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The Role of the Media
in the Creation of
Public Police Violence*

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INTRODUCTION

The process by which incidents of police violence[1] come to public, governmental, and police attention, and the reactions by various actors in these groups, consists of a complex web of responses, reactions, consequences, effects, and implications, hereafter labeled "outcomes."[2] Central to this process is the role of the mass media. Police violence can be thought of as similar to Freud's characterization of the mental process whereby 10 percent is conscious or above the surface, and 90 percent is unconscious or below the surface. The majority of police violence takes place beyond the knowledge of the public; only a small percentage of such activities become public knowledge.

Through a review of the literature and series of interviews conducted with police and crime reporters,[3] editors and producers, police public affairs personnel, and other actors in the criminal justice system in Denver, New York City, and Toronto, I developed a model of the process by which information on police violence is transformed into articles in the press and stories that are broadcast on radio and television.[4]

LITERATURE REVIEW

A series of studies have been conducted on the media. A smaller subset of that research examines the process by which media organizations make decisions about the types of stories they research, write about, and print or broadcast (for example, Chermak, 1994b; Chibnall, 1977, 1981; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987, 1989; Fishman, 1980; Gans, 1979; Glasgow University Media Group, 1980; Kasinsky, 1994; Rock, 1981). Although many researchers have investigated the way news media operate, few specifically look at the police-media relationship. Even fewer examine the media's treatment of police alleged or real deviance. A paucity of this literature analyzes the process by which the media research, write, and print or broadcast stories about police violence. This lack of coverage is unfortunate given that "because [police] are in the media spotlight constantly, [they] are especially vulnerable to having their procedural strays focused upon and controlled through the pressure of publicity" (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 97).[5] This gap in the literature prevents us from understanding how certain types of police violence receive the publicity and the chain reaction of events that police violence causes.

METHODOLOGY

Since I first started this research in 1988, I have conducted 55 semi-structured face-to-face interviews with reporters, editors, police public relations personnel, and lawyers representing clients who claimed to have suffered or were actually victims of police violence in Denver, New York City, and Toronto.[6] Individuals selected to be interviewed were culled from newspaper and magazine articles on police violence or through referrals. In other words, I obtained a snowball sample, and I make no pretenses or claims about having a representative sample of all individuals who work for or have contact with the media and police.

REVIEW OF THE MODEL

Publicization of incidents of police violence depends on a series of factors related to the operation of media organizations. Of paramount importance to media reporting of police violence is the working relationship between police and journalists. This can affect the number and type of stories. In addition, the "dynamics of the news production system" (that is, bureaucratic, normative, and economic), must be considered as factors that affect the printing or broadcast of stories (Fishman, 1980: 141-152).

I use the cover term *media initiation* to describe the series of events that lead to an incident of police violence coming to the attention of news organizations and the decision-making process to communicate it to the public,

government, and police department. The media are seen as the primary agenda setters (for example, Gitlin, 1980). In this policy sphere, social problem, and political relationship, the media occupy a central ground for conflict management (that is, expansion and resolution). The media also serve an educational function both inside and outside the police department. For instance, the media might reveal information that can help police managers improve service delivery and might be another method of monitoring police employees. Besides their effects on the police, news media can inform politicians and activists about problems arising in police-citizen relationships.

In the long run, "newsmaking is a fluid and equivocal process yet highly structured and severely circumscribed by organization, knowledge, and capacity to communicate" (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987: 178). Media initiation, in the form of articles or broadcasts disclosing police violence, is hypothesized to depend on a composite of 10 interacting factors endemic to reporters, sources, and news organizations. These variables are ranked in increasing order of predicted importance: gender of reporter(s), experience of reporter(s), number of media outlets in a city, number of reporters, status of reporter(s), source of the report, type of reporters or beats writing or reporting about police violence, kind of news organization, type of medium, and editorial decisions and traditions.[7] (See Figure 7-1)

Gender of Reporter(s)

Gender of reporter can affect the type of information that he or she gathers or has access to. Following extensive interviews with police reporters, some trends emerged. Female police reporters are often treated differently than male police reporters are; they have more difficulty developing sources and take longer to do so than male reporters do.[9] Many male police officers are paternalistic toward female reporters and, despite the increased numbers of policewomen on forces, consider the female reporters to be "potential dates." This is not the experience of all women reporters. According to Virginia Byrne, police reporter of four-and-a-half years with the Associated Press, most sources "are interested in brightness, integrity, and the ability of the reporters to use their information judiciously"[10] and not the gender of the reporter. In addition to these problems encountered with male police officers, female police reporters also experience discrimination from male reporters that can hamper the free flow of information.

Experience of the Reporter(s)

The greater reporters' experience in the field and with their editors or producers, the higher the likelihood they will uncover stories on police violence and convince their editors to publish or air these stories. Journalists take a long time to master their working environment, develop expertise in researching and writing, and develop a sense of trust with their sources. Reporters gain experience during their formal and informal training as well as by exposure to different beats. Most reporters are trained on the job and get accustomed to

FIGURE 7-1 Media Initiation[8]
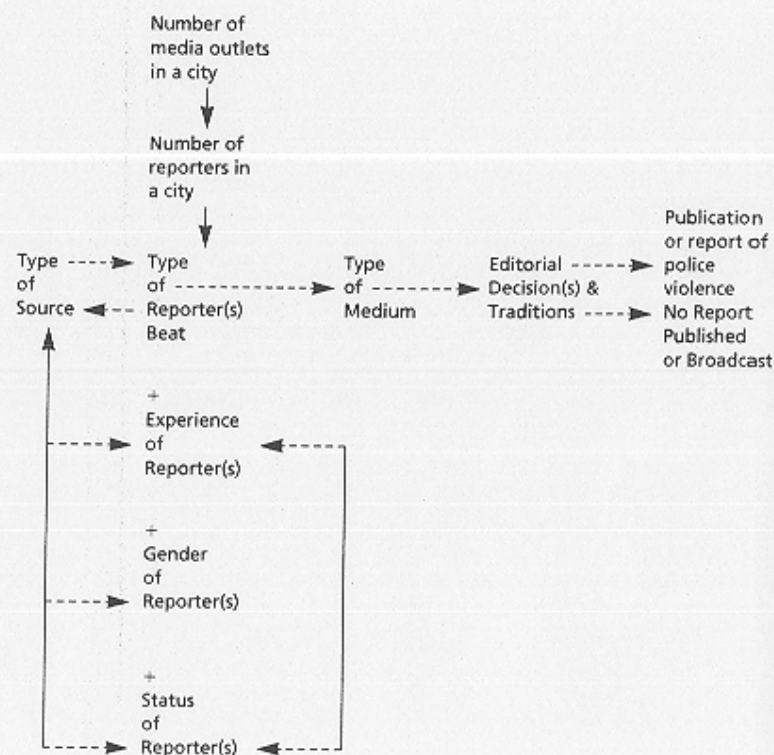
their beats through making a series of rounds to bureaucratically oriented sources (Fishman, 1980: Chapter 2). Experienced reporters are more likely to be able to negotiate with their editors and producers, extract information from sources, determine the amount of time and energy to expend in collecting information for a story, and better predict the probability of a final product (that is, article or broadcast) than are novice reporters.

Number of Media Outlets

The more media (that is, newspapers and radio and television stations) that exist in a city, the greater the competition (for example, Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987: 177). Also, the greater the number of news outlets of the same type (for example, newspapers), the higher the level of competition is. If reporters feel pressured to find the most sensationalistic information, then it is reasonable to assume that some of those stories will concern police violence. This competitive spirit can also contribute to reporting police violence that is not necessarily excessive.

Number of Reporters

The greater the number of reporters and the higher the competition, the more information will be uncovered. Not only is there external competition (among media outlets), but there might also be internal competition (among reporters inside the same media organization).[11] These processes in combination increase the likelihood that reporters will uncover incidents of police violence. Large amounts of information, however, do not necessarily translate into printed or broadcast stories because of editorial constraints that I will discuss shortly.

Status of Reporter(s)

News organizations have their own pecking order for whose "copy" (story) they prefer. According to Tuchman,

The news net is a hierarchical system of information gatherers, and so the status of reporters in the news net may determine whose information is identified as news. Editors prefer stories by salaried reporters to those by stringers, paid less well and on a piecework basis, simply because the news organization has a financial investment in the salaried reporter. (1978: 24)

Closely connected to the reporters' status is their experience because status is usually, but not always, achieved through experience. Although newcomers must go through a painful initiation process, columnists, especially those with a celebrity status, have a greater chance of having their articles published on a regular basis. Similarly, high-status journalists often have easier access to difficult-to-reach sources.

Source of Report

News of police violence comes to reporters through a variety of sources. In general, these sources mirror the typical individuals, groups, and mechanisms by which complaints are launched with police departments. Different types of reporters depend on different constellations of sources for their news stories. "Sources ... [vary] as to where they are located; at what times they are available; by what means they may be tapped...; and whether the information sources can be expected to be cooperative or recalcitrant to the reporter's inquiry" (Fishman, 1980: 36). Two main types of sources, written and oral, can be structured in various ways (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987: 42).

Although sources use a variety of techniques (for example, press releases) to "can" their accounts (for example, Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 383), the most common ways sources on police violence contact reporters are by phone, mail, and fax. Generally, "sources perceive considerable variation among news organizations and respond accordingly" (1989: 393). If stories are not heard, published, or aired by the mainstream media, sources have a variety of techniques to gain publicity for their plight.[2] Sources make a variety of decisions about whether and when they will disclose information to

reporters. A source's [dec]ium choice depends on a complex array of factors including speed of trsmission and impact as well as knowledge of which media outlets and reps are more sympathetic to the source's plight.

[Ro]le of Reporters and Beats

Media reports of police violence come to public attention and are sustained in the public eye primarily by the following types of reporters (in increasing order of importance): feature, court, city hall, or police and crime. Different working conditions also determine the reporters' access to sources, the type of relationships (for example, degree of autonomy) reporters have with their editors, contacts among news outlets, and decisions concerning the investigation, wr[iting], and timing of publication or broadcast of articles or segments on police violence (Fishman, 1980; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989).

If an incident of police violence has not reached the press through the police, city hall, or courtiers, then the incident is likely to be exposed or sustained through the ities of state or provincial legislative reporters, (also known as the press gal, particularly if the issue concerns a department or ministry such as the atty (solicitor) general or home office.

Usually, more reps are assigned to cover the police than the courts; however, court reporters also important as gatekeepers in the production of articles and stories olice violence (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 35). If a police reporterld not report the incident of police violence either because of legal complns (for example, a ban on publication) or because he or she was protectin feared "burning," or alienating his or her source(s), the court reporters are likely to feel these limitations because of less conflict with their beats. Surprisingly, most news stories emanating from the court beat are criminals (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 40; Rock, 1981) and only a minor portain to police violence. Occasionally, however, during a major criminal, police violence against defendants, as a by-product of a police ingation or arrest, is emphasized by the defense's lawyer, thus stimulatingdia report on real or alleged police violence.

Although not all podepartments are under municipal jurisdiction, city hall and urban affairs eers occasionally write stories that cover policing.[15] Often these stories ema from the police department itself, or come to city hall reporters throughses that they monitor in various other agencies or departments of city hat the experience of many of the sources I interviewed, the city hall rer was formerly a police reporter, which increased the likelihood that he e would have access to police sources and would write stories on this sub

The bulk of stories olice violence are covered by police reporters who get the material for thesicles and broadcasts through a variety of different means and sources. Thest common ways are community meetings, telephone calls, news contces, and police occurrence reports. The initial sources for stories on pe violence are either internal or external to the

police force. The internal source can be individual police officers, including insiders, "informants," or "whistle blowers" in the police department[14]; police radio or scanner; police complaints division; public affairs; and the chief's office. Some organizational and individual sources outside the police department include the police union or association; police commission members; other reporters; other media outlets; offices of the commissioner of public complaints, coroner, and public prosecutors; governmental agencies; concerned members of the community; legal institutions; witnesses at inquiries; established ad hoc protest groups; witnesses to police violence; independent groups that monitor the police; elected representatives; prominent community leaders; lawyers for victims or their families; the alleged victims'[15] relatives or friends; and, more important, the victims themselves when possible.

A major determinant of whether or not reporters have access to information from the police is the unique working relationship between reporters and police departments. The academic literature points to two major types of police reporters: those in the inner circle and those on the outside.[16] Much of the research on this subject suggests that the inner circle works out of "the police newsroom," maintains "close affinities with police officers," and seeks "stories sympathetic to the police viewpoint" (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 105). Consequently, inner-circle sources are very limited in the type of articles they produce or are biased. Predictably, inner-circle reporters serve as sources of information for each other. Thus inner-circle police reporters are less likely to report information critical of the police department (1989: 106).

The outer-circle reporters, in contrast, are more likely to report police deviance; less inclined to use the police newsroom, working instead from their media organization's offices; are more detached from police sources; and have a conflictual and tense relationship with the police (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 104-112). This type of reporting encourages police accountability and reform. In general, outer circle reporters receive their stories "from their assignment editors" (1987) and "used a wide variety of police sources and units. When they had burned one person or unit, and were denied further access in consequence, they moved on to other persons or units to further their purpose" (1989: 130).[17]

Information gathered from interviews that I conducted with a variety of actors, especially police reporters and public information officers of big city police departments, shows that there is either a complete absence of the insider-outsider distinctions among reporters or that this arrangement varies from one news organization or reporter to another. Although the insider-outsider categorization might have been an accurate description of the state of police reporting, during the 1980s economic considerations seem to have changed the number of police reporters newsrooms can hire and consequently the number of roles they can assume. Moreover, typically police reporters now cover a variety of stories, in addition to those that focus solely on police and crime, and consequently, the reporters are in the field more. There is also a difference between Ericson's view and mine about how beats are constructed

from newspaper to newspaper and from one type of media to another. For example, even though "so-called" inner-circle police reporters are provided with a newsroom by the police department, they are rarely physically present. Most of their time is spent out in the field collecting information from officers, victims, and witnesses.

Type of News Organization

Researchers also distinguish between popular (for example, tabloid) versus quality news outlets (for example, broadsheet). As Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, (1989: 118-119) pointed out, "popular news outlets were oriented to crime-incident reports and primary and tertiary understanding, whereas quality news outlets gave emphasis to policing the police." Further,

> Popular media are particularly noted for their emphasis on sensational crime, violence, sexual aberrations, major fires, disasters, and other tales of the unexpected that titillate and entertain. 'Quality' news outlets, on the other hand, disavow attention to such matters, but this is usually a matter of degree rather than kind. (Voumvakis and Ericson, 1984, as cited in Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987: 48)

Finally, there is also a difference between mainstream and alternative media. Although the former with mass circulations publish frequently and are accessible by the general public, the latter cater to a small and select audience and do not publish as often. Alternative media are more likely to report stories on police deviance than the mainstream press because of political and market segmenting agendas.

Type of Medium

Although some writers have suggested that there is little difference among mediums (for example, Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978), others disagree (Glasgow University Media Group, 1976; Graber, 1980; Sheley and Ashkins, 1981). Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, (1987: 76) say that this discrepancy exists because both groups of researchers have different foci of study. Regardless, medium type affects how reports of police violence are portrayed (that is, amount of sensationalism, comprehensiveness, and so on) and the public's perception of credibility.

Newspapers are the most comprehensive for numbers of stories on police violence, leave a relatively easily retrievable record (generally microfilm or indexes), and cover the story in greater depth. Radio and television, though leaving a permanent record of audio and video tapes, are the most difficult to access archivally. The broadcast media, however, are the most effective vehicles for sustaining the personalization and dramatization of the story (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 214). Yet broadcast media are also more cautious than their counterparts because their licenses can be revoked by the government for minor violations of federal communications laws.

Moreover, newspapers are potentially more comprehensive because they have more reporters in the field than do the broadcast media. This situation often leads to broadcast media producing secondary reports based on the primary research of the newspapers. And, as with different types of organizations, each source type is attracted to different mediums. Despite these differences, every newsmaking organization can marshal different resources to cover a particular story.

The popular and quality distinction determines the medium's emphasis on news originating from different beats. In the past, popular formats gave the most attention to police beat stories, but there is some indication that broadcast news are increasingly seeking out these types of stories. The court beat is primarily print-oriented, and the popular/quality distinction is a secondary consideration. In contrast, for the legislature, neither medium is preferred; rather, sources prefer outlets with large circulations or audiences (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 393-394).

Finally, "television journalists…rely heavily on predictable sources of stories in particular bureaucratic settings" whereas

> Newspaper [reporters] ha[ve] more resources, including a greater number of journalists. These resources allow the newspaper to set up a more decentralized system for routine news work, including a larger number and more diverse range of topic and beat specialists…newspaper time and space constraints are less severe… (Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987: 354-355)

Editorial Decisions and Traditions

In addition to the relationship between reporters and sources, a complex understanding exists between reporters and their various editors and producers. This interaction affects the assignment, writing, editing, and printing or broadcasting articles or stories about police violence. Many of these decisions take place in newspaper, radio, and television newsrooms, reflecting their unique agendas and economic constraints.

In deciding if, how, and when a story will be run, most editors and producers (as do reporters) make decisions about the reliability and "abnormality" of the story, its sources, other competing newsworthy stories, and, other stories that are on schedule, or were written or shot for that day's news. Also of concern are the ramifications of the story as well as the predicted resources it will take to substantiate its claims and complete it. Some of these decisions evolve from editors' and journalists' self censorship (that is, an avoidance of controversial stories). Many of these editorial decisions are involved with what is generally referred to as aspects of occupational newsroom culture.

These decisions are made in two contexts (where editors exercise control): before a story is written or shot, and once the story is written or shot (for example, Burns, 1979; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1987: Chapter 6; 1989; Fishman, 1980: Chapter 1; GUMG, 1976, 1980; Schlesinger, 1978; Tuchman, 1978: 31-38).

Editorial decisions will ultimately determine whether a segment is broadcast or article is published that mentions police violence and, in turn, will also affect the tone or treatment of that report. The publication or broadcast of a police violence report will generally lead to public, governmental, and police arousal. The media simply act as the catalyst and filter through which competing definitions and interpretations of the act(s) of police violence are channeled.

CONCLUSION

Unmistakably, these factors interact with each other in the specified causal order to facilitate the publication or broadcast of stories on police violence. In general, this process structures the type and number of articles and stories printed or broadcast on police violence. To test the strength of as many of the propositions of this model as possible, each factor should be operationalized, relationships among factors should be clearly specified, and an appropriate empirical method should be selected (for example, surveys) to assess how newspaper, radio, and television station personnel and organizations conform to the media initiation process. This will allow researchers, policymakers, and even the media to better understand how information on police violence makes its way into the public domain.

Causal modeling of the type developed here is an iterative task. First generation causal models in a field of inquiry such as the connection between the media and the police, which is descriptively rich but analytically barren, will provide the foundation for future and more complex models. More sophisticated models of media initiation should be developed in different markets (size of cities) and include psychological and rational choice theories on the causes of this process.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. According to Ross, what are some factors that determine whether or not incidents of police violence or alleged police violence will become news stories?

2. What role does the author suggest that individual factors such as gender, status, and experience of the reporter play in the news gathering and dissemination process? Does Ross's model suggest that a rookie (inexperienced) female reporter would necessarily be at a disadvantage in gathering news about police violence? Why or why not?

3. According to the author, how do police reporters generally acquire the information used in preparing stories about police violence? Does this influence what is reported?

NOTES

1. Police violence has been defined in various ways. "Most definitions, however, treat it as a type of misconduct and deviance. The term is used to cover a wide range of phenomena. Depending on the context, violent police behaviors are variously referred to as police abuse, assaults, brutality, riots, extra-legal or excessive force, deadly force, shootings, death squad activity, and torture committed by police officers" (Ross, 1995a: 223).

2. For a description of the later stages of this model, see Ross, 1995b.

3. All further references to police and crime reporters will be covered by the label "police reporters." It also must be understood that general assignment reporters can, from time to time, cover the police. Big (geographically dispersed) or complex incidents are covered by a team of these reporters. The newspapers, in particular, depend on a pool of general assignment reporters to cover a story from a variety of angles.

4. For a review of modeling in the social sciences, see, for example, Brodbeck (1959), Diesing (1971: Chapter 7), Pindyck and Rubinfeld (1981), Stogdill (1970), and in the criminal justice field, see, for instance, Bohigian (1977). This study is limited to big-city police departments and the local media that cover them.

5. Although field work by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan (1987) applies to specific news organizations in Toronto, it is not entirely generalizable to news agencies in other cities. Moreover, it neglects the newsrooms and personnel of radio stations. "In Britain, Canada, and the United States, their [media] influence is enormous. Police forces consider carefully the impact of their actions on public opinion. Sometimes, of course, this leads them to take strenuous action to mislead the public..." (Bayley, 1985: 166-167).

6. These cities were chosen based on proximity, familiarity, and comparability.

7. These factors and processes will not be explored in this model. Race was omitted from the media initiation portion of this model. This did not appear as a factor both in the literature I reviewed and the people I interviewed, most of whom were not visibly minorities.

8. This model is a modification of the one used by Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, (1987: 41), which in turn is adapted from those used by McQuail and Windal (1981).

9. According to Anne Murray, police reporter with the *New York Post*. Personal interview with author, August 26, 1991.

10. According to interview with author August 27, 1991.

11. In 1991, New York *Newsday*, for example, had five full-time police reporters.

12. See Ericson, Baranek, and Chan,(1989: 313-338) for a more detailed overview of these alternative methods.

13. For a cursory understanding of how this beat functions, see Bancroft (1967), Gieber and Johnson (1961), and Lovell (1983: Chapter 4).

14. Sometimes this is racially motivated. During the 1960s, "tensions created by blacks objecting to the treatment white officers were giving citizens...led to black and white cops pulling guns on each other in Detroit and Chicago" (Stark, 1972: 65). At other times it is a way of making another officer or officers look bad for office politics reasons.

15. All subsequent references to victims will include the understanding that they can be alleged victims.

16. This is also referred to as the good guy/bad guy reporter strategy.

17. By the same token, police organizations can use a variety of techniques to effectively control the flow of information coming to reporters (for example, Ericson, Baranek, and Chan, 1989: 140).

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Reflections on Crime, Criminals, and Control in Newsmagazine Television Programs*

KENNETH D. TUNNELL

Media crime reporting often is criticized, and rightly so, because of the selection and dissemination of skewed depictions of crime to the public. Research indicates that media coverage of crime consistently overrepresents, indeed, exaggerates particularly violent, random crimes; neglects to report that 55 percent of all murders occur between acquaintances; fails to report that about 93 percent of all crimes are property crimes; presents crime as entertainment; and groundlessly fuels viewers' perceptions that threats to them and their safety are growing even during times when crime rates have remained stable or declined (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 1991; MacGillis and ABC News, 1983). As a result, researchers conclude that crime in the media "bears little resemblance" to reality (Sheley and Ashkins, 1984: 137).

As the media overemphasize violent crime stories, the public's belief about the frequency of violent crimes has become incongruent with official crime rates. Heavy viewers of television crime and news programs are most likely to become "criminophobic," to distort the reality of violent crime from internalizing an image of a crime-filled world (Sheley and Ashkins, 1984) as they soak up crime depictions with "a can of beer in one hand, a can of mace in the other" (Rosenberg, 1995: 110). Furthermore, most Americans learn of crime and criminals only through the media, and television is *the* central medium disseminating stories of crime and criminals (for example, Barak, 1994a: 3). A