

Police corporate communications, crime reporting, and the shaping of policing news

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Abstract

Police forces in England and Wales in recent years have attempted to improve the ways in which they communicate. This results from a number of converging pressures that include technological media developments and government and public pressures to provide reassuring policing services. The same media developments have had consequences for news organisations and their processes and practices of news gathering. In this context the paper examines recent developments in police non-operational communications, explores the current dynamics of the relationship between crime reporters and their police sources and considers the implications for the 'shaping' of policing and crime news. Although the paper provides an examination of contemporary police-media relations, it also looks back to the work of Steve Chibnall whose 1970s research benchmarked police-media relations. Drawing on a national survey of police forces, together with data gathered from interviews with crime reporters and police communications managers, the paper concludes that although the police-media relationship is asymmetric in favour of the police, the practical dynamics of newsgathering ensure that police media relations remain in a healthy tension; the shaping of policing news continues to be contested and negotiated.

Keywords: police and media; crime reporting; police-media relations; police corporate communications.

Biographical note

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INTRODUCTION

This paper explores the shaping of policing news by examining recent developments in police corporate communications and the relationship between crime reporters and their police sources. It draws on data from a study of police-media relations that included a survey of police forces in England, Wales and Scotland and interviews with police communications managers and crime reporters¹. While the paper examines contemporary police-media relations, it also looks back to the work of Steve Chibnall, who researched the relationship between crime reporters and the police in the 1970s. While Chibnall's work may seem remote from the present context, it provides a benchmark against which we can consider the subsequent development of police communications activities. The paper develops as follows. First it sets out the background of converging policing pressures and changes in the media industry that make police-media relations a significant area of study. Second, it outlines the research methods. Third, it identifies dominant trends in the continuing professionalization of police communications and, fourth, it reflects on the implications of these developments for the dynamics of gathering, selecting and presenting policing news. Finally, it considers the consequences of these findings for the balance of power in the police-media relationship, concluding that the relationship is symbiotic and asymmetrical, but the shaping of policing news remains negotiated, contested and dynamic.

CONTEXT

In recent years the police service in England and Wales has attempted to improve the way it communicates due to a number of pressures. These include: the impact of managerialist reforms that now shape the police service and other public sector organisations and which pressurise police forces to demonstrate efficiency and effectiveness (Loader and Mulcahy 2003; McLaughlin 2005; Savage 2007); changes in society which require the police service to communicate with diverse communities (Macpherson 1999, Jones and Newburn 2001, Newburn 2008, p. 832-34); and political dissatisfaction with some policing functions and tactics, co-existing with a constant public demand for reassuring policing services (HMIC 1999, 2001; Innes 2004; Casey 2008; Flanagan 2008). While these circling pressures have their origins in the 1980s, they became more acute following the election of the New Labour government in 1997. Under successive Labour administrations a programme of police reform resulted in frequent consultation papers, copious legislation, reviews of the structure and effectiveness of policing and the creation of new policing policy and oversight bodies (e.g., the National Policing Improvement Agency). Under these conditions the police service has increasingly engaged in operational and non-operational communications activities. At an operational level police forces have utilised the media to assist their investigative work (Innes 1999). At a non-operational level they have engaged in corporate communications activities to demonstrate effectiveness and accountability and to communicate with a variety of stakeholders, but also to protect their image (Mawby 1999, 2002a).

A further influence on the development of police communications practice is that of technological advances in the media industries. The growth of digital technologies and the rise of the internet have influenced how organisations

communicate and how people gather, select and absorb information (Thompson 1995; Castells 2003; Allan 2006). The police and other public sector organisations now operate in a 24/7, multi-platform, intensely competitive media context, described by Ferrell and Greer (2009, p. 5) as a ‘global mediasphere – with a live-on-demand mediascape’. This shifting media landscape has consequences not only for those in the media’s focus, but also for the media industries themselves, particularly news organisations and the processes of news gathering. Technological change has enabled the growth of ‘news on demand’ through the internet and the introduction of online editions of local and national newspapers. Over a relatively short time period we have seen the emergence of open access blogging and citizen journalists contributing digital and mobile phone photos and camcorder footage, supplementing the work of professional journalists (Allan 2006). The same technological developments open up possibilities for organisations, including police forces, to bypass traditional media channels and to engage in direct communication. This creates a context in which the media now face competition from not only ‘citizen’, but also ‘organisational’ journalism.

The adaptation of the traditional media to new technologies has organisational and financial implications. In the case of newspapers, existing business models are being challenged and patterns of ownership have changed (Davies 2008:65). Consolidation of ownership, combined with the choice provided by digital technologies, has been accompanied by increased competition for audiences and advertising revenues, and declining circulations of purchased newspapers. At the level of working practices, the process of convergence has implications not only for staff numbers and the training of journalists, but also for their reliance on outside news

sources (see generally Davis 2003; Marr 2004; Allan 2006; Franklin 2006; Davies 2008).

Sketching out this background conveys that both police forces and media organisations currently operate within a challenging context. To compound this, there are overlaying issues of confidence and trust. In the criminal justice arena, despite an increase in police numbers and visible policing, many people believe crime is rising and personal safety is in decline (Casey 2008; Duffy et al 2008). Policymakers and senior police officers have placed the police service in the vanguard of closing such ‘perception gaps’ by championing reassurance policing strategies, embodied in the establishment of accessible and visible Neighbourhood Policing Teams in all areas of England and Wales from 1 April 2008. The importance of trust and confidence to the policing policy agenda was signalled in 2009 by the Home Office abandoning the existing wide range of police performance indicators in favour of setting police forces the single target of improving public confidence.

In the media arena, issues of trust have also come to the fore, for example, through the Hutton Inquiry following the death of government scientist David Kelly; the subsequent report was critical of the BBC’s journalistic practices (Hutton 2004). During the period in which the research for this paper was conducted, a number of media scandals unfolded. These included several cases of television phone-in competitions being fixed by the programme makers (e.g. the BBC’s flagship children’s programme *Blue Peter* manipulated a competition to name a new pet) and cases where documentaries had been inaccurately edited (e.g. a trailer for a documentary featuring the Queen suggested, incorrectly, that the Queen had clashed with a photographer). The exiting Prime Minister, Tony Blair, added to the criticism in June 2007 by comparing the media to a ‘pack of feral beasts’. He argued that the

arrival of web-based news, blogs and 24 hour news channels meant that reporting was now 'driven by impact' (Cole 2007).

Given these pressures on police forces and media organisations, it is timely to re-examine the police-media relationship and the factors impacting upon the shaping of policing news. The academic literature on policing and the media forms a sub-area of the substantive body of work covering the relationship between crime and the media (Leishman and Mason 2003; Reiner 2007, 2008). Reiner (2008, p.314) has argued that the media play an important role in projecting images of policing and tend to support 'the assumption that the police are a functional prerequisite of social order'. However, the media also provide a context in which police effectiveness and accountability are questioned. News is one arena in which this has traditionally taken place and the construction of policing news and relationships between crime reporters and police have been studied in a variety of jurisdictions. In the UK, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) interviewed media and policing professionals and Mawby (1999, 2002a) explored the work of police press offices as one dimension of police 'image work'. In the United States, there have been several studies of police Public Information Officers (Surette 2001; Motschall and Cao 2002; Lovall 2003), which Chermak and Weiss (2005) extended by analysing police-media relations using data from postal questionnaires sent not only to police, but also media organisations. In Canada, the work of Ericson and colleagues (Ericson et al 1987, 1989, 1991) focuses on news sources, news production and representations. In Australia, McGovern (2008) has undertaken research on New South Wales Police and Sydney newspaper journalists.

However, for the purposes of this paper, I wish to return to research undertaken by Steve Chibnall, which remains the seminal study of English crime

reporting. Between 1975 and 1981 Chibnall's publications documented and benchmarked police-media relations in London (Chibnall 1975a, 1975b, 1977, 1979, 1981). This period has been described as one of the 'professionalization of [police] image work' in which the Metropolitan Police Commissioner Sir Robert Mark established a new approach to, and framework for, police-media relations (Mawby 2002a).

Chibnall portrayed a textured world of seasoned crime reporters, meeting detectives in smoky pubs, building relationships and exchanging information for hospitality. Chibnall's work is of historical interest for its rich description of police-media relations; a world which he argued was beginning to slip away from a 1950s golden age of crime reporting. It is also of interest here as he argued (1975b, p.74) that police-media analysis needs to look behind the projection of favourable and unfavourable images, to 'examine the way in which the occupational ideologies and routine professional practices of communications systematically shape and distort reality'. Chibnall pursued this form of examination, in part by interviewing crime reporters. He concluded (1977, chapter 6) that the police media relationship was reciprocal, but asymmetric in favour of the police. The police dominated the relationship due to being gatekeepers to information and being in the advantageous position of not depending on the media to achieve their goals; a position not enjoyed by the crime reporters. He also set out that the three goals of a control agency such as the police in its media relations were (1) To protect public reputation and image; (2) to facilitate the work of controlling and apprehending deviants; and (3) to promote the aims, ideologies and interests of the police. These areas remain pertinent and deserve re-examination in the contemporary context of a fast-moving media landscape and a police service which faces pressure to communicate better and differently.

It may seem anachronistic to refer back to Chibnall's research as, in the 1970s, Britain had just three television channels, 'hot metal' newspapers, and commercial radio was a recent innovation (the first stations arriving on air in 1973). While this contrasts sharply with the contemporary media landscape, there are contextual similarities. First, the traditional media were feeling threatened by the introduction of commercial radio; it was feared that this new media form would reduce the advertising revenue of newspapers and have a knock-on effect on the numbers of journalists and their specialisms. Second, the Metropolitan Police were under siege following damaging corruption allegations and investigations (Cox et al. 1977). Third, the police, in London at least, were for the first time formalising frameworks that would professionalise police-media relations (Chibnall 1979:143; Mawby 2002a). Fourth, there were media and political concerns regarding a perceived increasingly violent society (Chibnall 1977; Hall et al. 1978), existing within an overarching anxiety over rapid social and technological change. Each of these concerns has contemporary resonance despite the passing of three decades.

METHODS

In order to collect data to map the current landscape of police-media relations, the study combined the quantitative method of a questionnaire survey with the qualitative method of semi-structured interviews. The first stage of the research comprised a postal questionnaire survey of the 51 territorial police forces in England, Wales and Scotland, targeting the departments responsible for media, public relations and corporate communications. The survey was implemented in consultation with the Association of Police Public Relations Officers (APPRO) and built on two previous surveys, enabling a longitudinal perspective on the development of police

communications structures and processes (Mawby 1999, 2002b). The questions collected information on departments' names and functions, their place in the organisational structure, their terms of reference, staffing levels and areas of professional expertise. Information was also requested concerning communications strategies, operating hours, methods of communication and numbers of contacts with media and other organisations.

The survey took place between October 2006 and March 2007 and questionnaires were completed by 86% of forces in England and Wales (37 of the 43 Home Office forces) and 63% of the Scottish forces (five of the eight forces). The returned questionnaires were analysed using SPSS for Windows. Follow-up visits were made to eight police forces between July 2007 and April 2008, where the heads of communications were interviewed.

Eighteen interviews were conducted with journalists who were currently crime reporters or had been earlier in their career before moving on to management posts. Their experience as crime reporters ranged from twelve months to over thirty years and three were members of the Crime Reporters' Association. They worked or had worked at local, regional and national levels as newspaper crime reporters, sub-editors, deputy news editors, or editors; others worked in radio and television news. The interviews were conducted throughout England between September 2007 and March 2008.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The continuing rise of police corporate communications

Analysis of the survey data enabled the mapping out nationally of the current structures for conducting police non-operational communications, including media

relations (Mawby 2007). The in-force interviews elicited greater detail on the priorities, practices and direction of police communications. The resulting data, considered with that from previous surveys (Mawby 1999, 2002b), enables analysis of trends in the development of police communications over a ten year period. Two themes are particularly evident, namely continuing professionalization and an evolving wider role for police communications departments.

Professionalization

Previously it has been argued that non-operational communications and police media relations forms part of 'police image work' which has developed through stages of increasing formalisation and professionalization (Mawby 2002a; see also Leishman and Mason 2003: ch3). The current study confirms that this trajectory is continuing. This is supported by a number of the survey findings.

First, across the 42 forces surveyed, the departments responsible for communications, media liaison and public relations most commonly operate under the name 'Corporate Communications' (20 forces, 48%). In the 1996-7 survey the most common names were 'Press Office' and 'Press and Public Relations'. The use of the name 'corporate communications', is not simply re-labelling; it denotes the strategic direction in which police communications is moving and is supported by an increase in communications budgets and the size of departments. In 2006-7, the surveyed forces' budgets for corporate communications activities ranged from £3,000 to £6.3 million. The previous survey (2000-1) recorded only one force with a budget over £1 million. There are now six forces whose budgets are £1 million or more. With regard to departmental size, the most common staffing level in 1996/7 was four people, followed by two people; in 2006/7 it was six, closely followed by thirteen.

Second, professionalization is supported by the practice in 90% of forces to recruit communications professionals. The numbers of professional communicators have increased significantly; there are now at least 408 communications professionals employed across the 42 forces (compared with 215 in 2000-1 across all 51 forces in England, Wales and Scotland). These include trained journalists, public relations officers and marketers, but also audio-visual and graphic design technicians. The trend identified in the previous surveys of departmental management moving into the domain of communications professionals and away from generalist police officer managers is confirmed. The head of the communications department is a member of police staff in 38 forces (90%) and only 2% of headquarters staff are police officers (cf. Schlesinger and Tumber 1994:130-5).

Third, the trend of communications ‘permeating’ the police organisation (Mawby 2002b) continues as more forces are placing communications staff outside of headquarters departments in their territorial areas, the Basic Command Units (BCUs). 62% of forces do this in 2006-7 compared with 29% in 2000-1 and there are now 146 communications staff deployed across BCUs compared with 69 in 2000-1. In summary, staff employed across the 42 surveyed forces with the primary role to undertake corporate communications activities number 146 in divisional locations and 550 at headquarters – a total of 696, compared with a total of 499 across the 51 forces in England, Wales and Scotland in 2000-1. Table 1 summarises the professionalizing trajectory evidenced through the three surveys. This shows at a glance that police forces are devoting greater resources to communications, are employing greater numbers of specialist staff and are locating them not just in headquarters departments.

Please insert Table 1 about here

Table 1: Trends in police communications 1996-2007

An evolving wider role

Just as departmental names denote a change from a 'press' function towards a wider communications function, the activities in which communications departments engage have broadened. Departments have wide ranging responsibilities with strategic and operational, internal and external dimensions. These include the established activities of reactive and proactive media liaison and the marketing of campaigns, but also responsibility for corporate communications strategies, for internal and partnership communications and for internet development (Mawby 2007).

Consequently the traditional media represent but one section of the customer base. Departments also support the communications needs of a range of partners including local police authorities and community safety partnerships. The follow-up interviews with police communications managers confirmed that they are also exploring 'new' media opportunities for direct communication that bypass the traditional media, for example, by targeting social networking websites or establishing websites aimed at specific sections of the public. In addition departments are increasingly involved in facilitating direct communication between operational police officers and communities. Some forces are building communications resources into their Neighbourhood Policing Teams. Such developments are significant since research suggests that attitudes towards the police are most often shaped by pre-existing attitudes and vicarious experience, including via the media, as much as by direct contact with police officers which errs towards neutral or negative impressions (Rosenbawm et al 2005; Skogan 2006, 2009; Jackson and Sunshine 2007; Bradford et al 2009).

These highlighted areas evidence that police communications is a growth area; it is employing more people, recruiting professional communicators, permeating the police organisation, supporting partner organisations and providing services to a host

of media and other customers. However, it is important not to overstate the case. This is not yet a communications juggernaut carrying all before it; the growth is inconsistent across forces. The research revealed some stark contrasts in the resourcing of corporate communications across forces which has implications for the consistency of communication nationally. The growth is also balanced by the increase in demand across a range of responsibilities. The survey found that 67% of forces experienced an increase in the number of daily contacts with media organisations in the previous twelve months. In addition, departments experienced an increase in demand relating to new media (e.g., maintaining websites), to internal communications and to providing internal marketing consultancy. As the research also found that a shortage of human resources was the most frequently cited constraint and that staff numbers were under scrutiny due to forces striving to make efficiency savings, the demands of the operating context ensure that corporate communications departments are ‘running to stand still’.

Furthermore, communication is a specialist area and despite the trend of recruiting professional communicators, there is little consistency in the grading of senior police staff across forces. The police service is yet to develop clear career development paths for specialist non-sworn staff and its track-record in developing such staff is not encouraging (HMIC 2004; Loveday 2007). Whether this will change through the workforce modernisation programme promoted by the Flanagan Report (2008) remains to be seen.

The dynamics of police-media relations

Despite uneven resourcing across police forces, collectively the survey data and interviews with police communications managers confirm that police forces are

committing greater resources to their communications functions at a time when media organisations, particularly at a local level, are reducing their news-gathering resources (Franklin 2006). This raises questions relating to the capacity and ability of the media to influence and shape policing news and, ultimately, to hold the police to account. To examine these areas empirically, the interview-based research explored the dynamics of the police-media relationship.

The interviews with police communications managers provided an opportunity to gain a police perspective on their relationship with the media. These interviews confirmed that media relations was now perceived as but one aspect of the work of communications departments rather than their prime focus. They had moved on from their original purpose of meeting the needs of the news media (Macready 1924). This was partly due to the documented expanding role of corporate communications, but also reflected the difficulties of controlling the message when liaising with traditional media organisations. As one manager commented: 'The media are a third party, they interpret and don't always get it right. What hope have you got if the message doesn't go out correctly? Therefore direct communication is better' (Interview 2.6).

Notwithstanding the development of police communications in new directions, relations with the traditional media were still maintained. However, the communications managers made a clear distinction between the local journalists they dealt with regularly and the national media. The latter were perceived as more aggressive and less trustworthy. Talking about the local media with whom they liaised on a daily basis, the interviewees recognised that newspapers were experiencing financial constraints. In evidence of this, police press officers were liaising with smaller newsgathering teams and generalist journalists rather than specialist crime reporters. Two consequences of this were: first, the police interviewees found that

they had less face-to-face contact with journalists whom, it appeared, tend to spend more time working from their offices than out on the 'crime beat'; and second, the journalists they dealt with often had limited knowledge of policing and crime issues.

One interviewee in the North of England commented:

'Local journalists don't know their patches as they used to. You don't get local specialists, they are just jacks of all trades with no specialisms. They have less professional attitudes in terms of balance, thoroughness and rigour, there's less contact between reporters and subs. Time constraints are all important now – they are all busy and don't always have the time to be thorough' (Interview 2.6).

This trend was confirmed by communications managers from forces in the South and the Midlands. One interviewee in the Midlands noted that the loss of specialisms was double-edged in terms of shaping policing news:

'The one paper we deal with that has a specialist crime reporter has a far deeper understanding of the issues and their stories are well-researched. With other papers, the generalists can't always grasp the complexities – which can sometimes be a good thing' (Interview 2.9).

Where this situation exists – generalist reporters operating under time constraints, there arises the potential for the police to dominate the shaping of news. This can happen through police-prepared packages or 'backgrounders' for journalists. These might comprise details of a forthcoming policing initiative or might be used at the conclusion of major trials, when the police provide journalists with prepared statements, graphics and textual information. In an interview with a police communications manager during previous research, the use of such packages was referred to as 'supermarket journalism' (Mawby 1999). The same interviewee in the most recent interviews confirmed that the trend had continued, now reaching the proportions of 'hypermarket' journalism:

'In the 1970s it was the DI in the snooker hall with the crime reporter, in the 1990s it was the local freelance using the press lines, rather than interviewing someone, they just served it up. Now it's hypermarket journalism – there is so much on the shelves now, so much information' (Interview 2.5).

This is not a trend restricted to policing, but rather represents the growth of public relations more generally across the public sector, resulting in the situation where news is packaged and journalists become dependent on ‘the steady supply of conveniently packaged (and free) public relations “information subsidies”’ (Davis 2003:32). While such packages have the potential to demonstrate police transparency, at the same time they may generate an unquestioned police-centric version of crime news.

In aggregate, the interviews with police communications managers present a picture of local journalism in decline, of fewer specialist crime reporters and smaller teams of generalist journalists, working under considerable pressure to meet tight deadlines. This reading favours Chibnall’s observation, that the police-media relationship is asymmetrical in favour of the police; a position subsequently maintained by others including Crandon and Dunne (1992), who compared the police-media relationship to one of vassalage. It is also supported to some degree by recent journalism literature (see, for example, Frith and Meech 2007; Davies 2008; Engel 2009).

The extent to which the interviews with crime reporters corroborated this picture of (particularly local) journalism in decline varied. Some overarching trends were confirmed, for example that news teams were decreasing in reporter numbers as newspapers struggled against declining circulations. Visited newspapers were being run on constrained budgets; one newspaper was publishing using free-to-use shareware rather than specialist publishing software. Other papers had not replaced departing specialists or were moving away from appointing specialists in favour of a pool of generalist reporters. One crime reporter, who had worked on national daily newspapers since the 1960s predicted that he would be one of the last of his type,

namely reporters who spend their whole careers covering crime and policing stories. Local and national newspaper crime reporters alluded to reluctance on the part of managers to invest in time-consuming investigative journalism and ‘classic crime stories’. However, just as the resourcing and organisation of communications is mixed across police forces, there is a similar unevenness among local newspapers. Some local papers were buoyant and continued to invest in specialist reporters.

Uniformly the interviewed crime reporters did not regard themselves as ‘ventriloquists’ dummies’ (Crandon and Dunne 1992) in asymmetric relationships with the police. They recognised the developments in police corporate communications, but maintained that as professional crime reporters, they retained their influence as independent shapers of policing news. Analysis of the interview data confirms that this was for at least three reasons: (1) the mixed service provided by police communications departments; (2) the cultivation of sources of policing news beyond the force press office; and (3) the continuing determination of journalists to report independently and accurately. Each will be considered in turn.

Just as the police managers recognised changes in local journalism, crime reporters in the course of their working routines recognised the increasing professionalization of police communications and considered that it brought mixed benefits. On the one hand at a practical level the interviewees welcomed pre-trial briefings and case packages that enabled them to plan their work. They appreciated the benefits of regular contacts with press officers, particularly those who had formerly been journalists, as ‘they know the rules and talk on and off record, they’ll tell you why they can’t tell you things. You can have an honest conversation’ (Interview 3.14). At another level, one journalist with 40 years experience considered that the professionalization of police communications had resulted in a more

‘realistic’ relationship between police and the media than that which existed when detectives routinely met crime reporters in smoky pubs (Chibnall 1977; Brunt 2007).

On the other hand a number of journalists expressed suspicion over the appointment of marketing specialists to manage police communications departments. They feared that this aspect of professionalization was associated with a motive to control the media relationship. One commented on his early encounters with the Head of Corporate Communications in a Midlands force: ‘Corporate communications? What’s that mean? [...] Marketers don’t understand the media, they don’t have the background and take it personally if the ‘brand’ is threatened. I prefer dealing with ex-journalists’ (Interview 3.9).

In addition, professionalization did not necessarily mean a better service. It was a frequent refrain that the police lack understanding of the needs of the different media, e.g., police insistence on information being released to all the media at the same time does not create a level playing field because media organisations have different deadlines and pre-publication processes. Other reporters believed that police press offices did understand reporters’ needs, but ignored them, one stating “‘Press office’ is a misnomer. They’re not there to serve the press, they’re there to stop the press finding out things these days. Their role is to manage the news and tell you as little as possible’ (Interview 3.11).

The interviewees provided examples from forces throughout England where news had been withheld and press offices had been reluctant to release information. While some reporters felt this was at times due to laziness and inefficiency, they also detected what they regarded as the strategic control of information as an intended means of pursuing the reassurance agenda and preventing anxiety over the reporting of violent crime. One reporter, for example, gave the example of receiving telephone

calls from local residents about a street shooting. He immediately phoned the police press office, which played down and the significance of the incident. No press statement was volunteered but one was finally released on request. The reporter concluded that the press office would never have publicised the incident had he not contacted them. He concluded that 'reassurance comes at the price of honesty sometimes – not telling people what is going on' (Interview 3.1).

A reporter dealing with a different force confirmed a similar finding. He had learned from a press officer whom he routinely liaised with that it was standard practice to intentionally withhold press releases unless they were specifically requested:

'The press officer goes through the logs and writes press releases ready for us, but we only get 20% of them. We get them if we ask, but otherwise they are not volunteered. They see it as keeping bad news down, the justification is not to alarm people. They wait until they know you are onto something' (Interview 3.9).

Despite the professionalization, the journalists concurred that the communications departments and their press officers were only one source of information for crime reporting; they were a necessary but not sufficient element of the news production process. Other sources included members of the public and disgruntled police employees. However, the most important source remained regular police contacts. Their work depended on building relationships with police officers throughout the force, primarily detectives, but also in other functions and across ranks. Maintaining these sources was an essential part of their day-to-day work. Several interviewees recounted their experiences of becoming a crime reporter and building their sources or of moving to a new town and breaking into the policing network. Typical of these was a reporter who relocated from the south-east to the south-west of England. He recounted:

‘in [names county] I would be down the nick every day for two-to-three years, roaming at will. Here in [names city] I’ve not got to that point. I’m phoning around a lot, building links and I’ll know I’m getting somewhere when I’m less reliant on the press office. I thought I’d had a good day recently when I got all my stories without speaking to the press office’ (Interview 3.14).

Without exception the reporters spoke of the importance of nurturing relationships and of having to prove they could be trusted. A number demonstrated this trust by not reporting all the stories that came to their attention; one summarised his position thus: ‘It’s a two-way relationship and I’ve always tried to build trust. I don’t always print stories [...] I’m old school, I’d rather lose stories than trust’ (Interview 3.11). Others recounted stories of withholding information from their superiors to protect their sources: ‘Never burn your contacts. In some situations you try not to tell the news editors what is really going on’ (Interview 3.14). A crime reporter with 40 years experience developed this further, confirming a formative episode:

I like to deal with detectives. Most of the information is off-record and if I used it, that would be it – finished. I won’t tell my superior because there’d be pressure to run it. I use the ‘Mushroom’ policy. I once allowed a senior news editor to bully me into writing a story and a detective [the news source] didn’t speak to me for six months (Interview 3.6).

The interview data strongly emphasised the importance of trust and relationships to the self-identity of the crime reporters. This again raises the possibility of a relationship dominated by the police if reporters are prepared to avoid criticism of the police in order to retain access to information. This was strongly repudiated by the interviewees. They maintained that in building relationships, they did not lose sight of their professional independence or their sense of justice. One reporter talked of the dilemmas of building trusted relations without becoming too embedded and ‘going native’. He once published a story that ‘destroyed’ the career of a senior detective and this involved breaking a trust that the officer placed in him. The reporter agonised over the personal cost of destroying the relationship, but the

seriousness of the story outweighed the personal loyalty. Another reporter provided a less personalised example of a victim of crime contacting his paper with a story critical of the police: ‘There was no dilemma about upsetting the police, we didn’t hesitate [to publish]. Friction is endemic, but the relationship with press officers is strong enough to withstand it. We will contact them to warn them, but don’t give them too much notice’ (Interview 3.9). Therefore, although the nurturing of relationships and trust is a key component of the crime reporter’s working personality, it co-exists with a fierce sense of independence and eschewal of being regarded as too close to police sources.

CONCLUSION: ASYMMETRY AND SYMBIOSIS

The data discussed in this paper provide empirical evidence that corporate communications continues to rise as an integral part of modern policing, albeit unevenly across police forces, at a time when news reporting, particularly local reporting, is responding to structural and technological changes which offer more threats than opportunities to traditional crime reporting. This final section draws on the research findings to sketch out some conclusions concerning the balance of power in the shaping of policing news.

Police forces have undoubtedly invested substantial resources in corporate communications and no longer necessarily regard the traditional media as the primary channel of communication. The interest of the police in new media and in direct communications are significant growth areas that are worthy of further research. Nevertheless police forces are still interested in maintaining good relations with traditional media organisations for reasons that, according to the interview data, include: demonstrating transparency; reassuring people; achieving publicity for

unsolved crimes; projecting positive stories and projecting a positive police image. These objectives remain a good fit with the goals identified by Chibnall as driving police involvement in media relations. The prevailing conditions also support Chibnall's argument that the police are in an asymmetric relationship with the news media and are well-positioned to achieve these goals. They are the gate-keepers to information, they do not depend on the news media to communicate their messages and they may consider that they do not need the relationship as much as the crime reporters do.

However, this asymmetric relationship is not yet a deterministic strait-jacket for at least two reasons. First, although police discourses routinely refer to 'managing the media' (see, for example, Cook 2008), crime reporters generally reject the notion of being managed. For example one reporter commented:

'A phrase I've heard a lot from PRs is 'managing the media' – you can't. We're not here to be managed, we don't work for the police, the best you can do is work with us, work with us and I'll guarantee every time you'll be happy with the outcome. You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours, that's the way it works' (Interview 3.17).

This comment captures the symbiotic nature of the police-media relationship that endures despite the structural conditions that would seem to strengthen the hand of the police. It captures the negotiated nature of the relationship, the recognition that the relationship is in tension, but can deliver mutual benefits. Crime reporters have a wary suspicion of the professionalisation of police communications; awareness exists of its possible ambition to control media relations and its potential to make policing less accountable. However, through nurturing formal relationships, building networks of unofficial contacts and applying journalistic skills, crime reporters remain confident of their influence in the shaping of policing news.

Second, the research also confirmed the multitude of relationships that exist which make it over-simplistic to baldly point to the asymmetry and conclude that the

police dominate the relationship. Chibnall argued (1975, p.74) that to understand the dynamics of police-media relations it is necessary to examine the routine professional practices that ‘shape and distort reality’. In the case of this research, the data evidenced the multiple relationships that exist between reporters and their sources, between local police stations and reporters and between individual police forces and news organisations (cf Mawby 2002a). For example, during the course of the research two reporters from different newspapers both commented on the press office of the same police force. One reporter upheld the press office as an exemplar that other forces should aspire to, while the other reporter described it as the worst press office he had dealt with. Another reporter, based in London, captured the nature of the local and changing relationships:

‘It’s very rich, there are hundreds and hundreds of different sets of circumstances; there’s an even spread of good and bad dealings, of press officers and police officers – some don’t help, some have a natural dislike of papers, there’s personal animosity with some. The evolution of press offices hasn’t impacted on this. The ledger remains balanced between positive and negative because there is no template, no standard murder, no standard fraud case’ (Interview 3.2).

Currently these ‘sets of circumstances’ operate within a framework where the media have less resources and the police have more, but this is balanced by technological media changes that mean the police remain under scrutiny. Albeit, this may be a scrutiny that matches our media age in that it can be instant, snapped by protesters and bypassers, rather than accomplished through the work of a well-resourced team of investigative journalists. Nevertheless, the production of routine policing news and periodic scandals, particularly at the local level, is still subject to negotiation; policing news remains the outcome of routine practices combined with complex relationships that are subject to tension, change and honour. If the police come under greater pressure to reassure people and increase confidence levels and, consequently, seek to further control the flow of information through traditional and

new media channels, then the job will become more difficult for crime reporters.

These same conditions ensure that the crime reporter role remains essential as a specialist with the information network and expertise to get the story out. The shaping of policing news, therefore, remains in delicate balance.

Notes.

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