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# Policing, social media and the new media landscape: can the police and the traditional media ever successfully bypass each other?

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**Policing, social media and the new media landscape: can the police and the traditional media ever successfully bypass each other?**

This study explores three issues. Firstly, it examines the effect of the use of digital platforms on the relationship between the police, the press and the public, in the context of restricted police/press contact, following the recommendations of the Filkin and Leveson Reports (2012). Secondly, it considers the question, raised in an Australian context (Lee & McGovern, 2014), as to whether the use of digital platforms allows the police, or more specifically in this study, the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS), to bypass the national British news media. Lastly, it identifies convergences and divergences with Lee and McGovern's (2014) study of police and press relations. Lee and McGovern's (2014) study indicates that, while the use of digital platforms has increased police control over flow of information, there is still a symbiotic police/press relationship. This study finds that, while the use of digital platforms has appeared to increase police transparency, the reverse is the case, and that the use of digital platforms has given the MPS more control than ever before over the flow of information to the press. The study suggests that these developments have serious consequences for the integrity of crime reporting and for democratic practices in the United Kingdom.

**Introduction**

In 2003, Leishman and Mason noted that 'the Internet provides the police with many useful opportunities to promote their activities, not least in terms of updating press

releases and "controlling the context" of such activities' (Leishman & Mason, 2003, p. 41). Since this observation was made, police use of social media has expanded far beyond the dissemination of information and the promotion of police activities. Police press officers work with operational officers to appeal for assistance with ongoing investigations, circulate information about suspects, deliver public safety messages and receive intelligence from the general public. Before social media, police organisations would communicate with the general public mainly through the news media. Audiences now are 'increasingly choosing, or being asked to be part of the news-making process' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 13), through being encouraged to send tip-offs or mobile phone footage directly to the police through social media.

In the United Kingdom, the rise of social media coincided with an expansion in police corporate communications, massive job losses in the news industry and severe restrictions on police and press relations. In 2011, the House of Commons Home Affairs Committee recorded concerns that senior Metropolitan Police Officers had been accepting hospitality from senior employees of the media company, News International. Two police investigations ensued – Operation Elvedon, investigating inappropriate payments made by the press to police officers, and Operation Weeting, investigating phone-hacking by British journalists – and three major reviews of police and media relations (HMIC, 2011; Filkin, 2012; Leveson, 2012). The HMIC Report (2011) recommended clearer guidelines on police/press relations and more training, but the Filkin Report (2012) took a more proscriptive stance. It argued that 'the relationship between the Metropolitan Police Service [MPS] and the press had caused serious harm' (Filkin, 2012, p. 37) to the reputation of the police and that lack of recorded contact had been a factor in 'improper disclosure of information' (Filkin, 2012, p. 10) to the press. As a result, Filkin (2012) recommended the recording of all contact between police

officers and journalists. This was implemented immediately in early 2012 with severe restrictions on official contact between the police and the press and a clampdown on all unofficial contact (Mawby, 2014; XXXX, 2017). Although the Leveson Report (2012), published eleven months after the Filkin Report (2012), noted that 'the police should not seek to constrain the media' and that 'the media … play a key role in holding the police to account' (Leveson, 2012, p. 745), it too recommended notes to be taken of all contact between senior officers – though not junior officers – and the press, despite concerns raised by a number of former Commissioners, including Lord Blair who noted that 'any set of regulations would be overtaken by the development of social media' (Blair quoted in Leveson, 2012, p. 931).

In the context of these technological, cultural and social changes, this study sets out to explore the impact of social media on current police/news media relations in the United Kingdom, to explore in a British context, Lee and McGovern's (2014) observation that the use of social media has allowed the police 'to bypass the traditional media altogether' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 114), and to compare and contrast findings with Lee and McGovern's (2014) Australian study.

This study has a very specific focus, concentrating on the use of social media by the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) and on relations between the MPS and the national news media. This is for a number of reasons. Firstly, the MPS's media relations are more complex than those of other forces: the MPS'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. As a result, the MPS's use of social media is far-reaching and extensive – in terms of Twitter alone, the MPS uses over 300 different channels to bring Londoners updates from different areas. Secondly, all three enquiries (HMIC, 2011;

Filkin, 2012; Leveson, 2012) into police/news media relations, following the phone-hacking scandal of 2011, focused on relationships between senior MPS officers and members of the national press. It can thus be reasonably assumed that restrictions on contact with the press by the police have hit the national press hardest – and, for that reason, the use of social media by the MPS is particularly salient in this study. The study is based on empirical research between 2012 and 2015, which comprised interviews with senior MPS 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 gain a critical purchase and to identify convergences and divergences between Lee and McGovern's (2014) study and the findings in this paper, I draw, as do Lee and McGovern (2014), on the work of De Certeau (1984), which explores power relations between producers and users of social representations and how people reappropriate rituals, laws and representations imposed upon them by organisations or institutions. Lee and McGovern (2014) use this structure to explore how the police use social media and digital platforms to control the flow of information to the press and to the public, and how the press and public 'encroach on the enemy's territory' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37) by using the same platforms and new technologies to enact 'tactics of resistance' (De Certeau, 1984, p. xix) to monitor the police or to challenge the police version of events. This study also uses this framework to understand the complex power relations between the police and the press and the impact of digital platforms on that relationship in the United Kingdom, but extends Lee and McGovern's (2014) analysis to understand how much resistance or 'anti-discipline' is possible on the part of the press in a climate of already restricted police/press contact and what consequences this may have for police accountability and transparency.

**Methods**

As this study has a specific focus, namely the effect of social media on relations between the national press and the MPS, the sample size is necessarily small. Nevertheless, it is hoped that the study may serve as a starting point for further research of this nature in the United Kingdom and as a point of comparison for studies of the impact of social and digital media on police relations with the public and with the traditional press in other jurisdictions.

All interviewees were selected to ensure that they were indicative of the reporters and police professionals needed for this project – namely, reporters working freelance or for national, London-based tabloid, broadsheet or broadcast outlets and former or current police press professionals or senior police officers whose work brought them regularly into contact with the press. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 23 crime correspondents, working on national news outlets, both print, including online, and broadcast outlets, of whom 22 were male and one was female. Two other female crime journalists were approached but declined to be interviewed. This reflects the gender imbalance in this particular area of reporting (Franks 2013). 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 MPS officers from specialist squads whose work brought them into contact on a daily basis with press officers and heads of communication as well as the national press, in order to ascertain whether recent technological and cultural changes in police and media relations had had any impact on operational policing. All respondents were male.

The experience of journalists, press officers and senior MPS officers 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 in excess of thirty years' experience.

Work began in July 2012 and was completed in autumn 2015. Interviews were 'on the record' and tape-recorded, apart from one police source, where notes were taken throughout the interview. Each interview lasted between 30 minutes and two hours. As some of my interviews had taken place at a time when relations between the MPS and the national media were at a particularly low ebb, I knew that my respondents might have a certain agenda in giving me a particular version of events. I decided to code manually rather than using computer software, concerned that software in this instance might lead to an 'overemphasis on decontextualised instances' (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007, p. 156). Data was subsequently analysed with reference to the existing literature on police/media relations and theoretical considerations. Questions relating to the core concern of this study were: (1) What impact have social media had on police communication with the public and the press? (2) What impact have social media had on crime reporting? (3) How have social media and new technologies transformed working practices of police sources and crime journalists? (4) How have they transformed the relations between the police and the traditional news media and to what effect?

**Police and traditional news media relations in context**

Greer and McLaughlin (2012) argue that a key component of past 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, p. 140). Although this model influenced early studies of crime reporting in the 1970s (Chibnall,

1977; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke, & Roberts, 1978), subsequent studies in Canada in the late 1980s (Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, 1989) and in the United Kingdom in the 1990s (Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994) stressed the importance of economic factors and organisational behaviour as well as working relationships between sources and reporters in shaping the news.

However, by the end of the 2000s, two studies by Cooke and Sturges (2009) and Mawby (2010) suggested that the wheel had turned full circle. In a study of relations between regional and national crime reporters and eight regional police forces, including heads of communications within those forces, Mawby (2010) argued that an expansion in police corporate communications had coincided with a worldwide crisis in the news media. He suggested that the asymmetric police/news media relationship identified by Hall et al. (1978) and Chibnall (1977) endured, and that the advent of new technologies and social media would only strengthen that asymmetry, arguing 'that the strategic choices of forces are likely to be in the direction of direct communication that bypasses the traditional media' (Mawby, 2010, p. 1073). While Mawby (2010)'s focus was mainly on police/press relations, in a case study exploring coverage of the 2009 G20 Summit Protests in London, Greer and McLoughlin (2010) explored the news-making process from another angle, arguing that new technologies could, on occasion, enable members of the public to produce information challenging the 'official' version of events. They discuss how mobile phone footage produced by a bystander showed that the death of a newspaper vendor, Ian Tomlinson, was due to to police brutality and not natural causes – the version of events given to the press by the MPS – and how, as a result, 'the news media focus at G20 changed from one of "protestor violence" to "police violence"' (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010, p. 1041). They argue that the transition was brought about by three factors: the greater capacity of citizens to monitor the press

through new technologies; the greater inclination of press and public to seek out and use that information; and finally the greater willingness of the press to take a stance 'that is more antagonistic towards institutional authority and more likely to take seriously … complaints against it' (Greer & McLaughlin, 2010, p. 1055). Thus, at the end of the 2000s, while justifiable concern was noted in the United Kingdom over 'the future ability of crime reporters to provide independent critical reporting on policing and crime' (Mawby, 2010, p. 1073), in a rapidly changing media and cultural landscape, new technologies appeared to offer new opportunities for the public and the press to monitor the police and for the press to continue to carry out its Fourth Estate role.

**The police and the rise of social media**

UK forces began experimenting with social media in 2008, with officers using it to engage with the public as part of neighbourhood policing programmes (Crump, 2011). However, the riots in the United Kingdom in August 2011, triggered by the shooting of a young man, Mark Duggan, by police in Tottenham, were a turning point for police interest in social media (Proctor, Crump, Karstedt, Voss, & Cantijoch, 2013). Anger about the shooting spread across social media and helped to trigger widespread public disturbance and attacks on property (HMIC, 2011). At the same time, social media enabled the MPS and the Greater Manchester Police to crowd-source information (Trottier, 2014), posting photos of suspects online and asking for witnesses to help with investigations.

Since 2011, studies exploring the use of social media by the police have emerged. A number of studies have explored the impact of social media on the police relationship with the press and the public in an Australian context. Using the disappearance, rape and murder of an Australian woman, Jill Meagher, in 2012 as a case study, Milivojevic

and McGovern (2014) argue that the case illustrates two key issues: the power of ordinary citizens through social media platforms to bring cases to the attention of the mainstream media; and the power of social media platforms to disrupt criminal justice proceedings and prejudice an individual's right to a fair trial – in this case, through the release of information on Facebook and Twitter relating to Jill Meagher's murderer's previous criminal convictions.

In another study, Johnston and McGovern (2013) compare and contrast police and courts' use of social media, drawing on Habermas' (1998) work on modes of communication. They suggest that the courts' use of social media is 'communicative' (Habermas, 1998, p. 119) and geared towards giving information to stakeholders and ensuring accuracy of court proceedings. By contrast, they suggest that the police's use of social media is 'strategic' and aimed towards 'exerting influence' (Habermas, 1998, p. 222), including 'increas[ing] public confidence and reduc[ing] community concerns over crime' (Johnston & McGovern, 2013, p. 1679).

In a longer study, Lee and McGovern (2014) examine how the New South Wales (NSW) Police Force are increasingly utilising social media and other forms of new communication technologies to interact with the public in innovative ways, They argue that the use of social media enables the police to communicate more directly with the public than ever before but also has opened up 'new possibilities for image work and operational policing' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 60). Press officers are no longer just 'engaged in information dissemination, they are actively working with operational police to identify and apprehend offenders, to deliver public safety messages and to receive intelligence through their "networks"' (Lee & McGovern, 2014). While, in the past, police organisations would have achieved many of these objectives through the mainstream media, Lee and McGovern (2014) argue that these new technologies are

increasingly enabling the police 'to bypass the traditional media altogether' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 114). Ellis and McGovern (2016) also explore the impact of social media on the police's relationship with the mainstream media and the public. They comment that, while the advent of digital platforms has 'resulted in a greater volume of and easier access to police generated operational information, the police maintain a premium on that information and control it more tightly than ever before' (Ellis & McGovern, 2016, pp. 956–957). They argue that, consequently, the police are less open than before to 'critical scrutiny by journalists' and that the public are denied 'access to quality information [about policing] on which to make informed decisions' (Ellis & McGovern, 2016, p. 957).

However, despite Mawby's (2010) and Greer and McLaughlin's (2010) early interventions, the effect of social media on police-press relations remains under-researched in a British context, even though, as recent studies (Mawby, 2014; XXXX, 2017) have noted, communication between the police and the press, both official and unofficial, has been severely restricted for some years in the United Kingdom, with such restrictions roughly coinciding with the advent of widespread police use of social media in this country. This study seeks to address that knowledge gap.


**Strategies of power – how the police use social media**

De Certeau (1984) argues that there is always a 'power relationship' between the makers and users of all social representations and explores these battles through the concepts of 'strategies' and 'tactics' (De Certeau, 1984, pp. 35–36), both taken from military terms. 'Strategies' are linked with institutions and structures of power, who are the 'producers', while 'users' are individuals who operate in environments determined

by 'producers', using 'tactics' to re-use or make something different of these 'strategies' for their own purposes.

In order to pursue 'strategies of power', De Certeau (1984) argues that any institution or business first needs a '*plac*e that can be delineated as its own' and can 'serve as the base from which relations with an *exteriority,* composed of targets or threats … can be managed' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36). In the case of the MPS, the physical base is the Directorate of Media and Communication (formerly the Directorate of Public Affairs), which is the focal point for media contact with the MPS. There are four key branches within the Directorate: 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.

Although the dominant view in the early literature on police/news media relations was that the balance of power is asymmetrical in favour of the police (Chibnall, 1977; Hall et al., 1978), later studies (Ericson et al., 1987, 1989; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994; Innes, 1999; Mawby, 1999, 2002) suggested that the relationship was symbiotic. Ericson et al. (1989) noted that 'from the perspective of sources the news media are … in possession of key resources that often give them the upper hand' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 278). Police respondents in this study shared this viewpoint and, while they acknowledged that they 'controlled the primary definitions of the subject of address (crime, criminality and its control by police)' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 122), they also 'sensed of loss of control over specific terms of the communication' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 124) in dealing with the mainstream media.

In discussing 'tactics of resistance' open to users of representations, De Certeau (1984) suggested that one ploy is to subvert these representations by using them 'with respect to ends and references foreign to [the producers]' (De Certeau, 1984, p. xiii).

Officers discussed how journalists often took snippets from interviews to quote them out of context. But perhaps the biggest frustration expressed by both operational and press officers was the traditional press's emphasis on 'bad news'. While police respondents clearly understood that 'if they participate in the public conversation, [they] will be subjecting themselves and the organisation to the discourse of deviance and control' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 378), officers were nonetheless frustrated at what they perceived to be the national press's reluctance to publicise police successes:

> 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.

However, it would appear that by establishing a virtual as well as a physical base with which to 'establish relations with both targets or threats' .(De Certeau, 1984, p. 36), the MPS and police in other jurisdictions (Lee & McGovern, 2014) have been able to redress this balance. By establishing a base, De Certeau (1984) argues that organisations are able to achieve the following key objectives: 'to capitalise on acquired advantages, to prepare future expansions and to give oneself a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36). In the next three sections, I discuss how social media has allowed the MPS to achieve these objectives through digital platforms and increasingly to bypass the mainstream media.

*Promoting the police image*

Lee and McGovern (2014) argue that there are 'three key logics of contemporary police engagement with the media' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 40). The first of these logics is the management of police image.

In 2015, the Directorate of Media and Communication announced a reduction in

staff from fifty-five 'news roles' to forty (Turvill, 2 December 2015). At the same time, the Directorate launched a news website on the already existing digital site, the MyNewsDesk platform. In an interview with *Press Gazette*, Martin Fewell, the then head of the Directorate, explained its purpose:

> 'What we're doing via the MyNewsDesk service is … providing the content in the best possible way for news organisations … and get[ting] them to use as much of it as possible.' (*Press Gazette*, 2 December 2015)

In the same interview, Ed Stearns, the Directorate's then head of media, gave an example of this, describing how CCTV footage provided by the website, of a woman being punched on a bus, was taken up directly by the *Evening Standard.*

One of the advantages for institutions in having an established base is, according to De Certeau (1984), being able to 'capitalise on acquired advantages' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36). As Lee and McGovern (2014) and XXXX (2017) note, in the mid-2000s, 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, as news outlets also developed online news sites, led to a greater dependence by journalists on police-produced press releases and other promotional material. In a climate of already restricted police/press contact (Mawby, 2012; XXXX, 2017), the MPS are able to capitalise on the crisis in the news industry, by providing more and more ready-made news stories and video footage for news organisations globally. Both MPS and NSW press officers, in Lee and McGovern's (2014) study, acknowledged that such content still had to meet normative news values – as one commented, 'if it's not visually exciting and impactful, they won't use it'. Nevertheless, as Lee and McGovern (2014) comment, 'the fact that the police now have the capacity to film, edit and produce stories' means the police have greater capacity than ever before in dealing with the

mainstream press to 'convey preferred images of policing' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 116).

However, as Lee and McGovern also observe, 'what does not make the news will be almost certainly disseminated through social media' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 106). Another advantage for institutions of power in establishing a base is being able to 'achieve a certain independence with respect to the variability of circumstances' (De Certeau, 2014, p. 36). Lee and McGovern (2014) note that NSW officers suggested that 'important stories are often ignored by journalists … and that the location and readership of a media outlet has a significant effect on whether a story is picked up' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 100). Similarly, MPS press officers suggested that one of the problems in dealing with the mainstream media is that coverage for operations was not automatic; stories would often be deemed not newsworthy or of insufficient appeal to the so-called 'demographic' of many mainstream newspapers and broadcasters:

> Papers want glamour, celebrity and one of the least glamorous things that we do stuff about is female genital mutilation, which is a big issue in certain communities. But newspapers don't want to write about that sort of thing. We've got a little coverage in certain places but mainstream, they're not going to write a page lead. Might write a page lead if we mucked up an investigation but that's the only way we'd get that out there.

Social media also affords the MPS independence from the traditional media by allowing press officers to promote 'good news' stories on social media platforms:

> We put out a story about two police going into a burning building to rescue someone. Got one mention in a local paper and nothing anywhere else. We put it on social media and got a huge response and very positive response from the public.

In summary, the establishment of a 'virtual base' allows the MPS the ability to 'capitalise on the acquired advantages' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36) of the decline in the news industry, by being able to provide media outlets with in-house video packages, conveying 'preferred images of policing' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 116), and to achieve 'a certain independence' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36) from the news media by releasing stories – particularly ones of police success – that traditional news outlets might not feature.

### *Risk and responsibilisation*

The second key logic of engagement with the media is, according to Lee and McGovern, the management of public risk or communication of threats or dangers to citizens and the 'responsibilisation' (Garland, 2001) of the public.

Lee and McGovern (2014) suggest that the 'communication of risk and dissemination of educational messages about … safety to the public' have always been 'key media activities for the police' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 44), but they also note how, in the last three decades, in the UK and in Australia, the concept of 'responsibilisation' or delivering community safety through the active involvement of citizens and communities has featured heavily on policing agendas.

De Certeau (1984) argues that an additional advantage for an organisation in establishing a base is 'the mastery of places through sight' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36). This 'makes possible a panopticon practice proceeding from a place whence the eye can transform foreign objects into objects that can be … control[led]' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36). During and following the 2011 riots in the United Kingdom, police forces used social media platforms to allay public fears and concerns over safety. Similarly, Lee and McGovern (2014) report how, during two cyclones in Australia in late 2010

and early 2011, police used social media to inform the public about impending weather threats, safety measures and public transport closures, demonstrating how 'social media can play a vital role for police organisations in the dissemination of risk-related information' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 127).

But Lee and McGovern (2014) also argue that social media can be used in enlisting more general help with policing. During the 2011 riots in the United Kingdom, a number of forces used Facebook to call for information, publish photographs and to name rioters who had been convicted of offences (HMIC, 2011; Denef, Bayerl, & Kaptein, 2013; Proctor et al., 2013; Williams, Edwards, Housley, Burnap, Rana, Avis, Morgan, & Sloan, 2013). In their study, Lee and McGovern (2014) describe how NSW officers used You Tube to post CCTV footage of crime scenes to appeal to the public for information. In the United Kingdom, the MPS have been using social media to enlist the public's help with ongoing initiatives, such as the knife-crime campaign – and to reach new audiences, as one press officer commented:

> If you want to publicise a knife crime campaign, then you're not going to get fifteen to twenty five year olds reading *The Guardian*. But they will look on social media. So we ran a campaign, offering knife amnesty boxes across Lewisham. We also ran testimonies of families who'd been directly affected by knife crime – so both sides of the story. We couldn't have done that through the old media and we couldn't have spoken as directly to the people involved in this kind of crime.

In summary, social media thus allows the police to communicate risk more directly than ever before to the public, to enlist public support for police initiatives more effectively than through the traditional news media and, at the same time, to increase their 'panoptic capacity' (De Certeau, 1984) and capacity for social control.

*Trust and legitimacy*

The third key logic underpinning contemporary police-media engagement, according to Lee and McGovern (2014), is the attempt to increase trust in policing and in the legitimacy of the police organisation. They note that, in 2010, a new customer service charter, informed partly by a public satisfaction agenda, was implemented by the New South Wales Police Force. In the United Kingdom, Myhill and Bradford (2012) comment that 'in recent years, public opinions of the police has been a fixture at the top of the policy agenda in England and Wales, with successive governments stating they wish to see improvements in trust and confidence' (Myhill & Bradford, 2012). But while several studies in the United Kingdom and in the United States have indicated that citizens' willingness to co-operate with the police is directly linked to the trust they place in the organisation and the legitimacy they grant it (Tyler, 1997; Sunshine & Tyler, 2003; Hough, Jackson, Bradford, Myhill, & Quinton, 2010), international research has also shown that police encounters with the public have little or negative impact on public satisfaction (Skogan, 2006; Bradford, Jackson, & Stanko, 2009). Nevertheless, Myhill and Bradford (2012) suggest that the police do have the capacity to enhance public confidence and argue that one way of doing so is 'showing interest in what people have to say and, fundamentally, creating the impression that the police care' (Myhill & Bradford, 2012, p. 417).

De Certeau (1984) argues that another key way in which institutions benefit from setting up a base is in acquiring the ability to 'plan future expansions' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 34). Whereas in the past, 'the notion of direct police-public communications was something that only occurred in personalised contexts such as "the beat"' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 114), social media has allowed police officers at all levels to set

up dialogue with the public, while circumventing the potentially problematic nature of direct police/citizen encounters (Skogan, 2006; Bradford et al., 2009). In their study, Lee and McGovern (2014) describe the launch of Project Eyewatch on Facebook by the NSW Police Force in 2011, a project described as 'the twenty-first century's response to more conventional Neighbourhood Watch schemes' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 131), and suggest that the scheme not only creates a 'perception to the community that the police are successfully performing their policing role' but also sets up a dialogue and allows citizens to see themselves as 'part of the solution to the local crime problem' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, pp. 132-33).

In the United Kingdom, the MPS communicates to Londoners through various corporate Twitter feeds, including @MetPoliceUK, providing updates on news, and @MPSOnTheStreet, giving insights into individual jobs or roles. However, a more personal communication is set up through other digital channels – the Commissioner and other senior officers conduct regular webchats with Londoners, while officers are encouraged to communicate directly with the public through social media and to promote the work that they do, such strategies being seen by the MPS as an important way of humanising the police and of 'reintroducing the police to their community' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 129). As one MPS press officer commented:

> Social media shows the public that policing really is a 24 hour service. We are there for them to get in touch any time of day or night and we want to hear their concerns and what we can do to address those concerns. Basically it's never been more easy for the public to get in touch.

But while the logics underpinning the use of social media by the police might seem to be the same in both Australia and the United Kingdom, attitudes towards the impact of social media on police-press relations would seem to be very different in this study and

the study conducted by Lee and McGovern (2014). Officers interviewed for Lee and McGovern's (2014) study emphasised that social media was another 'strategy on top of the police's traditional media activities' (Lee & McGovern, 2014. p. 118). By contrast, as one press officer put it:

> the news media are no longer the only way of communicating with the public, they are just one of a number of ways – and not necessarily the most effective way for us to communicate with the biggest and most relevant audiences.

But, as Lee and McGovern (2014) argue, any 'strategies of control that attempt to create some dialogue … must create within them the possibilities for their contestation' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 74). The next section explores how far UK journalists are able to use 'tactics of resistance' (De Certeau, 1984) to resist the 'nets of discipline' (De Certeau, 1984) used by the MPS to control the flow of policing news in a climate of already restricted police/press contact.


**Tactics of resistance – how journalists use social media in crime reporting**

In De Certeau's (1984) work, the concept of 'tactics of resistance' is used to explore how people use mass culture, altering objects, representations or rituals imposed upon them by 'producers' to make them their own, or as De Certeau (1984) puts it, 'poaching on the property of others' (De Certeau, 1984, p. xii). Lee and McGovern (2014) use the concept to explore how, in the police/press relationship, journalists have also traditionally resisted 'strategies of power' by 'poaching on the territory of others' and operating within 'enemy territory' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37) to establish unofficial contacts within the police organisation (Chibnall, 1977; Ericson et al., 1989; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994; Mawby, 2010, 2012; Lee & McGovern, 2014; XXXX, 2017). 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.

But as Lee and McGovern (2014) suggest, journalists are not the only ones who 'actively resist attempts to govern their activities' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 195). De Certeau (1984) argues that a second tactic of resistance is 'to make use of the cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of the proprietary power' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37). Among the major issues of concern raised by both the Filkin and Leveson Reports (2012) were the ways in which the police themselves revealed unauthorised information to the press. Although the Leveson Report (2012) noted that 'sometimes the motive is little other than personal disgruntlement or the desire to wound colleagues' (Leveson, 2012, p. 987), journalists interviewed for this study, and in Lee and McGovern's (2014) study, recounted how major stories about police corruption and malpractice had come to them from insider police contacts.

However, as a result of the restrictions on non-sanctioned contact between the police and the press in the United Kingdom following the Filkin Report (2012), crime correspondents expressed concern that this channel of information was now closed, leaving journalists impeded in their Fourth Estate role (Campbell, 2013). Although Lee and McGovern (2014) noted a trend in Australia to trace police leaks to journalists, citing how, in 2008, Queensland police officers suggested 'that the Police Internal Affairs were monitoring phone records to see if officers had been speaking with journalists' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 203), they also argue that reporters are still able to foster unofficial police contacts and that it would be 'overstating things to

suggest that the power relations between the police and the media were all … one-dimensional' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 109). By contrast, during the first few months following the implementation of the new regime in the United Kingdom, crime correspondents suggested that they were no longer being given even routine crime stories:

> One of the worst examples of how bad it's got recently was the attempted murder of the Russian banker, German Gorbuntsov.[1] We didn't know about it until it was published in a newspaper in Moscow. We knew there had been a shooting and we were told that Operation Trident officers are investigating so we thought, okay, routine gang crime. But instead it was a hit organised by someone in Moscow.

More recently, crime correspondents have argued that the advent of social media has enabled the MPS to exert even more control over the flow of policing information to the press. One crime journalist commented:

> Chats with the Commissioner may seem like the Met's being open but webchats do not open the Met up to scrutiny.

In an article for the *Press Gazette* in May 2015, crime reporter Gareth Davies suggested that, although crime incidents were being reported on the MPS's Twitter feed and news website, journalists were not being given background information to those reports, either from the Press Bureau or from officers making the tweets. As a result, according to Davies, incidents of public interest were being reported with minimal information,

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[1] German Gorbuntsov is a Russian businessman and banker, who moved to London in 2005, after being accused of embezzlement by the Moldovan government. In 2012, he was shot by a hitman but survived.

or simply not being reported at all. As he commented:

> If you make it more difficult for journalists to verify and obtain information,
> they produce less bad news.

By contrast, although Lee and McGovern (2014) reported that stories on the New South Wales police media website were similarly short, they noted that, unlike the Press Bureau, the New South Wales Police Media Unit have 'constant communications with journalists at which point follow-up information may be disseminated and interviews with relevant police might be organised' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 112).

Other crime correspondents suggested that the MPS were taking advantage of restricted press/police contact to present an unduly rosy picture of MPS successes. As one respondent explained:

> I went to this briefing and I knew off the record that this unit was in crisis. But
> this officer gave us all these success figures and we knew that they were
> glossing, but without officers within that unit prepared to speak to me, my hands
> are tied. And so we can't run that story and the public are left in the dark as to
> what's going on. It's bad for democracy but I think it's bad for the police to
> present themselves as this secretive force. That's what's happening and the
> public just haven't a clue.

However, Lee and McGovern argue that, just as social media and new technologies have afforded the police more direct forms of communication with the public, as well as 'enhanced technologies of surveillance through recording and monitoring devices', the 'very same technologies and forums the police are employing have also provided the public [and the press] with more sophisticated ways to monitor the police' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 174).

While older correspondents interviewed for this study were pessimistic about the future of crime reporting, some younger respondents were more optimistic and argued that new technologies and digital platforms had opened new ways 'to make use of cracks that particular conjunctions open in the surveillance of proprietary powers' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37) and to still operate within the 'enemy's field of vision' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37). One reporter described how a source had contacted him directly with mobile phone footage of police brutality:

> He told me that he was arrested and then when he was taken to the custody area of the police station he saw police officers beat another young black boy. In the past, if an incident had happened, it was the police's word against the other person; now these days [the public] have the means to provide proof. And through social media, it's easier than ever for them to get in touch with the press to report these incidents.

The same reporter suggested that social media had made it easier than ever to investigate stories and, in the process, changed the relationship of crime journalists with their readers or audience. As he explained:

> I was writing a story on Jimmy Mubenga[2], the asylum seeker, and the circumstances surrounding his death on the flight to Luanda and I was able to appeal immediately for witnesses through Twitter. Before social media, it would have been impossible for me to find those witnesses.

But while new technologies allow crime journalists to continue to infiltrate 'the space

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[2] Jimmy Mubenga was an Angolan deportee from the UK who died after being restrained by three private security guards on a British Airways flight in October 2010.

of the other' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37), it would seem that, in the United Kingdom, crime reporters' ability to hold the police to account or even to report routine crime stories has been impeded. However, as Goldsmith (2010) points out, 'the capacity to distort or mislead through the internet is immense' (Goldsmith, 2010, p. 921). While it might seem that the balance of power in the police/media relationship is skewed towards the police, the lack of accountability of content posted on digital platforms is a problem for both the MPS and the legacy media – and is exacerbated by the restrictions on contact between police and press.


**The problems of social media**

Ericson et al. (1989) argue that 'all organisations – the police department, the family, the multinational corporation – need to keep some matters secret' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 379). In the case of the police, failure to control the press can 'mean loss of control over organizational life and serious harms' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 388). Such harms may include the disclosure of information about an investigation in progress, which might affect the production and later value of evidence, information that might have an adverse impact on citizens involved in certain cases and information about operational matters that might give 'the "criminal element" information that would be to their benefit' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 128). As a result, Ericson et al. (1989) suggest that the easiest way for the police 'to overcome the ways in which they lose power in their relationships with reporters' is to develop a 'spatial, social and cultural system of relationship that sustains a spirit of trust and reciprocity' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 126).

Prior to the phone-hacking scandal of 2011 and the subsequent restrictions on police-press relations (Mawby, 2012, 2014; XXXX, 2017), the main tactic to contain sensitive information used by heads of specialist desks such as Counter-Terrorism and press

officers was to take the press into their confidence and ask them to postpone the publication of certain information. One senior police officer commented:

> So for example 7/7[3], we had the full-blown press conference, then the mainstream media left and we just had the crime reporters there and then the Assistant Commissioner came in and said, "Right guys, I don't want this reported but we're looking at this suspect, this house in Leeds but if you report this, it will have a detrimental effect on our investigation." And we knew everyone in that room would respect that.

As both police and press respondents interviewed for this study acknowledged, that relationship of trust appears to have been lost, following the recommendations of the Leveson and Filkin Reports (2012) to restrict contact between the police and the news media. But the advent of advent of social media has put new pressures on national crime journalists, already working to fill more space with fewer staff. As Alejandro (2010) notes, 'journalists are forced to accelerate the traditional journalistic process because people now want real time information … to sit on a story until it is complete is to risk being out-scooped by competitors' (Alejandro, 2010, p. 9). But in the current media landscape, 'the fear of missing out on a story surfacing on social media can lead to the temptation to cover it before significant details are confirmed' (Beckett, 2016, p. 33). For the crime reporter, there is an additional problem – severe restrictions on police contact, both official and unofficial, when trying to verify details of a breaking story. As one respondent explained:

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[3] The 7 July 2005 London bombings, often referred to as 7/7, were a series of coordinated terrorist suicide attacks in London, United Kingdom, which targeted commuters travelling on the city's public transport system during the morning rush hour.

> Take the Mark Duggan story. It was all over social media that a young man had been dragged from his car and shot point blank by police. But when I asked the press office, I just got no comment. And we couldn't take the risk of not printing in case it was true so we went ahead with the caveat that a witness reported that they had seen it.

Other journalists, frustrated by what they perceive to be the Press Bureau's stonewalling techniques, report more aggressive methods in their dealings with press officers:

> My technique is if I've got half a story, I'll send an email and say, "Would you like to respond?" And normally I get no comment. But a while back, I had this story about [an operation] being investigated by another force, so I sent in a mail saying I'm going to write a story and it's likely to be highly critical and within the hour, I had the head of [that operation] on the phone. As it turned out, I didn't get the story I wanted but I got another one, so that's a tactic I use now, scare the shit out of them.

But as one former police press officer commented:

> Leveson has made our job harder too. Whereas in the past, if someone was writing a story, we'd say, "Okay, we'll give x a call and get back to you". But now you don't know if that's counted as off the record. So we play safe.

The use of social media poses another problem for operational policing. As Beckett (2016) comments, the 'arrival of live video on social networks means that the citizen can become a social network broadcaster' (Beckett, 2016, p. 16) and, as a result, the risk of information or footage about an ongoing investigation being posted inadvertently by a bystander increases immeasurably. Beckett (2016) suggests that this is particularly relevant in the midst of a terrorist operation, where live video or pictures

of a scene 'can endanger security forces or hamper their work' and comments that it is 'essential that the news media works with security officers' (Beckett, 2016, p. 20). One operational police officer saw this as a reason for relaxing relations with reporters:

> With social media, there is no control. And that's the big fear, that a journalist might get hold of footage, say of a building where we're deploying security forces, not wait to check – or worse, as I know there's blame on both sides, not get the guidance he or she needs from us – and that's the whole operation blown and people's lives put in danger.

While the use of social media has undoubted benefits for the police, it also poses serious problems in terms of inaccurate reporting, obstruction of police work and the potential to compromise investigations.


**Conclusion**

This study explores three issues. Firstly, it examines the effect of the use of digital platforms on the relationship between the police, the press and the public, in the context of restricted police/press contact, following the recommendations of the Filkin and Leveson Reports (2012). Secondly, it considers the question, raised in an Australian context (Lee & McGovern, 2014), as to whether the use of digital platforms allows the police, or more specifically in this study, the MPS, to bypass the national British news media. Lastly, it identifies convergences and divergences with Lee and McGovern's (2014) study of police and press relations.

The study suggests that, by establishing a virtual base, both press and operational officers in the MPS and NSW police force have been able to use social media to enact 'strategies of power' (De Certeau, 1984, p. xix) to control press relations. Both forces have been able to 'capitalise on [the] acquired advantage' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36) of

the decline in the news industry, by providing time-poor journalists with ready-made press releases and videos, carrying 'preferred images of policing' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 130). They have also been able to 'achieve a certain independence' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37) from the traditional press by using digital platforms to promote stories of police valour and success – stories that would not normally be picked up by the media – and to communicate with the public more directly than before. Whereas, in the past, police organisations could only appeal for help with investigations or appeal for witnesses through the traditional media, now they can involve the public directly by posting photographs of suspects or CCTV footage of crime scenes on digital platforms – and at the same time increase their 'panoptic practice' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 36).

But while Lee and McGovern (2014) acknowledge that, as a result of investigations into police leaks, it is harder for crime journalists to cultivate unofficial contacts within the NSW police force, they nevertheless suggest that journalists are able to use 'tactics of resistance' (De Certeau, 1984, p. 37) in circumventing official channels. By contrast, the advent of social media in the United Kingdom coincided with a major scandal concerning police-media relations (Mawby, 2012, 2014; XXXX, 2017) and resulting restrictions on both official and unofficial police-press contact. In this context, this study argues that the use of social media poses problems for the integrity of crime reporting, for operational policing and for democratic practices. Inaccurate reporting and leakage by citizens of sensitive material into the public domain is one problem; another is the increased control of information by the police. Social media may appear to break down barriers between the police and the public, ostensibly promoting greater transparency, but this study argues that the reverse is happening. While new technologies and digital platforms have made the police more vulnerable in some respects in terms of 'tactics of resistance' (De Certeau, 1984) on the part of the press

and the public, those same platforms and technologies have afforded press officers greater ability to cast the MPS in a positive light without the 'filters of the traditional media' (Lee & McGovern, 2014, p. 118).

While De Certeau's (1984) work is mainly used to understand the everyday power relations between makers and users of social representations, De Certeau (1984) argues that there is a second orientation to his work, the relationship between 'localisable, repressive and legal institutions' exercising power and the 'clandestine [resistances] between … groups or individuals already caught in the nets of discipline' (De Certeau, 1984, pp. xiv-xv). The breakdown in communication between press and police has almost certainly led to a reduction of access 'to quality information for the public upon which to make informed decisions' (Ellis & McGovern, 2016, p. 957). In a climate in which crimes are reported by police press offices in 320 characters or less on social media, but journalists are unable to access routine information about crimes, it is hard to see how the press can fulfil their Fourth Estate role.

Ericson et al. (1989) warn that 'organisations with substantial control … can perpetuate their authority in part through the representations they make rather than from being direct representatives of the people' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 20). But as Ericson et al. (1989) comment, 'for the people, the trouble with representations is that it is difficult to know what to encourage or challenge because of the limitations on what one is permitted to see' (Ericson et al., 1989, p. 20). It would seem that the limitations on what the press and the public are permitted to see of the failures, as well as the successes, of the British police have never been greater.

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