



Digital literacy and information inequality in Dutch WhatsApp Neighbourhood Crime Prevention groups

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Introduction

In many neighbourhoods in the Netherlands, citizens aim to safeguard their neighbourhoods via WhatsApp Neighbourhood Crime Prevention (WNCP), a grassroots form of participatory policing (Larsson, 2017). Since 2015, over 9,250 Dutch WNCP groups have been registered on www.wabp.nl ('Groep Zoeken', n.d.). In these WhatsApp groups, neighbours exchange information about suspicious situations, crime, police actions, and other safety-related topics. Such information-sharing practices often result in problematic forms of participatory surveillance, because good intentions to safeguard a neighbourhood can create significant issues and have ambivalent effects on citizen wellbeing (Albrechtslund, 2008). Specifically, WNCP groups can cause risky forms of vigilantism, normalise suspicion, violate privacy, increase discriminatory practices, and create issues of accountability. When it comes to citizen wellbeing, WNCP practices make some citizens feel safer while they evoke anxiety for others. Moreover, WNCP practices increase social control while simultaneously stimulating social cohesion (de Vries, 2016; Lub & De Leeuw, 2017; Mehlbaum & Steden, 2018; Mols, 2021; Mols & Prid-

more, 2019; Smeets, et al., 2019; Van der Land, et al., 2014).

WNCP groups are a citizen-initiated form of crime prevention that most often does not directly include community police officers. This differentiates the participatory policing in WNCP groups from top-down forms of participatory policing practice initiated by law enforcement, such as those encouraged by public vigilance campaigns (Larsen and Piché, 2010; Larsson, 2017; Reeves, 2012) or projects targeted towards engaging citizens in community policing (Ryan, 2008; Shearing, 1994). In the WNCP context, power and control are in the hands of citizens, yet there are significant disparities. This essay, informed by two related research projects (including interviews and focus groups with twenty WNCP moderators, fifteen participants, and five police officers), argues that WNCP practices reinforce a problematic power imbalance in Dutch neighbourhoods. Differences in digital literacy and information inequalities influence WNCP group dynamics and participation.

Digital literacy

“And behind us, many elderly people live there...So we [WNCP moderators] went by their houses but then it became clear that from, I believe, 26 houses, only two of them had WhatsApp.” (quote from interview with Klara, moderator of a WNCP group)

Klara moderates a WNCP group that covers multiple streets in a suburban neighbourhood, and actively tries to include these neighbours. However, as her quote illustrates, one of the streets has a limited number of people able to join the WNCP group because the others do not have smartphones or do not use WhatsApp. Her case touches upon a critical issue that comes up time and time again in WNCP groups. At the very least, an informational imbalance emerges in neighbourhoods in which many citizens participate in WNCP groups but others are left out; these others are actively monitored by their neighbours but cannot take part in or react to surveillance practices to which they are subject. Furthermore, even within WNCP groups different levels of digital literacy create power inequalities. Not all participants are avid WhatsApp users, and many are unaware of what others can see about them. For instance, people can open information about a message sent in a group conversation to check who has received and read the message (activated by swiping left or by selecting the message). This allows neighbours to see whether others have read their messages, and to hold these others accountable for not responding or acting. When it comes to preventing criminal activities, this knowledge poses questions about when neighbours are (unknowingly) seen as being responsible for action and when they can be held accountable for failing to act on concerning activities.

Information inequality

“I’m part of 17 WNCP groups, and that’s also two groups in the nearby village, because when something happens there, I can see that, then I’ll think.. Yes, for example, in [village name] there was a robbery, and the robbers fled towards our village. So they [WNCP participants] posted that and I saw it! So I posted it in our group.” (quote from interview with Ron, moderator of multiple WNCP groups)

Self-appointed WNCP moderators determine who can control what information. Ron manages and participates in an (exceptionally) large number of WNCP groups, and he makes decisions about which information is shared where and with whom. Moreover, his WNCP network also includes a separate group made up of community police officers and local WNCP moderators (appointed by Ron). Ron has

control over all the information and over the connections to community police officers and other WNCP groups, whereas the WNCP participants can only access what is shared in their specific WhatsApp group. Information inequality arises in many WNCP groups because participants are often unaware of the complexities of the networks of which they form part, and, in some cases, even of police involvement in these networks. Police are involved in some WNCP groups: as an illustration from the author's research into 21 groups, ten of the groups are not in direct contact with law enforcement (some do not want a direct connection, while for others the community police service refuses involvement). In three groups, a community police officer participates in the WhatsApp group. In the remaining eight groups, police officers are indirectly involved through, for example, separate WhatsApp groups or one-to-one conversations with moderators. While WNCP group conversations are transparent, the underlying networks are not, enforcing a problematic power imbalance that provides some community members with more control and connections than others. Thus, the lack of transparency about WNCP involvement and WNCP network structures makes the scope of surveillance practices ambiguous and violates the privacy of WNCP members who are unaware of the underlying networks.

Concluding remarks

Differences in digital literacy and information inequality lead to power imbalances in Dutch neighbourhoods connected via WNCP. Citizens, community police, and municipalities need to be aware that WNCP practices produce an arrangement of relationships within a neighbourhood context that is characterised by unequal power structures and opaque information-sharing processes. These issues can be (partially) overcome by educating citizens about safe and privacy-preserving surveillance practices, by actively involving and informing non-participants (e.g. by distributing leaflets about the WNCP group in the neighbourhood or by actively reaching out to neighbours who are not part of the group), and by demanding more transparency from the WNCP moderators. Moderators need to communicate to (prospective) participants about the information they share and who has access to it, they need to be transparent about the other actors involved in the group, they need to educate participants about WhatsApp features, and they need to lay out clear ground rules and unequivocal guidelines for using WNCP. It is notable that many WNCP groups make use of the ground rules presented on www.wabp.nl, which instruct participants first and foremost to be aware of and notice suspicious situations (in Dutch: *signaleren*), then to alert the police first if there is a suspicious situation (*alarmeren*), then to inform the WNCP network via WhatsApp (*app*), and finally to react (*reageren*) ('Huisregels', n.d.). However, research shows that these guidelines are often not adhered to. WNCP participants do not contact the police and act in accordance with police instructions, but instead act and communicate with their WNCP network before they may decide to involve law enforcement (Mols and Pridmore, 2019). Therefore, the guidelines need to be amended or replaced in anticipation of citizens' urge to act directly.

Finally, the concerns over power and information inequality and a lack of transparency in WNCP practices touch upon wider issues of control and transparency in participatory policing practices. Within public participatory policing campaigns, law enforcers control the distribution of information and often fail to educate citizens on appropriate forms of participation, potentially leading to citizens unknowingly being monitored and reported via social media (e.g. Marx, 2013; Reeves, 2012). Increasingly, citizens across the world are taking up or participating in law enforcement activities. Researchers, governments, and law enforcers need to take active roles in preventing the problematic forms of power imbalance and information inequality that are reinforced by these activities.

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