



**Policing &
Reducing
Crime**

Policing and Reducing Crime Unit
Paper 120

The Effective Use of the Media in Serious Crime Investigations

Andy Feist

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Home Office

Policing and Reducing Crime Unit

Research, Development and Statistics Directorate

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Foreword

Many serious crime investigations attract substantial amounts of press interest. If effectively managed, the media can make a significant contribution to investigations by acting as a conduit for information from the general public. Every investigator can recall instances where the press have contributed the vital lead which unlocks an enquiry. The media spotlight can, however, also place major resource demands on investigations at the critical early stage of an enquiry; and in a wider sense, the media play an important role in shaping the public's views of crime, the police service, and the wider criminal justice system. They can drive the fear of crime.

This report explores the central issues around effective media handling in major crime investigations. It covers the development of appropriate media strategies, mechanisms for managing media interest, issues around the disclosure and acquisition of information, and wider concerns regarding relations with victims' families and communities. While the report offers a number of recommendations about how forces and senior investigating officers can improve media handling in major crime, it covers areas that will be relevant for media relations within crime investigation in general.

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November 1999*

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Executive summary

Media handling in serious crime investigations is a complex issue. On the one hand, the media can be an important mechanism for generating valuable information from the general public. On the other hand, dealing with the media can take up valuable time and resources during the critical early stages of an investigation. Consequently, media handling has been acknowledged as a critical skill of the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO).

On the basis of interviews with SIOs and media liaison officers, information was collected on the detail of media handling for 16 murders and sexual assaults. The research examined general issues around media handling in major crime investigations and focused on the main functions and objectives of a media strategy.

Managing media interest

Media interest in serious crimes In general, investigations into serious crime such as murder and rape attract a substantial amount of press interest, particularly in the first few days of an enquiry. Thereafter, interest will tend to diminish although some particularly newsworthy offences will sustain national media interest for some time. The factors that determine the level of press interest will vary from case to case and depend partly upon the coverage of other news events. For the cases examined, the age and background of the victim and location of the offence were most frequently perceived as influencing the level of media coverage. Not all offences, however, attract the desired level of press interest, and in these cases the challenge for any strategy is to gain and enhance media coverage.

The demands on the investigation Where press interest is high, one of the main problems arising from media handling in serious crime investigations is the demands placed on the resources of the investigative team. Most SIOs estimated that they spent between 20 and 40 per cent of their time dealing with the media in the first two days of an enquiry.

The disclosure and acquisition of information via the media

The disclosure of information Investigations have to effectively resolve tensions around the hold-back or disclosure of information about the offence. The investigative team's judgement about whether or not to disclose a piece of information should be influenced by a mature assessment of the likely *consequences* of that decision. In certain instances, providing more detailed information to the general public can increase the likelihood of generating additional valuable information.

The timing of disclosed information Interviewees placed particular importance on when initial contact is made with the press, and the timing of subsequent press releases and press conferences. Getting information out allowed the investigation to take the lead in press handling at an early stage, while allowing the rest of the investigation to progress. Furthermore, it was argued that early initial communication with the press limits the degree to which they formulate their own accounts of what happened and begin their own ‘investigations’.

The objectives of media appeals Finding ‘unknowing witnesses’ was the most frequently stated objective for press appeals. Three cases attempted to use the media to achieve more specific investigative objectives, such as putting pressure on an offender to admit the offence.

Dealing with the generation of information Appeals can generate substantial amounts of information from the general public. Two main issues were raised regarding the practical consequences of public appeals. First, the need to deal with the immediate response to an appeal by arranging sufficient phone lines and briefed operators. Secondly, the impact on the investigation of having to respond to a potentially large number of new messages entering the system.

The extent to which the public will contribute new information in the wake of an appeal is likely to depend on four key factors:

- the size of the potential population who might be able to contribute information;
- the extent to which the potential population can be targeted by particular media;
- how the disclosed information can be packaged to *appeal* to the public to come forward; and,
- the degree to which the information required can be made *specific*.

The ability of the investigation to assess the quality of incoming information will depend on the quality of information residing in the enquiry at the time of the appeal.

General relations with the press, victims, victims’ relatives and communities

An important part of effective press handling relies on understanding the media context in which any investigation will be conducted. Respondents identified several areas that influence the context within which a serious crime investigation is reported and which can affect reporting style and the dialogue with the press.

These included:

- general relations between the local/regional press and the police service;
- the variation in relations with different media outlets in the same force area;
- the nature of media boundaries and catchments;
- any general themes or campaigns adopted by local media; and,
- the experience of crime reporters covering major investigations and their understanding of the legal process.

Media portrayal of serious crime investigations Although investigators can determine the content and timing of a press release, they are not in a position to determine how that information is *portrayed* by the media. This was particularly important in terms of the way in which victims or communities were described in the media. The way this information was presented in the press could influence the willingness, for instance, of the victim's family or the general public to co-operate with the enquiry.

Improving media relations SIOs specifically highlighted the importance of explaining to the media the reasons why they could not furnish particular information about an enquiry, or why some investigative tasks took so long. While explaining why operationally sensitive material had to be held back, it was important to provide as much 'non-sensitive' information about the crime and the investigation as possible to the press. The aim was to 'over-provide' information for reporters to discourage 'journalist investigations'.

Legal issues When an investigation goes into a post-charge phase, the due legal process comes into force. In several cases, the activities of some parts of the press led to developments that had the potential to jeopardise proceedings. Several of the cases examined had encountered particular problems over the press gaining access to, and in one case publishing, pictures of a suspect prior to charge or the commencement of the trial.

Personnel issues

The role of the media liaison officer A central feature of the handling of the press in serious crime investigations is the bringing together of the SIO and the force media liaison officer in the early stages of an enquiry. This was often regarded as a key working relationship at one of the most difficult times of an investigation. Eleven of the sixteen media liaison officers were civilians and all but one of these had worked as journalists prior to joining the police.

Media liaison officers and the management team The presence of a press liaison officer on the investigative team was not universal, even in the initial stages of an investigation. Of the 16 investigations, 10 had a media liaison officer involved as a member of the management team at least in the initial stages of the investigation. Several forces had made it standard practice that media liaison officers would be part of the management team of all major enquiries.

SIO training and ability in media handling The majority of SIOs interviewed had received some training in media presentation skills, but relatively little training in how to develop effective media strategies. In spite of the general lack of formal training in this area, several experienced officers had developed expert skills in relation to media handling. Their abilities appeared to reflect a combination of personal charisma, a wide range of experience and a close working relationship with individuals and organisations in the media. The most frequently observed skill was the ability to *anticipate* the consequences of the media interpretation of a crime, the investigation and any decisions associated with media handling.

Recommendations

The report provides the following recommendations:

- Force media liaison officers should be formally members of management teams within serious crime investigations, at least for the initial phase of the investigation when press interest is likely to be at its height.
- While experience will always play an important part in the development of SIO media skills, practical training for SIOs in designing effective media strategies should be considered. This might be achieved through exposing investigators to a range of media handling scenarios/exercises, and undertaking joint exercises with media liaison officers. Consideration should also be given to introducing investigators to the principles of media handling in criminal investigations at an earlier stage in their careers.
- There should be more effort to improve communications between press/media officers and CID. This might be through a combination of workshops and short secondments of junior officers into media offices.
- The media impact on victims' relatives should be monitored and addressed as part of on-going family liaison procedures. Family Liaison Officers should provide relatives with copies of all formal press statements at the earliest opportunity.

- The shared responsibility for media matters on major crime by ACPO Media Advisory Group and ACPO Crime has in the past led to differing approaches in the handling of media within major crime investigations. While forces will want to set their own policy in the light of ACPO guidance, a single set of all embracing guidelines in this area would assist operational officers.
- At present there appears to be extreme levels of under-reporting to the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) of inappropriate press activity in relation to major crime enquiries. Forces should be more active in drawing this kind of behaviour to the attention of the PCC.
- Further research should be undertaken in three areas: assessing the effectiveness of different media for reaching particular types of public; exploring how recent developments in the wider media environment may impinge police handling of major crime; and to establish more clearly the core competencies of police media liaison officers.

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1. Introduction

Media¹ handling in serious crime investigations is a complex issue. On the one hand, the media provide excellent access to the general public and can help generate important information for an enquiry. On the other hand, the media can sap the resources of an investigation, mislead the public, and interfere with the investigative and legal processes.

As with other areas of policy-making in a serious crime investigation, it is the Senior Investigating Officer (SIO) who is ultimately responsible for deciding the overall media strategy. Even though the SIO will be advised by the relevant media specialist and guided by force policy, the handling of the media in the broadest sense has been identified as a critical skill of the SIO (Adhami and Browne, 1996).

This report examines media handling in major crime investigations and the development of effective media strategies, so as to produce useful advice for future SIOs. The study forms part of PRC's Serious Crime Research Programme, which is seeking to reduce the impact of major crime in the UK in collaboration with ACPO's Crime Committee.

Data and methodology

Data for this study have primarily been collected from 16 serious crime investigations across a range of forces. Four cases were offered up spontaneously by forces as 'interesting' examples of media handling within major crime investigations. The remainder were selected from the Reuters Online Business Briefing Service² according to the following criteria:

- the case was reported in the UK national or regional press;
- the offence was committed in the UK;
- the offence was being reported for the first time in the press (i.e. it was not a retrospective account);
- the offence was a murder/attempted murder, rape or sexual assault;
- that initial press coverage indicated that an offender had not been identified or apprehended, and consequently, some form of appeal to the public was necessary; and,
- once a case had been selected, further cases from that force area were excluded.

Cases were selected from periods when general news reporting was both 'light' and 'heavy' (corresponding to times when the House of Commons was in recess and in session). This was to ensure that different news contexts for the police handling of serious crime could be accounted for. Of the 16 cases which made up the final sample, three were stranger sexual offences (one attempted rape, one serious sexual

¹ The terms 'press' and 'media' have been used interchangeably throughout this report to refer to the full range of media outlets (television, radio, local, national and regional newspapers, specialist journals and magazines, and the Internet).

² This covers all the UK daily and Sunday broad-sheets (except the Financial Times, the Daily Mirror, Daily Mail, Mail on Sunday and The People). It also includes the following regional daily papers: Aberdeen Press, Belfast Newsletter, Birmingham Post, Eastern Daily Press, Evening Standard, Manchester Evening News, Northern Echo, Western Morning News, Yorkshire Post, and in Scotland, The Herald, The Scotsman, Scottish Daily Record, Scotland on Sunday and The Scottish Mail.

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assault and one rape), and 13 were murders. Of the 13 murders, one was part of a confirmed linked series. Once the cases had been selected, contact was made to confirm that the SIO and the relevant media liaison officer were still in service and willing to be interviewed. For most cases, separate interviews were undertaken with both the media liaison officer and the SIO. Additional data have been provided by Greater Manchester Police Quality Assurance (VQ) branch³.

³ This is a division of GMP Crime Operations which provides a dedicated quality assurance resource for major crime investigations in the GMP area.

An interview schedule was designed to elicit basic information about the offence and all aspects of the media handling of the investigation. Further questions were included to cover more general issues: the overall relationship between the force and the press; the working relationship between the press office and CID; general views about the use of the press in major crime investigations; and details of the interviewees' experience within the police service and in handling major crime.

Report structure

The report divides into the following main sections. Section 2 examines what a media strategy is. Section 3 considers the way in which the police manage press interest in major investigations, while Section 4 examines the disclosure and acquisition of information through the media. General issues around the relationship between the police, press, victims' families and communities are covered in Section 5. Section 6 summarises the role of the media liaison officer within serious crime investigations and the relationship with the SIO. Section 7 provides a summary of the main issues and some recommendations for future action.

2. What is a media strategy?

Interviews conducted with senior investigators and media liaison officers revealed that media handling issues arise in all component parts of an investigation: from the initial discovery of a crime, to the trial, and for some cases, the appeal process. In addition, it was found that media handling affected a number of the overarching aims of the police service, including those relating to efficient investigations, minimising the fear of crime and ensuring a fair and just society.

A central research question was to identify the factors that contribute to a successful media strategy in a serious crime investigation. Opinions on what a media strategy is varied among interviewees, although respondents were unanimous in agreeing that there was no fixed template for an effective media strategy. Media strategies needed to be dynamic and flexible, and tailored to the investigation as it developed; applying a prescriptive approach to the media from the outset and not adjusting to changing circumstances would fail the investigation. The cases examined illustrated a broad range of objectives within media strategies in serious crime investigations. These can be summarised as follows:

- to use the media in the best way possible to acquire information required by the investigation or meet other investigative objectives;
- to manage press interest effectively so as to minimise potential misinformation and interference with scenes, witnesses, victims' relatives and suspects;
- to provide the public with accurate information about the offence and the police response;
- to give due concern to the portrayal of victims, the feelings of victims' relatives and friends, and the response of the community;
- to minimise unnecessary community concern over the fear of crime;
- to disseminate relevant crime prevention advice; and,
- to demonstrate the professionalism of the police service.

To achieve these competing and sometimes conflicting objectives, the SIO needs to make a series of key decisions. These will concern the *timing*, *selection* and *presentation* of information to be disclosed. Furthermore, a media strategy needs to be set in the context of the overall investigation; that is, evaluated against other means of acquiring information within the enquiry.

Combining the responses of interviewees suggested that the main principles of an effective media strategy related to the following areas:

- *The management of press interest* – What will the level of press interest be and how long is it likely to be sustained? What issues need to be considered during the post-charge phase?

WHAT IS A MEDIA STRATEGY?

- *The disclosure and generation of information* – What initial information is to be disclosed via the press and what is to be ‘held back’ to assist with the process of the investigation? What issues need to be considered in respect of timing of press contact? What are the main messages that need to be deployed and reinforced at every opportunity? How should elements of the offence and the investigation be portrayed to achieve the stated objectives? What issues need to be considered regarding the effective handling of information generated through the media?
- *Target audiences* – What are the most likely target populations where information might reside about the offence and what is the most effective way of extracting that information?
- *General relations with the press, victims, victims’ relatives and communities* – Are there particular problems that might arise over the media and the scene, witnesses and the victim or his/her relatives and friends? What issues need to be considered in anticipation of charging an offender and the execution of the legal process?
- *Personnel issues* – What methods of working need to be agreed with the press liaison officer? What preparations need to be made to handle appropriately the public response to an appeal?

The remainder of this report addresses these issues in detail.

3. Too much or too little? – managing media interest

Media researchers have coined the term ‘newsworthiness’ as the criterion by which news producers or gatekeepers (editors and sub-editors) select events which are to be presented to the public as news (Surette, 1998)⁴. Research into the reporting of crime in British newspapers found that on average almost 13 per cent of ‘event-oriented’ news was about crime (Williams and Dickinson, 1993) while international research has shown serious crime to be disproportionately well-covered by the media. In one US study, murder cases were found to account for around one quarter of all stories carried in newspapers but only 0.2 per cent of all recorded crime (Graber, 1980, cited in Surette, 1998). Research on the crime content of Scottish newspapers revealed that 45 per cent of crime reported involved violent or sexual offences (Ditton and Duffy, 1983). Although this bias has often been seen as a predominantly tabloid phenomenon in the UK, the broad-sheets have been found to be skewed in the same direction (Williams and Dickinson, 1993). There is also evidence that the coverage of serious crime by the media is increasing; Soothill and Walby (1991) found a marked increase in the percentage of rape cases reported in the press in recent years. One of the consequences of the high levels of news coverage of serious crime is that the public develops a distorted view of the prevalence of certain types of offending behaviour, as well as the criminal justice system’s response to it (Hough and Roberts, 1998).

Recent UK research indicates that broadcast media devote even more attention to crime than newspapers. Just over one-fifth of news items carried on independent radio news were about crime, more than any other medium (Cumberbatch *et al*, 1995). There are, however, important qualitative differences between crime coverage by different media: newspapers generally have more analysis compared to both television and radio.

Factors affecting the level of media coverage

Although serious crime *in general* will attract substantial press coverage, the level of coverage will vary widely from case to case. This is in part determined by events outside the offence such as media ‘themes’, similarity to other recent offences, and the absence or presence of competing news items. The specific characteristics of the offence, the location⁵ and the victim’s background will also influence the degree of press interest. The research confirmed the view that, while the majority of serious cases may generate high levels of press coverage, particularly in the initial few days of an enquiry, some serious offences are not considered newsworthy. Both of these extremes can cause problems for the investigation. Newsworthy cases were overwhelmed by press interest and requests for information, while the competition for ‘angles’ could encourage some elements of the press to behave in a way which might seriously hinder the process of an investigation. Where a case generated

⁴ ‘Newsworthiness’ is itself a function of ‘periodicity’ (the degree to which an event’s cycle corresponds to a medium’s publication cycle) and the ‘consonance’ (the extent to which an event corresponds to existing themes in the news). The development and news coverage of road rage incidents is a good example of consonance in crime reporting.

⁵ ‘Location’ is a particularly complex factor. Places that were perceived to be relatively free of crime, at least during the daytime, attract particular attention, although certain serious offences attract publicity because the pattern of offending conforms to the perception of an area. In addition, several respondents stated that simple logistical factors, that is the ease with which journalists and television crews can get access to the scene or senior investigator, can play an important role in determining the level of press interest. The proximity of major news centres to crime scenes can therefore be an important factor in determining the level of coverage.

⁶ The extremes of press interest were clearly illustrated by the near simultaneous (but unrelated) disappearances of a female student at Oxford University and a young girl suffering from Downs Syndrome, in 1991. While the former received an enormous amount of press coverage, the latter struggled for initial publicity in spite of a concerted effort to get the disappearance covered in the press (Suzy Lamplugh Trust, 1992).

limited press interest, however, this could constrain opportunities to appeal to the public for information, and act as a brake on the investigation⁶.

Table 1 identifies the factors that the SIO and media officer felt influenced the level and intensity of media coverage for each of the 16 cases examined in the study. The age and background of the victim, and the location of the offence were most frequently perceived as influencing the level of media coverage. A range of factors have been included under the heading of ‘victim background’. These included the extent to which the victim was perceived as a genuinely innocent victim (for example, someone assaulted going about their everyday tasks) and those regarded as particularly vulnerable to crime. One case, which involved the murder of a prostitute, appeared to gain press interest on the grounds that the offence might be linked to other attacks on prostitutes. At the other extreme, press interest

Table 1: Factors believed to have influenced the level and intensity of press coverage *

Factor	Case																Total
	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	
Victim age (very young/old)					✓				✓	✓		✓				✓	5
Victim background	✓	✓						✓	✓	✓	✓	✓			✓		8
Possible motive			✓				✓										2
Severity of the offence								✓	✓	✓						✓	4
Location of offence			✓			✓		✓	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓		8
Time of day													✓				1
Time of year	✓											✓		✓			3
Campaign of local paper +															✓		1
Confirmed link with other offences							✓										1
Other similar offences in area (not linked)	✓													✓			2
Similar offence reported at same time not in locality (not linked)												✓					1
Type of press appeal														✓			1
Other factors not specified above													✓			✓	2

* Interviewees could mention as many factors as they wished. In all but one case, the factors identified were thought to have *increased* the level press activity.

+ A press campaign related to the circumstances of the offence but running before the offence took place.

appeared to be more muted if a victim was an active petty criminal. It should be added that it is the *combination* of factors that will ultimately determine the level of press interest, in conjunction with the presence or absence of other competing news stories.

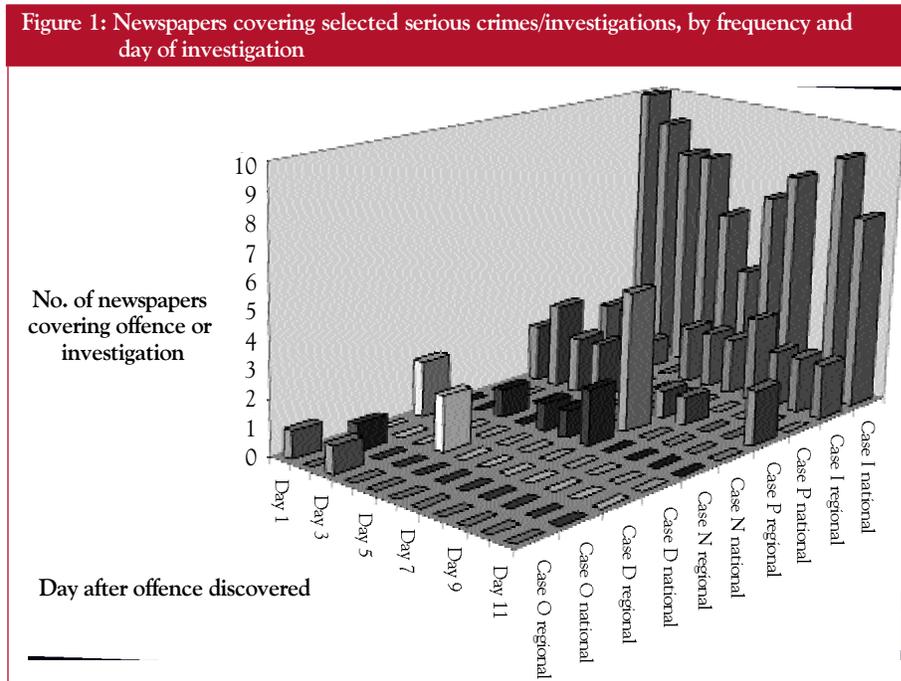
The duration and intensity of media interest

Press interest was usually at its greatest soon after the initial discovery of a serious crime. In the interviews, both SIOs and media liaison officers stressed the initial demands of the press once an enquiry had begun and an initial ‘holding statement’⁷ had been released; such statements simply put the press ‘on alert’.

Although some of the cases studied were unable to provide details of radio or television coverage, the interest of the broadcast media tended to be particularly concentrated during the first two days of an enquiry. Furthermore, while local and regional newspaper coverage could be maintained, the nationals’ interest in serious crimes would often wane after the initial press response. Depending on the degree of progress in an enquiry and the reporting of genuinely new developments, some local newspaper coverage would usually be sustained throughout the first few weeks of long running investigations. The efforts of the press office, random factors (such as similar offences attracting the interest of the press) and key milestones in the investigation (breakthroughs, anniversaries, arrests, novel components to the investigation) will go some way to keep press interest alive.

There were exceptions to these general patterns and several of these are illustrated in Figure 1. This is based on an analysis of the timing and extent of newspaper coverage for five of the cases studied across the first eleven days of the enquiry. If the crime is particularly newsworthy and remains undetected, interest in the investigation may remain consistently high even for national newspapers and television. Case I achieved substantial coverage from the national newspapers for a considerable time into the investigation. Media *coverage* does not necessarily coincide with the time when press demands on the SIO are highest; sometimes there are delays between the time when contact with the media is made and the actual publication of stories. For example, the area where case D took place does not have a daily local newspaper but is served by three weeklies (two published on Thursdays and one on Sundays). In one investigation (case N), the decision of the victim of a sexual assault to give a press conference succeeded in generating substantial national media interest one week into the investigation. Finally, it is worth noting that in case O, national newspaper coverage began one day after local press coverage, reflecting the fact that sometimes the nationals pick up their stories from the local press.

⁷ This will usually confirm that the police are dealing with an incident which is being treated as murder or is otherwise suspicious, the location, arrangements for a post mortem by a Home Office pathologist, the setting up of an incident room and, where appropriate, an initial appeal for witnesses. Victim details are rarely given in holding statements, partly for compassionate reasons (to inform immediate family and friends) and partly for practical investigative reasons (formal identification). The decision to release the victim’s name will be made by the SIO.



High levels of media interest and the demands on the investigation

For those investigations that do attract extensive national and local press coverage, one of the main problems arising from media handling in serious crime investigations is the demand on investigative resources. SIOs in particular will have to devote a significant part of the first few days of an investigation to dealing with the media. The majority of SIOs interviewed estimated that they spent between 20 and 40 per cent of their time dealing with the media in the first two days of an enquiry. In one case where the SIO felt that the press office had not been effective in controlling the demands of the press, he believed that almost two-thirds of his time was spent dealing with the media in the first 48 hours of the investigation. In general, this intense media interest coincides with the time when the investigator is required to make key decisions about the assessment of the crime and the necessary initial lines of enquiry. Furthermore, at this stage the investigative team’s understanding of the offence is often limited, and the information acquired by the investigation is at its most immature.

One of the factors that has increased the demands on the investigative team in recent years has been the proliferation of media outlets. Although major crimes

were once covered by a handful of known national and local crime correspondents, they are now reported on by a wide range of competing media outlets and agencies. In the UK alone there has been a substantial increase in local and national radio, cable and satellite channels in the last decade and a half. The number of hours of radio broadcast has increased considerably since the early 1970s, while the introduction of domestic satellite and cable television has expanded TV news output. More recent improvements in digital technology and the development of the Internet as a mechanism for news distribution have simply served to increase the speed at which such information is transferred and consumed. Case study 1 illustrates the intensity of media activity that can follow a major crime.

Case study 1: ‘ Within an hour [the press] had arrived. You have it, they were there...an HGV at the end of the street and within two hours they were up and running. The first 48 hours are the most busy and most important. I did an interview at 9 pm that evening....[The press] had been there for three hours...for three hours they had been combing, doing house-to-house, building their own picture. Press interviews were done at the scene to keep them there. There was a posse of 40 reporters and press people. The interest was tremendous – I had to do live television interviews at 6 am the following morning. If that is what is needed, I am back at the scene [in the morning] doing one-to-ones... that stops at 8 am. Another [series] at 11 am at the scene and another at tea time’.

A critical function of the media liaison officer is to manage the demands of the media for interviews or statements from the SIO or other appointed officer. In the majority of cases, SIOs felt the press offices were effective in handling the volume of press enquiries, taking away the immediate pressure and packaging demands for the SIO into more ‘manageable’ bundles. It was noted that inevitably some journalists succeed in getting through directly to SIOs. In only one of the 16 cases was the SIO seemingly overrun by enquiries from the press, and the necessary distance between the press and the investigation eroded. In this particular case the SIO claimed that:

‘most of my time [on the first two days of the enquiry] was taken up with media enquiries, not briefing and statement reading. The media did not want to talk to the press officer and circumvented press office...[The] media liaison people turned up on the day and then disappeared....[the] media can dictate the pattern of the day’.

There is an on-going debate about who is the most appropriate individual to deal directly with the press in briefings, interviews and press conferences. The disadvantages and advantages of ‘putting up’ someone other than the SIO have

been well-rehearsed. Delegating responsibility for facing the press to a media (or other) officer frees time for the investigator to pursue the detail of the investigation during the critical first few days. However, there are those who believe that this responsibility falls solely onto the shoulders of the SIO and argue that the public have a right to see and hear the lead investigator. This also allows the SIO to take ownership of the public face of the case and permits the individual with most knowledge of the case to be clear about what can and cannot be said to the public about the investigation. One SIO stated that dealing directly with the media enabled him to ‘personalise the investigation... you can take the public with you and involve the public in the investigation...[treat it as] a mystery which we are trying to get you to solve...’. While most SIOs were content to face the press and deliver interviews, one relied on a uniformed inspector to deal with all press enquiries during the first 48 hours of the enquiry.

Inadequate media interest

Not every serious offence suffers from an avalanche of media interest and limited press interest can also present problems for the investigative team. A range of factors might inhibit press attention. These might reflect the characteristics of the victim, the crime failing to correspond with a current press focus or simply other news activity ‘crowding out’ coverage. For the majority of the offences covered in the study, respondents felt that sufficient press interest was generated, at least within the initial few days of the enquiry. However, two cases recorded problems in gaining sufficient *appropriate* press interest. Both cases involved offenders who were known to be mobile and likely to be based outside the immediate locality. (In one case, a known suspect had left his home address, probably for elsewhere in the country; in the other, an unknown offender had used a vehicle to commit the index offence and was known not to be from the immediate locality.) In both cases the SIO had to adopt an appropriate ‘pro-active’ media strategy to generate sufficient press interest in key areas so as to support the investigation (see case studies 2 and 3, below).

Case study 2: The principal suspect’s name was identified within a few hours of the murder. Eventually, in compliance with force protocol and having received advice from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS), the SIO went public with the suspect’s photo and details with the agreed wording, ‘Wanted for interview in connection with...’. The investigative team went for national publicity but repeatedly failed to get it; the story was criticised for not being ‘sexy’ enough. Some nine months after the offence it got limited coverage on *Crimewatch UK*... In the meantime, the press officer targeted Muslim papers and radio stations (the suspect was a Muslim) and sent out press releases to papers and radio stations, in

those areas where intelligence reports suggested he might be living temporarily. By tailoring the press releases to each area [Officers from X Constabulary are visiting the City of A regarding an offence...'] very good co-operation and publicity was achieved in the target areas.

Case study 3: The media strategy was hampered by the fact that the offence took place on the watershed between the two regions which meant that the media response to the murder was very uneven. Newspapers and radio stations that covered the victim's home area gave good coverage, but in the adjacent region there was less sustained press interest in both the offence and the investigation. Even at an early stage of the enquiry, the SIO began to consider the prospect of a *Crimewatch UK* appeal. This would address the likelihood that key individuals resided in the 'low' press coverage region, or even further afield. In particular it was hoped that witnesses who may have seen the suspect's vehicle on a busy trunk road would be located, as well as individuals who knew the offender but might be unaware of the severity of the offence.

In long-running enquiries, investigations are faced with the challenge of keeping the enquiry in the public eye. We have already noted that interest from the national media tends to fade quickly, unless the case is especially high profile, significant developments are reported, or the offence is accepted for a *Crimewatch UK* reconstruction. However, in cases where no-one has been charged, it will often be critical to maintain press interest in the weeks that follow a serious crime.

Those investigations which either suffered from low levels of media interest at the outset, or needed to sustain interest over a period of time, adopted a range of approaches. These included the gradual disclosure of hold-back of information; the staged release of new information (e.g. the offer of a reward); high visibility seven day reconstructions and stop-checks; publicising subsequent anniversaries of the offence; and, the adoption of different themes and approaches for each week as the investigation progressed. Several media liaison officers placed particular emphasis on the use of photo opportunities of elements of the investigation to gain or revive press interest (fingertip searches, house-to-house visits, underwater searches and so on).

4. The disclosure and acquisition of information via the media

Disclosure of information

The general Home Office guidelines on how the police should approach the press over serious crime investigations are unambiguous. As a publicly accountable service, 'the public are entitled to accurate information in relation to serious crime through the media and the Police Service has a duty to report and comment on it responsibly' (Home Office Circular 114/82). This guidance arose directly from criticisms of the police use of the media identified by the formal inquiry into the 'Yorkshire Ripper' case. Since this guidance was issued, the police have generally been seen to be more open with the media in terms of what information is released (see, for instance, Wells, 1997) and the way in which the police manage their media and public relations is felt to have advanced considerably⁸.

⁸ Symptomatic of these changes has been the considerable increase in forces with formal written media policies in place since the mid-1970s (Mawby, 1997).

Increasingly, the general approach within the service is to consider what should not be disclosed, rather than what should be offered, to the press. Several senior investigators emphasised that *not* offering the media information was a way of generating problems for the investigation as it progressed. Both SIOs and media liaison officers noted that meeting many of the information demands of the press – 'feeding the beast' was an oft-repeated maxim – was critical for at least two reasons. First, the police service needed to observe its responsibility to the public in providing clear factual information about an offence; second, if the police failed to provide this information, the press would often begin collecting it themselves. Many respondents observed that the media are effective gatherers of information. If there is a reasonable chance the information will get into the public domain through whatever source, attempting to hold-back this information from the press is unlikely to be a sensible strategy to pursue.

Certain details about an offence (and an investigation) will, however, not be disclosed. This happens for a range of reasons. The SIO needs to consider what information relating to the crime should be held back from the public to assist in identifying the offender (or to eliminate innocent individuals from the enquiry). Many investigators will initially also keep back certain pieces of information so as to increase the duration of press interest. Although the decision to hold-back details of a crime permanently is usually determined around evidential reasons, several other factors may influence the decision to hold-back information about the offence. These might include concerns over copycat behaviour, how press interpretation of the details of an offence might influence the offender, and general concerns over unnecessarily raising anxieties in a community already coming to terms with a murder or serious assault. There is also some evidence that publicity about offender strategies designed to protect the public can actually lead to the offender adapting their behaviour (Elliott, Browne and Kilcoyne, 1995).

The balance between disclosure and hold-back

The investigative team’s judgement about whether or not to disclose a piece of information should be influenced by a mature assessment of the likely *consequences* of that decision. The SIO’s judgement will be based on the unique circumstances around the offence, the victim and the investigation, at any particular point in time. Figure 2 illustrates some of the ‘tensions’ that the SIO must resolve over the

Figure 2: The objectives and consequences of disclosing or holding back information

Disclosure of information	Holding back information
<i>Objectives</i>	<i>Objectives</i>
Keep investigation in public eye	Information to assist with investigative/evidential strategies
Provides more information to the public and assists their ability to help with investigation	Minimise anxiety among local community
Minimises journalist speculation	Minimise distress to victim’s family
Takes pressure off victim’s family	Maximise public response (where victim background/lifestyle may inhibit this)
Reassure community	Avoid the likelihood of copycatting
Induce offender response	Prevent offender destroying evidence
Crime prevention advice (e.g. details of the offender’s modus operandi)	Avoid offender changing behaviour in subsequent offences (e.g. non-disclosure of DNA samples)
	Information is available to release subsequently to maintain public interest
<i>Possible consequences</i>	<i>Possible consequences</i>
Cannot use information in interviews with suspects	May hinder public response to appeals by limiting information in the public domain
Less information to disclose later on	Increased risk of ‘press investigations’ and press acquiring information regardless, and using it in a way that either damages the investigation of any subsequent trial
Possibility of copycatting	Increased risk of misinformation and speculation
Impact on offender (e.g. destruction of forensic evidence or psychological state of offender)	
May damage the possibility of a fair trial (S78 of PACE Act 1984 may be applied)	

⁹ For instance, if a member of the public hears through the press that an unidentified body has been found in a local park, he/she may believe that they can contribute no relevant information to the enquiry. However, if they are subsequently informed that the individual is a former business partner, then they may be inclined to come forward.

withholding or disclosure of information to the public about the offence, via the media. Critically, the general public's ability to provide information will often depend upon how *specific* the information made available to the public actually is⁹. As one interviewee stated:

'You need to get information out to get information in.'

The timing of contact with the press

Many SIOs and media liaison officers highlighted the particular importance of the timing of initial contact with the press, subsequent press releases and press conferences, as a critical part of the overall media strategy.

The argument for getting information out early rests partly on the need to take the lead in press handling from an early stage while allowing the rest of the investigation to continue. Furthermore, it was argued that early initial communication with the press limits the degree to which they develop their own accounts of what happened and begin their own 'investigations'; in the absence of information from an official source, there may be a tendency for inaccurate reporting to take place. One SIO stated:

'If you do not speak to [the press...they will] still run it, but put their own story on and decide their own motive. What I gave [was] a brief outline of the offence, what had happened, who we were looking for. It allowed me to say straight away that this was not racially motivated... They would have controlled the investigation had I not made the initial live broadcast.'

It will be the media liaison officer who will have the closest and most detailed understanding of the media context, and will be able to advise the investigative team on issues of timing. Several SIOs highlighted the importance of understanding the consequences of different deadlines for different newspapers and other media. The timing of press releases and press conferences can be used positively to benefit particular media outlets, and therefore target those catering for 'desirable' audiences.

The content and timing of press releases for a subset of the investigations covered in the study is summarised in Table 2. The short summaries of the press releases indicate the way in which details acquired by the investigation are made public. The Table reveals how increasingly more specific pieces information are disclosed

to the public. At the first report of an offence, officers may know little about the circumstances of the crime and may only be in a position to provide limited details about the victim, the physical characteristics of the offender or the circumstances of the offence. Consequently, at the point when press interest in the enquiry is at its most intense (i.e. soon after the finding of a body), the investigation may be able to disclose relatively little. As the enquiry progresses, so the level of understanding within the investigation increases. This then affects the extent to which increasingly specific and accurate pieces of information can be given out to the public (and the extent to which the public in turn can assist). This may, however, coincide with reduced level of press interest as other 'newsworthy' events start to attract press attention.

The frequency of press releases varied from case to case, partly in accordance with force practice, and partly reflecting the investigation's acquisition of new information. One media liaison officer on a long-running enquiry felt that producing press releases too frequently could be counter-productive. If the release did not indicate anything significantly new in the way of positive leads, it could suggest that the investigation was in fact making little progress.

Elapsed time of enquiry

Table 2: The release of information by press releases, by day of investigation

	First press release – body found (a)	2nd press release	3rd press release	4th press release	5th press release	6th press release	7th press release	8th press release	9th press release	10th press release	11th press release
Case A	Day 1 Holding statement re finding of a body	Day 2 Physical description of victim and circumstances of finding body. Cause of death given	Day 2 Likely time of death given and details of victim's clothing	Day 3 Victim named	Day 3 Appeal regarding last movements	Day 5 Appeal for witnesses in body recovery area	Day 6 More recent photo of victim distributed	Day 7 Details of investigation	Day 8 Details of investigation	Day 9 Pseudonyms of victim disclosed	Day 10 Body dump-site disclosed. Appeal for witnesses
Case E	Day 1 Holding statement re circumstances of the offence; basic description of offender	Day 2 Appeal from SIO for those harbouring offender to call in	Day 2 Further details of offender and route of attacker as he fled the scene	Day 2 Divisional commander offers public reassurance to residents	Day 6 Individuals arrested in connection with the offence						
Case H	Day 1 Holding statement re incident and finding of body. Basic description of offender offered	Day 1 Appeal to trace two men	Day 2 Victim named	Day 2 Update on investigation	Day 3 Appeal for driver of lorry in near collision with suspects' vehicle to come forward	Day 5 Further appeal for lorry driver and others	Day 7 Update on investigation and seven roadside checks	Day 12 Type of van specified; appeal for second vehicle in incident with suspect vehicle to come forward	Day 28 Details of reward given		

(a) Not all murder investigations begin with the finding of a body. Some investigations begin as missing persons reports in which case the flow of information into and out of an investigation is different.

DISCLOSURE AND ACQUISITION OF INFORMATION VIA THE MEDIA

Table 2: The release of information by press releases, by day of investigation (continued)

First press release – body found (a)	2nd press release	3rd press release	4th press release	5th press release	6th press release	7th press release	8th press release	9th press release	10th press release	11th press release
Day 1										
Case K	Details of body found. Witnesses requested re activity near the scene, and vehicles in area at time	Details of earlier dispute on previous evening which may be related to offence	Post Mortem results	Victim named	General progress on investigation	Progress of investigation	Details of events leading up to murder released	Further appeal for individuals near scene at time	Update on investigation	Update on investigation
Day 2										
Case N	Day 2 Basic details of offence and description of offender	Day 3 Details provided by woman approached by a man similar to the offender	Day 6 Details of forthcoming press conference	Day 7 Press conference at which items left by offender are disclosed and further details of clothing released	Day 8 Update of investigation	Day 10 Pictures of similar clothing to attackers distributed	Day 27 Details of linked offence disclosed and items stolen			
Day 3										
Day 4										
Day 5										
Day 6										
Day 7										
Day 8										
Day 9										
Day 10										
Day 11										
Case P	Day 1 Basic details of offence and description of offender	Day 2 More detailed information about assault and offender	Day 4 E-fit distributed. Further details about offender's clothing and physical characteristics	Day 5 Specific request to trace two girls seen near scene	Day 6 Update of investigation	Day 11 Further appeal to identify a person sleeping rough				

(a) Not all murder investigations begin with the finding of a body. Some investigations begin as missing persons reports in which case the flow of information into and out of an investigation is different.

The media as an investigative tool

Decisions over the content and timing of communications with the media will in part reflect the need for the investigation to generate additional information from the general public. It is widely acknowledged that the public play an important role as providers of information in the detection of crime (Greenwood, Chaitken, and Petersilia, 1977; Morgan, 1980; Ainsworth, 1995). This is illustrated by the findings from a separate study of the messages recorded in four murder investigations by Greater Manchester Police (Table 3). The data revealed that the general public accounted for more than one-third of messages received. Of these, the majority related to activity at or near the scene (39 per cent), and 11 per cent of messages from the general public offered the enquiry the names of suspects.

Table 3: Messages received by four homicide investigations, by source and content

Message referred to:	Column percentages				
	General public	Victim associate	Police source	Other*	Total
Object found at scene	8	2	13	-	8
Activity at or near scene	39	2	14	18	20
Victim sightings	8	4	3	18	4
Background on victim	14	72	28	24	32
General background	1	4	4	-	3
Suspect names	11	4	19	6	11
Related criminal activity	6	4	8	-	6
Other	15	6	5	33	5
Total	100	100	100	100	100
N	85	54	80	17	236
Row percentages	36	23	34	7	100

Source: Analysis of the first 60 messages recorded for four murders investigated by Greater Manchester Police. Four messages could not be coded appropriately and are treated as missing data.

* Includes messages from house-to-house enquiries.

Little research has been undertaken on assessing the contribution that the media make to serious crime investigations. In the United States, Hanfland, Keppell and Weis (1997) undertook an assessment of investigations of child homicides and concluded that 77 per cent of investigations 'used the media' mainly to identify witnesses. Some 31 per cent of investigators believed that media coverage assisted

the investigation compared with 6 per cent who believed it hindered the investigation, and 31 per cent who believed that it had a neutral effect.

Some research has been done on the impact of BBC television’s *Crimewatch UK* as a tool for assisting in apprehending offenders. Figures prepared by the BBC and cited in Schlesinger and Tumber (1993) indicate that after 60 programmes, 38 per cent of cases featured resulted in offenders being arrested and charged. This analysis did not, however, indicate the relative success of reconstructions against other types of appeal featured on the programme. Furthermore, *Crimewatch UK* is unlikely to be representative of the role of the media in assisting with the detection of serious offending. The focus of *Crimewatch UK* is a specific appeal to the public, rather than a general news story, with the emphasis on a collaborative approach between the *Crimewatch UK* team and the investigation.

SIOs were asked to specify the main objectives of their media appeals. A total of thirteen objectives were identified (Table 4), with identifying ‘unknowing

Table 4: Objectives of media appeals *

Objective	No. of appeals with objective
Acquisition of information	
Identify victim	1
Identify suspects +	4
Trace a named suspect	1
Trace history of vehicle involved in offence	1
Trace witnesses to the offence/people near scene at time	9
Locate item stolen in linked offence	2
Establish victim’s last movements	4
Get associates of the victim to come forward	3
Find whereabouts of missing person	1
Close down a specific line of enquiry	1
Other investigative objectives	
Put pressure on suspect/suspect’s associates to admit the offence	1
Use of non-disclosed information to incriminate offenders	1
To directly address the offender	1

* Most cases offered more than one objective.

+Although the provision of suspect names was not often explicitly stated as an objective, in 25 per cent of cases, suspect names were contributed to the investigation.

¹⁰ Data were taken from a wider study of how the police investigate murder in England.

witnesses' the most frequently cited. Not all the objectives, however, related specifically to information acquisition. Three cases attempted to use the media to achieve several other specific investigative objectives. A recent UK study revealed a similar range of objectives for the use of the media in murder enquiries (Innes, 1999)¹⁰. In addition to identifying a suspect through publishing a composite or description, and tracing 'unknowing witnesses', the following aims were identified: encouraging a guilty offender to come forward; pressuring him or her in a way which brings about a change in behaviour; and encouraging someone shielding an offender to contact the police.

Making appeals for information

It is important to distinguish between a police *appeal* for information and the more general provision of information to the media about the offence (*publicity*). To get information into the enquiry effectively requires that press releases and other communications with the media are explicit in why and how the general public might assist. A failure to clarify and emphasise the critical objectives of the message to the public can increase the likelihood that the 'appeal' element would be diluted, or even lost into a less focused 'news story'. Several interviewees suggested that media liaison officers needed to pay particular attention to ensure that, where appropriate, the initial appeal message was clear and strong. At a more detailed level, appeals that ask the public for information about 'suspicious activity near the scene' or for people witnessing 'anything out of the ordinary' may be missing the point. It may well be information about the 'ordinary' which helps to progress a major crime enquiry. A more inclusive approach to public appeals should arguably focus on asking the public for *any* information relevant to the scene around the time of the offence.

A media appeal is of course just one of a number of routes by which the police can try to engage the support of, and receive information from, the general public to assist in the investigation of serious crimes. House-to-house enquiries, leaflet drops, reconstructions and road stop-checks are alternative mechanisms. Each of these has strengths and weaknesses as techniques for acquiring information, particularly in terms of:

- the ability to focus on a particular geographical area or community;
- the speed with which they can be initiated in relation to the offence;
- the extent to which the police can retain 'editorial' control over the request for information;
- the extent to which they can guarantee that target populations have been reached by an appeal;

- the expected volume and quality of information into the enquiry;
- the option for repeated or updated appeals; and,
- the resources required to make the initial appeal, handle the response, analyse it and respond to it.

Interviewees highlighted the advantages the media offered over alternative approaches to the public. For instance, newspapers, radio and television can be used to reach a high proportion of the population over a wide geographic area very quickly after the discovery of an offence. Even if an investigation does not achieve national coverage, local and regional media by themselves can achieve sizeable audiences, and more significantly, can address particular target audiences (e.g. those likely to contain potential witnesses)¹¹. This is because many serious crimes are basically local offences, with offender, victim and witnesses all based near to the scene of crime. For example, research by Davies and Dale (1995) found that nearly 75 per cent of stranger rapists had a home base within five miles of the place where victims were approached. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that *some* offenders are highly mobile, and that, depending on the circumstances surrounding a particular offence, potential witnesses and others with useful information to contribute, *may* also come from a wide geographical area.

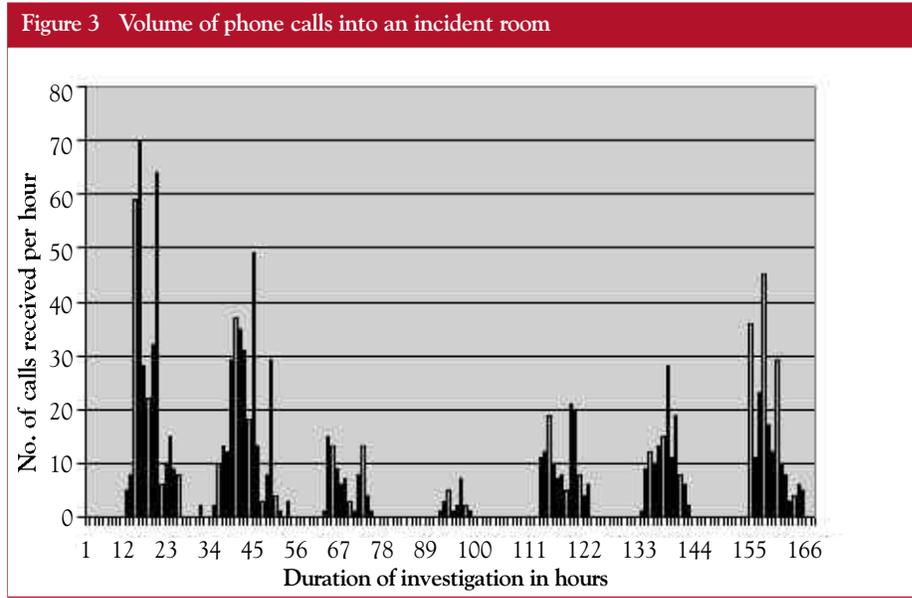
Some media outlets can be effective at reaching particular groups (for instance ethnic minority communities, the gay community or professional specialists). The research identified a number of examples of targeting specific parts of the media to achieve this. These ranged from placing articles in a university newspaper to seek witnesses located in a bed-sit area, to the targeting of a local radio station with a mature audience profile to trace associates of an elderly victim. Access to niche audiences may even be achieved through specialist magazines and journals.

Finally, the use of the media offers a relatively flexible means of acquiring information. Unlike other forms of information collection, the investigative team can alter the detail and the tone of the media message accordingly as the enquiry progresses. House-to-house enquiries offer some advantages over the media as a means of acquiring information, since they are more geographically focused and offer a greater guarantee that residents in a particular location can be targeted. House-to-house is, however, relatively restricted in its ability to adjust to the acquisition of new information. If, as the investigation progresses, additional details become known which require changes to the questions asked, it can be expensive to re-interview all those who have previously offered information.

¹¹ Research conducted by the Independent Broadcasting Authority (Wober and Gunter, 1990) indicated the important role of the media in general, and local newspapers in particular, in informing the general public about crime in their locality. The 'most likely source' of information about crime in respondents' own area or region was the local newspaper (61 per cent of respondents). Although this information is usually disseminated through publishing of relevant articles, occasionally newspapers will collaborate in the production and distribution of posters. This was evident in two cases covered in the PRC study.

Dealing with the generation of information

One of the principal purposes of an appeal is to increase the amount and quality of relevant information held in an enquiry. However, it is self-evident that the *best* response to an appeal is a limited amount of very high-quality information from the public. Figure 3 illustrates the volume of phone calls into one of the sample investigations during the first seven days. These data are based on calls into a dedicated incident room number. Although some of the calls into the incident room will be from the police, the chart gives some indication of the way in which public interest can be generated by an enquiry and the immediate demand on resources that this creates.



Two main issues were raised regarding the practical consequences of making an appeal. First, the need to deal with the immediate response to an appeal by arranging sufficient phone lines and briefed operators. Second, the wider impact on the investigation of having to respond to a potentially large number of messages entering the system.

Extended missing person enquiries exemplify the problems of generating a large public response to an appeal. One appeal for a young missing girl generated over 300 sightings from across the country, the vast majority of which were mistaken sightings from genuine callers. A second enquiry requested information about door-

to-door traders active in a region in the hope that this might turn up a possible offender. The enquiry was inundated with low quality information, albeit from genuine callers; this in turn generated a number of (ultimately misleading) lines of enquiry. Another SIO admitted that, in an investigation he had led some years ago, he had failed to judge correctly the likely response to a *Crimewatch UK* appeal. He had under-estimated both the number of calls on the night and the subsequent actions which had to be raised. He conceded that he had possibly given the programme too much information.

Judging the likely take-up of appeals through the media, regardless of whether they are at a national or local level, relies on the skill and experience of both the SIO and the media liaison officer. The extent to which information will be offered by the public following an appeal is likely to depend on a number of factors:

- the size of the potential population who might be able to contribute information (e.g. shoppers in a busy shopping street on a Saturday afternoon compared to visitors to a secluded park on a Saturday evening);
- the extent to which the potential population can be targeted by particular media;
- how the disclosed information can be packaged to focus on the *appeal* and emphasise the principal message, so as to encourage *genuinely* useful calls from the general public; and,
- the degree to which the information required can be made *specific* so as to minimise well-meaning but irrelevant contributions to the enquiry.

The ability of the investigation to assess the quality of incoming information will depend on the quality of information residing in the enquiry at the time of the appeal.

Several good practice points were raised with respect to call handling. One SIO had found it helpful to open the Force Casualty Bureau, especially when dealing with *Crimewatch UK* appeals, using officers who were dual trained in Major Incident Room and Casualty Bureau procedures on HOLMES¹². Particular thought needs to be given to dealing with media generated calls from the public which take place when a Major Incident Room is not staffed. The detail of such messages can be important to the investigation and one suggestion was that, where communications rooms have facilities, such calls should be taped and made available to the investigative team.

¹² HOLMES was implemented in the UK in the mid-1980s as a nationally standardised computer application to support the administration of major crime enquiries.

5. General relations with the media, victims, victims' relatives and communities

Relations with the media

Effective press handling relies on a clear understanding of the media context in which an investigation will be conducted. Interviewees identified several areas that influence the context within which a serious crime investigation is reported and which can affect the reporting style and the dialogue with the press. These included:

- the nature of media boundaries and catchments;
- the extent to which relations between the police and different media outlets in the same force vary;
- general relations between the local/regional press and the police service;
- any general themes or campaigns adopted by local media; and,
- the experience of crime reporters covering major investigations and their understanding of the legal process.

The majority of interviewees believed that, in general, relations with the press over the specific investigations covered were extremely constructive and positive. Although some SIOs had endured difficult encounters with the press at some time in their careers, the contribution that the media could make to an investigation was clearly valued. Several SIOs emphasised the symbiotic nature of the relationship, and the fact that, in spite of the different cultures that existed in the press and the police, the two relied on each other extensively.

Reference was made to specific problems encountered in press handling of the 16 cases, although these were not the exclusive preserve of either the national or the local media. However, the dialogue with local media outlets tends to be somewhat different because of the way that relationships, positively and negatively, are built up over time, and are sustained¹³. As one SIO stated:

¹³ Since media and police boundaries are rarely the same, this can lead to quite complex and not necessarily supportive relationships with the local and regional media.

'Local press relations are generally very good...we have a minority of bad ones. You get co-operation from local journalists, you have been working with them for the past couple of months...but when you get freelancers looking at stories, they are the ones who will cause you the problems....[But you need to] build into the strategy time to talk to local journalists and give them a little bit more...'

Editorial control and misinterpretation

Although investigators can determine the contents and timing of a press release, they are not in a position to determine how that information is ultimately portrayed

by the media. At a basic level, this extends to the way in which final copy is edited. This is a weakness of the media as a vehicle for getting information out to the general public. For example, several media liaison officers complained that critical details from press releases, such as the telephone number of the incident room, frequently failed to find their way into the final article.

Problems also can occur when the media misinterpret or embellish the facts offered by the police, usually to suit a more newsworthy interpretation of the crime. These fell into five categories:

- making speculative *links* to other offences in a region or elsewhere;
- making critical comments about the *location* where the offence took place;
- making assertions about the *motive* behind an offence;
- making assertions about the *background* of the *offender*; and,
- making assertions about the *background* of the *victim*.

Misinterpretation of police information, or general misinformation about an offence, can lead to unhelpful consequences for the investigation and for the community more generally. For instance, if the press make speculative observations about an offence being linked to others, this can serve to increase public anxiety. The media portrayal of the community in which an offence had taken place was also considered important in several cases. The portrayal of an area as ‘crime-ridden’ or hostile, can affect the degree of assistance provided by the community, and contribute more generally to the deterioration of community-police relations¹⁴. Case study 4 illustrates how one SIO anticipated the misinterpretation of an offence by one particular newspaper.

¹⁴ In addition, increasing the level of concern over crime through reporting can have tangible effects on the economy of a town or district.

Case study 4: A shooting took place in an area which had a history of drug-related gangs and firearms incidents. However, in recent years significant police efforts had succeeded in tackling the drugs problem, which by and large had been brought under control. This particular offence was the result of a revenge attack by petty criminals on a local burglar. The SIO anticipated that the offence would be misinterpreted by the media as a drugs-related incident, and in his initial press release disclosed the victim’s criminal background, and specifically made reference to the likely motive being unrelated to drugs. Nevertheless, one journalist working for an otherwise co-operative local paper ‘would not accept this could be anything but the “big picture”’, and the murder was reported to be part of a ‘new drugs war’. Because of the concern this would raise among the local community and the damage that such a misleading headline would have on the local economy, the Chief Constable wrote to the paper criticising them for inaccurate and damaging coverage.

One of the skills of the SIO and media liaison officer in dealing with these issues is correctly anticipating the potential for such misinterpretation by the press, and compensating for this in the formal media releases and other exchanges with the press. However, the danger of misinterpretation also reinforces the need for effective monitoring of the media by the press office, and critically, for issues arising as a result of misinterpretation to be brought to the attention of the investigative team and dealt with at the earliest opportunity¹⁵.

¹⁵ One SIO stated that television and other press interviews with witnesses were also routinely scanned to ensure that all potential witnesses had been identified by the investigation.

Victims and victims' relatives

The media portrayal of the victims of serious crime is a sensitive area. The way in which the victim is presented in the press can influence the willingness of the victim's family to co-operate with the enquiry. Press coverage of the victim can occasionally be negative and inaccurate, and the editorial or interpretative slant of the press is sometimes not fully understood by those reading newspapers and watching television. Police relations with the victim's family can be strained through a misunderstanding of the relationship between the police message and actual press coverage, and the investigation needs to be aware of this possibility (see Case study 5).

Case study 5: Following a murder in a town in Southern England, the victim's family, who lived in inner London, became distressed that the victim was being portrayed by the local and regional press in the Capital as a 'major drug dealer'. This was at odds with reality and the message being given out officially by the police (the victim was in fact a minor criminal on the fringes of major criminal activity). Special efforts had to be made to restore relations between the victim's family and the investigative team.

Effective and sensitive family liaison is now accepted as a key component of murder enquiries (Mason, 1998). In Leicestershire, it is policy to provide the family liaison officer in murder investigations with copies of the formal police press statements, in order that the family knows exactly what the police are saying about the offence and the victim.

One experienced SIO stated that, since it was important to anticipate press interpretation of any aspect of the investigation, 'you had to think like a sub-editor'. Personalising the qualities of the victim and emphasising his/her 'positive' characteristics were both important (for instance, emphasising that a victim was a mother of young children rather than focusing on her prostitution). This helped in gaining public sympathy and therefore improved the chance of a good response to appeals. Re-emphasising these qualities at every opportunity in the enquiry was

considered to be important in helping to maintain the focus of any particular message.

Victims' relatives and press appeals

There has been much discussion about the use of victims' relatives in appeals for assistance via the media (Chesshyre, 1997). In the 16 investigations covered, only two used a member of the victim's family in press appeals. While it is clearly preferable to *manage* press contact with a victim's relatives, it is difficult to prevent relatives commenting to the media if they so wish. Independently arranged contact between a victim's relative and the press proved to be a particular problem in one of the cases examined.

The current debate about the use of a victim's family in appeals centres on the apparent frequency with which victims' relatives appeal through the media, and have then been subsequently charged with committing the offence. This has encouraged speculation that police forces deliberately use this technique to observe how suspects react under the media spotlight. The former ACPO Crime Investigation Working Group's agreed policy in this area clearly states that victims' relatives should not be used at press conferences in the first six hours of an investigation, and thereafter only when they have been eliminated from the enquiry.

Improving media relations

We did not explore in detail how more positive relations might be fostered with the press in relation to serious crime. Addressing the demands of the press for information is important, and has already been discussed in Section 4. Four SIOs specifically identified the importance of explaining to the media the reasons why they could not furnish particular information about the enquiry, or why particular investigative tasks took so long. One officer summed it up as follows: 'it helps to explain why you cannot comment – the press respect qualification, legal or operational'. This qualification might simply explain the time it can take to assess particular pieces of information or to carry out particular investigative processes (house-to-house, forensic information from the scene, the checking of CCTV video footage). In addition to explaining why operationally-sensitive material had to be held back, one experienced SIO aimed simultaneously to provide as much 'non-sensitive' information about the crime and the investigation as possible in press releases and press conferences. His aim was to over-provide information to reporters to discourage 'journalist investigations'. In essence, he tried to write the story for the press.

Where sensitive information had been inadvertently disclosed, the research revealed several instances where press co-operation was exemplary. In two of the cases studied, the press became aware of information which, at that stage, formed part of the investigations' hold-back material (one through rumours circulating within the immediate local community regarding the details of one particular offence; the other through the inadvertent release of information during a press conference). In each case, when the significance of the information was explained, the reasons for treating it as hold-back, and the potential damage to the investigation if made public, the press responded positively and did not make the information public. Indeed, there appear to have been relatively few cases where, when in possession of hold-back information, the media have released it.

Several interviewees suggested that feeding back to the press instances where they had made a significant contribution to an enquiry was one way future relations could be improved. Indeed, this seemed to be a natural extension of maintaining good internal communications between the investigative team and the media liaison officer as to the contribution of the media to the investigation, alongside more general updates on the progress of the enquiry.

Legal issues

When an offender is charged, the due legal process comes into force until the trial begins. After criminal proceedings become active the press are bound by the sub-judice ruling and the provisions of the Contempt of Court Act 1981, which prevents them from publishing or broadcasting material that creates a 'substantial risk of serious prejudice' to the impending proceedings. The Lord Chancellor has responsibility for the substance of the Law of Contempt and its enforcement in the context of pre-trial publicity. This is exercised through applications for an injunction to restrain anticipated comment or on an *ex post facto* basis (Memorandum submitted by the Lord Chancellor's Department for the National Heritage Committee, 1997). Advice on the interpretation of the Act from the police perspective is covered in Home Office Circular 115/1982. This interprets the Act more broadly and advises Chief Police Officers to take precautions against 'any semblance of what the public or the courts might regard as improper or irresponsible behaviour'. In May 1997, the Advisory Committee on Legal Education and Conduct reported to the Lord Chancellor on comments to the media on judicial proceedings (Lord Chancellor's Department, 1997). The Home Office Circular 115/1982 is currently being revised.

Although forces adopt a variety of approaches, current advice from ACPO Media Advisory Group (MAG) regarding pre-trial and 'during trial' briefings suggests that

such briefings can take place subject to appropriate safeguards. Even though there are potential pitfalls in adopting this approach, there are benefits particularly in terms of ensuring that good police work is highlighted. Recent guidance from ACPO MAG indicates that when such briefings occur, they should be strictly controlled and undertaken with the consent of the trial judge and after consultation with the CPS (ACPO MAG, 1995).

In several of the cases studied, the activities of some parts of the press led to developments which had the potential to jeopardise the legal process. The research was not designed to focus explicitly on the legal issues thrown up in the media handling of serious crime and cases were not selected by the stage at which they had got within the judicial process. Hence, of our 16 cases, three had gone to court, one was awaiting trial and the remainder were still either undetected, or the police had insufficient information with which to charge an individual (Summer, 1998). While we cannot make any general observations on this handful of cases, it is instructive to observe the types of problem that exist with respect to the legal process and media handling.

Payments to witnesses

Following a number of high profile cases, there has been increased concerns over payments to witnesses, or 'cheque-book journalism', and its impact on the judicial (and investigative) processes. Concerns over 'cheque-book journalism' arise from the fact that media interviews may cause witnesses to exaggerate, distort or withhold their account of matters which may be the subject of evidence. Although such activity might fall within the common law of contempt of court, the Lord Chancellor's Department recently commented that 'it is not clear whether...[this] applies to payments of witnesses' (Memorandum submitted by the Lord Chancellor's Department for the National Heritage Select Committee, 1997).

Clause 16 of the Press Complaints Commission's (PCC) code of practice relates specifically to payments to witnesses¹⁶. Although the PCC has amended its code on payments to witnesses in the wake of the West case, the PCC does not believe the problem to be considerable. The 1997 annual report states that there have only been 'four cases raising the issue in forty years – and in none of these has there been any miscarriage of justice' (Press Complaints Commission, 1997).

¹⁶ *This states that payments should not be made to witnesses or potential witnesses except where the material ought to be published in the public interest.*

The remit of the PCC, however, only extends to the written press and does not cover television, radio or the overseas media. Furthermore, the extent to which complaints received by the PCC can be said to represent the extent of the problem is open to question. Since the establishment of the PCC, there have only been 15

adjudicated complaints made by police officers through formal channels to the PCC on *any* issue, and only one of these dealt with payments to witnesses. Several instances of 'cheque-book journalism' are believed to have taken place in recent years and the Lord Chancellor's Department believes there is 'little doubt that payments are made more and more frequently'. In January 1997, the National Heritage Select Committee published its report on Press Activity Affecting Court Cases and concluded that there was a need for legislation to control pre-trial publicity and payments to witnesses by the media in criminal trials. In September 1997, the government announced its decision to support the Heritage Committee's recommendation with a view to legislation during the 1997/98 session (Culture, Media and Sport Committee, 1997). Although this was not forthcoming, there is no indication that this delay should be taken as a weakening of the Government's resolve in this area.

Included within the definition of payments to witnesses used by the PCC is payment for the use of photographs. Placing photos into the public domain is critical where identification may be an issue at court, as it is both unfair to the suspect and can seriously impair the value and admissibility of evidence. Several of the cases examined had encountered particular problems over the press gaining access to, and in one case publishing, pictures of an offender prior to charge or the commencement of the court process. In one case, an injunction was issued as a precautionary measure to prevent photos being published. SIOs felt that where identification was likely to be part of a prosecution case, and where photographs were known to be in the hands of journalists, pre-emptive action was important, and it fell to the SIO to anticipate the likelihood of this being an issue at court.

6. Personnel issues

Media liaison officers

The handling of the press in serious crime investigations brings together the SIO and the media liaison officer in the early stages of an enquiry. This often constituted a key working relationship at one of the most difficult times of an investigation, and it is helpful to examine briefly the contribution of the media liaison officer, their backgrounds and the way in which they are involved in the enquiry.

The role of the media liaison officer in major crime investigations is wide-ranging. It is likely to include most or all of the following:

- the preparation and dissemination of information about the offence and investigation to the media through press releases and voicebank messages;
- liaison with journalists at the scene;
- the logging of information given out to journalists;
- mediating between the SIO and the press over interviews;
- the organisation of press conferences; and,
- the monitoring of press coverage to check accuracy and interpretation issues.

In many of the cases examined, press liaison officers provided advice to the SIO on specific issues around the development of a media strategy.

Eleven of the 16 media liaison officers in the study were civilians and all but one of these had worked as journalists prior to joining the police¹⁷. On average, they had spent just over six and a half years working in police press offices (Table 5). This level of exposure to the media handling of serious crime often allowed them to acquire a considerable degree of experience. The way in which work was allocated varied across press offices: some forces allocated regional responsibilities to different media liaison officers while in others they developed 'specialisms', including serious crime. Many had been involved in a large number of high profile investigations. In most instances, the SIOs interviewed clearly appreciated the depth of this experience and this was reflected in the role of the media liaison officer in assisting in the formulation of the media strategy.

¹⁷ Mawby's (1997) survey of police press offices found that just over half of all forces' press offices were completely civilianised and four-fifths had civilian head of departments.

Table 5: Media liaison officers: background and experience

	Civilian	Police
Number	11	5
Average number of years in police press office	6.7	1.6
Previous occupation:		
Journalist	10	na
Other	1	na

The presence of a press liaison officer on the investigative team was not, however, universal, even in the initial stages of an investigation. Of the 16 investigations, ten had a media liaison officer involved as a member of the management team at least at the start of the investigation. In cases where the understanding between the media liaison officer and an SIO was well developed, formal presence of the media liaison officer on the investigative team was not felt to be a critical condition for an effective working relationship.

Nevertheless, several forces had introduced standard practice that media liaison officers would be part of the management team of the investigation, and, depending on the scale of the enquiry, the rationale for this seemed powerful, at least in the early stages. One SIO stated:

‘Although this is not a force protocol as such...all SIOs have press officers as part of their management teams [in this force]. If it makes your job easier and takes some of the stress off you....the experts are down there, and I closely follow their guidance...’

The inclusion of the media liaison officer on the investigation management team was felt to offer a number of advantages: it eased the flow of information, allowed greater clarity in the allocation of respective roles, and permitted the media liaison officer to assess the likely press angle on a particular case¹⁸. It also, however, provided an opportunity for the media liaison officer to actively contribute their expertise to the development of the media strategy and more general advice about appropriate press handling.

¹⁸ This might be as detailed as suggesting the sorts of non-sensitive detail that the press were likely to be interested in reporting on and should therefore be included in the press release.

Indeed, there were several examples of additional benefits arising from a close working relationship between SIOs and press departments. In one case, the press department had provided the investigative team with a summary of all television programmes broadcast during the evening of an offence, to use to jog the memory of potential witnesses.

Internal communications

Media liaison officers were asked to describe the general relationship between the press office and the CID. Most long-serving media liaison officers testified to a gradual improvement in detectives’ willingness to engage with the press over the last decade or so. There remained, however, concern in some forces about the extent to which relations had progressed. For instance, one media liaison officer stated:

‘General relations with CID could be better...some [detectives] are not using the media, some older ones are very confident, some younger ones are not...not an age but a confidence thing. But they have made great strides...I do occasionally get invited to briefings. The Chief Constable is keen for integration...and there have been some successes due to media. But it is exception not rule that press officers are invited to briefings. It is not done and it should be. We need to know the background to minimise frustration [and the] ideal way, especially on long investigations, is by discussing it with the SIO.’

The degree to which CID and press offices liaised outside the handling of major incidents varied widely. A number of factors were relevant here: the size and geography of the force; the level of serious crime; the way in which responsibilities for media handling were allocated across the force; the general relationship between the force press office and CID; and, the extent to which the press office was pro-active in its efforts to pre-empt the operational working relationship with the SIO (and vice versa). Although the location of media liaison officers and CID in the same accommodation offered some advantage in informal communication, where this was not the case, distance was not found to be a formidable barrier to co-operation and exchange. Experience in several forces suggested that what mattered more was a commitment to developing a constructive relationship, and effort and receptiveness on both sides.

Senior Investigating Officers

Almost all the media liaison officers interviewed stated that the majority of senior detectives that they dealt with had an increasingly open and constructive relationship with the press. The adoption of a more open approach within the force, the impact of particular Chief Constables in driving this, the effect of programmes such as *Crimewatch UK*, and the use of the media in high profile ‘successes’ in serious crime investigations, were all cited as factors which have contributed to this improvement. It was felt, however, that there were still some SIOs who took a less positive view of the media and press relations. These were to be both a mixture of younger, inexperienced officers and older established investigators. Generally, this was perceived to be a small and declining group within the investigator community.

The majority of SIOs interviewed had received some training in media presentation skills, but relatively little training in how to develop effective media strategies (a point also noted by Ainsworth, 1995)¹⁹. Hence, almost all of their expertise in handling the media and developing media strategies had been developed ‘on the job’, and by observing the skills of more senior detectives.

¹⁹ One force had developed a rolling programme of three month secondments from anywhere in the force into the HQ Press Office. This was felt to provide a useful grounding for getting a general understanding of press and media issues as well as providing a useful resource for the Press Office.

In spite of the general lack of formal training in this area, several experienced officers had developed expert skills in media handling. These abilities were apparently a combination of personal charisma, extensive experience, in addition to a close working knowledge of individuals and organisations in the media.

It should be acknowledged that not all SIOs have the personal attributes necessary to deal effectively with the media face to face: 'some SIOs just should not be doing it...' was the observation of one media liaison officer. Although it would be preferable for SIOs to take on direct communication with the press (see p.9), if he or she feels particularly uncomfortable in this position, it would appear appropriate to pass it to another nominated individual. That person, however, clearly needs to be competent, fully briefed about the investigation and able to see the role through. Consistency of personnel in this area was felt to be particularly important during the course of an investigation.

7. Effective media handling in serious crime investigations: summary and recommendations

This report has examined the way in which the police handle the media in serious crime investigations. The media can make a considerable contribution to these investigations by providing access to, and engaging the support of, the general public. In this sense, an effective media strategy is an integral part of an investigative strategy, rather than a presentational luxury. The media can take up the time and resources of the investigative team, particularly in the early days of an enquiry. However, where this is properly managed, it is possible to achieve a number of complementary goals: the main messages can be deployed through the media; the demands of the media can be effectively serviced; relevant appeals can be made to the public and other investigative objectives met; the interests of other groups can be served; and, the pressures on the SIO can be minimised.

The working relationship between the SIO and the media liaison officer will be central to the success of media handling. Building up an effective working relationship in this highly pressurised area benefits from regular contact. Although resource constraints do not always make this easy, the willingness of both investigators and media liaison officers to engage in an ongoing dialogue should be developed and encouraged. Furthermore, the benefits of involving the media liaison officer within the investigation's management team appear to be overwhelming.

While it is difficult to overstate the positive contribution of the media to serious crime investigations, we should acknowledge that problems can and do arise with media handling in a range of areas. Some of these are simply a function of the perceived 'newsworthiness' of a particular offence which can either excite overwhelming interest from the media or otherwise restrict its coverage. Other difficulties relate to the way in which information is interpreted by the media, or is a result of the activities of some journalists interfering with witnesses, scenes or more generally acting in a way that threatens the legal process.

The difficulties which an investigation may encounter with the media are part of the context of the enquiry. As many of the interviewees identified, ignoring the media does not mean that they go away. In fact denial is more likely to accentuate difficulties. Not providing information to the press will encourage speculation and journalist-based investigations and encourage mis-reporting. By the same token, several SIOs acknowledged that the press can be effective 'investigators' in their own right, and consequently, their activities and output need to be carefully assessed.

Media strategies need to be flexible and sensitive to the changing media and public environment. They also need to consider the potential value and likely consequences of not releasing information into the public domain. Furthermore, the hold-back or release of information has consequences for the investigation, the legal process, the victim's relatives, the offender and the community at large. All of these need to be weighed up when developing an effective media strategy. The way in which information is made public, the manner in which offences, victims and investigations are portrayed, will influence the level and quality of public response and degree of co-operation, as well as critical relationships with victims' families. The way in which police actions or decisions are explained to the press is also important, as is the timing of communications to optimise coverage and reach target publics. In particular, media handling requires skills to anticipate the press and public response, as well as legal consequences of actions and inaction.

Indeed, perhaps the most frequently observed skill in devising an effective media strategy was an ability to *anticipate* the consequences of any decisions associated with media handling, the media interpretation of the crime and the investigation. For instance:

- Given what is known about a case, what is the likely level of press interest?
- What is the **primary** purpose of the media strategy and the main messages that need to be given to the public through an appeal?
- How is the media likely to interpret this offence (linking, motive, victim, location of the offence) and its subsequent investigation?
- What are the likely resource consequences of the media strategy?
- What are the short-term and long-term investigative and legal consequences of holding-back/disclosing pieces of information (i.e. anticipate the court situation months or years after the offence)?
- What is the likely public response to disclosing a piece of information? Will the investigation be inundated by calls from the public? How big is the potential population that might be able to contribute information? Are there sufficient call handlers in place who are briefed about the case? What will be the overall consequences for the investigation of new information coming in, and how might it be prioritised and possible new suspects eliminated?
- Post-charge, does the investigation need to take any pre-emptive legal action about possible press interference in the case? Are there photos in circulation and is identification likely to be an issue at court?

²⁰ For instance: Are you confident of an arrest? Will the offender strike again? What level of resources are being used to investigate this offence? What was the motive? Is the offence linked to another offence?

At a more detailed level, the likely issues to be raised during press conferences, and the appropriate responses, can often be identified in advance²⁰.

Recommendations

This study has identified a number of areas of good practice which forces and SIOs need to consider:

- Force media liaison officers should be formally members of management teams within serious crime investigations, at least for the initial phase of the investigation when press interest is likely to be at its height.
- While experience will always play an important part in the development of SIO media skills, practical training for SIOs in designing effective media strategies should be considered. This might be achieved through exposing investigators to a range of media handling scenarios/exercises, and undertaking joint exercises with media liaison officers. Consideration should also be given to introducing investigators to the principles of media handling in criminal investigations at an earlier stage in their careers.
- There should be more effort to improve communications between press/media officers and CID. This might be through a combination of workshops and short secondments of junior officers into media offices.
- The media impact on victims' relatives should be monitored and addressed as part of on-going family liaison procedures. Family Liaison Officers should provide relatives with copies of all formal press statements at the earliest opportunity.
- The shared responsibility for media matters on major crime by ACPO Media Advisory Group and ACPO Crime has in the past led to differing approaches in the handling of media within major crime investigations. While forces will want to set their own policy in the light of ACPO guidance, a single set of all embracing guidelines in this area would assist operational officers.
- At present there appears to be extreme levels of under-reporting to the PCC of inappropriate press activity in relation to major crime enquiries. Forces should be more active in drawing this kind of behaviour to the attention of the PCC.
- Further research should be undertaken in three areas: assessing the effectiveness of different media for reaching particular types of public; exploring how recent developments in the wider media environment may impinge police handling of major crime; and to establish more clearly the core competencies of police media liaison officers.

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