Discretion and digital tools in community-oriented policing: diverse styles of neighbourhood police officers in Belgium and the Netherlands

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Abstract

Officer discretion lies at the heart of community-oriented policing, playing a crucial role in building trust and responding to local concerns. Neighbourhood police officers in Belgium and the Netherlands exemplify this, operating with significant autonomy in setting priorities and choosing how to engage with the public. This article explores how such discretionary space is shaped by the increasing use of information and communication technology in policing.

While existing research often argues that digital tools constrain officer autonomy by automating decisions, standardizing procedures, and reinforcing centralized control, our findings reveal a more nuanced reality. Drawing on 545 hours of ethnographic fieldwork, we show that neighbourhood police officers continue to exercise discretion in how, when, and why they use technology. To capture this variation, we identify four distinct policing styles based on officers' use of both digital and traditional methods for information management and citizen interaction. These styles challenge the assumption that technology inevitably limits discretion. Instead, they demonstrate a reciprocal relationship in which digitalisation influences but does not displace discretionary practices.

This suggests that the impact of technology is not uniform across policing roles. In neighbourhood policing, discretion remains a central feature, with officers actively shaping how digital tools are integrated into their work. This study contributes to the broader debate on digitalisation in law enforcement by demonstrating the continued importance of discretion and underscoring the need to consider the diverse realities of police work when evaluating technological change.

Keywords: Community policing; technology; discretion; policing styles

Introduction

Over the years, police forces around the world have adopted various forms of community-oriented policing, reflecting its importance in modern law enforcement (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; de Maillard, 2023; de Maillard & Terpstra, 2021; Wisler & Onwudiwe, 2009). Kelling (1988) initially described this shift as a 'quiet revolution', while others have called it a profound 'paradigm shift' that redefined the relationship between police and communities (Bayley & Shearing, 1996; Oliver & Bartgis, 1998; Van Der Vijver & Zoomer, 2004). Highlighting its global influence, Brogden and Nijhar (2005: 3) went as far as to label community policing one of the most significant export products of modern policing, underscoring its impact across different countries and contexts (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005).

The popularity of community-oriented policing stems from a growing realisation in many countries that traditional policing methods were no longer meeting public expectations (Goldstein, 1987; Skolnick & Bayley, 1988; Wisler & Onwudiwe, 2009). This disconnect became particularly evident through widespread criticism of how police treated minorities and marginalized groups (Brogden & Nijhar, 2005; Rumbaut & Bittner, 1979). Disadvantaged communities, often facing discrimination and inequality, frequently clashed with police forces (van Caem-Posch, 2012; Wisler & Onwudiwe, 2009). These tensions led to a loss of public trust and weakened the legitimacy of police actions (Schaap, 2018). Community policing emerged as a response, aiming to rebuild trust (Cordner, 2014; de Maillard & Terpstra, 2021; Schaap, 2018).

While the core idea of community policing—restoring trust between police and the public—is straightforward, how it has been defined (Fielding, 2005; Friedman, 1994; Skolnick & Bayley, 1988) and implemented (de Maillard & Terpstra, 2021) varies widely between countries. Despite these differences, there is broad agreement that police organisations should prioritise decentralisation on the organisational level to strengthen the connection between officers and the communities they serve (Baxter & Sommerville, 2011; Cordner, 2014; Skogan, 2006). This approach often involves restructuring police work around neighbourhoods, districts, or 'beats', with officers assigned to specific geographic areas where they can build familiarity and trust with local residents (Kane, 2000; Skogan, 2004). For this purpose the police in Belgium and the Netherlands both assigned dedicated neighbourhood police officers to specific geographical areas. The officers' primary objective is to be 'the eyes and ears of the police', building strong relationships with local communities, addressing concerns proactively, and enhancing public trust in law enforcement (Easton et al., 2009; Terpstra, 2008, 2019).

These neighbourhood police officers have a significant degree of discretion in their daily duties. Over time, as they gain experience within the police organisation, this discretion

develops into a form of autonomy that becomes increasingly ingrained in their role. This growing autonomy is not merely about making decisions in specific situations but extends to a broader ability to determine how they carry out their responsibilities and which tasks they prioritise. Due to the autonomous nature of their work, these officers can determine how they engage with local residents, prioritise tasks, and address issues as they arise (Easton et al., 2009; Terpstra, 2008, 2019).

As research has shown, the ability to manage their own time and interactions allows for distinct policing styles to emerge (Fielding, 1995; Muir, 1977). Muir's (1977) research on street-level police officers in urban settings in the United States emphasises that this flexibility enables officers to develop personalized approaches to law enforcement (Muir, 1977). Ramshaw's (2012) ethnographic research within a urban conurbation in England with a community police team has shown that patrol officers can have very different ways of doing their patrol work. Where some officers use foot patrols to tackle problems and restore order, others focus on building relationships and fostering trust through friendly interactions with the public (Ramshaw, 2012).

The practices and decision-making of officers on the beat have been studied extensively (Banton, 1964; Cosgrove & Ramshaw, 2015; Frank et al., 1997; Novak et al., 2002; Ramshaw, 2012). Their discretion in decision-making provides valuable insight into how policing is carried out on the ground, sometimes diverging from official policies or guidelines (Rowe, 2007). However, while the practices of these officers have been extensively studied, research on how technology impacts the frontline activities of these police officers remains relatively limited (De Paepe & Easton, 2024). As Willis et al. (2022) point out there is a lack of research into whether the traditional beat cop—gathering information through personal relationships—has been replaced by a more tech-savvy officer relying on digital platforms (Willis et al., 2022). The increasing integration of digital tools in policing raises important questions about how these technologies influence officers' decision-making, their interactions with the public, and the extent to which they may alter the traditional discretionary practices that are at the heart of community-oriented policing (Rowe et al., 2022; Terpstra & Salet, 2022; Willis et al., 2022).

This study examines how neighbourhood police officers in Belgium and the Netherlands incorporate digital technologies into their daily routines and considers the broader implications of these changes for policing practices. The focus is specifically on information and communication technology (ICT), which enables the creation, storage, transmission, and sharing of information in various formats such as text, audio, data, images, and video (Nuth, 2008). ICT was chosen as the main area of investigation because it is the most commonly used and frequently discussed form of technology among neighbourhood

officers in both countries. This emphasis is consistent with Terpstra's (2025) research on local police in the Netherlands, which shows that officers often associate digitalization with tools that support information retrieval and processing, the use of social media, real time intelligence, and mobile applications (Terpstra, 2025). Although these technologies serve a variety of purposes, this study focuses primarily on two key uses of ICT: storing information and communicating with citizens, as these functions are central to the everyday work of neighbourhood police officers.

Therefore, the research question guiding this article is: In what ways do neighbourhood police officers use ICT to manage information and communicate with citizens as part of their daily duties? As will be shown later in the article, the autonomy of neighbourhood police officers leads to a wide range of ways that ICT is used in their daily work. To capture this diversity, the study develops a typology of different strategies officers employ, helping to conceptualize these variations. These strategies reveal how neighbourhood police officers balance digital and physical methods for storing information and engaging with citizens. This provides a framework for exploring the tensions between traditional analog approaches and technology-based methods. In doing so, the study contributes to broader conversations about the changing role of technology in law enforcement and the operational and cultural changes that come with it.

The article is structured as follows. The first section provides an overview of the discussions on the impact of technology on police discretion, examining how ICT influences decision-making. The methodology section then outlines the qualitative research design, including observations conducted within Belgian neighbourhood precincts and Dutch local police teams. The results section presents the findings, beginning with an exploration of neighbourhood police officers' day-to-day operations and their reliance on technology. It then moves to the development of policing styles based on the observed practices, specifically focusing on how officers store information and their communication strategies with citizens. The discussion section delves into the implications of these research findings for the current debate on the impact of technology on police discretion and suggests some avenues for future research. Finally, the conclusion summarises the study's contributions and its implications for how technology is reshaping front-line police work.

Street-level discretion and technology

Since the 1960s, scholars have studied how police officers make decisions in practice, choosing from various possible actions which is commonly referred to as *police discretion* (Cordner & Scott, 2014). The concept of police discretion centres on the idea that officers often make decisions that deviate from legislation, official policies or the guidelines set by their superiors (Rowe, 2007). Lipsky (2010) argues that discretion should primarily be

understood as a mechanism used by ‘street-level bureaucrats’ to navigate the competing and sometimes contradictory expectations they face in a context of limited resources (Lipsky, 2010).

In that sense, discretion refers to the authority to assess a situation and determine how, or even whether, to apply certain rules or take action. It involves the freedom to choose among various possible responses within the boundaries set not only by laws and formal regulations but also by informal expectations, such as those rooted in professional norms and community standards (Davis, 1969:25; Ericson, 1982:11-13). This allows officers to make flexible decisions (Kleinig, 1996; Willis & Toronjo, 2023), enabling them to respond appropriately to constantly changing and diverse situations while providing room for tailored, case-specific solutions (Verhage, 2022).

This discretion can have both positive and negative consequences. On the positive side, discretion is vital for effective policing, as it allows officers to adapt to complex real-world scenarios and make decisions that go beyond rigid policy guidelines (Charman & Williams, 2022). However, discretion also poses challenges, as it can compromise the impartiality of legal processes and introduce biases into decision-making (Charman & Williams, 2022; Miller, 2015). An example of this can be found in the context of stop and search as research has demonstrated that depending on the situation some groups in society are more likely to be checked by police officers on the ground of their discretionary powers (Bowling & Phillips, 2007; Vito et al., 2021). Given the profound impact of police discretion on communities—both positive and negative—it is crucial to continue researching this subject to better understand its implications.

ICT has become a central force in shaping police discretion. As Ericson and Haggerty (1997) observe, police organizations often adopt technological tools to reduce uncertainty and enhance control. However, these systems also embed specific rules and procedures that limit officers' flexibility in responding to complex situations. The growing reliance on digital platforms and standardized reporting tools shifts professional knowledge into system-driven processes, narrowing the space for individual judgment (Ericson & Haggerty, 1997). Terpstra et al. (2019) describe this development through the concept of the ‘abstract police,’ highlighting how increasing dependence on ICT and top-down procedures has made policing more impersonal and bureaucratic. As digital systems and standardized protocols replace human interaction, officers’ ability to deliver locally grounded, personalized responses is increasingly constrained (Terpstra et al., 2019, 2022).

Ericson and Haggerty (1997), along with Terpstra et al. (2019, 2022), argue that the adoption of ICT tools in policing is often closely tied to efforts to control frontline officers and streamline their activities, ultimately leading to the standardisation of police practices

(Ericson & Haggerty, 1997; Terpstra et al., 2019, 2022). This trend is evident in the case of the Norwegian police, where Gundhus et al. (2022) describe how the implementation of the 'intelligence doctrine' has been accompanied by ICT systems designed to enforce uniform procedures across different operations. These systems ensure that all officers access the same information, promoting consistency in police work and making individual officers more interchangeable. Applications such as 'My Mission' and the 'Police Work on the Site' system are specifically built to guide officers through routine tasks, improve daily workflow, and strengthen coordination between frontline personnel and digital platforms (Gundhus et al., 2022:32). A similar development can be observed in UK policing, where Wells et al. (2023, 2024) report that ICT adoption in public engagement is primarily driven by concerns about cost-efficiency and information gathering. Here, technology is used mainly to reduce in-person and telephone contact with the public, placing less importance on the relational aspects of police-public interaction. Instead, digital tools are employed to manage communication more efficiently, reinforcing a procedural rather than personal approach to engagement (Wells et al., 2023, 2024).

In other contexts, such as the Netherlands and Belgium, the use of ICT is closely connected to the growth of intelligence-led policing strategies. In these settings, digital tools are increasingly driven by big data and supported by algorithmic decision-making, shaping how police work is planned and executed (Debailleul, 2025; Forceville, 2023; Khalfa et al., 2024; Landman, 2022). This development marks a shift in the role technology plays in policing. As Landman (2023) points out, advances in underlying technologies and the growing availability of data have transformed ICT applications from merely supporting tools into more authoritative instruments that can shape, guide, and even discipline police practices (Landman, 2023; see also: Stol et al., 2025). These technologies no longer just assist officers in their work. They increasingly influence what actions are taken, how priorities are set, and how risks are interpreted (Brayne, 2017, 2020).

While the adoption of ICT can significantly restrict the operational freedom of frontline police officers (Brayne, 2017; Landman, 2022), it can also shift the location of discretion within the police organization (Landman, 2023; Schuilenburg & Soudijn, 2022, 2023). In the past, discretion was largely grounded in human expertise and the individual judgement of the traditional frontline officer. Today, however, that space is increasingly being transferred to technological expertise. In this transformation, new specialised roles are emerging, sometimes referred to as the 'coding elite' (Schuilenburg & Peeters, 2024:279; Terpstra, 2024). These individuals play a central role in designing, managing, and interpreting the digital systems that now shape much of policing. As a result, discretion is not necessarily reduced overall, but is redistributed to those with control over digital infrastructures (Khalfa et al., 2024; Schuilenburg & Soudijn, 2022, 2023).

While much of the literature emphasizes how technology can restrict and reshape discretion, it is less clear how street-level police officers navigate and potentially resist these constraints. There may be a mutual relationship at play, where not only technology shapes discretion, but discretion also influences how technology is used and implemented. In practice, the use of technological tools is often shaped by the culture, preferences, and routines of the officers who engage with them (Lum et al., 2017). Manning (2014a) similarly argues that technology is not a fixed or neutral entity, but a dynamic and socially constructed concept. It includes both its physical components - such as devices and software - and the symbolic meanings attached to it by those who design, maintain, and operate it (Manning, 1992, 2008, 2014a). These symbolic functions become embedded in police work and organizational structures, giving technology meanings that go beyond its intended technical functions. Furthermore, the way technology is interpreted and applied is shaped by local work practices, internal hierarchies, and broader political forces (Byrne & Marx, 2011), often leading to tensions between new technological systems and long-standing practices (Ernst et al., 2021; Lum et al., 2017).

Fussey et al. (2021) point out that science and technology studies cue that while practitioners influence and determine the use and potential of their technological tools, their actions, practices, and thought processes are, in turn, shaped and influenced by the technologies and the possibilities they offer (Fussey et al., 2021a). Aston & O'Neill (2023) point out that BWC's and other technologies are not 'neutral' elements in an encounter between the police and the public. These technologies can alter the behaviour of officers, whilst officers can also easily decide to ignore BWC's (Aston & O'Neill, 2023). Fussey et al. (2021) in their ethnographic research on police use of automated facial recognition (AFR) in the UK conclude that ''AFR algorithms steer and guide officer decision-making, but they do not wholly determine it. The rules encoded within the algorithms are not 'unbending' and inflexible but configured and constructed via a range of policing influences (Fussey et al., 2021: 342).'' These insights also echo in the research of Dekkers et al. (2019) on the amigo-boras application used by the Dutch Marechaussee and the research of Demarée (2017) which mentioned how mobile data terminals influenced the amount of checks conducted by Belgian police officers.

A valuable approach to understanding the mutual interaction between technology and police discretion is by examining the specific policing styles neighbourhood police officers adopt in their daily work. These styles highlight how officers use technology to shape their decision-making and adapt their approach to the unique needs of the community. Whether it's through using digital tools to gather information, communicate with the public, or manage situations in the field, these styles reveal how ICT influences the way officers exercise their discretion. By exploring these styles, we can gain deeper insights into how

technological tools shape their policing practices and decision-making. While primarily descriptive, these styles provide a valuable framework for comparing approaches and analysing trends, making them a key tool for studying how officers adapt to new challenges and innovations in law enforcement (Bailey, 1994; Becker, 1940).

Whereas the development of policing styles has a long-standing history within policing research (Banton, 1964; Hough, 2013; Muir, 1977; Ramshaw, 2012), There is a limited amount of policing styles centred on the strategies that police officers use to cope with technology. (Tanner & Meyer, 2015; Terpstra & Salet, 2022). This is a significant gap, considering the increasing integration of ICT into nearly every aspect of police work. As technological infrastructures reshape workflows, decision-making, and professional norms, it becomes crucial to understand how officers negotiate these changes in practice. In this article, we aim to address this gap by developing new policing styles that specifically examine the strategies neighbourhood police officers apply in their use of technology.

Research site and methodology

The following section outlines the research site and the methods used. As will become clear, the study is based on two selected cases, one in Belgium and one in the Netherlands. Although this research was originally designed to explore how national contexts might influence the ways neighbourhood police officers use technology, it soon became apparent that the local operational contexts were remarkably similar across both countries. Despite national differences, the everyday environments, responsibilities, and organisational structures in which neighbourhood officers work showed few meaningful distinctions. As a result, the cases are best understood through a most similar case design, as if the research had been conducted within the same national context.

The research site

The field research was conducted in an urban conurbation in Belgium and in the Netherlands. Despite being located in two different countries, the two areas share many similarities in terms of demographics, urban planning, security concerns, and police organisation. Both conurbations consist of medium-sized cities with diverse populations, comparable in density and community variety. They also have socio-economically diverse residents, with varying income levels and ethnic backgrounds. Additionally, both cities are home to renowned universities, resulting in a significant student population that contributes to a dynamic and often transient community.

In terms of policing infrastructure, six police stations operated in the Belgian conurbation, while three were active in the Dutch case. Despite operating under different national frameworks, the local police stations in both countries showed a striking degree of similarity

in their structure and daily operations. In both contexts, local police forces are responsible for what is referred to as 'basic police care'. This includes core policing functions such as neighbourhood patrols, citizen intake and assistance, incident response, victim support, local investigations, maintaining public order, and managing traffic. Officers are expected to carry out these duties in alignment with the principles of community-oriented policing (Easton, 2001; Van den Broeck & Eliaerts, 1994; van Duijneveldt, 2024).

Community-oriented policing serves as the overarching philosophy guiding local police work in both Belgium and the Netherlands. This model emerged in response to changing societal expectations and increasing demands for a police force that is democratic and responsive to local communities. Both countries began exploring community-oriented approaches during the second half of the twentieth century, specifically in the 1960s in the Netherlands and the 1980s in Belgium, as a way to strengthen the relationship between police officers and the citizens they serve (Van den Broeck, 2010; van Duijneveldt, 2024b).

However, community-oriented policing only became formally established later. In the Netherlands, this occurred in 1993 as part of a broader police reform intended to balance the growing scale of police operations with the need to maintain strong local ties. The reform aimed to ensure that the police remained rooted in local communities even as the organisation expanded (Terpstra, 2023; van Caem-Posch, 2012). In Belgium, community oriented policing was institutionalised through the major police reform of 1998, which explicitly presented it as a necessary cultural change to accompany structural reorganisation. In Belgium, the philosophy of community oriented policing was further formalised through Ministerial Circular CP1, which defines five core pillars: external orientation, partnership, competent involvement or empowerment, problem solving, and accountability. These pillars guide how police are expected to interact with the public and carry out their duties (Easton et al., 2001, 2009b). Although the Netherlands does not have an equivalent formal policy document, research on community-oriented policing in the Netherlands shows that Dutch police practice closely reflects the same five pillars found in the Belgian framework (see e.g. Terpstra, 2008, 2019; van Caem-Posch, 2012; van Duijneveldt, 2024; Van Steden et al., 2021).

Methods

The methodology of this article builds upon the long-standing tradition of ethnography within research on policing (Fleming & Charman, 2023). Police ethnography focuses on understanding the lived experiences, practices, and organisational dynamics within policing (Manning, 2014b; Yanow et al., 2012). Drawing on traditions from anthropology, sociology, criminology, and related disciplines, it employs mostly qualitative methods to provide deep insights into the cultural and operational aspects of law enforcement (O'Neill et al., 2023).

This study employed a step-in, step-out ethnographic approach, in which fieldwork was conducted across a range of sites in a sequential manner. Rather than embedding deeply within a single location or team, the aim was to gather a broad spectrum of insights into how various neighbourhood police officers engage with technology in their everyday work (see Madden, 2023). While this method does not lend itself to the highly detailed, immersive accounts that more traditional ethnography offers, it does provide a significant advantage: it enables the exploration of technological practices as part of a wider social process. By moving across different teams and locations, this approach avoids framing technology use as something unique to specific individuals or contexts. Instead, it highlights how technology is adopted, adapted, and interpreted in varying ways across the broader landscape of contemporary policing (Slooter, 2025:14).

This article draws on extensive direct observations of neighbourhood police officers, amounting to a total of 545 hours of fieldwork conducted between April 2022 and July 2024. The Belgian fieldwork was carried out from April to June 2022 and involved 180 hours of shadowing 18 different neighbourhood police officers. In the Netherlands, 365 hours of observation were conducted, involving 14 neighbourhood police officers. The difference in observation time between the two countries can largely be explained by the researcher's approach and positionality. Having already established strong relationships with local police stations in Belgium, the researcher found it easier to arrange ride-alongs and engage in open conversations with officers. Being Belgian himself also helped the researcher to quickly understand cultural nuances, including regional dialects and implicit meanings behind officers' statements. In contrast, fieldwork in the Netherlands required a longer period to build trust and rapport with local officers. The researcher needed more time to integrate into the Dutch policing environment, gain access to observation opportunities, and establish the kind of openness necessary for meaningful data collection. Additionally, becoming familiar with how Dutch neighbourhood police officers interpreted their surroundings and communicated their experiences required a deeper immersion. This gradual process contributed to the extended duration of the fieldwork in the Netherlands.

A key aspect of the data collection involved the researcher immersing himself in the daily activities of the police officers. By joining them in the field and in the office, the researcher gained valuable insights into the services they provide to citizens and the partnerships they form with other street-level bureaucrats, such as social workers and municipal authorities. Observing neighbourhood police officers at work offered a comprehensive understanding of their roles, the challenges they encounter, and their interactions with both the community and other institutions. In addition to field observations, informal conversations during breaks offered another rich source of data. These casual discussions among officers often provided a deeper understanding of the meanings attached to their work. The combination

of direct participation in daily duties and engagement in informal discussions revealed the complexities of the officers' roles and their experiences in navigating the challenges of modern-day policing in an urban context.

During the observations, fieldnotes were taken in real time as brief jottings and then expanded into detailed notes at the end of each shift. At the conclusion of each case study, a case report was compiled to serve as a first step in analyzing the large volume of data collected in the field. This initial analysis focused on several key aspects, including the everyday tasks of neighbourhood police officers, how they viewed their roles within the police organization, their collaboration with other actors, and their use and perception of technology in their work. Once all fieldwork had been completed, a cross-case analysis was conducted to examine similarities and differences between the two sites. This comparative analysis specifically explored the role and position of neighbourhood police officers in both contexts, with a particular focus on how they engaged with and interpreted technological tools in their daily routines. The findings presented in the following results section are based on this cross-case analysis.

Findings

Neighbourhood police officers and the role of technology

Neighbourhood police officers in both Belgium and the Netherlands share many similar responsibilities, despite differences in specific practices. This is because the core concept behind the role of neighbourhood police officers is the same in both countries. Neighbourhood police officers are seen as a bridge between the police organisation and society, acting as a frontline presence in various neighbourhoods where they serve as 'the eyes and ears of the police' (see also: Easton et al., 2009; Terpstra, 2008, 2019). This unique position allows them to gather crucial information and provide insights into the community's needs, concerns, and emerging issues. This makes them the backbone of community-oriented policing, where the focus is not solely on reactive law enforcement but also on building strong relationships with the community to prevent crime and maintain social order.

Neighbourhood police officers exercise a high degree of discretion in their daily duties, which, over time, develops into a deep-rooted autonomy within the police organisation. This autonomy enables them to shape their role in response to the specific needs of their community, deciding not only how to carry out their tasks but also which priorities to set. Rather than merely enforcing the law or responding to incidents, they independently determine how best to serve their neighbourhoods. By engaging directly with residents, attending local events, and maintaining an accessible presence, they build strong relationships that allow them to identify and address issues proactively. Their discretion extends beyond isolated decision-making; it allows them to collaborate with local

organisations, social services, and community members to develop long-term solutions tailored to their environment.

Despite differences in their approach, all neighbourhood police officers play a crucial role as both informers and communicators, ensuring a continuous flow of information between the community and the police. They not only gather intelligence but also keep the police connected to local concerns and needs. At the same time, they translate police policies, actions, and priorities into clear and relevant messages for the public. Beyond this, they foster dialogue between the police and local organisations such as schools, social services, and community groups, working together to address issues like youth crime, neighbour conflicts, and substance abuse. Through their daily interactions, neighbourhood police officers try to become trusted figures within the community, ensuring that citizens feel heard and that the police are seen as approachable and engaged in the wellbeing of the neighbourhood.

As neighbourhood police officers prioritise information and communication in their work, it's no surprise that they mainly rely on digital tools designed for these purposes. With devices like smartphones, tablets, and computers, neighbourhood police officers can access various applications while working in the field. These tools enable officers to independently retrieve essential information from the police database without needing to contact dispatch for additional details about a situation or vehicle. For instance, they can scan license plates or input citizen details to gain background information. This access helps them better understand the context of their interactions and enhances their personal safety—especially important as neighbourhood police officers often patrol alone. In addition to accessing extensive information on the ground, these applications allow neighbourhood police officers to enter data and handle certain administrative tasks directly. This eliminates the need to return to the office for such activities. As a result, these tools could enhance the officers' mobility and independence, enabling them to spend more time in the field rather than at the police station.

In addition to tools that provide access to information, neighbourhood police officers also use technologies to communicate with police colleagues, other professionals, and citizens. Unlike the previously mentioned information-focused tools, these communication technologies are not always specifically designed for police use. Examples include email, online messaging apps like WhatsApp, digital meeting platforms such as Microsoft Teams, and social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook. Communication through these tools could take different forms. For instance, two-way communication occurred in WhatsApp chats or via Instagram's direct message function, allowing for real-time interaction. On the other hand, some communication was one-sided, such as posting

informational flyers on Instagram feeds or stories. Regardless of the method, it was evident that most communication happened in response to specific requests from citizens or out of necessity to engage with other professionals in particular situations. This suggests that communication was more often reactive than proactive, with officers responding to needs as they arose rather than initiating outreach.

When discussing technology in the following section, we specifically refer to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) tools. These tools encompass technologies that assist in producing, storing, transmitting, and disseminating information in various forms, including text, voice, data, graphics, and video (Nuth, 2008). In the context of neighbourhood policing, ICT tools primarily serve two key functions: storing information and facilitating communication with citizens. Information-related technologies include databases that store case details, citizen records, and other essential data, enabling officers to store information. On the communication side, ICT tools refer to platforms such as email, WhatsApp, and social media, which neighbourhood police officers use to interact with the public.

Understanding Neighbourhood police officers' Use of Technology: Four Distinct Styles of Digital and Analog Approaches

It is important to emphasise that even though neighbourhood police officers mainly used ICT-tools as digital means to support their day-to-day operations, the extent and manner of their usage vary considerably in practice. Some officers heavily rely on digital tools for information and communication, while others prioritise analog methods and personal interaction. The balance between digital tools and analog methods highlights the diverse approaches and priorities among neighbourhood police officers. To better understand this, we have developed four styles that represent different ways officers use technology.

These styles are based on two axes: one for digital versus analog information and another for digital versus analog communication. The term ‘digital’ refers to the extent to which neighbourhood police officers use digital tools to perform their information and communication tasks, while the term ‘analog’ refers to how much officers rely on face-to-face interactions and their personal social skills. ‘Information’ refers to how data is stored, while ‘communication’ pertains to external interactions with citizens. This means that these styles do not cover how information is collected or how internal communication between colleagues takes place.

	Analog communication	**Digital communication**
Digital information	*The Hybrid Mediator style*	*The Digital Liaison style*

Analog information	*The analog Custodian style*	*The Hybrid Archivist style*

Table 1. Neighbourhood police officer styles in their use of ICT

The Analog Custodian style

The Analog Custodian style reflects an approach that relies primarily on analog methods for storing information and engaging with citizens. Officers adopting this style prioritise personal interactions, such as direct conversations with residents, field observations, and physical connections within local networks. They use digital tools sparingly, instead focusing on face-to-face engagement as their primary mode of communication. This style centres on street-level conversations, neighbourhood meetings, and home visits, with technology playing a secondary role. The emphasis is on physically building trust and maintaining personal relationships within the community.

During a monthly meeting between the new neighbourhood police officer and local shopkeepers, some shopkeepers shared their thoughts about the previous neighbourhood police officer. They mentioned that he never responded to emails, but he was always present in the neighbourhood, making himself visible every day. (field notes)

A key characteristic of the Analog Custodian style is a strong scepticism toward technology. Officers who adopt this style believe that digital systems cannot replicate or significantly enhance the unique insights they gain through direct, personal experiences. For them, the knowledge they gather—whether retained in memory or occasionally recorded in a notebook—is far more nuanced and valuable than any data stored in a database. This scepticism shapes their preference for traditional methods of learning about the community, trusting personal interaction over digital information.

The neighbourhood police officer has a wealth of information in his head. This manifests itself in the background stories he tells about the citizens we pass. For instance, he knows from a local resident that he is cheating on his wife, while his wife has no knowledge of this. It is information that may not be relevant but, according to the neighbourhood police officer, lends a lot of context. The neighbourhood police officer therefore cites that when he retires, this knowledge disappears. In an ideal scenario, he should be able to train an aspirant in his neighbourhood, but there is no time for that. (field notes)

The Analog Custodian style is characterized by a strong sense of ownership over the neighbourhood. Officers adopting the Analog Custodian style are fiercely protective of their role and see themselves as irreplaceable within their community. They believe only they possess the intimate knowledge and understanding needed to serve their area effectively. As a result, they may resist having colleagues take over their duties during absences. This territorial approach reflects their deep commitment to their residents, viewing themselves as essential advocates for the well-being of their community.

The neighbourhood police officer mentions that when he is on holiday, work remains stalled. He feels it would be irresponsible for a colleague to take over his district. (field notes)

The Analog Custodian style emphasises a deep commitment to residents, which shapes how officers approach their work. Officers adopting this style spend almost all their time in the neighbourhood, engaging directly with the community, and are rarely in the office. Communication with residents is strictly in-person, as they believe physical presence is key to building trust and ensuring their accessibility. Their preference for face-to-face interaction also extends to their use of communication tools, such as email. Officers adopting the Analog Custodian style rarely check or respond to emails, prioritizing their visibility and availability in the neighbourhood instead. They operate under the belief that residents should be able to reach them simply by stepping outside.

The neighbourhood police officer always ends his conversations by handing out his business card and saying: "Here's my card. It has my work phone number, but I'm hardly ever in the office. It also has my email, but I don't really use email" (field notes)

The Hybrid Archivist style

The Hybrid Archivist style involves a structured and systematic approach to information management, with a strong reliance on analog methods. Officers adopting this style observe their surroundings, engage in conversations with residents, and take handwritten notes to gain a deep understanding of their neighbourhoods. They don't take a casual approach to storing information; instead, they compile detailed archives that may include printed emails, field notes, and brochures. Their offices are filled with carefully labelled binders and filing cabinets, each reflecting the depth of their connection to the community and their commitment to organising and preserving valuable local knowledge.

During one of my first shifts with the local police team, some neighbourhood police officers jokingly suggested that if I wanted to learn more about digitalisation, I should talk to Officer X. They pointed me to his 'infamous cabinet', filled with binders containing notes, printed emails, and leaflets. (field notes)

The Hybrid Archivist style is characterized by an analog-first approach to organising information, where officers keep their desks cluttered with papers, post-it notes, and to-do lists. This analog-first approach helps some officers to maintain a tangible and easily accessible record of their work, ensuring that no piece of information is lost or overlooked. For these officers, this level of organisation is a point of pride, as it reflects their dedication to effectively serving their neighbourhoods and staying connected to the nuances of their community.

After lunch, the neighbourhood police officer prints some emails that he takes with him into the neighbourhood as a kind of to-do list. He then sometimes writes something on it during a visit. The officer mentions that he sometimes fears he would lose such an e-mail but chooses this way of working anyway because this way he is sure he has done everything necessary when he's out in the neighbourhood. (field notes)

While the methods of storing information remain analog, the Hybrid Archivist style entails a digital approach to communication. Within this style digital tools such as email, messaging apps, and social media platforms to share updates, safety tips, and announcements with their communities are embraced. These tools are not seen as a replacement for face-to-face interaction but as a complement to it. For example, some neighbourhood police officers might share their WhatsApp number with residents to enhance accessibility or use Instagram to post digital versions of flyers they would otherwise distribute in person. This dual approach allows officers to maintain the personal connections that build trust, while also expanding their reach to a broader audience. Digital communication enables them to act quickly and efficiently, ensuring they stay connected with residents who prefer online interactions.

The neighbourhood police officer works in a large area and has only been assigned there for a few months. He believes it's very important to cycle through the neighbourhood every day on his electric bike. According to him, residents value seeing him in the area from time to time. However, he also recognizes that the area is so vast that, even with an electric bike, it's impossible to be everywhere every day. To stay connected with the community, he uses Instagram. By posting updates about his activities, he can still show residents what he's doing in the neighbourhood, even if they haven't seen him in person that day. (field notes)

The Hybrid Archivist style views digital communication as an extension of the physical presence in the neighbourhood. While this style appreciates the immediacy and convenience that digital tools provide, it remains firmly committed to face-to-face interactions, understanding that these are vital for building trust and fostering deeper connections. Officers adopting this style recognize the limitations of digital communication, knowing it cannot fully replicate the depth of connection that comes from speaking directly with someone. However, they see digital communication as a valuable tool for enhancing their ability to inform and engage with the community, particularly when physical interactions are not possible.

The Hybrid Mediator style

The Hybrid Mediator style sees digital information technology as a vital tool for understanding the complexities of a neighbourhood and organising work. Officers adopting

this style rely heavily on data and digital records to stay informed about local trends, incidents, and resident concerns, using this information to guide their approach to policing and community engagement.

The neighbourhood officer mentions why he finds it important to first check the digital police systems prior to going in the neighbourhood physically: 'Imagine something significant happened in your neighbourhood, and you have no idea what's going on. That's not practical.' (field notes)

However, within the Hybrid Mediator style, technology is a means to an end, not the end itself. Officers adopting this style use this digital information as preparation for what they believe is the most important aspect of their role: face-to-face interactions. Personal engagement with residents, whether through door-to-door visits or street conversations, is at the core of their approach to building trust and addressing community needs. Their preference for direct, in-person communication with residents and stakeholders is based on the belief that this approach fosters deeper connections and allows for more meaningful exchanges.

A little later, the neighbourhood officer takes out his phone and he says he does take a critical view of smartphone use: 'I do write everything down in my notebook anyway, because I have the idea that citizens then look at you like: 'Are you listening to me now, or are you just texting?' (field notes)

As a result, officers adopting the Hybrid Mediator style are often faced with the decision of whether to store information into the official online police system or to store it within their own personally developed system. This ongoing balancing act reflects their desire to maintain control over sensitive local knowledge while ensuring they stay connected to the broader network of official records.

The neighbourhood officer is sceptical about putting all his information in the digital police system: ''The moment you put information in the system, anyone can use it. This can then lead to insufficient protection of your 'informants' or local residents, which can lead to a breach of trust when a colleague uses certain sensitive information.'' (field notes)

Officers who adopt the Hybrid Mediator style often rely on alternative methods, such as notebooks, to record information they prefer to keep private or outside the wider digital reach. In some cases, their personal systems may even incorporate digital elements, such as a digital notebook, Excel file, or Word document, allowing them to organize data in ways that align with their unique workflow. These personal systems offer a sense of security and familiarity but also require careful management to ensure that crucial information isn't lost or overlooked. The Hybrid Mediator style's tendency to toggle between digital and analog

methods reflects a nuanced understanding of the risks and benefits of both approaches to data storage.

Recently, one neighbourhood police officer swapped responsibilities with a colleague because his relationship with the local residents had become 'too close'. During this transition, the officer handed over an Excel file containing personal information and phone records of the residents to the new officer. Although the officer recognizes that using an Excel file in this way may not fully comply with ethical or privacy standards, he explains that it was necessary to ensure the information wasn't lost. After the shift from the previous information system to a new one, the officer became less confident in the long-term reliability of certain applications. He believes the police often create new systems or applications that don't integrate well with older databases, which could lead to data gaps or loss. (field notes)

The Digital Liaison style

The Digital Liaison style stands in stark contrast to the Analog Custodian style, fully embracing the potential of digital tools for both information storage and communication with citizens. At the centre of this style is the reliance on data analysis tools, online reporting systems, and statistical models to gain insights into the community, while using digital platforms such as social media and online communication tools to engage with residents. For officers adopting the Digital Liaison style, performing their duties without technological support is nearly inconceivable.

The neighbourhood officer cites that police training is increasingly focusing on the use of digital tools. New officers often learn during their internship how to create a dossier via programmes on the computer. The downside of this is that when the online environment fails, you can no longer fall back on a backup. New inspectors, he says, no longer know how to start a dossier from scratch. (field notes)

Officers who adopt the Digital Liaison style place great value on digital information systems, considering them superior to the knowledge that is stored through traditional, on-the-ground methods. They take a systematic approach to data management, prioritizing the storage of every relevant piece of information into digital systems. For the Digital Liaison style, having these systems is a point of pride, as they view it as essential to modern policing.

As one officer stated: 'After every shift, you must always add all the information you have into the digital system.' (field notes)

Unlike officers who rely on personal observations or street-level interactions, officers with the Digital Liaison style typically only visit neighbourhoods when prompted by a specific issue identified through online systems. Even then, their primary goal is often to gather additional data that can be uploaded back into the system to enrich the collective

knowledge base. For them, the neighbourhood is as much a digital space as it is a physical one, and they are deeply invested in the digital representation of their community.

The officers explained that they rely on citizens to approach them rather than proactively reaching out to the communities. They stressed the importance of their department's website, which features an interactive map allowing residents to easily identify and contact their assigned neighbourhood officer. This approach, they believe, ensures accessibility without requiring them to engage proactively with citizens in their neighbourhood. (field notes)

Digital Liaison styles have a markedly different perspective on accountability compared to the other styles. They believe that managing a neighbourhood is a collective effort, facilitated by the information they store in the digital systems. Their philosophy is that the data they compile should enable seamless handoffs to colleagues during their absence. This perspective extends to how they see their role within the broader police organisation. Digital Liaison styles often compare the police force to private companies, where digital efficiency and seamless communication are prioritised. They view themselves as modern professionals who contribute to the organisation by ensuring that valuable information is well-documented and widely accessible.

The neighbourhood officer cites that he has linked his Instagram account to a fellow neighbourhood officer. In doing so, there is a system that if he himself does not reply to a private message within 3 days, his colleague takes it up. (field notes)

Digital Liaison styles strongly favour digital channels for communication, believing that society has evolved to a point where analog, face-to-face interactions are no longer necessary for most exchanges. Officers adopting this style rely heavily on email, messaging apps like WhatsApp, and social media platforms such as Instagram to connect with residents. For them, digital communication is not just a convenience but a necessity, reflecting the broader societal shift toward online interaction in both private and public sectors. The digital liaison style means that citizens are redirected to online platforms in order to communicate. Neighbourhood police officers adopting this style would share their email address, WhatsApp number, or social media handles to continue the discussion online. They see this as an efficient way to maintain contact and believe that online communities are just as important—if not more so—than physical neighbourhoods.

The neighbourhood officer works in an area with a large student population. Because of this, he has intentionally chosen to use Instagram and WhatsApp as his primary communication tools with this group. He believes using these digital means to communicate are what students expect and are what they are most comfortable with. To engage with the

community, he uses Instagram's direct messaging feature and WhatsApp's chat function for more personal communication. Additionally, he posts regularly on his Instagram account and shares updates through Instagram stories to raise awareness about his role and activities as the neighbourhood officer. The officer feels that Facebook is outdated, as many young people no longer use it. He believes he can reach a larger audience through Instagram and WhatsApp, making these platforms more effective for his work. (field notes)

Discussion

Our research shows that neighbourhood police officers in both Belgium and the Netherlands exercise a significant degree of discretion in deciding what they do and how they do it. This aligns with earlier studies from the Netherlands, which highlight the substantial autonomy these officers have; an autonomy that grows with experience and time in the role (Terpstra, 2008, 2019). We found that the same applies in Belgium. Despite operating in a different national context, neighbourhood police officers in both countries possess remarkably similar discretionary powers. This reflects their central role in community-oriented policing, a model in which such discretion is not only recognised but considered essential to effective professional practice (Ponsaers, 2001).

In our article, we examined how this discretionary space of neighbourhood police officers intersects with the use of ICT. The ongoing digitalisation of policing raises important questions about how ICT influences decision-making. Some scholars contend that technological advancements have contributed to the dehumanisation of policing, replacing personal interaction with automated systems and rigid procedures (Terpstra et al., 2019, 2022). In many cases, ICT tools are introduced alongside formal processes that limit officers' initiative, with strict top-down guidance reducing their ability to act independently (Gundhus et al., 2022). In particular, digital knowledge management systems have automated tasks once reliant on individual judgement. By embedding structured data and predefined decision rules, these systems restrict discretionary space and promote greater procedural uniformity (Schuilenburg & Peeters, 2024; Terpstra et al., 2019, 2022)

However, the fieldwork conducted in Belgium and the Netherlands presents a more nuanced picture. While digital tools do have the potential to reshape the traditional role of neighbourhood officers, discretion continues to play a central role in their daily practice. The findings demonstrate that officers regularly make choices about how, when, and why they use technology. Rather than eroding discretion, digitalisation appears to reshape it, allowing officers to integrate technology in ways that reflect their styles and adapt to the demands of specific situations. This flexibility is evident in the range of policing styles observed across individual officers. These approaches are not rigid or tied to specific personality types but

are adaptable and responsive. Officers may shift between styles depending on the context. Such adaptability highlights the dynamic and situational nature of police discretion.

Despite the diversity of policing environments, the repeated use of similar strategies across both case studies points to the influence of deeper cultural patterns. These shared patterns help guide how officers interpret their roles and carry out their responsibilities. As Bowling et al. (2019) note, police occupational culture is not static or immune to change, nor is it uniform across all officers. It varies across contexts and evolves over time (Bowling et al., 2019). Officers are not passive recipients of culture but active participants in its ongoing negotiation. They selectively adopt or reject norms and practices based on personal values, professional judgement, and practical considerations (Fielding, 1988). Their behaviours are further shaped by individual experiences, role perceptions, relationships with colleagues and community members, and the broader organisational and political context (Chan, 1996; Chan et al., 2003).

In this context, the work of Rowe et al. (2022) offers valuable insight. Drawing on 28 interviews with police officers, Police Community Support Officers, and staff from four police services in northern England, their study explored the relationship between occupational culture and the notion of the 'abstract police'. They found that, despite the pressures introduced by digitalisation and organisational restructuring, core elements of police occupational culture have proven remarkably resilient. Some norms, attitudes, and everyday practices remain intact even in the face of significant technological and managerial change (Rowe et al., 2022).

The present study supports and extends these findings by highlighting how occupational culture remains especially strong in neighbourhood policing. In this setting, culture does more than simply endure—it actively shapes how technology is perceived and implemented. Officers do not uncritically adopt digital tools according to centralised directives aimed at increasing efficiency or standardising procedures. Instead, they interpret and incorporate these technologies through the lens of their professional culture. As a result, technological change is filtered through existing norms and role understandings, often muting or redirecting its intended effects. This underscores the crucial role of occupational culture in mediating the impact of digitalisation. It suggests that frontline discretion is not merely a matter of individual choice or procedural flexibility, but a culturally embedded practice shaped by shared understandings, professional values, and local contexts (see also: Davis, 1969:4).

These findings align with research in science and technology studies. This perspective suggests that while professionals influence how technological tools are used and what they can achieve, these same tools also shape and influence practitioners' actions, decision-

making processes, and ways of thinking through the possibilities they offer (Fussey et al., 2021a; Martin et al., 2012). The typology developed in this study illustrates the dynamic interaction between discretion and technology, but it does not yet identify the specific factors that explain why, in some situations, technology shapes officers' discretion, while in others, discretion takes precedence. Nor does it fully address the reasoning behind officers' choices to adopt different approaches in different contexts. Future research could use this typology, perhaps in combination with a science and technology perspective, to examine when and why officers apply or even deviate from these established styles. To do so, it is essential to closely analyse practitioners' day-to-day actions (De Paepe & Easton, 2024) and consider the broader context in which they operate (Bull et al., 2024).

Conclusion

This study adds to the ongoing conversation about how technology is shaping police practices, particularly within community-oriented policing. Over the years, police forces worldwide have adopted various community policing strategies to redefine their relationship with the public (de Maillard & Terpstra, 2021). These efforts aim to rebuild trust and improve public engagement, especially after tensions caused by traditional policing methods (van Caem-Posch, 2012; Wisler & Onwudiwe, 2009). At the heart of community policing lies the discretion of officers on the beat (Ponsaers, 2001). While there is plenty of research on police discretion, the role of technology has been less explored. The increasing use of digital tools in policing, however, raises important questions about how these technologies impact the discretionary power of police officers.

This study examined how neighbourhood police officers in Belgium and the Netherlands navigate their roles in community policing, particularly in relation to their reliance on ICT. Neighbourhood police officers are a specific type of police officers within Belgium and the Netherlands and are considered to be the embodiment of community-oriented policing. Their primary role is to bridge the gap between law enforcement and the public by fostering trust, addressing local concerns, and proactively engaging with residents to enhance community safety (Easton et al., 2009; Terpstra, 2008, 2019). The neighbourhood police officers that were part of this research operated in urban environments with similar characteristics. Over 545 hours of direct observations, from April 2022 to July 2024, allowed the researcher to closely follow the officers' daily activities, interactions with residents, and decision-making processes.

The findings from this study suggest that while new technologies have the potential to significantly transform the role of neighbourhood police officers, they do not necessarily eliminate discretion. Instead, they reshape it, offering officers new tools to adapt their approaches. This is evident in the emergence of four distinct policing styles that reflect how

officers incorporate technology into their daily routines while retaining their autonomy in decision-making. These styles—ranging from those who fully embrace digital tools to those who remain skeptical of their utility—demonstrate the diverse ways in which neighbourhood police officers navigate their roles within the broader framework of community policing.

Ultimately, these findings highlight that technology does not necessarily diminish the officer's discretion but instead interacts with it in complex and dynamic ways. Rather than viewing technology and discretion in isolation, this study suggests that they exist in a mutually influencing relationship, where digital tools shape how officers make decisions, while officers, in turn, determine how these tools are applied in practice (Aston & O'Neill, 2023; Fussey et al., 2021). This interaction is not uniform. At times, technology may constrain discretion through standardizing procedures or increasing oversight (Gundhus et al., 2022; Terpstra et al., 2019). In other instances, discretion plays a decisive role in shaping how technology is used, as officers determine how and when to leverage digital tools. The balance between these forces is shaped by multiple factors. Future research could explore these influencing factors in greater depth, examining under what conditions technology reinforces or restricts discretion.

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