

# strange bedfellows - police & the media

David Salter queries the relationship between police and the media

**P**onder for a moment the contradictions embedded in the following scenes played out in our media over the recent period:

- After the committal hearing, the solicitor for the man charged with the "Backpacker Murders" called an all-in press conference on the steps of the court house to appeal against "trial by media" and to complain that the excessive attentions of press, television and radio might have already made it impossible for his client to get a fair trial.
- A nightly ABC current affairs programme was given access to police video recordings of their interview of the accused in a particularly brutal bashing death of a homosexual man. The most gruesome portions of that interview - including admissions - were transmitted in prime time as part of a story on the defence of provocation.
- When police in Newcastle, NSW, needed to shake down the local "escort agency" business last May, they raided five inner-city establishments and charged just about every prostitute in town. The next day, the local newspaper dutifully printed the full name, age, occupation and address of each sex worker - straight off the charge sheets. What news value that recital had is doubtful, but the public disclosure of such information might be quite useful to anyone running a protection racket.
- On a routine basis, major metropolitan commercial radio stations now carry "live" and recorded "police reports" of serious crimes - items prepared, written and presented by police media liaison or public relations staff. Because of dwindling production budgets, these reports are rarely checked or supplemented by journalists or the newsreader.

Clearly, those traditional bedfellows - the press and the police - would seem to be in a far more subtle and dangerously dependent relationship than the simple "we're all in this together" mateship of previous generations.

## the common cause

**U**ntil quite recently, the social backgrounds and character types of policemen and police reporters were virtually interchangeable.

Their shared culture was founded in the digger/footy/lifesaving ethos of big, tough blokes who could all drink like fish and use their fists. They delighted in a common bravado. The two groups accepted quite openly that to a large extent their chances for fame and promotion were intertwined. It was a small, closed community and the detectives and the journos made sure to look after each other's interests. Favours owed were always repaid. Two examples:

In early 1956, when the NSW Vice Squad had a particular interest in the exact movements of Sir Eugene Goossens as he prepared to return to Australia (with a suitcase full of "indecent articles"), it was *The Sun* which arranged for the Conductor to be tailed in Europe. On the strength of this information, a senior *Sun* police reporter was able to give Goossens' precise arrival details to the investigating detective who then had plenty of time to arrange for the customs search which destroyed Sir

Eugene's career.

On the morning of New Year's Day, 1963, the bodies of Gilbert Bogle and Margaret Chandler were found in Lane Cove River Park. It was the beginning of one of the most sensational (and still unsolved) crime stories of the modern era. At that same moment, the ace crime reporter for the *Sydney Daily Mirror* was enjoying a few free rounds of beer at an inner-city hotel. The reception officer at CIB headquarters patiently rang each of the *Mirror* man's known watering holes until he finally found him and sent the grateful reporter racing to the scene.

## women and television

**T**hat old "mates" world of police and reporters has gone forever. It was dismantled by two overpowering influences: women and television.



As "the bloody sheilas" slowly became tolerated on police rounds, they found it difficult to pick up an off-the-record briefing from a Detective Inspector simply by standing beside him in the local hotel. Women forced the exchange of information between police and journalists onto a more open, formal - and potentially much fairer - basis.

But the impact of television has been even greater. The police roundsman of a generation ago wouldn't believe he'd done a decent job until he filed 750 - 1,000 words on a story. Print therefore required a solid working relationship with the police not just for their precious tip-offs, but to assemble enough reliable information, colour, interviews and background detail to support a substantial article.

In its punishing time-frame of only 90-120 seconds per story, television can only use: two or three sentences of narration over brief views of the crime scene; a 30-word "standup" from the reporter; another 20-words of interview from (take your pick - an eyewitness/victim/policeman/relative); and a closing sentence or two of narration. That's the formula.

Radio is even less demanding - no more than 80 words of straight summary, phoned in from the location (or, more often, the media office at police HQ).

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### informed or duped

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**A**t the same time, fierce competitive pressures of contemporary print, radio and television (and their technical sophistication) give the ethical issues of the police/media relationship particular currency.

These days the media would have virtually *nothing* to report on crime without the active involvement - and often encouragement - of police. Therein lies the central dilemma: to what extent are the journalists who cover crime being manipulated - even duped - by the police who feed them their stories?

The process can be observed at the most basic operational level. 24-hours-per day, every News Editor and Chief of Staff in the country keeps one ear tuned to a battery of special radios, all designed to monitor the full range of police frequencies. Such blatant eavesdropping is questionable, but the police never complain (after all, the tow-truck drivers are all listening in too).

The radios supply the starting point for almost every police story. From a bus smash to a multiple murder, the radio will provide the first vital details - most importantly the location to which the film crew, photographer or reporter should be dispatched.

Sometimes the media manage to arrive *before* the police, and for a few chaotic moments there is no legal authority at a crime or disaster scene. In the inevitable climate of scoop frenzy, despicable things can - and often do - happen. But whatever happens, it is police radio traffic which sets the base line of crime reporting - and that traffic can always be controlled.

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### the information (super) shopfront

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**A**t the next level - beyond what journalists like to call "fire engine chasing" - is the less clear-cut world of police "media liaison". Trained and carefully briefed teams of PR personnel in police uniforms provide the information shopfront for the vast corporate structures now entrusted with law enforcement in Australia.

And, like all PR teams, their job is to peddle the most self-serving and optimistic version of events: to convince the public - through the media - that their police *are* doing a great job.

Once again, with the media so reliant on the police for information and access, it hasn't been difficult for these media liaison groups to shape and control the way crime stories and police work are represented.

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### police conduit?

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**P**erhaps the most extreme recent example of this manipulation was *Australia's Most Wanted*, a flashy offering from a commercial network, made with the generous involvement and support of the police. It purported to be a "service" programme with the lofty ambition of helping police apprehend offenders at large.

In truth, it was a cynical vehicle for gruesome and sensational dramatised "re-creations" of crimes - voyeurism dressed up as public service. Yet the police were delighted to co-operate because the producers always depicted them as a concerned, caring and dedicated team of crime-stoppers.

Fortunately, the programme succumbed to that fatal combination of falling ratings and high production costs. (Presumably the legion of clean-cut constables who were made to sit about in the background every week pretending to take phone calls were all returned to more useful work).

At another (some might say higher) level, two *Four Corners* programmes during the past 12 months were entirely devoted to police affairs. Both were reported by Chris Masters, both depended on high levels of

police "co-operation", and both ended up presenting the majority of police in a good light.

During the Summer of 1993/4, Masters was allowed an impressive level of freedom to report from the inside on the vast and intensive "Backpacker Murder" investigation. It was a solid and level-headed account, yet the lasting impression it gave was more of a PR exercise for the police than an example of investigative journalism.

At times it was difficult to shake off the suspicion that the ABC had only been permitted such open access because the police were under enormous public pressure to produce an arrest. Through the programme, the police seemed to be saying: "Look, we're doing our best!".

Last year, *Four Corners* ventured into far more contentious territory when it transmitted an extended survey of corruption in NSW, offering an insight not only into police corruption, but also police attempts to trace and eradicate that corruption.

Context is important here. Police corruption is a high-profile *political* issue in NSW. Police Ministers resign on a more-or-less regular basis. Police Commissioners are often in open warfare with those Ministers (and usually win). The battles are fought in the media, and by mobilising their well-resourced PR machinery, the elite officers of the force have become expert at the sophisticated techniques of media manipulation.

The trick is to put distance between the current leadership and the sins of your immediate predecessors. As part of this need to point the accusing finger backwards, the *Four Corners* special on corruption was invaluable to the NSW police leadership. Behind every sequence showing the dedicated corruption-busters hard at work on their computers was a persistent sub-text: *they* were the bad boys, not us.

It's the kind of atmospheric support a Police Commissioner finds invaluable when giving evidence to ICAC or being quizzed by the next pesky Parliamentary committee.

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### the basic game is still the same

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**B**ut, in essence, how different is today's subtle media management from those side-of-the-mouth leaks from detective to crime reporter in the darkest corner of a waterfront public bar?

Not much. The basic game is still the same - and still just as dangerous.

David Salter, Executive Producer, ABC TV "Media Watch"