

Police and Social Media: The Need for Presence and the Challenges This Poses

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Abstract

This article argues the importance, the need, and the essentiality of the police having a social media presence. As social media is a new and unquestionable reality in the area of communication between individuals and organisations, this article concludes that the police need to modernise and use these tools to communicate with the public quickly and effectively. This article investigates what kind of presence the police should have on social media and the challenges the police face in delivering a social media presence. The methodology used for this investigation is a wide range of articles on the subject (secondary data analysis), that are focused on the experience of police institutions in the English-speaking world, predominantly in the United Kingdom. Based on this study, suggestions for future use of social media were provided.

Keywords

Criminal Justice, Police, Policing, Communication, Social Media

1. Introduction

There are different types of social media available to the public, each with its own characteristics. Among the most popular are Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, YouTube, Instagram, and Snapchat (London School of Economics and Political Science, 2017). For 2023, it is estimated that there will be 4.76 billion users (Statista, 2023). This figure grows every month, showing that more and more people and organisations occupy a place in cyberspace and communicate through social media. Esteban Ortiz-Ospina (2019) points out that “social media platforms were used by one-in-three people worldwide and more than two-thirds of all internet users”. This new reality in social communications has not gone unnoticed by the police force, which has understood, for some time, that “we are living in a virtual communications world, and issues are being followed in real-time through

a range of new technology and social media” (*Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011: pp. 28-29*). In the context of the police’s online presence, the use of social media has become commonplace: as a way to promote greater engagement with the community; to optimise the results of their crime prevention and investigation tasks; even, with the intention to improve its image, credibility, legitimacy and reputation with the public (*Crump, 2011; Procter et al., 2013, Wood, 2020; Livingstone, 2022*).

With the new technologies of social media, the relationship between police and community has become more direct and independent from the mainstream media (*Lee & McGovern, 2014*). If before, information reached the public through radio, television and news websites, nowadays, the various social media platforms used by the police disseminate information to the public and these exist in parallel with the traditional forms of communication.

This is a new reality that requires adaptation rather than questioning, as can be seen in the following comment in one of the first police publications on the subject:

We need to embrace this new form of communication because if we don’t engage with people via social media they will move on without us and we will miss the opportunity to influence them, making it much more difficult to re-engage with them later (*National Policing Improvement Agency, 2010: p. 4*).

Currently, social media is used as part of official communication policy in most police forces (*Brainard & McNutt, 2010*) of various sizes (*Livingstone, 2022*). It can be said, without great risks, that nowadays police and policing exist in a “technologically mediated sociality” (Tufekci 2008, as cited in *Goldsmith, 2015: p. 255*). The relevance of this new field is demonstrated by the increased amount of investment in media and public relations from the police, including the creation of specialised departments (*Greer & McLaughlin, 2010: p. 1043*).

In this article, the importance, the need, and even the essentiality of the police having a social media presence will be argued, analysing how this presence should happen and critically discussing the challenges of a virtual existence for the organisation.

The structure of the work is divided into two main topics. The first one will address what kind of presence the police should have on social media. In this topic, some of the most important objectives for this presence will be indicated. We will address social media presence as a means of improving institutional communication, exercising other forms of journalism, approaching the community, improving police legitimacy and, finally, as a form of crime prevention, crime solving and policing new forms of crime. In the second topic, we will discuss the challenges the police face in delivering a social media presence. In this section, we will look at the issue of effective communication and real interaction, contrasts between the “shop window” and reality, a new demand and the need for specialised professionals and training and, finally, we will discuss the problem of indiscretion in social media spaces.

2. Notes on Methodology

Regarding the methodology used, the collection of information for this work involved research in Web of Knowledge, Google Scholar, and Microsoft Academic resources. For the searches, the terms used were “police”, “policing”, “social media” and related terms such as “public engagement” and “interaction”. The purpose of the search for related terms was to obtain better results catalogued using similar expressions. After procuring the results, the articles were briefly examined by reading their titles and abstracts in order to filter the articles obtained with the theme of this article.

As this is an article prepared from secondary data, resulting from other research carried out on the subject, the path taken here was to construct our own arguments, highlighting the most important points from the research carried out, seeking argumentative consolidation, coherence, seriousness, and originality in propositions. The use of existing data (secondary data analysis) as the research method was chosen because there is already a great number of empirical evidence on the subject. Data analysis takes less time and resources, therefore, for the purpose of this article, that is to point out to the importance, need, and essentiality of the police’s social media presence, previous research was considered sufficient.

3. The Kind of Presence the Police Should Have on Social Media

In the UK, the police already had their websites, but they are static and do not allow engagement with the public (Crump, 2011: p. 8). The use of social media by the police occurred for the first time in 2008 in the context of community policing programs (Colbran, 2020: p. 298). Initially, through individual initiatives and, later, as a form of general communication strategy (Crump, 2011: p. 1). In August 2011, however, following protests after the death of Mark Duggan, this interest becomes more evident. Greater Manchester Police provided 24/7 coverage of the protests via their Twitter account. This episode was a watershed moment in the police’s use of social media and the need to strengthen this type of communication with the community. Observing this police action on Twitter, it can be seen that the police “face difficult problems in making effective use of social media services such as Twitter during crisis situations” (Procter et al., 2013: p. 433), raising the need for the corporation to make better use of social media. Studies and research on the use of these tools by the police also appeared in 2011 (Crump, 2011; Procter et al., 2013; Colbran, 2020). From these analyses, we can identify some of the ways how the police can take advantage of their presence on social media.

3.1. Improving the Institutional Communication

“Social media are undoubtedly altering the ways that constabularies and officers communicate with citizens” (Bullock, 2018: p. 255). One of the main uses of so-

cial media by the police is as a tool to work on their image and reputation with the public (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018). The use of social media makes individuals and organisations better known (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 250) and being present on these platforms is an excellent way for the police to become better known, to publicise their actions, their strategic plans and their campaigns, in short, promoting a positive image of police forces (Mawby, 2012: p. 272). Johnston and McGovern (2013) analysed the visibility of the police on social media and found that it is greater than the visibility of the courts. This example highlights what is a strategic action by the police on social networks to promote a positive image for the institution.

Social media publications also have the potential to humanise police officers and the police itself, through posts that represent the daily lives of ordinary people who are part of the police forces, captivating the public's sympathy. Wood (2020) describes the social communication strategy used by the New South Wales Police Force (NSW Police) to garner more followers and get more engagement. The force used the creation of memes, that is, humour (meme strategy) as a way of approaching the community, which is more effective with the young population (Ralph, 2022: p. 825). The strategy, from the point of view of gaining followers, was quite successful. In August 2017, NSW Police reached one million followers on Facebook. The use of humour to convey serious messages and show a more humanised side of the police was also successful and received praise. The use of "humour and cuteness" proved to be effective in increasing the engagement with the NSW Police Facebook page in the short term, but it raises questions about the effectiveness of the strategy in the long term, mainly due to the lack of dialectical engagement (Wood, 2020: p. 41, 54). This problem of dialectical and real engagement will be discussed further on.

3.2. Exercising Other Forms of Journalism, Leading the Agenda of News and Combating Fake News

Social media revolutionised communications by empowering ordinary citizens as protagonists in the creation and circulation of news. Social media increasingly plays a leading role in the dissemination of news, in some cases surpassing the mainstream media (Williams et al., 2020; p. 99). Thus, more and more people assume the role of reporting facts, which are then consumed on a large scale. Social media therefore gives a "microphone for the masses" (Murthy, 2011: p. 779). Consequently, in contemporary times there is a new profile of journalism carried out by the citizen or "citizen journalist" (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010: p. 1041).

Citizen journalism has the potential to deconstruct narratives, as is well demonstrated in the study by Greer and McLaughlin (2010) on the process of creating journalistic news from the perspective of citizens and deconstructing official narratives. This research demonstrates, among other conclusions, that there is a growing accountability on the part of citizens and the news needs to correspond to reality, otherwise, it is at great risk of being confronted and overthrown. If, on the one hand, we have this positive aspect, with the possibility to oppose facts,

on the other hand, the universalisation of access to social media allows false narratives (Williams et al., 2020: p. 99), since citizens, as users of social media, report facts on their own account and not always reliably.

We therefore have a strong reason for the presence of the police on social media in order to offer the population official information that can be more reliable, including the potential to combat fake news, rumours and speculation. The police being the protagonist of the news, regardless of the acceptance by the mainstream media about what is worth being published, gives police forces independence from the press (Colbran, 2020: p. 301) and the possibility to launch and organise their own agenda of news, according to its strategic and social communication plans.

3.3. Approaching to the Community and Improving Police Legitimacy

It is important to remember that the community has a great interest in police actions, ranging from mere curiosity to society's right to information and transparency (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 255). Greater engagement between the police and the community is one of the objectives of the police presence policy on social media, including with the aim of increasing public trust and confidence (Crump, 2011). The use of social media has the potential to reach a large number of people in a short period of time, many of whom receive the information immediately, without the bureaucracy, cost and time consumption of a press conference or transmission of information through the traditional media (Scholes-Fogg, 2012: p. 9).

The police recognise the potential of social media to provide better public engagement and “forces are using social media sites as a method of widening their access to communities and engaging with people through their preferred method of communication” (National Policing Improvement Agency, 2010: p. 11). In fact, media and communications and citizen engagement were two areas of interest highlighted at the “Policing 2.0” conference in October 2009, highlighting social media as an essential element for effective communication (Crump, 2011: p. 10).

Still, police forces are increasingly aware and concerned about their reputation, legitimacy and authority (Mawby, 2002, cited in Greer & McLaughlin, 2010: p. 1043). Working on the corporation's image in the eyes of public opinion is a way of ensuring legitimacy. Over time, different strategies were used by the police to maintain a positive image. The use of technology and, more recently, social media, is a way to achieve this goal (Kudla & Parnaby, 2018: p. 2). As Bottoms and Tankebe (2012) point out, the legitimacy enjoyed by an institution of the criminal justice system (power holder) is a highly relevant aspect when assessing its level of acceptance in the community, compliance with the law, and the cooperation of citizens (audience) in relation to these organisations. “Legitimacy is dialogic, involving claims to legitimacy by power-holders and responses by audiences” (Bottoms & Tankebe, 2012: p. 120). The reasoning is that

the more legitimacy the institution and its agents enjoy, the greater the cooperation of people with that institution and its representatives. This is very important because “citizens will cooperate and comply with the police when they accept police legitimacy” (Ralph, 2022: p. 824). Therefore, social media are spaces where it is also sought to reinforce the legitimacy of the police before the community.

Between November 2016 and September 2017, Ralph (2022) conducted a study involving police, police staff and citizens in Scotland to understand how the use of social media impacts police legitimacy and “how social media fits into everyday policing” (Ralph, 2022: p. 820). The study served to demonstrate that the search for legitimacy is still present in the daily life of the police, who now also use social media as a way to achieve this objective. It is worth mentioning, however, that despite the relevance of social media to achieve this objective, the face-to-face relationship still has great importance in achieving the legitimacy of the police (Ralph, 2022: p. 818).

In the analyses that have been carried out so far, the presence of the police is visible, that is, it is seen by people. However, the new reality of social communications also demands a disguised or invisible presence, with the objective of crime prevention, crime solving and policing new forms of crime on these very platforms.

3.4. Police’s Invisible Presence: Crime Prevention and Crime Solving

“The most popular uses of social media by officers were identifying people and locations, discovering criminal activity and gathering evidence” (Williams et al., 2013: p. 464). Social media is a very useful tool for investigating and solving crimes and the police have increasingly used information from this source as another way to gather information (Scholes-Fogg, 2012: p. 7), demonstrating the potential of social networks to aid the investigation activity (Colbran, 2020: p. 295). “In addition to engaging with communities through digital technology, some police forces are now using online monitoring to track and follow web based conversations” (National Policing Improvement Agency, 2010: p. 19).

An interesting example of how the interaction between users and the police on social media can be useful in the elucidation of a crime, and how this interaction can help to generate an immediate response, occurred at the London Olympics, involving abusive behavior by a teenager via Twitter against British athlete Tom Daley. “There were dozens of complaints and after establishing which force area the suspect lived in he was arrested for trolling” (Scholes-Fogg, 2012: p. 8). As can be seen, the police became aware of the case through social media and acted promptly. In addition to being an example of effective interaction, the user community feels confident that it can collaborate with the police and that it is heard, contributing to the institution’s credibility and legitimacy.

Considering that “social media streams can therefore be considered as new sources of information on the perceptions, opinions, actions, feelings and ten-

sions expressed by individuals and their neighbourhoods” (Williams et al., 2013: p. 462), monitoring social networks through artificial intelligence programs is a strong instrument in favour of the police in the difficult task of preventing conflicts or, in other words, using information from social media to understand and anticipate social conflicts. Social media monitoring can also be useful in preventing riots and other types of violent protests that are arranged via social media (Innes & Thiel, 2008). “Track online conversations, identify emerging issues and monitor the online communities most influential to the police” (National Policing Improvement Agency, 2010: p. 19) are contemporary forms of policing.

3.5. Police’s Invisible Presence: Policing New Forms of Crime

It is important that police are prepared for the growing number of criminals who specialise in committing crimes through cyberspace, as well as a world where social interaction, conflict and crime take place online. In the period 2020-2021, for example, an estimated 14,130 cyber-crimes were recorded by the police in Scotland. This has almost doubled (increasing by 95%) compared to the estimated 7240 cyber-crimes recorded in 2019-20’ (Scottish Government, 2022). Cybercrime is one of the global priorities in the security area due to the growth in the number of crimes committed in cyberspace, which are surpassing traditional forms of crimes. The police have received investments to help them with the prevention of cybercrimes and specialised units have been created to act specifically in this new scenario (Wall & Williams, 2013: p. 409).

Through research carried out in London, Williams et al. (2020: pp. 111-113) demonstrate evidence of “association between Twitter hate speech targeting race and religion and offline racially and religiously aggravated offences”. The study also highlights the need for greater use of predictive policing mechanisms in social media. Social media has a very high potential for harm, as material posted online quickly spreads, crosses geographic borders and, in a short time, is in all parts of the world. When the content of this material is hate speech, it encourages this behavior in others who think the same way. “Online hate speech posted on social media has become a pernicious social problem” (Williams et al., 2020: p. 94). In this context, important research by Awan and Zempi (2017) on the reporting of hate crimes against the Muslim population (Islamophobia), showed that this is not restricted to the traditional form of face-to-face crime, but increasingly occupy the virtual spaces. Irrespective of the way they are practiced, they cause profound impacts on the lives of victims. Social media is the space where this type of violence most occurs and has become fertile ground for the propagation of anti-Muslim discourse and sentiment, notably against young Muslims (Awan & Zempi, 2017: p. 370). The Christchurch case, in New Zealand, in 2019, also illustrates the close relationship between social media and hate crime with the publication of the terrorist attack on the Facebook platform. Despite being removed in less than an hour, the video was already circulating massively (Williams et al., 2020: p. 97).

4. Challenges in Delivering a Social Media Presence

The use of social media by the police does not only have beneficial effects, there are also important challenges to be overcome. This awareness is present in corporations, which recognise that “its use also poses risks which need to be understood and managed” (*Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011: p. 37*).

4.1. Effective Communication and Real Interaction

When we consider that one of the goals of using social media is to allow greater engagement between the police and the public, this engagement must be effective. Otherwise, we’ll just have a new form of broadcast information. *Wood (2020: p. 43)* explains that there are at least two ways of understanding what social media engagement is. First, engagement can mean users’ reactions to content and posts, through commands such as like, share and comment. On the other hand, engagement can have a deeper meaning, as the dialogic interaction between police and public. If we understand that engagement is just like, share and comment, the police are fine, but in the dialogic analysis, this relationship almost does not exist. Thus, “social media are not currently transforming the communicative practices of police services in the ways that proponents have proposed” (*Bullock, 2018: p. 245*).

In a study (*Crump, 2011*) that analysed the main Twitter accounts of police in England and Wales, it was shown that the platform has been used much more as an extra tool for disseminating information than as a form of interaction between the police and the community. In other research, *Brainard and McNutt (2010)* looked at the online interaction between The Washington, D. C., Police and local residents. The investigation focused on understanding how the police organisation and citizens interacted virtually, and whether such a relationship was informational, transactional, or collaborative. In the end, they concluded that the interaction takes place much more in an informational and transactional way than in a collaborative way. Thus, the use of online platforms by the police is much more “performing old tasks in new ways” (*Brainard & McNutt, 2010: p. 852*). Therefore, police rarely engage meaningfully with other social media users, often doing so only with an audience sympathetic to their actions and ignoring those who question their legitimacy (*Kudla & Parnaby, 2018: pp. 10-11*).

“The logic of social media necessitates that police engage in not only image work but what we might also term engagement work” (*Wood, 2020: pp. 43-44*). Engaging is not having a lot of followers, a lot of published material or a lot of likes. It is important that there is effective communication. Therefore, when talking about engagement, it is important to understand it as something substantial, in the sense that social media must be an instrument of communication and real interaction, not only a vehicle that disseminates information and disseminates advertising (*Kudla & Parnaby, 2018: p. 13*).

There are, on the other hand, positive experiences such as the one described

by Ralph (2022: p. 827) in which a successful practice of proactive and direct engagement between the police and the community is portrayed. From police posts on Facebook, which received criticism from users, the organisation responded to comments and made direct contact with people so that they could report in detail what their complaints were. As a result of this dialogue, police officers began to have a more direct approach to people in the center of the city and this was portrayed and well received in other Facebook posts.

Furthermore, “citizens can contribute to police operational goals on social media, for example by assisting with appeals and acting upon current and future risks broadcasted by the police” (Ralph, 2022: p. 824). The lack of real interaction is also an obstacle for the community for communicating and contributing to police investigative activities. If social media has been rejected as a means of reporting crimes (e.g. Police Scotland, 2021: p. 41), then this aspect also deserves attention in the future.

It is not simple to interact effectively on social media when you have a large number of followers and messages, it also needs to be thought out and managed correctly. Greater Manchester Police, for example, presented an interesting chart guide for analysing comments on social media (Scholes-Fogg, 2012) that pointed out ways on how to deal with the demand for comments. This model could constitute a starting point for each force to reflect and develop its plan of action that is truly interactive with users without leaving them unanswered.

4.2. Contrasts between the “Shop Window” and Reality

Freedom on social media, including through anonymity and fake profiles, makes people more comfortable to comment, criticise and highlight negative opinions about police work (Ralph, 2022: p. 826). “Presentational as well as operational and individual flaws are rendered visible and open to judgment by outsiders” (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 252) and social media “allow citizens to expose, discuss, and mobilize around perceived injustice” (Walsh & O’ Connor, 2019: p. 2). As Goldsmith (2015: p. 255) points out, “performance, whether good or bad, is readily made publicly visible through SM sites such as Facebook”.

The legitimacy of the police on social media is evaluated from the behavior of the organisation and its agents on a day-to-day basis, that is, what is shown in the online world must faithfully portray the reality of the offline world, without that there will be a crisis of legitimacy. Thus, “police services must not overlook the role that policing in the physical world has in shaping police legitimacy online” Ralph (2022: p. 829) or “the micro-level, face to face, on the street, interactions between police and people matter” (Henry, 2021: p. 1066).

4.3. A New Demand and the Need for Specialised Professionals and Training

As seen, there is a great concern by police institutions with the social communication via social media. This concern is shown with the creation of internal departments that deal specifically with this topic (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 255). In ad-

dition, there is an increase in the investment of resources in the presence of the police on social media and in the virtual world as a whole (Ralph, 2022: p. 829). The current departments that take care of communication have become increasingly complex, with responsibilities that range from dealing with the press to promoting the institution's positive reputation or handling serious cases and crises (Mawby, 2012: pp. 273-274).

With the ever growing demand for information and the expansion of responsibilities, in addition to the need to assert itself before the public through active campaigns, there is a need to employ a significant number of professionals specialised in communication, such as journalists, public relations officers, marketers, audio-visual and graphic design technicians, working in police forces (Mawby, 2012: p. 274). However, studies indicate that this increase in demand is not always accompanied by an increase in available financial resources, or in the number of professionals involved (Cartmell & Green, 2011, cited in Mawby, 2012: p. 275).

4.4. Indiscretion: New Old Things

In the year 2006-2007, there were five complaints regarding the leaking of information on social media. In 2010-2011, that number rose to 57 new cases (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011). After some negative incidents, reported in at least three reports on the relationship between police and the press (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011; Filkin, 2012; Leveson, 2012), there were a number of restrictions between the contact of police officers and the press. The reports were able to show a very close and indiscreet relationship between senior police officers and press staff (Mawby, 2012: p. 272). These restrictions dramatically affected the material available for publications by the mainstream media, stressing the importance of the presence of the police in social media spaces (Colbran, 2020: p. 296), from which the mainstream media currently obtain news.

Even in 2011, it was already noted that the use of social media by staff was a "new source of information for the media" and there was a need to discipline the use of social media by police officers. In eight police forces researched, "3.4% of officers and staff using Facebook identify themselves as police employees, of which 2% (43) had posted inappropriate pictures or comments" (Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011: p. 16).

Although with different contours, the problem of indiscretion remains in the social media. This indiscretion can occur and lead to, for example, "undermining criminal proceedings", "expressing extreme and prejudiced views", "undesirable associations", "vulnerability", etc. (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 255), that is, it affects both the operational effectiveness of police actions and the institution's reputation (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 253).

When the institution itself takes the lead role in disseminating information, it reduces the risk of problems in the context of indiscretion and leaks by officials. It is important, however, that there is an internal policy to "be able to effectively

protect their reputation through staff use of social networking” (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011: p. 37). The publication Engage (National Policing Improvement Agency, 2010), for example, represents an advance in the regulation (guidance) of the presence of police on social media so that there are clear guidelines on the use of social media by police officers (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary, 2011: p. 37). It is worth noting that several police forces have regulated their presence on social networks, not only at the institutional level but also at the level of their members (Goldsmith, 2015: p. 250). Therefore, it is necessary that the field of social media is exhaustively regulated so that problems with misuse can be avoided, which not only compromise the person involved, but can put the credibility and seriousness of the institution in check.

5. Conclusion

As social media is a new and unquestionable reality in the area of communication between individuals and organisations, the police need to modernise and use these tools to communicate with the public quickly and effectively. When used correctly, social media enables the police to disseminate accurate and reliable information, at speed, whilst offering a way to refute fake news stories. The proximity between the police and the community can no longer be restricted to the physical environment of the streets that allows face-to-face interaction. Even before COVID and much longer after the pandemic, people and institutions began to communicate with great intensity through the available technological tools, with social networks emerging as the protagonists of contemporary communications. Therefore, it is no longer questioned whether the police should be present on social media, only in what way, to what extent, and what are the implications of this presence. There are, of course, risks involved when the horizon is new.

In this writing, we argue that social media is an excellent tool to bring the police closer to society and it is a way of publicising how the police want to be seen and recognised by society, as well as promoting their actions, work plans, and strategic planning. Effective use of social media by the police also means the image projected on these platforms matches up to how the organisation are in reality. Properly utilised, this all helps to improve police legitimacy.

Being active on social media does not mean having only a visible presence but also, equally important, the invisible presence that can provide a useful tool in preventing and solving crimes. Likewise, it is important to have an awareness of the different types of crime that occur in virtual spaces, such as cybercrime, and racially and religiously motivated crimes. The police need to be present in order to follow society’s new ways of committing crime beyond the “beat” on the streets. That being the case, the presence of the police on social media poses several challenges. We have seen that from the moment the police make themselves known, they are subject to increased criticism, especially on social networks where

users can interact. In addition, we discuss how dealing with the ever-increasing demand is a problem that deserves attention, since there is an increasing need for specialisation, equipment, and police officers dedicated to monitoring social media and developing programs that optimise responses, etc. As a final discussion, the old problem of indiscretion was analysed and that, with the accentuated use of social media, emphasises the need for greater care and regulation of the use of platforms by corporations and their agents.

Based on this study, suggestions for future use of social media by Police Forces are: to have an interactive presence on social media, thereby providing a platform to properly engage with the public following protocols. In addition, to create internal departments specialised in effective communication on social media, and to regulate extensively the use of this by the institution itself and their members.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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