

# The relationship between police and media: is the Met less accountable than ever before?



*Drawing on interviews with journalists, senior police, and press officers, [Marianne Colbran](#) explores changes between the Met and the mainstream media over the last 40 years. She argues that in recent years the police has gained much control over the flow of policing news to the press and the public, limiting its accountability function in the process.*

Over the last two years, the Met has been dogged by scandal: the [murder of Sarah Everard](#) by a serving Met officer; the allegations of 'institutional corruption' in the report into [the Daniel Morgan case](#); and the recent '[partygate](#)' investigation into the lockdown gatherings held by Boris Johnson and others at Downing Street.

But what is less discussed in the press is the breakdown over the last ten years in the relationship between the Met and the national press. At a time when the Met's reputation is at an all-time low, the force has also never had such control over the flow of information to the public or been less accountable.

Many operational and press officers that I interviewed for my book, [Crime and Investigative Reporting in the UK](#), argued that, before the advent of new digital technologies, the balance of power was very firmly in favour of the press. The mainstream media were the only channel through which the police could communicate with the public, to ask for help with investigations, to call for witnesses or to publicise police success. At the same time, press officers commented that access to the press was not automatic and if they wanted the press to cover a story about a missing person or a murder inquiry, the story had to be 'newsworthy' and appeal to that newspaper's particular demographic:

We had a story about a little old lady who was mugged and then broke her arm and died. That was a murder inquiry. But that was impossible to generate interest. Stories about little old ladies aren't seen as sexy or interesting.

As a result, many investigations were simply not reported and police were unable to draw upon the public for assistance. Press officers also commented that it was almost impossible to generate interest in 'good news' stories: 'We give them so many stories – real human interest stories of police officers committing acts of real heroism. If we're lucky it might make a local paper. But if we cock up, it's front page news.'

In 2011, two events started to shift the balance of power between the Met and the national press. The first was the News International [phone hacking scandal](#) – a controversy involving the now-defunct *News of the World* and other British newspapers owned by Rupert Murdoch – and revelations of improper relations between senior Met officers and the press. Three reviews of police/media relations followed, and two of these – the [Leveson](#) and [Filkin](#) Reports – recommended the recording of police/media contact. This led to severe restrictions on official, and clampdowns on unofficial, police/media contact. The second event was the nationwide rioting in August 2011 and the uptake of social media by the Met and other forces, using Twitter and other platforms to call for witnesses and information about rioters.

Over the coming months and years, the Met and other forces realised that the use of social media allowed them to achieve many of their key aims in dealing with mainstream media – promoting the service, the management of public risk, and increasing trust and incidence in the police. Instead of struggling to place 'good news' stories in the media, press officers could just post them directly onto social media. They could also publicise new initiatives directly to the public and show the 'human face' of the police through webchats with senior officers and humorous memes and images on social media platforms.

But from the perspectives of crime journalists, social media appears to have given the Met more control than ever before over the flow of policing news – and possibly enabled senior officers to keep details of botched investigations under wraps more easily.

Before Leveson, major stories about police corruption and malpractice had often been leaked to the press from insiders within the Met. According to a number of crime reporters I spoke with, that channel is now closed. Other crime journalists I spoke with told me that, although crime incidents were being reported daily on the Metropolitan Police's Twitter feed and news website, when they rang the Press Bureau for background information or to speak to investigating officers, they were invariably fobbed off. One reporter told me: 'The less information we get, the less bad news we can print. Forget about Fourth Estate roles, most of us can't even carry out our day-to-day jobs.' Other crime correspondents suggested that the Met were taking advantage of restricted press/police contact to present an unduly rosy picture of the Met's work:

I knew off the record that this unit was in trouble. But this officer gave us all these success figures and we knew that they were glossing. But without officers within that unit prepared to talk to me, my hands are tied ... and the public are left in the dark as to what's going on.

Of course, it is also true that new digital technologies have provided both the public and the press with more sophisticated ways with which to monitor the police and publicly disseminate and circulate images of police brutality in real time. A recent example was the [murder of George Floyd](#) in Minneapolis in May 2020, which triggered worldwide demonstrations and protests.

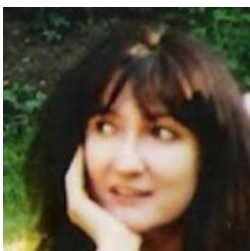
But the police are not powerless in these situations. Bystander video footage of police brutality can be dismissed as a partial representation of events, while body worn cameras also afford the police greater powers of surveillance. Even when citizens do take out civil cases against the police, it may take years for these cases to be investigated. In the [case of Darren Cumberbatch](#), who died in 2017 after being punched repeatedly and tasered by officers, his sister was told it could take three years for her to receive a full report from the Independent Office for Police Conduct, even though it was revealed at the inquest that one officer had made incorrect statements on police notes after the event.

In the pre-internet age, the Met did not have the option of not co-operating with the press. With the advent of new digital technologies, this is no longer true and the police do not need to rely on the press to communicate effectively with the public or to convey news about their work. But there is a real danger in creating a culture of secrecy: by keeping journalists at bay, are the Met creating an organisation that hides its mistakes and, however inadvertently, allows corruption to go uninvestigated?

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Note: the above draws on the author's new book [Crime and Investigative Reporting in the UK](#), for which a [launch event](#) will be held on 30 June in London.

### About the Author



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