

Mapping the Police-Media Institutional Relationship

Brett McKay

Abstract

The relationship between police and media has been and remains significant for both institutions. The modern police and news media developed contemporaneously, each influencing the form, function and popular appeal of the other. Police are an important, authoritative source for journalists, and in turn rely on the press for dissemination of news relating to crime and police operations, and ultimately their legitimization. This relationship influences how media report on crime and policing and affects how the public and lawmakers treat issues related to crime and policing (Perlmutter, 2000; Dowler et al., 2006; Ericson, 1982). Because the police-media relationship has the power to establish and influence narratives surrounding crime, criminalization, incarceration, policing, and police funding, it is an important area of study for communications research.

This article will begin by defining police and policing. Key points of interaction between the police and media are addressed in the introduction, along with examples of how this relationship affects both institutions and the public. Three prominent theoretical approaches from media studies research are then compared: the media-effects theory, dominant ideology theory, and institutional theory. A review of the literature from these theories is given, and each is evaluated for its ability to explain the nuanced relationship between the police and media and the effects of this relationship. After establishing institutional theory as the most appropriate analytical framework, the institutional logics of both institutions are defined. Having established the shared values and habits that define these institutional logics, the history of these institutions is analyzed to locate the historical origin of these values and habits, demonstrating how longstanding these practices are and how they have impacted the evolution of policing, media, and public perception of crime. The conclusion raises some of the social harms that have resulted from the police-media institutional relationship – such as racialization, over-policing and over-incarceration, police militarization – and suggests ways that media habits can be reformed.

Introduction

Policing has been defined as “a mechanism for the moral health and improvement of the population” (Ericson et al., 1991, p. 7) and involves a “set of activities aimed at preserving the security of a particular social order” (Reiner, 2000, p. 3). What distinguishes the police as an institution is its authorization to use force in the execution of the “omnibus mandate of order maintenance” (Reiner, 2000, p. 4). The function of the police as the formation and preservation of order is generally accepted within police studies, with disagreement arising on the moral evaluation or efficacy of this work (Reiner, 2000). Neocleous (2000) has argued that theories of

the police tend to focus on their relationship to power without critically considering their operations as a distinct institution within law and government. This tendency is also present in theories of the press.

Siebert et al.'s (1984) *Four Theories of the Press* addresses the relationship between the media, market forces, and various forms of authority and power. Though the police function is implicit in talk of press control, the police, as such, are only mentioned in Wilbur Schramm's "Soviet Communist Theory" of the press. Here, he notes the use of police and military force as essential for the preservation of the communist state, and that in this system "the papers, the broadcasts, the publishing industry, and the police and surveillance system of the government are different instruments with a single purpose" (p. 122).

The sympathy of function of both media and police is given a more nuanced treatment by Ericson et al. (1991). They assert that law and media are both primarily concerned with policing, and that the aggregate result of media practices promotes certain elements of a social order, while providing moralizing discourse on deviant aspects. Both functions are also central to the work of policing (Reiner, 2000), and they can be considered to operate with overlapping purpose, even in liberal democracies such as Canada.

For most members of the public, their views of police are shaped by presentations in media, both news and entertainment, and not direct experience (Perlmutter, 2000; Dowler et al., 2006; Ericson, 1982). Through its dramatic and symbolic representation of crime and police, the press is the primary medium for the legitimization of police claims to authority (Ericson et al., 1991), and can be understood as an active part of the police assemblage (Schneider, 2016). This perspective accounts for the ways format and genre give rise to this ordering principle of media, without the need for a central authoritarian figure dictating the ideological content of news reports.

Many of these forms and practices have their origins in the contemporaneous birth of the modern press and modern policing. Early British police theorists and supporters noted the value of the press in promoting the need for police through the publicizing of crime reports, and the positive perception that would come from coverage of their handling of the criminals responsible (Chibnall, 1981). The press, in turn, recognized the public appeal of these crime stories, and the significant financial benefit they would gain from having these stories in their publications. This early relationship cast influence over how crime reporting developed as a genre. It also established the police or their representatives as the authoritative source on crime, with the police today remaining the most significant and often sole source of this news for journalists.

At the centre of the police-media relationship is the negotiation over the control of information (Ericson et al., 1989). Members of the media rely on the police as a primary source of information about breaking events and expert opinion in the production of crime news (Fishman, 1978; Ericson et al., 1991). Police attempt to control access to this information by selecting which events to provide reporters, by creating organizational media strategies (Lovell, 2001), and, less often, by physically restricting access to an event or otherwise preventing

journalists from reporting. Surveys and interviews have shown that the importance of the media in shaping public opinion and understanding of police work is recognized by management and rank and file officers alike (Lovell, 2001; Perlmutter, 2000). Lovell (2001) found that the most frequent complaint police officers had about media coverage of crime and policing was that it “sensationalize[d] crime within the community” (p. 194). The belief that media “seem to enjoy giving an unfavorable slant to news concerning police” (Neiderhoffer, 1967, p. 227) is also widely held by police and fosters attitudes of suspicion and mistrust towards reporters (Lovell, 2001, p. 38). For these and other reasons, the police-media relationship is one of deep professional interdependence characterized by tenuous co-operation, misunderstanding, mistrust, and animosity.

The sources used by journalists are major participants in the news process. Through their “positions of institutional authority or involvement in newsworthy events” (Ericson et al, 1991, p. 13), sources become “authorized knowers” (Tuchman, 1978) for media, presented in the news as reliable representatives or experts trusted to report on events, people, and processes. As the primary source of information about crime, the police provide journalists with the “raw materials for news” (Fishman, 1981, p. 371) and have considerable power to determine how crime and policing are presented.

Official statistics on crime are themselves often police-generated, and are “cultural, legal, and social constructs produced by the police for organizational purposes” (Ericson, 1998, p. 220). These statistics are one example of the police-as-source when used by media to report on criminal trends. The data are also susceptible to being unrepresentative of crime, as they are produced in part through police decisions about what criminal matters should be given attention and resources – almost exclusively street level crime – and *where* to look for them (Fishman, 1981).

The police provide regular reports to news agencies on specific crimes and investigations (Fishman, 1981; Lovell, 2001). Public information officers, media relations specialists and other specialized personnel within police departments are responsible for deciding which incidents to forward to the media. In doing so, they contribute to the editorial process by selecting materials for their “newsworthiness” and for their potential to portray police organizations favourably. Fishman (1981) has noted that the “police anticipation of media interest was based mainly on their reading of newspapers and viewing of television” (p. 380). The police show a keen awareness of news practices, and through their filtering of events by perceived media interest contribute to the distorted presentation of crime in the media by emphasizing the unusual or violent over less exciting but more prevalent incidents.

Because of their proximity to breaking news events, police routinely become on-the-scene sources for media (Lovell, 2001; Fishman, 1981). This includes both designated media relations officers and beat cops who are dispatched to the incident. The time-sensitive nature of breaking news reporting privileges the police as an authorized source because they are likely to be on the scene and have more experience and formal training in speaking with reporters than

members of the public, who are often reluctant to be interviewed or unable to provide useable quotes.

Members of the media see themselves as watchdogs for public officials and authorities, and, as such, “reporters often feel uneasy about their dependence on police agencies, for they do not want to serve as uncritical publicists for police matters” (Lovell, 2001, p. 38). Incidents of police corruption or violence serve as opportunities for media to reaffirm that professional independence from the police by producing critical accounts that necessarily platform sources that aren’t normally positioned as experts, such as social activists and community members affected by policing practices. Lovell found that, when media focus on “performances never intended for public view,” police organizations reflexively withhold information, thus inadvertently encouraging the use of “non-official voices” who “project their own definitions of social events” (p. 44). Media scrutiny of police conduct has precipitated virtually all eras of police reform by putting the issue on the national agenda and forcing organizational change as a means of image-restoration (p. 23). Additionally, media coverage of these exceptional events has a lasting impact on police attitudes toward individual journalists and reporters, and toward the media in general.

The criticism from police that the media sensationalize crime is also expressed by media scholars and researchers. Dowler, Fleming, and Muzzatti (2006), for example, argue that crime news, “with its emphasis on violence and sensationalism – essentially crime as a product, playing to the fears, both imagined and real, of viewers and readers – has produced a distorted picture of the world of crime and criminality” (p. 839). Williams and Dickinson (1993) found that this distorted representation of the types and frequency of crime produced an exaggerated fear of crime in media consumers. However, they concluded, “it may not be realistic to expect newspapers to reflect crime types and frequencies accurately when the disproportion may be a reflection of the information that is disseminated by official agencies, particularly the police” (p. 49). This view is shared by Ericson (1998), who adds that assumptions about the distortion of crime in media by media-researchers themselves fail to account for the role of law enforcement agencies in the construction of knowledge about crime and their direct participation in the news production process, as detailed above.

Theoretical Approaches

This section focuses on three prominent approaches in media studies and evaluates their strengths and weaknesses in interpreting the police-media relationship.

Media-Effects Theory

As mass media are the primary source of information on crime and policing, they have the power to shape discourse and public opinion (Perlmutter, 2000; Ericson et al., 1989). This influence can alter police behaviour in two ways. Individual officers, as media consumers, may be compelled to alter their self-presentation and even physical appearance to match media images of police officers: “masculine, tough, quasi-athletic figures” (Perlmutter, 2000, p. 25).

Accommodating the “dramaturgical demands” placed on them and meeting the public’s expectations improves their standing and credibility (Lovell, 2001).

These considerations could be interpreted using a media-effects approach, one of the oldest and most widely known mass media-research paradigms (Phillips, 2017; Hall, 1982). This model deals with how viewers’ attitudes, actions, opinions, and behaviours are affected by media exposure (Gerbner and Gross, 1976; Phillips, 2017). This field of media research has been behaviourally oriented, with attention to the effect on individual consumers (Hall, 1982). As an interpretive tool in analysis of the police-media relationship, the role of the police as media consumers would be most applicable. A perennial fear underscoring decades of research in this field is the motivating effect violent and sensational content has on viewers, and so it has been this type of news-media content that has been most investigated (Phillips, 2017; Rios, 2018). Evidence remains mixed, but a Rios (2018) study concluded that media coverage of violent crime “influences the probability that other criminals use similar styles of crimes” (p. 1), i.e., copycat effects, but doesn’t incite people to crime. A similar line could be drawn between the image of police in the media and police self-presentation, as in the example of the “pumped” cops (Perlmutter, 2000, p. 25). The effects could be seen as being strong enough to alter existing practices to conform to media presentations.

This approach has been criticized as being reductionist and for assuming an uncritical audience lacking interpretive power and agency (Hall, 1982; Ericson, 1991). Ericson (1991) criticizes this approach for being overly media-centred and ignoring social influence, as in the influence of one’s social circle on perceptions of crime and policing and failing to distinguish between the strength of effect on local and national audiences. Perlmutter (2000) observed that, though media images of police officers inspired a culture of bodybuilding and fitness within the department, this was reinforced by “conversational groupings” and “extra-work friendships” as well as the genuine advantages heightened fitness brings to routine police work (pp. 25–26).

The media-effects approach also does not adequately account for the significant power the police have in shaping their own image in the media and their degree of participation in the news production process (Fishman, 1978; Ericson et al., 1989; Chermak, 1995). Hall’s (1982) critique of this approach centres on its avoidance of the subjects of power, domination, legitimization, and inequality. Any understanding of media or police that does not include these topics is incomplete and, so, we will now explore an ideological approach to the police-media relationship.

Dominant Ideology Theory

The dominant ideology approach has been used as another framework for analyzing media, police and power, because ideology is concerned with inequality and social order (Hall, 1982). The police are principally concerned with the maintenance of social order (Reiner, 2000; Neocleous, 2000), and “specialized police forces develop hand-in-hand with the development of inequality” (Reiner, 2000, p. 5). Following from this, critiques of police power have emphasized the police role in the formation and defence of dominant ideologies through their “policing of

poverty” and suppression of social and labour movements that threaten dominant ideological hegemony (Neocleous, 2000). Gerber & Jackson (2017) have illustrated the importance of ideology in establishing police legitimacy in general, and in garnering support for police after a contested use of force.

Hall (1982) argues that legitimization of authority is a product of the work of the production of meaning that is entrusted to the media. Through the selection of materials, use of sources, framing and narrative structures, the media does not only describe an event, but it also actively participates in the construction of its meaning. The media then has the power to shape perceptions of reality, reproducing existing social orders and providing justification for its inherent inequalities. The ideological approach “views the mass media as an ideological apparatus that maintains class formations” (Ericson, 1998, p. 221).

Ericson (1998) has criticized the ideological approach as being susceptible to the same problems of media centrism that plague the media-effects model. He cites the overreliance on content analysis and the homogenizing of “mass media” and “public” as key limitations. Relevant to this essay, the ideological approach also does not explain the ability of individual journalists to criticize authority – police, government, the church – in the press without incurring censure. Neither does it explain why open and highly public criticism is not more effective in delegitimizing that authority. Ericson uses an approach drawn from institutional theory to explain how the habits of critically reporting on the police – focusing on individual officers’ impropriety, for example – allow for the media to maintain its perception of neutrality, while letting police departments that are under scrutiny take action to satisfy the public and rehabilitate their image.

Institutional Theory

There is considerable overlap between the core concepts of ideology and institutional theory (Meyer et al., 2009). Although ideology is incorporated into the understanding of institutions, an important distinction between symbolic and material practices can be made: “While the term of institutional logic emphasizes the conflation of symbolic constructions and material practices, capturing both, ideology only refers to the former, being reliant on, but separated from, material practices. ... Ideologies are the nonobservable and ideal part of an institutional order which is, and must be, related to material practices” (Vogel, as cited in Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 8). If we are to evaluate the actions and practices of the police and the media, as well as their interactions, we need a theoretical framework that includes material practices.

Institutions are “supraorganizational patterns of activity rooted in material practices and symbolic systems by which individuals and organizations produce and reproduce their material lives and render their experiences meaningful” (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 101). Because institutions are socially constructed, these patterns are formed from the actions of individuals and organizations and, as these practices are sedimented, they become the norms that guide behaviour (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Institutions can be thought of as “the rules of the game in a society or, more formally, the humanly devised constraints that shape human interactions” (North, 1990, p. 3). This definition provides an important distinction between organizations and

institutions, with the organizations understood as the “teams” in this analogy, operating within a larger established set of rules. The constraints on behaviour implicit in an institution are communicated to the actors within it via an institutional logic.

Each institution has a core logic that “constrain[s] both the means and ends of individual behavior” but “also provide[s] sources of agency and change” (Thornton & Ocasio, 2008, p. 101). The need to explain such contradictory practices and beliefs gave rise to the first theories of institutional logics (p. 101). This consideration makes it useful in evaluating the police and the press, both of which are marked by stark contradictions in their beliefs and actions. The news media act collectively as a principal critic of police behaviour, and this has spurred police reform for centuries. However, at the same time, the press serves as the primary source of police legitimization for the public. The police view themselves as public servants and as isolated groups separate from society (Perlmutter, 2000). They are also given licence to use force, though, in most events, they refrain from using it. These contradictions and others can be defined within the unique logics that govern each profession.

News Media and Police Logics

This section defines the institutional logics of the police and media, comparing their similarities and demonstrating aspects of their co-dependence.

News Media Institutional Logic

The shared values and habits that are defined by institutional logic can be separated into professional norms and professional standards (Asp, 2014). The core values that constitute professional norms in news media are independence, objectivity, and neutrality (Asp, 2014; Ericson et al., 1991). It is understood by practitioners that their work should be free of influence from other powerful groups, institutions, or individuals. For Asp (2014), the scope and character of this independence can be assumed to vary depending on the spheres of power or institutions with which the media is interacting. This variable independence is highly situational and changes the character of journalistic practice from one where “news media primarily have a monitoring function, to one where the news media are proactive and have a scrutinizing function” (Asp, 2014, p. 261). The ideal of objectivity relates to fairness: “the notion that journalism shall be unbiased and different views and ideas are treated in such a way that no view is unduly favoured or discounted” (p. 261). Both independence and objectivity derive from the news media’s claims to neutrality. Ericson et al. (1991) identify the image of neutrality as the source of the news media’s legitimacy and authority. This image as an impartial body is essential to claims of operating in the public interest and authorizes news media’s selective “underpinning or undercutting legitimacy and authority of other social institutions” (p. 7).

News workers adhere to professional definitions of what constitutes news and journalistic rules of how it should be produced for an audience (Ryfe, 2006). The newsworthiness of an event is evaluated by its novelty, its importance with consideration to the content and actors involved, and interest irrespective of importance – e.g., human interest

stories and sensational crime reportage (Asp, 2014). News production involves the selection of events for publication from a virtually unlimited pool of possible stories. As “selectors” (Ericson et al., 1991), news media professionals make decisions about what is covered, what is excluded, which institutions and spokespersons are authorized as sources, and how these components are formulated in the news product (p. 16). Altheide (2014) argues that the entertainment value of media content is now *the* dominant logic guiding news production: privileging immediacy, visual presentation, and excitement in coverage.

Regulative rules are a subsection of professional norms that are concerned with how news “ought to be produced” (Ryfe, 2006, p. 211) for an audience. Story-telling practices are, to some extent, determined by the medium, but consistently use individualization and personalization as dramatic techniques to produce engaging characters – outlaw criminals, crooked politicians, idealized victims, “bad apple” cops – and share an event-orientation that “examin[es] conflicts as they arise on a specific case-by-case basis” (Ericson et al., 1991, p. 8). For Ryfe (2006), these rules are constantly being negotiated and “only come into play when there is some question as to whether a particular action is consistent with prevailing constitutive rules” (p. 211). Lacking a formal governing body, these rules that constitute news-media logic are what delineate appropriate professional practices. Despite the endless possibility of what could be news there is a consistency in form across organizations and platforms because news media workers “constantly patrol the boundaries between legitimate and illegitimate (i.e., recognizable and unrecognizable) news” (p. 211).

Police Institutional Logic

Independence and neutrality are also institutionalized values within professional policing. Most police, Reiner argues (2000), view their work as nonpartisan and aligned with the community, rather than the dictates of government officials (pp. 7–8). Police and all organizations concerned with law make claims to neutrality and rely on this image of impartiality to justify their actions (Ericson et al., 1991, p. 7). “This notion of political neutrality or independence of the police cannot withstand serious consideration,” Reiner writes (2000, p. 8), because “all relationships which have a power dimension are political” and, so, policing is “inescapably political.” What is institutionalized are the ideals of independence and neutrality, which shape police self-perception and behaviour regardless of their veracity. This perception of neutrality, in turn, justifies the belief that police are capable of, and routinely are, acting in the public interest. Thus, the belief that “civil service is the appropriate organizational form for police personnel systems,” is a professional norm that is validated by the belief that the “ceremonial rituals demonstrating police observance of due process actually produce justice” (Crank and Langworthy, 1992, p. 349).

Perhaps the most important belief within police organizations is that real police work is crime work (Ericson, 1982, 5; Perlmutter, 2000; Crank and Langworthy, 1992). In his review of literature on police activity, Ericson (1982) found that the amount of time spent dealing with criminal incidents is quite low – ranging from a low of .2 per cent to 17 per cent, depending upon

the department surveyed (pp. 5–7). However, police officers themselves believe crime work defines their profession, expect that the public shares this view (Perlmutter, 2000, pp. 26–30), and are invested in perpetuating this image through media and public relations (Ericson, 1982, pp. 5–10).

Unlike news-media professionals, police are subject to formalized credentialing, elaborate organizational classifications, titles, uniforms, and rules of conduct that determine what constitutes a police officer and appropriate police activity (Crank and Langworthy, 1992, pp. 342–349).

Such characteristic police practices as patrolling, surveillance, administration of law, arrests, negotiation techniques, and use of force are governed by regulative rules. Although criminal law and administrative rules establish expectations of police conduct, individual officers exercise a great deal of discretion in the application of those laws and rules, and this, in part, is determined by police culture:

This includes an array of “recipe” rules which guide [police officers] on how to get the job done in ways that will appear acceptable to the organization, which persons in what situations should be dealt with in particular ways (e.g., who should be “targeted” for stops on suspicion, who should be charged for specific offence-types), how to avoid supervisors and various organizational control checks, when it is necessary to produce “paper” regarding an incident or complaint, and so on. (Ericson, 1982, p. 14)

Comparison of Media and Police Logics and their Functional Overlap

The similarity of the police and news media logics produces mutual institutional support and shared social functions. With a focus on people or events that are out of the ordinary, or deviating from the social order, the news media engages in moral evaluation and provides instruction on where things fit into the social order (Ericson et al., 1991, pp. 4–5). In the sense that policing is a “mechanism for the moral health and improvement of the population,” the news media is an active part of the practice of policing (p. 7). By identifying deviant groups, problem communities, or generating moral panic, the news media also provide direction to the police in their discretionary selection of types of activities to watch, the demographic characteristics that signify potential criminality, and the neighborhoods chosen for surveillance.

News media preferences for novelty and entertainment value privilege coverage of violent and sensational crime, and this produces a distorted public perception of crime and of policing (Chermak, 1995). The police participate in this news production by selecting stories to provide to the media and acting as sources for journalists. Police leverage this news media practice to bolster the perception that their work is fundamentally concerned with crime, and use perceptions of out-of-control crime rates to lobby for expansive budgets and equipment provisions (Ericson, 1982, p. 8). Dowler et al. (2006) observe that there is great consistency in news commentary on rising crime rates and that “the only message that appeals to media

outlets is one supporting harsher measures, critiques of the inadequacy of police efforts (another means of encouraging more draconian law enforcement), strengthening laws, or increasing prison sentences” (p. 842). Contributing to the cycle of crime panic and new punitive measures is the shared treatment of crime with event-orientation and personalization that individualizes crime and “rule[s] out systemic and structural accounts” (Ericson et al. 1991, p. 9). This same logic shapes news media criticism of police, giving greater attention to high profile cases of police brutality or corruption with a focus on the individual offending officer, affording police departments the opportunity to publicly discipline those officers as a means of image restoration and avoid discussion of systemic problems and systemic reform.

Historical Origins of Institutional Logics

Having defined the institutional logics that govern the behaviour of the police and the press, and how these logics shape the relationship between these institutions, the next section will identify historical points of origin and significant moments in the evolution of these correlated institutional logics. The social conditions that these logics arose from shaped them, and notions of class, criminalization, hierarchy, power, and professionalism continue to be reproduced through the institutional practices of the police and media.

This historical analysis is concerned with the development of the police and the press in Britain, because modern police in North America have their origin in the law-and-order reform movements that culminated in the creation of the London Metropolitan Police and colonial policing in Ireland (Sinclair, 2008; Marquise, 2016). These policing models were exported to the British colonies along with the early media technologies and reportorial practices.

“Moral Entrepreneurs” and the Press

Early police theorists and reformers were quick to recognize the potential of the press for self-promotion and moral instruction. Henry Fielding became a justice of the peace for Westminster in 1748 and established one of the earliest professional police forces (Lemmings, 2017, p. 78). Shortly thereafter, the newspapers in London began publishing detailed accounts of criminals apprehended by Fielding and his men. Lemmings suggests that, from the earliest days of Fielding’s post, there is “strong evidence that reports of this kind were being supplied directly by the magistrate himself or by his clerk, Joshua Brogden” (p. 81). He cites as evidence a level of detail that would have been unavailable to anyone but Fielding or Brogden. In 1752, Fielding became part owner of the *Public Advertiser*, and announced that it would become the sole recipient of reports from his office. At the same time, he admitted that he and his staff had previously been distributing these reports to various London newspapers.

The effect of this reporting was to give Fielding “the proportions of a law-and-order champion who was intent on rooting out crime and vice on the streets of London” (p. 81). Fielding’s positioning of himself as a primary source for newspapers produced coverage that was “intended to counterpoise a narrative of authority and justice against the feelings of anxiety and panic about the inadequacy of the justice system that were projected by most reports about

crime” (p. 82). Capitalizing on the panic generated by the prevalence of crime reporting in London papers, Fielding drafted a bill for the establishment of organized policing systems and other legal reforms. As a response to the growing anxiety about crime and justice, the government implemented new measures for dealing with “robbery, murder, excessive gin consumption, gaming, and prostitution” (p. 82).

Patrick Colquhoun was one of the first seven salaried police magistrates appointed by the British government in 1792, and a theorist whose ideas shaped British conceptions of crime, policing, and justice (Philips, 2003). Colquhoun was “identified as a pivotal figure in the shift between a notion of police as a broad governmental responsibility for moral regulation and oversight and a recognizably modern notion of police as an apolitical service focused on the prevention and investigation of crimes” (Quinn, 2021, p. 230). Through a collaboration with Jeremy Bentham, Colquhoun created the *Police Gazette*, a weekly paper that published news of crime and policing. The creation of the paper could be considered an extension of Fielding’s press strategies, but with a “moralizing agenda” that “differentiates it from Fielding’s prototype” (p. 244). Philips (2003) refers to Colquhoun as a “moral entrepreneur,” a person who “makes a career out of rousing public alarm on some particular issue (especially crime), advocating certain necessary reforms and measures (such as establishing a police force) to deal with the problem, and putting forward himself as the appropriate person to carry out these reforms and measures effectively” (p. 3). These practices, here identified with one person, have been incorporated into the routine work of modern image-management in policing, as has previously been shown.

Bentham recognized that the publishing cycle of newspapers created a need for content and, absent the occurrence of newsworthy political events, that this was satisfied by crime reports. The public’s endless interest in these matters, he believed, made it an ideal vector for moral and political instruction. The *Police Gazette*’s apparent political neutrality made it even more effective to these ends: “No paper bearing a name of party on its title-page – though it were the party of the country – No paper which aimed avowedly at this object, can act in pursuit of it with nearly equal advantage and effect” (Bentham, quoted in Quinn, 2021, p. 247). Bentham saw the potential of the paper to shape public opinion without appearing to be propagandist and “repeatedly urge[d] government to exploit its ostensibly objective nature, and the public perception of its objectivity, to pass off substantive moral judgments and condemnations as equally objective” (p. 247). Some reports in the *Gazette* were accompanied by moral comment, but Bentham also saw the reports of arrest and punishment on their own as “a perpetual lesson of morality and of submission to the laws” (Quoted in Quinn, 2021, p. 246). Here, Bentham anticipates the institutionalization of neutrality as a governing news media value and the use of what David Altheide calls the “problem frame,” which functions as a “secular alternative to the morality play”:

Unlike a morality play, in which characters are abstractions facing death and damnation, news reports focus on “actual” people and events to package the entire narrative as “realistic.” Complex and often ambiguous events and concerns are symbolically mined for moral truths and understandings presumed to be held by the audience, while the repeated

presentations of similar scenarios “teaches” the audience about the nature and causes of “disorder” (Ericson et al., 1989). (Altheide, 1997, p. 653)

Crime Statistics, Fear of Crime, and the Police Solution

There was initially resistance to the idea of a professional police force from all sections of British society. The authoritarian use of police by Russian and continental regimes produced an aversion to the idea, and having a dedicated force for the policing of the population was viewed as incompatible with traditional English liberties. Governments opposed the idea on two fronts. There was hesitancy to grant such power to a non-military force that could potentially be used against them should the waves of revolt sweeping Europe at the time reach London. The other, and more influential reason was pecuniary, with politicians seeing the expense of a new police force as unwarranted (Lemmings, 2017; Philips, 2003).

A small police force had been established by the magistrate, Henry Fielding, in London, the Bow Street Runners, in 1749. By the 1790s, his initial force of six professional “thief-takers” had grown to just 68 officers (McMullan, 1998). Parliamentary committees set up to research London’s approach to policing in 1812, 1816, 1817, 1818 and 1822 all recommended against a new police force (Reiner, 2000). When the Metropolitan Police Act of 1829 succeeded in creating a modern police force, it was the fear of crime and moral decay that persuaded legislators on the need for stronger social control measures (Harrison, 1998; Reiner, 2000; Neocleous, 2000).

The trends of urbanization, industrialization and population growth all contributed to the increase in crime and are recognized by orthodox historians as the motivation for the new police force (Harrison, 1998; Reiner, 2000). While these factors did undoubtedly contribute to criminal activity, it was debated even at the time to what extent this was real and how much of this perception was influenced by the new practice of reporting crime statistics and the increased ease of prosecution brought about by legal reform (Harrison, 1998). “The important issue, of course, is not so much the statistical support for an increasing incidence of crime but more that contemporaries believed that it was out of control,” Harrison argues (1998, p. 178).

Contributing to the belief that crime was out of control was the generating of statistics about crime. In this practice, Colquhoun was again a major figure. As has become routine practice in policing, “Colquhoun liked to use numbers and tables to impart to his work an air of objectivity and scientific accuracy” (Philips, 2003, p. 4). This included a refined definition of the criminal class, which was at the time just beginning to solidify as an identifiable subsection of the population. In his writing, Colquhoun named 24 classes of criminals, and provided a “suspiciously-precise round figure” (p. 4) for the presence of each in London. In his estimations, there were 115,000 members of the dangerous criminal class of London, which at the time had a total population of around 1 million. Within that incredible number, Colquhoun identified some 50,000 women who “support[ed] themselves chiefly or wholly by prostitution” (p. 5). By presenting these made-up statistics as scientific fact, Colquhoun hoped to convince respectable middle-class Londoners that there was imminent danger lurking in the “lower classes of people”

and “above all, to convince his readers that London urgently needed a regular organized, paid police force” (p. 4).

In Parliament, Peel relied on the rhetoric of crime and decay to encourage support for his police reforms. This fear of crime can be observed in trends in the press as well, and the prevalence of crime reporting in the late 18th and 19th centuries can be shown to have produced widespread misperceptions about the rates and types of crime in London and Northern England, contributing to the perception of social decay, and promoting the idea of a professional police as an effective remedy (King, 2007; Sharpe, 2012; Casey, 2011).

Crime News, Professional Journalists and the Police as Source

King (2007) notes that by the late 18th century, most of London’s inhabitants would have had little direct contact with crime or the criminal justice system, and many in England would have “gained most of their information about these issues from printed sources, and in particular from the newspapers” (pp. 73–74). The growth of print culture gave Londoners “significant exposure to newspaper-transmitted news on a regular basis” (p. 74). Their popularity and availability helped newspapers replace other print sources of crime information, such as pamphlets or trial reports published in the Old Bailey sessions (Chibnall, 1981). While these older formats were still enjoyed as a form of news and entertainment, “by the late eighteenth century the newspapers were almost certainly the most widely read source of printed information about crime and justice” (King, 2007, p. 74).

Publishers included crime news in their paper for mainly economic reasons. Stories of violence, murder, prurience and deviance were of great interest to the masses and were given considerable space in popular and respectable papers alike. King (2007) surveyed *The Times* and *The London Chronicle* in four years – 1787, 1790, 1800, 1821 – and found that, on average, 10 percent of the daily non-advertising content was made up of crime and justice stories (p. 80). A similar study of five London newspapers in 1790 found crime and justice stories accounted for an average of 10.7 percent of the news hole. The frequency of reporting on, and amount of space afforded to, crime in the newspapers “certainly made an important contribution to the rapid increase in anxiety about crime” (King, 2007, p. 83).

Aside from the popular interest in crime stories, the press benefitted from including this content as it was an easily sourced and readily available genre of news. The lapsing of the Licensing Act in 1694 effectively ended pre-publication censorship in England and initiated a boom in the newspaper publishing industry (O’Malley, 2020). The number of papers grew, as did the size of the papers and the frequency of publication – from weeklies, to bi- or tri-weeklies and eventually dailies. Newspapers seldom had access to a stable of reporters or even reliable staff, and many responsibilities that would later be specialized fell to the publishers themselves. As one 18th century editor explained, “the life of a paper is as uncertain as his, who gives life to it” (Black, 2011, p. 10).

To meet the expanded demand for content, publishers as late as the 1790s actively solicited content from their readers in the forms of letters, opinions, poems and moralizing tracts (Black, 2011). Crime reporting provided another form of easily produced content as reports could be solicited from the victims themselves, obtained from public trials and court proceedings, or lifted from publications like the Old Bailey pamphlets. The importance of crime reporting as a means of meeting these new demands for content can be seen in its increased prevalence over the 18th century. Chibnall (1981) observes that “newspapers contained little or no crime news for the first fifty years of their development” (p. 180), but, after the explosion in the number of papers, the genre quickly became a staple of the press. The presence of crime news in the papers also predictably rose or fell depending on major events. Wars and political turmoil were matters of great public concern and provided ample copy, and the need for crime news noticeably declined during periods of conflict and upheaval (King, 2007).

Although the press treated crime as material to fill newspapers and sell them, this easy copy had broad impacts on the public and the formation and legitimization of the police. The extent of the impact on the public is difficult to measure. We lack resources that document citizens’ subjective response to the news and how it changed their opinions or actions, but modern research has shown a correlation between frequency of exposure to crime news and fear of crime (Williams & Dickinson, 1993). In Victorian England, this fear of crime was presented alongside suggestions that professional police would curtail the rise in criminal activity and prevent further moral decay. This solution was promoted by such police reformers as Fielding, Colquhoun, Bentham and Peel, as well as newspapers (Lemmings, 2017; McMullan, 1998).

O’ Malley (2020) argues that, because newspapers were “dependent on the practices of law for copy” (p. 212), they distributed representations of emerging legal procedures and authorities and “naturalised the activities of local law enforcement agents, representing them as given, essentially unproblematic, aspects of everyday life” (p. 214). The treatment of law, police, and legal process by the press was part of the legitimization of journalism as a profession as well as emerging systems of control that better suited market economies:

In the middle of the nineteenth century, the traditional control system over the press was replaced by a new and more effective control system based on remorseless economic forces which, unlike the law, could be neither evaded nor defied. The capitalist development of the press, with its accompanying rise in publishing costs, led to a progressive transfer of ownership and control of the popular press from the working class to capitalist entrepreneurs, while the advertising licensing system encouraged the absorption or elimination of the early radical press and effectively stifled its re-emergence. (Curran, 1989, p. 226)

Journalists and publishers sought, and found, power and recognition within existing systems. With the demise of the radical press, journalists and publishers formed organizations to lobby for their inclusion into the halls of power and procured significant political influence on them. By 1880, there were 11 journalists in the House of Commons, and newspapers became a

“part of a process which identified breaches of the law and orchestrated public outrage calling for tougher legislation” (O’ Malley, 2020, p. 213), resulting in the passage of several pieces of legislation relating to crime and punishment.

The professionalization of journalism also altered the press’s habits of obtaining information from the police. Publishers, lacking the staff to investigate stories as they arose, had been happy to use reports sent directly from magistrates and officials. Once journalists were greater in number, there arose an economic push for exclusive information, and this encouraged the development of relationships with police officials. Reasons for police co-operation ranged from the love of seeing one’s name in print to the strategic use of the press to solicit help from the public during investigations. From this, a “culture of exchange ... developed between journalists and the police” (Shpayer-Makov, 2009, p. 968) that remains integral to the production of daily news.

Conclusion

This article has demonstrated the importance of the police-media relationship to both institutions and the broader effects this relationship has on the media-consuming public. A comparison of theoretical approaches in media studies found that media-effects theory and dominant ideology theory have considerable limitations as analytical frameworks for interpreting the police media relationship, limitations that are compensated for in institutional theory. The institutional logics that govern inter- and intra-institutional behavior among police and media professionals can be shown to have their origins, in some cases, in the formative years of both professions. These early established norms and habits have been routineized to the point of being virtually invisible within daily professional practice and continue to direct the evolution of the police and the media. The social conditions of the points of origin of these institutional logics continue to be reproduced by them, reinforcing oppressive notions of class, racialization, hierarchy, economics, and professionalism.

The habits of interaction that define the police-media relationship have their origins in the early developments of both professions. Although policing and media have changed considerably over more than 200 years, many of these practices have remained remarkably consistent. Institutional logics persist because they simplify decision-making processes, providing a narrowed field of possible interpretations and appropriate actions. Many aspects of the police-media relationship developed out of mutual convenience and have been routinized to the point of being virtually unquestioned aspects of professional news media practice.

Authority is most effective when it appears natural and elicits consent for its moral order without arousing debate or requiring coercive techniques (Ericson et al., 1991, p. 8). Crime reporting is so mundane within news production that its impacts on social control easily go overlooked. News media workers rightfully see themselves as police watchdogs, but their institutional practices focus critical attention on specific extraordinary events. Although these events tend to be given more space in national coverage, such as police brutality or corruption,

daily crime reportage cumulatively produces a fear of crime, and frequently results in policy changes that expand the power of the police and the justice system (Dowler et al, 2006).

Professional norms and standards are constantly being negotiated, and there is potential for journalists and news workers to produce information that mitigates the adverse social effects of granting police the degree of access to and control over the news production process they currently enjoy. In the past, journalists have scrutinized harmful police practices and spurred significant police reforms. The ability for reform, however, is limited by the media's own logics of event-orientation and personalization that divert critical attention away from systemic problems. Following the death of George Floyd in 2020, and the months-long protests in the United States that followed, there is a greater public criticism of the police and popular recognition of the role the police have in colonization and the maintenance of a repressive, inequitable social order. Journalists, at their best, are concerned with the public interest. Through the routinization and subconscious habits outlined in this essay, the news media profession has provided justification and even direction for the systemic problems considered here. There is no single exposé that could counterbalance the perceptions of crime and police practice that centuries of crime reportage have established. Meaningful change to police institutions, if news media were able to cause it, would result from the cumulative effect of new standards and practices employed regularly in a popular genre like crime reporting over time.

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