

## **Mediating Cops: News-Making and the NSW Police Media Unit**

Murray Lee and Alyce McGovern

Centre for Social Justice and Social Change, University of Western Sydney

[m.lee@uws.edu.au](mailto:m.lee@uws.edu.au); [a.mcgovern@uws.edu.au](mailto:a.mcgovern@uws.edu.au)

### **Abstract:**

Working relationships between journalists and police have implications for the ways in which news about crime and policing is reported in the news media and what in these crime narratives is likely to count as truth. In the past twenty years police media units have played an increasing role in this police/media interface. This article assesses the journalistic deployment of information produced by the NSW Police Media Unit (NSW PMU). Using interviews from journalists and NSW PMU staff, and a content analysis of two Sydney based daily newspapers we argue that PMUs provide journalists with a range of 'ready made' stories many of which are simply paraphrased as 'objective' news stories. However, it would be overstating the case to suggest that PMUs have completely colonised the police/media interface and in some instances relationships between police and the media remain dynamic with resistance to the control of news through the NSW PMU evident. It is hoped that this assessment contributes to the small but growing body of literature on Police Media Units and police media relationships.

### **Introduction**

The 47-year-old woman sustained superficial injuries after allegedly being repeatedly kicked and punched by a 38-year-old man. It will also be alleged the man threatened the woman with a firearm. Officers using a firearm detection dog executed a search warrant on the address, allegedly seizing two sawn-off rifles and more than 3,000 live rounds of ammunition (*NSW Police Media Unit 27<sup>th</sup> July 2006*).

The 47-year-old woman suffered superficial injuries when kicked and punched by a man, 38. It is also alleged the man threatened

her with a firearm. Officers using a firearm detection dog allegedly seized two sawn-off rifles and more than 3,000 live rounds (*The Daily Telegraph* 28<sup>th</sup> July 2006: 14).

In 1977 Steve Chibnall argued that crime reporting had been 'ignored by academic researchers or treated as essentially apolitical' (p1). Since then, much has been written about the way in which crime is reported in the media, and the ways by which journalists go about constructing or mediating news (see Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1989; Ericson, Baranek and Chan 1991; Fishman 1981; Hall *et al.* 1978; Kelly 1987; Mawby 1998; Mawby 2003; Reiner 1997; Reiner 2003). Ian Freckelton (1988: 78) has argued that a 'symbiotic' relationship exists between some police and media representatives that is not conducive to high quality, critical, investigative journalism on issues of criminal justice or policing. Rather, there is an unnecessary and improper reliance upon 'unnamed police sources' and an unwillingness to seek out 'independent', 'alternative' viewpoints.

Recently police media units have grown significantly in number, size and in their status as filters for police public relations<sup>1</sup>. The first formal public relations branch within NSW Police specifically created to deal with media issues was introduced in 1964 (New South Wales Police 1965) and can be seen as a reaction to what has been described as a 'crisis of consent' or confidence in police organizations of the western world during the 1960s and 1970s (Finnane 1990; 1994; Edwards 2005). Today this unit, known as the NSW Police Media Unit, operates within the NSW Police Public Relations Branch. This paper aims to contribute to the field of knowledge regarding police/media relationships by discussing the way newspaper reporters utilise the NSW Police Media Unit and the information it disseminates.

This paper begins by drawing on three sources of qualitative and quantitative empirical data which are outlined below. We then develop a conceptual framework informed by David Garland's (2001) notion that the governmental pressure to 'tame the system' on the one hand, and what he calls the 'political turn' aimed at 'crime control' on the other, place police media units in a key but problematic role in the construction of crime/police news and what counts as truth.

## **Method**

The discussion that follows is based on three sources of original empirical data<sup>2</sup>. First, press releases published by the NSW PMU on the NSW Police web site were monitored over a one-month period from 1<sup>st</sup> March 2006 until the 31<sup>st</sup> March 2006. During this period two major daily newspapers from the Sydney metropolitan area were examined and the content of state crime and police related stories compared to that of the media releases. Second, research interviews were conducted with eighteen police and crime reporters working in radio, television and newspapers in the Sydney metropolitan area. Third, research interviews were conducted with nine staff of the NSW Police Media Unit. In the course of both sets of interviews respondents were asked a range of questions about the nature of their police/media interactions<sup>3</sup>.

## **Media Content**

We wanted to consider just how closely the daily newspapers reproduced PMU information. Thus, media releases and news stories were compared and news stories were categorised as follows:

1. Paraphrased

Articles attributed to this category were classified as being paraphrased, or written almost word for word, from the corresponding media release.

2. Semi Paraphrased

Articles within this category were heavily drawn from the corresponding media release but also contained additional material. In most cases this additional information was obtained from the court appearances of alleged offenders.

3. Prompts

Articles in this category were prompted by a specific release but included supplementary information from other sources – much of the time presumably from journalistic follow up with the PMU. ‘Follow up’ articles were also included in this category.

4. Non-Media Release Articles

These articles appeared unprompted by any official Police Media Releases and were unrelated to previous incidents. Many dealt with controversial or negative issues involving police and may have used unofficial or anonymous police sources. Many were investigative in nature.

During our one-month monitoring period the NSW PMU produced 260 media releases, some 8.5 per day. This sheer volume provides media organisations with a glut of potential stories. *The Daily Telegraph* and *Sunday Telegraph* published a total of 119 crime-related articles (see Table 1) and *The Sydney Morning* and *Sun Herald* a total of 111 (see Table 2). In *The Daily* and *Sunday Telegraph* 69% of all crime related articles were derived from releases, with the remaining 31% being unrelated to any official PMU releases<sup>4</sup>. Similarly, 67% of articles in *The Sydney Morning* and *Sun Herald* were linked to releases, with 33% being unrelated.

**Table 1: The Daily and Sunday Telegraph Content Analysis Results**

THE DAILY AND SUNDAY TELEGRAPH							
Paraphrased		Half Paraphrased		Prompt		Non Media Release	
Author	No Author	Author	No Author	Author	No Author	Author	No Author
0	42	2	7	26	5	34	3
<b>42</b>		<b>9</b>		<b>31</b>		<b>37</b>	

**Table 2: The Sydney Morning and Sun Herald Content Analysis Results**

THE SYDNEY MORNING AND SUN HERALD							
Paraphrased		Half Paraphrased		Prompt		Non Media Release	
Author	No Author	Author	No Author	Author	No Author	Author	No Author
24	13	12	0	22	3	36	1
<b>37</b>		<b>12</b>		<b>25</b>		<b>37</b>	

There were a high percentage of articles paraphrased from the content of NSW Police Media Releases with 35% of all *Telegraph* crime stories and 33% of all *Herald* crime stories falling within this category. Attribution to an author for these stories was more likely in *The Herald* papers (24) than in *The Telegraph* (0). The heavy overall reliance on the PMU as a source, and the fact that journalists were relatively unlikely to seek out other sources, raise serious questions about the impartiality of reportage and the power of police organisations to influence crime news.

### **Making News Today...**

The growth of PMUs has also impacted upon the ways in which police and journalists interact, as our interview data attests. Although somewhat ambivalent about the PMU's role, journalists nevertheless freely admit to its utility, particularly in a context where media organisations are being rationalised and budgets for investigative journalism minimised. One journalist suggested:

It's a syphoning unit in a very positive way... it saves me having to ring around every single [local area command] to see what's gone on overnight. At the same time they can what is sent out to us because obviously their function is to not only get the news out there, but to make sure its all good news. [They are] essentially a PR firm (Journalist One).

Staff at the Media Unit freely suggested to us that their role was, as one staff member put it, 'to try and portray the police always in a good light'; such statements partly reflect the policy that guides the Unit<sup>5</sup> but it also tell us something of the staff's self-awareness of

their roles. Journalists, they suggested, often phone the Media Unit hourly in order to update the latest 'news', check that 'nothing's going on' or in the hope of being first to report major events. One PMU staff member noted that 'the phone in the Media Unit never stops'.

Journalists were asked whether the existence of media units make it easy for some journalists to overlook the critical investigative function of their reporting. They were almost unanimous in their responses:

Definitely. I don't think many police reporters do original investigations at all. You know, the investigation doesn't really go beyond the coppers that will give them a bit of information (Journalist Three).

Theoretically I guess the answer is yes. Although I think most media outlets expect a bit more than press releases and sound bites, sometimes they need, you know, harder information than they are going to get from a press release (Journalist Four)

Yeah, in particular with the smaller stories, like you know, if the Media Unit puts out an armed hold up or something, and they've got the information there for us, we just write briefs from the information they give us (Journalist Five)

Oh yeah, it breeds lazy journalists. But it's also very convenient, particularly for some aspects of the media like radio, where we need information quickly. Without it you are required to go to different sources, and in a sense it legitimises the cowboys of the industry who are prepared to go to print without having checked as many sources as possible or legitimising it through some officially sanctioned authority (Journalist Six).

Yeah sure. I mean that doesn't just happen because of the Police Media Unit, that happens because of spin doctors everywhere. I mean that's perfectly accurate, yeah... if you're lazy... But yeah there's always people who undoubtedly get things from the Media Unit, type it in as a press release, and let it go (Journalist Seven)

Journalists also told us of how the PMU often rewards particularly helpful reporters with 'scoops' or 'exclusives' providing incentives to publish the police angle. As one disgruntled investigative reporter put it:

There's no doubt that there was a conflict between the *Herald* and counter-terrorist type people and the Police Media Unit [two nights before an operation] and the *Herald* was out of the loop and *The Daily Telegraph* got a leak that there was an operation,

you know, “stand by for an operation”, and so did *Channel Nine*, that could only come from them [the PMU] (Journalist Two).

### **The Power of Presentation**

Paul Wilson has written of the ‘close, comfortable’ relationship between police and media in Australia (1992: 160). Wilson (1992: 161) believes ‘there is a power balance ...so that reporters rely far more on police information than the police rely on reporters’ knowledge of events’. He also notes that most reporters would not acknowledge the delicacy in developing and maintaining the relationship. Wilson suggests that:

Even though the press recognise that the police manipulate the news media, reporters and editors often uncritically publish police accounts of crime. It is not that journalists actively promote the interests of the police or that they deliberately ignore other versions of particular crime events. Rather, the fragility of their relationship with law enforcement agencies demands that they acquiesce to the police version (1992: 163).

He goes on to argue that the power exercised by police can have a number of negative consequences; the orchestration of what is written and photographed; the withholding of information from journalists with whom they have conflict; even the intimidation of journalists (Wilson 1992: 163, 166, 169). In Wilson’s (1992: 177) view Police Media Units have simply strengthened police attempts to ‘manage’ the presentation of crime news.

While our content analysis and interview data largely support Wilson’s position, there is a broader context in which this ‘management’ takes place. Police organizations, like other state institutions, are reacting to new institutional arrangements, new performance and accountability measures, a new socio-political climate and new modes of governance. The power relationships between police, the media, the public and government thus require broader analysis.

### **New Political Rationalities and Mediating Cops**

David Garland (2001:120) notes that over the past two decades criminal justice organisations – including the police – have become less committed to externally defined purposes, more inwardly directed and have developed more defensive postures. New levels of monitoring, assessment and accountability have been increasingly introduced

into policing organisations from the 1980s onwards as governments enhanced their capacity to pursue system wide objectives (Garland 2001)<sup>6</sup>. Central government has often colluded in developing reduced and ‘more realistic’ mission statements, and part of the price of failure (perceived or otherwise) is that professional autonomy and discretion are reduced by the introduction of state-imposed guidelines, monitoring and inspection. As Garland puts it, “‘taming the system’ – its costs, its discretionary powers, its liability to expose the public to dangers – came to be part of the project of government in this field’. PMUs are no doubt part of this ‘taming of the system’. The PMU becomes a form of information filter, siphon, and a guardian where sensitive stories can be ‘managed’ and ‘good news’ stories fostered and disseminated. They can serve consumers and react to customer’s needs by providing ‘public service’ information. However, at the very same time they can help to redefine the goals of the organisation down by shifting the responsibility for crime control to the public. PMUs create opportunities for the ‘responsibilisation’ of the public, where crime control is reconstructed as a ‘partnership’ and the ability to ‘serve and protect’ is rendered contingent on *inter-alia* public input.

However, these administrative and managerial discourses operate in parallel (and sometimes problematically) with a new political discourse or ‘political turn’ reactive to public opinion and subject to the travails of partisan politics (Stenson & Edwards 2001; Garland 2001). While the administrator manages the organisation via statistical reasoning, resource management, cost-benefit analysis, audit and strategic planning, all of which require the organisation to identify and reach achievable objectives or ‘performance indicators’, the politician via ‘public opinion’ demands (at least publicly) the application of the full extent of the law whatever the cost. Sometimes these discourses are harmonious – for example the NSW PMU web site proudly displays performance indicators for the Police Assistance Line<sup>7</sup> indicating police both responsiveness to the public and bureaucratic efficiency. However, the conflict is perhaps no more explicitly played out than in NSW in the current pre-election-year climate. Recently a new director of the Public Affairs Unit (Paul Willoughby) was appointed at a salary second<sup>8</sup> only to the NSW Police Commissioner Ken Moroney. He was said to be a ‘key appointment’ ahead of the State election early next year. His job, according to unnamed police employees, is ‘to ‘keep the lid’ on any problems within the police and to review the

‘troubled media unit’ which has had a ‘high turnover of senior staff’ (Mercer 16<sup>th</sup> July 2006: 36). This high turnover of staff at the NSW PMU has reflected a number of highly publicised ‘falling-outs’ with and between government and police (Mitchell and Walsh 12<sup>th</sup> February 2006; Lee 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2004; ABC Online 2004).

The NSW PMU is also often accused by opposition politicians of being the ‘government’s mouthpiece’; or part of the NSW government ‘spin’ machine (*The Sun-Herald* 9<sup>th</sup> July 2006). Simultaneously many police themselves see the PMU as having removed yet more of their discretionary power as information dissemination is centralised. One PMU staff member articulated the internal relationship struggles with serving police officers:

I don’t know that they don’t trust us; I think it’s more that they see us as another body who are on their back wanting information... they just see us as part of the media and not part of them... they don’t quite see us or accept us as part of the police service (PMU Staff Member One).

### **Concluding Remarks**

As the interviews and content analysis demonstrate, the PMU plays a pivotal mediating role in the construction of crime/police news. Reliance upon the PMU as a source evokes important questions about journalistic independence and potentially has negative ramifications in maintaining a power imbalance between police and media organisations. On the one hand this may lead to simply the reproduction of the police line in important stories or the omission of facts and entire stories of public importance on the other. However, to again draw from Garland, the PMU is constitutive of another domain through which new political rationalities are deployed to ‘tame the system’ and ‘manage’ both the police organisation and what ‘news’ is disseminated. This also takes on increased political salience in the lead up to a state election in which ‘crime control’ will once again be high on the agenda.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> In 1964, when the Branch was established, it consisted of three staff: a Sergeant, a Constable and a female Public Service Officer (New South Wales Police 1965). In 2006 twenty three people staff the Media Unit, including nine civilian employees and five seconded uniformed officers. The Police Media Unit, along with all NSW Police employees, is governed by the New South Wales Police Media Policy (New South Wales Police 2004).

<sup>2</sup> It is also part of a broader research project investigating police/media relationships in New South Wales

<sup>3</sup> Interviews were semi-structured and included a range of common prompts. While staff of the NSW PMU were contacted and recruited in consultation with the NSW Police Force, journalists were selected on criteria related to their style of and role in reporting and their availability. Interviews were analysed and themeatised using the NVivo program. These themes included political influence, quality of relationship, power balance, impact of negative stories, frequency of communication, utility of unofficial sources, media policy.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that not all information disseminated by the NSW PMU is represented on their web site in the form of a media release. Rather, NSW PMU staff have constant communications with journalists at which point follow up information may be disseminated and interviews with relevant police might be organised. Thus, there would be a significant amount of information our study would not capture. This caveat is clearly illustrated by the fact that some years ago the NSW PMU release much more in-depth stories on their site. Currently however, stories are generally only one paragraph in length.

<sup>5</sup> It is suggested to all NSW Police in the Media Policy that by following it officers "will play your part in building positive public opinion of your work and that of your colleagues" (New South Wales Police 2004: 4).

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<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps best illustrated in NSW with the reforms that followed the Wood Royal Commission.

<sup>7</sup> These include the average length of time in answering calls, the total number of calls answered, and the percentage of calls answered in 27 seconds or less. The latter being a performance indicator for the grade of service - 80% on our most recent viewing (New South Wales Police 2006).

<sup>8</sup> Reported to be \$257,000 per year (Mercer 16<sup>th</sup> July 2006). Since the writing of this article Mr Willoughby has since been fired from the Media Unit.