

The relationship between media and police in Britain



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The following essay will examine the symbiotic relationship between the British police force and the British media. Over the years the relationship between the police and the media has progressed and as a result this essay will examine the following areas, the representation of both the police and the media including their symbiotic relationship. By examining the public perception of both parties the essay will highlight how public perception has changed over the years and the impact it has had as a consequence.

Important areas to be defined would be the representations of the media and police within today's society. Media can include numerous services which distribute information to provide the general public with an understanding of social values and changes within their communities and society as a whole.

(Howitt, D. 1998) The media has various outputs which include newspapers, television whether it be fact or fictional, radio and in addition the world-wide web. The primary aim of the media is to keep the public informed and influence the way that they accept and perceive changes within society.

(Jewkes, Y. 2011)

In Britain today we are absorbed by the portrayal of crime and deviance within our society. However, the attraction may leave an undesired effect on how lives are influenced by the media and alter perceptions of law enforcement and heighten the fear of crime. Stan Cohen coined the phrase 'folk devils' during the 1960s and 70s. He used the phrase to describe groups of individuals deemed to be a danger or nuisance to society.

Misrepresentation by the media could conceivably create 'moral panics' within society due to the fact that individuals interpret information differently. Moral panics within society have been created by the media

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through labelling individuals and intensifying the specific societal issue.

Through glamourizing crime it has been suggested that the media conveys information in an exaggerated and dramatized way. From a Marxist perspective the media would focus on individuals that threaten the power of the rich and the influential within society. (Jewkes, Y. 2011)

Criminal behaviour is focused upon and portrayed as an act that would be committed from those from a middle class background. Therefore, the media are stereotyping who the public should perceive as a criminal. Post-modernists perceive the crime coverage by the media as no more than a spectacle display for the general public to witness and to be influenced by the media's views. (Jewkes, Y. 2011: 282)

The police within today's society have taken on the role of peace keeping through the act of discretion and by carrying out a negotiation process. Working proactively in conjunction with local communities the police are continuously trying to reinforce their presence and form associations with communities on an informal basis. By trying to build community policing within specific areas the police are helping to manage and educate individuals within those communities on crime and the impact it has on their local community. (Grieve, J. et al 2007)

So what exactly do the police and the media do within our society as a whole?

Britain's media is theoretically existent to provide the general public with information that concerns their safety and wellbeing within society. The media may also assist individuals to make informed, knowledgeable
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decisions on issues that affect them directly or their local communities. The media is also responsible for providing the general public with crucial information regarding government legislation and the criminal justice system. What this endeavours to highlight is the fact that the involvement of the media is also used by the government to publicize the politician's achievements on crime within communities to their advantage. (Howitt, D. 1998)

According to Jewkes 2011, society is no longer about class or social stature within our economy but what it does highlight are those individuals most vulnerable to media influences. It is not all about pluralism where it may be suggested that everyone's thoughts or opinions are taken into consideration and equally represented once the information has been interpreted. These decisions are realized by individuals creating informed personal choices. The growth of the mass media and the sources readily available on the internet has made the availability of media coverage widely accessible to those from all varying social backgrounds. (Jewkes, Y. 2011: 24)

Factual reporting of crime within society is often sensationalised and carefully selected by the media as to what they deem as newsworthy to aid the dramatization for the general public. The public's interest on how crime is reported and the content of those reports influence what we both see and read in terms of media representation. Through displaying an interest in a particular area of crime the public feed this interest to the media who in return, focus on similar crimes. (Howitt, D. 1998)

Just how the media represent crime can be influential over public perceptions and their understanding of media news reports. By educating positively on the ideology of crime, and by having this knowledge, it could be used in a progressive way to assist and implement changes on how crime and punishment are dealt with within society. Media influences can go two ways, negatively or positively. Unfortunately in today's society we have individuals who are easily influenced and take what the media says as true to its word. The misinterpretation of reports and the lack of knowledge and understanding can have a negative impact on what the individual thinks about crime and how they perceive the policing of criminals.

According to Howitt 1998 ' there is plenty of evidence that the media create dichotomies of good and evil. This applies to a range of criminal activities which, without media reinforcement, might not have resulted in such a negative response from the public.' (Howitt, D. 1998)

The media and the police have always been seen to have had an uneasy and complex relationship. According to Robert Reiner, ' it captures the mutual dependence and reciprocal reinforcement that underlies a relationship frequently characterised by bickering and tension.' (Cited in Newburn, T. 2003: 259)

Radical and liberal analyses have suggested that media representation creates unrealistic public fears by over reporting and exaggerating specific crimes. As a result of this reporting public support for policing and social laws are called into question by the general public. This can create unlawful forms of policing and vigilantism. (Reiner, R. 2003)

The way in which the media portray the police can often affect the public's perceptions on policing and how they manage law and order within society. The portrayal of policing by the media can challenge and contest the actions of the police. By challenging the police it is bringing their accountability into question. (Grieve. J, et al 2007: 35)

According to Jones & Newburn 1998, policing is defined as ' those organised forms of order-maintenance, peacekeeping, rule or law enforcement and other forms of investigation and information-brokering which may involve a conscious exercise of coercive power.' (Cited in Grieve, J. et al 2007: 20)

We've seen on many occasions how media reports and investigative journalism have actually helped police in their work. These are occasions when the media can help to create encouraging images of policing today. (Grieve. J, et al 2007)

For example, in the case of missing children media coverage is used to help encourage witnesses to come forward from the public.

Scotland Yard was the first police department to establish a media press office in 1919. (Grieve. J, et al 2007) In 1970 commissioner Sir Robert Mark of New Scotland Yard introduced an ' open door' policy in regards to the media and the exchange of information. Marks main aim was to put an end to the corruption and publication of ' exclusive' crime stories. Mark believed that the public had a right to know what was going on in their communities. However, this has led to limited information being handed over by the police at their discretion and the media being fed information when and if seen as appropriate. (Chester, S. 2010)
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In the 1970s media relationships with the police were simpler than what they have developed into in today's society. By building relationships with the local police departments media journalists would basically call their connection at the police department and ask for various information.

Functioning in this way prevented the need to go through official channels to gather the information required. Front line police officers regarded the media at this time as interfering, suspicious and a public nuisance. In relation to media training for the police there was very little to advise officers as to how to respond or conduct themselves in the course of a press conference.

(Trotter, A. 2010)

Over the years there has been an increase in awareness and training for police officers on how to deal with media situations. There are strategies in place along with professional police media staff to take control and manage serious crimes or incidents. The relationship between the media and the police is far becoming more complex than ever before. Their symbiotic relationship is still essential to enable the public to be kept up to date with crime stories but, this is kept within limitation. By using the police department for crime stories to print the media are using the police to help sell newspapers, gain TV audiences and other accessible public news sources which highlights the mutual reliance they have for each other.

Through providing the media with limited information the police department are still keeping the general public up to date with crimes in their areas and public safety. When there is a serious crime incident the police will monitor and limit the information the media are given to prevent damage to the investigation or those directly involved. The fact that this information has <https://assignbuster.com/the-relationship-between-media-and-police-in-britain/>

been given does not prevent the media from misrepresenting the facts. As cited by Yvonne Jewkes 2011: 156 ' the fact that the readers of popular newspapers (that is, those that report crime in a sensationalized and salient fashion) have the highest levels of fear of crime may simply reflect their actual risk of victimization.'

Many researchers suggest that a negative image of the police is portrayed by the use of fictional TV programmes. Through their portrayal the police are either made to look like crime fighting heroes or ineffective and incompetent. For the public to have a positive attitude towards the police they need to feel safe from the effectiveness of their crime fighting strategies and their implementation of punitive measures. (Surette, R. 1998)

An incident which occurred in July 2010 was questioned by David Hayward the director of the BBC College of Journalism as to whether the police and the media used appropriate coverage in regards to the shooting of Raoul Moat in Northumberland. The incident began on the 3rd July 2010 when Raoul Moat who had recently been released from prison shot his girlfriend and killed her new boyfriend. He later shot and severely injured a local police officer. Moat avoided the police and went on the run for almost a week. He later shot himself after a long stand-off with police officers all of which was broadcast live by the media to TV audience's.

The media coverage on Raoul Moat was extensive and gained international media interest. As the incident progressed and the whereabouts of Moat became known, Moats final moments were covered by live media coverage. This has since led to many questions being raised in regards to the coverage

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of live incidents within communities and the behaviour of the media. An important area that was examined was the relationship between the media and the police and how it could be improved for future reference. What this highlights however, is the need for concise and the clearer exchange of important information to maintain public safety and knowledge in any given situation. It is also important to realise the consequences of media coverage and the affects it can have on public audiences and also family members witnessing these incidents first hand. (Hayward, D. 2010)

The general public's perception of the police and the media varies according to what they have read and seen from media coverage, whether it be a newspaper or on TV. Perception of both the police and the media may also be influenced by an individual's social background within society. Different age groups have varying perceptions of what they believe the role of the police should be and how the media have influenced their overall perception of their fear of crime.

According to a home office report written in 1998 young people aged between 14-25 years believe there is a distinct absence of communication and knowledge with the police which has led to a lack of respect. The socio-economic group aged between 25-40 years believe that the police have shown a lack of concern for their fears and also when it comes to a response to a specific incident. It has highlighted that older adults aged from the age of 40/45 have a respect and a favourable perception of the police as they feel that they do their best whenever possible although there is still room for improvement. (Bradley, R. 1998). The majority of research that has been carried out regarding the effects of the media is done so from a positive <https://assignbuster.com/the-relationship-between-media-and-police-in-britain/>

psychological perspective. This also brought to the forefront the continual debate regarding the causal relationship between the media representation and criminal behaviour. (Reiner, R. 2003)

According to Jason Ditton 2005, when considering the perceptions of the public and their perceptions on crime there are three main dimensions to take into consideration. Firstly, the public's belief in crime or specific kinds of crime committed. Secondly, the change in victim crime rates or the variation in the frequency of the crimes. Finally, have the public based their beliefs on local, regional, or a national crime rates and incidents? (Ditton, J. 2005)

According to Jewkes, by creating false portrayals of crimes within society the media are choosing to manipulate public perceptions of crime. As a result this forms a basis for the implementation of labelling, prejudices and oversimplification of the true facts. (Jewkes, Y. 2011: 155) The media are known to focus on certain types of crimes at certain periods in time, where society or the economy is in need of public support, the media increases the public's interest which also delivers a financial gain for the media. (Jewkes, Y. 2011: 59)

After the Second World War the perception of the police force changed. A fictional TV portrayal of a British police force which typified the 'Golden Age' of police was aired and known as 'Dixon of Dock Green.' The community policeman reinforced the safety aspect within communities by portraying a community spirit by highlighting honesty and the fact that crime within society is punishable by law. Thus, allowing the audience to morally evaluate

crime and the consequences involved. However, times change and so has individual's perceptions. (Grieve. J, et al 2007)

In conclusion it is fair to say that in today's society the media plays an important role in relaying information and providing the general public with interpretations on crimes which our society appear to want. Whether the public gather their information from factual or fictional aspects of the media there will always be limitations in regards to what is viewed or written. How the public interpret this information regardless of whether the media have shaped or had an influence on them will depend on the individual themselves. The more vulnerable they are, the more likely it is that the media will impact greatly on their perceptions within society. This can have an undesired effect on policing. How the public view the portrayal of crime and how the police are perceived to deal with crime issues may deem their effectiveness within their practice.

The symbiotic relationship between the media and the police will continue as both need each other and depend on each other for information. Whether this information is then kept quiet or misrepresented is the issue for the media and the police to seriously think about. As both their actions in terms of public communication is having an impact on individuals whether rightly or wrongly.

With increased technology developments and the freedom of information it has allowed the general public the access to information that was previously out of reach. In our society this now allows the main organisations such as

the police force to be scrutinised by the public and calls into question the polices ability to control the news media. (Mawby, RC. 1999)

However, further research would help determine whether the relationship between the police and the media plays an important part on individual's views and attitudes towards crime within their society.