

Public perceptions of policing



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This paper will critically examine the effect media representations of the police can have on public perceptions of policing. In doing so it will argue that the media has a considerable influence on public perceptions of policing, highlighting that positive representations of the police are a necessity in reducing crime and creating social cohesion as a whole. This paper will conclude that negative representations should be reduced, through the media and through police accountability.

In order to critically examine the effect of media representations on public perceptions, the role of the police must be discussed. Traditionally, the police role was based on the role of the 'night watchmen'. In the late 17th Century, from every evening until sunrise, 'night watchmen' would patrol the streets with a task to examine all " suspicious characters" (Emsley et al. 2012). Their main responsibility was to arrest offenders of minor crime and to deter offenders of more serious crimes (Emsley et al. 2012). To clarify, part of their role was to detect and prevent crime which generally adds to the maintaining of public order in society. This is considered to be a traditional role of the police, but, in present times this role has become much more complex. The role of the police can now be considered as split into two; to punish or to support. To explain, civil policing has a minimal distance between the police and the community, with concerns to conflict resolution and peace keeping. However, as a coercive and repressive force, military policing distances the service and the community by concentrating on punishment rather than community involvement.

For instance, military policing has been used as an attempt to tackle the " war on terror", despite the debates surrounding its considered effectiveness

(Murray, 2005: 347). Despite this, in recent years greater emphasis has been placed on designing policing services around public need (Myhill, 2011: 273).

Not only can the overall role be considered torn into antithesis, the duties within the role are numerous. McLaughlin (2007) describes police work as 'multifaceted' in that the duties of the police include officers on the beat, stopping crimes in progress, investigating serious crimes and the arresting of offenders. In addition, the police have to focus on the deterrence of criminals as well as the reassurance of the public. On this view, " police activity is in fact difficult to define and, for the most part, unrelated to law enforcement and criminal detection" (McLaughlin, 2007: 52). With a police role that is in itself hard to define, it is important to discuss what the public perception of the role of the police is.

The public can be considered to perceive the police as " symbols of moral authority" (Jackson et al. 2009: 104). Therefore, the role of the police is to resolve immoral acts, and set the standard of morality. To illustrate, if the police are found to be corrupt then they are arguably damaging the moral symbol, which reduces the confidence the public have in the symbol.

Perhaps due to this focus on morality, the public demand that offenders (the wrong-doers) are caught and crime is prevented (Manning cited in McLaughlin, 2007: 53). Public views on policing are considered as important as administrative assessments (Myhill, 2011: 273-274), this can help to ensure that their duties are executed in a satisfactory manner. Overall, public perceptions of policing are influential in their own right.

In regards to this, it is important to address the perceptions of the efficiency of the police and the confidence the public have in the police. Bradford (2009) discusses four distinct groups in regards to confidence and perceptions of police effectiveness; these groups being identified through research undertaken in London. Firstly, there are 'the supporters' who are confident about policing and the improvements in policing but have little direct experience of the police, for example, they are unlikely to have been a victim. Secondly, 'the contents' are satisfied with policing but have indifferent feelings towards policing, similarly, they have little contact with the police. Thirdly, 'the needy' have negative views towards the improvement of policing and do not appear to be satisfied with policing; they have high levels of police contact and victimisation. Lastly, there are 'the demanding' who have high levels of police contact but less of this contact is caused by victimisation. They are not completely satisfied with policing but are more likely to feel informed about neighbourhood policing (Bradford, 2009: 144).

From this, it seems that public perceptions of the police vary due to personal experience, but the amount of contact one has with the police doesn't entirely determine whether one has a positive or negative view of policing. For example, 'the contents' and 'the supporters' have similar contact with the police but have differing perceptions and confidence in policing. Arguably this could be due to 'vicarious experience' (Bradford, 2009: 42), for example, stories about the police which one hears from others or through the media. This type of experience could influence one's views on policing.

Concerning the split role of the police, it has been established that a more service-oriented style of policing can improve public confidence, for example neighbour policing (Myhill, 2011: 276). Public confidence in policing is important as it aids police-public relations, and can help to deal with the 'reassurance gap' (Bradford, 2011: 179). To clarify, crime is falling but it appears to have had little impact on public confidence in policing (Jackson et al. 2009: 101). Due to this, the police are having to deal with the fear of crime in addition to attempting to control crime. The police service is trying to reduce the fear by dealing with broader concerns, for example, social disorder, as well as increasing police visibility and police-public relations (Jackson et al. 2009: 101).

In recent years, the media can be considered to play on this fear of crime.

Ditton et al. explains that

" although the dominant current attitude towards the relationship between the media and crime is of the former's causing fear of the latter, it wasn't always so...most research attention in the field was oriented to connecting the media to viewers' aggression (i. e. as potential offenders) rather than to their anxieties (i. e. as potential victims)" (Ditton et al. 2011: 443).

On this view, if the media was to concentrate on the aggression instead of the victimisation, the fear of crime would be reduced. If this fear was reduced it would increase public confidence in policing as they would believe that crime has fallen, as opposed to the public lacking confidence in the falling rate of crime. In addition, if policing does not have to tackle the fear of crime, it leaves more time to tackle actual crime, which in turn may make

police-public relations stronger. Moreover, trends in public perceptions of national and local crime rates in England and Wales of 2003/2004, found that the more people thought crime was increasing, the more they lacked confidence in the police (Myhill, 2011: 275). Overall, one can argue that the media influences the public into fearing increasing crime, this lowers their confidence in the police and so infringes on the strength of police-public relations.

As media representations are available for general consumption, they are one of the few means whereby the public can make sense of crime and justice (Schlesinger et al. 2010 : 255). In fact, the media can be considered as something that " is no longer something separable from society" (McRobbie&Thornton, 2010: 488). Furthermore, the media can emphasise what they desire to cover, and neglect others (Schlesinger et al. 2010 : 260). For example, a problem with policing which can be easily sensationalised in order to sell more newspapers may be reported on, whereas a successful policing crime-prevention technique lacking dramatic value may not be.

Predominantly, one may view the representations of policing in the media as negative. To illustrate, the death of Ian Tomlison was heavily reported in the media. Between Tomlison's death and the Crown Prosecution Service's decision not to prosecute, " there was a shift in news media attention-from 'police violence' to the wider problem of systemic 'institutional failure'" (Greer, 2011: 275). To explain, the media acknowledged the misconduct of a particular police officer, but in time forwarded alleged problems of policing itself. As the public use the media to access knowledge of crime and justice, it can be considered that the public would have followed this story from the <https://assignbuster.com/public-perceptions-of-policing/>

start, and so would have gained negative perceptions of policing by the end of this string of media representations.

As well as producing hyperbole in the news, the media can be guilty of misrepresentations. To illustrate, McLaughlin (2007) argues that "the boundaries of the 'real' have become heavily blurred and, to some extent, erased", in that the many fictional police based programmes give an incorrect impression of policing, and produce false perceptions of policing. The media has put the "once sacred icon of national security and social order" at risk (McLaughlin, 2007: 114)

On the other hand, the media can produce positive representations of the police, which in effect may increase positivity among the public perception of policing. For instance, 'Neighbourhood Blues' (BBC1, 2012) represents the police in a positive light, demonstrating how they integrate with the public, for example, liaising with the homeless, giving advice, showing care and compassion as well as enforcing the law.

Therefore it seems that the televised representations of policing can have its strengths and weaknesses in regards to public perceptions of policing. To clarify, on-screen media can take away the reality of policing and create false representations, however it can also be a means to demonstrate the real work that the police actually undergo. In regards to media as news reports, it appears that the more sellable the story the more likely it will be printed, and so the more scandalous stories, such as police misconduct, will be presented on a larger scale than other less sensational stories.

As previously acknowledged, the effects of media representations on public perceptions of policing also affects the trust the public have in the police.

Greer & Castells explain,

" When public officials and institutions are repeatedly and sensationally 'named and shamed' as incompetent or corrupt, and failing to adhere to the norms and values they are supposed to uphold and encourage in others, public trust is undermined" (Greer & McLaughlin, 2012: 289)

An example of such, is the media reaction to the 'MacPherson Report', in relation to the murder of Stephen Lawrence in 1993. Allegedly, collusion and corruption on the police's behalf occurred during the Stephen Lawrence enquiry which affected the time-scale of the case achieving justice. There were also claims of unprofessional treatment of the Lawrence family during the enquiry (MacPherson, 1999). The media was immediately receptive to the enquiry (Neal, 2003: 65), taking a hold of the misconduct within the police, and transforming representations to focus on institutional racism and the need for policy intervention, with four major newspapers reporting about this on their front pages (Neal, 2003: 65). These newspapers heavily criticised the police in a way which was considerably unmanageable for the police (Neal, 2003: 63). It is thought that " higher levels of trust are linked to positive outcomes in terms of co-operation, deference and even compliance with the law" (Tyler cited in Bradford 2011: 179). In this sense, one could argue that this excess of negative representations from the media hindered this trust by encouraging public perceptions that were damaging to policing.

However, on the opposite view the media can be considered to have had positive effects on public perceptions, arguably it was the sole reason for the Lawrence case eventually coming to justice. If it was not for the media initially reporting on the case, the MacPherson report might never have emerged, and the issue of institutional racism may never have been acknowledged. Taking this into account, the media helped to increase the professionalism of the police. This may not have provided a positive perception of policing, but ultimately by tackling corruption, policing will improve, and in turn this could limit the negative publicity of the police. Arguably, if the police had held themselves accountable for the misconduct in dealing with the Lawrence case, then the media would not have had to expose the corruption in the police on behalf of the community. Thereby, the police need to safeguard their trust from the public and maintain a positive representation of policing by being accountable and professional.

As well as maximising audiences as much as possible, on behalf of the public the media also challenges state institutions (Mawby, 2002, 30), therefore it is in the police service's interest to have positive media relations and be more proactive in order to control the police image.

There exist certain strategies as a result of this interest, the main objective being the generating of "...positive publicity, thereby influencing public opinion in favour of force objectives" (Mawby, 2002: 317). By promoting a positive light on police work, making use of all opportunities to obtain positive publicity, ensuring a professional image, and using the media to promote policing in a positive way, the public can gain a better understanding of policing and policing objectives (Mawby, 2002: 317).

To clarify, if the police were to be continually accountable for their acts and professional in undertaking tasks and dealing with the public, they would begin to tackle the negative image of policing that the media represents so often. This is due to the fact that the media would have less need to expose the police on behalf of the community, as the police would have deemed themselves responsible prior to any media report. Moreover, the police can only do a limited amount in the realms of policing in producing a positive image to the public as it is the media that has the influence on the police-public perception. Ultimately, policing must focus on improving media relations and taking a pro-active role in promoting themselves in a positive light. This would reduce the negativity that the media can present to the public, ultimately improving the public's perception of policing.

In summary, this paper has argued that media representations of the police do influence the public's perception of policing. With the police role being a debatable, complex concept, public perceptions of policing are important. As was illustrated through Bradford's 'distinct groups', one's perception of policing is not solely dependent on personal experience. Due to the media's need to sensationalise and their duty to speak for community, the media generally represents a negative view of the police. Furthermore, the media can be considered to play on the 'fear of crime' which has had a massive effect on public perceptions of crime, and is counter productive in the tackling of crime and in improving the trust the public have in the police. However, the media can present policing in a positive light in informative programmes for example. This paper has argued in favour of the importance of a positive police-public relation, as this positive relationship can not only

help to reduce the fear of crime but can tackle crime itself. With emphasis on the importance and the benefits of a positive relationship, it is paramount that the media limits its negative representations of policing in order to improve the public perception of the police and so the police-public relationship. However, this paper has acknowledged that the media is not always incorrect when negative perceptions of policing are represented, in fact the media can be a necessary tool in holding the police to account in certain cases. Ultimately, this can add to the professionalism of the police service, and so can improve community satisfaction. Even so, the police need to control their own image and take charge in presenting themselves positively, regardless of the media. Overall, the representation of the police in the media needs to be positive, this could be achieved through the police service itself improving its professionalism by showing accountability, alongside the necessity of the media changing through acknowledgment of the disadvantages they can bring by negatively representing the police.

To conclude, this paper has critically examined the effect that media representations of the police can have on public perceptions of policing, and has argued that these representations do have a considerably negative effect on public perceptions, of which needs to change.