

The image of the 'traditional British Bobby' is embedded in our cultural history along with cricket on village greens and warm beer. This benign image does not always sit easily with the difficulties of policing a complex society comprising different communities with contrasting expectations and experiences of the police. In an era in which media images of policing are ubiquitous and in which

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the other is the resources that are allocated to media liaison activities. In these areas, during the last ten years there has been a marked change of attitude across the police service.

# Policing the image

**Rob C Mawby charts the history of police image management.**

technological and organisational changes in the communications industry have created a highly mediated society, the police are a prime focus of attention. In this context a question worth asking is how the police contribute to these images of policing and how they seek to manage their image. Two strands are easily identified. One is the attention that forces pay to corporate image management and

## Image management

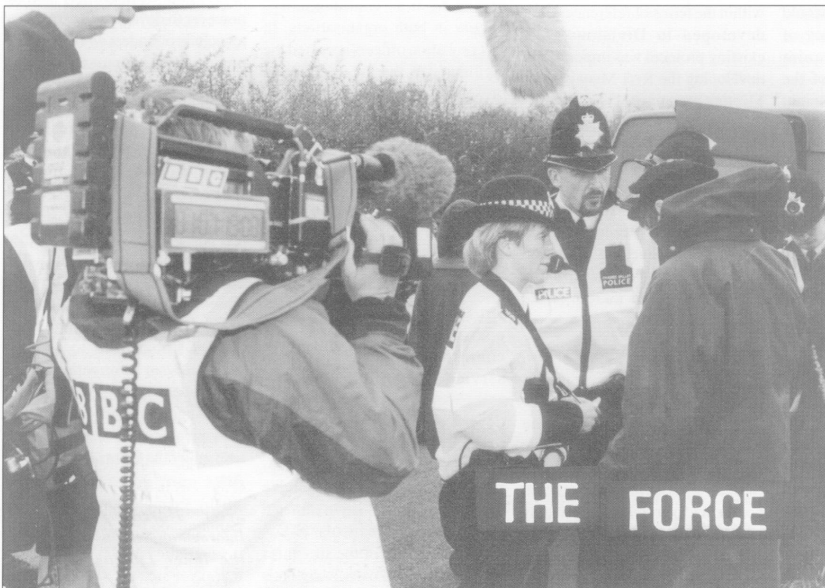
In terms of corporate image management, the Metropolitan Police heralded the professionalisation of police image management in 1988 by appointing the Wolf Olins consultancy to undertake an audit of internal and external attitudes towards the force. The consultants made recommendations concerning, *inter alia*, communication and presentation. As a result, the Met embarked upon a programme of change including the renaming of the 'Force' as a 'Service.' They also developed measures aimed at improving the image of the Met, and realigning the organisation with the needs of their public, now talked about in terms of consumers rather than citizens. Like the Met., other forces have followed the example of commercial organisations and contracted specialists

to advise on image and public relations. Most recently Nottinghamshire Police invested £9,600 in commissioning the research and design of a new corporate identity.

At a national level, reverence for the traditional police image is reflected in the consultation and deliberation which routinely accompanies moves towards changes in the uniform. Recently when it was mooted that the helmet should be replaced by a more functional model, the issue was discussed in national newspapers and on national television. In addition the Police Federation commissioned a national survey of forces and the public on whether the helmet should stay and its uniform project group debated the helmet against terms of reference which included image.

## Handling the press

The second strand is that of the professionalisation of police media liaison. In 1919 Scotland Yard established the first police press office to create an official communications channel to rival the informal channel of detectives selling information to journalists in pubs. The new 'Press Bureau' comprised one civil servant who issued two press releases each day. Today the Bureau is a Directorate of Public Affairs (DPA) employing approximately 100 people and has a budget of around £9 million. The DPA has a 24 hour press office and a Public Relations branch responsible for publicity campaigns. These and other DPA branches are responsible for maintaining media relationships, developing media and communications policies, promoting police good news stories and monitoring and responding to media stories relating to



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the Met. They also liaise with prospective programme makers and offer advice on media matters to officers.

As the police of the Metropolis, the Met. has special needs and whilst no other force operates on this scale, there is evidence of changes in media relations and strategic communication occurring throughout the service. Police service press offices, traditionally managed and staffed by police officers, are increasingly professionalised and civilianised. Specialists including journalists, marketing and public relations professionals are being recruited. These offices have broken the convention that police functions need to be managed by police officers and in the most progressive forces the heads of these departments have responsibility for all corporate communications, integrating the most obvious function of media liaison with others such as marketing, public relations, internal communications and corporate image management. These individuals operate at a strategic level in a number of forces, e.g. participating in force executive meetings to advise on media and image implications of particular issues.

As a result police forces are adopting proactive attitudes towards media and public relations. Press offices are expected to promote the work of forces to the communities they operate in. In this respect these offices have a facilitative role linking media-police-public relations through open media policies. At the same time press offices have a support role, providing advice to officers, who are encouraged to liaise with the media so that 'no comment' becomes a thing of the past.

It is not only at the force level that the police have become more media conscious. At a national level the Association of Chief Police Officers has established a Media Advisory Group (ACPO MAG) with the objectives of achieving a consistent media approach and of stimulating media interest in pertinent policing issues

The Police Superintendents' Association has raised its media profile under the leadership of the recently retired Brian Mackenzie who adopted a policy of constant

availability to national and local media to comment on criminal justice issues. The Police Federation also maintains a high media profile and employs a full-time press manager at its headquarters.

Whilst the police service has become increasingly sophisticated in terms of communication, image management is not something novel to policing. Peel's new police were born largely unwanted into a hostile world in 1829 and to foster acceptance image considerations were taken into account in selection of uniform, weapon and policing tactics such as minimal force. What is new is that the police have both opened up and 'wised up'. Some may fear a movement towards spin doctoring; that the police have become more organisationally image conscious as a means of motivating faltering consent and of appeasing politicians. If this were the case, it would be a sticking plaster solution to deeper problems. Conversely, others might argue that the move towards open media and public relations, the emphasis on integrity and on disclosing rather than withholding information should be encouraged as healthy for democratic and accountable policing.

To understand these developments in police image management the author is undertaking empirical research to explore which models of communication the police are pursuing and to what end. However, what is beyond question is that in our highly mediated society there is a need for the police to communicate effectively an image appropriate to their role. It is also crucial for the legitimacy of policing that their concern is not simply with appearance, but with substance, aligning image management with transparency and accountability rather than with the strategic manipulation of impressions.

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**"The romance of the police force is.... the whole romance of man..."**

**G.K. Chesterton**

**G**K Chesterton, the creator of Father Brown, once wrote that 'The romance of the police force is ... the whole romance of man... It reminds us that the whole noiseless and unnoticeable police management by which we are ruled and protected is only a successful knight-errantry'. Recent governments have sought to reconstruct the British police on a business-like model. In the Information Age, intelligence-led thief-taking is supposed to achieve the crime prevention panacea which traditional patrol and detection methods promised but failed to deliver.

## Knights errant in the naked city

**Robert Reiner** examines changing media representations of policing since World War II.

Arguably, however, Chesterton's romantic conception of policing may tell us more about how policing contributes to social control than the rational deterrent strategies proffered by policy-makers. Policing, especially in Britain, has always been a matter of symbolism as much as substance, and the media constitute the most prominent arena in which different conceptions of policing have been contested.

Many studies have analysed the content of representations of policing, and concluded that overall the police are presented in a favourable light, as successful protectors of the public against serious criminal threats. The frequent stories of police deviance (a highly newsworthy issue) are normally presented within a 'one bad apple' framework, or in the

context of a discussion of already instituted police reforms, which counters any potential threat to the legitimacy of the police organisation itself.

## **“Most stories still justify ultimately the criminal justice viewpoint, but in an increasing minority the police are either irrelevant, ineffective or deviant.”**

Although crime stories in both news and fiction have generally legitimated the police, there have been considerable changes over time in the extent and the way that this has been accomplished. There are also important variations between different media, and within any medium at different market levels, for example between popular and quality, newspapers.

### **New research**

A systematic analysis of the changing media images of police is provided by a historical content analysis of representations of crime since the Second World War which I have recently conducted with Sonia Livingstone and Jessica Allen (supported by the ESRC). We assessed the extent of crime in a random sample of all films released in Britain from 1945-91 and carried out a detailed quantitative and qualitative content analysis of 84 out of the 196 crime films which have been top box office successes in that period. We also analysed in detail a random sample of nearly 500 crime-related stories from *The Times* and *The Mirror* between 1945-91. Finally we conducted an analysis of those crime series which featured in the top ten rated shows on TV between 1955-91. We also organised a range of focus-group discussions to study audience interpretations.

The media vary in the extent to which the police figure prominently in the stories analysed. The police typically played a minor role in cinema films until the mid-1960s. Hardly any films in our sample between 1945-65 featured police heroes, but after the late 1960s police protagonists become the most common type. The police have, however, always been the most common protagonist of television crime series, although this is to a slightly decreasing extent. In the period up to 1979, 64% of the top rated TV crime series had police heroes, but in the 1980s this falls to 43%.

In newspapers the proportion of stories which were about the criminal justice system (as distinct from specific crimes) rose in the period since the War, but has

always been greater in *The Times* than *The Mirror*. Criminal justice stories rose from 2% of all stories on average between 1945-51 to 6% 1985-91 in *The Mirror*, and from 3% to 9% in *The Times* (and crime stories rose from 9% in *The Mirror* and 7% in *The Times* to 21% in both papers).

Overall the police are more frequently the central protagonists in stories in all the media now than in the immediate postwar period. But the change is most marked in the cinema, and least on television, where the dominance of police heroes has slightly receded.

In all the media the representation of the police became less positive over the period as a whole, although still remaining predominantly positive. However, this overall decline in positive images masks some important complexities. Most aspects of the representation of the integrity or effectiveness of policing follow a clear curvilinear pattern. The police are presented most positively in the first part of our period, from 1945-63. Their image is most negatively presented overall in the middle part of our period, from 1964-79. In the last years of our period, 1980-91, there is some recovery in the representation of police ethics and efficiency. However, this partial turnaround is itself a complex result of a bifurcation of images in recent years, between very negative ones and attempts to resuscitate the earlier positive pattern of representation.

Illustrations of this curvilinear trend include:

- i) **The clear up rate.** In all media throughout the period most crimes depicted are cleared up. However the extent to which offenders are represented as brought to justice is lowest between 1964-79. In press stories, for example, the proportion of crimes *not* cleared up was 23% between 1945-63; 37% from 1964-79; and 31% 1980-91.
- ii) **Caring police.** In the first period of our study police are usually represented as caring and socially responsible, not 'just doing a job'. This benign

image almost disappears in the middle period, but then stages a partial comeback. In cinema films, for example, 56% present a caring police image between 1945-63; only 6% from 1964-79; but 39% thereafter.

- iii) **Internal police conflicts.** The representation of conflict within the police organisation is rare in the earliest period, usual in the second, but less frequent though still common in the third.
- iv) **Police deviance.** Malpractice of all kinds was rarely depicted in the early period, routinely in the second, but less frequently in the third. For example, excessive use of force by police was depicted in only 3% of films between 1945-63; 44% from 1964-79; and 25% 1980-91. Other illicit methods were shown in 11% of films 1945-63; 80% 1964-79; 67% 1980-91.

### **A process of change**

Altogether, media representations of crime and law enforcement exhibit profound processes of change since the Second World War. These can be periodised roughly in terms of three ideal-type patterns. The first postwar decade is a period of consensus and social harmony in representations of criminal justice. Crime stories - news as well as fiction - present an image of society as based largely on shared values and a clear yet accepted hierarchy of status and authority. Criminals were normally brought to justice, crime did not pay. The police were almost invariably represented as righteous, dedicated and efficient.

During the mid-1960s the dominant mode of representation of crime and justice shifts. Doubts about the fairness and effectiveness of the police proliferate. Whilst street-cops feature increasingly as protagonists, they are more frequently morally tarnished if not outright corrupt.

Since the late 1970s another shift is discernible, the advent of what could be called a post-critical era. Stories are increasingly bifurcated between counter-critical ones, which seek to return as far as possible to the values of consensus, and those which represent a hopelessly disordered beyond-good-and-evil world. It is

this division of narratives which accounts for the curvilinear pattern of many variables: there is some attempt to restore the values of the past, challenged by representations which extend the critiques of the middle period.

Underneath these shifts a more fundamental alteration in discourse is discernible: a demystification of authority and law. The media still generally represent crime as wrong, but this is a pragmatic issue, based on the harm which may be done to individual victims, not the authority of the law itself.

The moral status of the police is no longer conferred by their role in the social order. Rather, it is subject to negotiation and must be established from scratch in each narrative, by the demonstration of serious suffering caused to victims. (In an increasing minority of stories, these may even be the legally defined offenders, who may be represented as victimised by a criminal injustice system).

Most stories still justify ultimately the criminal justice viewpoint, but in an increasing minority the police are either irrelevant, ineffective or deviant. Thus the media generally continue to function as sources of social control, whilst also reflecting the increasing individualism of a less deferential and more desubordinate consumer culture. The performance of policing is tested pragmatically for its value to individual clients, as much in media representations as in the practice of policing in the age of the Audit Commission.

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