

Police Media Activities in Scotland: Is Social Media the Way Forward?

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Introduction

The media act as a significant source of information for the public about crime and policing and are considered an effective method of holding the police to account OSCE (2008). Research suggests that the police control their relationship with the media since they are the gatekeepers of much of the information that journalists require in order to write their crime and criminal justice stories (e.g. Chibnall 1977; Reiner 2010). The current research aimed to examine police media activities in Scotland, the objectives for such activities, and how their perceptions of the media influence their gatekeeping practices. The research has a particular focus on how the expansion of social media has impacted on police media activities.

Methods

Qualitative interviews with eleven communications staff and ten police officers of various ranks (from chief constable to police constable), conducted during 2012 and early 2013.

Quantitative content analysis of national and local newspapers: The Daily Record; The Herald; and the Edinburgh Evening News.

Quantitative analysis of police Facebook and Twitter accounts

Findings

Although police communications departments have moved on a great deal from the situation where members of staff would be sitting by the phones waiting on journalists to call, the police continue to dedicate a great deal of time and resources to their relationship with the traditional media.

All interviewees were quick to say they had a very positive relationship with the media. However, as interviews progressed they would start to begin a lot of sentences with “the problem I have with the media is...” Indeed, interviewees could express a number of frustrations in their dealings with the traditional media, including:

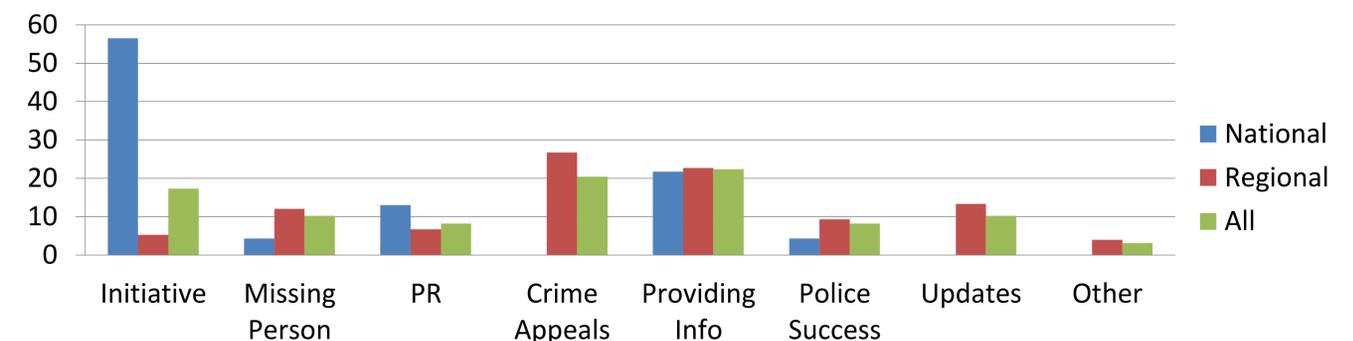
- The media’s focus on the most sensational and statistically rare crimes
 - The content analysis of newspapers backed this up, with murder being the most common type of crime reported by all three papers.
 - Interviewees were frustrated that they had to conform to the media’s news values if they wanted coverage for something, while less sensational (thus, newsworthy) issues would receive minimal coverage.
- The lack of coverage the police receive
 - The content analysis revealed that although crime was the third most common type of news item across all three newspapers, the police were only mentioned in around half of all crime-related stories.
 - When the police were mentioned, it was often only a very basic statement, despite the police dedicating a lot of resources into trying to influence media coverage in a positive manner.

Findings

Whilst it has its own set of unique challenges, most interviewees viewed social media as a way of combating these issues.

The content analysis of social media supports the assertions of interviewees that the information shared via social media is far removed from traditional media coverage of policing issues; only 26.5% of all Facebook posts and 38% of all Tweets included in the current analysis actually mentioned a specific crime, and only a small proportion of these were about serious/violent crime

Percentage of all posts made in each category for national and regional Police Scotland Facebook accounts



Although police use of social media use was in its relative infancy, and although it provided its own complex mix of challenges and opportunities, most interviewees were very positive about its use and some could envisage a time where the police would concentrate on publishing all information via social media and investing very little in the traditional media – who would still have access to policing information through the same channels as everyone else.

Conclusion

At first glance, the fact that the police can envisage a time where they are less invested in their relationship with the traditional media seems like it would be detrimental to police accountability. However, this research argues that the opposite can be true. The police can choose to be more accountable through social media by communicating all information that is in the public interest and not just their good news stories or propaganda. At the same time, the media would be free from the constraints of having to behave in a way that does not threaten the steady stream of information coming from the police if they are not invested in the relationship either – they would still have access to the policing information shared by the police through social media, as well as increased access to information provided by the public through social media.