

CIVIC TECHNOLOGY



European Forum for Urban Security

The concept of civic technology refers to the use of technology to facilitate citizen involvement in various tasks of governance and law enforcement with the aim of improving the quality of public services. This can be done through websites, online platforms, mobile applications or other innovative digital communication channels. Civic technology can be used to inform citizens and facilitate access to services, but also to directly involve them in policy making and co-producing security.

CIVIC TECH IN EVERYDAY LIFE



Civic tech can take on many forms and be aimed at various objectives. There are many examples of initiatives in Europe. The Brussels-based Citizenlab is one example of a digital platform that allows people to generate ideas, discuss, exchange information and take decisions based on this multi-layered input. Numerous cities, including Helsinki, Barcelona and the European Metropolis of Lille, use the “Decidim” mobile application, which facilitates citizen participation through participatory budgeting and citizen consultations and ideation amongst other features.

CIVIC TECH IN URBAN SECURITY



In the domain of urban security, civic technology can be used to promote an integrated security model, in which security is co-produced with citizens. Citizens are often involved through social media in their various forms: platforms, networks, applications or messaging services. In some instances digital tools are developed by institutional security actors, for example when community police officers collect information by engaging with local residents. As part of an approach seeking to co-produce security, institutional actors might ask citizens to contribute ideas on how to improve safety in their neighbourhood.

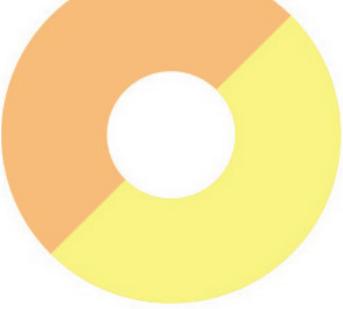
It can also be a bottom-up process in which citizens take the initiative. They create online platforms to facilitate access to information about some aspects of their city’s security. They collect and analyse data, organise neighbourhood surveillance, and sometimes go as far as directly investigating crimes at local and even international level. Sometimes, they use social media to establish police watchdogs, promote transparency and denounce police misconduct.

Main uses of civic technologies by institutional security actors for urban security purposes

| <i>Intelligence gathering</i> | <i>Communication and Engagement</i> | <i>Criminal investigations</i> | <i>Enforcing the law</i> |
|--|--|---|--|
| Social media analytics, direct contact with citizens | Informing, educating, answering questions, exchanging, recruiting, holding informal office hours, inclusion of citizens in decision making, target group engagement, organising volunteers | Dark web monitoring tools, undercover operations, social media monitoring | Crime reporting platforms, applications and messaging services, crowd management |

Main uses of civic technologies for citizens

| <i>Organisation of events</i> | <i>DIY investigations, justice, journalism</i> | <i>Watchdogs</i> | <i>Neighbourhood Watch</i> |
|---|--|--|--|
| Protests, volunteering, use of encrypted messaging apps | Naming and shaming, vigilantism, mapping offenders, listening in on police radio, informing others on security matters | Monitoring, recording and flagging police misconduct through live streaming, specific apps and platforms | In-house channels such as Whatsapp groups within a neighbourhood, market solutions |



CIVIC TECHNOLOGY IN AN INTEGRATED SECURITY MODEL

The information shared by citizens is not always linked to major crimes but often relates to minor infractions, incivilities or what is perceived as inadequate provision of public services, such as a lack of response to parking infractions or littering in a public space. While these aspects might not always be relevant to the police, other municipal actors can use such information to improve their services.

Civic technologies also enable municipal departments in charge of social inclusion and crime prevention to engage with hard-to-reach groups, offering them direct digital communication channels. For example, the mobile application «Integreat» used in the city of Nuremberg in Bavaria (DE) is tailored to the needs of refugees and migrants. It provides information about housing services and childcare in seven languages. Prior to the launch, the city of Nuremberg organised a workshop with refugees and migrants to consult them on the type of information they needed to access through the app.



Aiming to facilitate the reporting of hate crimes, the Mayor of London's Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) created a mobile application in 2015. Users can upload information that is directly transmitted to the police. While the number of reports was initially limited, it increased after an awareness campaign targeting victims, community groups and police officers.

WHAT IMPACT ON COMMUNITY POLICING?



In the framework of the EU's Cutting Crime Impact (CCI) project, researchers have produced a state of the art survey of community policing models in Europe. They identified three common issues: visibility, citizen engagement and prioritising community concerns, which are affected in different ways by digitalisation processes.

- The presence of police officers on the beat, in the streets, is the *raison d'être* of community policing, but there has always been a debate on how much physical presence is needed and whether it can be either too much or too little. Community policing focuses on communities of place¹ but it should also take into account how communities move in the digital space. Being present in the digital space should not substitute for physical presence in the streets but rather complement it.
- The online space facilitates communication, mostly through social media and messaging services. This is closely linked to the issue of prioritising community concerns. The police can use online forums and messaging apps to communicate directly with citizens and learn about their concerns, especially those of people that might not otherwise communicate openly with the police.

¹Bell, D. (2016), "Communitarianism", The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, Edward N. Zalta (ed.), retrieved from: <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/communitarianism/>.

LEGAL, SOCIAL AND ETHICAL IMPLICATIONS



The use of online platforms can have both a positive and negative impact on urban security. It can improve communication between security stakeholders and citizens and thus help to better tailor responses to the situation on the ground, but it can also blur the line between legitimate and self-proclaimed security actors. This in turn increases the risk of privacy breaches and vigilantism, which can have negative effects on social cohesion.

Fairness and trust:

A key component of community policing is building trust with the community. With the advent of automation tools and predictive policing methods it becomes increasingly important to carefully select and analyse the data in order to decide on appropriate in-person interventions which will not unfairly target individuals or communities.

(See reading suggestions: CCI Factsheet)

Speed and scale of citizen reactions: Among the positive aspects of using social media in the domain of urban security is that citizens can coordinate actions when public security is insufficient or does not produce the intended outcomes. In the best cases this can guide public security actors in choosing focus areas for their work and improving their service. Denunciations of individuals who are openly engaging in discriminatory behaviours can raise awareness and put pressure on institutional actors to take action.

Public shaming can however become disproportionate to the infraction. An inflated sense of personal righteousness can, at worst, lead to acts of vigilantism that can harm innocent people or impose crude informal justice on the guilty.

Feelings of insecurity:

Access to information on crime is facilitated through social media and can lead to an information overload that distorts people's perception of crime levels and enhances feelings of insecurity. In a climate of heightened fears about crime, the use of crime reporting applications often reflects biases and prejudices. When responding, the police must be aware of such biases and prejudices and acknowledge that one community's feelings of insecurity can be harmful to other communities and in turn increase the latter's own feelings of insecurity.

Legal uncertainty:

Police departments need to be able to set up procedural measures to ensure that the technology is used according to data protection regulations and that the fundamental right to privacy is respected. This is particularly important when a third party is involved in the form of market solutions sold to public institutions.

LOCAL PRACTICES



Romagna Faentina (IT) - Monica Visentin on FA-TAMTAM, an app to improve exchange between local police and neighbourhood watch groups

The Unione della Romagna Faentina is a local urban authority grouping 6 municipalities with a total population of 90,000, with the majority living in the largest city, Faenza.

In 2015, authorities sought to improve communication between citizens and the local police. What started as a simple text messaging service evolved into a mobile application called FA-TAMTAM, which now reaches 40 neighbourhood groups and 2,000 members. The purpose of the app is to foster proactive cooperation with citizens and remedy feelings of insecurity by raising awareness on the community network. Each neighbourhood group discusses issues internally and has a moderator - trained by the local police - who reports to the police the problems deemed most relevant.

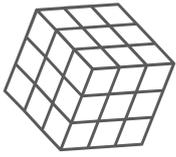
Since 2015, the number of neighbourhood groups has increased throughout the region and the mobile application has had some positive spillover effects. The groups now often organise community activities and work on issues other than security, thus indirectly improving social cohesion. Other positive effects are a higher number of volunteers and increased trust in the local authorities. On the other hand, a number of challenges remain: the creation of the FA-TAMTAM platform requires technical know-how and resources are needed to train local moderators.

Municipality of Terrassa (SP) - Use of social media and digital tools to better communicate with citizens

The municipality of Terrassa uses different social media platforms to better communicate with citizens. The municipal website is the main tool of communication and provides general information and news about the municipality. Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and Youtube are used to communicate more directly with citizens and to inform them on particular issues. The personal social media profiles of elected officials such as the mayor or the head of security are also helpful in terms of communication.

The use of social media has both positive and negative impacts on the community policing approach in the municipality of Terrassa. Social media are perceived as direct channels of communication with the police, and citizens are increasingly using them to report crime. The Covid-19 public health crisis led the police to use new, more direct channels of communication such as Whatsapp to stay in contact with citizens. However, there are a number of challenges. It can be difficult for police officers to distinguish which citizen reports are relevant or not, and also to manage the flow of information they receive. In order to overcome these difficulties and also avoid the risk of spreading fake news that cause unnecessary social alarm, it is essential to develop an appropriate response system.

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS



- The use of civic technology calls for appropriate training. It is equally important to develop rules of use that outline which type of information is relevant and how to respond to complex issues and different groups' priorities. In the same vein it is necessary to have an appropriate response system. This can only be done if the principles and tradeoffs involved in using civic technology for urban security are understood and criteria are developed for the appropriate design of digital tools.
- It can be helpful to have mediators or other forms of intermediary figures that connect citizens and local security authorities. A better understanding of the intersections of top-down and bottom-up processes can help in developing systems that mitigate the overflow of information and filter out irrelevant reports while ensuring broad and inclusive citizen participation.
- In order to implement these recommendations, police services need training and resources. They need to research the benefits and understand the implications of using digital tools to involve citizens in the co-production of security. Filtering out irrelevant and potentially harmful information requires time and effort but is necessary to gain and retain trust. When the police act on poor, unchecked information, they not only jeopardize the investigation but also face scrutiny from the public, since they can easily access the same information.
- Any application of civic technology must be adapted to each specific local context. It is important to take into account the difference between rural and urban environments, rather than use a "one-size-fit-all" application. It can be useful to provide the service in different languages in order to cater to the largest group of population possible, but this might not always be possible due to the cost involved. Another aspect that must be taken into account is the various levels of population density between different areas. Lastly, the average age and computer and online literacy of the local population should also be taken into account.

READING SUGGESTIONS



- CCI: [factsheets on community policing](#) (state of the art and ethical implications)
- A Pattern Language of Social Media in Public Security: This publication was written in the framework of the [Medi@4Sec](#) project, which was funded by the European Commission. The report looks at different use patterns of social media by public security actors and maps out lessons learnt. It examines how law enforcement agencies, citizens and criminals use social media and how it impacts public security either positively or negatively.
- [Community-oriented policing in the European Union today](#): This toolbox was published in 2018 by the EU's European Crime Prevention Network (EUCPN) in collaboration with the European Union Agency for Law Enforcement Training (CEPOL). In particular, the publication outlines ways in which technology can support community policing approaches and gives examples of practices in Europe.
- [Decidim](#) is an online platform for citizen participation, which is also accessible on mobile. It offers a number of services to facilitate public participation such as citizen consultations, participatory budgeting and real-time online deliberations. Numerous European cities and regions are using this platform and adapt it to their specific local needs.

