

Force Selling: Policing and the Manufacture of Public Confidence?

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Abstract

This paper explores aspects of the ways in which police image work is conducted in NSW. Specifically, it looks at the links between such image work and the project of public confidence building in the police. Based on research interviews with NSW Police public affairs professionals the paper draws out a number of themes articulated by respondents. It also places these themes in a broader context of changing relationships between the police and media. It concludes by suggesting the modern police agencies have little choice but to engage in image work and confidence building but sounds a word of caution about the growing capacity of policing agencies to frame preferred images of crime and policing.

Introduction

In recent years policing organisations have become increasingly savvy at producing positive images of police work through both old and new media, via the growth in police public relations (PR). This image work has emerged as a response to a number of modern policing and political challenges. These include the public fear of crime, reform agendas, the crisis in policing consent, and the withering 'old media', such as newspapers, and a proliferation of new media, social media and citizen journalism. With a growing body of international research pointing to the need for policing organisations to foster public confidence and organisational legitimacy through the practice of procedural and distributive justice (Tyler 2006; Jackson and Sunshine 2007; Hinds and Murphy 2007), much less research has looked at public confidence in the context of police PR or media. Based on early qualitative data from a research project², which includes interviews with key uniformed and civilian directors of police PR in Australia and observations of police-media operations, this paper constitutes a preliminary case study and explores how directors within the NSW Police Force Public Affairs Branch conceive the links between 'image work', public confidence in the organisation, and police legitimacy.

Scene Setting and Image Work

While much has been made of the managerialist turn in policing that began in the 1980s and has gradually swept through many Western police organisations, much less has been said about the way in which the organisations themselves have become subject to increasing public visibility. In the UK, Mawby (2002) has highlighted how this increased 'police visibility' has led to, or developed hand in hand with, a new push to manage 'policing images'. The contemporary multi-mediated environment in which policing takes place is, he suggests, an example of Mathieson's (1997) 'synopticon'; an inversion of Foucault's reading of the panopticon, where the many watch the few. Thus, ironically, as policing agencies have developed increasingly sophisticated modes of surveilling the public, it has simultaneously come under increasing scrutiny from interested publics. As Mawby (2002:36-7) explains, 'the police service is one of the most watched institutions in our contemporary society'.

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² *Policing Public Opinion* is a research project funded by a University of Sydney Faculty of Law small research grant. I would like to acknowledge my co-investigator Dr Alyce McGovern of UNSW for her intellectual contributions to the project.

The reasons for this increasing visibility are many: police are a valuable source of stories for media outlets; police stories are popular with consumers; police 'reality' television programs can be made relatively cheaply; new managerialist public accountability measures require public visibility as part of customer accountability; and police organisations need media coverage and public cooperation to police effectively. The proliferation of media outlets since the 1980s and subsequently the democratisation of information through the world wide web have ushered in a reassessment of the way police organisations communicate through the media at both an organisational and technical level, and have also increased the opportunities to promote the public image of the police.

In Australia this institutional reassessment of the police/media/public relationship has taken place in the contexts of an array of public inquiries, royal commissions and reform. Many of these inquiries uncovered entrenched levels of police misconduct, political influence, or incompetence: in particular the Woodward Royal Commission in NSW (1977-80), the Fitzgerald Inquiry in Queensland (1987-89), the Wood Royal Commission in NSW (1994-97), and finally the WA Police Royal Commission (02-04). This Australian experience uncannily mirrors the UK context of change, or what Reiner (2010) refers to as a 'cyclical synthesis of reform strategies' chosen from the coercion to consent spectrum (from Scarman to MacPherson). There has also been the perceived problem of a growing fear of crime as well as an insatiable public appetite for increased police numbers. Again, as Mawby (1992:42) succinctly outlines in the British context:

Police were to address image work; as a defence to the reform program; to engage with media development; and also as a genuine reaction by concerned police leaders to the state of the institution and the police-public relationship - an attempt to maintain legitimacy.

Legitimacy of the Police Organisation

To be effective, policing requires the ongoing support, consent and voluntary cooperation of the public. Such public support and cooperation rests upon the legitimacy of the police organisation. Beetham (1991) defines legitimacy as the legal validity, the justifiability in terms of shared beliefs, and evidence of a public obligation to defer to the power and authority of an organisation. As Murphy et al (2008:16) argue, '[p]olicing by consent encourages public trust in police, which thereby facilitates an ongoing interchange of information between the public and the police and voluntary compliance with the law' (see also Skogan 2006). Likewise Hinds and Murphy (2007:35) suggest '... people are more likely to assist police when they perceive police are treating the public with procedural justice'. Using a normative/moral values model of criminal social regulation, Hough et al (2010) suggest procedural and distributive fairness and the perception that police are effectively fighting crime, leads to trust in the organisation, which in turn also leads to the organisation being granted legitimacy by those it governs. This then increases compliance with the law and cooperation with authorities.

The link is also made in the research between visibility and confidence. Indermaur and Roberts (2009) argue that police are highly visible and that this visibility and contact are linked with higher levels of confidence as compared to the courts or prisons. Public confidence, they suggest, evaporates as the public has less interaction with the institution. On the weight of such evidence, police organisations would be well-served to have a robust and proactive communications apparatus.

Recent research suggests that many newspaper reporters reproduce police media releases verbatim as objective news stories (McGovern and Lee 2010). This has implications in regard to the framing of crime in the media and the relative ease with which policing agencies can tell their 'preferred' story. McGovern and Lee (2010) identified a number of themes that can be said to account for much police media interaction. Key among these were the management of public risks and attempts to actuate public self-governance (safety campaigns etc), the management of reputation ('image work'), and resistance by reporters (critical reporting outside of the control of the media unit).

Mawby (2002) poses the question: does image work support legitimate policing or does it in fact simply compensate for problems of legitimacy? While this is indeed a key question in the

Australian context it is beyond the scope of the present analysis. The question this paper concerns itself with is more preliminary: Whether the directors of public affairs see the issues of public confidence and organisational legitimacy as central to their work, and if so, how? This question is significant as there has been considerable discourse in the Sydney print media, in particular in the News Corporation-owned *The Daily Telegraph*, suggesting the NSW Police Force Media Unit is simply a PR unit aimed at 'spinning' a pro-government or pro-police line and publicly defining down crime for political purposes (e.g. Morri 2010a, 2010b). This project thus goes some way to testing this claim. Before proceeding, however, it is important to map the current landscape of police media interactions in Australia generally and more specifically in NSW – the state from which this research is drawn.

Police Media and the NSW Public Affairs Branch

The structural nature of public affairs, media relations and corporate communications varies across the eight Australian states and territories. However, all Australian police services now have a dedicated media branch within their corporate structure. In NSW, the Public Affairs Branch incorporates the media unit, corporate communications, freedom of information and a multimedia unit. It is responsible for media and issues management, internal communication, overseeing media policy, the corporate image and branding, providing operational support to investigations through media liaison and multimedia production, proactive communications and marketing projects targeting internal and external stakeholders, public relations, including event management, website management, market research, film and TV liaison, and corporate photography.

Corporate communications engage in a range of proactive strategies that have led to commercial collaboration with a number of media organisations, particularly on police reality television shows such as *The Force*, *The Recruits* and *Missing Persons Unit*, as well as engagement with new media formats such as social networking sites and online video broadcasting (McGovern 2010). As the NSW Police Force Annual Report 2008-2009 notes:

Public interest in policing has never been greater. We continue to promote core police messages and highlight the good work of our officers through involvement with commercial television shows. These programs included the Nine Network's *Missing Persons Unit*, Channel Seven's *The Force* and the *Recruits* on Channel 10. (NSW Police Force 2009:27)

The media unit has a 24 hour a day 'dedicated media liaison team', carrying forward what NSW Police Force refers to as 'preferred messages' to the public via a wide variety of media (NSW Police Force 2010). It responds to inquiries and engages in proactive media work using 22 full-time staff—half sworn officers, half staff with external journalistic experience. The NSW Police Force Annual Report (2009) notes that the media unit produced some 3962 media releases and trained 1400 officers in media skilling in the twelve-month period. It also supported senior offices at 302 media conferences.

The public affairs branch is also home to a multimedia unit which, as the NSW Police Force Media Policy states, 'films police action for release to the media to showcase good police work' (NSW Police Force Public Affairs Branch 2010:10). Media work and all NSW Police Force employees, are governed by the media policy (NSW Police Force Public Affairs Branch 2010:10).

Method

The following qualitative data is drawn from three interviews with the four key directors of Public Affairs in the NSW Police Force: the Director of Public Affairs (DPA); the Director of Corporate Communications (DCC: respondent 2); the Director of the Media Unit (DMU: respondent 3); and the Deputy Commissioner, Corporate Services (DC: respondent 4). While the DPA and the DCC were interviewed together, the other respondents were interviewed individually. This piece of the research could best be described as a bounded 'case study' (Punch 2005). By this I mean the data being studied is

given a unitary character by the interrelation of a variety of facts to a single case (Theodorson and Theodorson 1969, cited in Punch 2005). The research interviews were semi-structured in nature. They were recorded, transcribed and have been provisionally thematically coded. The interviews lasted between 35 and 80 minutes.

Interview Data

Of most significance to the research question are the three key themes related to public confidence, which are discussed below under the titles 'doing something', 'corporate reputation' and 'deterrence and compliance'.

'Doing Something'

The respondents suggested that engagement with the media was important for public confidence on a number of levels. Simply being seen to be *doing* policing was vitally important for the organisation as a whole. This was a key justification for engagement in 'reality' television policing programs about which the both the DPA and the DCC agree: 'We have people knocking on our door every day of the week with a new concept about making a show about NSW Police' (DCC). The DPA notes:

... I think the resilience of the organisation is made more solid by exploring other opportunities ... if there was to be a hallmark over the last four years ... it's been the fact that we've built up a suite of television programs ... and it goes back to those core issues about we've gotta tell people about what we're doing and I guess as a counter balance to that notion that Don Weatherburn³ and his people have published [...] ...that the people's perception of the criminal justice system is completely ... inverted based on sensational media coverage ... We have an opportunity over here to create another perception.

The rationale here is that communicating effectively can reassure the public that the police are out there doing police work. As the DPA further notes:

... [I]f you don't tell people what you're doing, they'll assume you're doing nothing or you're doing it poorly. So I think we do have to tell people what we're doing and internally we've also got to tell our own people why we're doing it.

The Deputy Commissioner (DC) whose portfolio includes public affairs notes that:

In terms of customer service, communication, both to our internal colleagues and the public, is absolutely critical. One, we need to be finding out all about how we can improve customer service, why there are barriers etc ... both internally and externally. And then, how we can improve satisfaction with our service. And then the next level [is] confidence. And then the more you get into that, the more you realise that it is all linked.

This thus draws a link between being seen as 'doing something' and the next theme, 'corporate reputation'.

'Corporate Reputation'

The respondents were keenly aware that their work is often interpreted as spin by some in the media. However, they regard their work as a key element of modern policing and note the importance of the police 'corporate reputation'. Policing, they suggest, is all about communication. If you can't communicate effectively, you can't police:

... [W]e're a communications organisation, and we've got to communicate with the community and we do that for a whole bunch of reasons, obviously in terms of investigations, assisting with the investigations, warning the public, I guess raising awareness of dangers and

³ Director of the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research (NSW BOCSAR).

things of that nature, so you're constantly communicating that kind of thing and you've got to communicate it in a way that the community is going to listen. So that's always been done through the media, I guess, you know, these times we have other opportunities of course. There is a notion of pure public relations that's simply about reputation[...], corporate reputation is pretty important for the cops because we know from our own research, or research conducted on our behalf ... if community confidence in police declines, community reporting of crime declines, therefore the cops can't do their job. So that I often wonder about people's cynicism about corporate public relations when it comes to the reputation of the police force because it's actually fairly important (DPA).

This link to operational policing is also made by the DMU:

We're here for operational police and the community so it's providing that flow of information in an efficient, quick way, that works best for all. So if the policeman in the field, say, is doing that, well, they'll have confidence in us. And if the media see us doing that, well, they'll also have confidence.

'Deterrence' and Compliance

Another strong rationale for the work of corporate communications, in terms of agreements with television producers, is to increase deterrence. The DPA noted:

... [T]he other obvious but understated goal ...is that (of) increasing the perception of detections ... We're putting all this stuff out there and in *RBT* [Random Breath Test, the television program] world, it's obviously increasing the perception you'll be pulled over if you drink and drive. But there could be other crime types. Even with the *Drug Lords*, one of the underlying themes is that the cops are always out there looking, and if you want to become a drug dealer then that's the risk you take, that you're being observed.

Two models of justice are being conceptualised here. One is a normative model that suggests co-operation with the police and compliance with the law can be achieved through building public trust in the organisation, and by being seen to achieve positive policing outcomes through methodical and just policing. The second model suggests that public knowledge of positive outcomes produces a deterrence effect, reducing the likelihood of offending.

There is also an acknowledgment of the diversification of media work being undertaken. Again, this is justified by the perceived impact on public confidence and organisational legitimacy. The DMU stressed the way in which their newly published media policy clearly articulated the rights of both police and the media at crime scenes. He noted that, in the past, some members of the media had been treated unjustly by police who were themselves unsure of the proper procedure. The new policy makes it clear that if the media are outside the crime scene, and not 'contaminating evidence':

... [T]hey have every right to shoot into the crime scene. In fact, we want them to. [...]...We want the media coverage because we'll be standing up in 15 minutes and appealing to the public for anyone who has seen anything at this crime scene, or getting information out there to warn the public (DMU).

While not articulated in this manner, this could be seen as an example of a form of 'procedural justice' being practised with the media, with the quite precise aims of better communication with, and cooperation from, the public. As the DMU further noted, 'building faith, and confidence, from both police in the field and the media, is integral to our role, because if those two parties don't have faith, our message won't get out'.

Discussion

At this early stage of the research, the data cannot tell us how accurately the images of policing constructed and disseminated by the Public Affairs Branch equate with the reality of police activity. That is, it cannot answer Mawby's (2002) question of whether this image work attempts to compensate

for a lack of legitimacy or whether it supports legitimate policing. What we can say, however, is that these interviewees are keenly aware of the challenges and opportunities created by the increasing visibility of the modern policing organisation. They see the opportunity of deploying this visibility to improve the corporate image of the organisation, improve public perceptions of the organisation, and increase the effectiveness of police operational work.

All public relations work encapsulates an element of 'spin'. However, while there are significant resources being channelled into police image work in NSW, this early research suggests that the professional conception of such work is perhaps less about 'spin' than some media commentators might suggest. Or, more to the point, the 'spin' is not overtly political, but aimed at increasing public satisfaction or trust in the organisation and, ultimately, at legitimating the role and corporate reputation of the NSW Police.

There remains, however, some question as to just how effective these attempts at increasing trust and legitimacy might actually be. While the current strategies seems to entail a 'suite' of resources and differing modes of information delivery, not all appear to be aligned with the latest research findings in this field. It is also important to stress that, notwithstanding the necessity of engaging in media strategies for reasons of visibility discussed above, the most effective way of securing the trust of the public and subsequently the legitimacy of the organisation, is to treat the public fairly, justly and professionally.

Police in NSW, like other police organisations are, for better or worse, selling themselves, but the new multi-mediated environment in which they work necessitates this. While policing organisations are increasingly able to frame information about crime (McGovern and Lee 2010), they are also open to new forms of scrutiny through this increased visibility (Mawby 2002). While they are selling the Force, this is no doubt a forced selling. The police/media/public interface is increasingly complex and multi-faceted. However simply dismissing PR as 'spin' is reductionist and overlooks an important aspect of modern policing, that it should be subject to careful and systematic analysis.

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ANZCCC: The Australian and New Zealand Critical Criminology Conference 2010

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The Institute of Criminology would like to thank the University of Western Sydney as co-sponsors of the ANZCCC.

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