| Article | # Watch Groups, Surveillance, and Doing It for Themselves |

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Abstract

This paper focuses on surveillant relations between citizens and police. We consider how online platforms enable the public to *support* the task of policing, as well as empowering the public to work *without* and *beyond* the police. While community-supported policing interventions are not new, more recently mobile and accessible technologies have promoted and enabled a DIY (Do-It-Yourself) culture towards policing amongst the public. The paper examines watch groups or those who task themselves with monitoring suspicious or actual behaviours. We consider two empirical examples: first, a community alert group mediated through social media. Second, a group of businesses that circulate, via a website, CCTV images of (alleged) wrongdoing in their premises. Drawing on David Garland's (1996) work on responsibilisation, we situate the growth of these types of responsibilised groups within the contemporary economic and political climate of crime control in the UK. We argue that citizens are establishing new surveillant relations that are pushing policing in new and evolving directions.

Introduction

This paper examines citizen-led watch groups and our aim is to offer an insight into how such groups are increasingly assimilated into roles traditionally held by the police. What must be considered within the context of our discussions is the dominant spectre of neoliberalism as a mode of governance and control. Neoliberal forms of governance have sought to place citizens at the heart of their own development and to pursue "the creation of the citizen who 'frees' himself from the care of the state and instead assumes responsibility" (Hoffman Birk 2017: 2). Equally, in the UK the spectre of austerity has had a dramatic impact on policing, for example, since 2009 the number of police officers in England and Wales is said to have dropped by sixteen per cent (see Siddique 2018). The paper therefore questions the shifting paradigm of responsibility, as the public subsume policing roles as a result of changing economic and political landscapes. Considerable academic research has discussed the comparative merits of the public working with the police, for example, private and voluntary sector partners as part of networked policing models (see Berry et al. 2011; Fleming 2006; O'Neill, 2017; O'Neill and McCarthy 2014; Somerville 2009). These literatures have tended to focus on how the police facilitate public–police practices via engagement initiatives; less pressing however has been the impact of tools such as online platforms in examining public–police relations—notwithstanding recent literature (see Trottier 2012, 2014; Schneider 2016). Therefore, the paper's focus is on online watch groups—that is, groups organised with the aim of monitoring and reporting on others—and how through online platforms they work with and beyond the police.

The groups we highlight have created bespoke modes of policing partly in response to perceived gaps or failures in the performances of state police actors. We present two contrasting examples in which groups of individuals have mobilised to monitor, record, report, and ultimately police their communities.[1] The first is a community group mediated via social media led by local residents in reaction to a rise in crime and antisocial behaviour in their locale. The second is a group of businesses based in London who contribute CCTV images captured on their premises to a collective online platform. We make no claims that our examples are representative of other watch groups and certainly do not claim that these two examples are exhaustive. Nevertheless, they do offer insights into how groups are responsibilising themselves, much in line with neoliberal principles.

In what follows, we begin by positioning our argument in relation to previous work on neoliberal governance and strategies of responsibilisation in public–police relations. We then introduce our empirical focus and present findings from our research into these groups. Finally, we consider the impact of these groups on how we can begin to better understand new forms of public–police relations and reflect more broadly on how these examples may be instructive of future developments in the policing landscape.

Public–Police Relations, DIYism, and Watch Groups in a Digital Age

Community-oriented policing has been well established (see Skolnick and Bayley 1986); for example, prior to Robert Peel's Metropolitan Police Act (1829), local militias often fulfilled the role of enforcement and indeed justice (Lentz and Chaires 2007; Lyman 1964). Indeed, Peel's declaration that "the police are the public and the public are the police" makes clear that the task of nineteenth century policing was intended as a cooperative endeavour between citizens and police officers (Peel 1829). More recently, police–community collaborations have created accredited police roles designed to work closely with communities (Johnston 2006), establishing bottom-up, ongoing partnerships between the community representatives and police actors (Crawford 2006; Walklate 2001); instigating temporary problem-solving arrangements (Skogan et al. 1999); and encouraging unstructured, ad hoc communications between the public and the police to address specific issues (Skolnick and Bayley 1986). Notable examples of public–police collaborations include the growth of Neighbourhood Watch schemes in the US and the UK, which are intended to form close ties between communities and local police, demonstrating the manner in which citizen participation in policing can undergo a process of formalisation and accreditation (Bullock 2017; Kang 2015; Rosenbaum 1987).

Underlying self-responsibilised policing activity is a protectionism that offers solace, particularly at times when extra reassurance is needed. In the aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks, law enforcement agencies alongside government bodies significantly intensified attempts to responsibilise citizens and institutions in the fight against crime and terrorism. For instance, the US Department of Homeland Security's "If you see something, say something" scheme explicitly instructed the public to help the state combat terrorism (Reeves 2012). Furthermore, in the UK, the Metropolitan Police's Assistant Commissioner John Yates stated:

> The police and security services need the help of the public to protect the country from the threat of terrorism. We cannot do it alone. We all have a responsibility to remain vigilant and aware and to report any suspicious activity. We must not become complacent. (Metropolitan Police 2010)

These pronouncements speak to new approaches to policing, most especially moves towards less punitive appreciations of public control and public management and more risk avoidance measures. Seminal in appreciations of neoliberal models of sovereignty has been Garland's (1996) considerations of the placing

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[1] We recognise that the term community/communities is not homogenous and should not be treated as a discrete category. Indeed, this paper examines quite different communities and we seek to show that these communities are characterised by variances in their socio-economic backgrounds and the motivations that underpin their behaviours.

of responsibility on those outside the police force, much in line with Yates's comments above. As Garland explains, the sovereign state's role was once to ensure security through the apparatus of the police or the army combined with legislative and/or penal authority. However, the limitations of pervasive state control are apparent as the "hollow state" (Milward and Provan 2000) encourages third parties to deliver services in the name of the state. Indeed, more recently Loader (2016) offers similar conclusions in relation to Peel's principles of policing, which he characterises as directives devised in the context of state building and ones with limitations in modern society. Loader argues for a more flexible interpretation to Peel's principles of policing and, further, proposes that debates concerning stop and search and other controversial policing activities should not warrant defensive retreats and justification based on arguably outdated Peelian principles. Rather, the danger of centralised policy and directives does not compensate for localised irregularities, and it is these that should be used to highlight the democratic ideologies of policing. This is where watch groups may be working to draw on the localised and—as we will see—address autocratic disparities.

UK governments have over the past twenty-five years promoted a responsibilisation strategy (Garland 1996)—an indirect approach reliant on instigating responses and actions from private organisations and individuals. These approaches are evidenced in the terminology often used in the context of contemporary crime control, for example, "partnerships," "cooperation," and "multi-agency approaches." The key message here is that the state cannot be wholly responsible for preventing crime, and by extension society must recognise its role in crime prevention. Equally, what should be noted is that the state is not simply handing over its policing powers, such as privatising policing. The state retains powers of arrest, incarceration, and legislative oversight as Garland emphasises that "the responsibilisation strategy does not entail the simple off-loading of state functions . . . The state does not diminish or become merely a nightwatchman" (ibid.: 454). Indeed, Cohen (1985) draws on the potential for net-widening in the context of responsibilisation strategies. While some developments within criminal justice may appear benevolent, moving away from punitivism and seeking to promote autonomy within certain communities, these same approaches actually work (deliberately or as an unintended consequence) to widen the state's control as more people enter the criminal justice system. Within a responsibilised strategy, new partnerships can be forceful (i.e., regulated responsibility — for example the UK's Prevent Strategy) or suggestive (i.e., good citizens reporting a crime or a moral duty to participate). However, while responsibilisation may help communities to become independent in their social control (or at least believe that this is the case), it may also further overly attentive mechanisms of reporting (see Cohen 1985), where for instance those responsibilised report too much and too frequently through fear of admonishment (see Amicelle and Favarel-Garrigues 2012). Equally, questions of economic inequality prevail within responsibilisation strategies in which individuals and groups concerned about a crime problem are drawn towards purchasing security solutions. As Monahan (2009: 155-6) explains, neoliberal crime control emphasises the "production of consumer-citizen subjects" who become "obligated to consume in order to meet their basic needs or solve social problems." Apt examples here include identity theft and community safety, where citizens are encouraged to purchase solutions such as Trojan horse detection software or the latest home security products respectively to avoid becoming a victim of crime (Monahan 2006, 2009).

While neoliberalism incentivises privatisation, independence, and responsibility for citizens and organisations, its principles are based on an economic drive for reduction (Giroux 2015), and this is a key component to how and why watch groups are mobilised. As Lippert (2014) attests, this can be seen in shifts from municipal governance (i.e., city councils and an ethos of governmental support) to a market-based form of governance. For Lippert, "police" symbolises how civil groups or members conduct their policing through little tasks or the rules of residential and city living (Sanders and Langan 2018). The context to much of his argument centres on attempts to revitalise the city or specifically business improvement districts (BIDs). He develops a compelling point in relation to marketisation incentivised through "police" practices or the regulations set within the BIDs—such as security patrols, rules of condo living, excluding undesirable people, appointing BID ambassadors. These practices are tailored towards an emphasis on risk avoidance, and, in the context of Lippert's research, ultimately insurance companies look favourably on the organisational structures of the area. The economic incentive is plain to see, and Lippert's argument

concludes that BIDs are responsibilised through the "dos and don'ts" of being in this space. Hence the influence of fellow citizens, market principles, and management directives work in a neoliberal and/or responsibilisation context to help municipal governments assert control "at-a-distance." But in the context of community building, questions arise whether neoliberal models of governance are conducive to creating cohesive and inclusive communities. While responsibilisation, which is sold to the public as part of political rubrics such as the so-called "Big Society" (Walker and Corbett 2013), may on the surface appear to be advancing empowerment and independence amongst communities by encouraging them to take greater responsibility for their own safety, Monahan (2006) argues that such strategies can in fact reinforce spatial and social divisions. Relatedly, Raymen (2016) proposes that neoliberal crime control strategies underpinned by such models of segregation or "capsularization" (de Cauter 2003: 96) effectively promote individualism, competition, and indeed narcissism—central products of modern societies that contribute to "a significant part of the contemporary crime problem" (Raymen 2016: 511).

What is evident to our argument is a deep problematising of public–police relations and indeed the large implications for mobilised collections, such as watch groups. Research has consistently shown that police–community relations are often underpinned by adversarial relationships (Manning 1983; Wilson 1963; Waddington 1999), and so questions remain whether the watch groups discussed in this paper will overcome this hurdle in the long term, particularly given that both groups we concentrate on were created in light of perceived police failures. Previous work on civilian policing shows that the presence of some groups helps to improve police relations while others exacerbate existing tensions, though much of this may depend on whether watch groups are "supplemental" or "adversarial" to the police (Marx and Archer 1971). Perhaps a salient example here is the recent emergence of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) movement. BLM can be characterised as a community of like-minded citizens who created a cohesive movement in response to what they perceived to be unsatisfactory (and in fact discriminatory) behaviours by state policing actors (Carney 2016). The movement engages in direct physical action through protests, marches, vigils, or art interventions, as well as virtual community engagements via social media platforms. Though ostensibly drawing attention to police abuses and receiving worldwide support, the creation of the movement in fact appeared to worsen police–community relations as police actors frequently reacted defensively and in an adversarial manner to the presence of BLM. As the movement grew, the right-wing mass media (Hall 2012) began to recast the activities of BLM as confrontational and disorderly, while its concerns were criticised for being reductionist. Countermovements such as All Lives Matter and Blue Lives Matter were constructed in part to draw attention to BLM's supposedly narrow and self-serving purpose, and in a very short time, BLM was presented as a movement in opposition to peaceful and productive police–community relations (Gallagher et al. 2018). Thus, while social media movements or self-responsibilised groups can call attention to narratives that are ignored or suppressed by the state, the consequences for police–community relations are unpredictable and may depend on how significant a challenge these watch groups pose to the state's coercive supremacy as exercised through the police (Freelon, McIlwain, and Clark 2016).

Within this context, the ease of capturing digital information and the vast instantaneous reach of this information is undoubtedly moving public–police relations into new arenas (Smith, Bennett Moses, and Chan 2017). For us, these developments, as well as the organising principle facilitated by online platforms, extend the input of the public within policing. What may be useful in expanding our argument is the concept of Do-It-Yourself (DIY), a phenomenon commonly associated with home improvements, within which a wave of enthusiasts celebrate a "can-do" attitude (Watson and Shove 2008; Smith 2014). DIYism began through necessity, the cost of a professional tradesperson being prohibitively expensive, the householder simply attempts the job themselves. As the examples of watch groups below will show, we observe a similar movement in policing today insofar as traditional forms of policing are being amended with digital competencies—individuals, groups, and communities are identifying fissures in policing and are addressing those gaps (Innes and Tucker 2009; Rogers and Gravelle 2013). It appears to us that the public are enthusiastic towards their new-found responsibilised roles and readily contribute their labours and monitoring, editing, and data collection skills to the police.

Talking to Watch Groups

The findings that inform this paper are based on nine semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders in two watch groups. The first group is "Townbury Alert" (TA), a Facebook community group based in Townbury, a town in the North East of England with a population of just under 25,000 residents. Like many other post-industrial towns in the North East, Townbury endures a series of unfavourable socio-economic indicators including high levels of unemployment together with poor educational achievement and several indicators of poor health (Bilton 2018). Seven interviews were conducted with individuals with a vested interest in the activities of the watch group. These included the three founding members of the group (Jen, Robert, and Michelle[2]), two police officers from the local Neighbourhood Policing Team (Police Officers #1 and #2), one local councillor, and one AntiSocial Behaviour (ASB) Officer working for the local social housing association. These individuals were recruited via personal contacts and were selected due to their status as stakeholders in the local community with a clear link to the activities of TA. All participants regularly visited the Facebook page, were *in situ* in Townbury at the time of the creation of the group, and have all had extensive forms of interaction with the group in the six years since its inception. Participants were specifically targeted due to their knowledge of the history and development of the watch group as well as being able to reflect on the impact of the group's activities from their own personal or professional perspectives. Observations were also undertaken and involved the observation of police strategy meetings, team meetings of the social housing association, and community meetings involving residents, the police, and other local service providers. These observations not only facilitated access to research participants but helped to situate the role and impact of TA within the daily activities of service providers such as the police and others.

Our second group is "Pickpocket Watch" (PW), a fee-paying website that invites members to upload images of CCTV captured on their business premises purporting to show criminal activity. The intention of the venture is to share information with police and other members of the organisation. PW started in London but has now expanded to other cities in the UK. We conducted an in-depth interview with the managing director of PW, as well as with one of its members—a senior manager in the fraud department of a leading UK high street bank. All the interviews that inform the paper were recorded and fully transcribed; the interviews lasted ninety minutes on average.

Townbury Alert and Pickpocket Watch

At the outset of this paper we sought to understand the impacts of new public–police relations in a digital age and our examples offer contrasting findings due to historical, social, and economic differences—as will become evident. Nevertheless, these perspectives allow us to consider how digital advancements can transcend cultural and social differences and ultimately have an effect on resulting public-police relations.

Townbury Alert—Community Watching "By Us, For Us"
In early 2011, Townbury residents Jen, Robert, and Michelle decided to create a Facebook group named "Townbury Alert." The period leading up to the creation of the online group was challenging for parts of the town, with one police officer explaining, "It was a time when there were a lot of issues happening on the estate. There was a lot of antisocial behaviour, a lot of criminal damage, a lot of drug dealing" (Police Officer #1). Exacerbating these problems was a perceived breakdown of communication between the police and local residents, a tense situation that finally exploded in response to an alleged criminal incident in the area—an individual exposing himself to young girls near playgrounds, referred to below as a "flasher." Jen explains:

> It was set up originally because there was a flasher that was going around on the estate. We weren't told about it and we were finding out little pieces about it here and there. After the first [incident] happened, we brought it to the police. . . . But we wanted something in the

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[2] All names of participants have been changed, as have the names of the watch groups.

media and the police wouldn't put it in the [local newspaper] because it would cause panic
and it was an ongoing investigation. (Jen)

The group sought to create a platform whereby members of the community watched one another and reported what they perceived to be unacceptable behaviour. TA's administrators freely admit that the group was—and continues to be—narrowly focused on tackling antisocial behaviour and drug dealing, two issues perceived as being particularly problematic in certain Townbury neighbourhoods. Further still, a specific group of young men was targeted by many of TA's early posts for their antisocial behaviour, which predominantly consisted of smoking, talking loudly, playing football in an open square near a local takeaway shop, and (allegedly) drug dealing. Alongside reporting on incidences of crime and antisocial behaviour, TA sought to hold local service providers to account by keeping members informed about their interactions with individual police officers or council staff. Inevitably, however, many of these reports tended towards negative depictions and anecdotes. Local police officers reported feeling under constant surveillance by the community during the early days of TA's creation, with innocuous incidents reported online and exponentially exaggerated to reflect negatively on the police.

> We did feel at one point like Big Brother was watching us! We'd go into [a shop] to get some lunch and you'd be thinking, "oh god, it'll be on TA this afternoon that we were getting a sandwich.". . . You'd visit an address and be talking and see the laptop on the side and you'd think "as soon as I leave this address, this is going to be all over TA." And that was frustrating because they don't understand how things work. (Police Officer #2)
> In the early days it was quite negative. When it first started, on the back of this [flasher] incident, a lot of people were quite anti-police. There were a lot of nasty comments put on there and people didn't have a high opinion of us—what we did, what they thought we did, what they thought we didn't do. (Police Officer #1)

Similarly, an ASB Officer for the local social housing provider (who also received heavy criticism on TA) explains that "it got personal literally from minute one," with users of the group posting inaccurate or completely false information. Minor instances were reframed as serious failures, and narratives were created by TA members to reflect negatively on local service providers.[3] Infighting within the group also surfaced around how to report events, including using TA as a platform to name and shame alleged offenders in the community.

As a result of these tensions, TA's administrators eventually created a set of rules to regulate the content being posted online. TA became a "members only" group; the group was limited to people over the age of 16; new members were checked to filter out false profiles and aliases; and new posts (but not subsequent comments) needed to be approved by one of the group administrators. As these new rules began to be enforced, relations with local service providers not only began to thaw but in fact started to significantly improve (see Figure 1 for overview of the rules—right-hand side).

Over the next several months, the police began to work in tandem with the group, interacting with the group's administrators online and opening reciprocal lines of communication whereby TA's administrators would provide intelligence to the police and the police would—off the record—explain how this intelligence was being used and any outcomes arising from it. However, it is crucial to note that at no point was TA officially endorsed by the police. Nevertheless, during this period TA established itself as a conduit of communication between the police and residents. Crucially, the local police came to accept that the founding members of TA had a unique advantage insofar as they were well-known trusted members of the community and this accrued local cultural capital placed them in a privileged position to gather and pass on local intelligence.

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[3] In one instance, an incident during which a housing officer asked a tenant if they owned a dog was wildly distorted on TA as the housing officer asking the tenant to choose between having the dog euthanized or losing their social housing.

With Jen living on the estate as well, that helps. She's a resident, she's one of them so if they say, "Please keep me anonymous," they know that she will. There's a bit of trust there. She's like a gatekeeper in a way, for the estate. She's got into this role where she's realised that passing something on to us will be beneficial. (Police Officer #2)

Basically, the community will listen to them whereas they won't listen to people like me. (ASB Officer)

Figure 1: *TA Facebook Page (any individual identifying information has been removed)*
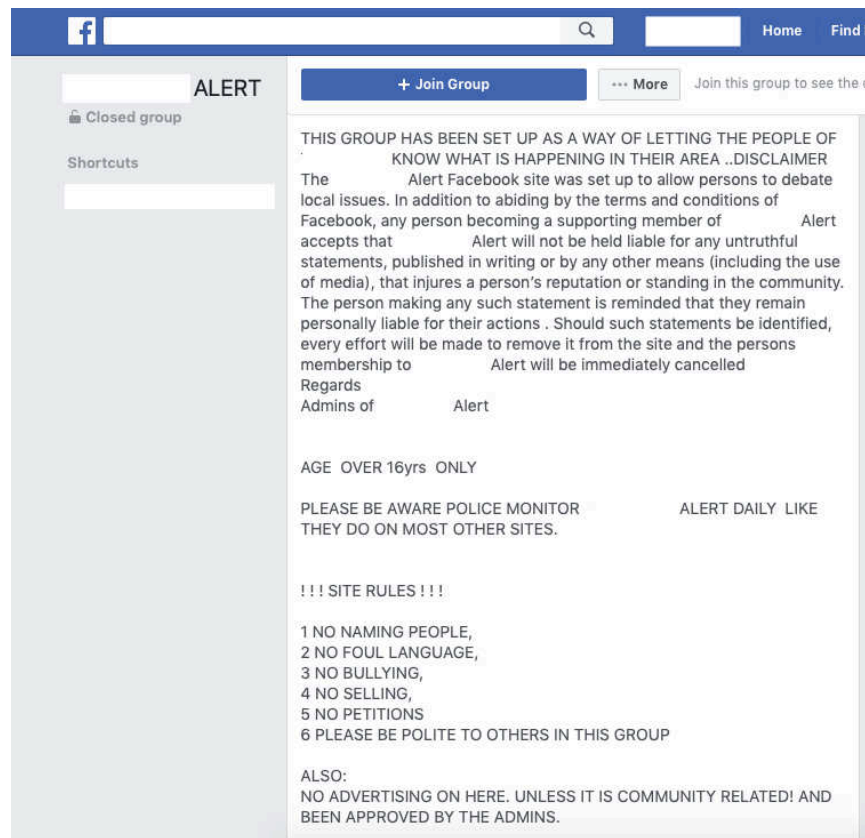
Gathering intelligence in this way overcame several traditionally difficult obstacles in a challenging locale. Firstly, residents trusted Jen and the other TA administrators to respect their anonymity, thus overcoming the perennial problem of residents fearing being labelled a "grass" or a "snitch" if it somehow emerged that they had spoken to the police (Yates 2006). The police had in the months preceding TA's inception trialled some methods to overcome this issue, including running a public relations campaign in the local media as well as installing an anonymous tip-off postbox in the town centre—all to no avail. Secondly, the instantaneous nature of posting on a social media website was making residents more likely to provide intelligence rather than retain information before deciding not to report it.

The good thing [with TA being on a social media website] is that if someone is angry about something, they'll take a picture straight away and put it on TA. Whereas otherwise they'd be angry about it, they might write a number plate down and then a few days later they might see us walking past but they'd think, "Ah well I can't be bothered saying anything now," but at the time they were really angry. So it's instant which a positive. . . . The longer they have a piece of information, the longer it gives them to worry about what might happen if they pass it on. (Police Officer #2)

Gradually, as trust relations developed, information sharing also became considerably more reciprocal. Rather than TA being simply used by the police to gather intelligence, the group was also used by the police as a tool with which to speak to the community. The police began to feed messages and statements for Jen to relay on TA, bypassing the police's own Facebook and Twitter pages. TA's administrators also often posted the content of "off the record" conversations held with the police, including updates on local investigations—all of which was done with the unofficial consent of the local police neighbourhood team. A key aspect to the public–police relations within TA is how social media has amplified communication, and notably in this example, it is negotiated through unofficial means. Perhaps neoliberal modes of responsibilisation stretch to encouraging an echo chamber of modelling citizens' behaviours, further demonstrating traits of "governance-at-a-distance" (Garland 1996).

Through the perceived authenticity and gravitas lent to Jen's voice as a representative of the community, the police and other local service providers continued to use TA as a vehicle through which to publicise their own events, successes, and appeals for help (Crump 2011). At the time of writing, TA's membership has continued to grow, reaching over 10,500. TA's administrators are in little doubt that crime and antisocial behaviour has dramatically decreased in Townbury in recent years, and they confidently declare that TA has played a central role in this positive outcome.

> The police will tell you that crime in our area has completely dropped off. Our local bobby has told us that TA has helped get rid of crime. Because if someone is burgled then it goes straight on [TA], then that dodgy guy has nowhere to go because it's there, it's online. (Robert)

Crime statistics support this conclusion as crime has dropped from 4,061 to 3,547 offences per year—a 12.6% decrease over a period of three years.[4] Local service providers explained in interviews that they regularly use TA in their daily work and planning, and every participant admitted checking TA before work, sometimes at weekends and on holiday, to give them a "heads-up of what we're coming back to work to face" (ASB Officer). While acknowledging that TA should not be considered completely accurate, these participants do believe that TA remains a useful tool to provide an indicator of what the main issues may be that they are expected to prioritise at any given time. This admission alone demonstrates the power of TA in enabling local citizens to identify the operational priorities of the police and others.

TA thus represents a community responsibilising itself as a result of what was perceived to be the inaction of local service providers, most prominently the police. Via TA, residents were urged to watch and report on one another and were assured of anonymity in doing so (cf. Andrejevic 2002). The founding members reflect that they have formed a bottom-up, grassroots movement, "run by us, for us" (Robert), which holds local service providers to account, identifies priorities for the area, but also develops positive, trust-enhancing relationships with the police and others. This may be argued to be an example of classic sociological processes of social organisation and collective efficacy within a community, but one rebooted for a digital age and thus mediated online (Burgess, Lohman, and Shaw 1937).

Pickpocket Watch—A Modern Day Rogue's Gallery "Helping Businesses Help Themselves"
Our second example is "Pickpocket Watch" (PW), a fee-paying website that shares CCTV images captured by businesses of individuals committing minor crimes on their premises. Such activities may include pickpocketing, shop lifting, bag theft, passing fraudulent goods, using stolen credit cards, and such like. PW works by enabling businesses to sign up and pay a fee to become members, and they are then invited to upload images online of those caught committing criminal acts on their premises. Members can also view the profiles of those caught on camera elsewhere, enabling them to cross reference this data against their

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[4] It should be noted here that during this period, the police in England and Wales have made significant efforts to improve crime recording practices and data integrity processes, which could arguably dictate that recorded crime actually increases.

own images. At the time of writing, PW has over ten thousand registered businesses and ten police forces have also signed up. PW has also received "Secured by Design"[5] status from the Association of Chief Police Officers and the website proudly displays endorsements from the Crown Prosecution Service and the Metropolitan Police. There are even plans to embed facial recognition software into the website as well as launching mobile apps linked to the site. The managing director of PW describes its services:

> Basically, we're just a website, effectively. We're just a, if you like, a portal to connect that business with the police. . . . They basically sign up. We charge £3 a month per premises, and they sign the terms and conditions and the data protocol, and that then enables them to share [CCTV footage] in a secure environment where, for instance, other bars in the area, or a shopping centre, or within a banking group [have the ability to share their evidence]. (Managing Director PW)

As the managing director was keen to emphasise, PW members have a duty of care to their customers, including maintaining customer safety and the security of their possessions (Levi 2001; Montoya 2015). And so, PW contributes to the protection and minimisation of risk—it performs a civic duty and also protects business interests.

The creation of the website stems from a group of concerned businesses coming together in 2010 to discuss what they perceived to be a rise in crime on their premises. These businesses, based in central London, had noted that while offences were taking place in different premises, they were often perpetrated by the same individuals; hence these businesses had a shared problem. They also noted that once offences were reported to the police, long delays usually followed in officers attending to pick up CCTV evidence, therefore potentially reducing the effectiveness of having caught an offender in the act. Thus, working collectively, they hoped not only to reduce the delays in law enforcement accessing this material but also sought to boost its effectiveness as a collective tool of surveillance and vigilance.

> Pre-[PW], what you'd have to do is phone [the police] up, they'd have to send one, if not two, officers out to pick [our CCTV footage] up. So we arrived at a good time that police can't, because you can't really afford to send an officer out to pick up a CD—that's ridiculous. Especially now that police stations are shutting and your local policeman is maybe based a mile away—or in the case of some of the rural forces, a lot of miles away. And they've got to drive, and then pick up a CD, and then inevitably they get it back to the—not inevitably, but sometimes they get it back to their office. (Managing Director PW)

PW is much like the rogue's gallery of old or similar to UK television shows such as *Crime Watch*, where viewers are asked to identify offenders, as well as being warned of offenders operating in certain areas. Images uploaded by members to the website are displayed on a password-protected forum with the time and place of the (alleged) offence (see Figure 2 for a screenshot of what members view online). As a result, other businesses in the area can remain vigilant and the police can build up a profile of known offenders. The website also provides a live newsfeed, reporting the movements of suspects in real time.

The managing director explains that he and his fellow business owners took inspiration from the police's fingerprint and DNA databases. These systems were seen as examples of data being easily cross-referenceable, a centralised resource that police forces could use, and one that often provided cogent results. PW sought to extend the model by effectively outsourcing the collection of evidence to the public and then allowing members to have access to the database for them to easily view those who had been committing crime in their area.

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[5] Secured by Design is a national police project working with industry to design-out crime on business and domestic premises. For more information, see www.securedbydesign.com.

Dissatisfied with the delays in the collection of what businesses viewed as vital CCTV evidence, they pro-actively and unilaterally created an online platform to, in their own words, "help themselves." Much like other incarnations of public–police collaborations such as Crime and Disorder Reduction Partnerships (Crawford 2006) or Situation Tables, where groups meet to consider specific risk problems (see Sanders and Langan 2018), evidenced here are self-motivated partnerships between public and police that address specific local problems. What is particularly noteworthy is that the conclusion reached by this collection of business owners rebuts past academic assertions that commercial and corporate actors enjoy a "privileged" relationship with policing actors, certainly in comparison to ordinary citizens (Hagan 1988; Ericson and Haggerty 1997). Perhaps economic austerity and the impact upon official police capabilities has created a more equitable (lack of) access to police actors, once more pushing responsibilised citizens to manufacture their own solutions. The managing director continues:

> [We seek to] help business help themselves, help the community, help the police where necessary, clean up and take the bad guys out. And also, I think, share that intelligence amongst the business community. Somebody said to me a while ago, the criminals in this area are very professional; the businesses aren't. And you look around these parts—especially shop theft, there are a lot of really good criminal gangs, travelling gangs. (Managing Director PW)

Figure 2: Pickpocket Watch Member's Page
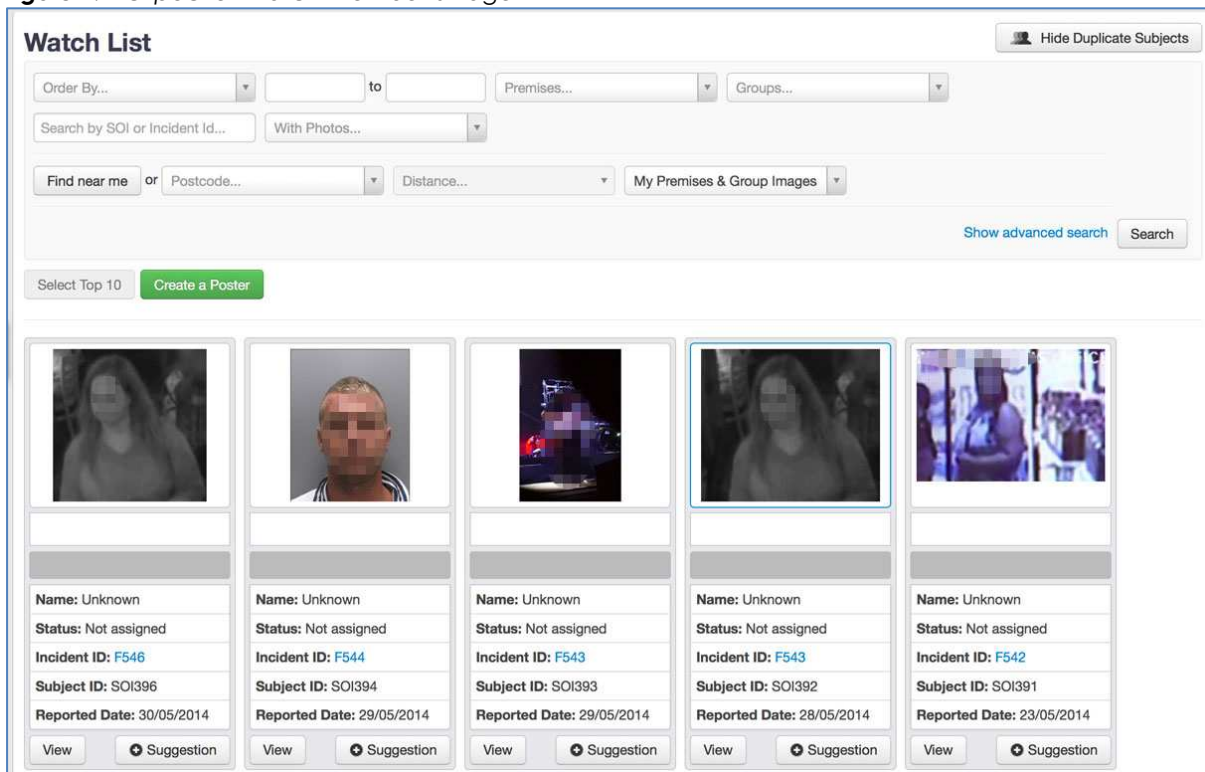
The agenda is clear, keep the "bad guys out," and let members know who these "bad guys" are. The language used also alludes to the professionalism of criminals and suggests there is a need for businesses to become skilled in how they combat crime. Yet, he was careful to add:

> We're not vigilantes, or anything like that—far from it, but this is a guy [in the image] who's made a lot of people's lives pretty unhappy. (Managing Director PW)

PW certainly appears to be highly valued by its members, which include individual business owners as well as entire departments of larger organisations. One such member is the fraud department of a multinational bank, who was keen to endorse PW as an invaluable tool of vigilance:

> It is a fantastic system, it really is, and it links into, you can report crime through them, which means you haven't got to go through the aberration that is actual fraud, so you can report crime directly to them, it links directly into the police, the police end up with [the] image. (Fraud Department)

Again, the speed and precision of the service provided by PW is a notable factor according to the participant above, as is helping the police. There is a strong undercurrent here of how the service not only enables members to capture crime in the act, but also aids the police in the pursuit of criminals. The mundanity and logistics of police officers calling in person to premises to collect DVDs with CCTV is now all but eliminated. It may also enable members to prevent crime or be more attentive to those entering their premises. The bank's fraud department continues:

> One of the places that people go with stolen debit cards is Selfridges and Rackhams and House of Fraser and Harrods and places like that, so they buy high-end goods; well, their CCTV recovery stuff is fantastic . . . and they do monitor theirs because they're looking for shop theft, so we can get a theft at, I don't know, Harrods, and they'll identify it and we can have that image before that bloke's even left that shop, and then we can look at it and go, ooh, guess what, we've got thirty images; we ring the Old Bill, he gets locked up at the front, by the time they've got him back to the local police station, we've said, here's another forty crimes he's carried out. (Fraud Department)

In this hypothetical example, through the efficiency and rapidity of the system, the offender is apprehended as he leaves the shop. It suggests vested parties—the police, high street shops, the forty premises where crime has been committed—all working together in a highly efficient and cohesive network. The belief in this system is reminiscent of the emergence of CCTV three decades ago and the panacea it was expected to offer in reducing crime (Taylor 2010). In theory, individuals would sit in control rooms, witness crimes in real time and alert police forces who would immediately be dispatched to arrest the "bad guys." In practice, however, there are seldom enough resources to watch and instantaneously communicate between control rooms and police leading to real time police intervention (Fussey 2002). Instead, perhaps the more realistic value of PW is twofold. Firstly, there is an evidential value—images could be used in court. Secondly, PW generates and cultivates collective vigilance—businesses can use the website to keep an eye out for certain individuals. Perhaps the futurist, "all solving" belief in these systems presents surveillance in glowing terms. Yet, while we know CCTV and PW do not and will not eliminate crime, what it may achieve is bringing people together in a "common cause." Moreover, it may provide a vehicle upon which citizens and the police create new and fluid working relations. But PW also provides a clear example of concerned citizens being recast as consumers, drawn into purchasing security solutions, having accepted the police's limitations. By becoming paying members of PW, the organisations involved have fulfilled the neoliberal goal of turning them into "consumer-citizen subjects" (Monahan 2009: 155) who responsibilise themselves for their own security.

Complex Relations in Townbury Alert and Pickpocket Watch

In framing our thoughts on watch groups, we offer two key observations. The first is in relation to neoliberal modes of operation and the second expresses the tension between optimism and concern found in the public–police relations we have documented. What ultimately has motivated the groups discussed is a drive to act and to appropriate the role of the police. This, for them, is constructed with an acknowledgment of the police's inability to perform particular roles. There may be altruistic motives of helping the community or even helping the police, but what prevails is a reasoning based on stepping in and performing roles and functions that these groups have no prior training or experience with. This, we contend, is sanctioned by a

recent climate of austerity and a longer-term culture of neoliberalism. Garland's (1996) "responsibilisation strategy" has long been in practice and applied in examples such as border control or security functions (Abrahamsen and Williams 2011; Ball et al. 2015; van der Veer 2016). Therefore, the public motivating and responsibilising themselves to carry out policing functions fits into this broader and ongoing responsibilisation project. They have not been asked or mandated to perform these roles, but rather like Lippert's (2014) observations, they have been immersed into and conditioned to perform policing functions. In this regard, the impacts of neoliberalism may be more perverse than previously expected. Citizens in a bottom-up perspective, rather than in conjunction with the top-down dispersion from governmental initiatives, are increasingly doing it for themselves (Huey, Nhan, and Broll 2012; Reeves 2017: Sanders and Langan 2018).

Through online platforms, both groups sought to create mechanisms of surveillance, eventually graduating into a form of cohesion, particularly in the case of TA, which helped to bind together a previously socially disorganised community and (re)establish links with the police. One could add that this is a useful exercise for the police to gather intelligence and disseminate information through the group's social media page, perhaps engaging in a form of "unwilling partnership" (Trottier 2012: 412). Further, key to both groups is a belief that they have made a difference—they have essentially achieved where the police failed. Although crime statistics in Townbury suggest a drop in recorded crime since TA's inception, the role of the group in this reduction is difficult to determine (Smith, Novak, and Hurley 1997). Nevertheless, TA's members *believe* that they have played a role in the turnaround of a challenging neighbourhood and perhaps this imagined success is greater than tangible outcomes. With this belief may come a diffusion of other benefits such as a reduction in the fear of crime or a greater sense of community cohesion (Bannister and Fyfe 2001; Pain 2001). Moreover, belief in community-led successes may beget broader emotional investment in the sustained and future successes of the community (Sampson 1995).

The findings also highlight tensions inherent in watch groups and DIY policing. An unintended consequence of these developments may also be the net-widening effect of watch groups' vigilance (Cohen 1985). For both TA and PW, as individuals come to have their misbehaviour more closely monitored and reported, more people may fall into the net of the criminal justice system, particularly since observed misbehaviours are not being internally addressed by the watch groups but rather reported to the police. For Townbury specifically, the short-term impact for the community may seem positive (antisocial behaviour may stop temporarily), but the longer-term repercussions of young people entering the criminal justice system are unlikely to benefit an already challenged socio-economic locale. On the other hand, one may speculate that over time, the presence of the watch groups may help to disseminate an understanding and adoption of a code of acceptable behaviour amongst those targeted for surveillance. Misbehaviour may therefore stop, and fewer people will enter the criminal justice system thanks to the informal social control exerted by the watchers. In this scenario, net-widening is avoided, but concerns arise as to the asymmetries of power between those watching and those watched and how misbehaviour and criminality is socially constructed.

The potential for internal biases to be exercised by TA and PW are pressing, particularly amongst the administrators of both these online platforms who determine what does and does not appear online. Like all surveillance systems, TA and PW are subject to human intervention and inherent biases (Goold 2009). This may have dangerous repercussions, and as Trottier (2014: 75) warns, "policing by the public suggests that although social media allows for counter-power, so too does it allow for ground-up manifestation of state control in the form of law-and-order politics, including profiling and discrimination." For TA, the strict enforcement of the group's rules means that the administrators determine what can and cannot be discussed, and thus TA group administrators have become the arbiters of the content that is, and is not, disseminated. What matters to the community is selectively filtered in or out of the discourse, and what is presented online to the group's members may merely be a narrow depiction of the neighbourhood's problems according to the personal views of a small group of individuals. False narratives, inaccurate gossip, and other self-serving content is thus potentially allowed to appear (Toma and Hancock 2013) and is often relatively unchallenged.

The same may be true of PW as images are uploaded with little or no formal process of investigation of the alleged offences. Individuals are labelled as undesirable others who must be excluded from certain locales based merely on what they appear to have done through the lens of the camera and the economically minded interpretation of business owners (Fussey 2002). Research has consistently shown that CCTV in particular is not a neutral tool of surveillance (Norris and Armstrong 1999), particularly in commercial settings where surveillance is used to filter out individuals who appear to be from lower socio-economic backgrounds or certain locales (McCahill and Finn 2014). As such, the activities of both groups illustrate the ways in which criminality can be socially constructed according to the wants and needs of those who become responsibilised. The social construction of crime, traditionally seen as the preserve of the powerful few (Becker 1963), is increasingly being carried out by the many, thanks to the democratising effects of communication capabilities provided by digital technology. For TA, crime is socially constructed as centred on young people predominantly partaking in antisocial behaviour. For PW, the crime problem is narrowly constructed as one that damages the economic interests of its members. Diverse communities are constructing crime in different ways, but for both watch groups concerns abound as to who is being watched and whether some individuals are being targeted for surveillance more than others.

All the while, the state benefits from such processes in more subtle ways. As communities are responsibilised to control crime (however they construct it) and manufacture their own bespoke solutions to this problem, the state becomes further disavowed from problem-solving responsibility. This allows the fundamental conditions that underpin issues of crime and social harm to remain unaddressed (Monahan 2009). In Townbury and its surrounding locale, the great neoliberal project that began in the late 1970s has seen the privatisation and eventual withdrawal of industry that not only sustained the local economy but formed a central pillar of local identity for many decades (Box 1987). This ongoing de-industrialisation has been coupled with the systematic withdrawal of social support, leaving the local economy in a state of "permanent recession" (Hall, Winlow, and Ancrum 2008: 68) and those left behind politically disenfranchised, socially marginalised, and suffering amongst the worst socio-economic and health indicators in the country (Bilton 2018). For PW, like many other areas of London, its locale has been affected by rapid gentrification processes guided by consumer sensibilities, focusing primarily on urban regeneration designed to maximise economic exploitation. Having introduced these criminogenic conditions, the state uses the strategy of responsibilisation to absolve itself of the burden of finding sustainable solutions. For the police specifically, narrow social constructions of crime proposed by some communities allow for a limited, reactionary response that addresses little more than the fear of crime of what may be a vocal minority with, once again, the deeper causes of crime systematically ignored (Garland 2001: 18).

Conclusion

The increased responsibilisation of citizens illustrated in the two watch groups represents another step towards the fragmentation and dispersion of policing duties (Loader 2002). Thanks to accessible surveillance tools and the increased interconnectivity offered by digital technologies, policing, like many other security functions, is being increasingly pushed onto the public and organisations not traditionally associated with such tasks (see Spiller, Awan, and Whiting 2017). As demonstrated above, assorted communities, from marginalised, so-called broken working-class neighbourhoods to commercially oriented organisations are following similar initiatives. Though this paper situates these emerging modes of policing within the context of two empirical examples, we contend that these developments in policing and urban governance are taking place at a broader level in light of evolving economic and political landscapes. In the UK, the withdrawal of the state—including its policing function—and the tacit encouragement given to citizens to responsibilise themselves are not unintentional. What Garland (1996: 448) described as the "myth of sovereign crime control" may increasingly be accepted by policing actors who are conceding that they can no longer carry out their functions in isolation. Policing in an age of austerity demands greater pragmatism and collaboration, a reality well-recognised within policing circles (HMIC 2013; NPCC 2016; Police Foundation 2016). With this may come an acceptance of the need for shared responsibility not just amongst recognised members of plural policing networks but for new members such as pseudo-autonomous and largely unregulated citizen groups to join the fray. These new modes of policing, rather than desirable,

may be a contemporary necessity, and hence groups such as those described above are tolerated, at worst, and heartily embraced, at best. Concurrently, these processes also allow the state to abdicate from its responsibility to address the underlying socio-economic and political conditions that give rise to crime and harm problems in the first place. But the pluralisation of policing tasks to non-regulated individuals and groups creates complex issues of accountability, democratic governance, and judicial fairness (Loader 2002). Despite the apparent benefits associated with the watch groups discussed in this paper, these challenges cannot be ignored. The role of new and emerging technology is particularly pressing here; while Garland (1996, 2001) proposed that responsibilisation allows the state to exert greater control and to govern at a distance, we argue that the ease of access to digital platforms together with their potential to disseminate unfiltered information widely and instantaneously has created an unregulated democratisation in functions of watching, reporting, and, more broadly, policing one another's behaviours. The digital does, of course, present an additional mechanism for governmental agencies to monitor, however it is not an increase in state control that we emphasise here but rather a citizen-led control.

For us, the widening of governmental control has not been an overt focus, though is no doubt a function of what the groups are attempting. TA and PW's actions may be driven by altruism and self-interest to improve their local vicinity or maintain their businesses. Yet the wider implications of the activities of these and other groups, as has been argued with examples such as BLM, is a tentative relationship not only between police and public but also between public groups with alternative perspectives. The two watch groups discussed above emerged from unions of socio-economic, cultural, and technological development that have compelled and encouraged responsible citizens to assume obligations for self-policing, which in turn has manifested itself in the creation of the groups. The paper has sought to highlight the ongoing turn to self-responsibilisation in crime prevention, and as highlighted at the start, the foundations of this development in contemporary crime control may be found in the convergence of a climate of austerity, neoliberal models of governance that are influencing policing in the UK, and the rapid growth of accessible technology. There is evidence of social cohesion encouraged by the watch groups, where disparate individuals are working together with purpose. However, we suggest that rather less positive and more pressing are aspects of bias or over-estimation of technology's powers to prevent crime. Further and relatedly, we draw attention to concerns as to who is framing the crime problem in these contexts, for what purposes, and with what consequences for those being watched? These are important questions because in non-professional policing settings difficulties abound concerning who has the control and who has the power. Yet more important still is a belief in the power to act and this, we stress, may be a key driver in evolving public–police relations. The groups we explored are motivated to improve their situations (be it socially, economically, or otherwise) together with the realisation that policing resources are stretched. We contend that this is neoliberal policing-in-practice. Individuals take responsibility to monitor, report on, and more broadly police their local communities. However, the potential pitfalls of these negotiated and assimilated activities are apparent: how information is collected, used, and regulated needs greater consideration, particularly with the growing influx of recording devices of all sorts, significant legislative developments concerning data protection (Albrecht 2016), and perennial hazards of misinformation (Starbird et al. 2014). As we have observed, mobilising groups to police fellow citizens has a community-serving impact of drawing an array of individuals together in the face of crime, but it also heightens micromanagement tensions and questions regarding authority when self-responsibilised groups in climates of neoliberalism and austerity are tasked with performing security roles.

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