

# Promoting the Police? The Rise of Police Image Work

Rob C Mawby reviews the progress of the police in learning to manage their own public image.

In recent years the public image of the British police has been tarnished by a number of highly mediated scandals alleging, *inter alia*, institutional racism, incompetent murder investigation and recurring corruption. Across the media, newspapers, radio and television all have a constant interest in the police, both for the purposes of news reporting and also for features and series. In our media dominated society it is easier than ever before to know about organisations and institutions, and the police have become amongst the most watched and the most visible. This raises issues of what has been called the 'management of visibility' (Thompson 1995) and today's police service has many 'image workers' engaged in promoting,

conditions, together with rapidly changing media developments, have compelled the police service to raise the profile of its image work.

The high visibility of policing has implications for the police-media relationship and the deployment of police image workers. Media treatment of the police has always played a role in mystifying the police and in fostering favourable imagery (Reiner 2000). Equally the media historically have played an important role in exposing police malpractice and misconduct, from the uncovering of corruption in the Metropolitan Police in the 1960s by investigative journalists from the *Sunday Times* to the saturation coverage and analysis of the Macpherson Inquiry and report concerning the same force's conduct of the Stephen

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projecting and protecting the police image. These police employees include press officers, marketing professionals, public relations officers and corporate identity specialists.

The police service has always practised image work. However, it took on greater significance as a new policing context emerged during the 1990s, generated by a combination of managerialist government policy and widespread concern with police performance and misconduct. At the same time there existed what appeared to be an insatiable demand for policing services within a climate of 'fear of crime'. These

Lawrence murder investigation (Macpherson 1999).

Clearly the police-media relationship is one of significance and recent changes in the media industry have impacted upon it. Organisational and technological changes have led to an explosion of media outlets, particularly news based. These include changes in news distribution formats, notably 24-hour rolling news, and a growth in weekend news-reporting, cable and satellite television stations, and commercial radio stations. Over the ten years from 1989 to 1999 there was an 800 per cent increase in the supply of television news alone. Such developments have increased the number of news gatherers and the demand for stories which places greater demands on



media personnel. This in turn places more demand upon the police, as an established source, to supply copy to meet the increased need. A survey of police press offices I recently conducted found that in 80 per cent of forces, the overall number of daily contacts with media organisations had increased during the year 2000.

Technological advances in the media have also had an impact. The use of lightweight cameras and camcorders has increased the level of scrutiny to which the police are subjected. This has impacted on the potential accountability of the police, for example, through the use of hand-held camcorders by protesters during the policing of environmental issues. There have been examples of amateur footage being used on national news, most obviously the beating of Rodney King by LAPD officers in 1992. These media developments therefore provide for high visibility policing and both subject the police to scrutiny but also present more opportunities for the police to communicate messages and to promote their public image.

How has the police service responded to the challenge of managing its visibility? Research conducted in the early 1990s suggested that the police service was showing uneven but increasing

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interest in managing its media relations (Schlesinger and Tumber 1992). Since then there have been significant steps towards professionalising police image work. This is evident at both a national level and at the level of local forces. In the absence of a Home Office or Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) national press and public relations policy, the ACPO Media Advisory Group was established in 1993 by a small group of senior press officers and ACPO officers. This group fulfils a coordinating role and disseminates advice to forces on policy and practice. A further step towards professionalisation was made in 1998 through the establishment of the Association of Police Public Relations Officers (APPRO). Also operating at a national level, the three main uniformed staff associations (ACPO, the Police Superintendents' Association and the Police Federation) actively promote the police through the media.

At the local level, research I have undertaken recently (including surveys of police force press offices in 1996/7 and 2000/2001) confirms that despite divergence in practice, no force is immune to the pressures to engage in image work. Forces have developed media strategies and their press offices are now routinely managed and staffed by civilian communications specialists. Over 90 per cent of press offices are managed by civilians and

over 85 per cent of all press office staff are civilians. These image workers are increasingly media professionals, recruited for their specific skills and far removed from earlier incumbents, generally police officers or civilian administrators.

Although press offices were originally established for the purpose of conducting reactive and proactive press relations, the trend is now towards a broader role. The traditional 'Press Bureau' has given way to 'Media Services' departments which coordinate diverse communications activities force-wide, including marketing and sponsorship, to promote and manage the image of the force. Evident of this broader role, press officers are now working at strategic and tactical levels, communicating with external agencies and also providing support to operational colleagues - backstage by enabling them to communicate more effectively - and front of stage by acting as a buffer between the media and operational officers. Image workers therefore are actively involved in both developing overarching communications strategies and in day-to-day news management and public relations activities. In short image work is now undoubtedly professional - it is guided by strategy and policy, it has its own processes, and it is managed by specialist communicators or conducted by police officers who have been trained and advised by specialists.

There is a danger that police image work could be deployed for motives of, at best, organisational advantage and, at worst, systematic misrepresentation to mask malpractice, to abdicate or deflect responsibility. However, embedded within police image work is the prominent use of the language of 'openness'. Police forces are espousing 'open' communications with the objective of providing transparency, allowing the media and the wider public to be informed about policing policy and practice. Hence there is an implied legitimisation purpose through mediated accountability and herein lies the potential to develop image work that serves not only the organisational needs of the police service, but also the wider public interest. Whether, in practice, image work in its future development serves the interests of democratic accountable policing or the restricted interests of the police service remains to be seen.

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