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Police-Media Relations in the 21st Century

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INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Both positive and negative representations of police agencies by mainstream and alternative media formats have become commonplace. Huey and Broll (2011) described the emergence of the Internet and alternative media as formats that have compelled police agencies to become more self-aware of their public image.

Police agencies now recognize that, regardless of the format, media plays a vital role in the portrayal of the police in either a favorable or an unfavorable light. Given this, tensions prevail within the existing duality of interdependence and conflict between the two institutions.

Police agencies that have implemented an effective communications strategy in their dealings with the media, recognize how such a strategy can shape a police agency's image (Carroll and McCombs, 2003). Today, most police agencies accept that a structured, strategic and ethical approach to police corporate communications is an essential step in the path towards the legitimization of police corporate communications in the 21st century (Mawby, 2012a).

STUDY AIMS

This review examined the objectives of police corporate communications in the face of competing investigative and political demands, as well as technological advancements.

Specifically, six elements were considered:

1. The historical development of traditional media platforms utilized by police agencies.
2. Strategic communication strategies required to effectively address privacy legislation.
3. The necessity of professionalization of police corporate communications and current approaches.
4. The challenge of maintaining police legitimacy and trust through strategic communications within ever-evolving social media platforms.
5. The objectives of current police and media models.
6. The challenges that mainstream media face within an increasingly competitive marketplace. Finally, the review examined the rapidly evolving media landscape and online social media migration, the strategies employed by police agencies in response to these changes, and the effect they have on the police-media relationship.

RESULTS

To examine these issues, a review of the pertinent literature was undertaken. Kingshott (2011) asserted that police agencies should establish media protocols based on the nine principles of Sir Robert Peel. While all nine principles remain relevant today, three principles are germane to the genuine efforts of police engagement in community partnerships: 1) police agencies must not lose sight of their responsibility to seek and preserve public support by demonstrating an absolute and impartial service to the law, rather than catering to the vagaries of public opinion; 2) police agencies must maintain a relationship with the public that underscores the historic community tradition, namely that the police and the citizens are one in the same. The police must remain mindful that they are members of the public who are tasked with providing full-time attention to duties. These duties are not exclusively consigned to the police, but are incumbent upon every citizen in the interest of community welfare; 3) the test of police efficiency is the absence of crime and disorder, not the visible evidence of police action in dealing with it. These efforts effectively form the foundation of a protocol between the police and the media.

The literature review consistently acknowledged the importance of the role mainstream and alternative media play within a democratic society. Peel's principles have provided a generic model for the police and the media; one that acknowledges that the public's need to be made aware of police activities within their community is made possible by the media (Kingshott, 2011).

Effective police-media interaction offers reassurance to the public by providing, in whole or in part, a factual account of events. Nevertheless, police agencies have been reluctant to publicly disclose their activities, largely attributable to hubris (Kingshott, 2011). The effect has been the creation of a closed society of police that serves as an impetus in the formation of informal relationships between the police and the media. The information exchanged during these unofficial liaisons has resulted in media misrepresentations of police incidents that have only served to heightened fear of crime (Lee and McGovern, 2013).

DISCUSSION

Increasingly, police organizations within Canada are held to the highest of standards by a citizenry that demands investigational transparency and adherence to performance measures (Cooke and Sturges, 2009). The professionalization of police corporate communications has made significant contributions towards the legitimization of the police in their interaction with the media (Chermak and Weiss, 2005). Police agencies find themselves engaged in an incessant struggle to maintain their institutional legitimacy. Legitimacy is defined as "the property of an authority or institution that leads people to feel that that authority or institution is entitled to be deferred to and obeyed" (Sunshine and Tyler, 2003: 514). A cynical view shared by many journalists is that police corporate communications, accompanied by the enlistment of media specialists, exists for the exclusive purpose of attaining control of the police-media relationship (Mawby, 2012a). Media outlets face reduced budgets that constrain their ability to conduct critical analysis and effectively hold police agencies accountable for their shortcomings.

CONCLUSIONS

A significant shift has occurred along the continuum of police management of operational components. The shift has resulted in the adoption of a more open and professional approach to the media. Mandated changes within legislation have played a significant role in police media communications. Despite this approach, criticisms have been raised that enhanced professionalization has not resulted in the release of a better product. This perspective is exemplified by a common police agency practice of simultaneous media releases to all media outlets, without regard to differing media outlets deadlines and pre-publication processes (Mawby, 2012a).

This research would support the endorsement of effective police media encounters by adhering to established guidelines that promote transparency and provide an opportunity to enhance police agency legitimacy in the eyes of the public (Sindall et al., 2012). The promotions of noteworthy achievements, including high profile arrests, crime fighting initiatives, and partnerships with the community, are regarded by the police as the type of communication that is critical for the effective control of the external environment (Chermak and Weiss, 2005).

The professionalization of police corporate communications, when judiciously and strategically applied in accordance with Peel's principles, will ensure the public is informed rather than manipulated. The public is provided with an accurate account of police actions and a means by which to address public misperceptions of the police, enabling police agencies to highlight the effectiveness of their crime and disorder mitigation strategies.

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