Police as Television Viewers and Policing Practitioners

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Abstract
This article discusses police practice as performance influenced by the construction of policing through cop shows, a term encompassing television drama and reality television programs featuring police. It draws on theoretical approaches relevant to police representations in the media and police attitudes. The article explores the intersection of these two institutions – the police and television – whose influence on the ideological construction of society is both pervasive and powerful. Investigating police officers’ attitudes to their representation on television, brings to the study a third dimension to that intersection; how the image of police as constructed through television is received by those who are the abstracted model for their televised doubles, yet are also consumers of television. As consumers they view the tropes of the mediated image of police knowing that the public and their colleagues do so too, perhaps shaping their own performance accordingly and bringing into question the direction of influence in police image making and television production. Previous studies exploring police officer attitudes to police in cop shows expose a tendency to focus on and criticise inaccuracies relating to procedure and technologies. Further research on this topic could delve deeper into exploring how this translates to police officers’ understanding of television’s role in legitimating the police to its wider audience, while also providing a model of policing for the police themselves.

Keywords: police, reality TV, television drama, representations, work cultures

This article reports one part of a broader project traversing three main topics. First, the idea of police and its myth-making power, which informs, and is informed by, the imagery of police in the media. Second, the representation of police on television in drama series and reality TV programs or “cop shows”, to use Maurantatio’s description (2012, p. 1). This second topic necessarily draws on the first, the idea of police, and examines how it has been applied through these genres. Third, studies that investigated police officers’ perceptions of the way they and their profession were portrayed in television programs. It is the third of these topics that particularly relates to the theme of the MASK Symposium and is the focus of this article.

The major component of this article comprises a review of the literature on police attitudes to television. It is preceded by discussion on theoretical considerations relevant to the broader project and explored at the Mask Symposium.

Theoretical considerations: performance, performativity and hyperreality

Jacobsen, in his introduction to The Contemporary Goffman, noted the timelessness and versatility of Goffman’s theories and extolled their capacity to be “stretched, angled and applied to fit” by listing a sample of studies ranging from politics to companion pets (2010, p. 29). In the field of policing it is Manning’s extensive research (1978, 1988, 1997, 2001, 2003, 2012), which has stretched, angled and applied Goffman’s theories such that his work could well be included in Jacobsen’s select list. In particular, and in the context of this discussion, Manning’s dramaturgical perspective “explores the performances, the communication of messages, the symbolic representations, to an audience conveying impressions that shape subsequent interactions” (2012, p. 191). He argued that “collective representations of our time are mediated”, and this is how we learn to know about policing (2012, p. 191).
For Manning, the dramaturgical metaphor of policing-as-performance ably explained the function of the police. Legitimating the mythology of the police, however, has become a function predominantly of mediated representation because most people have little experience with police in real life, and a conversely familiar relationship with the television version in the form of the cop show. It is, therefore, the reflected – or perhaps refracted (Clarke, 1983) – performance of policing through the medium of television, specifically in police drama and reality TV programs, that more readily explains the social construction of the police. Manning saw it as a mutually reinforcing media loop wherein “policing influences media and the media influence policing and its practices” (2003, p. 61).

These pairings of policing-as-performance versus the performance of policing, and real police versus television police, also offer scope for critical analysis through other theoretical approaches. In the case of the former, Butler’s (1999) notion of the performative, and for the latter, Baudrillard’s (1983) concept of hyperreality.

Police and gender

Butler considers gender performative: it is “an identity tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a stylized repetition of acts” (1999, p. 191). Performativity, when applied to the police and the symbols and procedures of operational practice, is a predominantly masculine spectacle. In Australia, men outnumber women in the profession three to one (Irving, 2009). In the Butlerian analysis, it is predominantly men who “do” policing, who perform those acts that execute and symbolise the power of the state. But, masculinity in the policing profession is not just a characteristic of organisational demographics. Crank (2004, p. 229) argues it is a “cultural descriptor” that carries the idea of the appropriateness of men for police work and, by implication, the inappropriateness of women for the role.

Despite the corrective experience of Royal Commissions and other enquiries, and the manifestation of social change in contemporary recruitment practices and media management, culture within police organisations continues to be the expression of their demography, “grounded in traditional “masculine” values such as power, activity, independence and control” (Halsema & Halsema, 2006, p. 237). This culture can only ensure the performativity of policing is the hegemonic expression of masculinity and of the state. Television, through its propensity to engage in what Reiner describes as “police fetishism” (2010, p. 210), or the sensationalising and overstating of crime, reinforces these masculine values of power, activity, independence and control as necessarily characteristic of the profession.

Hyperreality: police and television

Baudrillard’s (1983) concept of hyperrealism and the attendant denaturalisation of the relation between the sign and its referent or, in this case, the television representations of the police and the police themselves, affords scope for exploring the reflexive relationship between the real and mediated police. Lovell (2003) describes this cultural reflexivity as the mutual reinforcement of police performance (what police actually do) and police performances (the construction of police work). Fictional television police act as stand-ins for their real counterparts, creating for viewers the idea of police on behalf of the genuine article, while also providing the model for real police performance. Reality TV police perform a distorted, sanitised and more entertaining version of police work in a pretence of passive, fly-on-the-wall documenting of patrol. The reality of reality TV is that it is unreal. Police reality TV is generally sponsored and often co-produced by police agencies. These programs, selectively edited, and as manufactured as their fictional counterparts, create law and order mythologies or “stories we tell ourselves about authority, power and social conflict” (Fishman, 1999, p. 268). The reality TV genre, like the fictional cop show, constructs an idea of police that carries political, cultural and social meaning. It does not simply, and neutrally, “show” police.

The theoretical concepts of performativity and hyperreality provide considerable scope for analysing and interpreting police attitudes to cop shows. The studies discussed in the following section do explore this phenomenon. However, they vary in their application of critical theory to their approaches; variations that point to the historical and discursive
progression of the ethnography of police.

**Police attitudes to cop shows**

The body of research exploring police attitudes about their mediated selves is not large. Maurantonio describes the police as “one of the most understudied populations when addressing questions of media influence” (2012, p. 6), lamenting not only the missed opportunity to learn how meaning is made, but also “how meaning is made when the subjects of representation are the viewers themselves” (2012, p. 6). The few studies that have explored police attitudes to cop shows provide varying degrees of insight into how the idea of police is constructed and the influence of this idea on the police themselves. Fewer still, and only among those more recently undertaken, are studies that have gone beyond questions of verisimilitude as it relates to procedures and technologies, and actively explored the idea of police, its myth making power, and the influence of media on performance.

**Questions of authenticity**

The earliest example of research into police attitudes to cop shows is that of Arcuri (1977) who surveyed police officers about their views on thirteen police television dramas. The officers were asked how frequently they watched the programs, how realistic they thought they were, and what impact the programs had on the public. The fixed response data revealed that, while the participants nominated a large proportion of the programs as frequent or occasional viewing, only three programs, all police procedurals, rated highly as being realistic. The measure they applied to this rating was professionalism, a term the participants used to refer to the competence, dedication and skill of the officers depicted on the three programs. There were elements in these three programs that some of the participants found to be unrealistic, such as the number of arrests per episode, but the way that the television officers went about their duties (including arresting at a rate disproportionate to reality) was seen as professional, a quality the real officers identified as an authentic element of modern policing. Programs depicting police work as highly action-oriented, notably when this included violence, were considered particularly unrealistic, while programs giving screen time to officer interaction and non-crime activities were more readily endorsed. Participants clearly valued seeing the humanity and the everyday of policing presented as being integral to the work of their mediated selves.

In response to the questions dealing with public impressions derived from television police drama, two-thirds of the participants considered that they created unrealistic expectations of the police (Arcuri,1977, p. 242). Issues raised by the participants in relation to the questions on this topic included: concerns that detective programs made uniformed police officers look incompetent; the high success rate television police achieved in solving crimes gave the public a false impression of police work and its impact on crime; and, by contrast, the glamorisation of crime was seen as an encouragement to commit crime.

Significantly, Arcuri’s research treated the communication of ideology tangentially. His interest was limited to police viewing habits, their opinions on the authenticity of the programs fictionalising their practice and on the impact of this representation on the public. The issue of police legitimacy was left unchallenged in the research questions and, although the participants stated their displeasure toward the police image as projected by television drama, Arcuri did not explore this misrepresentation as social, political or cultural discourse. The nominated programs, as mainstream fare of the middle 1970s, were unlikely to have shown a representation of policing as contesting the hegemony of an ideological apparatus. Similarly, the research paradigm of the era was unlikely to have explored ideological encodings and decodings. Nevertheless, Arcuri’s study was able to demonstrate that the richness of this type of research lies in the comments offered by the participants rather than quantitative data provided in reply to the fixed response questions.

Perlmutter (2000), through his experience of “riding along” with officers during their patrol car shifts over a three year period, was privy to police attitudes to their television image. While his purpose was primarily to take photographs of policing activities, his interactions with, and observations of police officers provided an insight into
police perceptions of themselves, their perceptions of public attitudes towards them, and their views on the media’s role in constructing these attitudes. This resulted in a unique, self reflexive study, drawing on unguarded moments of interaction between participant/observer and police officer, rather than between a researcher/interviewer and subject/interviewee.

The police officers in this extended ethnographic study displayed conflicting attitudes to their mediated selves. They were critical of fictional television officers who they regarded as presenting an unrealistic portrait of their profession, yet many of the officers, consciously and unconsciously, adopted some of the poses they associated with their mediated counterparts in their own performance. This demonstration of the acculturating effect of the media stemmed from the officers’ assumptions that the public expected TV portrayals to be played out in real life.

Perlmutter (2000) explored the contrasts between the mediated image of police and what police believed was the truth about real or street policing, and what effects this disparity may have had on police and public behaviour. The points of divergence were explored using a number of themes: intensive action and its contrast with mundane reality; the escalation of crime and violence; the characterisation of heroes and villains and, within policing, the hierarchy of ranks and other indicators of status; and, the compression of time and the expediting of resolutions to fit programming schedules (Perlmutter, 2000, pp. 41-50). Perlmutter’s list of themes is extensive and it is unlikely that all police would recognise or have concerns about all of them. However, they offer useful concepts on which to base guiding questions for engaging with police when conducting field research into police attitudes.

**Discursive approaches**

O’Sullivan (2005), in his critical review of the literature focusing on police on UK television, described the lack of research into police attitudes as a deficit needing to be addressed. He acknowledged the significance of Reiner’s work (1994, 2000, 2008, 2010) in integrating the mythology of mediated police into a discourse of police legitimacy. But, he considered the programs that Reiner and others (Clarke, 1986, 1992; Mawby, 2003) focused on – *Dixon of Dock Green* and *The Sweeney*, British fare spanning the 1950s to the 1970s – although useful for analysing the construction and maintenance of “the traditional hegemonic law and order model of policing” (O’Sullivan, 2005, p. 507), provided a limited range of program types for reflecting on other outlooks on the police image. Citing McLaughlin and Murji (1999), who refer to Baudrillard’s concept of the hyperreal, O’Sullivan pointed to the proliferation of competing images of policing ranging from the nostalgic warmth created by programs such as *Heartbeat* to the clinical science of forensics such as *Silent Witness*, which had resulted in television police becoming “free floating signifiers … rather than having any meaningful relationship with policing realities” (2005, p. 506).

With such a plethora of mediated policing types to consider, O’Sullivan was interested in how television might affect the perceptions of police and those considering the profession. He asked whether programming that presented mediated police in ways that supported the hegemonic model of law and order influenced a perception that there was a need for more police to fight criminals, terrorists and others who challenge the social order, or whether alternative modernising constructions of gender and race within television police agencies might account for increased diversity in recruitment (2005, p. 507).

O’Sullivan’s (2005) consideration of police on television differed markedly in analytical approach to that of Arcuri (1977), published nearly thirty years prior. Demonstrating the trend toward a more discursive analysis of media – and other phenomena – O’Sullivan brought a political, social and cultural element to his approach. Nevertheless, where Arcuri was able to pose his less critical questions to police officers, O’Sullivan expressed concern that his own deeper, more critical questions were not being asked of police themselves, those who would be best placed to answer.

**Hi-tech glamour**
The Canadian researcher Huey (2010; Huey & Broll, 2015) has made some steps toward the type of discursive approach advocated by O'Sullivan through work with forensic officers. In her 2010 study, Huey acknowledged the trend for police dramas and reality based crime programs to feature forensic science as the vehicle for crime solving. Labelled the “CSI effect”, after the dominant forensic program franchise Crime Scene Investigation, the phenomenon has received attention from the popular press and academic researchers (Arntfield, 2011; Deutsch & Cavender, 2008). It is purported to manifest in juror decisions relying on the presence or absence of physical forensic evidence, regardless of its evidentiary purpose (Huey, 2010). Huey reviewed nine studies in the five years from 2005, all claiming to demonstrate the CSI effect. None of these studies shared the same conclusions and many were contradictory, which suggested to Huey that the “so-called CSI effect” was at least overstated, if it existed at all (2010, p. 50).

Rather than attempting to prove a defined media effect on a specific audience, as was the case with the juror studies, Huey focused on whether the police as “the objects of representations” felt that forensic and procedural police programs affected their interactions with the public (2010, p. 65). Drawing on Perlmutter’s (2000) claim that the police see their media counterparts as rivals for the public’s sympathies, Huey conducted semi-structured interviews with thirty one Canadian crime scene investigators questioning them on their views of two core aspects: the coherence of television portrayals of police investigative work with actual police roles and functions, and the influence television programs, particularly CSI, had on public expectations of their professional practice. The participating officers responded strongly on both concerns. Many considered the depiction of police investigative work on television police drama to be an unrealistic representation of their own work. Some of the participants also provided examples of witnesses and victims expecting to see investigators perform forensic procedures that were not suitable for the circumstances but were regular features of police drama series like CSI.

Huey’s (2010) research demonstrates that police officers’ concerns about police drama continue to relate to authenticity, seeing the lack of congruity with the real world of policing as creating false expectations that undermine their implicit claim to expertise in their field. Police officers rarely frame this in the context of ideology and the legitimising of their role in the maintenance of social, cultural and political order. Nevertheless, the participants in Huey’s study did discuss the discrepancies between the high-tech, well resourced television police units and their own world of shortages in staffing, resources and funding, with some expressing concern that it could lead to decreased public confidence in the police (2010, p. 66). While this type of comment hints at an understanding of the symbolism of police power, the implications are not pursued purposefully within a discursive framework.

Dirty work sanitised

More recently, Huey, with co-author Broll (2015), reported on the attitudes of investigators to television representations of “dirty work” in police drama. Dirty work refers to activities required of members of an occupation that “contain elements that may be physically, socially or morally repugnant to outsiders” (2015, p. 237). Huey and Broll established that their participants generally regarded the investigative work they performed in terms corresponding with the definitive features of dirty work. The officers also recognised that television portrayed a sanitised and glamorous version of their work lives rather than showing the physically and socially dirty work of their own reality. Consistent with Huey’s 2010 study, Huey and Broll’s project focused on police concerns about authenticity. They described their study as a “small contribution to developing greater insight into how this occupational group both understands their work and attempts to balance often contradictory “outsider” perceptions of that work with their own lived realities” (Huey & Broll, 2015, p. 247). Significantly, it did not explicitly delve into what the officers thought this might mean for police legitimacy.

Television as an influence on police performance

While Huey took some steps toward O’Sullivan’s (2005) request for a more discursive approach to police attitudes, Maurantonio (2012) took up this challenge more actively. In a study with American police officer participants she explored their interpretations of cop shows in order to understand the ways in which they “construct their realities in
relation to programs that purport, in varying degrees, to represent the true police experience” (Maurantioni, 2012, p. 4). Her field work consisted of one-on-one interviews with 14 New York Police Department officers of various ranks and a focus group with seven rookie officers.

Of significance in Maurantioni’s study is her interest in symbolic power which she described as the “product of the contests and negotiations” between the police, those who depict them and the general public (2012, p. 4). She argued that cop show representations of police present a challenge to officers’ symbolic power that can cause them to question their professional and personal value, “generating problematic consequences” for them (2012, p. 4). Maurantioni framed her research around criminal investigators, drawing on Deutsch and Cavender’s (2008) concept of “forensic facticity”, which legitimates that particular field of policing practice by representing it as being “upheld by rigorous scientific inquiry” (Maurantioni, 2012, p. 13).

It is clear from Maurantioni’s work that the issue of police legitimacy is also problematic at a level beyond that of the effect on the individual officer. The legitimacy afforded to television cops due to the perceived verisimilitude of modern portrayals “serves to reinforce the significance of police work to the proper functioning of society” while simultaneously creating false expectations of police capabilities (Maurantioni, 2012, p. 17).

In this context, Maurantioni (2012) explored the effect of cop shows on police performance in the real world. Citing an accidental shooting of a child during a raid in Detroit that was filmed for an observational documentary reality television program, Maurantioni contended that the circumstances of the child’s death prompted questions about the effect the presence of cameras had on police performance. Maurantioni asked if the officer was engaging in a “dramatic” response because the cameras were there, and whether he was “conflating scenarios” from television with the “situation he was embedded in?” (2012, p. 6). In what can be seen as another instance of the media loop, news organisations asked: “does the presence of TV crews affect how well police officers do their job?” (Maurantioni, 2012, p. 6).

These are perhaps the wrong questions. They presume that such a construction of police performance that is modelled on the media representation of police is only possible in circumstances in which a documentary camera is present. A very small percentage of police officers participate in reality television programs, whereas all police perform policing. Perhaps a more useful question is needed: do police in their day-to-day work perform their role in ways that are learnt from their television models? According to some of Maurantioni’s interviewees, there are some who do.

**Police acting out**

While most of the officers Maurantioni interviewed considered themselves not to be regular viewers of cop shows, they were familiar with the current popular programs to the extent that they knew “the basic premise and characters” (2012, p. 8). Whether through familiarity or assumption, they offered their views on the content and its impact on viewers, including their colleagues. Several officers tendered comments on the effect of police drama only on the public, while others “revealed how the webs of forensic facticity may tangle with the realm of the police institution itself” (Maurantioni, 2012, p. 16). The more common examples of this type of tangling were offered by forensic investigators who reported that their generalist police officer colleagues had similarly unrealistic expectations as the public in regard to forensic capabilities, acknowledging that “even we [the police] get unrealistic expectations for some of the things going on television. Imagine what it does to the kids …” (Maurantioni, 2012, p. 16). However, in a statement supporting Maurantioni’s concern for problematic consequences for police stemming from challenges to their symbolic power, one officer observed that in her experience when detectives were assigned to homicide squads they tended to “play like they’re on television”, a phenomenon she attributed to a presumption on their part that “because they see it on TV that’s the way they’re supposed to act” (2012, p. 16).

Instances of police modelling their performance on television police were also reported by a group of retired officers participating in a recent British pilot study conducted by Cummins, Foley and King (2014). Here, too, behaviour
among detectives was seen to demonstrate a “loop between media or popular cultural representations and the officers on whose work the TV drama was based” (2014, p. 6). An example of this was offered by one officer who observed that “when The Sweeney was on officers started to call me Guv” (Cummins et al., 2014, p. 6).

Where Huey (2010) and Maurantonio (2012) situated their research around the “facticity” of forensics and scientific realism, Cummins, Foley and King (2014) explored their interviewees’ viewing habits and attitudes – both self-reflexive and presumed of the public – in the context of police organisational culture. The authors asked the former officers about their viewing habits and preferences in regard to police drama, and what they liked and disliked about the genre. The participants were also asked to nominate what they thought was portrayed well and what was not, and why the genre held such popularity.

These questions prompted the same type of comments about verisimilitude as did the earlier studies reviewed above. As was the case in those studies, the issues most readily identified by the participants were in relation to the minutiae of police activity. Like Maurantonio’s study (2012) the retired officers claimed “they did not watch much TV crime drama”, although they also expressed annoyance with most police drama programs because they were “completely improbable but also full of procedural errors” (Cummins et al., 2014, p. 4).

However, they also raised issues about behavioural and attitudinal elements, matters that should be seen as being of a deeper level, relating to police culture rather than procedure. The program, Life on Mars, a post-modern “hybrid of cop show, time travelling sffantasy and psychological thriller” (Irwin, 2013, p. 369) was nominated in relation to this topic. The historical rendering of policing – and society in general – from the early 1970s, when most of the participants had started their careers, did resonate with them. They all mentioned the program and some watched it, but they were generally critical of the unprofessional culture of the era. The authors described this as “the conceit of the programme – the viewer is invited to mock these outmoded social attitudes the assumption being that these prejudices have been eradicated”, whereas, as one interviewee noted, the “big macho culture, big drinking culture” that was a feature of Life on Mars was still prevalent among the real police of today (Cummins et al., 2014, p. 6).

The Australian context

Australian research into police attitudes of television policing is also very limited; indeed, there is no published research that specifically focuses on this topic. Chan, Devery and Doran's 2003 study into occupational socialisation, Fair Cop: Learning the art of policing, did touch on the issue through their exploration of police recruits' perceptions of policing and their motivations for becoming police officers. While the media generally, including cop shows, was acknowledged as a source of knowledge, what impact it had on recruits was not explicitly explored.

Nevertheless, Fair Cop does demonstrate the influence of the media in police recruits' construction of policing. The acceptance of the preferred reading of police offered in police television programming is evidenced by the claim that recruits favoured an idealised construction of policing. Although they were generally aware of heightened levels of negative press generated by police corruption at the time (the Wood Royal Commission into Police Corruption (1997) was the subject of much media attention when this research was conducted), it would appear that more deeply embedded ideological images of police held sway in their own constructions of the police.

Concluding remarks: methodologies and relevance

Of the studies discussed above, the more recent (Cummins et al., 2014; Huey, 2010; Huey & Broll, 2015; Maurantonio, 2012) share a methodology which actively and purposefully elicits the attitudes of police in regard to their mediated image. Importantly, these studies, to varying degrees, move beyond questions of accuracy in the depiction of the police processes, or iconography, a term Maurantonio (2012) uses to refer to the accoutrements of policing such as cars, guns and uniforms. They each reveal police awareness of the television representation of the idea of police in the context of institutional state power. However, only two of these studies (Cummins et al., 2014; Maurantonio, 2012) do so with purpose. Significantly, these two more discursive studies extend that approach to
consider the influence that police performance on television has on the performance of real policing. This is critical to the development of police media studies, bringing as it does the necessary reflexive component to police understandings of practice and performance.

In concluding this discussion on police on television it is useful to consider an observation made by Rantatalo (2014) whose recent research focuses on newspaper rather than television images of policing. Rantatalo, in referring to the interconnectedness of the media image of police and contemporary police work and the influence they have on each other, asserts that an “underexplored dimension of this relation is how mediated representations of policing transfer meaning to police officers’ sense making of their occupational identities” (2014, p. 1). The police and the media are significant institutions in society; they are, as Althusser describes them respectively, the repressive and ideological apparatuses of the state (1971). The relationship between them, as Rantatalo argues, needs to be broadly, deeply and regularly examined so that we understand these mythologies of social control “the stories we tell ourselves about authority, power and social conflict” (Fishman, 1999, p. 268), and the performance and performances of police identities, individually and collectively. Research that explores police attitudinal and performative responses to the way they are represented on cop shows contribute significantly to understanding these stories.

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