'Crimewatching': homicide investigations in the age of information

Martin Innes describes the collaborative relationship between police and the media.

Crime investigation can be conceptualised as a form of 'information work'. In order to solve and prosecute a crime, police need to collect information that tells them who committed the offence, what happened, when it happened, how it happened and possibly why it happened. Social research in this area has suggested that one of the most important sources of information for police when investigating a crime are the public (Ericson, 1993). Traditionally, police have used certain investigative strategies such as witness interviews and house to house enquiries to collect information from members of the public who might have relevant information that can be used to construct an understanding of the crime. More recently though, it has become apparent that particularly in relation to crimes such as homicide, the police are increasingly using the media as part of their investigative strategy.

Appealing for information

On major crime enquiries there is often a collaborative relationship between detectives and journalists. It is well established that stories about serious and violent crime are regularly featured in newspapers and television news broadcasts, due to the fact that these events typically meet the media's criteria as to what is considered 'newsworthy'. For the police, the media's established interest in such events can be exploited and used as an instrument to appeal for information that might assist them in solving the crime (Innes, 1999).

Mass communication via the media is a way in which police can inform the public that a crime has occurred and thereby identify potential witnesses. Programmes such as Crimewatch are premised upon this principle, but newspapers and other forms of broadcast news are also involved in this process. Press appeals from bereaved families, crime reconstructions and interviews with senior detectives requesting public assistance are now familiar communicative formats. The images and language of such communications are carefully crafted and chosen by police in an attempt to persuade potential witnesses, offenders or people who suspect someone of the offence to make their information available.

Television is a particularly effective medium for the police when conducting information appeals. It can bring audience members 'close' to the relatives and can give a 'visceral' sense of the profound grief that they are experiencing. But newspapers too, use particular techniques of representation that implicitly and subtly emphasise the heinous nature of the crime that has occurred. Newspaper reports tend to be accompanied by pictures when the victim is a young, attractive female or a young child. In both televised and written news reports there is then an 'iconography of the victim role'; a stylised way of constructing reports that displays and encapsulates why this crime is bad and its perpetrator must be apprehended. This iconography does not just relay 'facts', it also encodes values and emotions about the morality of deviance and social order. The police assist this process by encouraging the victim's relatives to co-operate with media in organised press conferences and by providing photos and interviews to journalists in the hope of it generating relevant information.

The police collusion is publicly justified on pragmatic grounds. Mediated communication is a potentially cost-effective tactic for identifying relevant information, particularly from those people who do not live in the vicinity of where a crime occurred. Also, co-operation with journalists is seen as being one way in which the risks of the media conducting their own 'cheque-book journalism' enquiries can be lessened.

Furthermore, many senior police officers are aware that the mediated portrayal of police as 'crime-fighters', tackling serious forms of criminality, performs an important symbolic function. As Manning (1997) has suggested, media portrayals of detective work are central to the production of a "mythology of policing". Public trust and confidence in the police is currently very fragile. Such dramatic representations of the nature of police work and the nature of crime are thus important in producing a sense (albeit temporary) of public legitimacy for the institution of policing.

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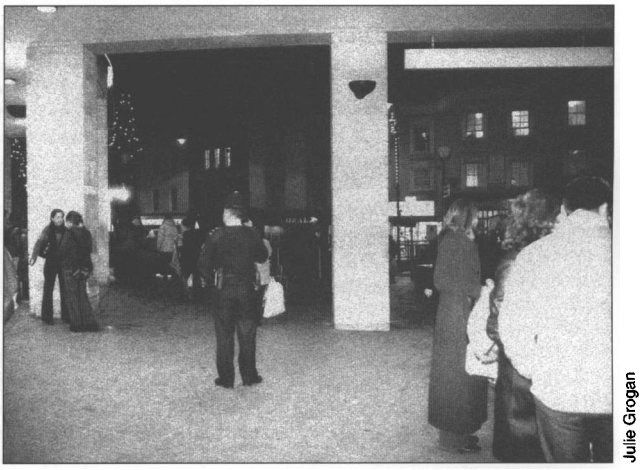
The limits of communication

Of course not all investigations use media appeals. Journalists may not deem a case 'newsworthy', or the senior detective may not feel media coverage to be appropriate. There have also been problems with

media appeals where close relatives of the victim have been encouraged to make a media appeal by the police, only for the subsequent investigation to reveal that these individuals were involved in the offence.

More significantly though, there is an increased realisation amongst detectives that media publicity has to be carefully targeted and managed. Media appeals can be so effective that they generate large amounts of information from the public. The only trouble is that most of the information provided will be irrelevant to the ongoing enquiry, yet in order to establish what is relevant, it all has to be researched. Thus a poorly managed media strategy can be detrimental to the overall effectiveness and efficiency of an investigation.



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The logic of mediated communication

The media reporting of homicide provides an example of what C. Wright Mills termed the conversion of "private troubles into public issues". The police are implicated in this process, motivated by a combination of pragmatic and symbolic concerns. There are though important ethical considerations that might develop from the logic that underpins their involvement.

In a number of recent cases, including the killings of Jill Dando, Sarah Payne and Damilola Taylor, the police have enlisted media assistance and have as a consequence, ensured that the investigation is high profile. This creates a 'feedback loop', where there is a public expectation that the police should solve these cases, which in turn leads to large amounts of resources being directed to the investigation. But the question remains about what happens in those investigations where the victim does not fulfil the media iconography of who makes a 'good victim'. Are these cases investigated with as much care and attention as those where the victim or their relatives are particularly 'media friendly?' We need to investigate the evidence.

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