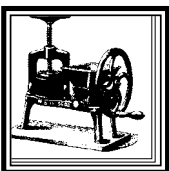


University of Gloucestershire Inaugural Lecture
No 1

*From Dock Green to Life on Mars:
Continuity and Change in TV Copland*

Professor Frank Leishman



THE CYDER PRESS



UNIVERSITY OF
GLOUCESTERSHIRE

at Cheltenham and Gloucester

THE CYDER PRESS

... thy Press with purest Juice
Shall flow ...

(John Philips: *Cyder. A Poem*, 1708)

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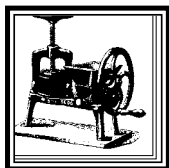
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Copland*

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Editorial Note

Frank Leishman, Professor of Criminology and Head of the Department of Natural and Social Sciences at the University of Gloucestershire, delivered the first in a new series of inaugural lectures by the university's professors on 7 May 2008. The present booklet reproduces the text of the lecture more or less verbatim, and the editor of The Cyder Press is most grateful to Professor Leishman for allowing the Press to reprint it.

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Introduction

I have for a long time had a considerable interest in the relationship between policing and the media. Before I became a full-time academic criminologist, I was for ten years a serving police officer in the UK, where I worked both as an operational detective sergeant and as a police press officer. My time as a press officer coincided with a paradigm shift in police media relations, when forces throughout the UK were moving away from a position of withholding as much information as possible, to one of more professional, proactive engagement with the news and other media.

As a criminologist I have researched and lectured on crime, policing and the media for a variety of students, including many serving police officers. I will draw on both aspects of my professional background in this lecture, in which I will attempt to chart the continuities and changes that have occurred in representations of policing in the TV police series since the genre began in the 1950s and to illustrate along the way, how fictional representations of policing have closely tracked developments in real-life policing. I also explore the frequently posed question of whether professional police officers should regard their fictional portrayals as a threat or an opportunity when it comes to promoting themselves.

I am conscious that my references and examples are drawn predominantly from television programming in the United Kingdom and, to a lesser extent, the United States and I apologise in advance for that. But, as we are all aware, policing now occurs in an increasingly globalised and inter-connected world and, in that context, I do hope that my presentation will raise a number of discussion points that will have wider relevance and application.

Policing and the Media

May I begin by highlighting five important general findings arising from research about the relationship between policing and the media?

1. Policing is a mass-mediated activity

Policing takes place in a highly mediated environment and policing itself is an inherently newsworthy activity. There is an enduring public fascination with crime and criminal events. Electronic newsgathering and its global reach, coupled with the expansion of digital television channels have ensured that there is now even more broadcasting space to fill in terms of both news and entertainment. As Yvonne Jewkes (2004:40) suggests, 21st century news values continue to emphasise the traditional place of crime and deviance being at the core of what makes a 'good story', but also reflect a heightened focus on such 'newsworthy' criteria as risk, violence, celebrity and children – the Maddie McCann story comes readily to mind.. In this context, law enforcement agencies are highly visible as never before, and this heightened media exposure calls for ever more careful and creative management of what Rob C. Mawby terms the 'policing image' (Mawby (2002) (2007a)).

2. Boundaries between factual, fictional and 'reality' programming increasingly blurred

In the postmodern media landscape, the boundaries between factual, fictional and reality TV programming related to crime and policing are increasingly blurred (Leishman and Mason, 2003). This creates in many ways a more complex and challenging environment for police public relations professionals, that calls for strategic thinking which transcends traditional news management and PR functions, to include the provision of facilities, advice and briefings for programme-makers, including the producers of fictional police series. Now in its centenary year, this is something that the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has been doing for some considerable time. In the 1930s the FBI were influential in transforming Hollywood's 'heroic gangster' movie, into the G-Man film (Leishman and Mason, 2003: 52).

3. *Media 'effects' on audiences are complex*

There are many assertions about the ill 'effects' of media images of crime and policing in relation to the imitation of criminal behaviour, and the raising of public anxieties about crime. While the research evidence indicates some qualified effects, it does not support clear-cut claims of causal links between, for example, media violence and aggressive behaviour, which, as Reiner suggests, tend to be predicated on the implausible model of the media acting as "a powerful ideological hypodermic syringe, injecting ideas and values into a passive public of cultural dopes" (2000a: 53). However, there does appear to be slightly stronger evidence of 'cultivation' or cumulative effects of media representations on fear of crime among certain groups in society (Leishman and Mason, 2003). These are however complex relationships that move beyond the scope of this lecture.

4. *Media coverage tends to be supportive of the police, ultimately reproducing order*

One of the main conclusions to be drawn from content analysis studies of media representations of policing (and this applies across the three domains of fact, fiction and 'faction') is that, on the whole, media coverage does tend to be very supportive of the police, representing and reproducing order through an underlying common-sense ideology about crime and policing (Leishman and Mason, 2003). Now I know from my own policing experience that that may be of little comfort or consolation to police agencies in the midst of dealing with difficult and damaging media coverage surrounding an on-going investigation or an organisational 'crisis', but it is a useful 'perspective-taking' finding to be considered.

5. *Viewers learn as much about crime and policing from TV dramas as from factual programming*

Research confirms the popularity of TV crime stories in the media, and the significance of their role in shaping both public knowledge and attitudes towards criminal justice and law enforcement agencies. Significantly, findings indicate that viewers gain as much information from police dramas and soaps, as from factual programmes (Rethinking Crime and Punishment, 2003). In a real sense, fictional representations can be seen to address gaps in viewers'

knowledge about ‘real’ policing issues, by facilitating what Hurd termed “completion of the half-formed picture” (1981: 57). In that context, the changing contours of TV ‘copland’ can reveal much about corresponding shifts in society and in public expectations of the police.

Cop Show: Opportunity or Threat?

The two chosen quotations reflect contrasting views of the utility and appropriateness of the fictional TV police series as a conduit for information about policing, and as a vehicle for influencing public opinion. Robards (1985: 24) commented that:

“The police show is television’s heroic genre, and the arbitration of right and wrong for society has become the function of the television cop”.

Somewhere in the late 1950s, the TV cop show’s rise intersected with the Western’s demise as the dominant dramatic setting for the modern, mass-media morality play. Robards’ depiction of the ‘cop as hero’ flags up the potential for the fictional TV police series to deliver symbolic reassurance to more of the public for more of the time (and probably at considerably less cost to law enforcement agencies) than simply putting more police officers out on high visibility patrol duties on the streets.

Professor Robert Reiner (2000a: 55), however, articulates a fear that may resonate with the concerns of many professional police officers and criminal justice practitioners that, in fact,

“...TV ‘cop shows’ breed an assumption that crimes can be cleared up routinely in half an hour minus commercial breaks”.

While Robards’ summation suggests that the TV cop show presents an ‘opportunity’ to influence positively public opinion about the police, Reiner captures the essence of what many police officers view as a ‘threat’, namely that the apparent ‘success’ of the TV cop may raise unrealistic public expectations of their real-life counterparts. Some years ago, my colleague Dr Paul Mason conducted a content analysis of 24 episodes of *The Bill* and discovered that the detection rate at Sun Hill Police Station was 78%, more than double the then England and Wales

average of 34% (Mason, 1992). And of course, detection rate for ‘murder’ is even higher and more certain in such popular detective shows as *Taggart*, *Colombo*, and *Inspector Morse*, all of which now have vast global audiences, so that fear that Professor Reiner’s quotation captures is quite understandable.

I will return to the “opportunity or threat?” question a little later, but let me first, if I may, put the British TV police series into some kind of historical and contemporary context, to illustrate how the TV police series can be seen to mediate developments in real-life policing, through its various representations over the last fifty years or so.

Defining British TV Police Dramas

The time line and images on the slide reflect the analysis in Reiner’s seminal (1994) paper ‘The dialectics of Dixon: the changing image of the TV cop’. They locate what are generally considered to be the defining British TV police series in the lead up to the initial appearance of *The Bill* back in 1983.

(1956) Dixon of Dock Green

PC George Dixon first appeared in the 1950 Ealing film *The Blue Lamp* which was made with the full cooperation of the Metropolitan Police under the Commissionership of Sir Harold Scott. In the film, Dixon was actually shot and killed after twenty minutes by a young armed robber, but such was the popularity of the character that, in 1956, the BBC resurrected him as the central figure in their long-running TV drama *Dixon of Dock Green*, which continued to run for twenty years (by which time, incidentally, PC Dixon had been promoted to become the only 80 year old station sergeant ever in the history of the Metropolitan Police!)

Dixon was very much a community police officer and the series presented the public with an image of the police primarily as ‘carers’, in touch with local people on the neighbourhood beat and dealing with routine crime and social problems. To this day Dixon is still associated with a nostalgic style of community oriented policing in the UK. Indeed the recently introduced Police Community Support Officers have been described in the news media as being like “Dixon of Dock Green with mobile phones” (www.bbc.co.uk/news).

(1962) *Z Cars*

In 1962, the TV programme *Z Cars* brought ‘rougher edges’ to the Dixon brand of community policing. Set in the North West of England (the outskirts of Liverpool, actually), *Z Cars* portrayed a much grittier picture of the police that anticipated the shift to a more reactive style of policing that began to take place in the later 1960s with the widespread use of mobile response patrol cars. *Z Cars* caused considerable controversy at the time because it also portrayed police officers as ‘real’ people, with marriage problems, gambling habits and bullying tendencies.

The then Chief Constable of Lancashire, Sir Eric St Johnston, was so outraged by what he saw in the first episode, that he famously drove straight down to London to the BBC to demand that it be taken off air. The Lancashire force subsequently withdrew its cooperation from the programme makers, but *Z Cars* continued to run for a further thirteen years, attracting at its peak audiences of 14 million British viewers (Leishman and Mason, 2003).

(1974) *The Sweeney*

The defining British TV police series of the 1970s was Euston Films *The Sweeney*, which effectively stood the ‘Dixonian’ image of policing on its head, with its uncompromising picture of the police as ‘crime controllers’ rather than ‘community carers’. In his dialectical analysis, Reiner (1994) posits *The Sweeney* as the ‘antithesis’ to the Dock Green ‘thesis’. (*The Sweeney* incidentally is London Cockney rhyming slang for ‘Sweeney Todd’, the nickname for London’s famous ‘flying squad’ which tackled serious crime in the Metropolis.)

This series came to the screen at a time when crime rates were rising in the UK and the image of the police as tough, tooled-up crime fighters – as you see in the picture Detective Inspector Jack Regan (the late John Thaw) and DS George Carter (Dennis Waterman) - struck a chord with the public and the political mood in Britain at the time. Again, as with ‘Dixon’, ‘The Sweeney’ has come to be associated with a particular style of policing, one that emphasises a macho culture, tough enforcement practices, screeching car tyres and such pithy sayings as “You’re nicked” and – “We’re the Sweeney son and we haven’t had any dinner”.

(1980) Juliet Bravo

In 1980, the series *Juliet Bravo* brought some ‘gentler touches’ to the representation of policing on British TV, by having as its main character a woman inspector in charge of a small police subdivision in Lancashire, once again relocating the cop show out of London to the North of England. Importantly it also challenged some stereotypes of women in the police, creating a new female perspective in crime drama, at a time when the earliest equal opportunities legislation had only recently come into force. In Professor Reiner’s analysis of the progression of the British TV police series, *Juliet Bravo* paved the way for the shift from the crime control agenda of *The Sweeney* to the ‘synthesis’ of policing styles evident in *The Bill*, which began in 1983 and established a kind of balance between caring and controlling images of policing in the mass media.

(1983) The Bill

The Bill is now the longest running police series on British television and, in the course of its 25 year life-span, it has tracked the continuities and changes that have characterised the British TV police series. In that regard, *The Bill* has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to adapt itself, and its longevity is in no small measure due to its relative ‘authenticity’.

Continuity and Change

At the heart of every successful fictional TV police series is ‘authenticity’: audiences expect it and producers prize it.

Authenticity in the TV police series involves five key ingredients:

- Location

Series producers will seek to represent ‘reality’ in the fictional series by maximising the authentic feel of the drama’s setting in terms of physical location. This will include shots of iconic buildings and landmarks, especially in city-set dramas; convincing exteriors such as ‘problem’ housing estates and corporate policing headquarters, and especially realistic police station interiors,

interview rooms, custody suites, control-rooms, canteens and locker rooms. Over the years, the notice boards in *The Bill's* Sun Hill Police Station have featured real-life police posters advertising various current policing initiatives and campaigns. This kind of attention to detail in terms of location and setting is also reflected in the emphasis on accuracy with regard to police vehicles, uniforms and equipment.

Location in time is also an important ingredient in cop show authenticity, and very often the choice of theme and incidental music plays a pivotal part – the sixties soundtrack of the long-running nostalgic police series *Heartbeat*, being perhaps the prime example.

- Procedure

Procedural accuracy is a crucial constituent of the ‘authentic’ TV police series. Interview scenes in fictional cop shows are typically accompanied by references to official police procedure. Likewise, in charge and detention sequences, the custody officer will be seen asking for age, date of birth, address and surname. The use of police procedural jargon and ‘factually-based’ dialogue - also contribute to the sense of ‘realism’. From a producer’s point of view, accuracy in small details of procedure like those mentioned, allows for dramatic licence in other areas of the storyline. The volume and nature of incidents coming through the fictional police station are likely to be far in excess of those encountered in real life, but because there is a foundation of procedural accuracy, the programme remains ‘believable’.

- News-responsive storylines

News-responsiveness in storylines has been another recurrent feature of the fictional TV police series. *Z Cars* actually placed fictional police officers in panda cars a year or so before pilot unit-beat policing initiatives had actually been mainstreamed in real life. Arguably, this element of authenticity has intensified greatly in recent years, reflecting the immediacy of 24/7 rolling news programming, to the extent that ‘news-predictive’ storylines might now be a more accurate description, particularly with narratives dealing with topics such as cybercrime and terrorism.

- Naturalistic filming style

I have already alluded to the blurring of boundaries between factual, fictional and ‘reality’ TV programming, and there can be little doubt that filming style has contributed to this. The TV police procedural series has long been characterised by the use of ‘quasi-documentary’ filming techniques, such as the use of hand-held cameras – often out of focus – uneven sound, and slick editing, to convey the kind of ‘grubby realism’ that veteran police series producer Tony Garnett once referred to as “a form of eavesdropping on real life” (Leishman and Mason, 2003: 66).

- Heritage

Finally, while each new TV police series strives to be more ‘realistic’ than its predecessor, authenticity and ‘believability’ still require that programmes remain in touch with the heritage of policing as portrayed in the police series that went before it. Thus we have linkage of police heroes across time. This aspect of the heritage of realism in British police drama is very evident in *The Bill* which featured two long-standing characters in the 1980s and 1990s who were essentially direct lineal descendants from earlier TV police series: ‘caring’ Sergeant Bob Cryer was in many respects an updated George Dixon, while ‘controlling’ Detective Inspector Frank Burnside was a thief-taker very much in the mould of DI Jack Regan from *The Sweeney* (Leishman and Mason, 2003).

Continuity in the pursuit of authenticity is quite evident, but as production values have got higher and the narratives more complex, the TV police series has changed, in a cycle of continual evolution and retrospection. Let me attempt to chart, principally with reference to the British experience, how things have evolved over time.

Care

Our evolutionary cycle begins with Dixon and its portrayal of uniformed police officers as primarily ‘carers’ – essentially projecting an image of policing as a ‘soft’ social *service*.

Control

By the mid-1970s, Dixon was looking decidedly out of date, and the defining image of a decade in which law and order emerged as a major political issue in real life was one of crime control, captured in Britain by the hard-hitting detectives Regan and Carter of *The Sweeney*, a series which emphasised policing as a *force*. As Tulloch (1990) pointed out, *The Sweeney* was very much of its time: a rise in violent crime and the influence of American cop shows demanded a change in direction for the TV police series. *The Sweeney* portrayed the police engaged in a literal fight against crime in an anomic 1970’s London, where the ruthless pursuit of villains frequently entailed what Hurd euphemistically termed “the short cutting of legal niceties” (1981: 66). It coincided with a perceived crisis in a criminal justice system that many felt was failing to protect the public, not least because the police were viewed as being hampered by the restrictions of due process, which allowed the guilty to go free. Interestingly, *The Sweeney*’s run, coincided with the emergence of ‘law and order’ as an election-deciding issue: Mrs Thatcher who came to power in 1979, is said to have been an ardent fan of the programme.

Culture

A significant transition in the TV police series came in the early 1990s with (Dame) Helen Mirren’s inspired performance as Detective Chief Inspector Jane Tennison in Granada TV’s *Prime Suspect*. This programme highlighted the challenges and difficulties that women face within the strongly masculine world of policing, and inside criminal investigation departments in particular. The *Prime Suspect* dramas drew attention to the occupational culture of policing and immersed Jane Tennison in cases which explored various dimensions of diversity and equal opportunities

discourse, at a time when, in real life, issues of racism, sexism and homophobia were ascending high on the policing policy agenda. Former Deputy Chief Constable John Stalker claimed that the representation of policing in *Prime Suspect* “comes closest to the atmosphere of the CID offices I grew up in: tough, taciturn and sexist” (*Sunday Times*, 20 September 1992). That comment finds corroboration in over forty years of social scientific studies of policework, which have defined and refined the core characteristics of ‘cop culture’, a worldview framed by a recurring set of common themes, in particular moral conservatism, social isolation and action-centred machismo (Foster 2003; Reiner, 2000b).

Throughout the *Prime Suspect* dramas, Jane Tennison’s journey highlights the extent to which, as Mary Eaton put it:

“Women do not easily fit into structures designed to celebrate masculinity in the form endorsed by the police subculture (1995: 175).

Based on the real-life experiences of former Flying Squad detective Jackie Malton (incidentally now a story consultant for *The Bill*) Lynda La Plante’s award-winning drama *Prime Suspect* can be seen as an influential series in terms of further filling in for audiences that ‘half-formed picture of policing’, through embedding an understanding of police occupational culture as part of that ‘heritage of realism’ in the fictional TV police series.

Corruption

Another – perhaps *the* defining British series of the 1990s was *Between the Lines*, created by John Wilsher, one of the most prolific script-writers for *The Bill*. Like *Prime Suspect*, this series also tackled issues associated with the shadier side of policing, by centring on the activities of a team of three detectives working within the Complaints Investigation Branch of the Metropolitan Police, investigating rule-breaking police officers – the ‘between the lines’ of the title. This series added a fourth ‘C’ to the evolutionary cycle, namely ‘corruption’, which resonated with many of the real news stories of the time, especially contemporaneous examples of miscarriages of justice cases, where police misconduct or unethical behaviour had been implicated (Brunsdon, 2000: 211). *Between the Lines* dealt with real

1990s policing issues: public order, run-down housing estates awash with guns and drugs, racism and sexual harassment both inside and outside of the force. *Between the Lines* also extended the scope of the cop show beyond policing on the streets, to policing in the suites (Leishman 1995), with its portrayals of conniving senior officers and murky struggles for power and influence in the higher echelons of policing, big business and government. This was also true of its contemporary, Anglia TV's *The Chief*, which was mould-breaking in having as its main protagonist a chief constable, frequently at odds with the Machiavellian machinations of manipulative mandarins at the Home Office (Leishman, 1995).

By way of *Prime Suspect* and *Between the Lines*, many of the older simplifications in the TV cop show were replaced by more complex and ambiguous representations of policing. Interestingly, this was tracked by *The Bill*, which from 2000 onwards began to feature officers with serious character flaws, including highly corrupt police officers, like Detective Sergeant Don Beech, who engaged in every conceivable form of rule-breaking, including drug-dealing and murder. Even Sun Hill's 'new broom' Superintendent Tom Chandler, who was initially depicted as a high-flying, incorruptible new public manager, fixated on performance management and quality of service, turned out to have a criminal past and violent disposition (O'Sullivan and Sheridan, 2005). At the same time, more 'ordinary' characters like PC Jim Carver – the original 'Woodentop' in the TV pilot for *The Bill* - embarked on a sad personal decline and fall, littered with addictions, bad decisions and failed relationships (Leishman and Mason, 2005).

Contestability

By the beginning of the 21st century then, the moral certainties of policing as portrayed in *Dixon of Dock Green* had disappeared and, as Professor Reiner put it the police's moral status had become "contestable, and [had] to be established anew in each narrative" (2000a: 162). By this time, 'contestability' had entered the lexicon of the value for money and performance regimes that local authorities and real police agencies must now operate under. In the context of real policing and the TV police series, 'contestability' also had the connotation of 'who actually *does* policing these days?', as well as questioning 'who can be *trusted* to do it?' (Brunsdon, 2000).

Real-life policing is no longer the sole jurisdiction of locally based public police officers: policing is now increasingly plural, private, transnational, intelligence-led and contested.

Between the Lines was pioneering in propelling the British TV police series beyond its traditional focus on uniformed officers and detectives. It can be seen as paving the way for the emergence of storylines and even new *policing* series focusing on the role of the (largely unregulated) private security sector, and also of other non-police statutory investigatory agencies, including the military police, Customs and Excise and the security services (Mawby 2007b). The heritage linkage is evident in the striking similarity of images between the CIB team in *Between the Lines* - Tony Clark, Harry Naylor and Mo Connell - and successive MI5 teams of counter-terrorist agents in *Spooks*, now into its sixth series on BBC TV, with its famous strap-line of “MI5 not 9 - 5”.

In the post 9/11 environment, *Spooks* has built its ‘believability’ on news-responsive storylines that reflect the nature of policing in the risk society. One very controversial episode in the second series, for example featured a storyline about young British Muslim boys being taught how to become suicide bombers in a Midlands mosque (www.bbc.co.uk/news), while in the current series “the complex relationship between the UK, Iran and the US is put under the spotlight” (www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/)

The frequent use of split-screen images in *Spooks* and US variants like *24* can be interpreted as a kind of visual metaphor for the contested, fragmented and rather paranoid nature of policing in the risk society (Leishman and Mason, 2003: 93)

Certainty

Alongside some of the more complex, ambiguous and ‘contestable’ representations of ‘policing as social science’ (Poniewozik, 2000) began to re-emerge some scientific ‘certainty’ through the popularity of police series founded on ‘forensic empiricism’. *Cracker* can be viewed as an influential transitional televisual text in this regard. As Glen Creeber suggests, Fitz, the enigmatic psychologist played by Robbie Coltrane, presented as “a complex anti-hero who seemed both to

encapsulate and explore many of the ambiguities and contradictions inherent in contemporary British masculinity” (2002: 169).

Moreover, as Paul Mason and I put forward in our book *Policing and the Media: facts, fictions and factions*:

“...Fitz not only embodies all of the flaws of cop culture, but also extends the iconography of the police procedural to embrace the field of forensic psychology, in particular offender profiling which, being based on probabilities, is arguably the quintessential scientific aid to policing in the risk society.” (2003: 103).

The mid to late 1990s saw a discernible shift “towards the medicalisation of crime within the crime series” (Brunsdon 2000: 216), a move manifested in the UK in a cluster of ‘medico-detective’ dramas, featuring police surgeons and pathologists as their main protagonists (*Dangerfield, Silent Witness and McCallum*). All of these foregrounded forensic medical characters, suddenly liberated from the traditional role of providing gobbets of gallows humour at crime scenes and autopsies in shows such as *Taggart* and *Inspector Morse*, to restore some integrity and certainty to crime investigation through the appliance of science.

This trend has continued in the UK with ‘cold-case’ reinvestigation dramas, such as *New Tricks* and *Waking the Dead* (Mawby, 2007: 152), and, of course has gone global in recent years with the emergence and popularity of the *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* ‘franchise’. Some claim CSI has brought a new moral authority to the TV police series and, arguably to the legitimacy of law enforcement itself (Cavender and Deutsch, 2007). As Martha Gever reminds us, “Over and over the CSIs repeat the mantra: ‘The evidence doesn’t lie’” (2005: 455).

Again, the sense of forensic realism in *CSI* and its spin-offs *CSI: NY* and *CSI: Miami* derives from adhering to those same five conventions of authenticity that have already been outlined. For instance, as *CSI* characters use their specialist scientific equipment, they explain its purposes to the audience, and the dialogue is punctuated with frequent references to forensic databases. *CSI* is also informed by many of the filming conventions associated with reality TV programming, again adding to the ‘boundary blurring’ already mentioned.

I would suggest – to use a natural science analogy - that the fictional TV police series in a sense acts not as a mirror, but as a kind of ‘prism’ with regard to real-life policing: in the same way that white light going into a glass prism is refracted into the colours of the rainbow, so the 6 C’s of Care, Control, Culture, Corruption, Contestability and Certainty (the certainty of science) represent a kind of spectrum of constituent themes that are now well embedded in the heritage of the TV cop series.

Life on Mars

Arguably, one recent British TV police series succeeded in embracing all six C’s, thereby demonstrating the importance of those five components of authenticity in making cop show viewers suspend their disbelief.

Life on Mars was based on the rather improbable premise of a police officer from the 21st Century (DI Sam Tyler, played by John Simm) being transported back in time to 1970s Manchester and working alongside an unreconstructed throwback from the *Sweeney*, DCI Gene Hunt, ‘the Gene Genie’ (Phillip Glenister). (The successor series *Ashes to Ashes* similarly transports a woman officer DI Alex Drake back to 1980s London, where Hunt and his team have relocated.)

Life on Mars with its entertaining postmodern mix of pastiche, parody and irony, added a new twist to ‘contestability’, by pitting the methods and values of contemporary policing against those of 1970s crimefighting. While Sam Tyler’s 21st Century brand of policing is more aware of cultural diversity, human rights and ethical evidence-gathering, Gene Hunt and his team are hard-hitting, hard-drinking, sexist crime controllers straight out of *The Sweeney*. In the contest between the two, ultimately it is Gene Hunt’s world that appears to win out. Tyler, it transpires, has been in a coma and transported to a kind of ‘hyperreal’ copland that mingles memory, fact and fiction. At the end of the second series, Sam Tyler recovers from the coma but, once back in his own world of politically correct, performance driven, intelligence-led policing, decides that ‘Life on Mars’ was a preferable place to be.

Implications for Police Public Relations

Earlier in the lecture, I raised the question as to whether cooperating with the makers of TV cop shows should be viewed as an opportunity or a threat to those involved in policing image work and corporate communications. I had the privilege of being invited to give a presentation in February at the Europol Public Awareness Seminar at The Hague on this very topic. As you would expect, there are elements of each.

Threats

- Excessive demands

Threat number one is related to the potential time and resource implications of police involvement in this area. From discussion with police corporate communications professionals in the UK, there is little doubt that British police forces have experienced a significant increase in requests for assistance from programme makers of all types, and demand appears to outstrip the resources available to respond to these.

There is evidence that forces are now frequently asked to authenticate scripts for fictional series and for films (and even comment on books and book proposals), as well as responding to the more traditional media requests for location filming facilities. Police media guidelines have tended to centre around news management protocols, which have then been extended to cover 'reality' and documentary programming, including guidelines on crime reconstructions, the use of CCTV and of other police footage. It would appear that, faced with such growing demands in relation to other types of media production, some forces simply cannot and will not respond to fictional domain requests, preferring to prioritise the more conventional and urgent news information management function.

Where forces do consider becoming involved in the fictional domain, it is likely to be based on a careful assessment of the public interest and the extent to which the proposed programme fits with the force's policing priorities and

performance targets. For example, a force with a ‘non-pursuit’ policy may choose not to cooperate with a programme involving high speed car chases (Personal communication, Mawby 2008).

- Lack of ‘control’

Where a police organisation does cooperate with fictional programme makers, a perceived threat obviously concerns the lack of control over the eventual portrayal of the police characters in the series. I drew attention earlier to the case of *Z Cars* in the 1960s, when the Chief Constable complained to the BBC. A similar situation occurred in 1998 with a series called *Cops*, again set in the North West of England. Like *Z Cars*, *Cops* portrayed uniformed police officers as flawed characters, including in the first episode a notorious scene in which a young woman police officer was shown snorting cocaine in a nightclub prior to staggering in for an early morning shift at work. The local forces concerned withdrew their cooperation from the programme’s second series (Mawby, 2007).

Clearly, in becoming involved with fictional police series, police organisations have potentially far less control over the context and final cut than they may expect to have in relation to factual news and even reality TV programming, where they can mould the message through carefully crafted press releases, stage managed media conferences, and with the backing of *sub judice* rules and other legal constraints. But, as one British force press officer suggested to me, “Even when police officers are shown as being ‘bad’ [in fictional series], the organisation itself is still usually shown as being active and doing something positive.” At the recent Europol seminar, I cheekily took the opportunity to ask a senior FBI official how the bureau viewed its representation in the *X Files*, and he similarly noted that, setting aside all the conspiracy theories, Agents Mulder and Scully were always depicted as dedicated agents of the Bureau, endeavouring to ‘do the right thing’.

- Criminogenic effects?

As already indicated, the research on the criminogenic effects of the media is by no means definitive. One frequently quoted American study from 1961 called *Television in the Lives of our Children* illustrates just how equivocal the findings of media ‘effects’ studies can be. It concluded with authoritative uncertainty:

“For some children under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under other conditions it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor beneficial” (Schramm *et al.* 1961: 11).

As with factual or documentary coverage, a perceived threat by police officers is the possibility that covert techniques might be compromised, or that criminals might learn how to commit crimes from TV images, or even how to evade forensic detection, as some recent media reports have suggested with reference to *CSI*.

However, in the ecosystem of the information society, any threat posed by images portrayed in fictional TV police series has to be set in context against the sheer volume of potentially criminogenic information and images about terrorism and ‘scamming’ now available via the internet and the plethora of digital TV channels.

- Undermine public confidence?

As indicated earlier, one of the recurrent concerns expressed by the police in relation to the TV cop show is that it may raise unrealistic public expectations about police performance, and thus may serve to undermine public confidence. Media reports have suggested another possible ‘*CSI* effect’ to be that the public (including members of juries) may not find real police officers and forensic scientists to be as effective as their TV counterparts.

Likewise, portrayals of ‘bad apple’ cops might also be feared to have a negative impact on public opinion about police integrity. However, focus group studies tend to show that audiences do make clear distinctions for themselves about ‘reality’ and ‘realism’ in detective and police dramas, and their reactions can sometimes be counter-intuitive, in that they may actually endorse the fictional rule-breaking cop because they ‘get the job done’, including, for instance, the no-nonsense old school copper PC Roy Bramel from the Skeetsmoor Estate in the TV series *Cops*.

In the case of *Life on Mars*, audience reaction appears to have settled not on caring, ethical, forensically aware Sam Tyler from the 21st Century as the main ‘hero’, but rather the politically incorrect Gene Hunt from the 1970s with his more brutal ‘back to basics’ brand of ‘real police work’.

Opportunities

As in any SWOT analysis, every ‘threat’ has its silver lining and I would suggest that the following ‘opportunities’ may arise from extended police cooperation with TV police series makers.

- Consultancy

There is a long history of retired police officers becoming involved as advisers to fictional TV police series – the same, of course, has long been true for ‘factual’ news coverage of policing. Jackie Malton, mentioned earlier is one distinguished example, former Chief Constable John Alderson who acted as a consultant to the Anglia TV drama series, *The Chief* another. As discussed, ‘authenticity’ is such an essential ingredient in the television police series that producers are prepared to pay for it in order to ensure high ratings and critical acclaim.

It is frequently stated that, nowadays, policing is much more of a business, moreover a business founded on ‘information work’. While it is likely that there will always be a role for individual retired police professionals in advising writers, film-makers and producers, it may also be that there are now emerging opportunities for police organisations, perhaps even as part of their income generation strategies, to move into more formal consultancy arrangements to cater for programme makers’ demand for authenticity.

This would necessarily involve police forces in considering the ‘business case’ for requests for cooperation and possibly charging for the service, in a way that after some reticence, police forces began to bill for other policing services provided for free or below cost in the past.

- Reality checking

While it is perhaps unlikely that police corporate consultancy will ever extend to in-house script-writing or editing, the blurring of the boundaries between the various domains of fact, fiction and faction may, however, be creating new opportunities for policing agencies to act as authoritative ‘reality checkers’. Such ‘reality checking’

might involve making reference to or commenting upon fictional depictions of policing in order to advance organisational priorities and policy positions, or to correct misrepresentations. In short, this kind of ‘reality checking’ may present a sort of ‘right to reply’ opportunity that does not always exist in the factual domain where, for operational or legal reasons, police agencies may be unable to comment.

Referring to ‘MI5 not 9-5’, the former Director-General of MI5 Dame Eliza Manningham-Buller recently provided just such a ‘reality check’ when she commented: “I wish life were like *Spooks*, where everything is a) knowable and b) soluble by six people” (www.bbc.co.uk/print/pressoffice/pressreleases/stories/2007/09_september/27/spooks).

A similar ‘reality check’ was evident when Metropolitan Police Assistant Commissioner Andy Hayman, explained to the British Parliamentary Home Affairs Select Committee in 2006 that TV drama “painted an unrealistic picture of the fight against terrorism” (www.bbc.co.uk/news).

- Promoting reassurance and awareness of risk

The positive spin on the ‘threat’ aspects is that selective and judicious engagement with respected broadcasters may have a positive effect on the promotion of reassurance and awareness of ‘risk’. There have been a number of instances in the UK of police organisations providing advice to producers in relation to sensitive fictional storylines centred on domestic violence and sexual assault. A most recent example relates to an episode of *The Bill* dealing with child abuse on the internet which was made with the full cooperation of CEOPS (Child Exploitation and On-line Protection Service).

However, against this ‘opportunity’, it has to be remembered that, as Yvonne Jewkes observes, “Sometimes the media exploit public concerns by exaggerating potential risks in order to play into people’s wider fears and anxieties” (2004: 47).

- Selling ‘the brand’

Lastly, given the high ratings that the genre routinely attracts and the prime time slots given over to the most popular police series, like *The Bill*, the real opportunity

is, that selective and judicious cooperation and collaboration offers advertising space through which to sell ‘the brand’ of policing to audiences locally, regionally, nationally, globally. At Europol, I was struck with an example from Denmark in connection with an Emmy - award-winning TV cop show there called *Het Ornen* (*The Eagle*) which involved close cooperation between police and programme makers and promoted the Danish police service very positively. In this fictional series, a popular detective character was ‘killed off’ while investigating an organised crime ring in Eastern Europe. Apparently this prompted a spontaneous and emotional public reaction – as one imagines the death of Dixon in *The Blue Lamp* must have done at the time. In response to this, the ‘dead’ fictional officer was brought home to Denmark, in a ceremonially decked coffin, and greeted by a 200 strong uniformed guard of honour of real police officers, and the massed ranks of the European media, so that the hero could properly be laid to rest (Jorgensen, 2008).

Conclusion

Managing the policing image in the media, as Rob C Mawby has chronicled become an integral part of police-work itself. Wearing my former police PR helmet, for me there are clearly opportunities for the police and other law enforcement agencies to proceed even further in a promotional direction through extending their collaborative engagement with the makers of fictional TV police series, although the resource implications are a serious constraint for even the largest constabularies.

As a criminologist, I think that the cop show as it has evolved, does have useful informational as well as entertainment value, in assisting viewers to complete what has been referred to earlier as that ‘half-formed picture’ of policing, by incorporating into the heritage of TV cop realism an awareness and understanding of debates, developments and issues affecting real-life policing, such as cop culture, police misconduct and corruption, pluralisation of policing, the possibilities of forensic science and technology, and the consequences of globalisation.

The representation of the police in fictional TV shows has certainly moved beyond the rather flat parables of right and wrong that were once the hallmark of good old

Dixon of Dock Green, who ended every episode delivering a reassuring homespun homily from the station steps, before catching the end of the concert in the local church hall. In contrast, as Reiner put it, the police are now

“no longer portrayed as paragons of virtue, but as effective if often venal protectors of the mainstream public – ‘us’ – against risks posed by a variety of demonised others – ‘them’, including serial killers, paedophiles, international organised criminals and terrorists” (2003: 275).

This of course results in media coverage of policing that presents a simultaneously ‘cop-sided’ and ‘lop-sided’ (after Reiner, 2000b) perspective on both community safety and criminal justice. Crime is generally an over-exposed topic in the media, where the focus is disproportionately on serious and solved crimes, which necessarily casts both real police and their fictional counterparts in an ultimately favourable and heroic light. The TV police series, as it has developed from the days of *Dixon* to Sam Tyler’s *Life on Mars*, may well have succeeded in plugging gaps in the audience’s ‘half-formed picture of policing’. However, the crime-fighting trope that provides the thread of continuity running through the cop show’s evolutionary cycle, has arguably done rather less to raise public awareness of the causes and consequences of crime.

Viewers may well have acquired via the media a more nuanced understanding of the politics and culture of policing, however, by contrast, their knowledge of sentencing, punishment and alternatives to imprisonment is for most a very limited, and considerably less than ‘half-formed’ picture (Rethinking Crime and Punishment, 2003). I also share the concerns of other academic colleagues and indeed of many criminal justice practitioners (including the police) that media coverage of crime and disorder these days, rarely seems to consider serious alternatives to solving social problems other than policing solutions.

It remains to be seen if some future TV cop show can address that threat, by taking the opportunity to bring the ‘Community’ back to community safety.

Thank you for listening.

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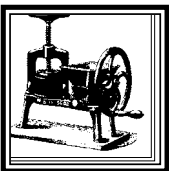
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Frank Leishman's inaugural lecture considers the relationship between policing and the mass media, with a particular focus on fictional representations through the British TV police dramas series. The lecture charts continuities and changes in the mass-mediated images of policing and police-work since the appearance of *Dixon of Dock Green* in the 1950s, and discusses how such images have tracked and even anticipated developments in real-life policing. The lecture also considers the threats and opportunities that the TV police series presents for practitioners at a time when the boundaries between factual, fictional and 'reality' TV programming are becoming increasingly blurred.

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