

Leveson five years on: the effect of the Leveson and Filkin Reports on
relations between the Metropolitan Police and the national news media

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Abstract

This paper re-examines certain previous conclusions from the classic literature on police / media relations in the United Kingdom in the wake of the Filkin and Leveson Reports. The paper draws on interviews with senior Metropolitan Police officers, press officers and national crime journalists and argues that previous conclusions about asymmetrical relations favouring the police are partially problematic, with the media being in possession of key resources that often give them the upper hand. The paper also explores the role of new media in crime reporting and exposing police misconduct and suggests a new transfiguration may be emerging in police / media relations, allowing the media partially to by-pass police sources

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Introduction

In July 2011, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee (2011) recorded concerns over senior Metropolitan Police officers accepting hospitality from senior employees of News International, the parent company of the *News of The World* and other national British newspapers (Mawby 2012). This was followed by three separate reviews by Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC 2011), Elizabeth Filkin (Filkin 2012) and Lord Leveson (Leveson 2012) of the relationship between the press and the police. The last of these Reports to be published was the Leveson Report in November 2012. Leveson found no extensive evidence of corrupt behaviour although the Report was critical of some senior officers' judgement and leadership. The main recommendations of the Report called for more formal reporting of contacts between officers and the press, greater consistency of police–press policies and practices nationally and 'clear and direct' policy guidance – recommendations already made by both the HMIC and Filkin Reports. However, as the crime correspondent Duncan Campbell suggested, "the big chill on relations between the police and journalists had started some months before the Leveson Report was completed" (Campbell 2013: 197) with official and unofficial contact between the press and the police being severely restricted. Many crime correspondents in the United Kingdom argued that these measures severely impeded them from carrying out carrying out their Fourth Estate Role, while Mawby (2014) expressed concern that these measures "had the potential to reinforce the balance of

power uncomfortably towards the police in terms of controlling contacts with the press and, hence, the information flow into the public sphere” (Mawby 2014: 242).

The aim of this paper, five years after the publication of the Leveson and Filkin Reports and six years after the publication of the HMIC Report, is to explore the current state of play in the relationship between the Metropolitan Police and the national news media. This study is based on recent empirical research between 2012 and 2015. This comprised interviews with senior Metropolitan Police officers, staff from the Directorate of Media and Communication at Scotland Yard, both past and present, and crime journalists working for national news outlets in online, broadcast and print media.

In order to understand fully the current relationships between the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and the national news media, the study first explores relations between the two parties prior to the events of July 2011 and draws on Goffman’s (1959) work on front and back region work in order to gain a critical purchase on the complex web of relationships, both official and unofficial, that existed between police officers, press officers and the media. The paper suggests that, by and large, the relationship between the press and the MPS was mutually beneficial and based on trust and reciprocity. Nevertheless, from police respondents’ perspectives, the media were and are extremely powerful and, in many ways, respondents argued they were dependent on the press. Police officers suggested that they felt vulnerable in terms of loss of control over content once released to the press, and in the need to make that content fit normative news values, and often believed the media held the upper hand.

The study then examines current relations between the MPS and the national news media and suggests that the clampdown on official and unofficial contact has led journalists to seek other sources, including social media, for crime news stories.

The lack of accountability of online material has on occasion resulted in sensitive material being released into the public domain, prejudicing investigations; while reporters, unable to access help from press officers in verifying their sources, are increasingly printing speculative and inaccurate reports. The study concludes that the breakdown in communications between the MPS and the national news media has had serious repercussions in terms of operational policing and the integrity of investigative reporting in this country. It suggests that the only way forward can be a lifting of such restrictions and the rebuilding of relations of trust and reciprocity between the MPS and the press.

Police and news media relations in context

Greer and McLaughlin (2012) argue that one of the key concepts that has featured in research on news media and police relationships is Becker's (1967) concept of the "hierarchy of credibility", a model proposing that, in any society, it is taken for granted that governing elites have the power to "define the way things really are" (Becker 1967: 140).

They suggest that this model influenced two key studies in the United Kingdom in the 1970s. In *Policing The Crisis*, Hall *et al.* (1978) argued that time pressures, and the need for media statements wherever possible to be grounded in "objective" and "authoritative" statements from "accredited sources", lead to a "systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged positions" (Hall *et al.* 1978: 58). Similarly, Chibnall (1977) suggested that, while the police perspective might be challenged on occasion, the relationship between the police and the press is always asymmetrical – "the reporter who cannot get information is out of a job, whereas the policeman who retains it is not" (Chibnall

1977: 155). Subsequent studies in Canada in the late 1980s (Ericson *et al.* 1987, 1989, 1991) and in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994) took a more nuanced view, stressing the importance of economic factors as well as working relationships between sources and reporters in shaping the news. However, these studies also argued, albeit less deterministically, that the police were the “key definitional source in setting the crime agenda” (Greer and McLaughlin 2012: 134).

In the late 1990s, there was a shift in thinking. Mawby (1999) examined media coverage of stories of police corruption and leakage of information by key witnesses in the Fred and Rosemary West¹ murder trials and argued that, far from being able to control information for their organisational advantage, police control of the media was not as “complete as upholders of the orthodox view would suggest” (Mawby 1999: 278). Innes (1999) echoed Mawby’s (1999) findings in his study of the ways in which police forces in the South of England sought to use the media as an investigative resource in murder cases and concluded that “the media is not necessarily a functionary of the police institution, it is a diverse industry with its own set of guiding principles and objectives” (Innes 1999: 273).

However, by the end of the 2000s, and immediately prior to the phone hacking scandal of 2011, two studies by Cooke and Sturges (2009) and Mawby (2010) suggested that the wheel had turned full circle. Both studies suggested that, as a result of the rise in police corporate communications, together with organisational changes in the news media, including severe staff cuts across the industry, the asymmetric police-media relationship identified by Hall *et al.* (1978) and Chibnall (1977) not only

¹ Fred West, a Gloucestershire builder, was accused of committing 12 murders between 1971 and 1984. West committed suicide before his trial but his wife, Rosemary, was convicted of ten murders and sentenced to life imprisonment.

endures but “has become more pronounced in terms of police dominance of the relationship” (Mawby 2010: 1073).

Since these studies, a number of social, political, cultural and technological changes have had an impact on the relationship between the police and the news media. Firstly, the relationship between the police and the press has been the subject of three major inquiries and reports (HMIC 2011; Filkin 2012; Leveson 2012). One of the key recommendations of the Filkin Report was the recording of all contact between the police and the press, which was immediately implemented across all British police forces, leading Mawby to comment that the balance of police–press power is now completely in “favour of the police, who have subsequently used ... the recommendations for the recording of police–press contacts to further control the flow of police news and information” (Mawby 2014: 253). However, as Mawby suggests, there has not yet been any empirical research on how these recommendations have affected day-to-day relations between the police and the media, and this paper seeks to address this.

The other key change of the last five to seven years has been the increasing use of new technologies and social media, both by the police and by the news media. There have been two main themes in the research on this subject. In their study of news coverage of the riots following the G20 summit meeting in London in 2009, Greer and McLaughlin argue that the “capacity of technologically empowered citizen journalists to produce information that challenges the official version of events” (Greer and McLaughlin 2010: 1041) – in this case, mobile phone footage showing that the death of a newspaper vendor, Ian Tomlinson, was due to police brutality – means in turn that the role of the police as primary definers and their role in the “hierarchy of credibility” can no longer be taken for granted. In a more detailed study

of police–news media relations in Australia, Lee and McGovern (2014) endorse this finding but also suggest that new technologies may afford the public and the press new ways of monitoring the police. They also suggest that new media, such as Twitter and Facebook, afford the police ways of communicating with the public more directly than through traditional media and allow them more control over content. In the current context of restricted relations between police and press in the United Kingdom, this study considers whether new media does in fact allow the police to bypass traditional media in terms of disseminating information and publicising initiatives and further increase their apparent control over “the flow of police news and information” (Mawby 2014, p. 273).

Finally it should be noted that the study concentrates solely on relations between the Metropolitan Police Service and the national news media. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the focus of all three of the inquiries on police–news media relations was on relations between senior MPS officers and the press. Secondly, the economic crisis affecting the news industry hit regional papers and outlets hardest (Davies 2008; Dean 2011); although, at the time of writing, a leading national newspaper, *The Independent*, had just been closed down, all the national news outlets contacted in the course of this study still maintained at least one, and in most cases two or three, members of staff involved in crime reporting. Additionally, the Metropolitan Police Service’s media relations are more complex than those of other forces for a number of reasons: the Metropolitan Police Service’s operational territory is the capital city, a focus for national media attention, and it is by far the largest force in England and Wales, with national policing responsibilities, such as for counter-terrorism, that attract media attention. It cannot be assumed that the issues identified within the

Metropolitan Police Service—news media relations are pertinent to other forces (Mawby 2012).

[FIGURE 1 HERE]

In order to analyse the complex ebb and flow of relationship and information between police sources and crime journalists, this study draws on a model (figure 1 above) devised by Ericson *et al.* (1989) based on the work of Goffman (1959) and on the subsequent refinements of Giddens (1984: 122-6) and seeks to show how organisations such as the police constantly protect and preserve their activities. The front regions are where the public business of the police is transacted. Enclosure refers to efforts to circumscribe or control information given out to journalists. The back regions are where the private work of the organisation is carried out. Disclosure relates to efforts to communicate information – through publicity or knowledge helpful to their operations or image in the front regions and through what Ericson describes as confidence or “leaks” of information which the police would rather not make public in the back regions. As the model shows, and as Giddens (1984) points out, the differentiation between front and back region by no means coincides with enclosure or covering up and disclosure or divulgence and the “two axes operate in a complex nexus of possible relations” (1984: 126). In this paper, I draw on this model in order to explore the various tactics and strategies press offices and individual officers use to control how their organisation and activities are presented in the press; and the strategies journalists use to circumvent official channels and official narratives to penetrate back region activities and fulfill their Fourth Estate roles.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 23 crime correspondents, working on national newspapers, of whom 22 were male and one was female. Five interviews were carried out with current and former senior employees of the Scotland Yard Press Bureau, all of whom were male. Seven interviews were carried out with senior Metropolitan Police officers from specialist squads whose work brought them into contact on a daily basis with press officers and heads of communication. All of these respondents were male. Interviews were initially carried out with crime correspondents and access to these journalists was obtained through the author's personal media contacts. A number of crime correspondents offered to introduce the author to their own police contacts. Interviews with these contacts then led to personal introductions to personnel working within the Scotland Yard Press Bureau.

The experience of journalists interviewed for this study ranged between eight years and over thirty years; similarly, press officers and senior officers interviewed for the study had between ten years and over thirty years' experience. It follows, then, that the older participants in this research would have been at the early stages of their careers at the time of the early studies of crime news reporting (Chibnall 1977; Hall *et al.* 1978), allowing me to re-evaluate some of the findings in those studies.

Work began in July 2012 and, whilst the in-depth data gathering had been completed by autumn 2013, further follow-up interviews were carried out with two journalists and two press officers from Scotland Yard in 2014, to reflect any further changes in the police–news media relationship since 2012. This study forms part of a larger ethnographic research project on crime news reporting in the United Kingdom with the aims of exploring how technological, political, social and economic changes have affected relationships between crime, legal and home affairs correspondents and

their news sources, their ability to carry out investigative journalism and the effect of these changes on the content of crime news in an online, print and broadcast context.

Interviews were semi-structured and “on the record”. All were tape-recorded, apart from one police source, where notes were taken throughout the interview. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours.

A grounded theory approach was used to thematically code the data following transcription. My interviews had taken place at a time when relations between the Metropolitan Police and the national media were at a particularly low ebb and I knew that my respondents might have a certain agenda in giving me a particular version of events, I thus decided to code manually rather than using computer software, concerned that software in this instance might lead to an “overemphasis on decontextualised instances” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007: 156). All questions related to the core concerns of this study: (1) to what extent was the relationship between the Metropolitan Police Service and the national news media asymmetrical in favour of the police? and (2) what effect did the recommendations of the HMIC (2011), Filkin (2012) and Leveson (2012) Reports have on current relations between the Metropolitan Police Service and the national news media?

Relationships between the Metropolitan Police and the national news media prior to July 2011

Front region activities

In terms of front region activities, Ericson *et al.* (1989) argue that the two main aims of any news source are to achieve positive publicity while protecting the organisation against unwelcome intrusion. At the Metropolitan Police Headquarters at Scotland Yard, front region work or work where the official business of the

organisation is transacted (Goffman 1959), or in this case publicized, is carried out by the Directorate of Media and Communication (formerly the Directorate of Public Affairs). The Directorate is the focal point for media contact with the MPS. It works to communicate the work of the MPS through four main core activities and four branches dealing with this work: news and media relations or the News Branch, Internal Communication, E-communication and Marketing and Publicity. The main point of contact for crime journalists is the News Branch. This consists of a 24 hour, seven day a week bureau, which in 2012-2013 employed three full-time staff and nine shift workers. Alongside the press bureau are five specialist desks dedicated to supporting the four main functional commands within the MPS: Special Operations, Specialist Crime, Central Operations and Territorial Policing; and also the corporate desk. These are the main points of contact for requests to interview, or obtain information from, senior officers.

However, for most journalists, the real stories are to be found in the back regions of an organisation, areas not usually open to them or other members of the public. As Ericson *et al.* (1989) argue, there is “a great difference between being in a position to give coverage to a source organisation’s event, process or state of affairs and having access that allows for the story the journalist needs for his news organisation’s purposes” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 8).

But it is also important to note that sources such as the Metropolitan Police Service and, in this instance, the Directorate of Media and Communication have different requirements of enclosure and disclosure of knowledge at different times. Police press officers and journalists interviewed for this study suggested that openness or otherwise of relations between the Press Bureau and crime journalists varied according to successive Commissioners’ policies on official and unofficial contact

with the press and to individual Press Officers' attitudes to their role and relationships of trust between those officers and individual reporters. One journalist gave an example of this:

“For years, I’d had this vision of the Met as this impenetrable fortress. But when Imbert² took over, he wanted genuinely to know what was wrong. And during his time, I wrote a long piece about racial violence and was taken out in Southall by the Chief Superintendent, openly saying, “I don’t know how to talk to these people and I know that’s a problem for our force”.”

But he also suggested that access could be stopped or restricted at any time, due to a change in Commissioner or a change in Press Bureau personnel.

“There was a new head of the Press Bureau and I needed access to some officers for a story and I called her up and she said, “What’s in it for us?” And I realized in that second that the world had changed yet again and the easy flow of information I’d had was about to be stopped.”

Similarly, other journalists suggested that, particularly in the years immediately preceding the Leveson Inquiry, information was given to “favourites” of press bureau staff rather than the same information being given to all national media outlets, resonating with the Filkin Report’s claim that “influence and favour have played a part and have affected what should be an unbiased relationship between the MPS and the media” (Filkin 2012: 14).

Although it would seem, then, that control over good and bad news, in terms of Press Bureau relations with the national news media from the 1970s to 2000s, could be characterised as “contextual, equivocal, transitory and unresolved” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 8), more recently Mawby (2010; 2012), in a study of relations between

² Sir Peter Imbert was Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police from 1987 to 1983.

regional police press offices and crime journalists working for regional outlets, has suggested that a number of factors have led to the balance of power being asymmetric in favour of the police. In particular, the introduction of twenty-four hours rolling news, coupled with staff cuts across the news media industry and the need to fill more space with fewer staff, has, according to Mawby (2010; 2012), led to a greater dependence by journalists on police-produced press releases and other promotional material.

However, as Ericson *et al.* (1989) comment, police experience the strictures of news discourse just as reporters are limited by police discourse, and police–media relations inevitably entail controls from both sides and inter-dependency. Certainly it could be said that, in terms of preparing the initial press release, sources have always functioned as reporters – constantly deciding whether certain information should be released and which details should be kept back. Nevertheless, the police respondents in this study, while acknowledging that they “controlled the primary definitions of the subject of address (crime, criminality and control by the police)” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 124), believed themselves to be quite dependent on journalists in the process of co-operation with them. Firstly, press officers argued that journalists could take a snippet from an interview and place it with others to give it a context of their own making. Secondly, police officers and press officers argued that, in terms of using the media to publicise details of an investigation or to appeal for help from the public, the media would only run stories if they met normative news values and appealed to the particular demographic of a news outlet (Chibnall 1977; Jewkes 2004). As one press officer explained:

“There’s a borough called Southwark and in the Met it’s called M district.

And that became M for murder. You get a little old lady who just happened to

be mugged in Brixton. And fallen, broke her arm and then died of pneumonia. That's a murder inquiry. But stories about little old ladies aren't seen as sexy or interesting. Whereas there was a case of a girl who was an ex-Playboy model who was found murdered in the East End. Beautiful young girl, element of sleaze, found murdered. So that story ran and ran."

Chibnall (1977) identifies a number of core news values or imperatives, which act as an implicit guide to the construction of news stories, including dramatisation, personalisation and immediacy. Jewkes (2004) updates this list, suggesting that a number of other news values also now determine an editor's perception of whether a story will appeal to his or her outlet's audience. These include stories that feature children as victims or offenders, stories with a celebrity angle, stories featuring crimes of a particularly violent or sexual nature, and stories featuring crimes with a strong element of spectacle, such as arson, rioting or police clashes with citizens. She also identifies proximity, both spatial and cultural, as a key new news value. Spatial proximity relates to the geographical nearness of an event while cultural proximity relates to the "relevance" of an event or crime to an audience or readership. For example, she suggests that the likelihood of the national news media lending its weight to a campaign to find a missing person is far higher if that missing person is a child or a young woman who is white, middle-class and of British descent. By contrast, if a missing person or victim of a crime is older, as in the example above, of African-Caribbean or Asian descent, is working-class or has had previous convictions, Jewkes argues that "reporters perceive that their audience is less likely to relate or empathise with the victim, and the case gets commensurably lower publicity" (Jewkes 2004: 57). Thus, in order to access media assistance with certain

investigations, police sources know that they need to have an understanding of newsworthiness and that not all cases will fit those criteria (Fenton 2009).

Secondly, police sources, both press officers and individual officers, suggested that reporters often operate with the assumption that “something hidden is going on” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 126). However, as one senior officer explained, the predominant reason for secrecy is that disclosure of information might prejudice an investigation in progress by affecting the production and later value of evidence. Police officers also face the dilemma that disclosure may allow them to portray their work or the organisation in a better light, but enclosure is essential in the circumstances or is a legal requirement.

One police source described the pressure he had felt from the Press Bureau to give details to the press of the arrest of a serial rapist who had attacked a number of elderly victims, even though such information would prejudice his investigation.

“I know x (Press Officer) wanted us to get in first to manage the reputation of the organisation, which was going to take a battering, because it had taken us twelve years to catch him. But we needed to make sure that the inevitable mass of public speculation didn’t interfere with the fairness of his trial. And there was a big tension between protecting the integrity of the investigation versus the reputation of the organisation.”

Other reasons given for maintaining secrecy about back region work included sensitivity to the impact of publicity on citizens involved in a particular case, and not giving “the criminal element” information that might be to their benefit. However, at the same time, officers – and press officers – realised that if they remained secretive about back-region activities, they ran the risk – especially in an increasingly competitive media culture with huge pressure put daily on journalists to fill space

(Davies 2008) – that, as one respondent suggested, reporters would “either dig things up by themselves and print them or make them up”. One tactic (Chibnall 1977; Ericson *et al.* 1989; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994) used by heads of specialist desks, such as Counter-Terrorism, was to take the news media into their confidence and ask them to postpone the publication of certain information:

“The one I refer to particularly is post 9/11, where the accusation at the time was that we were exaggerating the terrorist threat, in order to support British foreign policy in Iraq. We had a lot of terrorist cases in the pipeline where the evidence would eventually come out but we couldn’t tell the public yet what we’d found. So there was a clear public interest in informing editors, we’ve found plans for dirty bombs so that they didn’t then rush off writing things which were wrong ... which would undermine our ability to mount effective investigations.”

Although the dominant view in the literature in the 1970s, and again in this decade, is that the police–journalist relationship in the United Kingdom is asymmetrical in favour of the police, all police respondents in this study felt quite dependent on journalists and that, whatever partial control they had over information, journalists had the power to edit and the power of the last word.

Back region activities

For any bureaucratic organisation with hundreds of departments and thousands of employees, control of knowledge is always partial. The effort to control such information is a perpetual struggle and, as Ericson *et al.* comment, although “the police devise various formal–organisation appearances that they are in command ... fundamental control remains elusive” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 12). They go on to

comment that the work of an organisation, in this case, police–media relations, “does not get done simply in terms of where the parties are supposed to connect on the organizational charts” but is “accomplished through a complex web of relations, affinities, trust and reciprocity” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 129).

One of the key ways in which journalists attempt to circumvent the gatekeeping role of police–public relations is to establish their own police contacts and sources (Chibnall 1977; Ericson *et al.* 1989, 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Mawby 2010, 2012; Lee and McGovern 2014). In her witness statement to the Leveson Inquiry, the British crime reporter Sandra Laville gave her reasons for seeking to circumvent “official” channels of information:

“The Met is very bad at answering questions when things have gone wrong or at giving out information on incompetent investigations that affect the public or have put the public at risk ... As such I have always sought and built contacts with police officers, whose desire is to keep an open flow of information in order to highlight abuses of power, to highlight the brilliant work of a team member ... to correct any mistakes I might be about to make.” (Laville 2012b: 3)

For many crime journalists, having informal links to the police is invaluable in the search for an exclusive story in an increasingly competitive market (Fenton 2009). As one respondent commented, “If you just relied on the Press Bureau, all you’d get is the party line. You need to talk to people on the job, who are out there on the front line, who know what’s really happening.” Such relationships would often be built over a number of years and “would operate as structured allegiances that can be seen as competing and/or operating in tandem with official channels of information” (Lee and McGovern 2014: 195). Additionally, such relationships could often bring benefits

to both parties, as one crime journalist describes working on the case of Carole Waugh, a middle-aged woman, whose body was found three months after her mysterious disappearance in a garage in Surrey in 2012.

“So I rang my detective to ask him if it was true what my ring-in had said, that she was not a millionaire businesswoman which is how we’d all been reporting, but that she was actually a high class escort. So first of all, he said he couldn’t answer, then about an hour later he rang back, said he’d spoken to the family and yes, that was an avenue of inquiry that she was an escort and would it be possible as a tip-off back to ring my guy.”

But as Lee and McGovern suggest in their study of Australian police–news media relations, journalists are not the only ones who “actively resist attempts to govern their activities” (Lee and McGovern 2014: 195) and among the key concerns of both the Filkin and Leveson Reports (2012) were the ways in which police officers at all levels, for a wide range of reasons, also seek to circumvent official channels of information, by revealing “back-region” secrets to the press (Filkin Report 2012; Lee and McGovern 2014).

When asked why they thought colleagues often gave unauthorised information to the press, police respondents suggested that it was for a variety of reasons and would vary according to the rank of the officer and the nature of the interaction he or she would have with the press (Filkin 2012). Some suggested that, at street level, officers might leak information to the press “for a sense of importance, getting one over on their colleagues, a bit of self-aggrandisement”. Others suggested that ambition was a motivating factor at street level and above. But a key problem at all levels were “leaks” to reporters on special police operations. One police respondent described how he had endeavoured to keep secret the impending arrests of the four

men involved in the attempted London bombing on 21 July 2005, to the extent that he had not even given the operational details to the Directorate of Media and Communication, “simply because you put anyone who has that information in an awkward position if there is a problem”. However, as he recounted, the information was leaked to a television reporter:

“who was standing outside Parliament the day the arrests were made. Could have been the Met. Could have even have been inside Number Ten. Could have been both. But what I do know is the organisation is a sieve.”

Media respondents also spoke of access to systematic sources of police information and that contacts would run criminal information checks for them. One journalist spoke of a deal he had made with a senior officer who, knowing that the journalist was about to run a potentially sensitive story on him, offered “information on another colleague’s investigation to get me off his back”.

Goffman (1959) argues that there are a number of types of secret that may be disclosed about an organisation’s back regions, the types being “based upon the function the secret performs and the relation of the secret to the conception others have about the possessor” (Goffman 1959: 141). One such type is the “dark” secret – facts about a team or organisation “which it knows and conceals and which are incompatible with the image of self that the team attempts to maintain before its audience” (Goffman 1959: 141). Leaks about police corruption, malpractice and/or incompetent investigations affecting the public or putting the public at risk fall into this category, and many journalists recounted how several major stories about police corruption and police malpractice had come to them from insider police contacts. The crime correspondent Sandra Laville, echoing these findings, commented in an article in *The Guardian*:

“Within the Met, the Guardian knows of at least two cases where whistleblowers have been bullied, isolated and investigated for spurious disciplinary offences which have never been proven, after making complaints to superior officers about bad practice, including racism and sexual assault.” (Laville 2012a)

For that reason, as one interviewee explained, rather than making complaints through official channels, whistle-blowers in the police organisation have preferred to make contact anonymously with journalists.

Finally, as the Leveson Inquiry noted, “sometimes the motive for approaching the press is little other than personal disgruntlement or the desire to wound colleagues” (Leveson 2012: 987). In his study of police–media relations, Silverman (2012) argues that, particularly for senior officers, the media provides valuable resources in terms of forging reputations or fighting personality battles. Goffman (1959) categorises this as the “strategic” secret – a secret to be released in order to “disrupt the performance” of the organisation. A respondent interviewed for this study gave an example of this. He was given in confidence a story about a senior police officer’s sexual indiscretion by one of the officer’s colleagues. However, as the journalist explained, the motive for divulging this secret was not merely to discredit a colleague but to bring about, by using leverage of adverse publicity in the press, the officer in question’s resignation. As the respondent explained:

“I thought long and hard, was this in the public interest? So I was taking soundings from other senior police officers who were independent, who didn’t have an axe to grind against that man. And I came to the conclusion that it had to be. He was a senior officer who came within a whisker of losing his job over a high profile murder case. Who had exercised poor judgement. And had

gone on holiday in the first twenty-four hours of a major investigation, two missing girls... If he'd had a clean slate, so to speak, beforehand ... then I might, I might not have done it.”

If control over knowledge in any large organisation can only ever be partial, the easiest way, as Ericson *et al.* (1989) argue, for the police to overcome “the ways in which they lose power in their relationship with reporters is to develop a spatial, social and cultural system of relations that maintains a spirit of trust and reciprocity” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 126). In the next section, the study explores how the recommendations of the Filkin and Leveson Reports on police–media relations were implemented by the Metropolitan Police Service and laid waste any relations of trust and reciprocity between the MPS and the national press that had previously existed.

The big chill? The balance of power between the Metropolitan Police Service and the national news media, post July 2011

Closure of front and back region access

In July 2011, employees of News International were accused of phone hacking and police bribery. This was followed by Operations Elveden (investigating allegations of inappropriate payments to police officers) and Weeting (investigating allegations of phone hacking) and reviews by Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary (HMIC, 2011), Elizabeth Filkin (Filkin 2012) and Lord Leveson (Leveson 2012) of the relationship between the press and the police.

The concerns raised by these reports revolved round a number of issues: that some senior police officers had become too close to senior media personnel, that hospitality was out of control (Mawby 2012) and that information had been leaked to media outlets for various reasons. However, while the HMIC Report (2011) suggested

that a record of all meetings between police officers and press contacts should be made, the Filkin Report (2012) was more proscriptive and suggested that all police officers should make notes of information supplied to the press with such records being freely available to their line manager (Filkin 2012: 44).

Despite all Reports highlighting the importance of the media's public function and explicitly warning against a disproportionate response to their findings (Filkin 2012: 7; Leveson 2012: 20), respondents in this study indicate that the initial response by Scotland Yard and by the Directorate of Media and Communication was a severe limitation on official requests for interviews and information on ongoing investigations and a clampdown on unofficial contact with the press, with officers being threatened with disciplinary proceedings in the event of any unauthorised disclosures being made to the press. As one journalist explained:

“I went to a briefing today on the Sapphire Rape Unit. Now this is open knowledge that the Unit is in crisis but today we were all given these success figures about rape and I knew that they were glossing over the big issue – that the Unit is in serious trouble. But I can't do anything without officers in Sapphire to talk to me. And we know there's a problem but we can't report it. It's bad for the public, bad for democracy and bad for the police.”

These recommendations came at a time when police–news media relations were being transformed globally by the increasing use of social media such as Facebook, YouTube, Twitter and Flickr by the police to disseminate information about initiatives, to appeal for help with investigations and to promote police work (Lee and McGovern 2014). In the last fifteen years, as Lee and McGovern (2014) observe, not only has the Internet “grown to become one of the most powerful tools in the police's media and public relations toolbox” but police organisations globally

have made “strategising round social media ... a priority within media and public affairs branches of police organisations” (Lee and McGovern 2014). In his witness report to the Leveson Inquiry in 2012, Dick Fedorcio, a former Director of Media and Communication at Scotland Yard, gave examples of how the MPS used social media to publicise front region activities (Goffman 1959). These included regular webchats between the Commissioner and Londoners and posting photos during the riots in London in August 2011 of wanted suspects on Flickr, a website designed specifically for photo sharing. Police respondents in this study also described how social media allowed them to reach new audiences when publicising new initiatives, with one explaining that “If we want to publicise a knife crime operation, seventeen to twenty one year olds aren’t going to read *The Guardian*. But they are going to look on Facebook”. The same respondent also argued that, by using social media, the Metropolitan Police Service could also publicise stories that would not be deemed newsworthy by the national press (Chibnall 1977; Jewkes 2004; Dean 2011).

“We put out a story about two officers going into a burning building and saving a family, putting their lives at risk. Got a little bit on the local TV news, nothing in the *Evening Standard*. But when we put it on our social media channel, that got a massive reaction.”

Although there have been a limited number of criminological studies on the effect of new and social media on police–news media relations (Greer and McLaughlin 2010; Mawby 2010; Goldsmith 2010, 2015; Lee and McGovern 2014), the ways in which new media have reconfigured traditional source–media dynamics have been widely explored in a cultural studies context (Fenton 2009; Davis 2007; Couldry 2009). In a study of NGOs and their use of new media, Fenton (2009) argues that, in increasingly competitive news markets, NGOs can follow one of two routes –

produce copy that conforms to normative news values or follow the path initiated by grassroots pressure groups, as she terms them, groups “that reject wholesale any relationship with mainstream media on the grounds that they will distort and misrepresent their views and use new media for the dissemination of alternative news and views” (Fenton 2009: 196). In the same vein, press officers from the MPS argued that new and particularly social media allowed them the chance to communicate more directly with their public than ever before and to have more control – at least in initial dissemination – over the content of material released than was the case when dealing with traditional media.

Given the restrictions on official and unofficial contact with the press and consequent closure of access to both front and back region activities of the MPS, coupled with the use of new media as a way of bypassing traditional news media to disseminate information and gain positive publicity, Mawby’s (2010) observation that the balance of power in terms of the police–news media relationship would seem to be asymmetrically in favour of the police might be seen to be prescient.

However, while the use of social media and new technologies may have enabled the police to communicate more directly with the public than ever before in disseminating front region activities, Lee and McGovern (2014) suggest that:

“The very same technologies and forums police are employing have also provided the public with more sophisticated ways in which to monitor the police and publicly disseminate and circulate images and narratives that potentially counter those coming from the police.” (Lee and McGovern 2014: 174)

Lee and McGovern (2014) argue that the beating of African-American construction worker Rodney King in 1991 by officers from the Los Angeles Police

Department, captured on film by a bystander observing from his flat, “constituted a watershed moment in the capacity for citizen countersurveillance” (Lee and McGovern 2014: 179.) But, as they also observe, the timing was felicitous – what has changed between 1991 and the present day is the ubiquity of smartphones allowing citizens to record police malpractice and to upload content almost instantaneously onto social media sites. Greer and McLaughlin (2010) argue that, in terms of the police–news media relationship, one of the critical developments of the last few years has been that of the citizen journalist, a term defined by Allan and Thorsen (2009) as “the spontaneous actions of ordinary people, caught up in extraordinary events, who felt compelled to adopt the role of a news reporter”. They discuss how press coverage of the G20 riots in 2009 and the death of a newspaper vendor called Ian Tomlinson changed as a result of the emergence of mobile phone footage showing Ian Tomlinson being beaten by a police officer with a baton. As Greer and McLaughlin (2010) argue, citizen journalism has not only provided “a valuable additional source of real-time information” but also helped to challenge “the ‘official truth’, as portrayed by those powerful institutional sources who have traditionally maintained a relatively uncontested position at the top of the ‘hierarchy of credibility’” (Greer and McLaughlin 2010: 1056).

But social media also pose another difficulty for the police. As Fenton (2009) argues, although early commentators on the advent of the internet and its impact on journalistic practices eulogised its “democratic potential, its ability to become a tool for the people wresting power from the elite structures of society” (Fenton 2009: 4), later researchers commented on “how the lack of accountability and anonymity of those responding online also introduces concerns of verification, accountability and accuracy”. These concerns were echoed by many police respondents, who suggested

that the advent of new media coupled with the deterioration of relations between the Metropolitan Police Service and the national news media could have grave consequences – not only in terms of inaccurate, speculative reports, based on information from members of the public posting on Twitter, but could also on occasion causing distress to victims’ families or prejudicing judicial proceedings by releasing the names of suspects into the public domain too soon. One respondent cited an example:

“My colleagues have had this with the Jimmy Savile³ case where there are one or two celebrities were being investigated but obviously we didn’t give their identities to the press, but their identities circulated on social media. And that has a massive impact on the victims’ families as they want to know if this is true, and where this information is coming from.”

Additionally, police respondents involved in frontline activities – heads of specialist units or murder detectives, in the case of this study – expressed concern that the breakdown in relations with the national press, forcing journalists to find other sources for stories, including social media, would lead to more and more inaccurate reporting of cases, possibly with serious consequences for the Metropolitan Police Service. As one police respondent explained:

“The press seem to think that the big problem in this clampdown on contact is that they won’t be able to carry out their Fourth Estate Role but the fact is the real problem for both sides is the fact that without contact, without that trust, things are going to be put in the public domain that are not in the public

³ Jimmy Savile was an English DJ, television and radio personality, dance hall manager, and charity fundraiser. After his death, hundreds of allegations of sexual abuse were made against him, leading the police to believe that Savile was a predatory sex offender – possibly one of Britain's most prolific.

interest, that are going to damage police operations and are going to damage press credibility if they put out information they can't back up."

But in a fast-moving, highly competitive media environment, the pressure is on journalists to fill space and break news, with or without police co-operation. One seasoned crime reporter described how he tried to access information about the shooting of Mark Duggan⁴, whose killing by Metropolitan Police officers in North London was the trigger for the nationwide riots in the United Kingdom in 2011.

"On the Friday morning, there was a news agency report that Duggan had been dragged from his car and shot in the head by police officers. So your immediate reaction is that it can't be right, but you can't ignore it. So I put it to a lot of people and all I got was no comment. Whereas in the past, they would have given you a steer, like they didn't think that was right, or a bit of background but with the big freeze there was nothing. So we couldn't take the chance of not printing it – by then there was all manner of things on social media, and if we didn't run it, the others would, so we went ahead but with the caveat that a witness had claimed they'd seen this, to clear us from the risk of prosecution."

Yet, as one press officer explained, in a climate in which colleagues had been investigated for having a coffee with a press contact, using discretion to decide what could or could not be given as background to a journalist was a luxury they could no longer afford. In the same vein, the more seasoned crime journalists understood the reason for reticence on the part of former contacts within the MPS, both within the

⁴ Mark Duggan, a 29-year-old Tottenham resident, was shot and killed by police in Tottenham, North London, England, on 4 August 2011. The Metropolitan Police stated that officers were attempting to arrest Duggan on suspicion of planning an attack, and that he was in possession of a handgun.

Press Bureau and within the wider organisation, but nevertheless argued that if the MPS refused to comment or assist with press enquiries, they still had a “job to do, a paper to fill”. One respondent explained that his tactic post-Leveson was “to call the Press Bureau, send a mail, say okay, here’s the story I am going to write, do you have any comments? And if they don’t, then it’s on their heads if we don’t get it right.”

As Ericson *et al.* 1989 argue, “a source organisation that is expected to engage the public conversation and fails to do so, sews the seeds of long-term hostile relations with journalists” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 381). Currently, the relationship between the MPS and the national news media would seem to be in such a parlous state. While police officers and press officers alike welcomed what they hoped would be a decrease in leaks to the press, through restrictions on unofficial contact, they also acknowledged that, by their silence, they also relinquished any control they might have had over accounts of crimes and ongoing investigations printed in the press. As one respondent said:

“By monitoring every interaction, I think we (the Metropolitan Police Service) believe we have won the battle. We’ve lost. And I think instead of us controlling negative publicity, we’re actually going to see more and more of it as a result of the lack of trust and the culture of fear we’ve set up in the organisation and in our relations with the media. And that is also going to affect the public and their perception of us as an organisation.”

While new media may seem to have enabled the police to bypass the traditional news media, new media technologies and platforms are “also being deployed to promote and produce counter-discourse and resistances to preferred police messages” (Lee and McGovern 2014). At the same time, restricted contact between the MPS and the national news media has forced crime journalists to seek

out alternative sources for stories, including social media, but lack of accountability over the content of such media, coupled with press officers' increasing fear of dealing with the press, has led to increasingly inaccurate reporting, compromising investigations or giving the public erroneous information, as in the case of Mark Duggan.

Conclusion

This paper has set out to explore relations between the MPS and the national news media, both prior to and following the Leveson and Filkin Reports on the ethics of the relationship between the police as an organisation and the news media. The study suggests that prior to the events of July 2011, which precipitated the commissioning of these two Reports, the relationship was complex, multilayered and contingent – that openness to both front and back region activities of the MPS revolved round a number of factors, both social and cultural, including the policy of the then Commissioner towards press relations, the personality of the Commissioner in question, the agenda of individual press officers in terms of dealing with the press and individual relationships formed between press officers, individual police officers and members of the national news media. Although previous academic literature has either suggested a relationship between the two parties in which the police are the dominant party or a more symbiotic relationship in which both parties have a mutually beneficial relationship, police respondents in this study argued that they often felt vulnerable in their relationships with the press. While they might be the “primary definers of crime and its control to the public” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 123), police and press officers argued that, prior to July 2011, they often “sensed a loss of

control over specific terms of the communication” (Ericson *et al.*, 1989: 124) and that they frequently believed the media held the upper hand.

Although, in the wake of recommendations by the Leveson and Filkin Reports (2012) that all police contact with the press should be recorded, commentators (Laville 2012; Campbell 2013; Mawby 2014) have expressed concern that the balance of police–press power has swung firmly towards the police, this paper suggests that the current police–press relationship is somewhat more complex. It might seem that the police are more in control than ever before of the flow of information and police news to the press, and that the advent of social media has further strengthened their position, by enabling them to communicate more directly with the public than ever before and by affording them complete control over the information released (Lee and McGovern 2014).

However, as a result of restrictions on contact with the press, journalists have been forced to seek other news stories, including stories accessed through social media. The lack of accountability for material posted online, coupled with Scotland Yard press officers’ reluctance to engage with the press beyond their very limited remit, has led to increasingly inaccurate and, at times, inflammatory reporting, sometimes with serious consequences for operational policing.

But more than that, the restrictions imposed on contact between the police and the press has serious implications for democratic practices in this country. As Lord Leveson argued in the Leveson Inquiry (2012):

“In our mature democracy policing must be with the consent of the public ... The public must be kept aware of policing concerns and must engage in the debate. Therefore the press has a vital role: it must encourage the public to engage in the criminal justice system by coming forward with evidence and it

must applaud when criminals are brought to justice as a result. The press must also hold the police to account, acting as the eyes and ears of the public.”

(Leveson 2012:20)

In the current climate, the public are not being kept aware of policing concerns. Journalists are aware that when official briefings on MPS work are held, they are only being given part of the story or an overly favourable impression of police work, as in the case of the reporter discussing the briefing on the Sapphire Rape Unit’s work; but without informal contacts to corroborate their concerns, they are unable to voice their fears in the press. Inaccurate information is being printed in the press because police press officers are worried about overstepping their brief and giving too much information to journalists. And while in the past, many abuses of police power or corruption were brought to the attention of the press by serving officers, this channel has now seemingly been closed. If, as Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) argue, “openness and publicity are means of making political life transparent and accountable” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994:8), the current climate of censorship and control dominating the police – press relationship must surely work in a contrary direction.

While both police and press respondents acknowledged that relations between some police officers, particularly in the MPS, and some members of the news media had been problematical, both sides believed, as one police respondent put it, “that the police have over-reacted. What was needed was a sticking plaster and instead they have put a bloody great cast on the problem”. However, Reiss (1984) suggests that, given the larger an organisation is, the more vulnerable it is to disclosure of its secrets, the best way to police such knowledge is not by deterrence, but by combining “control with compliance, surveillance with trust” (Reiss 1984: 29). In the case of

police–media relations prior to July 2011, this study argues that a relationship of trust and reciprocity did exist between a significant number of MPS officers, press officers and members of the national press, a relationship in which journalists, by and large, were trusted to maintain “secrecy and confidence when it count[ed]” and with “having the good sense ... not to publicise something when it might affect the organisation negatively” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 381). It is clear for many reasons – the legitimacy of policing, the ability of the public to assess and understand the conduct of policing, the integrity of crime news reporting and the integrity of operational police work – that a relationship of trust and reciprocity needs to be rebuilt between the police and press, even if such trust and reciprocity may be as “elusive as the control of knowledge itself” (Ericson *et al.* 1989: 382).

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Figure 1

Regions and closures

