

And Now for the Good News...

Allan Ross describes the efforts of the Home Office to communicate its criminal justice strategies to the press.

‘**M**an does good job’ is a headline seldom seen in a national newspaper. Replace ‘man’ with ‘Government’ and the resulting headline is probably even rarer. This is partly the result of an increasingly politicised media but is also a symptom of the fierce competition between national media outlets to outdo their rivals. Many would draw from this the resigned, but perhaps undeserved, conclusion that the media are only interested in bad news, however the reality is far more complex. In order to sell papers, editors need to respond to the public perception of news. As long as we expect the man to be doing a good job, it only becomes news when he is found wanting.

So if the man *is* doing a good job, how should he go about getting recognition for it in the media? Sometimes delivering improvements isn’t enough in itself and perhaps alternative ways of presenting these achievements are needed to secure better coverage. The Government has delivered record numbers of police officers, reduced crime to the lowest level for 20 years and radically rebalanced the criminal justice system, yet we still read more about bureaucracy in the police, alcohol related crime and an out of touch judiciary than about these successes. But we shouldn’t admit defeat, because there is hope for getting good news in the press.

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There is no question that the national media is very powerful. On average 51% of adults in the UK read a national daily newspaper and over 50% read a regional newspaper every week (National Readership Survey, 2003).

It is therefore essential that the Government uses the media to inform and influence public opinion, however there is a marked difference between coverage of policy and announcements in the national and regional media. Research carried out on behalf of the Home Office shows that coverage in regional newspapers is more favourable than coverage in national newspapers. Between October and December last year, 53% of the articles on Home Office issues that appeared in the regional press contained a high level of favourable quotes and good Home Office material, compared to only 9% in the national media (independent media evaluation carried out on behalf of the Home Office).

We cannot ignore the national media, but against that backdrop should we keep plugging away or look

at alternatives?

The traditional method of handling major policy announcements consisted of a press notice, press conference and possibly a photo opportunity for national media. There is no question that this is effective in ensuring that the media understand the detail of the policy, but there is no guarantee that the coverage will be balanced or non-polemical. Nor should it. A free press is the cornerstone of our democracy, but the result is often that issues such as crime, justice and anti-social behaviour receive mixed, and largely predictable, levels and tone of coverage in the national press.

Many stories that, to somebody with an interest in the criminal justice system, are newsworthy, often don’t interest national newspapers unless the focus can be shifted to show that government is somehow failing. A good example is the recent publication of the Home Office criminal statistics, which showed that the number of offences brought to justice had risen by 8% and included a regional breakdown showing that some areas had seen increases of up to 27% from the previous year. The only article that greeted this news focused, somewhat pessimistically, on the disparities between different areas with the headline “Postcode Highlights the Justice Gap.” Similarly the recent publication of CJS figures

showing that ineffective trials had been reduced by one third, saving the taxpayer over £11 million, received absolutely no coverage in the national media.

In this environment, alternative options for media handling have a far greater attraction. As the Phillis Review of government communications acknowledged, people place greater trust in regional media because it can engage the audiences most interested in how government policy affects them directly. Regional newspapers often aren’t involved in such competition for readers so generally publish articles with a more objective tone. Therefore if a national story can be regionalised then it will have a far greater chance of gaining column inches. High levels of regional media coverage can in turn actually encourage national media to follow up stories in a way they might not had it come straight from a Home Office press notice.

When the annual performance figures for the criminal justice system were published, regional media were enthusiastic about covering the good



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news in their area and headlines such as 'Justice system success', 'Confidence in the CJS rising' and 'Success in court for the system' surprised even the most cynical government media observers. And it works both ways. By monitoring coverage in the regional media, central government press officers can understand the issues that affect their readers and tailor media handling to suit their needs. This was put to good effect when, on publishing the consultation paper on road traffic offences, selected regional newspapers were only too willing to carry ministerial articles and, with a nudge from the Home Office, explore at some length the implications of the policy for people in their area. National media were quick to follow up on long-running regional media campaigns and bring their case studies to a wider audience.

This approach is beginning to be mirrored across government. Research carried out by the Phillis Review Group last year showed the benefits of making national announcements relevant to a regional audience and the added value that engaging with a regional audience can give an announcement. The report recommended a new approach to regional communications, stressing that, "communication needs to be as much a partner and senior player in the regions as in Whitehall," and emphasising the mutual benefits of two-way communication between central government and the regional media (*Report of the Phillis Review of Government Communications*, HMSO).

But to limit presentation and media handling for print journalists solely to newspapers is to ignore the specialist media, which can consider issues in considerably more detail and tailor them to a specific audience. Although not as well read – despite the fact that 42% of women in the UK read

a specialist monthly magazine (National Readership Survey 2003) – the audience are likely to be more engaged in the subject matter in a specialist magazine. Recent examples include in-depth articles on domestic violence, prostitution, victims issues and new community justice initiatives.

New media also has a role to play. Over 50% of households now have a home computer and large numbers of young people cite internet news sites as their main source of information (Office of National Statistics). Government departments are responding to this demand with bigger and more advanced websites and a clear focus on making online communication customer-driven.

Communication clearly extends beyond the main national newspapers and the Home Office has worked hard to develop strategies encompassing the whole communications mix.

This works well in practice. Baroness Scotland seldom visits an area of the country without undertaking a series of regional interviews and the articles she writes for specialist criminal justice publications inform key practitioners and opinion-formers about government policy, all of which contributes to increasing confidence in the criminal justice system, a performance target that the Home Office is well on the way to meeting.

National media will always come first - their influence and circulation ensures this – but by continuing to widen the scope of media handling to include regional, specialist and online media, in time we can build on our achievements and improve public perceptions of the criminal justice system.

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