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SOCIAL MEDIA IN THE PR ACTIVITIES OF THE POLISH UNIFORMED SERVICES USING THE EXAMPLE OF THE “POLISH POLICE” FACEBOOK PROFILE

Aleksandra Powierska

ABSTRACT

The development of information technologies in the last two decades has made traditional public relations tools insufficient. New media, in particular social media, has opened up the possibility of establishing a direct contact with the public and using a brand to build long-lasting relations. A platform serving a special role in PR

activities is Facebook, whose importance has already been noticed by the Polish uniformed services. The presented analysis of the “Polish Police” profile shows how and to what extent the Police utilize Facebook to create their online image and build relations with the public.

KEYWORDS

police, uniformed services, public relations, social media

INTRODUCTION

Attention to one's image and reputation is now of high priority, both among commercial companies as well as public services. But building positive relations with the public is a difficult task that demands to be carried out within a coherent strategy. Contrary to commercial companies and organizations, whose aim is to sell particular goods or services, the public relations activities of uniformed services concentrate on increasing the credibility and social trust towards their units. The latter is of key importance because social trust directly translates into the effectiveness of activities undertaken by the Police, the State Fire Service and the Border Guard.

The expansion of Web 2.0 solutions in the last decade, in particular the development of social networking services, such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube, has introduced new quality to PR activities. The creators of the strategies for building positive relations with the public have been given means of contact with the public and direct response to their demands. Therefore, it should come as no surprise that also the Polish uniformed services have come to utilize social media in their PR activities. The analysis of their

Facebook profile shows how the Polish Police use the platform to create their image and which of the areas of their activities they recognize as the most important to building social trust.

This article presents the results of a study which analysed the content published on the “Polish Police” fan page between 4 June and 18 October 2013. The categories of coding particular posts were selected in such a way as to facilitate the study results to answer the following research questions:

- How does the Police utilize Facebook in their public relations activities?
- What image of the Police as a uniformed service emerges in the course of the analysis of their Facebook profile?
- What type of content and for what purpose is most frequently published?

The results of the analysis and the detailed methodological assumptions are presented in the final part of this article. In order for the reader to fully understand the discussed topic, this is preceded by a presentation of the main theoretical conceptions concerning public relations and in particular image-building activities in uniformed

services and the direction of their development and change influenced by the development of Web 2.0.

PUBLIC RELATIONS IN THE POLISH UNIFORMED SERVICES – MAIN GOALS OF ACTIVITIES

Public relations is a sphere of marketing activities which has been defined in a variety of ways. But in spite of this multitude of theoretical perspectives, most of the definitions emphasize the same or similar elements. They are encompassed by a definition proposed by Rex Harlow on the basis of his analysis of 472 definitions of other researchers.¹ Harlow defines PR as:

„(...) the distinctive management function which helps establish and maintain mutual lines of communication, understanding, acceptance and co-operation between an organisation and its publics; involves the management of problems or issues; helps management to keep informed on and responsive to public opinion; defines and emphasizes the responsibility of management to serve the public interest; helps management keep abreast of and effectively utilize change, serving as an early warning system to help anticipate trends; and uses research and sound and ethical communication as its principal tools”².

This definition underlines the role of organizations in building relations with the public, responding to crisis situations while taking account of the public interest and maintaining ethical standards. The role of public relations is to serve the development and progress. However, given the specific character of the activities undertaken by the uniformed services, in particular by the Police, a more adequate definition of PR is the one proposed by the Chartered Institute of Public Relations, one which stresses the importance of reputation and public opinion:

„Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. Public relations practice is the discipline, which looks after reputation – with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behavior. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain

goodwill and mutual understanding between an organization and its publics”³.

As Paul Baines, John Egan and Frank Jefkins emphasize, PR activities should not be identified with advertisement, while one of the main factors distinguishing the two spheres is the addressee of the message. The authors mention the police, fire service and emergency service as services which address their message to a wide circle of audiences but, at the same time, are not directed at the sale of products or goods.⁴ This is because the activities of the uniformed services have little to do with advertising since they utilize PR tools primarily to build a positive image of their own units and gain social trust. According to Sławomir Gawroński, the main goals of the uniformed services' PR also include warning the citizens about potential danger, increasing their sense of security and “building social acceptance of the uniformed services' functioning which results in cooperation and support of the general public with respect to the activities undertaken by these services”.⁵

In achieving these goals, the services make use of the support provided by the activities relating to media relations – a part of PR focusing on the cooperation of the services with the media, one that offers a possibility of reaching mass audience. The duties pertaining to this area are usually assigned to spokespersons or press offices of particular services.⁶ As Gawroński points out, of all the uniformed services in the country, it is the Polish Police that possess the most developed organization of press services. Appointed spokespersons, press officers and other officers authorized to release information to the media perform the tasks which are in the competence of the Police Commander in Chief, the Capital Police Commander and provincial and district commanders.⁷ The tasks of the press services are similar at every level and focus

¹ K. Butterick, *Introducing Public Relations: Theory and Practice*, London 2011, p. 6.

² R. Harlow, *Building a Public Relations Definition*, “Public Relations Review”, 1976, vol. 2(4), p. 36.

³ K. Butterick, op. cit., p. 7.

⁴ P. Baines, J. Egan, and F. Jefkins, *Public Relations. Contemporary issues and techniques*, London 2004, pp. 18–19.

⁵ S. Gawroński, *Media Relations służb mundurowych w Polsce. Analiza wybranych formacji*, Kraków-Rzeszów-Zamość 2011, p. 138.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 28.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 151.

mainly on informing the media about current activities and actions of the Police, providing opinions and substantive explanations and responding to all accusations and criticism of the press.⁸

In light of the present study it is important to characterize the Press Service of the Polish Police Headquarters (PPH), as it is the website of the Polish Police Headquarters that the “Polish Police” fan page links to. The press service of the PPH is headed by the Spokesman of the Police Commander in Chief. As Gawroński points out, the duties of both units coincide in many respects.⁹ Apart from informing the press about current activities of the PPH, the Press Service is responsible, *inter alia*, for monitoring the media, “participating in developing the conceptions of information activities in the country concerning the undertakings of the Police organizational units that lead to solving major problems pertaining to social pathologies, criminogenic phenomena as well as prevention and the contacts with the general public”,¹⁰ but also editing the website of the PPH.¹¹ An analysis of the layout of the latter, in particular the presence of social plugins that connect to YouTube and Facebook, shows that in their work, the Press Service takes account of the development of social networks and utilizes solutions which belong to the public relations of the Web 2.0 era.

PR 2.0 – NEW WAYS OF BUILDING RELATIONS WITH THE AUDIENCE

Due to technological development and the increasing availability of the Internet, new ways of direct contact with the audience have gained in popularity. Despite the fact that a direct contact with journalists, organizing press conferences and releasing press information are still important for the uniformed services, running a website and being active in social media have become an equally significant element of their PR strategies.

Especially the latter offer new possibilities of contacting the public.

David Meerman Scot states that in the age of the new media, new principles have come to govern the PR. People are no longer satisfied with the role of a passive audience and they now demand participation. The field of public relations has developed beyond being merely an image of a company or organization created by well-paid specialists. The opinions expressed by customers and published on company websites, blogs and social networking services are now being recognized as an equally important part of PR, because it is these opinions which indicate how the public perceive a given subject and what expectations they hold for a particular company or organization. According to Scot, “the Internet has made public relations public again, after years of almost exclusive focus on media”.¹² Arguably, the above opinion is as valid for the PR of business subjects, with regard to which it was formulated, as for the PR of non-profit organizations, public institutions and the uniformed services.

In her book “PR 2.0: New Media, New Tools, New Audiences”, Deirdre K. Breakenridge points out that PR 2.0 offers not only the possibility to build long-lasting relations with audiences based on contact and direct response to their needs. The development of the new media has facilitated the creation of citizen journalism services as well as the growth in popularity of the blogosphere. Many bloggers and citizen journalists have won recognition and respect in the world of the media, including traditional media. They have become important “players” in the process of building positive relations with the public.¹³

In light of the above change, utilizing the new media, in particular social media, by the services handling the PR of the Polish Police appears to have become a necessity. One of the ways of contacting the public is to maintain the official profile of the PPH on Facebook.

⁸ *Ibidem*, pp. 151–155.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 158.

¹⁰ Official website of the Polish Police Headquarters, <http://www.policja.pl/pol/kgp/zespol-prasowy/86055,Zespol-Prasowy-Komendy-Glownej-Policji.html>, (2 November 2013).

¹¹ *Ibidem*.

¹² D.M., Scot, *The New Rules of Marketing and PR: how to use social media, online video, mobile applications, blogs, news releases, and viral marketing to reach buyers directly*, New Jersey 2007, p. 36.

¹³ D.K., Breakenridge, *PR 2.0: New Media, New Tools, New Audiences*, New Jersey 2008, p. 15.

“POLISH POLICE” ON FACEBOOK – ANALYSIS OF THE OFFICIAL PROFILE OF THE POLISH POLICE HEADQUARTERS

The official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters¹⁴ was created on 13 May 2010. As of 3 November 2013 it has 15,798 fans, that is people who have expressed their interest in the profile by clicking the “Like” button. The basic information provided in the “About” section of the fan page include the address of the PPH and the following description of the mission of the service:

“Police is a uniformed and armed force, whose main goal is to serve and protect the people, and to maintain public order and security. It comprises the following services: criminal, preventive, investigative, Police aviation service and the logistical support Police which handles organizational, logistic and technical matters. Police services also include judicial police.”¹⁵

The content published on the fan page mostly consists of posts, photos, videos and events created by the use of an internal Facebook application, which allows to directly inform other users about a forthcoming event by the option of inviting them to join. The analysis of the posts published between 9 May and 18 October 2013 covered a total of 45 posts. A qualitative data analysis programme called MAXQDA was used for content coding. The content was analysed in two categories, for which separate codes were distinguished.

The first coding referred to the degree of compatibility of the published posts in relation to the needs expressed by the users of mass media. Studying the media image of crime, Katarzyna Witkowska points out that the role of the media is to meet specific needs of the audience:

“Providing information by the mass media significantly contributes to satisfying particular needs of an individual, in particular cognitive needs (acquiring information and knowledge about

the world around and explanations of various phenomena, issues and problems), affective needs (providing emotional and aesthetic experience), and the need for social integration (expanding the potential sphere of contact with other media).”¹⁶

In light of the above distinction, the following types of posts were included in the first category of coding of the “Polish Police” fan page posts:

- posts satisfying the cognitive needs of the user,
- posts satisfying the affective needs of the user,
- posts satisfying the users' needs for social integration.

Within the period under analysis, the most numerous group of posts were those serving an informational function, i.e. those which satisfied the first of the needs mentioned above. They were 27 posts related to apprehension reports, committed crimes and other Police interventions. They presented information gathered from the whole country and each included a link allowing to read the full article on a given topic on the PPH website. The affective needs of the users were satisfied by the published photos presenting uniforms and equipment of police officers. Those were professional and highly aestheticized photos showing police cars, motorbikes, a police boat and police officers preparing for action. The photos are added as so-called “cover photos”, which makes them the main element of the profile's visual identity along with the logo.¹⁷ The photos were originally part of a photo exhibition “Nowoczesna Policja w obiektywie” (“Modern Police on camera”) of a well-known photographer Michał Drabikowski and were intended to present the “different face of the Police”¹⁸ by showing, *inter alia*, “superbly trained men and modern

¹⁴ That it is officially maintained by the Police is suggested by a social plugin on the PPH's website which links directly to this fan page. Moreover, the “About” section of the profile holds the following address: KOMENDA GŁÓWNA POLICJI (“Polish Police Headquarters”), ul. Puławska 148/150, 02-624 Warsaw, Telephone: +48 22 621-02-51.

¹⁵ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL/info>, (3 November 2013).

¹⁶ K. Witkowska, *Medialny obraz przestępczości oraz jego oddziaływanie na kształt realizowanej polityki karnej*, [in:] *Media w Polsce. Pierwsza władza IV RP?*, M. Sokołowski (Ed.), Warsaw 2007, pp. 115–116.

¹⁷ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?set=a.363225257031967.84145.121526247868537&type=3>, (3 November 2013).

¹⁸ Official website of the Polish Police Headquarters, <http://www.policja.pl/pol/aktualnosci/88573.dok.html>, (3 November 2013)

equipment – police cars, helicopters, motorbikes, quads and a pyrotechnic robot”¹⁹. It can be inferred that the photos served the function of emphasizing the professionalism and importance of the uniformed services, while it is also important to note considerable graphical work that was put into the presented pictures.

Posts which concerned social campaigns or directly called for participation in a particular event satisfied the users' need for social integration. Nine posts were classified under this category, of which two are particularly worthy of note. The first read: “>>Whoever saw, whoever knows<< – Wanted”²⁰ and linked to the PPH's website, on which users could report a person missing or leave a message concerning people having the “wanted” status in the Police database. The post is an example of a call for social mobilization and help in finding people who broke the law. The second post concerned the Police Holiday and invited users to actively participate in its celebration: “Central Police Holiday celebration. The Police Holiday is a special day for officers. It is the time of promotion, nominations and decorations – of both the police officers as well as those who work with them every day. Central celebration will be held in Warsaw beginning 20th July. In celebration police officers will be joined by representatives of the state's highest authorities, academic circles, associations and – most importantly – people who receive the support of the Polish Police daily. The Police Holiday is also a massive family picnic which will be held on Sunday on Agricola.”²¹ Two aspects of the post may be indicated as having an integrating character. First, the Police Holiday was not an event held for police officers but first and foremost for people whom the Police serve. Second, it had the form of a picnic, that is an event that one could celebrate with the whole family. The Police Holiday was therefore an event that promoted the integration between police officers and members of the public and between the citizens themselves.

The list of posts divided with regard to their number is presented in the table below:

Table 1. Posts published on the “Polish Police” fan page divided according to the satisfied needs of the user

TYPE OF PUBLISHED CONTENT WITH REGARD TO THE NEEDS OF THE USER	Posts satisfying the cognitive needs of the user	Posts satisfying the affective needs of the user	Posts satisfying the users' need for social integration
NUMBER OF POSTS	28	8	9

The second type of coding covered primarily the type and subject of the published content. The classification and analysis of this data allows for the determination of what image of their own units the Police want to show to Facebook users and how they attempt to build relations with the fans of their profile. The posts were divided into the following categories:

- reports of police actions,
- posts which promoted campaigns and social actions of the Police (or actions in which they took part),
- posts which explained the functioning of the Police,
- posts which informed about police events and holidays,
- posts and photos which shaped the image of the Police.

The first category was the most popular one on the “Polish Police” fan page and contained 20 posts published in the period under discussion. They concerned actions of the Police that were successfully carried out in various regions of Poland and resulted in apprehending criminals, closing down of an illegal tobacco factory, intercepting illegal drugs and detecting fraud. What is worth mentioning, they also included three posts which showed the heroism of police officers and at the same time emphasized the fact that the Police serve the ordinary man. The first of them concerned two policewomen who saved an elderly woman from the fire. The post read as follows: “Policewomen saved a woman from the fire. Exceptional vigilance of policewomen from

¹⁹ Ibidem.

²⁰ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

²¹ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

Żyrardów saved the life of a 73-year-old woman who lost consciousness in attempting to put out grass fire. Had it not been for a quick reaction and help of the policewomen, the event could have had a truly tragic conclusion.”²² Another post concerned a police officer who over the phone instructed desperate parents on how to give first aid to their child: “A police officer saved the life of a 2-week-old girl. 'My child stopped breathing, please tell me what to do!' – this dramatic call for help was received by assistant duty officer in Police Headquarters in Częstochowa, Senior Sergeant Damian Bachniak. The officer calmed the parents down and instructed them on what to do to make the little girl breathe again. His composure and knowledge of first pre-medical aid probably saved the life of the baby.”²³ The third post described how a police officer provided immediate help to a football player: “A police officer saved the life of an Odra Club player. Dramatic events unfolded during he match of Odra Opole. One of the players collapsed in the 60th minute of the match. He received immediate help from a police officer from the Independent Preventive Police Subunit of the Provincial Police Headquarters in Opole. This probably saved his life.”²⁴ It is worth noting that each of these posts contained the word “saved” and underlined the desired features of a police officer: composure, quick reaction and experience. These rhetorical techniques were used to emphasize the reliability of the Police and their readiness to bring help to citizens. It can be inferred that the goal was achieved: the posts discussed above met with a positive reaction of Facebook users and received a total of 977 “Likes”, while their content was shared 104 times. The comments made to the posts expressed congratulations and recognition. The Police had an opportunity to inform the public of their own success on their own (without the involvement of journalists) but they also received response directly from the users, some of which

also expressed specific expectations of police officers. However, it must be admitted that as much as the posts published to the profile wall did accomplish its PR goal, the lack of response to the accusations expressed by the users in the comments to the posts may indicate difficulties in the situation of a communication crisis.

The “Polish Police” profile also hosts messages which promote social campaigns and actions organized or co-organized by the Police. One of the initiatives which received the greatest promotion in the discussed period was the campaign entitled “Kieruj się rozsądkiem” (“Follow your reason”). It was addressed to pedestrians, senior citizens and motorcyclists and encouraged “all road users to behave safely on the road, show more kindness, refrain from aggressive behaviour and observe the law”²⁵. Another Police initiative that is worth mentioning from the point of view of using PR strategies was the action which raised drivers' awareness of the dangers of using mobile phones while driving. It was a joint campaign of the Police and the Ani Mru Mru Cabaret. By inviting famous people to join their campaigns the Police are able to warm up their image and build positive relations with the public. The initiative was well received: 110 people expressed their approval by clicking the “Like” button. The above promotion of such campaigns on Facebook may be interpreted as aiming to show the Police as socially engaged service whose priorities include the education of the public and which is also open to cooperation with other subjects.

There were only three posts which belonged to the category of posts which explained the functioning of the Police. They referred to the following topics: the procedure of testing the sobriety of drivers who refused to undergo such tests, the tests of ISKRA radars and a disclaimer concerning a computer virus by the use of which hackers attempted a false impersonation of the Police. Such a small number of posts may raise reservations. One of the basic principles of building relations with the public, a fact which is especially relevant for public institutions and the uniformed services, is to ensure that the citizens

²² Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

²³ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

²⁴ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

²⁵ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

understand how they function. It appears that Facebook is the perfect means to promote this understanding and engage in a direct dialogue with the platform's users in order to clear up their particular doubts. However, there is no such interaction on the "Polish Police" fan page and the users' questions remain without an answer.

A small number of posts was also classified under the category of posts which informed about police events and holidays. As has been noted above, such messages have a significant potential for integration, while the information concerning the launch of the "Nowoczesna Policja w obiektywie" exhibition had a particular importance for shaping the image of the Police. Posts which provided information about the celebrations of the Police Holiday met with a positive response of the users who expressed their solidarity and approval by posting numerous comments with wishes and praise. The event became the opportunity for both a real as well as virtual meeting.

There were 10 posts which shaped the image of the Police, most of which included the above-described photos from the professional photo session. Moreover, there was yet another publication which deserves to be mentioned, namely that of a photo album called "Czworonogi w Policji" ("Police Pets").²⁶

It is an example of action aimed at raising the users' interest and sympathy, one which also perfectly fit the narrative trends of Facebook since images of animals are a popular form of posts that have a high viral and communication potential. This category also included posts portraying the Police as a professional and reliable service: "66 PERCENT OF POLES APPRAISED HIGHLY THE WORK OF THE POLICE. The majority of Poles highly appraise the activities of the Police. A survey of the appraisal of public institutions carried out by the Public Opinion Research Center between 5 and 12 September 2013 shows that only some media receive better appraisal than the Police."²⁷ The study was quoted not only to provide the information but also to prove that one should trust the Police if the majority of citizens did so. The list of posts under the discussed category, divided with regard to their number, is presented in the table below:

Table 2. Posts published on the "Polish Police" fan page divided according to the subject

TYPE OF THE PUBLISHED CONTENT WITH REGARD TO SUBJECT	Reports of police actions	Posts which promoted campaigns and social actions of the Police	Posts which explained the functioning of the Police	Posts which informed about police events and holidays	Posts and photos which shaped the image of the Police
NUMBER OF POSTS	20	8	3	3	10

²⁶ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (3 November 2013).

²⁷ Official Facebook profile of the Polish Police Headquarters, <https://www.facebook.com/PolicjaPL>, (4 November 2013).

CONCLUSIONS

The analysis described above shows that the Police utilize Facebook primarily to shape their image as the uniformed service that are professional, efficient as well as socially engaged and open to the needs of the citizens. The prevalence of posts concerning successful police interventions demonstrates that the main priorities of the Police are fighting crime and protecting the citizens. Such messages are intended to increase social trust and the public sense of security. At the same time, photos of police officers and invitations to join police events bring the Police closer to the ordinary man. It can be argued that, similarly to the ways of maintaining contact with journalists, also the publication of fan page posts is a thought out albeit an irregular process. As is rightly pointed out by Witkowska, such a selection enables a more precise control of how these messages are received by the audience:

“Controlling the flow of information, the Police are able to implement their policies, the press policy and the social cooperation policy, in a more coherent manner. By selecting information, they are able to shape the desired image of the Police held by the public.”²⁸

The official Facebook profile has become the medium which offers the Police the best opportunity to influence how they are perceived by the public. In contrast, their media image in press and television is largely dependent upon the character of a particular programme or the profile of the news but also, to the greatest extent, on the type of crime that is being reported – the more a given crime “appeals” to the media, the more it is profitable to the broadcaster or publisher. In spite of this, it appears that the opportunities offered by the “Polish Police” fan page are yet to be fully utilized. The published posts initiate discussion among the users who often comment them, ask additional questions and pass their remarks. Unfortunately, most of them remain unanswered. Even though the “Polish Police” profile offers information on the users' expectations and the type of content they are most interested in, its moderators do not engage in direct interaction with the users. Such discussions could support

image-building activities of the Police and strengthen their relations with the audience, especially when the members of the online community ask specific questions. However, this does not change the fact that Facebook is an important social platform which allows the Police to provide the public with information unlikely to be published by traditional media. The structure of the published content also indicates what the Police consider to be their priority and what are the actions which they want to be representative of them.

But the fact that the public hold interest in the “Polish Police” profile is not attributable to the PR skills of its moderator alone. Witkowska distinguishes three major factors influencing public interest in media reports on crime:

“First, an 'encounter' with information concerning crime reinforces an individual's conviction that he or she is 'normal' and increases his or her self-esteem (which occurs when one 'compares him- or herself' to the criminal, the 'derelict' who commits that which is forbidden). Second, such information helps to create a distance between oneself and those who break the law. Third, information concerning a committed crime satisfies people's curiosity and offers entertainment, thus breaking the commonness and boredom of so-called everyday life.”²⁹

All of the above are adequate also in relation to the Internet users. Furthermore, social media has given its public not only the possibility to follow media coverage and reports but also to express their opinions and discuss them with other members of the online community. This opportunity to express one's opinion may be regarded as the fourth factor stimulating public interest in crime – and thus also the activities of the Police – a factor which emerged with the development of social media.

To conclude, the “Polish Police” profile is both a response to the interest of Facebook users but also a tool for creating a positive image and building relations with the audience. It allows the Police to show their efficiency in various aspects of their service, while the Internet users are given access to materials which are not shown in television or published in press. The very fact that

²⁸ K. Witkowska, op. cit., pp. 118–119.

²⁹ Ibidem, p. 117.

the Police maintain their own Facebook profile indicates that they see the need for a direct contact with the public, also by utilizing the new media, a need which can be satisfied to bring the Police closer to the citizens.

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