The Effects and Outcomes of Police-Media Relations on Police-Community Relations

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In a perfect world, police officers and media workers are both working for the benefit of the public. Police are expected to serve and protect the public while the media are supposed to be gatekeepers of the social elite and provide truthful information that the public wouldn't otherwise have access to. So, it would make sense that the two institutions work together, right? Unfortunately, this is oftentimes not the case. Police-media relations are shaky at best and often go through tumultuous highs and lows. This report seeks to define police-media relations, explain the relational history, discuss current changes and future concerns, and finally connect these issues to the public by showing that weakening police-media relations often lead to weaker police-community relations. It should be noted that "police-community relations" in this paper are referring to police relations with the general public. How has police-media relations effected police-community relations in the past? Have there been notable changes in public safety or behavior after a collapse in police-media relations? What are some of the positives of police-media relations? These are a few areas that will be covered throughout the writing of this paper. In order to understand any of this though, the definition of police-media relations must first be concretely defined.

In their book *Police Community Relations and the Administrations of Justice* authors Ron Hunter, Tom Barker, and Melchor de Guzman describe mass media as, "…mass media involves the print and electronic media, including the newspapers, magazines, television, movies, radio, and the Internet" (Hunter et al., 2017, p. 210). They later go on to state, "Each separately and collectively has an impact on police–community relations," (Hunter et al., 2017, p. 210). When thinking of the media, it's easy to think only of the news media. As Hunter and his colleagues highlight though, the media is a far stretching term that encompasses much more than just the local news station or CNN. While police-media relations are mostly specifying the relationship

between police institutions and news institutions, the term also covers the relationship between police and the imagery crafted for them by entertainment media and the internet.

Though it may seem insignificant, police are affected by the image that popular media creates for them. They themselves might not take any stock in it, but the public will. Police dramas made up 14% of the top 50 most watched shows of 2019[1]. Though that may seem like a small number, it's statistically significant because these are shows cut from one genre all in the top 50. Shows like *NCIS* and *CSI* build police officers into unbeatable detectives that can never make mistakes (but often miss shots on fleeing criminals). At the end of the show though, they get the bad guy, the main character flirts with his female coworker, and everything returns to normal.

This is simply unrealistic. Police cases may take months and months to solve and many cases go cold with the victims gaining no closure. What precedent do shows like this set for police officers? The public may believe that officers should never make mistakes and that they should be able to solve any problem, no matter how big it may seem. Reality is often disappointing for many people though, and they may become distrustful of police if they don't live up to this media created superhero they've formed in their minds. The opposite image can often be created by the news media and the internet.

There's a phrase often used in the journalism industry. If it bleeds, it leads. This saying is often used *against* journalists now, but it's all too true. Violent stories or negative stories often sell better than happy stories or feel good stories. With this in mind, stories highlighting the

[1] Information from Variety.com. Retrieved from: https://variety.com/2019/tv/news/most-watched-tv-shows-highest-rated-2018-2019-season-game-of-thrones-1203222287/

negative actions of police officers are bound to sell better than the story of the officer who saved someone. When defining police-media relations, it's important to showcase the imagery created by the media for police officers. In this case, people may only see the bad side of policing and begin to believe that all officers are bad people who will abuse their power with no hesitation. Police-media relations are often defined by these images, stereotypes, and memes. All of this information is important to keep in mind as actual occurrences and data are analyzed.

The public reactions and interpretations of police officers are often molded by police-media relations, or more importantly, by media generated images for police institutions. There is perhaps no place more unpredictable and accessible than the internet for police-media relations and police-community relations. The speed and volume of data that is shared across the internet is too much for a human mind to comprehend. Interpretations and moral blocks are built and lost on the internet every day, and this can create difficulties for both the news media and for police officers.

In an article describing the evolving relationship between the police and the media in Great Britain, researcher Marianne Colbran describes how the internet is being used by police. She says, "Police press officers work with operational officers to appeal for assistance with ongoing investigations, circulate information about suspects, deliver public safety messages and receive intelligence from the general public," (Colbran, 2020, p. 295). This is perhaps the most common way that police interact with social media and the internet. They act like any other organization and release information for followers of their pages. Some police agencies even have dedicated social media teams. The practice of appealing to the public for help through social media is similar to crime stopper programs facilitated by local news agencies. Social media platforms usually give every side a voice (to an extent) though. So, as the police can use

social media and the internet positively for themselves, it can easily be used against them by other groups. Anyone can post videos online of police acting out of line or committing crimes themselves. This is only fair, as that information should be shared.

The problem with social media is that it acts like an echo chamber for any ideology or message. If someone is only seeing positive images of police, they will naturally develop a higher standing for police and vice-versa. This can be problematic for police and for police-community relations. Colbran highlights a case in 2011 when video of police shooting a man spread over multiple social media platforms. She explains the results, "Anger about the shooting spread across social media and helped to trigger widespread public disturbance and attacks on property," (Colbran, 2020, p. 298). Police in Tottenham had not made a full statement before the rioting began. This case shows off how the use of social media can negatively impact police-media relations, and in turn, negatively impact police-community relations. Many people reacted in a knee jerk fashion, quick to assume that whatever they had seen online was damning evidence against the police. This is all many need to develop an image of a person or body, and this can quickly spiral out of control.

Interestingly, the police in Tottenham used these 2011 riots and their relationship to social media for their own benefit. They asked people taking photos and videos to upload them online and share them with police. Using this information online, police were able to begin making arrests and they were better prepared for where the next riots might occur (Colbran, 2020, p. 298). As it is, the internet is a sort of international space. It's hard to regulate without infringing on rights, and everyone uses this for their own purposes. The police would be foolish not to utilize social media and the internet not only to help with investigations or crime fighting, but to build up their relations with the community. With an increasingly digital focus in new

generations, police will certainly have more success building police-community relations online as opposed to more traditional styles like town halls or business meetings. While these older methods are still useful, the power of the internet and of social media cannot be denied.

With this in mind, how does television fit in with police-media relations? Many television channels have gone online and are accessible via cellphone or computer, but millions of Americans still watch plenty of TV at home. Studies show that Americans "watch more than 20 hours of TV a week" (Hunter et al., 2017, p. 213) and those numbers have shown no signs of changing. People of all ages are being exposed to the images broadcast on TV. What other device allows someone to go from watching cartoons to the latest murder coverage on the news in the click of a single button? News agencies have perhaps the longest history of police-media relations among the media bodies discussed in this paper. Journalists have been interacting with police investigations for years, long before there were TVs or computers. This relationship is ever changing, with triumphant highs and critical lows. It seems that journalism and policing have always been related, and that relationship has had effects on relations with the public for as long as there have been police-media relations.

One of the most recognizable examples of positive police-media relations can be seen with Crime Stoppers programs across the world. Australian researchers Robyn Lincoln and Laura McGillivray define Crime Stoppers as, "Crime Stoppers is a convergence of police, media, private sponsorship, and a watchful public, to ultimately derive citizen information about local crime events," (Lincoln & McGillivray, 2019, p. 292). Oftentimes, Crime Stoppers programs will incentivize the public to work with their local news outlets and police for rewards (usually cash). This is the prime example of police-media relations tying in with community relations. In fact, some police institutions rely on Crime Stoppers and similar programs to build trust with

their communities. Some find that Crime Stoppers does more to weaken police-community relations by creating an “us versus them” mentality among the public which spawns distrust among the public (Lincoln & McGillivray, 2019, p. 294). Others have argued that Crime Stoppers creates an oppressive image for news media and police, especially with the focus on CCTV cameras “watching the public” in advertising for Crime Stoppers programs (Lippert & Wilkinson, 2010, p. 136). Crime Stoppers programs aren’t just American though and are a worldwide service. They are generally trusted by the public, and act as a solid platform to build police-media relations, and for the police to build stronger community relations. These programs also act as the primary example of how police consistently use news media to capture criminals. Similar programs and actions are now being brought to social media platforms, as previously discussed.

On a larger scale than local news stations, police can be shown in a very positive light based on national events. Most Americans remember September 11, 2001. If they weren’t born yet or were very young, they have been taught what happened on that day. America had never experienced a terrorist attack on that scale before. The country was shocked and needed something to latch onto. President Bush and the news media of the time used imagery of emergency workers to instill feelings of hope and patriotism in the shaken citizens of the country. Police specifically were created into images of martyrs and heroes, giving their lives to protect the lives of fellow Americans. The messages at the time were focused around building up nationalism in America, and the usage of police imagery was key in this effort. Police were shown as heroes in the news and children were taught that cops would always be there to protect them. Police officers and the American flag were rarely seen apart in news images. This was one of the highest points for positive police representation in the media at large.

Crime Stoppers programs are examples of positive police-media relations where both sides benefit and the public in turn benefits. The 9/11 attacks and the subsequent imagery created around police act as an example of extreme positivity in police depiction. Unfortunately, police-media relations with news outlets are often a lot more complicated. In the years of 1979 through 1981, Atlanta was plagued by a terrifying serial killer. Called the Atlanta Child Murders, these years saw the deaths of 30 black children in Atlanta. The FBI were sent in to assist local police with the investigation. After months of struggle and little evidence to build a case on, the police pulled over a suspicious driver in the early hours of the morning. The killer had been using rivers to dispose of his victims' bodies and police were alerted after hearing a loud splash while staking a bridge out. They quickly blocked the road and stopped the car of Wayne Williams. Though Williams had several off-putting items in his vehicle, there was nothing solid enough to make an arrest. Police allowed him to return home but wanted to keep an eye on him. Thus, began a long process of tailing and surveillance which was quickly broken by the insertion of the media.

Journalists and news stations discovered that the FBI and local police had a suspect and learned that Wayne Williams was now in question of being the Atlanta Child Murderer. The entire police process was interrupted by the media flocking to Williams' home. Williams enjoyed the attention and tried to spin a story of innocence to the city of Atlanta through the media. The entire police and FBI investigation was ruined as the news media camped endlessly outside Williams' home and made it impossible for police to discretely complete their investigation. Members of the community began to fight back against police saying that a black man (Wayne Williams) would never kill his own people. They demanded that a member of the KKK be brought in. The media had inadvertently gotten the public more involved in the investigation, and

it created a major uproar for investigators and police. Williams would eventually be connected to the killing of two of the 30 that had been killed in the spree, and he was arrested in 1981. Some argue that the police could've found more evidence and pinned Williams to more of the murders if they had been given ample time and space to conduct a proper investigation. Instead, they found themselves battling Williams, the news media, and the public all at once.

The Atlanta Child Murders stand as the perfect case to show how police-media relations can often be rocky and lead to distrust from the public. An interview with Senior Investigation Officer Roy Lambert revealed his outline to working with the media on high-profile murder cases. He said, "…you need to service the needs of the media but keep them at arm's length," (Wilson et al., 2011, p. 348). The media wanted to give the public answers; they wanted to give the people something to cling onto, or a witch to burn at the stake. Instead, the created a disastrous environment that didn't allow the FBI and local police to do their jobs. They unfortunately couldn't be held at arm's length during this investigation. No attempts by the FBI or police were enough to quell the backlash at accusing and eventually arresting Wayne Williams, and there is still debate today over his role in the killing spree.

On the note of serial killers, Dennis Rader (commonly known as BTK) was captured years after his killing spree thanks to strong police-media relations. Local news agencies made a report in 2005 about BTK's crime spree, and how they suspected he might be dead (Hansen, 2006). As journalist Mark Hansen puts it, the police and news agencies played into Rader's ego perfectly (Hansen, 2006). Rader immediately began sending the same cryptic messages he'd become known for when he was killing as BTK. The one problem for him was that police technology had advanced a lot in over 20 years, and he was easily traced and captured.

This simply shows that police-media relations are critically important when dealing with crime, especially serious crime. The media can either act as a strong ally to police or they can easily become a hindrance to policework. Police-media relations are constantly changing with the times and it never seems to be a consistent relationship. Both institutions want similar things, namely justice for the public. Their work can easily be conflicted though. More and more police institutions are making dedicated media personnel now. With the advent of mass media and the focus on news, social media, and community relations, modern policing almost *needs* to please the media. Criminologist Rob Mawby summarizes this idea, "The managerialist pressures have been for the police to be effective, efficient and economic—to achieve publicized objectives, to be accountable," (Mawby, 1999, p. 264). On the bright side for police, they can at least build up their relations with the news media. Police-media relations in news are more manageable when compared to police-media relations in the entertainment industry. Police have little control over what Hollywood or evening dramas have to say about their work and their image. Though these films and shows are works of fiction, they can still have a substantial impact on police-community relations.

According to research conducted with Canadian police forces, officers are increasingly displeased with their portrayal in the media. Though many shows will try and show off police officers as pseudo-superhero type figures, some say this message is actually a negative portrayal. Researchers Laure Huey and Ryan Broll interviewed a Canadian forensic investigator about his thoughts on police portrayal in popular media. He said, "I've been to scenes and known the facts of what's going on and gone home and the news is completely off. They're broadcasting this stuff to be real and true and people are believing it," (Huey & Broll, 2011, p. 388). Huey and Broll later find through other interviews that some officers believe the media is applying their

own visions to policework (Huey & Broll, 2011, p. 388). They find that the media, especially the entertainment industry, is more than willing to apply filters to real life scenarios in order to make them more presentable for audiences. Thus, we have the sexy police drama where the team always catches the bad guys, but they're all supermodels who make it look easy. In a sense, it waters down how serious crime actually can be. Entertainment media probably stands as one of the top influencers for public behavior. These shows not only hold police to an impossible standard, but they also cloud the reality of what policework is really like.

Is this such a serious problem though? People consume these shows to escape the dark realities of the world. They don't want to see the daily news as their seven o' clock drama show. They want a world where the bad guys always get caught and no one has to die (most of the time). The problem resides in the fact that these portrayals can affect the real-life roles they show off. These roles are based heavily off societal stereotypes. Hunter et al. describe this reality, "The police officers of Hollywood lore are fictional images of police stereotypes that have been exaggerated to provide entertainment to a bored public," (Hunter et al., 2017, p. 40). There are general categories for these stereotypes: the superhero cop, the idiot cop, and the evil cop. These roles and stereotypes are used and reused throughout countless police dramas and shows because they're familiar to the public and they sell well. How do officers feel about these images and personalities that are created for them though? A homicide investigator from Canada says, "Either we're heroes and brilliant or we're complete idiots, and there's very little in between," (Huey & Broll, 2011, p. 389).

A survey of American law enforcement officers occurred from May 16, 2016 through August 14 of the same year. The survey asked officers to rate their treatment by the media, particularly news media sources. By the end of the survey, some 42% of surveyed officers said

that they strongly agreed with the statement that police officers were mistreated by the media. A net of 81% either agreed or strongly agreed (Gramlich & Parker, 2017). Though Gramlich and Parker's data analysis didn't display exact questions, it's easy to see that the great majority of responding officers felt that they were mistreated by the media. This obviously isn't good for police-media relations, and when police-media relations suffer, the biggest victims are the public. Faltering police-media relations lead directly to weaker police-community relations. Huey and Broll note that many officers feel they are misrepresented in news stories and they say, "…misrepresentations of their [police] work in media stories often draw unfair criticism from both media and the general public," (Huey & Broll, 2011, p. 389).

With recent events of 2020, American police-media relations seem to be at an all time low. News media outlets get more clicks and views by showing off the crimes of officers than they would by showing the opposite. Police are very much under the aggressive microscope of the media, social media, and the American public right now. The final conclusion of this paper is that weak police-media relations lead directly to weaker police-community relations, and then everyone suffers. Yet how exactly are police-media relations and police-community relations connected? While the public has their own relations with both media sources and police institutions, many do not associate the two with one another. The two are seen more commonly as exclusive parties that sometimes interact, but as a rule, hold different functions in society. While this is true, it seems that whenever police-media relations begin to fail, police-community relations soon follow. So, what does this mean for the future of police-media relations in the United States?

Multiple personal unprofessional interviews have shown that a lot of young Americans are in no mind set to forgive the police. The crimes committed against George Floyd reopened an

ugly wound exposing systemic racism across the criminal justice program of America. Many would like to think that these are problems of the past and that America has matured and moved on. Yet, the reality is much grimmer. The cases of George Floyd and Jacob Blake aren't new or surprising for many people, they're a reminder of the horrible reality that many people face in America. While all of this is true, can the entirety of America's police forces be held accountable for the crimes of the few? Is this an ethical and well-reasoned response to recent atrocities committed by officers of the law? For many young Americans, the answer to that question is yes. Police-community relations as a whole have reached an incredible low in the U.S. The future for these relations doesn't seem too bright either.

Part of the reason that police-community relations have reached the point that they have is in part due to media coverage, especially social media. As a rule, most social media websites aren't putting out their own news. They simply host the platform with which people spread every kind of image possible in under seconds. So, what does this mean for the police? Generally speaking, the image of police online is increasingly negative. As seen in this paper, many police are willing to speak out about how they're perceived by the media and how their image is shown to the public. While this still holds true, the waves of negative imagery online simply drown out any attempts at rational discourse. Unfortunately, this tends to be the case with social media and mass media. Once an ideology becomes popular, it's hard to find dissenting opinions because social media platforms lend themselves to being echo chambers—for better or for worse.

Police institutions are upheld in some way across the entire world. Some fear that America is going to abolish policing completely. This is just unreasonable and extremely unlikely. That being said, many police across America are quitting the job thanks to increasing societal pressure created by weak media and community relations. The future for police-media

relations certainly doesn't look good, but this ties in with the theme of these relations throughout history.

When police arrested Wayne Williams in 1981 the public was very disgruntled, calling the FBI and Atlanta police racist in spite of the evidence against Williams. The media tried to paint a negative image for the police at the time, yet the murders stopped, and the people moved on. Police-media relations were praised with the capture of Dennis Rader, and the two institutions were held in much higher regard by the public. This paper has shown that the role of police-media relations is changing with the popularity of social media and mass media. It's no longer about just maintaining a positive image with the local news network or giving a calming message over the radio. Police are under an electron microscope 24/7, with every action and every officer being evaluated by the media. Those evaluations are then taken and reevaluated and judged by the public. Police have used these media platforms to capture criminals and build better relationships with both the media and the communities they live in. They have also lost trust with the people through these platforms.

Police-media relations are going through the growing pains of entering the digital age. While it seems police may never regain the trust of the American people, those exact words have probably been written and spoken time and time again. Police, the media, and the public must continue to move forward and work together as they have for hundreds of years in American history, and even longer in global history. It's been proven that weaker police-media relations lead to weaker police-community relations. With this in mind, both police and media institutions should strive to become working partners as their livelihoods rely on the support of the communities they exist in. In won't be easy to adapt to the world of advancing technology, but it is necessary for the continued existence of these institutions and their communities.

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