

Public de-... the bureaucratization of... looked at the weakening in public confidence... plans to impose new efficiency targets. The Operational Policing Review was commissioned by the police and it was essentially designed to consider the fundamental tension that was - and still remains - at the heart of the relationship between the police and the public whom they serve, namely that the police are chasing the elusive goals of economy and efficiency, while the public are demanding more community policing, which is costly and inefficient.

The role of the police

One aspect of the Operational Policing Review was that both individual police officers and members of the public were asked to choose between two mediated ideals: a *Dixon of Dock Green* character called PC Jones, who spent most of his time working with local people in communities to prevent and solve crime, and a PC Smith who was at the time characterized as a *Sweeney* style cop but would be more familiar to us now as Gene Hunt from *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes*, who believed in the strong arm of the law and spent his time chasing round in fast cars arresting major criminals. It hardly needs revealing that the public favoured PC Jones, while the officers preferred to see themselves in the mould of PC Smith. But the fact that the researchers used readily-identifiable television characters to assess attitudes towards the police is interesting, if not surprising. The police are by far the most widely covered profession on television in both factual and fictional representations, and many senior police officers are aware that fictionalized media representations

of the police go beyond mere entertainment. In an age when the police have been accused of institutional racism, incompetent murder investigations and recurring corruption, dramatic portrayals of police work, and of the nature of crime and criminal justice, perform an important symbolic function and help to perpetuate a 'mythology of policing' (Manning, 1997).

For this reason, it is worth just briefly considering the role of *Dixon of Dock Green*. In recent years a surfeit of studies about media representations of the police have emerged and, for that reason, a detailed chronological analysis of media images of policing is not included here (although see suggestions for further reading at the end of this chapter). Instead, the focus will remain on the responses of public and police to mediated representations of *police* generally and the extent to which media portrayals inform perceptions of the police and produce a sense of public *legitimacy* for the institution of *policing*. But *Dixon* is worth mentioning on two accounts. The first is that he played a key role in shaping cultural perceptions of policing in the mid- to late-20th century and remains a looming presence in the British psyche. He first appeared in *The Blue Lamp* in 1950, an Ealing film that spawned the 20-year-long series *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955–76) on BBC1. Since that time the police have been a source of endless fascination for television producers and public alike and the ghost of *Dixon* continues to overshadow debates about public attitudes towards the police. In fact, despite not being a regular presence on our screens for 40 years, he is still constantly evoked by politicians, the media and the police themselves. Yet, public trust and confidence in the police is, and arguably always has been, very fragile and there has *never* been a time when the police have been universally loved and respected, nor a time when the police have conformed to the gentle, benevolent, 'firm but fair' characterization that *George Dixon* embodied.

The Blue Lamp, and the television series it inspired, were explicitly produced as extended tributes to the Metropolitan force and were made with their co-operation at a time when the police were feared to be losing public confidence and respect (Reiner, 2000). In fact, *The Blue Lamp* tells us much about post-war attitudes to crime, criminals and the police (anticipating our discussion in the next chapter on film) and illustrates many of the themes already discussed in this book. The remnants of mass society theory, anxieties about brash and immoral 'teenagers', fears about certain types of crime, namely juvenile crime and offences committed by armed gangs, and a desire to seek moral certainty in figures of authority, are all to be found in this black-and-white cinematic classic. Released at a time of heightened public anxieties over juvenile delinquency following the disruption of war, the loss of fathers, a relaxing of moral standards and so on, the film is a conventional morality tale of good versus evil. PC *Dixon* is portrayed as a kindly, avuncular figure who takes his role of keeping the public safe from harm very seriously. However, he lasts only 20 minutes into the film, dying after being shot during an armed robbery at a

cinema by a baby-faced petty criminal played by Dirk Bogarde. The shock waves created by the depiction of the violent death of a policeman at the hands of an adolescent tearaway are hard to comprehend half a century on, but the shooting of Dixon had a wider resonance as a representation of the death of order. In other words, this plot device was entirely consistent with moral panics about youth and change in the rapidly moving society of the late 1950s (see Chapter 3). Young delinquents were regarded as a new breed of criminal who, according to a voice-over narration, lacked 'the code, experience and self-discipline of the professional thief'. They were from 'broken homes', 'a class apart' and 'all the more dangerous for their immaturity' - so unstable that they were even rejected by the established criminal underworld. Even the fact that the murder of PC Dixon takes place in a cinema is significant. In the film, cinema is contrasted with a nostalgic reference to music hall, a more traditional form of popular culture. We see a young couple on a date, quarrelling as they leave - hence the impression is reinforced that it is an appropriate place for the young delinquent with all his connotations of sex and violence (Geraghty, n.d.). Following the shooting, the film becomes a conventional thriller as the police pursue the feckless young villain. The audience witness Bogarde's character descending into a morass of fear and paranoia until finally he takes refuge in a greyhound stadium. The tacit understanding between the police and the criminal underworld (the decent, respectable, 'gentleman' crooks) works to track him down and together they corner him. The crowd (signifying 'the community'), who have gathered at the stadium, then close in on him and sweep him up into arms of the police, symbolically communicating society's intolerance of young offenders and their commitment to delivering criminals up to the law.

The television series *Dixon of Dock Green* continued the cosy, paternalistic and highly idealized view of the police that was established in *The Blue Lamp*, but by the time it was decommissioned in 1976 the age of innocence portrayed by Dixon was looking even more incongruous and irrelevant than it had 20 years earlier. Policing had become increasingly politicized, crime rates were rising and public concerns were escalating in the wake of a number of high-profile crimes involving notorious villains, widely publicized escapes from prisons, and the abolition of the death penalty. Within this context police series became more realistic and hard-hitting and there began a procession of police officers who were portrayed not as gentlemen or heroes, but as ordinary people doing a difficult job. From *Z Cars* (BBC, 1962-78) through *The Sweeney* (ITV, 1974-78) to *The Bill* (ITV, 1984-2010), the police have been depicted on British television with all the human flaws and vices that any other section of the population would have. Once again, the BBC series *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* (first broadcast in 2006), comic-dramas about policing in the 1970s and 1980s respectively, have succeeded in exposing these flaws and vices in an honest, if arguably caricatured way. Meanwhile, shows ranging from *Juliet Bravo* (first shown in 1980) and *Heartbeat* (1979) to *Prime Suspect* (1991) and

Between the Lines (1992) have offered diverse and sometimes contradictory images of policing. Officers have variously been portrayed as caring, controlling, corrupting and corrupted (Reiner, 2000; Leishman and Mason, 2003). In contemporary police dramas more divergent and previously neglected 'types' of officers have been introduced, including high-ranking female and ethnic minority officers and openly gay officers (ironically, such 'minority' groups are probably more represented in police dramas than in real-life policing). The discourse of equal opportunities can thus be seen to operate in both fictional representations and real policing, even if much progress is still to be made in both domains (O'Leary, 2003).

Interestingly, the politically incorrect (though ironically so) *Life on Mars* probably generated more public debate about the nature of policing than any other cultural form since *Dixon*. Based on the implausible premise of a police officer from the 21st century (DCI Sam Tyler, played by John Simm) being transported back in time to 1970s Manchester and partnered with an unreconstructed throwback from the *Sweeney*, DCI Gene Hunt (played by Phillip Glenister), the series is a postmodern pastiche that pits the methods and morals of contemporary policing against those of 1970s crime fighting - and it is 'the Gene Genie's' world that ultimately appears to win the contest (Leishman, 2008). The statement by a former Chief Constable that in *Dixon's* era the police force, far from being benevolent and cosy was 'brutal, authoritarian and corrupt' (Hellawell, 2002: 40) is brought to life in *Life on Mars*. However, in addition to reminding us about some of the problems with 1970s law enforcement, *Life on Mars* also highlights the politically correct, performance-driven, paperwork-saturated and intelligence-led service of the 21st century; a scenario that DCI Tyler ultimately rejected to return to the more colourful and intuitive policing environment of the 1970s.

Throughout the last four decades the police have also become increasingly visible in the factual news media, and dramatic portrayals of the police have to some extent reflected 'real life' events (many of which have been 'negative' in essence). Significant milestones in the recent, mediated history of the police - many of which were referenced in *Life on Mars* and *Ashes to Ashes* - include stories of police corruption (most notoriously within the West Midlands Serious Crime Squad in the 1970s, which resulted in the wrongful conviction of the 'Birmingham Six'); the inner city riots of the early 1980s, which led to a transformation in public order policing from inexperienced officers trying to protect themselves with dustbin lids to trained and 'tooled up' professionals - dubbed 'Robocops' by the media; the bungled investigation of the Yorkshire Ripper case, during which the police were led up a blind alley by a hoaxer with a north-east accent; the murder of WPC Yvonne Fletcher at the Libyan Embassy in London in 1984; the Miners' Strike of 1984 in which the police were involved in bloody clashes and mocked as 'Maggie's boys' by miners protesting at the closure of their pits by a government led by Margaret

Thatcher; and the inquiry into the death of black teenager, Stephen Lawrence in 1999, in which the Met were found to be 'institutionally racist'.

There has been very little research on the extent to which media representations inform public opinions about the police, and even less about the impact that media have on the police. For example, Leishman and Mason (2003: 21) note that a 'question rarely asked ... concerns the "effects" that media images may have on the police themselves', but they do not develop this point or draw any conclusions themselves. In a small-scale study involving interviews with 12 serving police officers, Nicola O'Leary found that positive and negative media images of the police were influential in their decisions to join the police service. The younger, male officers talked of their 'positive' expectations of the police based on their mediated perceptions of excitement, glamour and car chases, while the older males remembered (with a rose-tinted hue) joining a *Dixon of Dock Green* style force in which their colleagues were men of pride and principle. Perhaps most surprisingly, the two female officers interviewed cited negative media portrayals as reasons for joining the police. Following damaging portrayals in documentaries which showed police officers in a poor light (for example, as racist), they decided that the service needed people, like them, 'joining with the right attitude' (O'Leary, 2003: 31).

This research is undeniably limited in scope - largely because the researcher (a postgraduate student) faced difficulties in access when she told her target police force the subject matter on which she wished to interview respondents; an indication of the sensitivity felt by the police regarding media representations of their work, even three months prior to the transmission of the infamous BBC documentary uncovering racism among recruits. It cannot, therefore, be said to be conclusive in its findings. However, the study does raise important questions about the symbiotic relationship between police and media. The younger officers interviewed cited fictional portrayals of the police which they enjoyed; in line with previous studies, O'Leary found that *The Bill* is still viewed as one of the most accurate reflections of police work although their perception is somewhat undermined by Mason's (1992) finding that the detection rate at Sun Hill Police Station was 78 per cent; more than double the real average for England and Wales which, at the time was 34 per cent. Generally, O'Leary found that her respondents were dismissive of factual representations and were suspicious of the motives of journalists. Young male officers hinted at a combative relationship between themselves and the media, viewing their own role as that of 'gatekeepers', preventing the media from getting 'what they want'. They also saw themselves as 'easy targets' for a critical and scandal hunting media in contrast to 'the criminals who don't have to play by the same rules' (O'Leary, 2003: 33; cf. Graef, 1989; Reiner, 2000). Senior officers were more positive in their views, regarding the relationship as one of interdependency, mutual benefits and 'trust' rather than 'power'. They were more inclined to talk of the media as an effective tool to be used by the police (O'Leary, 2003: 33).

Over the decade since this research was conducted, police forces around the world have seen their relationship with traditional media change somewhat. They have also embraced mobile and social media as effective tools in image management, as well as in tactical responses to crime and investigation, as the following section will describe.

The role of mobile and social media in policing

Tactical responses to crime and investigation

The use of mobile and social media in crime investigations covers many aspects of police work. Most obviously, platforms like Facebook and Twitter are helpful in publicizing details of a case and responsabilizing the public, for example in circumstances where someone has gone missing and their description, photo and last known whereabouts can be shared or re-tweeted (Lee and McGovern, 2014). Facebook has even developed a tool to assist police in harnessing their potential in social media, 'Build' (Department of Justice, 2014).