

AN EXAMINATION OF THE NATURE AND IMPACT OF PRINT MEDIA NEWS REPORTING ON SELECTED POLICE ORGANISATIONS IN AUSTRALIA

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The project investigated the complex relationships between Australian newspaper reporting and portrayal of the police and police media relations units. The project explored the range of news frames used by newspapers and the potential and actual consequences these reports have on police, and on social and legal policy.

The methodology for the project drew heavily on news sociology, specifically news frame analyses, and unstructured in-depth interviewing and participant observation techniques. The candidate is a former head of media relations for the Australian Federal Police. Two case studies, one involving allegations of political and police corruption, and another involving a successful drugs seizure by federal police, were examined. Additionally, how the press reported and portrayed police commissioners was investigated to support the project's research objectives.

The project demonstrated that the Australian press uses a variety of news frames, and framing devices, to portray the police, police activities, and police commissioners, and probed the conflicting, often-changing nature of frames used both by police media units and by the press. The project demonstrated how the Australian press routinely promoted a news discourse of policing that was centred on conflict, drama and controversy.

The study proposes that the police and the press need to do more to actively understand each other's changing frame perspectives, and the constraints faced by both the police and by journalists and editors in daily, routine experience.

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OF PRINT MEDIA NEWS REPORTING ON SELECTED
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By

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PREFACE

Prior to 1994 I had little interest in the activities of the police. As a mass media consumer I was aware of the prominence of crime in the daily news agenda and I watched, read and listened to potted summaries of rape, mayhem and murder. Frequent too, were stories of police malpractice, incompetence and corruption. Police stories were also a significant part of television drama with programs like the long running British series *The Bill*, and a range of Australian productions: *The Feds*, *Halifax f.p.*, *Rafferty's Rules*, *Blue Heelers*, *State Coroner*, and *Water Rats*.

The police also featured at the cinema with crime genre movies *Natural Born Killers* (Oliver Stone, USA), *Once Were Warriors* (Lee Tamahori, New Zealand) and *Pulp Fiction* (Quentin Tarantino, USA) becoming box office hits.

My interest in the portrayal of police change dramatically when on the 7th of October 1994, I was appointed Officer-in-Charge of the Media and Publications Branch of the Australian Federal Police (AFP). I was responsible for all aspects of the communication function including: media liaison, crisis management, media management, publications and internal communication.

My branch dealt with media inquiries from local, national and international media across the gamut of issues facing the AFP. These ranged from industrial issues about budgets and overtime, allegations of corruption and incompetence, and operational matters as diverse as burglaries, alleged Nazi war criminals, peace-keeping operations and drug 'busts'.

Needless to say my police stakeholders did not always see things the same way as my media colleagues. I was seeing at a practical day-to-day level the complex taxonomy of police/media relations outlined by Putnis (1996). Putnis noted the ubiquity of the police and the media as social institutions and observed that their daily operations involved a complex, dynamic, relationship constructed out of many thousands of interactions, across all levels of the organisations, in many different settings.

My experiences in dealing with the media became the genesis of this study.

My aim is to expand our understanding of the police/media relationship by exploring characteristic forms of print news-media reports about policing, the impact these reports have on police, and on law and order policy.

The possibility of bias towards police in this study is acknowledged given I was a member of a police service from 1994 until 2002 and the research relies heavily on 'participant observer' techniques (Kay 1997; Potter 1996; Schofield 1993). Every effort has been made to maintain a critical perspective on the subject matters raised and it should be noted my association with police ended prior to the writing-up phase of the research. In addition to comments from my supervisory panel, ongoing discussions with media colleagues were another strategy adopted to ensure balance in the writing-up of this study.

This is a unique study in that it offers an insider's perspective of police/media relations and at a time that represented a watershed for police. The early 90s was a period of straightened finances for public sector agencies and police, like other agencies, were under pressure from governments to demonstrate the efficient use of public monies (AFP 1995; Grieve 2000). Reform programs swept through policing with many, like the AFP, being organised along business lines (Palmer 1995; Etter 1995; Rohl 1999; WAPOL 1999). The 90s were also a watershed for criminal organisations with the emergence of transnational criminal syndicates, such as drug traffickers, that had the potential to impact on crime at a local level without even entering the country, let alone the jurisdiction, in which the crime took place (Bliss and Harfield 1998; Palmer 1995; McFarlane 1999). In order to combat these syndicates, police began to work in a more cooperative fashion and formed loose coalitions, often across countries, in a manner similar to the criminal syndicates they were trying to combat (Palmer 1995). The 90s also saw the continuation of committees of inquiry and royal commissions into police malpractice (Landa and Dillon 1995) and the inevitable bad press for police (Wood 1996; Munday 1995).

The media and police have a symbiotic relationship and it is a critical one as most members of society have little direct contact with the criminal justice system.

Information about crime, and the efforts of police to combat it, is obtained second hand through fictional accounts from such vehicles as television dramas, and from the news media. As aptly described by Hall et al. (1975), nearly thirty years ago, the media is the link between crime and the public. The police are therefore heavily reliant on the media to provide a balanced account of the panoply of issues surrounding the criminal justice system (Cowdery 2001). At its most fundamental, police require the support of the communities they serve in order to be effective, and the news media can have a major impact on perceptions about police performance (Reiner 1997; Surette 1992). As organisational entities, police need to compete with other bureaucracies for public funding, and the media is an essential tool in generating positive publicity about successful operations and policies. The media is, therefore, critical to the maintenance of positive relationships with the two most important stakeholders in the policing function: the community and the government.

McGregor (1993) provides a useful summary of the literature relating to print media coverage of policing issues: there are substantial discrepancies between official accounts of criminal activity and press reports of crime; the media tends to homogenise crime by concentrating on a limited range of crimes (mainly violent crime) and drawing facts from a limited range of sources (police/court reports); the media over-report serious crimes, especially murder and crimes with a sexual element; and, the press concentrates crime reportage on events rather than issues, so crime incidents and specific crimes form the bulk of crime news as opposed to analyses of the causes of crime or remedies, trends or issues. McQuail (1994, p.256) reminds us that assessing media performance on the basis of media content, measured against the extent to which content relates to reality, is open to question. He argues that there is no general answer to questions of meaning construction, but media research has pointed to several elements in a more general framework of social and personal meanings including clues as to what is more or less important, salient or relevant in many different contexts (1994, p. 379).

An important research question concerns the impact of news media practices, particularly given the significant costs to the community flowing from the commission of crime, its investigation by police, and the processing of offenders through the criminal justice system. The Australian Institute of Criminology estimates

the cost of crime in Australia is approximately \$19 billion, while the cost of dealing with crime is another \$13 billion (Mayhew 2003). The news media, articulated through radio talk-back hosts, are seen as having undue influence on how public funds on crime control are spent (ABC, *The Media Report*, 1 August 2002; Chan 1995; Cowdery 2001; Dixon 2002; Weatherburn 2002). These commentators have pointed to the serious public policy issues arising from the contribution made by the media towards what Weatherburn describes as an irrational public debate about law and order (2002, p. 12) and Hogg and Brown have coined 'the uncivil politics of law and order' (1998, p. 4). As Hogg and Brown (1998, p. 4) observe:

crime is depicted as a problem of ever-increasing gravity set to overwhelm society unless urgent, typically punitive measures are taken to control and suppress it.

The influence of the media on public policy has long been recognised. As Paletz and Entmann (1981, p. 6) observe:

they influence the decisions and actions of politicians; they are open to manipulation by the powerful which insulates the powerful from accountability to the public; they reallocate power amongst the already powerful; they decreased to a marked extent the ability of ordinary citizens to judge events; they foment discontent among the public; and they preserve the legitimacy of the political, economic and social system.

Ethnomethodological approaches (Ericson and Haggerty 1997) underpin the research in this study. The ethnomethodological approach was used because of its wider scope, employing as it does, observation, interviewing, and document-analysis techniques (Ericson et al. 1987, p. 77) and its ability to provide meaning and context to the phenomena under observation (Hall 1978; Willis 1981). Ethnomethodological approaches are complemented by news framing analyses (Barkin and Gurevitch 1987; Blood, Putnis and Pirkis 2002; Capella and Jamieson 1996; Coleman 1995; Entman 1993; Kitzinger 2000; Keely 1999; Darling-Wolf 1997; London 1993; Pan and Kosicki 2001; Miller and Riechert 2001; Pirkis and Blood 2001; Reese, Gandy and Grant 2003; Scheufele 1999) to explore the news media frames employed in the genre of print crime reporting.

What emerges from the study is evidence of a one-sided, highly negative, discourse about policing implemented through a range of media frames centred on conflict and broader xenophobic and egalitarian narratives. Despite the advantages police have as

information gatekeepers, their attempts to manage the media environment have met with little success (Hughes 2004; Williams 2002) and the need for police to restrict access to police communications is being challenged (Crime and Misconduct Commission 2004, Inquiry into the effects of a Queensland Police Service decision to adopt digital technology for radio communications). There are exceptions, of course: the news media are not all bad. Routine reporting of crimes, where details of offenders are publicised, greatly assists the work of police as reflected in the case of 43-year-old Mr Colin George Dunstan which is discussed in Chapter Eight. Dunstan sent a series of explosive devices through the mail system in Canberra and police provided the media with photographs of the devices, Mr Dunstan (who was the main suspect), and his vehicle. The media coverage restricted Mr Dunstan's movements and led to his early arrest. Similarly, publication of the details of missing persons, warnings about lethal batches of drugs and crimes such as drink-spiking, enable police to reach a mass audience efficiently and quickly. And at a more abstract level, as noted by McQuail (1994, p. 34), modern communication vehicles can make a positive contribution to cohesion and community.

The emergence of the 'yapping pack' form of journalism (Tiffen 1999, p. 207) has resulted in elements of the media exercising a worrying degree of influence over what should be a broader and better informed debate about criminal justice issues. An illustration of this process occurred toward the end of this study with the widely reported spectacle of the Premier of New South Wales presenting his replacement police minister before radio presenter Mr Alan Jones for his endorsement; the subsequent involvement of that minister in operational police matters (Williams 2002); and the departure of the state's police commissioner as a result of sustained media attack (ABC, *The Media Report*, 1 August 2002; Weatherburn 2002). These incidents say much about the influence of the news media in relation to police matters and makes this study a timely one.

What follows is a literature review examining contemporary trends in policing and the media; a detailed analysis of two major case studies involving complex police operations; an analysis of a number of examples of print media reports about policing, to identify typical, or characteristic, media frames; the findings from nearly 50

interviews with senior people involved in the police/media interface; and an examination of changes in the milieu in which media reports about policing occur.

TABLE OF CONTENTS	PAGE
CONDITIONS OF USAGE	II
CERTIFICATE OF AUTHORSHIP OF THESIS	III
PREFACE	IV
TABLE OF CONTENTS	IX
LIST OF FIGURES	X
LIST OF TABLES	XIII
1. INTRODUCTION	
INTRODUCTION	1
ACCOUNTS OF CRIME AND POLICING	6
Fictional forms	6
Other fictional forms	10
Newspaper cartoons	14
Non fictional narratives about policing	20
Differences between fictional and non-fictional formats	21
THE STUDY	27
Research questions	31
Definitions	32
Data sources	33
Case studies	34
Selected examples of print media reporting on policing issues	36
Interviews	39
Other data sources	40
STUDY LIMITATIONS	41
THESIS PLAN	42
ETHICS STATEMENT	44
2. POLICING IN AUSTRALIA	
HISTORICAL CONTEXT	46
RECENT TRENDS IN POLICING IN AUSTRALIA	51
The emergence of organised crime	52
Transnational crime	54
THE CHANGING CRIMINAL ENVIRONMENT	56
POLICING TODAY	59
Police corruption	60
Public accountability of policing organisations	63
Police reform programs	68
Changes in police culture	76
SUMMARY	78

3. MEDIA AND POLICING	
INTRODUCTION	81
GENERAL NEWS THEORY RELEVANT TO FRAMING ANALYSIS	81
News sources	81
News frames	84
News impacts	89
The role of the news media	97
MEDIA REPORTS ABOUT POLICING	100
MANAGING CRIME NEWS	112
The media	112
The police	120
Police media liaison units	121
A day in the life of a police media liaison unit	124
Police media training	129
Management of the media at crime scenes	129
Police media policies	132
Interaction between media and police	133
THE IMPACT OF POLICE NEWS	137
SUMMARY	140
4. CASE STUDY ONE: OPERATION WALLAH	
INTRODUCTION	143
OVERVIEW OF EVENTS LEADING TO THE INQUIRY	145
KEY PEOPLE/ORGANISATIONS INVOLVED IN THE WALLAH MATTER	146
Senator Richardson	146
Criminal Justice Commission (CJC)	148
Australian Federal Police (AFP)	150
The Courier-Mail	155
Journalist Paul Whittaker	155
Federal Parliament	157
State Parliament	157
THE CJC INQUIRY	158
The Inquiry's Findings	158
PRINT MEDIA COVERAGE OF OPERATION WALLAH	160
The Courier-Mail	161
The Australian	164
Analysis of print media coverage	165
Comparing The Courier Mail coverage with other newspapers	176
SUMMARY	183
5. CASE STUDY TWO: OPERATION LINNET	
INTRODUCTION	188
BACKGROUND	188
OVERVIEW OF THE OPERATION	191
MEDIA STRATEGIES	192
KEY MEDIA EVENTS	196
The seizure phase	196

The interregnum	197
The press conference	197
The arrival of the vessel	199
Initial court appearances	199
Destruction of the drugs	199
Sentencing of the offenders	201
MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE OPERATION	202
Radio	202
Television	203
Print	204
Other aspects	206
MEDIA VIEWS OF THE POLICE OPERATION	207
POLICE VIEWS OF THE MEDIA IN RELATION TO THIS OPERATION	207
MEDIA FRAMES IN THE PRINT NEWS MEDIA	209
SUMMARY	212

6. THE CREATION OF THE 'PRESIDENTIAL POLICE CHIEF'

INTRODUCTION	215
THE CREATION OF THE 'PRESIDENTIAL POLICE CHIEF'	216
The sacking of a Deputy Commissioner	220
ATTACKS ON LEADERSHIP	225
Self-serving travel	226
Failure to address crime rates	229
Overseas Experience	233
THE OUTSIDER	233
An outsider from Queensland	233
An outsider from NSW	234
An outsider from the UK	235
An outsider from Victoria	237
Comparing insiders to outsiders	237
Insiders on the rise	239
CONFLICT	240
Ethnic crime	241
The 'troops' in conflict with the 'bosses'	242
A commissioner immersed in conflict	242
SOURCES	246
Appointments	247
White-anting	248
MALPRACTICE	248
The 'Secret police'	249
Police 'bungle'	250
Defamation	252
PARTISAN AGENDAS	253
ACT Heroin trial	254
Ethnic gangs (Sydney)	255
INCOMPETENCE	256
Police invest in failed scheme	256

THE POLICING RESPONSE	258
SUMMARY	261
7. INTERVIEWS	
INTRODUCTION	265
ANALYSIS	269
POLICE VIEWS	271
Media reports about policing	271
Police/media relationships	274
Media frames	279
MEDIA VIEWS	281
Media reports about policing	281
Police/media relations	283
Media frames	289
KEY OBSERVERS	291
SUMMARY	297
8. CHANGES IN THE MEDIA/POLICE INTERFACE	
INTRODUCTION	302
THE INTERNET	302
International police sites	306
A case study involving law enforcement and the Internet	308
Australian law enforcement experience	311
Using the Internet to assist police investigations	314
STRUCTURAL CHANGES IN THE MEDIA	320
Changes in media portrayals of crime and the police	325
Trial by media	330
Media performance	334
Investigative journalism	337
An absence of competing views	339
SUMMARY	342
9. CONCLUSION	
RESPONDING TO THE RESEARCH QUESTIONS	345
Characteristic news media frames	345
Do media frames inform wider debates about criminal justice issues in Australia	357
Has there been a change in the way the police interact with the media	360
Has there been a change in the way the media interact with police	363
Has there been any change in the power relationship between the media and police	365
Have there been changes in the way the print media report policing matters	368

THE NEED FOR PARADIGM CHANGE	370
Coverage of police related issues	373
FURTHER RESEARCH	382
CONCLUDING COMMENTS	383

REFERENCES

MEDIA	386
Electronic	386
Newspapers	388
BOOKS, ARTICLES AND OTHER REFERENCES	396

APPENDICES

A	Copies of the information sheet handed to interview participants	425
B	Informed Consent Form for interview participants	427
C	Interview topics	428
D	Extract from the AFP 1997-98 Annual Report	430
E	MEAA Journalist's Code of Ethics	432
F	Designated Fields for Print Media Monitoring	434
G	Example of Print Media Clip	435
H	Example of an Electronic Media Alert	436
I	<i>Courier-Mail</i> story 'FBI Probes Richo mate', 13 March 1995	437
J	Transcript, Early PM, Interview with Commissioner Mick Palmer, 23 August 1995	439
K	AAP Report QLD: 'Row over call for probe into alleged CJC leak', 31 March 1995	444
L	The Courier Mail, '\$1 million probe fails to find leak', 22 December 1995.	445
M	AAP Report: 'Hook, Line and Sinker', 14 October 1998	448
N	News Limited story 'record haul/ 7 held in \$500m heroin operation', 14 October 1998	449
O	BBC News, Australia's record drugs haul, 14 October 1998	450
P	Press Release from Commissioner Ryan	453
Q	AFP Media Alert for Press Conference 14 October 1998	454
R	AAP Report 'Drug vessel to arrive in Sydney', 15 October 1998.	455
S	'The luxury life of Marco Polo', <i>The Daily Telegraph</i> , 18 February 1999	456
T	Transcript of the Alan Jones Program, 18 February 1999	458
U	Letter to the editor by Commissioner Palmer 18 February 1999	461
V	Overview of the Mindframe National Media Initiative	463
W	Mental illness: issues to consider when reporting	466
X	Law and order: issues to consider when reporting	467
Y	List of interview participants	469

LIST OF FIGURES

1. Leiss and Krewski's Model of Risk Communication
2. Opening graphic from the television series *Homicide*
3. Molnar cartoon (from Hogan 2001)
4. *The Australian* 1-2 May 1999
5. Geoff Pryor 'Recycling' *Canberra Times* 6 September 2001
6. *Sun Herald* 11 February 2001
7. Changes in Policing (Murray 2001)
8. The social ecology of crime in the entertainment media as proposed by Surette
9. Major features of media/police relations
10. Front page story in the *Sydney Sun Herald* in January 1999
11. Page One story on News Limited newspaper 15 October 1998
12. Joint media release 'Australia's largest ever heroin haul', 15 October 1998
13. Photograph of offender being led from the vessel on arrival in Sydney
14. *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 September 2001. p. 1
15. Warren cartoon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 2 August 2001, p. 23
16. Warren cartoon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 4 August 2001, p. 23
17. Warren cartoon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 11 August 2001, p. 19
18. Warren cartoon, *The Daily Telegraph*, 10 February 1998
19. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 February 2002, p. 14
20. Identikit image of a man wanted in relation to the disappearance of British tourist Mr Peter Falconio
21. Timeline of Falconio/Lees investigation from NT Police website
22. Photograph of suspect package issued by the AFP
23. Page One story in the *Daily Telegraph*
24. The Internet: importance as an information source
25. Comparing the internet with other important sources of information
26. Sites linked to ABC News during coverage of the East Timor crisis in 1998
27. Cartoon from *The Australian* 21 June 2001
28. Front Page story 'Terror Alert', *The Herald Sun*, 2 March 2002

LIST OF TABLES

1. A comparison across the print media on use of the terms 'Police commissioner' and 'Police spokesperson' for three selected years.
2. Estimates of the total number of police stories appearing in selected print media.
3. Operation Wallah Percentage Aware
4. Responses by subject groups to Question 1
5. Cultural Changes in Policing identified by Murray (2000)
6. The link between law enforcement agencies and media outlets
7. Frequency of police-related stories published in selected metro dailies for three one-week periods in 1998, 2000 and 2003