Abstract: Relationships between the police and the media have long been discussed in the social sciences, particularly criminology and sociology. Both the police and the media play important roles in delimiting our social world and, as such, they are both open to analysis and criticism. These criticisms not only refer to the roles of each institution, but also extend to the relationship between the police and the media. Research thus far, however, has failed to produce a thorough analysis of the ways in which these relationships operate. This paper discusses interviews conducted with key stakeholders in this relationship, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the complexities and dynamics of police-media relations. Various discourses emerged from these interviews, showing a more complex and sophisticated relationship between the police and the media. The relationship is one that is not just negative or positive, but also productive.
The Governing of Police-Media Relations
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Abstract: Relationships between the police and the media have long been discussed in the social sciences, particularly criminology and sociology. Both the police and the media play important roles in delimiting our social world and, as such, they are both open to analysis and criticism. These criticisms not only refer to the roles of each institution, but also extend to the relationship between the police and the media. Research thus far, however, has failed to produce a thorough analysis of the ways in which these relationships operate. This paper discusses interviews conducted with key stakeholders in this relationship, with the aim of gaining a better understanding of the complexities and dynamics of police-media relations. Various discourses emerged from these interviews, showing a more complex and sophisticated relationship between the police and the media. The relationship is one that is not just negative or positive, but also productive.

Introduction

Historically, the media has held a fascination for many aspects of crime and criminal justice, and therefore, it was almost inevitable that the police and the media would develop some kind of relationship (1997; Finnane 2002; 1991; Grabosky and Wilson 1989; Stenson and Edwards 2001). Police-media relations have long come under scrutiny from the academic world (see Cohen 1972; Fishman 1981; Hall et al. 1978), with many authors examining the workings of this relationship. Social constructionists (Cohen 1972; Hall et al. 1978) looked at the role both the police and the media play in creating and perpetuating moral panics. More recently, Beck’s (1992) ‘risk society’ thesis was utilised in an attempt to understand the influence that ‘risk communications’ have had on interactions between the police and other institutions and organisations, including the media (Ericson and Haggerty 1997). What these, and other, theories have been criticised for, however, is essentialising a relationship that is quite complex and dynamic in nature.
An alternative theoretical approach which has been employed by both O’Malley (1992; 1999; 2000) and Stenson (1993; 2001) in a similar context is Foucault’s (1991) concept of ‘governmentality’. Although not directly addressing the role of the media, these authors have applied this approach to police practices and police organisations. It is this theoretical framework which I propose to use here to further explore interactions between the police and the media.

To gain a better understanding of police-media relations, five pilot interviews were conducted with key stakeholders in the police-media relationship: namely journalists from two Sydney metropolitan newspapers and three members of the New South Wales Police Media Unit. They were questioned on various aspects of their work interactions with the other organisation. These interviews mainly examined the social world of the respondents, relationships and situations (Denzin and Lincoln 2000: 8). These interviews were then discursively analysed and thematised. Four themes emerged from these interviews. For the purposes of clarity I have named these symbiosis, risk communication, legitimisation and investigative journalism. Examples of discussions within these themes were as follows.

**Symbiosis: Interview Outcomes**

Interviews conducted with Police Media Unit officers and newspaper journalists were revealing about the nature of police-media relationships, with representatives from both organisations acknowledging the symbiosis inherent in their interactions.

Without prompting, one Officer from the Police Media Unit stated:
It’s a symbiotic relationship, to the extent that the media are looking to fill the papers, they’re looking to do the follow-up story… So [we] supply them with information that’s useful for the investigation as well. It doesn’t always happen as cleanly as that, but if we can, then that’s useful for everyone (Police Media Unit Officer Three).

Journalists within these relationships further supported this:

We have a good relationship with them [the police]. We don’t always see eye to eye, but mainly they understand what I’m doing and what the paper does, and we understand them…I expect them to keep me in the loop (Newspaper Journalist One).

In certain cases, these relationships may also be social in nature, especially with those Police Media Unit Officers who had previously worked as journalists:

From the other side of the fence, when I was a particularly younger Police Roundsman, you worked very hard to establish your police contacts, and that could involve a reasonable amount of alcohol… I’m sure [nowadays] that some that go out for the occasional drink, and that doesn’t mean to suggest anything improper (Police Media Unit Officer Three).

However, potential conflicts were also found in this relationship. When asked if he thought his relationship with the police would be affected if he got the police offside, one journalist answered:

Most definitely, absolutely (Newspaper Journalist One).

This sentiment was echoed not only by other journalists, but the police themselves. When asked how a journalist would be treated should they abuse the trust of the Media Unit, one Officer commented:
They [the journalist] wouldn’t be treated very well. They may find it much much harder to find information. They wouldn’t be calling me on my personal mobile… We would probably freeze them out (Police Media Unit Officer Two).

Journalists were quick to point out that although a closeness, both professional and social, exists between themselves and various police, they would not hesitate to cover issues dealing with police corruption, and other such illegal activities:

If the story involves police corruption or brutality… I will ring them for their point of view, which they will or will not give, but it won’t stop us from running the story (Newspaper Journalist One).

These interviews exemplify the dynamic and fragile nature of the relationship between the police and the media, as well as the symbiosis that is involved in their communications.

**Risk Communications and Public Appeals: Interview Outcomes**

Police Media Unit Officers acknowledge the help given to them by newspapers in communicating risks and helping them with public appeals for information. When asked if journalists can be of assistance to the Police Media Unit, one officer commented:

Yeah, we often do appeals for information, we use the Crimestoppers number a lot, missing people. And it works (Police Media Unit Officer One).
Another Media Unit Officer commented on the use of Crimestoppers as a mechanism through which the police can appeal to the public for information on crime and the like:

There is a particular focus on Crimestoppers… so we will put specific releases out with a Crimestoppers flavour, saying this has happened, anyone with information please call the Crimestoppers number (Police Media Unit Officer Three).

These policing techniques demonstrate the ways in which they can communicate with the public through the media. This is what Foucault (1991) might describe as ‘governing at a distance’, furthermore encouraging the ‘active citizenship’ of individuals in the community (Stenson 1993).

**Discourses of Police Legitimisation: Interview Outcomes**

Prominent in interviews with Police Media Unit Officers was the need to present positive images of the police and the work that they do. As one officer suggested, they are:

Basically promoting. We want to give out accurate information, rather than the media make up in their own minds what they think or assume, we try and give them as much information as possible, without jeopardising the integrity of the police (Police Media Unit Officer One).

This is an ongoing part of daily activity:

We do a check every hour to see if there’s anything we can identify as being a media issue or something that shows a good arrest by police or anything we think the media would jump at (Police Media Unit Officer One).
The Police Media Unit can also achieve promotion through ways other than simply putting out a press release:

It’s always good when you can get photos or video footage ‘cause you get T.V. coverage if it’s a decent story… You see so much good stuff, and then you hear about Royal Commission stuff…so it’s really good to put positive policing stories out (Police Media Unit Officer Two).

Promoting these positive images was also understood to bring balance to the potentially negative aspects focused on by the media:

Of course we need to get some of the good news out as well, because particularly if there is a bit of a campaign against the police, you need to get the message out that police in fact are doing the job, that they are getting results, so there will be an attempt to do that as well (Police Media Unit Officer Three).

This data illustrates how the Police Media Unit is actively involved in promoting the images and issues of the police they represent. Successes are seen as an important way for the police to enhance their image and legitimacy in the community through the media. The reproduction of these images also has the effect of producing ‘positive’ images and discourses of police themselves. As such, these potentially positive or productive discourses and images have effects on the police themselves.

**Investigative Journalism: Interview Outcomes**

In interviews conducted, police were well aware of the media’s ‘Watchdog’ or investigatory role:
They’re investigators too, that’s what their job is (Police Media Unit Officer One).

Informal contacts, outside the Police Media Unit, are also useful for journalists who are investigating their own stories:

A lot of the time we will already know about a particular story through out contacts before there is a Police Media Release issued (Newspaper Journalist One).

Policing and crime reporters are seen as investigators in their own right. This is something the Police Media Unit is aware of and equally as keen to contain by providing journalists with as much ‘accurate’ information about cases as possible. Here the media displays a role which ‘oversees’ the police organisation. This relationship therefore offers the potential for the media to influence the self governance of police organisations.

Discussion

What emerges from interviews conducted indicates that, indeed, relations between New South Wales Police and Sydney metropolitan newspaper journalists are dynamic and complex in nature, consistent with the ideas of authors such as Freckelton (1988), Putnis (1996) and Wilson (1992). The major discourses drawn from this study are also indicative of a number of themes that correspond with those discussed in the work of other authors on police-media relationships, such as Ericson and Haggerty (1997), Reiner (1997; 2000) and Hall et al (1978). What also emerges, however, is that many of these theories are limited in defining the complex interactions between the police and the media, particularly given the institutional changes in the last twenty years or
so. No one theory seems to be able to adequately explain the different variables, subtleties and exchanges that constitute police-media relations and, consequently, it seems that a much less essentialising theoretical approach needs to be explored when evaluating these interactions.

A governmental style analysis of police and media relationships offers an alternative way of looking at the broader dynamic interactions of social institutions (see O'Malley 1999). With this concept in mind, the remainder of this discussion will address the concept of governmentality and how it can be applied to police-media relationships as evidenced in the interviews conducted.

**Identification of Governmentalities**

*Mentalities and Rationalities*

It has been argued by Stenson (1993; 2001), O’Malley (1992; 2001) and others that contemporary changes in policing and crime control are, in part, due to the “construction of a compact but much stronger state that rules ‘at a distance’ and seeks to autonomise and entrepreneurialise individual citizens” (McLaughlin and Murji 2001: 106). These rationalities are typified by ideals of efficiency, accountability and professionalism, all of which can be seen in the way modern day Australian police organisations imagine themselves. This move has seen police go from ‘autonomous’ organisations, characterised by notions to ‘serve and protect’, to being focused on developing ‘partnerships’ with the ‘community’ and creating ‘responsible’ citizens. This is exemplified in the various practices and policies of police organisations today, such as community policing initiatives, situational crime prevention strategies,

As Stenson and Edwards (2001) point out, there are three main ways in which these governmentalities operate:

Firstly, they involve attempts to interest others in adopting preferred ways to conceptualise problems and appropriate ways to respond to them. Secondly, coalitions are enrolled and formed around these modes of problematisation. Thirdly, they involve exploring the unfolding dynamics of political association and the interaction between informal and more formal, legally sanctioned agents of governance (Stenson and Edwards 2001: 75).

In this neo-liberal form of governance, one of the central concerns of policing is the attempt to create citizens who are reflexive and largely self-policing, behaving in ways which are broadly acceptable to a range of authorities (Stenson 1993: 375). Foucault (1991) would typify this as the exercise of bio-power. These mentalities are also reflected within police organisations themselves, which encourage individual and organisational accountability.

The creation of a Police Media Unit within the New South Wales police can be viewed as a direct manifestation of these new forms of governance. It entails the bringing in of specialists, such as ex-journalists, and a rationalisation of resources around media issues. These governmentalities are not limited to forms of bio-power exercised through the community that is being policed. The police themselves are subject to mentalities and rationalities of governing within their own institution. The New South Wales Police Media Policy (2002) is a document which ‘guides’ police on
their dealings and interactions with the media. This policy recognises the importance
of the media as a vehicle of communication with the public. In the interviews
conducted, the importance of communicating with the public was seen to be
significant, and the media was identified as the main vehicle through which
information could be channelled to, and indeed from, citizens. As interviewees stated,
the focus on Crimestoppers is one which can both disseminate and generate
information which is not only useful to an investigation, but seen as a more ‘accurate’
version of the facts which may otherwise be generated by journalists. Furthermore,
stories of ‘good police arrests’ may also serve the function of positively promoting
police, as identified by interviewees, showing police are ‘doing the job’. Indeed, this
also serves the function of promoting positive images within the organisation.

Each of the standards promoted by the Media Policy (2002) and carried out by
policing organisations themselves, such as encouraging public assistance in crime
investigation and warning of public danger (New South Wales. Police 2002), not only
aim to responsibilise citizens, but also create social and economic environments that
limit the development of conditions associated with criminality, along with creating
partnerships between the community and police (O'Malley and Sutton 1997). Public
appeals for information, as noted in interviews, are often fed through the media, and
have the effect of involving the community in policing, whether it be through the
provision of information or the communicating of risks which in turn encourage and
educate citizens about taking responsibility for the avoidance of such risks.
Tactics, Techniques and Technologies

Governance can not only been seen in the mentalities and rationalities of police organisations, but they are also reflected in the practices of contemporary police organisations, in particular, the Police Media Unit. As Chan (1997) points out, in recent years police organisations have recognised the importance of co-operating with the media as a way of sustaining the organisations image of being open and accountable (see also Finnane 2002). This was communicated in the interviews conducted, whereby the creation of a positive police image in the media was of major importance.

Early on in the relationship, the police were quite (and to some degree still are) sceptical of the media, virtually shutting out any kind of co-operative interaction between the two. Over time, however, the police became aware of the benefits of fostering communicative and positive relations with the various media outlets. Nowadays, most police organisations take a proactive approach to their interactions with the media, often employing public relations officers who disseminate information and stage ‘media events’ (Chan 1997: 185). This symbiotic relationship, acknowledged in interviews, indicates that the police view the media as a very important vehicle for the dissemination of knowledge, particularly in promoting positive police images and communicating risks to the public.

Regulating individuals by collectivist risk management is another governmental technique employed by the police to further devolve responsibility back to the individual for the management of their own risks (O'Malley 1992: 261; 2001). These risk communications typify the ways in which police are able to govern the
community at a distance, consistent with neo-liberal forms of governance. The media is seen as a partner when addressing issues of concern or promoting campaigns. For example, Crimestoppers was highlighted in interviews as a vehicle through which police can channel information on crimes via the media. Looking back at the definition of governmentality (Foucault 1991), this shows police, and indeed media, attempts to involve others, namely the public, in conceptualising problems and appropriate ways to respond. It is all about responsibilising citizens and equipping them with the information and knowledge to ‘police’ themselves.

As interviews have demonstrated, the Police Media Unit actively reproduces the rationalities reflected in their policy documents through tactics and techniques which encourage the public to accept police as a legitimate governing organisation. By using Foucault’s (1991) notion of ‘governmentality’, a new way of understanding the mentalities and rationalities behind police-media relations may be developed. This analysis allows us to go beyond notions of ‘sensation and symbiosis’ (Freckelton 1988; see also Grabosky and Wilson 1989), which essentially paints police-media relationships as always negative and/or oppressive. I am not suggesting that these relationships are not negative and oppressive in some instances. Rather, in line with other work using governmentality, I would suggest that these relationships are productive. That is, they produce ‘active citizens’ and have the potential of producing potentially positive and negative features of this complex relationship.

References


