



Facing the Gatekeepers:



An Account of the Trials and Tribulations of Researching the Police

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Context of the Research

- Questions
 - How, and under what conditions, did the NSW Police Media Unit come into formation?
 - What role does the Police Media Unit play in mediating police-media relationship and the processes creating public perceptions of policing?
- Methods
 - Interviews with key stakeholders (Police Media Unit staff, crime and policing reporters)
 - Documentary analysis
 - Observation of the Police Media Unit



Negotiating Access

- Research Application
 - Research program
 - Ethics application
 - University ethics approval letter



Researching the Police

- May 2005: submit application to NSW Police Force
- June 2005: official approval granted
- August 2005: contact initiated with Media Unit
- October 2005: Media Unit express concern with research
- October 2005: scheduled meeting with Media Unit cancelled last minute
- October-November 2005: attempts to contact Media Unit were disregarded
- November 2005: meeting with Media Unit; request for resubmission of research application
- February 2006: Research re-approved with conditions
- February-March 2006: attempts to contact Media Unit ignored
- March 2006: Media Unit finally contacted; fieldwork interviews initiated
- April 2006: attempts to carry out observations ignored; fieldwork aborted



Controlling the Media

Journalist 9: Now it's a lot more controlled, the information flow, and a lot more dire consequences for police who leak information, although it still happens, don't worry about that...



Management of the Media Unit

PMU Staffer 1: There's a lot of paper work involved, so I've got to ensure that staff sign on, sign off, their rosters are reflected accurately, deal with staff changes if there's people sick, so I do a lot of paperwork actually, semi-middle management sort of stuff, arranging roster changes, but also as a standard media officer you're taking requirements from the media, you endeavour to liaise with the officers in charge, or the commanders, or whatever is relevant, you can comment on the situation that you're dealing with and provide a response to the media within their deadline.



Journalist 6: Well the police are bound by legislation to respond to crises or stories in certain ways and as a result the bureaucracy makes it very difficult to get stories approved quickly. They need to get ticked off by Supervisors and Assistant Commissioners and sometimes Commissioners, and as a result we might have information we're waiting to publish, to broadcast but we can't, or we're waiting for clarification on something. The rate at which information is disseminated sometimes is very slow.



Media Units as Key to Police Administration

PMU Staffer 1: Basically it sets parameters under which we operate and provides guidelines of what we must adhere to, like often it's as basic as appropriate racial descriptors or acceptable racial descriptors, legal guidelines on what we can and can't release with regard to the identity of people, and missing persons and protocols such as permission from [the] family over different issues... we train police in the Media Policy and discuss the Media Policy and what it means to them as a day-to-day on the ground on the street cop, and why we do it that way.



PMU Staffer 4: We haven't had always a direct input, I mean I think it would be great to get a working team from the Unit to help revise the policies from the grassroots up



Journalist 1: They want to be in control of [information], they want to know exactly what's going on in their organisation... Their main purpose is look after the image of the police service, look after the Commissioner, so everything that comes through has to look good for the Commissioner and the police department.



The Filters

Journalist 7: Often they sort of serve a counter purpose really in restricting the flow of information... They can give out much more information than they do I think.



Journalist 14: I think [the PMU is] really there to restrain [information], really I mean...they're there to facilitate it in the way that they've always got press releases coming out and information, things like that, but equally it doesn't mean that they're letting free-flow of information. A lot of the time there's some restriction of information, and it's, I don't know if it's sort of Orwellian or whatever...



The End