The Symbiotic, But Conflicted Relationship Between Law Enforcement and the Media: A Case Study

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Abstract

Police officers and journalists share a legacy of mutual distrust. However, when some police officers believe that the criminal justice system has been thwarted or extorted by colleagues, they sometimes risk their careers and perhaps even their lives to “leak,” or provide confidential information to the media. This paper presents and explores an overview of this conflicted relationship, as well as providing successful case study depictions of this “last-resort relationship” between the two professions.

Introduction

As members of law enforcement and the news media pursue their professional goals, a symbiotic, but conflicted relationship has evolved in their mutual roles of uncovering and revealing truths to the constituencies they serve. That this professional synergism exists is documented in a case study contained in this paper, which is based on the experiences and observations of one of the co-authors, an investigative journalist with more than thirty years’ experience.
The mutually advantageous results of this synergy, however, do not occur as frequently as they might because of two primary factors. First, police almost always choose to cooperate and share information with journalists only after conventional means of solving crime and resolving police problems have been thwarted. Secondly, perhaps ironically, a legacy of suspicion undermines the trust between the two professions that ostensibly share the same mission, i.e., the relentless pursuit of facts, unwavering impartiality, and service to community. More often than not then, these two professions unite for common purpose as a last resort.

Review of Literature

As varied public representations of societal crime increase, police are now, more than ever, faced with the necessity of building and maintaining relationships with members of the media, primarily reporters who often pursue goals that are in direct conflict with those of law enforcement. Garner (1984) characterized this historically stormy relationship as one comprising basic mistrust and mutual dislike between the two parties. Moreover, there is an inherent “territorial” ideology among police, as well as this general mistrust of media. These points of conflict are not new, but rather appear to emanate from longstanding constitutional and historical factors that have served to perpetuate struggles between police and members of the media over time. Certainly, disagreements between the two groups are deeply embedded in the right to free speech outlined in the First Amendment to the US Constitution. Claiming these rights, journalists have traditionally been viewed by the police as quasi-competitors with powers to penetrate police secrecy, and even attempting to color what police themselves see as
reality (Reiner 2008). Complicating this necessitated exchange relationship, the media are dependent on the news ‘fed’ to them on a regular basis by police. Additionally, this dependency status suggests the media must strive not to offend police; so censorship often may take place. Whatever the objective truth, significant and pronounced differences of opinion exist between members of the press and officers regarding the publication of crime news stories (Altschull, 1975; Selke & Bartoszek, 1984).

The existing mutual distrust has been fuelled by historical events that have worked to deepen the division between police and members of the media over time. In particular, the social and political turmoil of the 1960’s served as a catalyst in the escalation of this ‘undeclared war.’ The media played a key role in identifying and investigating problems related to police corruption, abuses of power, and even criminal activity on the part of officers during this period (Sherman, 1974b). Media reports of these activities were not well received by the historically closed society the police community has long considered itself to be. Police officers’ reluctance to accept civilian review and oversight is well-documented in public proceedings, from the Knapp Commission investigation (1971) into police corruption in New York City to, more than thirty years later, the Christopher Commission’s examination (1991) of excessive force among members of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Within the paramilitary ranks of police, there is a similarly documentable and unique form of cultural and professional ethnocentricity that imposes an unwritten, but formalized code of secrecy. This wariness of outsiders has been called the “blue wall of silence” by former NYPD Detective Frank Serpico (Tyre, 1997), a whistleblower who
was critically wounded during a drug raid that he claimed was set up by corrupt fellow officers. Later that year, Serpico broke ranks to testify against fellow officers before the Knapp Commission. The key tenet of this phenomenon of silence prohibits officers within the so-called “blue circle” from discussing their activities with anyone who isn’t a police officer. This “us-against-them” perspective has been widely dramatized in television shows such as *NYPD Blue* (Bocho & Milch, 1998) and in non-fiction literary works ranging from *Serpico* (Maas, 1973), the classic biographical account of the Serpico experience, to fictionalized works such as *New Centurions* (Wambaugh, 1971) and *The Blue Knight* (Wambaugh, 1973); Joseph Wambaugh himself is a former detective sergeant in Los Angeles.

During this same period, police officers have become particularly dubious and distrustful of the media, which have been instrumental in exposing problems within police ranks. Moreover, the brutal beating of Rodney King by officers in Los Angeles has become a precursor to countless television film clips that now appear almost routinely and which capture police officers in high-adrenalin, heat-of-the-moment rages, beating suspects who had attempted to escape during high-speed chases. Not coincidentally given the public’s increased exposure to these previously unpublicized acts of corruption and brutality, at least two newspapers, *The Philadelphia Inquirer* (Pulitzer Board, 1978) and *The Dallas Morning News* (Pulitzer Board, 1992), were awarded Pulitzer Prizes for their analyses of police corruption and abuse.

The media’s public disclosure of these illegal and/or negligent police practices, along with ensuing internal and external investigations, convictions, and mandatory
changes in training, has accentuated the historical and deeply divisive adversarial relationship between police and journalists, particularly among journalists who are investigative reporters. These journalists, many of whom rely heavily on state and federal open records acts enacted as government reform measures in the early-1970s, gain access to scores of internal police documents and background files that previously were barred from public disclosure. The result has been more rigorous and in-depth coverage of police than perhaps at any time in American history. Concurrently, and as a result of revelations that have been substantiated within internal police files, in depositions and during testimony in a growing number of federal civil rights cases and on videotapes such as the King beating, journalists have grown increasingly suspicious and jaundiced in their examination of police.

In spite of law enforcement’s trepidation in dealing with journalists, police have contributed substantial amounts of information to journalists as a “court of last resort.” This contribution suffices to serve their own goals, which, coincidentally, are generally those of the media and the public at large.

These collaborative efforts between law enforcement and media generally fall within two distinct categories -- those that are administratively-sanctioned and justified as “public service” efforts, and those that are wholly unauthorized, in which information is “leaked” to journalists anonymously by individual officers, sometimes in violation of police regulations and the federal Privacy Act of 1974 (5 U.S.C. 552A, 1974).

Organized, sanctioned collaborative efforts date back more than fifty years to late-1949 when an enterprising reporter for the now-defunct International News Service, the
predecessor of United Press International, asked the Federal Bureau of Investigation for a list of criminals the Bureau was most interested in capturing. FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, realizing the merit in marshalling the public’s eyes and ears in the bureau’s crime-fighting efforts, institutionalized the “Ten Most Wanted List” on March 14, 1950. By October 2009, according to FBI statistics, 494 fugitives had appeared on the list; 463 had been located, 152 of those as a direct result of the public’s involvement (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2010).

Perhaps the most contemporary example of this sanctioned pooling of law enforcement information and media dissemination is the television series America’s Most Wanted (America’s Most Wanted, 2010). The FBI, other federal agencies, and state and local law enforcement jurisdictions throughout the country willingly provide the weekly show with information, some of which they previously had zealously withheld from disclosure, in an effort to enlist the public’s help in locating fugitives and suspects in pending criminal investigations. The program relies on police mug shots and artists’ conceptions and, on occasion, surveillance camera video, but its mainstay is reenactments produced with professional actors. The program, aired on the Fox Television Network, features an 800-, toll-free telephone number through which it receives tips from viewers. According to its own records, America’s Most Wanted has directly led to the arrests of 1102 suspects and fugitives since it began airing in April 1988 (America’s Most Wanted, 2010).

Nevertheless, in the instances of the FBI’s Top Ten List and America’s Most Wanted, law enforcement almost always has tried – and exhausted -- standard
investigative techniques in apprehending these fugitives and suspects before turning to the media, and hence the public, as a last resort. Throughout the country, various local law enforcement agencies have similar “crime stopper” relationships with the media in which rewards are offered for information leading to arrests or convictions in uncleared cases. Another “public service” cooperative effort by law enforcement and media also is manifested in newspapers’ publication of the names, addresses and photographs of registered sex offenders who, by law in many states, are required to register upon conviction or release from custody.

Case Studies

Far and away the most dramatic and far-reaching impact of police-media collaboration is found in the unauthorized sharing or pooling of confidential information by individual police officers with investigative journalists. These facts, almost always made available to journalists on the condition that the officer’s identity be kept confidential at all costs, frequently result in major investigations and sometimes trigger reforms within police agencies. Almost always, individual police officers embark on this method of ensuring that facts be made public as a last resort, and only after they believe they have been thwarted within the official police hierarchy.

A case in point occurred in 1979 when, after a lengthy series of preliminary telephone calls, two New York-based special agents of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration met surreptitiously in Beaumont, Texas with an investigative reporter for The Dallas Morning News. The agents had become convinced that their investigation into a prominent, politically powerful drug suspect in North Texas had been jeopardized when
the U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of New York forced them to turn jurisdiction of the investigation over to the Dallas-based Northern District of Texas. Their suspect, a millionaire rancher, banker and businessman who lived in Denton, Texas, not only was a prominent Democratic powerbroker, but was a close personal friend of one of the state’s U.S. senators and several other Democratic Party dignitaries. Additionally, he had been a gubernatorial appointee to an influential state board and had been named an honorary Texas Ranger for his financial contributions and support of the Texas Department of Public Safety. The New York-based DEA agents feared that politics had already caused their investigation of the suspect to be transferred to Texas where it ultimately would be dropped. Meeting with the journalist, the two federal agents turned over a list of places along the East Coast where they believed the Denton man had off-loaded marijuana boats from Colombia; they also offered the names of several smugglers, some of whom had already been arrested, who they believed were on his payroll. The agents had prepared the information for submission to a federal grand jury in New York before the case was abruptly transferred to Texas.

Using the agents’ information as a starting point, The Dallas Morning News over the next several months researched other information and published a series of copyrighted articles that indicated the Texas entrepreneur was, in fact, the financier of an international marijuana-smuggling cartel. The information contained in the stories was so compelling and authoritative that the DEA’s internal security division attempted unsuccessfully to prove that one of its agents had leaked information in violation of the Privacy Act. The journalist, claiming his privilege under the First Amendment, refused
the agency’s request to take a polygraph or to cooperate in its investigation; the internal investigation finally was suspended without charges against any agent.

Nearly two years later, after recurring articles on the front page of *The Morning News*, the prominent Texas businessman was indicted on charges of violating federal banking laws (U.S.A. v. Cauble, 1981). When the indictment was announced, one of the DEA agents from New York phoned the journalist. Without the public and political pressure resulting from the articles, the agent said, the indictment never would have occurred. Even still, he reported, the investigation had taken months longer than it should have, having become periodically gridlocked in political considerations. The prominent businessman ultimately was tried and convicted on the banking violations and sentenced to prison for his role as “kingpin” in smuggling 176,000 pounds of marijuana from Colombia (U.S.A. v. Cauble, 1982).

In another case, an agent with a state law enforcement agency anonymously contributed information to a journalist that helped document a criminal case against two corrupt narcotics officers in Tyler, Texas. The state agent also passed along information warning the journalist of the corrupt officers’ illicit attempts to destroy his credibility.

In the late-1970s, Tyler was the scene of the largest undercover narcotics investigation in Texas history. One hundred twenty-one suspects were indicted on drug violations as the result of a months-long investigation by undercover narcotics agents Creig Matthews and Kimberly Wozencraft Ramsey. At trial, defendants routinely were being convicted and sentenced to lengthy prison sentences. Indeed, the sentences were so severe that many other defendants who continued to claim their innocence were
reluctantly accepting plea bargains for 10- and 20-year sentences. In the interim, the East Texas Peace Officers Association named both Matthews and Ramsey “Officers of the Year.” A Dallas Morning News journalist, however, learned that before Matthews joined the Tyler Police Department, he had been fired by the Dallas Police Department for stealing money from a man he had arrested. More recently, he had resigned from the Plano Police Department after firemen answering a call at his apartment had discovered a large cache of illicit drugs. A handful of prominent defense attorneys represented the bulk of the defendants in the Tyler raids and, according to the accounts related to the journalist by the attorneys, each of those arrested offered versions of the same story: The undercover narcotics agents had used drugs with them, given them drugs, and had even sold drugs to people whose names had not appeared on the indictments (Files and Ireland, 1979).

The journalist tape-recorded interviews with many of those arrested, some of whom claimed the undercover officers had “planted,” or hidden, evidence on them, then committed perjury before the grand jury in order to win indictments against them. Already realizing the credibility problems associated with defendants under indictment, the journalist discovered that many of the suspects also had prior criminal records, which only accentuated the issue of their truthfulness. Aware that the word of these defendants would be weighed against the integrity of two commissioned police officers, The Dallas Morning News journalist retained a retired, well-regarded Texas Department of Public Safety polygrapher to administer lie detector examinations to ten of those indicted suspects. All the suspects claimed to have witnessed one or both undercover agents use
narcotics, and all denied the circumstances of the indictments against them; likewise, all
the defendants, according to the former DPS polygrapher, were truthful in their
statements (Swindle, 1979). Shown the results of the polygraph tests, the Smith County
district attorney declined to investigate allegations of corruption among the two agents;
he also refused to force them to take polygraphs. The journalist, during subsequent
interviews with the two corrupt officers, was also given information that indicated the
department’s chief was fully aware of the fraudulent charges filed by the agents, but
allowed the charges to be presented to the grand jury and, subsequently, authorized their
prosecution (Swindle, 1982).

*The Morning News* launched a series of articles in August, 1979, indicating that
Matthews and Ramsey used drugs themselves, planted drugs on suspects, and committed
perjury in their testimony against the drug defendants. The district attorney and police
chief, meanwhile, steadfastly defended their officers and refused to investigate the
allegations. Prosecutions continued as did the guilty verdicts. As the articles played out
on Page One, the Federal Bureau of Investigation launched an investigation to determine
if agents of the Tyler Police Department had violated the civil rights of the 121
defendants indicted as a result of the undercover drug probe. The journalist, meanwhile,
received a phone call from the anonymous state investigator who “leaked,” or passed on
information about the narcotics officers’ illegal activities that he had collected from
informants of his own. The state agent also warned that the two agents, under growing
pressure as a result of the articles, had orchestrated a plan using their drug informants to
“discredit you (the journalist) or hurt you.” “You need to watch yourself or something bad’s going to happen,” he said.

Within the month, the journalist noticed someone attempting to break into the side glass of his auto while it was parked on a downtown Dallas lot. The man ran when he heard the journalist coming. A taillight lens on the car had been shattered, and the side glass on the driver’s side had been leveraged.

In 1982, after an extensive investigation by the FBI and amid continuing, periodic articles in The Dallas Morning News, Creig Matthews and Kimberly Wozencraft Matthews (the couple was married in the interim) pleaded guilty to federal civil rights violations in the Eastern District of Texas (U.S.A. v. Matthews and Matthews, 1982). Pending charges were dropped against the remaining defendants in their illegal investigation, and those who already had been sentenced to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice were bench-warranted to Tyler where, in most cases, the convictions were overturned. Each of the agents was sentenced to eighteen months in federal prison. The chief, also charged with civil rights violations, elected to stand trial and was acquitted (U.S.A. v. Hardy, 1981).

Not until Matthews and Ramsey entered their pleas before U.S. District Judge William Wayne Justice did the import of the attempted break-in of the journalist’s car become apparent. Creig Matthews admitted to a conspiracy to plant cocaine in the journalist’s car. An acquaintance of Matthews’, a Dallas police officer, was to have stopped the journalist for having a defective taillight lens. Using the traffic infraction as probable cause, the officer was to have “discovered” cocaine on the back floorboard,
ostensibly resulting not only in criminal charges against the journalist, but destroying his
credibility in the process.

Upon the guilty pleas of the two narcotics officers, the state law enforcement
officer, the investigator who had anonymously passed along the warning to the journalist, related that he had been alarmed and disgusted when he discovered that the Tyler Police Department had sanctioned the illegal activities of the undercover officers. He also realized, he said that no one in the county’s law enforcement administration would stop the wrongful prosecutions. The checks and balances in the county’s criminal justice system had failed. The media, he determined, would be the best catalyst for an outside investigation into the corruption. Justice, the veteran investigator said, had to come “from outside the system.”

A series of events earlier this year in Dallas provides a dramatic and more topical case study to demonstrate the far-reaching impact on the criminal justice system when police officers and journalists share information in a common goal. On July 28, a 17-year-old girl returned home from a neighborhood recreation center, explaining to her stepfather, an off-duty Dallas police officer, that she had been beaten during a parking lot brawl. Within minutes, the officer and “12 to 15 family members and friends,” according to police offense reports, sped to the recreation center in various vehicles. According to some of those same police reports, several of those who accompanied the officer were armed with an array of makeshift weapons, ranging from baseball bats to screwdrivers. The off-duty officer, Derrick C. Evans, was dressed in baggy shorts and a pullover “muscle shirt,” and he wore his service weapon in plain sight with his badge on a chain
around his neck. Later, Officer Evans told police investigators that he saw a young man fire a handgun at a car passing through the parking lot and that the young man had also pointed the pistol at him. The man, the officer said, refused to drop the weapon to the ground even after Officer Evans identified himself as a police officer. At that point, in fear of his life, the officer said he shot the 19-year-old, wounding him in his right forearm. Other witnesses, however, gave police statements in which they claimed the young man had no weapon. Officer Evans was immediately placed on administrative leave, a customary procedure, while detectives investigated the “officer-involved shooting.”

Within days of the shooting, which resulted in extensive newspaper and television coverage because of the disparate statements given investigators about whether the teenager had a gun, a detective phoned a journalist he knew with *The Dallas Morning News*. The detective described Officer Evans as “a thug with a badge.” “Evans should never have been a police officer, not with his background,” he said. “And the administration knows it.”

The detective, who demanded anonymity for the information he provided, said he, like several others in the Dallas Police Department, was aware that Officer Evans, while still a recruit in police academy three years earlier, had been a suspect in an uncleared homicide. Further, the detective said, Evans was found during a departmental polygraph examination to have been deceptive in his answers about his role in the homicide. That information, according to the detective, had been turned over to his lieutenant, who had passed it up the chain of command. Although the detective could not directly, of his own
independent knowledge, say how far up the command structure the information had gone, he said he had been told by supervisors that it “went all the way to the top” -- an apparent reference to then-Chief of Police Terrell Bolton. Even though Evans had been questioned in a homicide and had been found to be deceptive on the polygraph exam, according to the detective, Evans nonetheless was permitted to graduate with his academy class in 2000 and become a commissioned, uniformed patrol officer.

The journalist and two colleagues began checking the detective’s account. They confirmed that the homicide in which Evans had been a suspect, that of Simuel Huey Jr., had occurred June 10, 2000 near Fair Park in South Dallas. The team of journalists learned that Huey, a 31-year-old ex-convict on parole from Washington, had been living with Officer Evans’ sister-in-law in an apparently turbulent relationship at the time he was killed. Huey, according to an autopsy, had been shot in his head, near the right jaw, and in his chest. Police files (Dallas Police Department, 2003) showed the Huey homicide was still pending. Additionally, one of the journalists was able to convince a police source to provide a copy of the polygraph results in the Evans interrogation, confirming his deception on the questions. The journalists also were able to determine that Evans, who previously had been stationed in Alaska with the U.S. Army, had failed to include on his Dallas police employment application that he had been arrested, while a soldier, for driving under the influence of alcohol. While a background investigator had recommended against hiring Evans, a deputy chief had approved the former soldier’s admission to academy, saying she believed Evans’ omission of the DWI arrest was an “oversight.”
All officers agreed to provide information only under the condition of anonymity for fear of being disciplined or terminated. The department’s Code of Conduct makes it a violation for an officer to do anything that could “adversely affect, lower or destroy public respect and confidence in the department or office,” which clearly created an atmosphere of ethical dissonance for the officers.

According to the detective who provided the original information, and in the opinion of other officers interviewed by the journalists, Evans, an African-American, had been allowed to enter the academy despite the omission of arrest information on his application and to graduate (even after failing a polygraph exam about his role in an uncleared homicide) primarily because of the department’s strong commitment to minority hiring. That commitment to diversity, they maintained, became even more rigid under Chief Bolton, who became the first African-American police chief in Dallas history, when he assumed command in late-1999.

The majority of officers who had direct knowledge of the Evans case and who were willing to be interviewed were white. Proving cause-and-effect is difficult in the best of circumstances; that process is made even more problematic and emotional when race is introduced as a factor. Few people would admit to being racist. Similarly, it would be reasonable to assume that few also would admit to violating regulations to provide preferential treatment in their goal of diversity, particularly if that suspension of the rules meant granting a person benefit of doubt about his implication in a homicide investigation.
The journalists and their editor were mindful of the pitfalls of documenting “why” an event occurs, and continued on a course that treated the Evans case as a single, isolated scenario in which an officer apparently had fallen through the cracks of the police department’s checks and balances. A short time later, however, a well-respected African-American lieutenant also volunteered information about Officer Evans. The lieutenant told journalists that “breaking rules” in hiring Officer Evans had hurt the credibility of all minority officers who had strived to achieve success on their own accomplishments. “There are qualified, good minority candidates out there and they don’t have to lower the standards to hire them,” he said. The African-American lieutenant maintained that the hiring of Officer Evans was even more flawed than the journalists had realized. “Check the records in Alaska on domestic violence,” he said. Indeed, journalists found that twice, while Derrick Evans had been stationed in Fairbanks, Alaska, in the U.S. Army, judges had determined that he posed a serious enough threat to his wife’s safety that they issued emergency protective orders against him (Alaska Superior Court, 1995). Those judicial rulings, like the omission of the DWI, normally would have disqualified him as a candidate for police officer. Evans’ wife, at the time, had since divorced him and was living in Dallas. Interviewed by journalists, she said her former husband, while on duty and driving a Dallas police cruiser, had continually harassed her and her new husband.

When Chief Bolton was confronted by the journalists with information about Evans’ hiring, much of it obtained from police officers within his department, he declined to be interviewed. The chief, already under public scrutiny for a wide-scale firing of his
command staff that cost $5 million in legal settlements, a botched series of narcotics
arrests, and a crime rate that put Dallas at the top of major U.S. cities, routinely released
public statements through a staff aide rather than personally address the media. However,
within hours of the journalists’ request for an interview, Officer Evans was summoned to
police headquarters where he was kept overnight answering questions from Internal
Affairs investigators. At 6:30 a.m. the next morning and after 14 hours at police
headquarters, Officer Evans was fired for two procedural violations of the department’s
Code of Conduct -- carrying his weapon in a manner that attracted the attention of the
public, and “willful misrepresentation or omission” of his personal history and
qualifications for employment. The journalists were notified by facsimile that the chief
had fired Officer Evans.

Within days of publication of the Evans article (Becka, Eiserer & Swindle, 2003),
the Dallas County district attorney hand-delivered a letter to Chief Bolton. The letter
questioned whether hiring standards for other police officers also had been suspended.
“The recent revelations about ex-Officer Derrick Evans have prompted our concern
regarding information in your files about which we are unaware, but which we may well
have a duty to disclose…with the cases we prosecute….If an officer has been convicted
of a misdemeanor offense involving moral turpitude, our office needs to know about that
conviction,” the letter said. Omitting information from a police employment application,
prosecutors noted, would be “tampering with a government record,” which would
constitute a crime of moral turpitude. The district attorney’s office asked Dallas police to
examine all police officers’ personnel files, and requested the names, badge numbers, and
a description of any misdemeanor crimes the officers may have committed. Two business
days after Chief Bolton received the letter, a copy of which was sent to the head of the
City Council’s Public Safety Committee, Chief Bolton was fired.

The detective who provided the original information about Officer Evans’ failure
of the polygraph examination said the firing of Officer Evans and Chief Bolton
vindicated him. Though he said he had lived in fear of being exposed as the officer who
had leaked information to the media, the detective considered his conduct, admittedly a
violation of departmental regulations, a “public service.” “It was,” he said, “the only way
the right thing would have gotten done. The administration wasn’t going to do it.”

Summary and Conclusions

Indeed, police and media appear locked into a relationship described as a
‘complex loop of interdependence’ (Reiner 2008). In the three cases described and
undoubtedly in many others, it is clear that some police officers are willing to assume
certain risks, including their careers and indeed even their own lives, in “leaking,” or
sharing confidential information with journalists to ensure that justice is achieved. These
committed law enforcement officers, in the cases cited here, elect to make these last-
resort decisions only when they believe the criminal justice system has been stymied or
extorted. Interestingly, this synergistic association with journalists, members of a
profession law enforcement historically distrusts, apparently becomes more important to
these officers than their own unspoken, but highly formalized credo of silence within the
so-called “blue circle.” Clearly, the balance between the control exercised by the police,
and that exercised on the other hand by the media, is not fixed; rather it is an entity
continually shifting control between the two. We can no longer easy to make clear divisions between these two domains; rather we should declare a fine line existing between what constitutes ‘a police-led media story vs. a media-led police investigation’

Regarding the potential significance of this research, we have shown media assisting with, as well as legitimizing police work; thus, it could be argued that with regard to high-profile news stories described herein, the media still play an important “watchdog role” (Mawby 1999).

Police communication is important: democratic societies need open, responsive and accountable police forces. Moreover, in addition to the review of a growing body of work investigating police and media interaction, the public can undoubtedly continue to benefit from what they are able to learn about police activities, both good and bad. In closing, we recognize the need for caution in drawing generalizations from these cases; however, we believe that this preliminary exploration of the symbiotic, but conflicted relationship between law enforcement and the media offers some useful and interesting findings.
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