draft a document with instructions on how to post on social media and what types of posts to avoid, how to plan posts, how to focus on target groups, etc. Draft documents with graphic templates to ensure the recognition of posts by the police.
8. Draft a plan for posting on social media	Draft a calendar of what content is posted when and what the focus of a post should be with regard to the categories listed in chapter 4.5. Content creation.
9. Amend the Police Code of Ethics and the Police Act regarding inappropriate communication via social media	Define the rules of communication via social media, private and official profiles, and cases when the reputation of the police has been damaged, with gradation of maladministration level.
10. Select and implement the technical infrastructure for managing presence on social media	Appoint a working group to analyse the available platforms for managing social media and make recommendations for the selection and implementation of individual platforms.
11. Establish a quality management system for the presence on social media in order to plan, execute, check and improve activities	The central team for managing the presence on social media should define the type of information that is collected and the dynamics of its collection with the aim of creating reports that could show deficiencies. Create metrics for monitoring digital communication via social media and reporting by the police management and other activities in accordance with chapter 4.8. Quality management system.

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*Source: drafted by the authors*

## 5. CONCLUSION

An analysis of the available documents related to the work of the Croatian police revealed that there are no prescribed norms and procedures in the field of digital communication of the Ministry of the Interior. The aforementioned shortcomings have opened up a space for the creation of proposals for an initial methodological framework of communication that includes available digital channels with a special emphasis on social media.

The paper presents a proposal for a methodological model of digital police communication with stakeholders via social media. This communication implies a planned distribution of information to targeted interest groups in a simple and comprehensible manner.

By conducting primary research using a focus group, the views of experts employed in positions related to public relations of the Croatian police were determined. The collected information provided an insight into the issue of the application of digital channels and social media, as well as an overview of areas that need to be further investigated and adapted to the specific business situations in which the police operate. This resulted in the creation of the aforementioned proposal for a methodological framework for communication between the Croatian police and stakeholders via social media.

The continuation of the development of the model should be aimed at defining the maturity levels of digital police communication via digital channels and social media, which is the basis for further research into this increasingly important issue. The stated maturity levels would enable self-assessment of one's own maturity level and would provide an insight into the steps that would need to be taken in order to raise the currently assessed level of maturity to the desired state. For this purpose, a customized GAP analysis and an action plan to achieve the desired state were proposed.

The proposed model needs to be further developed by analysing the activity plan and defining the implementation time, competences and responsibilities. The aforementioned activities and a well-established quality management system can significantly influence the development of digital communication of the Croatian police, which will have the ultimate goal of increasing the communication reach towards the citizens and interested groups, i.e. bringing the police closer to the community. Therefore, the perspective of future research in Croatia is twofold. It is necessary to precisely identify the level of digital competencies as a critical predictor of the potential and limitations of digital police communication using appropriate scientific research methods. However, considering that the police must correspond to the community's needs, it is necessary to investigate public opinion on the digital communication of the police. Based on the results of such research, it will be possible to accurately and realistically predict the activities of the police, which are necessary for its effective digital communication, which will make it possible to make a further contribution to its legitimacy and cooperation with citizens.

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## Sažetak

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**Ivana Radić, Robert Idlbek, Nikolaj Lazić**

### **Hrvatska policija u digitalnom prostoru – prijedlog modela za komunikaciju s javnošću putem društvenih mreža**

Primjena društvenih mreža u komunikaciji policije i javnosti postaje sve važnija tema stručne i znanstvene zajednice. To rezultira činjenicom kako je potreba za novim digitalnim kanalima komunikacije s javnošću sve izraženija i u javnom sektoru. Poslovni subjekti primjenjuju društvene mreže poput Facebooka, Twittera i Instagrama za promociju svog brenda, doseg potencijalnih kupaca i interakciju s trenutačnim klijentima. S druge strane, policija se koristi društvenim mrežama za prikupljanje informacija, suradnju sa zajednicom i komunikaciju vezanu uz sigurnost javnosti. No postoji zabrinutost s obzirom na to da komunikacija na društvenim mrežama u tom sustavu nije dovoljno regulirana.

Cilj ovoga istraživanja jest procjena stavova policijskih službenika i okruženja u kojem djeluje hrvatska policija, ali i prijedlog inicijalnog modela komunikacije putem društvenih mreža, primjenjivog u uvjetima u kojima posluje hrvatska policija. Primarno istraživanje putem fokus-grupa provedeno je kako bi se dobio uvid u stavove službenika za odnose s javnošću, dok su sekundarni izvori poput analize znanstvene literature i sustava najboljih praksi drugih zemalja analizirani kako bi se model dodatno prilagodio hrvatskim uvjetima.

Rezultati ovoga rada upućuju na to da je moguće predložiti model komunikacije temeljen na modelu zrelosti, a koji će hrvatskoj policiji omogućiti povećanje sposobnosti stvaranja novih komunikacijskih kanala putem društvenih mreža.

**Ključne riječi:** društvene mreže, hrvatska policija, komunikacijski model, model zrelosti, gap analiza.