

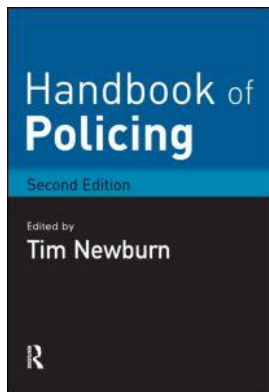
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Chapter 13

Policing and the media

Robert Reiner

Introduction: the Odd Couple – the media and policing

Lots of people in this country are actually undertaking a permanent NVQ on policing – it's called *The Bill* – and the British have loved detective stories since Sherlock Holmes. And newspapers and news programmes would be empty without us – but informed commentary on policing is piecemeal.

So said the Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, Sir Ian Blair, in his Dimpleby lecture on BBC television on 15 November 2005. As Sir Ian said in the lecture, his invitation to deliver it was a significant indication of the prominence of policing issues in media and political debate, though it was only the second time a police officer had given this illustrious lecture. When Sir Ian's distinguished predecessor as Metropolitan Commissioner, Sir Robert Mark, had delivered his Dimpleby lecture in 1973 it had constituted a major milestone in the politicisation of law and order and the emergence of the police onto the political stage (Reiner 2000: 71; Loader and Mulcahy 2003: 228).

Sir Ian Blair has had a particularly fraught relationship with the media, in large part because of the on-going fall-out from the tragic shooting of the Brazilian electrician Jean Charles de Menezes at Stockwell tube station in July 2005, when officers mistook him for a terrorist in the wake of the 7/7 bombings. Blair was in the spotlight not only for the catastrophic shooting itself, but also because of allegations that he had sought deliberately to mislead the media about what happened. But from his appointment as Commissioner in February 2005 Sir Ian had been subjected to relentless attack from the right-wing press in particular for his efforts to reform the police, characterised by Melanie Phillips, for example, as turning the force from 'the thin blue line against disorder' into 'our utterly pc police' ('Rape of Justice', *Daily Mail* 6 June 2005).

For his part Sir Ian has contributed to this tension by criticism of media reporting of crime and policing issues, and by a series of 'gaffes' in his handling of reporters (Katz 2007). In January 2006, for example, Sir Ian had to apologise to the parents of Holly Wells and Jessica Chapman, the Soham

schoolgirls who had been murdered in August 2002, for his remark that 'almost nobody can understand why that dreadful story became the biggest story in Britain'. This comment had been made during a meeting of the Metropolitan Police Authority, at which Sir Ian had also accused the media of being 'institutionally racist' for giving much more prominence to reporting the murder of a white solicitor than to a number of equally horrific murders of black and Asian victims, which were relegated to 'a paragraph on page 97' ('Met chief labels media institutionally racist', *The Guardian* 27 January 2006). In the light of the extensive empirical evidence of the disproportionate attention given to higher status white people, and especially women and children, by media crime stories (Reiner 2007a: 309–10), Sir Ian's error was to accuse the media of institutional racism only and not also of sexism, classism and ageism. But of course the controversy over his flagrant act of *lèse-majesté* in criticising the media only increased the appetite for publicising his subsequent 'gaffes'. The relationship between policing and the mass media has always been vexed and complex. Sir Robert Mark once referred to it as 'an enduring, if not ecstatically happy, marriage'. In many ways this is an apt metaphor. It captures the co-dependence that underlies a relationship frequently characterised by bickering and tension.

Stories of crime, deviance and their policing have always been a prominent part of the content of the mass media. Since the Second World War they have become increasingly central in news and entertainment stories. This necessarily makes the media depend on the police as prime sources of their product. In turn, the mass media are an important concern to the police. Policing, especially in Britain, has always been a matter of symbolism as much as substance (Walker 1996; Loader 1997; Reiner 2000; Leishman and Mason 2003). Most sophisticated police leaders have realised this. From the architects of modern British policing in the early nineteenth century, such as Sir Robert Peel, up to today's chief officers, there has been a continuing concern with constructing and maintaining a favourable image of policing as a benign, honourable and helpful service (Mawby 1999, 2001, 2002a, 2002b).

Police elites, in Britain and elsewhere, have struggled, largely successfully, to represent policing as the monopolistic source of security, the primary protection for the public against threats and fears about crime and disorder (McLaughlin and Murji 1998; Wilson 2000; Loader and Mulcahy 2003). This has involved continuous reconstruction and reinterpretation of the nature of policing as patterns of social order, conflict and authority change. But beneath the shifting modes of representation of policing there has remained in place a bedrock theme that I have called 'police fetishism' (Reiner 2000: 1). By this I mean the assumption that the police are a functional prerequisite of social order, so that without a police force there would be chaos and uncontrolled war of all against all. This is a theme that most people already encounter in contemporary society in children's nursery stories and is deeply embedded in modern culture (Reiner 2000: 163). What police fetishism blots out is the variety of other forms of policing that have existed and do and could exist (Jones and Newburn 1998; Johnston and Shearing 2003). Even more importantly, it obscures the fundamental significance of other aspects of social structure and culture for the maintenance and reproduction of order and security (Reiner 2000: ix–12).

In the last quarter of the twentieth century anxiety about media and policing took a new turn in the context of the profound social and cultural shifts that have been variously interpreted as post- or late-modernity. Changes in technology and routines of social life have interacted to produce a saturation of social and cultural life by ever more pervasive mass media (Thompson 1995). The media in a proliferating variety of forms (new like the Internet, or developments of the old such as radio, television or CDs) have become omnipresent, continuously consumed and almost inescapable. This has been an important feature of such key social changes as the erosion of 'space-time distancing' (Giddens 1990) through the growing speed of communications across the globe. The proliferation of opportunities to access the media is related to important shifts in social interaction and authority, notably cultural diversification, the questioning of moral absolutes, declining deference, heightened sensitivity to risk and insecurity of diverse kinds, and other processes with profound implications for policing.

These changes transform the old debate about the significance of media representations of crime and policing: 'The media are no longer, if they ever were, observers of the scene, they are players in the game' (Simon Lee, cited in Peay 1998: 8). Representations of policing are not just after-the-event narratives with more or less worrying implications for the legitimacy of the social order. Increasingly in a world of 24/7 rolling news, the commission of crimes, public disorder and policing operations are depicted as they happen, a trend most vividly illustrated by the destruction of the World Trade Center on 11 September 2001, when mass murders were broadcast around the world on live television. This was just the most dramatic example of this trend, which can also be seen in more general growth of 'reality' television (Fishman and Cavender 1998; Hill 2000). Policing and crime now are shaped – in part at least – by their media representation, in a semiotic loop (Lawrence 2000). A vivid illustration of this was the declaration by Sir Stephen Lander, newly appointed chairman of the Serious Organised Crime Agency, that SOCA's priorities would be set by the 'brainboxes in the Home Office' according to analysis of the prominence of different kinds of crime, measured by column inches in the press ('UK's crime-fighting agency will use the press to set agenda', *The Independent* 10 January 2005).

This chapter will examine the long-running debates about media and policing. The first section considers different perspectives on the significance of media representations and constructions of policing. There is then a discussion of media representations before the Second World War and an analysis of their implications for the struggle to establish police legitimacy. The many changes since the Second World War are then examined. In the conclusions the implications of contemporary patterns of representation are considered further.

The debate about the media and social order

The main arena in modern societies where public images of policing are constructed and contested is the mass media. Two polar opposite anxieties

about the effects of media representations of crime and policing have flourished. Conservatives frequently claim that the media subvert authority and exacerbate deviance, while liberals and radicals have suggested that the media undermine the rule of law and legitimate authoritarian policing by exaggerating the threat posed by crime (Reiner 2007a). Conservative concerns about the potential impact of mass media of communication on order and policing have existed throughout the history of the media. In the late eighteenth century, Patrick Colquhoun (1795), one of the most prominent champions of the creation of the new police, drew attention to a supposed new wave of 'bawdy ballad singers' and their deleterious effects on 'the morals and habits of the lower ranks in society'. (He advocated government support for rival groups of ballad singers who would tour the pubs singing wholesome, uplifting lyrics and remedy the damage done by their subversive counterparts.)

During the twentieth century successive waves of new technological forms of mass media – cinema, radio, television, video, satellite, the Internet – sparked a series of moral panics spreading alarm about their alleged detrimental effect on morality, crime and violence (Barker and Petley 2001; Carter and Weaver 2003). Police voices have often been in the vanguard of these anxieties. In 1916 John Percival, Chief Constable of Wigan, declared in evidence to an inquiry by the 'National Council for Morals' that 'the cinema is responsible for the increase in juvenile crime' (Mathews 1994: 27). That same year a report representing all chief constables concluded that 'The establishment of a central Government censor of cinematograph films is essential and will conduce to the reduction of juvenile crime in the country' (Mathews 1994: 25). These comments typify a long history of 'respectable fears' (Pearson 1983) held by older, well established people about threats to morality posed by the young and outsiders, supposedly egged on by noxious cultural influences.

Radical and liberal analyses have often had the opposite worry, that the media foment unrealistic public fears, vastly exaggerating the extent, seriousness and violence of crime. This has the effect of undermining popular support for the rule of law, thus legitimating undemocratic and authoritarian forms of policing and criminal justice, including vigilantism. The systematic tendency of the media to encourage tough policing and law and order solutions to crime is attributed by radical analyses to the interests that the elites who dominate media industries have in maintaining the socioeconomic and political status quo. Media demonisation of offenders diverts public anxiety away from other sources of insecurity, and solutions to the crime problem are portrayed in terms of strengthening the forces of order rather than reform of the social system.

These anxieties have stimulated a veritable industry of research attempting to assess the content, effects and sources of media representations (Livingstone 1996; Reiner 2007a), tending to support a 'third way' position. The pattern of media representation, even if it confirms some of the anxieties of critics, emerges from a web of interactions and influences in a complex process of production, and cannot be attributed to a straightforward political ideology or vested interest (Greer 2005; Reiner 2007a).

Much of the research on media effects has been conducted within a positivist psychological frame of reference, seeking to establish whether exposure to

particular images has clearly identifiable consequences either for 'anti-social' attitudes or actions, or for fear of crime. These prodigious efforts to isolate a 'pure' media effect tend to result in such masterpieces of inconsequentiality as the conclusion of one major study that, 'for some children, under some conditions, some television is harmful. For some children under the same conditions, or for the same children under [different] conditions, it may be beneficial. For most children, under most conditions, most television is probably neither particularly harmful nor particularly beneficial' (Schramm *et al.* 1961: 11).

It is not surprising that the vast research enterprise on media effects has been rather inconclusive. The implicit model behind such anxieties is implausibly simplistic: the media as an autonomous and powerful ideological hypodermic syringe, injecting ideas and values into a passive public of cultural dopes.

It is far more plausible to suggest that media images do indeed have profound consequences, but not in a pure and directly deterministic manner. Audiences may interpret media images in differing ways, according to their particular social experiences and interests. The media themselves do not change autonomously but reflect developments in social perceptions and practices that have other origins. The media–society relationship is dialectical: each develops in interaction with the other, in a complex loop of interdependence. Media representations have significant consequences, although the hunt for pure effects that can be experimentally isolated is chimerical. The question is not 'how the media make us act or think, but rather how the media contribute to making us who we are' (Livingstone 1996: 31–2).

However complex and hard to measure the relationship might be, however, it is undeniable that media representations are a major source of popular perceptions of crime and policing, and frame public discourse about them (Cavender 2004). This is indeed recognised by most people themselves. A major survey of Londoners, for example, found that 80 per cent said the news media were their principal source of information about the police, contrasted with only 20 per cent citing 'direct experience'. Whilst 'word of mouth' was the second most prominent source of information (43 per cent), it is striking that 29 per cent mentioned 'media fiction' as their main source (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2003). Whether this refers to *Poirot* or *Midsomer Murders* or *CSI* is not specified – but it does shed light on the so-called 'reassurance gap': how could flesh-and-blood coppers compete with their never-failing fictional comrades.

Constructing police fetishism: images of policing and the media before the Second World War

The media representation of the police has always been one key aspect of the general debate about media and crime, and constitutes an important arena within which the legitimacy of the police has been contested and constructed. The creators of the modern British police in the early nineteenth century faced an enormously resistant market for their product. Throughout the eighteenth century a succession of proposals had been put forward calling for reform of

the policing arrangements that had been inherited from the Middle Ages, which were a patchwork quilt of entrepreneurial and citizen bodies, backed up ultimately by the army (see Chapters 3 and 4, this volume).

Literary advocates of a new, modern police, such as Defoe and the Fielding brothers, wrote lurid accounts of rising crime and disorder in London and other cities, although these are not borne out by the fragmentary statistical evidence, at any rate until the later eighteenth century. In the reformers' accounts the old forms of policing were either corrupt or bumblingly incompetent, and there was a clear need for a rational, professional, modern organisation.

During the second half of the eighteenth century the reform arguments gathered force, in a context of increasing questioning of the whole criminal justice process by Enlightenment and utilitarian thinkers such as Beccaria and Bentham. In much of Europe this found expression in a flourishing 'science of police' which sought to analyse the techniques for effectively regulating and disciplining the populations of modern societies (Reiner 2007b: 345–7). In eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Britain there was clearly widespread and deep hostility to the police, evidenced by the protracted struggle around the creation of the new police. The campaign to establish a modern police only succeeded after 1829 and Peel's Metropolitan Police Act which created a model that eventually spread through the whole country, following the County and Borough Police Act 1856.

The sources of opposition to the new police lay at the top and bottom of the social hierarchy – the middle class were the strongest bastion of support for the police idea. The rhetoric which justified opposition to the police was much the same at both ends of the social scale. The police were represented as oppressive threats to the cherished liberties of the British people, an alien import from France, Russia, Prussia or some other European police states, who would necessarily be brutal and corrupt agents of political tyranny.

During the first half of the nineteenth century this widespread rejection of the police was gradually overcome. Peel and other police leaders packaged and marketed the police in a way that succeeded in selling them to a growing section of the public. This was made possible by changes in the political economy and social structure that reduced the sources of opposition. The legitimisation of the police involved the careful construction of an image that subtly combined the representation of the police as both paragons of virtue and panaceas for crime and disorder. Between the middle of the nineteenth and the middle of the twentieth centuries this succeeded in displacing the opposing image of the police as oppressive pariahs in the eyes of most British people (Reiner 2000: ch. 2).

The elements of the successful marketing of the police by Peel (and Rowan and Mayne, the first two Commissioners of the Metropolitan Police) were directed at defusing the various strands of the opposition. They developed the image of the British bobby as a citizen in uniform, subject to the rule of law not party politics, and operating with minimal force, backed by the consent of the community rather than coercive powers. This paragon of virtue would protect the public from crime and disorder more effectively than a force that relied upon the state's monopoly of the means of violence, its unique

advantage being the cultivation of public support. The marketing of this image succeeded only in part because of its own virtues. A precondition for policing by consent was the slow, faltering and never complete incorporation of the mass of the British population into a common citizenship (Marshall 1950). A more harmonious, if still highly unequal, society was much more receptive to accepting the police as a symbol of its integration.

The nineteenth-century conflicts about the establishment and acceptability of the police were played out in the media of the day, the press, the novel and the music hall (Miller 1988; Miller 1999: ch. 5). Popular literature and journalism began to feature the exploits of police 'detective officers' from the mid-1840s, and Dickens 'virtually appointed himself patron and publicist to the Detective Department' (Ousby 1976: 65–6). The genre of police memoirs (pioneered by the celebrated 1828 *Memoires* of Vidocq, head of the Sûreté in Paris from 1812 to 1827) was imported to Britain in 1849 when a long-running series *Recollections of a Detective Police-officer* first appeared in *Chambers' Edinburgh Journal* (Ousby 1976: 66).

The advent of the cinema as the primary medium of mass entertainment early in the twentieth century stimulated the kind of respectable anxiety that has accompanied each successive form of technological innovation, from television to the Internet. Cinema history has been continuously punctuated by conflicts about the supposedly anti-social aspects of its representation of crime (Rafter 2006). As illustrated earlier, the police have been prominent in campaigns to censor cinema because of fears about its criminogenic consequences. There was also continuing concern about the cinema's representation of the police, which was alleged to undermine their authority. As early as 1910 the International Association of Chiefs of Police adopted a resolution condemning the cinema's treatment of the police. Its president complained that 'in moving pictures the police are sometimes made to appear ridiculous, and in view of the large number of young people, children, who attend these moving picture shows, it gives them an improper idea of the policeman' (Reiner 1981: 197). The police were alarmed by being lampooned as the Keystone Cops, and by appearing dull and ineffectual in comparison with heroic private investigators or glamorised gangsters.

These fears reached a height in the early 1930s with the cycle of classic gangster movies such as *Little Caesar*, *Public Enemy* and *Scarface*. Concern about these was a major factor in the enforcement from 1934 of the Hays Code, which laid down strict rules about how Hollywood could depict crime and law enforcement, as well as more general moral issues (Black 1994: ch. 5). In the early 1930s the Director of the FBI, J. Edgar Hoover, the first of many media-conscious police chiefs, initiated a policy of co-operating with Hollywood in return for control over how his agency was represented (Powers 1983: ch. 4; Potter 1998). The result of the Hays Code and Hoover's moral entrepreneurship was the birth of the first cycle of films featuring law enforcement heroes, beginning in 1935 with *G-men*, a paean to the bureau replete with documentary-style footage on FBI training and forensic methods (Reiner 1981: 200–3).

The G-men films were unusual in popular entertainment before the Second World War in featuring professional law enforcers as the protagonists. Police

heroes were rare in the cinema and in popular literature until the late 1940s. Television, which began to be the dominant form of popular entertainment after the early 1950s, is the only medium that has always represented the police as central characters in fiction. Before the Second World War the main heroes in crime fiction in all media were amateur sleuths, private detectives or bystanders inadvertently drawn into crime as victims, suspects and/or investigators (Reiner 1981, 2000a: ch. 5; Rafter 2006). In the predominant subgenres of crime fiction before the Second World War (notably the classical whodunnit à la Conan Doyle or Agatha Christie, and the private eye stories of Hammett, Chandler *et al.*), the police appear as minor characters, often portrayed negatively as either comic or corrupt.

A darker shade of blue: police and the media since the Second World War

In the immediate aftermath of the Second World War the police achieved a zenith of public popularity. This was crystallised in the image epitomised by the fictional hero PC George Dixon, the quintessential representation of the British bobby ideal, introduced in the 1949 Ealing film *The Blue Lamp*. Murdered after only 45 minutes of *The Blue Lamp*, the Dixon character made such a popular impact that he was resurrected in 1955 for a BBC television series that lasted until 1976.¹ Dixon remains a potent symbol of all that was supposedly best in British policing, and politicians or police chiefs under pressure regularly call for the return of Dixon. On 28 February 2003, for example, the *Guardian* reported that the Commissioner and Deputy Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police believed 'it's time to bring back Dixon' (Hopkins 2003).

In the late 1960s the long-term process of increasing the popular legitimacy of policing went into reverse (Reiner 2000: chs 2, 7). The ultimate source of this lay in deep cultural and social changes that undermined the structural basis of police legitimation (Reiner 1992). Culturally the whole post-war period saw a slow decline in deference, increasing 'desubordination' (Miliband 1978) and a widespread challenging of authority. In the early 1970s there began a sustained economic recession with permanently high levels of unemployment. It became increasingly clear that this was not cyclical but a fundamental change in the nature of the economy. Developing technology and globalisation had generated a structurally excluded 'underclass' that 'the majority class does not need to maintain or even increase its standard of living' (Dahrendorf 1985: 101). This excluded minority of about one-third of the population has become increasingly criminalised due to the pressures of hopelessness and the erosion of the most potent socialising agencies, work and family (Currie 1998; Davies 1998; Taylor 1999; Young 1999; Reiner 2007b, 2007c).

As crime and disorder increased and the police tried to stem this, the unintended consequence was the reversal of the ingredients of the Peelian police image. The media began to spotlight scandals concerning police corruption and malpractice, miscarriages of justice, racism, sexism and a militarisation of public order tactics. They also focused increasingly on apparent police ineffectiveness in crime control as indicated by soaring crime

and plummeting clear-up rates. The result was declining public confidence, as indicated by many surveys and other evidence, although this appears to have levelled out recently (Allen *et al.* 2006). Successive governments and police chiefs have tried various strategies to reverse the decline in confidence, with mixed success (Henry and Smith 2007; Savage 2007). For most of the 1980s and the early 1990s the re-legitimation strategy was 'back to the future'. Its blueprint was the 1981 report by Lord Scarman on the Brixton disorders (Scarman 1981), with its prioritisation of 'peace-keeping'. In 1993–94 a major shift in official definitions of the police mission was implemented by Home Secretary Kenneth Clarke, and by his successor, Michael Howard. As defined in the 1993 white paper on police reform the overriding police objective became simply 'catching criminals', as if life was a gangster movie. The supposed means of achieving this was reorganisation on 'businesslike' lines (as detailed in the Sheehy Report published in the same week as the white paper). This proposed market disciplines – short-term contracts, performance-related pay and so on – to restructure policing around a performance culture. Although much modified during its legislative passage, the Police and Magistrates' Courts Act 1994 heralded a significant tilt towards the 'businesslike' crime control ethos (Morgan and Newburn 1997). Tony Blair's 'New Labour' government in 1997 continued the fundamentals of this approach. The police mission was defined primarily as crime reduction, and a quasi-market model, involving continuous setting and monitoring of performance targets from the centre, was seen as the vehicle for effective delivery (Newburn and Reiner 2007a, 2007b).

The police image encouraged by government seems to have considerably narrowed from the traditional broad peace-keeping, consensus-building model. Since 1993 the aim has been to sell the police as crime fighters, downplaying the service function and problems of legality. Despite periodic calls in moments of challenge to police legitimacy for a return to the Dixon of Dock Green police culture, these amount to little more than blips in the drive towards a crime control performance culture, reflecting the overall politicisation of law and order (Reiner 2007c).

The media representation of policing has become an increasingly central aspect of the struggles over police legitimacy in the period since 1945. Reflecting this, the police became more prominent in all media during the second half of the twentieth century, whether in fiction, news stories and 'factions' – as Leishman and Mason call the increasingly prevalent genre of entertainment/documentary hybrids (Doyle 1998; Hill 2000; Leishman and Mason 2003; O'Sullivan 2005).

The same two broad perspectives found in the general debate about crime and the media are echoed in current controversies about the representation of the police. On one hand, there has been a continuation of the long-running conservative anxiety about media images undermining order, with fears about how they portray the police, who are of course the frontline embodiments of the state's authority. On the other hand, there has been concern among liberal and radical commentators that the media presentation of crime and policing is detrimental to popular support for principles of legality and fosters authoritarianism.

There has been considerable research in Britain and North America in the last 30 years studying the content of media representations of policing (usually as an aspect of a more general concern with images of crime and criminal justice). There has also been some research on the processes of production, and the perception of media images by the public, and by police officers themselves (Perlmutter 2000; O'Sullivan 2005). The police themselves are generally very sensitive about their image in the media. Sir Robert Mark advocated a more open approach to the media while he was Metropolitan Commissioner in the early 1970s. Nonetheless in 1974 he declared to the London Press Club that the police were 'without doubt the most abused, the most unfairly criticised and the most silent minority in this country' (Chibnall 1979). Police reactions to their media representation suggest a kind of *Catch-22* paranoia. Stories about police deviance are understandably regarded with concern, even though they are usually framed within a perspective that legitimates the police institution itself (Chibnall 1977; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). Somewhat less predictably, officers are also worried about positive representations of policing, which could lead the public to expect too much of the police, in terms of crime-fighting wizardry or superhuman patience, tact and integrity. They fear that TV cop shows breed an assumption that crimes can be cleared up routinely in half an hour minus commercial breaks: 'You can't take fingerprints off water', as one officer put it in a survey (Arcuri 1977).

Anxiety about the media representation of policing has stimulated police leaders and professional associations to try to cultivate positive relations. The most common strategy in the post-war period has been to pre-empt problems by co-operation with media producers, and by training police spokespersons for media appearances (Crandon and Dunne 1997; Boyle 1999; Mawby 1999, 2002a, 2000b; Innes 1999, 2003; Leishman and Mason 2003: ch. 3). Unfortunately, there is also a pattern of negative reactions to particular programmes stimulating cyclical periods of police-media conflict (Reiner 2000a: 143-7).

The numerous content analyses of news and fiction stories about crime suggest that the predominant representation of policing is an extremely favourable one, contrary to the perennial police anxiety about this. Interestingly, similar patterns of representation have been found in studies of both fiction and news/documentary stories about crime and law enforcement. Although there are some variations in the representation of crime and policing between different media, operating with varying technologies and in different markets, and between different genres, the following broad patterns have been found by studies conducted at different times and places (Reiner 2007a).

1. Stories about crime and law enforcement are perennially prominent in all media, although varying between different media and the markets they operate in. The general prominence of crime stories flows in part from the very nature of news and story-telling. As one study of news-making put it, 'deviance is *the* defining characteristic of what journalists regard as newsworthy' (Ericson *et al.* 1987: 4). This is clearly almost tautologous: news implies some element of novelty and extraordinariness, and the same applies to fictional story-telling. In this sense crime, deviance and control,

'some disruption of the social order', are intrinsic to all narrative (Leitch 2002: 11–13), so the empirical finding of perpetual media fascination with crime and police stories is hardly astonishing.

2. The media concentrate on stories of serious crimes against the person, particularly homicide and sexual offences. These offences, which constitute only a small proportion of crime recorded in official statistics or victim surveys, are the focus of the overwhelming majority of media accounts.
3. The media concentrate on crimes that are already or are likely to be solved. Offences which are reported in the news when they occur are typically the most serious cases of interpersonal violence, which have the highest clear-up rates. Most other offences are reported only at the stage of an arrest or trial, and the reports are usually filtered through the perspective of the police, prosecutor or judge. Fictional crimes are almost invariably cleared up, as a result of the exercise of remarkable skill and daring by police or other law enforcement heroes. This contrasts with the picture given in official statistics, which shows that only two per cent of offences reported in victim surveys result in a conviction. Studies of detection indicate that few of these clear-ups are the product of skilful detection; the majority are either virtually self-clearing cases or solved due to effective interrogation tactics and bureaucratic processes (Innes 2003).
4. Offenders and victims reported in news stories are disproportionately older, white, middle or upper class. The same demographic pattern of offenders and victims features in most fiction. The media picture contrasts sharply with the characteristics of convicted offenders or victims portrayed in official statistics (Barclay and Tavares 1999). These are mostly young, from the most marginal socioeconomic groups, and disproportionately black. This portrait of the demography of crime skews it to the more serious, rational end of the spectrum, making the usual triumph of law enforcement all the more impressive.

The overall picture of crime and control presented in the media, whether fiction or news, is thus highly favourable to the police image. Crime is represented as a serious threat to vulnerable individual victims, but one that the police routinely tackle successfully because of their prowess and heroism. The police accordingly appear as the seldom-failing guardians of the public in general, essential bulwarks of the social order – the essence of 'police fetishism'.

The police are sensitive about the regular appearance of stories that focus on police deviance. Corrupt police officers have high news value, as do all stories of authority figures caught in wrongdoing. The news media will hunt these scandals out with great gusto. None the less, the overall framework for presenting particular stories about police corruption or malpractice tends to legitimate institutions of law enforcement in general. In the past such stories have typically portrayed the deviant police officer as 'one bad apple' in an otherwise sound barrel (Chibnall 1977). As stories about police malpractice have multiplied in the last three decades this narrative has become less

credible. Nevertheless, the overall framework of police deviance stories continues to legitimate the organisation per se. This is accomplished by constructing a narrative of progressive reform. Cases of deviance are presented within an overarching account of how organisational procedures are being changed to prevent the recurrence of malpractice in the future (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994). The fundamental theme is that the police may have erred but now they are getting their house in order and, indeed, they tend to use classic police techniques in the process.

Police corruption features less often in fiction, but where it does the protagonists are often the cops who fight corruption (as in *The Untouchables* or *Between the Lines*). When the deviance takes the form of rule-breaking to catch criminals, what former Metropolitan Police Commissioner Paul Condon notoriously referred to as 'noble cause corruption', this vigilante style policing is often celebrated (as in *Dirty Harry* or *The Sweeney*). Thus the presentation of police deviance by both news and fiction helps reproduce police fetishism, the overwhelmingly favourable police image in the media as successful and heroic guardians of the public without whom social order is impossible.

The sources of this overwhelmingly favourable police image lie more in the practical exigencies of production processes than any direct consequences of the ideology of those responsible for creating the content of media output. It is true that the British press has been predominantly conservative and overtly champions 'law and order', and even liberal newspapers support the police role although they are concerned about civil liberties. Traditional crime reporters working for popular tabloid newspapers have felt themselves under an obligation to present the police in a favourable light whenever possible, representing them as the 'goodies' (Chibnall 1977: 145).

However, as 'law and order' has become increasingly controversial as a political issue (Downes and Morgan 2007; Reiner 2007c), the broadsheet press at the 'quality' end of the market have also appointed specialist editors in this area. They are more commonly referred to as 'home affairs' or 'legal' correspondents than 'crime' reporters (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994), and do not share the police-centred perspective of their tabloid counterparts. The producers of broadcast news, as well as the creators of crime fiction in any medium, do not intentionally act as police cheerleaders either. Their primary self-conception is as purveyors of objective information or non-ideological entertainment. Both values would lead to assiduous pursuit of police failure or malpractice, in exactly the way that the police themselves fear. Moreover, according to one empirical study of the contemporary 'Hollywood elite', responsible for producing the most popular entertainment for large and small screens around the world, they are quintessential children of the 1960s, with liberal, permissive and anti-authoritarian values (Powers *et al.* 1996). If the outcome nonetheless is the overall legitimization of the police role that is found by content analyses, then the source of this cannot be the direct ideological intention of the creative personnel working in the media.

The origins of the fundamentally favourable representation of the police in the media lie in a combination of professional conceptions of what counts as a 'good story' for news or fiction, and practical exigencies in the production process. The concentration of news on the most serious interpersonal crimes

of violence, especially murder or sexual offences, is due to what reporters perceive as the essence of newsworthiness: individualisation, immediacy, drama, titillation, novelty (Chibnall 1977: 22–45; Hall *et al.* 1978; Ericson *et al.* 1987, 1989, 1991). These crimes are portrayed primarily as specific cases rather than in terms of broader social causes because the basic format of news schedules involves an event orientation – what’s happened since the last news (Rock 1973: 76–9). Perceptions of ‘good stories’ by writers and producers of popular fiction share a similar sense of what interests audiences (and audience interviews confirm this – Livingstone *et al.* 2001).

Another ingredient of the conception of a ‘good story’ held by creators and audiences is a structure which resolves tension with a clear, satisfying outcome, as encapsulated in Miss Prism’s celebrated definition of fiction in Wilde’s *Lady Windermere’s Fan*: ‘The good ended happily, and the bad unhappily’. This inclines towards stories with crimes that are cleared up, since the majority of audience members are positioned with the victim or the law enforcers by most conventional crime stories (Sparks 1992; Livingstone *et al.* 2001).

In addition to the professional sense of what kinds of narratives interest and satisfy audiences, practical exigencies exert pressures and incline producers towards a police-filtered perspective. The most overt of these have been formal and informal censorship pressures, deriving from a variety of moral entrepreneurs concerned about the criminogenic or destabilising consequences of media representations of crime and law enforcement. A clear example discussed earlier was the Hays Code, which from 1934 until the early 1950s forced Hollywood to conform to a ‘crime doesn’t pay’ message (Black 1994: ch. 5; Leitch 2002: ch. 2).

More consistently important than negative censorship pressures has been the need of producers of news and fiction to achieve and maintain practical co-operation with the police. The exigencies of news production in particular have several unintended pro-police ideological consequences. The focus on cleared-up cases, which creates a misleading image of police effectiveness, is primarily a result of the economics of allocating reporting resources, leading to the deployment of personnel to institutional settings such as courts where newsworthy events can be expected to recur regularly. Considerations of convenience and personal safety lead camera crews and reporters typically to cover incidents such as riots from behind police positions, creating an image of the police as ‘us’, and the people they are dealing with as ‘them’ (Murdock 1982: 108–9).

Above all, the police control much of the information on which crime news reporters depend, which gives them an inevitable degree of power as essential and accredited sources (Chibnall 1977; Ericson *et al.* 1987, 1989, 1991). This allows the police often to be the ‘primary definers’ of crime news, which is often framed by their perspective (Hall *et al.* 1978: 58). There is considerable variation between news production processes and procedures according to the medium and market in which they work, and contingency and cock-up play a central role in determining day-to-day content (Ericson *et al.* 1991: 93–4). Nonetheless, the most comprehensive study of the creation of crime news concluded that ‘the news media are as much an agency of *policing* as the law-enforcement agencies whose activities and classifications are reported on’

(Ericson *et al.* 1991: 74). They reproduce order while representing it. Although no systematic studies have yet been completed on the production of crime fiction in any medium, the hallmark of police stories above all has been a realist style and the appearance of verisimilitude. It is likely that this too sets up pressures to obtain police co-operation which are analogous to those for news production, albeit not as pervasive or tight. However, there are indications that economic pressures are making police fiction programmes increasingly self-referential and less concerned with accuracy (Colbran 2007).

While crime stories in both news and fiction have generally legitimated the police, as shown by studies of content and production, there have been considerable changes over time in its extent and the way that it has been accomplished (Reiner *et al.* 2000a, 2000b, 2003). There are also important differences between different media, and within any medium at different market levels, for example between the popular and 'quality' newspapers (Ericson *et al.* 1991).

In fiction the police seldom figured as central characters before the Second World War, as was noted earlier. The police emerged as heroic protagonists during the late 1940s in the subgenre of crime fiction usually referred to as the 'police procedural' (Reiner 1978, 1981, 2000: ch. 5; Dove 1982; Dove and Bargainnier 1986; Winston and Mellerski 1992; Wilson 2000: ch. 2; Leishman and Mason 2003: ch. 4). This form of narrative, in which police 'organisation men' successfully solve crimes through the bureaucratic use of routine police procedures, developed simultaneously in several media in the immediate post-war years, on both sides of the Atlantic. British examples include *The Blue Lamp/Dixon of Dock Green*, *PC 49*, *Fabian of the Yard*, *Shadow Squad/Murder Bag* and John Creasey's Inspector West and Gideon of Scotland Yard novels (the latter subsequently became a TV series and a John Ford film). The leading US examples are the 1947 movie *The Naked City* (subsequently a TV series), the novels of Lawrence Treat, Hillary Waugh and Ed McBain (Dove 1982: ch. 2), and above all *Dragnet*, originally a radio series and subsequently a pattern-setting TV series and movie. *Dragnet* inspired many imitations such as *Highway Patrol*, *Racket Squad*, *Gangbusters* and *The Untouchables*.

The emergence after the Second World War of the police procedural subgenre was the first time that police featured regularly as central characters in either print, radio or cinema fiction. However, it coincided with the advent of television as the primary entertainment medium, and police heroes have been prominent in television fiction throughout its history. There have been many studies of the television representation of the police.² In an earlier article I attempted to periodise the British television representation of policing as a dialectic development (Reiner 1994). Starting from the cosily consensual world of *Dixon of Dock Green* in the 1950s, the thesis moved through a transitional phase with a gradually hardening image in *Z-Cars* in the 1960s, to the antithesis of *The Sweeney* and its tough vigilantism in the 1970s. The synthesis of this dialectic was *The Bill*, which projected an array of contrasting images of the police from cosy community constables in the Dixon mould to tough, rule-bending Sweeney-style thief-takers. *The Bill* was also a demographic synthesis, representing the spectrum of contemporary policing in terms of gender, race, organisational specialism and rank. More broadly in the 1980s

and 1990s television police series became diversified into an array of contrasting styles encapsulating the whole previous development of the genre. The range extended from the nostalgic worlds of *Heartbeat* and classic cosy sleuth stories like *Morse* (and its rivals or successors such as *A Touch of Frost*, *Midsomer Murders*, *Alleyn*, *Dalziel and Pascoe* and *Lewis*), which although almost entirely neglected by academic analysis are by far the most popular police series on television (Sparks 1993), the Dixon-in-drag community policing of *Juliet Bravo* and *The Gentle Touch*, to Sweeney-esque crime-busters such as *Dempsey and Makepeace*.

Recently Leishman and Mason have suggested that the synthesis embodied in *The Bill* in the 1980s can be seen as the thesis of a new dialectic (2003: ch. 6). *The Bill* foreshadowed recognition of the diverse demographic make-up of contemporary police organisation and its conflict-ridden bureaucratic dimensions. This developed into a transitional stage of series featuring a diversity of police types and more politicised aspects of policing, of which *Prime Suspect* was emblematic. These explore the more problematic aspects of traditional police culture, such as gender and race discrimination. The antithesis is represented by the culmination of these trends, *Between the Lines*, which focused on a unit responsible for the investigation of police corruption and malpractice (Brunsdon 2000 is a stimulating analysis of these series). In the mid-1990s a new set of transitional series began to emerge. These echo the tensions of 'third way' crime control policy, 'tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime'. They feature protagonists who are psychologically or morally flawed or at least ambiguous, the antithesis of the overgrown boy-scout image of Dixon or Dragnet, but who nonetheless may function as effective crime-fighting police. Examples include *The Cops*, *Thief-takers* and *The Vice* or (in the USA) *NYPD Blue*, *Homicide* or *The Shield*. This pattern was heralded by 1970s vigilante films such as *Dirty Harry*, but the deviance of the central characters of contemporary movies often makes them seem like model citizens (King 1999 is a useful study of American cop movies since 1980), and the protagonists, in particular in more recent post-9/11 examples, especially from Murdoch's Fox studios, such as *The Shield* or *24*, are legitimated in their violations of legality not as tragic exceptions but by an all's fair in war, necessary-evil ethos.

The contemporary anti-heroes are nonetheless courageous, resourceful, even if rule-breaking, protectors of the weak and vulnerable from extremely violent crime and terrorism. Often the protagonists are psychologists, profilers or forensic scientists (*Cracker*, *CSI*, *Silent Witness*, *Waking the Dead*, *Bones*, *Criminal Minds*, etc.), allowing a distinction between the fallibly human context of their own lives and the unsullied virtue of their security function (Brunsdon 2000: 216–17; Leishman and Mason 2003: 102–3). In Leishman and Mason's analysis, *The Bill* remains the synthesis of the dialectic. Over the course of the 1990s *The Bill*'s leading characters became increasingly flawed or even corrupt, encapsulating the gamut of deviance represented in other contemporary series (Leishman and Mason 2003: 103–4).

A more systematic analysis of the changing images of police in the media is provided by a historical content analysis of changing representations of crime and criminal justice that I conducted with Sonia Livingstone and Jessica Allen (Allen *et al.* 1998; Reiner *et al.* 2000a, 2000b, 2003). This analysed a sample of

the crime films that were top box-office successes in Britain between 1945 and 1991, a random sample of crime-related stories from *The Times* and *The Mirror* in that period and the crime series that were most popular on British TV between 1955 and 1991.

The different media varied in the extent to which the police figured prominently in the stories analysed. The police typically played a minor role in cinema films until the mid-1960s. Hardly any films in our random sample between 1945 and 1965 featured police heroes, but after the late 1960s police protagonists become the most frequent type. The police have, however, always been the most common protagonists of television crime series. In the period up to 1979, 64 per cent of the top-rated TV crime series had police heroes. Although in the 1980s this fell to 43 per cent, the police remain the most frequent hero figures in TV series. In newspapers the proportion of stories which focused on policing and the criminal justice system (as distinct from specific crimes) rose in the period studied, but was always greater in *The Times* than *The Mirror*. Criminal justice stories rose from two per cent of all stories on average between 1945 and 1951 to six per cent between 1985 and 1991 in *The Mirror*, and from three to nine per cent in *The Times*. Overall, the police are more frequently the central protagonists in stories in all the media now than in the immediate post-war period. The change is most marked in the cinema, and least on television, where stories have always been dominated by police heroes.

In all media the representation of the police became somewhat *less* supportive over the post-war period as a whole, although still remaining predominantly positive. However, this declining trend overall in favourable images of policing masks some important complexities. In the cinema representation of the integrity and the effectiveness of the police we found a clear curvilinear pattern. The police are presented most positively in the first part of our period, from 1945 to 1963, and most negatively in the middle, from 1964 to 1979. In the last years of our period, 1980–91, there is some slight overall improvement in the representation of police ethics and efficiency. However, this recovery is ambiguous: the total figures mask a bifurcation of images in recent years between extremely negative ones and attempts to resuscitate the earlier positive representations. In newspaper stories there is a more straightforward linear trend towards an increasingly negative portrayal of police effectiveness and integrity.

The extent to which crime is cleared up in media stories illustrates this. In cinema films the offender was brought to justice in 39 per cent of cases in 1945–64, and killed in another nine per cent. After 1965 they were brought to justice in less than 15 per cent of films, but killed in 35 per cent (Reiner *et al.* 2000a, 2000b). In press stories, the proportion of the principal crimes reported that was cleared up was 73 per cent between 1945 and 1964, 63 per cent between 1965 and 1979 and 51 per cent between 1980 and 1991 (Reiner *et al.* 2003). Thus, although the broad conclusions of previous content analyses are confirmed by our study – the police are typically represented as effective in bringing offenders to justice – this is to a diminishing extent in all media.

A similar trend can be seen in representations of police malpractice. Excessive use of force by police was shown in only three per cent of films from 1945 to 1963, but 44 per cent from 1964 to 1979 and 25 per cent from 1980 to

1991. Illicit investigation methods were shown in 11 per cent of films in the first period, 80 per cent in the second and 67 per cent in the third. Corruption featured in no films in our sample before 1963, 13 per cent from 1964 to 1979 and 15 per cent from 1980 to 1991. In newspaper stories there is a steady trend upwards in the representation of police deviance. Between 1945 and 1964 only 10 per cent of all crime news stories primarily concerned police deviance, but this rose to 12 per cent between 1965 and 1979 and to 19 per cent between 1981 and 1991. The largest single category of police deviance stories reported abuse of powers (42 per cent 1945–64; 59 per cent 1965–79; 45 per cent 1981–91). Stories about race or gender discrimination by police had become the next most common by the end of the period, taking over from reports of personal corruption. Of police deviance stories, 21 per cent in the period 1945–64 were about personal corruption but only 14 per cent in 1981–91. The proportion of stories about discrimination in these respective periods was almost the reverse: 14 and 24 per cent (Reiner *et al.* 2003).

The personal characteristics of the police in films show the same pattern. Until 1963 no films had police protagonists whose lifestyle was deviant in any way. Between 1964 and 1979 this appeared in 33 per cent of films, but only 17 per cent from 1980 to 1991. Between 1945 and 1963, 50 per cent of police protagonists were caring and pleasant in manner, only 19 per cent from 1964 to 1979, and 39 per cent after 1980. In the earliest period only 26 per cent of police protagonists were reacted to as sexually attractive within the narrative, but this was 63 per cent in the middle period and 59 per cent after 1980. News stories about police engaged in deviant conduct short of illegality actually declined during the period studied (from 21 per cent of police deviance stories to 14 per cent), possibly because the disappearance of fictional police with boy-scout lifestyles and the generally greater social liberalism made minor police peccadilloes less newsworthy.

The overall pattern of representation of the police since 1945 thus seems curvilinear. Positive images are increasingly challenged after the mid-1960s, but with some bifurcation after the early 1980s between attempts to restore the past and even more negative representations of policing as ineffective or unjust. In news stories the trend is more straightforwardly negative, with increasing proportions of stories featuring police malpractice and declining success in clearing up crime. Overall, however, the prevailing representation remains positive in all media. The characteristic portrayal of the police is as ethical and effective guardians of the public.

Conclusion: the Teflon service and the reproduction of police fetishism

Policing is at best a palliative and not a panacea for the social harms of crime, disorder and insecurity. The point was made most pithily by Raymond Chandler in the classic 1953 crime novel, *The Long Goodbye*: 'Crime isn't a disease, it's a symptom', claims Chandler's hero, private eye Philip Marlowe. 'Cops are like a doctor that gives you an aspirin for a brain tumour' (Chandler 1977: 599). This is confirmed by most social scientific analyses of the police and policing (I have tried to summarise the arguments and evidence in Reiner

2000). Yet there is a deeply entrenched cultural denial of this, the myth of police indispensability that I referred to earlier as 'police fetishism'. It became ingrained during the nineteenth century through an intertwined process of socioeconomic and political changes that disciplined modern societies, and the gradual legitimization of the police as the symbols of this.

As conflict in modern societies became increasingly institutionalised, and crime and disorder declined, so the police became the totems of this broader civilising process for which they tacitly gained the credit. News stories about crime testified to this. For the first two-thirds of the twentieth century, crime was not seen as a major threat or policy problem. Crime stories were mainly confined to the popular press and concentrated on spectacular cases that the police were usually successful in solving. Police heroes were almost entirely absent from crime fiction, but paradoxically this implicitly assumed police success in regulating routine crime. Detective stories created a fantasy world of genteel crime in country houses. Idiosyncratic victims, perpetrators and red-herring bystanders became embroiled in puzzles that were solved by eccentric amateurs or private investigators massively well endowed with what Agatha Christie's Poirot called 'little grey cells'. The tacit assumption was of a society so well ordered that the most minute deviations from routine constituted clues to crime.

After the Second World War, and particularly from the mid-1950s, crime became perceived as a growing problem, and recorded crime rates began a seemingly inexorable rise. At first this continued to be interpreted as a marginal issue that social amelioration and reformist criminal justice interventions would contain successfully. The rise of the fictional police hero suggests, however, that crime was coming to be perceived as a problem requiring the attentions of a professional bureaucracy, not enthusiastic amateurs.

After the late 1960s the conception of crime and criminal justice in political discourse and popular culture begins to change profoundly. Crime and disorder come to be seen as profound threats, to individuals and to the social fabric. The control of crime, under the new rubric of 'law and order', becomes a prominent political issue that parties contest with growing ferocity (Garland 2001; Downes and Morgan 2007; Reiner 2007c). Media representations reflect and reinforce this process, as indicated above. In fiction the police are increasingly celebrated as vigilantes who must break the rules of legality to crack crime. News stories more often report police failure and police deviance.

At first this was associated with considerable debate and evidence of a loss of police legitimacy in public opinion surveys. However, in the mid-1990s there was a consolidation of policy around the conception of policing as crime control, with 'businesslike' organisation seen as the means of achieving this. Media representations reflect this in portraying the police as what Leishman and Mason graphically call 'the thin blurred line' (2003: 83). Police officers are no longer portrayed as paragons of virtue but as effective if often venal protectors of the mainstream public – 'us' – against risks posed by a variety of demonised others – 'them', including serial killers, paedophiles, international organised criminals and terrorists. If the police fail, the media usually blame the thinning of the blue line: the answer is more and tougher policing. The conservative media in particular also blame the post-Scarman pc police chiefs

for allegedly letting down the PCs they are supposed to lead, as the discussion of the controversies surrounding Sir Ian Blair showed at the start of this chapter. Banished from serious political and media discussion is anything beyond police fetishism, such as a consideration of what aspects of social structure and culture may contribute towards the development of the evils that threaten society. The police seem to be a 'Teflon service' that has survived a long period of increasing revelations of failure and malpractice to remain a powerful political and cultural force (Reiner 2000: 47). Although the media have increasingly highlighted scandals and controversy about policing, they have also perpetuated the myth of police fetishism. Crime and disorder are identified as the key elements of social threat, and policing solutions as the only conceivable ones. The police remain the most potent symbols of security in popular consciousness (Loader and Mulcahy 2003). Media stories of morally flawed but courageous and determined cops as shields against victimisation continue to reproduce police fetishism.

Notes

- 1 Willis (1950) is a novelisation of *The Blue Lamp*. Several stories drawn from scripts for the television series were published as Edwards (1974). For discussions of the significance of Dixon, see Clarke (1983), Reiner (1994), Barr (1998: 80–105), Sydney-Smith (2002), Leishman and Mason (2003: 49–54), McLaughlin (2005) and O'Sullivan 2005.
- 2 See, for example, Hurd (1979), Inciardi and Dee (1987), Buxton (1990), Laing (1991), Clarke (1982, 1983, 1986, 1992), Sparks (1992, 1993), Leishman (1995), Eaton (1996), Stead (1999), Brunson (2000), Reiner (1994, 2000: ch. 5), Leishman and Mason (2003) and O'Sullivan 2005.

Selected further reading

As the long reference section implies, there is now an extensive literature on policing and the media. Without doubt the most useful and important single reading is the excellent text by Leishman and Mason: *Policing the Media: Facts, Fictions and Factions* (2003), which provides a comprehensive and stimulating overview of the area. There are many articles that offer analytic accounts of the media presentation of policing, including Clarke's "'You're nicked!'" Television police series and the fictional representation of law and order' (1992), Reiner's 'Mystifying the police: the media presentation of policing', Chapter 5 of *The Politics of the Police* (2000) and Brunson's 'The structure of anxiety: recent British crime drama' (2000). Mawby's *Policing Images: Policing, Communication and Legitimacy* (2002) is a comprehensive analysis of police use of the media to promote their image. General reviews of the research on media representation of crime and criminal justice generally are Surette's *Media, Crime and Criminal Justice* (2007) and Reiner's 'Media made criminality' (2007).

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