

The Communicative Architecture of Policing



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Abstract

Inspired in part by the findings of, and fallout from, the Leveson Inquiry, and the recommendations in the subsequent Filkin Report on the relationship between the Metropolitan Police and the media, my DPhil explores police-media relations and police communications in the local (extra-London) and contemporary context. It also assesses the impact of social media technologies on both journalists and police, and on their social and informational relationships. The project involved an in-depth ethnography of newsrooms in local print and broadcast media in England, and police communications departments. The principal methodological approach is observation. Fieldwork lasted over two years, with more than seven months each of continuous observation with both local journalists and police communication professionals.

This research is unique in the limited scholarship on police-media relations, combining observational data from both newsrooms and police communications departments. It provides insights on the revenue crisis and decline in local journalism, and how this has impacted reporting on crime and policing. It details the emergence of a professional police communicator identity in British policing: tasked with managing public/media trust and confidence in policing. Perhaps most importantly, the thesis offers an account of how strategies by journalists and police to enhance their communication power, structures their relationship with one another, and the production of crime and policing knowledge. Finally, the thesis explores the deeper mechanics of power relations between policing and media, by theoretically situating them within the context of their broader fields of power.

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Table of abbreviations

- ACPO – Association of Chief Police Officers
- APComm – Association of Police Communicators
- APP – Approved Professional Practice
- BBC – British Broadcasting Corporation
- C&C – Command and Control
- CC – Chief Constable
- CCD – Police Corporate Communications Department
- CSE – Child sexual exploitation
- DCC – Deputy Chief Constable
- DCI – Detective Chief Inspector
- DWP – Department of Work and Pensions
- EDL – English Defence League
- FLO – Family Liaison Officer
- FOI – Freedom of Information
- GMP – Greater Manchester Police
- HMICFRS – Her Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services
- LPA – Local Policing Area
- NPCC – National Police Chiefs' Council
- PCCU – Police Corporate Communications Unit
- RTC – Road Traffic Collision
- SEP – Southern England Police
- SIO – Senior Investigating Officer
- SM – Social Media
- VIP – Very Important Person

Cast of Characters

Places

- Busyford
- Castletown
- Coinshire
- Frithville
- Littleshire
- Nearville
- Odditon
- Oranvale
- Poppy Rise
- Punshire
- Pynton
- Stocktown
- Sunnyside
- Townsend
- Utton
- Uxminister

Organisations

- *BBC Odditon*
- *DigiNews*
- *Ear to the Ground*
- *Odditon Student*
- *Poppy Rise Democrat*
- *The Commuter*
- *The Evening Crier*
- *The Loyal Uttonian*
- *The Odditon Post (The Post)*
- *The Odditon Times (The Times)*
- *The Royal Citizen*
- *The Stocktown Patriot*

- Shield Media
- Sonnet Media

- Littleshire Police
- Middleshire Police
- Southern England Police (SEP)

The Post Staff

- Alex
- Andy

- Benjamin Jenkins
- Connolly
- Damien
- Diane
- Eddie
- Gwen
- Harry Maguire
- Josie
- Kieron
- Mido
- Paula
- Penny
- Phil
- Ricky
- Samuel
- William
- Zoe

The Crier Staff

- Carol
- Deb
- Dominic
- Jimmy Cole
- John
- Kelly

BBC Odditon Staff

- AJ
- Andy Owens
- Bruce
- Emma
- Gigi
- Jen
- Joseph
- Nancy
- Paz
- Sally
- Sanja
- Tom Baker

Other Journalists

- Eddie Prince
- Eleanor O'Reilly
- Jonah George
- Lindsey Richards
- Marge

- Riz Hooper
- Shane Jordan

Police Officers

- Daniel Richards
- DCI Paddy Lough
- Matt Dune
- Nora
- Shawn Wright
- Tom Owens

Police and Crime Commissioner SEP

- George Whitshow

SEP Corporate Comms

- Joan North

Media Team

- Brian
- Emily Scott
- John
- Naomi
- Nigel
- Stacy
- Suzanne

Other

- Alpa
- Farah Shah

Digital team

- Colin
- Guy
- Roger

Police Operations

- Operation Goldfile
- Operation Rinse
- Seeing Vulnerability

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Introduction and Outline

Crime and policing news has, for much of the past century, provided a backbone of interesting and engaging content as British journalism (particularly tabloid journalism) increased in power ([Reiner, Livingstone et al. 2003](#), [Campbell 2015](#)). The seeming growth in interest¹ among journalists in diagnosing ‘crime epidemics’ ([Cohen 1972](#), [Fishman 1980](#)), and the often underlying—or overtly—racist tones of its discourses ([Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#)), for a time attracted sustained empirical and theoretical attention from many of the ‘heavyweights’ of the criminological canon ([Mason 2003](#)). In the 1990s, the toxic confluence of ‘tough on crime’ political rhetoric with the intense thirst for greater amounts of crime news content to fill unending broadcast deadlines, was in part credited with the draconian and populist turn in British criminal justice and penal policy ([Roberts, Stalans et al. 2002](#), [Lappi-Seppala 2007](#), [Green 2008](#)). Along with this evidence that crime reporting can influence criminal justice policy making, early intuitions ([Cohen 1972](#), [Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#), [Mason 2003](#)) that reporting on crime matters because it shapes the public’s understanding of the ‘crime problem’ have also been borne out in more recent empirical work ([Mohan, Twigg et al. 2011](#)). Criminal justice as a regulatory aim, and popular experience, seems then to be intimately connected to how these journalistic manufacturers of mass public knowledge go about representing its issues.

For police, the utilitarian relationship with the newsmedia has had a varied history in terms of collaboration and conflict ([Mawby 2002](#)). British policing’s mythological ‘Peelian’ underpinnings ([Loader 2016](#)), combined with more recent managerialist turns in state governance culture ([Mawby 2002](#), [Gilling 2014](#)), has placed

[ENREF 157 ENREF 69 ENREF 70 ENREF 157 ENREF 157 ENREF 157 ENREF 158 ENREF 158 ENREF 70 ENREF 49 ENREF 158 ENREF 19 ENREF 152 ENREF 152](#)¹ Though some might suggest that there has been a long-standing obsession with crime: ([Pearson 1983](#))

public-facing accountability at the core of contemporary cultural expectations about the meaning of police legitimacy. In order to achieve these demands for ritualised self-governance, police became dependent on newsmedia ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#)) through the latter's effective monopolisation of mass communications infrastructures, and its machinery of knowledge-creating. Another, perhaps more cynical, parallel reason for police cooperation with news media was no doubt rooted in the former's recognition in the latter's increasing political power. Either way, one institutional holder of remarkable coercive power became deeply intertwined with a holder of mass communications power. Scandal ([Filkin 2012](#), [Leveson 2012](#)), technology and information culture have, over the past decade, emerged to disrupt this settled, symbiotic relationship ([Mawby 2010](#)), suggesting, for some, a concerning shift in the balance of power, with implications for police accountability and democracy ([Colbran 2016, 2018](#)). Given such concern, this thesis, then, is perhaps a timely investigatory response to the context of change in police communications and police-media relations.

Over the following eight chapters I describe and theorise my two years of observational fieldwork in the Odditon area in the South of England. During this time I immersed myself in both sides of the police-media relationship, spending many months in Odditon's local newsrooms, and in its local police force's communications departments. In part motivated by the fallout from the Leveson inquiry, this study was also concerned with understanding the existential challenges that have stalked news media over the past 15 years, and how this shaped the production of knowledge on crime and policing. Through that fieldwork, the salience of the Leveson scandal lost traction as my understanding of the complex dynamics between policing and media developed. Instead, the structurally and culturally disruptive power of social media technologies came to overshadow a scandal that, at times, seemed a trivial, contingent detail. By getting 'deep' into the cultures of both these distinct power holders within the

Odditon community, this study unearthed the central role of ideas of identity, place, and legitimacy as potent cultural drivers in the deeper mechanics of police-media power relations, and the knowledge that those relationships produce.

This thesis has two principal focuses: firstly, the processes through which crime and policing knowledge is produced and disseminated to mass audiences, including the cultural and power-relations features that shape that production line. Secondly, it is concerned with understanding the nature and shape of state coercive power as exercised by policing, and how that power is informed by legitimation and communications activities, and interactions with other holders of power. The police-media relationship as the focal point for critical inquiry has proven to be an outstanding illustrative example for these overarching questions. In the following chapters, I take seriously ideas about the power of newsmedia and of social media, and use those ideas to try to understand and theorise the relational dynamics and tensions between policing and media. Unlike some predecessors who have been tempted to ground similar studies in a concern about popular perceptions of crime and policing ‘problems’, I remain agnostic to this question, as answering it is far outside the scope of my methodology.

Ultimately, this project evolved beyond a mere account of police-media relations into an ethnographic study of power in a distinctly local sense. It eschews the common academic obsession with the metropolis, to examine the nature of the power that permeates our daily lives from a peripheral ([Souhami 2018](#)), provincial line of approach. The thesis therefore concludes by offering an account of police-media relations situated within and among the local community, and its field of power. In doing so it complicates and pierces cosy narratives about the role of journalism in holding power to account, while problematising and advancing the most recent thinking on police legitimacy.

0.1 Thesis Contents Outline

0.1.1 Conditions Precedent: Advanced Reading

The first substantive chapter, ‘Crime, Policing and News Media’, positions this thesis within the existing scholarship on the production of knowledge on criminal justice. The key strands of literature contained within this field of criminological scholarship are crime-reporting journalism, media constructions of crime and policing, police communications, and police-media relations. This chapter sets out the empirical gaps in these bodies of work, particularly the failure of the academy to properly account for the dramatic changes in mass communications and news media in the power relations between policing and media. This chapter also examines the theoretical literature that has underpinned and explained these empirical insights, and calls for a reconsideration of the theory in light of change. The chapter concludes by outlining the overarching research questions that guided this thesis.

This second chapter accounts for my research methods—ethnographies of both journalistic and police communications field sites. Adopting a confessional style, this chapter explains my choices around field sites and recounts the idiosyncratic challenges posed by the dual primary field sites in a single policing area. This chapter also situates my research within, and differentiates it from, the methodological approaches undertaken within the existing body of police-media relations and crime news construction literature.

0.1.2 Local Journalism

Chapters 3 and 4 contain my ethnography of local crime reporting journalism in the city of Odditon.

Chapter 3, ‘Constructing and Policing the Community’, explores the central importance of asserting, labelling and claiming the boundaries and contents of ‘the community’ in local journalistic role identity. This journalistically imagined community—in this case the Odditon community—is then subject to the second stage in the community-building project by news media: the policing of its institutions, symbols of power, and norms. This chapter explains how the police, as symbolically important components of the community, are therefore an important part of this community construction project. It describes how the loss of enhanced access to policing by local journalists, in combination with other background features of the crisis in journalism, is challenging a core part of local journalist identity, and generating a crisis for that role.

Chapter 4, ‘Audiences, Sources and Newsroom Values: Self-Legitimation in Contemporary Local Journalism, and its Crises’, tracks deeper into the cultures and practices of local journalism in England. In particular, it examines the various strategies and adaptive responses employed by local journalists in their attempts to manage the revenue crisis in the local newspaper industry. The chapter explores how this crisis and their responses shape their relationship with their readers and their institutional sources, such as the police. Ultimately, this chapter describes the cultural processes that take place as an institution and culture come to terms with perceived declines in status, influence and power.

0.1.3 Local Police Communications

Chapters 5 and 6 detail my ethnography of local police communications in the Odditon area.

Chapter 5, ‘Constructing and Legitimizing Police Communicator Identity’, sharply contrasts the news media ethnography in finding police communications in a

moment of empowerment. This chapter shows how the same mass communications technologies at the root of the crisis in local journalism, has created new spaces for the assertion of communications power within policing. Within such empowerment, this chapter shows how police communicator identity is being fuelled by the decline in newsmedia, feeding off journalist's perceived loss of power to construct new features of their own role identity.

Chapter 6, 'The Labour of Police Legitimation', offers a contemporaneous account of new police legitimisation practices. Here, we begin to see the practical consequence of police communicator empowerment and perceived press decline, with police communications increasingly situating itself within the space of 'news publisher' rather than 'news source'. However, despite perceptions and cultural empowerment, this chapter demonstrates a tension between this new police communicator identity and its day-to-day work of legitimisation. In particular, it identifies the persistence of local news media in the business of police legitimisation, and the continuing resource burdens policing enthusiastically adopts to service local news media's demands. This, the chapter argues, is indicative of a distinct and persistent power-holder status in local journalism, which policing is bound to respond to.

0.1.4 The Field of Local Governance

Chapters 7 and 8 bring together the distinctive components of each fieldsite, to construct a single ethnography of the Local Governance field of power, and its theoretical underpinnings.

The penultimate chapter 7, 'The Architecture of Contemporary Police-Media Relations', situates police-media relations in the context of the era of information ubiquity in the late stages of the digital revolution. It focuses specifically on the flows and

controls on informational transactions within the relationship, and questions some claims from research participants and the recent literature about transparency and disclosure in policing. This chapter concludes that raw informational material for policing and crime news is in plentiful supply: the key change is the perceived status of each institutional player in policing and media within the broader governance field.

The final chapter 8, 'Contemporary Police-Media Relations in the Governance Field', draws heavily from both field theory and police legitimacy theory to construct a new theoretical understanding of police-media relations as situated within a broader background field of power. This chapter captures the diversity and complexity of each field, within a single theoretical understanding of the deeper mechanics of power relations between policing and media.

1 Crime, Policing and News Media

1.1 Introduction

The production of knowledge about crime, policing and security is a key site for both empirical and theoretical inquiry within criminological scholarship. How representations of the coercive state, and the various sources of insecurity it claims to guard against, are constructed are treated as important barometers for not just objectively assessable trends in the governance architecture of the state, but also the health of democracy itself ([Garland 2001](#)). In a society that is increasingly mediated ([Ericson 1994](#)), as many advanced westernised democracies have clearly become during the most recent stages of the so-called ‘Digital Revolution’, social organisation, authority, and control, are heavily centred upon communications technologies, practices and strategies. The State, in its most coercive forms, has also exploited communications logics, practices and cultures to construct and affirm the nature and extent of its own authority ([Foucault 1977](#)). How the agencies and actors within the policing apparatus communicate—most notably the police and government—has generated a range of literatures with a distinct set of systemic assumptions and focuses, theoretical bases, and methodologies. The communications-centric criminological and policing literature has overwhelmingly approached this field with a dominant focus on either government-media discourse around social order, and criminal justice policy, or police-media relations around the construction of social order, and deviancy, in the crime reporting process.

The largest component of existing literature has focused its critical energies on the published communications outputs of the news media. This body of work has used

quantitative and qualitative analysis to infer dominant or controlling ideologies within the broader criminal justice system (CJS) ([Cohen 1972](#), [Group 1976](#), [Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#)), and to examine links between published outputs on deviancy, disorder, crime, and justice, and popular perceptions and fear of crime, and appropriate policy responses to it ([Roberts, Stalans et al. 2002](#)). While questions of mass communications power—at the theoretical heart of this thesis—are intimately connected to public perceptions of crime and (in)security ([Ramsay 2012](#)), I consciously avoid examining the latter beyond the occasional reference. The main reason for this is methodological. This ethnographic account of the various, occasionally competing, attempts at producing knowledge of crime and policing did not seek to ascertain the views of the public or community at which this putative knowledge was targeted: this was well beyond my research design and this project’s resources. Indeed, through this fieldwork I have come to question many subtle assumptions underpinning some of this policing and media literature (assumptions shared intuitively by many of my research participants) that crime and policing news affects public opinion on criminal justice policy, and more specifically, police legitimacy. This chapter instead focuses on the significantly smaller body of scholarship that has examined the communications ideologies, practices and cultures in policing and crime reporting journalism. The aim here is to both situate and differentiate this thesis from this literature, pointing also to the empirical, theoretical and methodological limitations of earlier studies: limitations my project consciously sought to remedy. In this respect, this chapter introduces the state of knowledge about the internal mechanics in the relationship between crime, policing and media prior to my undertaking my research. It also includes a handful of contributions to the literature that emerged after I began.

Section 1 reviews a number of bodies of ethnographic research that focus on the news media’s pre-publication relationships and interactions with formal policing agencies and actors. While the majority of this material was produced a number of decades ago, it

continues to offer important insights from the history of crime reporting journalism in the UK, USA, Australia and Canada, and the kinds of professional ideologies, economic, social, and ideological structures, and organisational cultures which continue to shape the processes and construction of crime news. The second section will review research that explored the knowledge and information sources from which journalists draw their crime news. While earlier research ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#)) was committed to examining the diverse array of potential sources of crime news, such as the courts, or by embedding themselves within an investigations unit of the police ([Simon 1991](#)), most recent scholarship has focused on the increasing role of Police Corporate Communications units (PCCUs), and their personnel, within police forces. The third section will outline and examine the Leveson Inquiry, the much-maligned ([Ramsay 2012](#)) disruptor of police-media relations in England, and the Filkin Report which followed. The concluding section will reflect upon the questions that current police, media, and police-media paradigms raise in relation to the established theoretical and empirical body of knowledge on the construction and communication of social order in contemporary England.

1.2 Crime Reporting Journalism

The study of crime reporting, or the distinct cultural features of news media as a key player in the production of knowledge on crime and policing, is a relatively narrow field. The early and influential journalism ethnographies by Fishman ([1980](#)) and Tuchman ([1978](#)), took the first meaningful critical steps into charting the culture and practices of ‘newswork’, and the various structural and ideological forces shaping the production of news: the ‘social construction of reality’ ([Fishman 1980](#)). Both studies drew heavily from participant observation components of their broader projects, with Fishman taking up

work as a ‘political beat’ reporter for a significant part of his research. Fishman’s field research centred on a mid-sized Californian city, and its local press; Tuchman’s in, and around, New York’s local news beats, and its local press. Both found their journalist and newspaper participants intensely focused on stories of deviance, particularly crime. These journalist-centred ethnographies ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Schlesinger 1987](#))² did not begin exclusively concerned with the production of crime news (though Fishman was inspired in no small part by his witnessing what he characterised as the blatant construction of a ‘crime wave’ in New York City in 1976) ([1980](#)). However, the centrality of crime news in the production of newspapers in that period, directed both towards a more critical engagement of that particular ‘news beat’. For Fishman in particular, crimes—specifically distinct categorisations of crime³—were key organising concepts through which journalists could interpret and impose order on the mass of information available to them to report on.

Working around the same period of the mid- to late-1970s, but within the notably different environment of London’s elite crime reporters, Chibnall focused specifically on the work of crime news construction ([1975](#), [1977](#)). Chibnall’s seminal research on crime reporting in England ([Mawby 2010](#)), reflected the highly centralised structure of mainstream news media in England and Wales, with the city of London, and its Metropolitan police force, dominating the interests and concerns of news reporters in the ‘national’ press, and broadcast media ([Schlesinger 1987](#)). Chibnall’s research, which consisted of a series of richly insightful and revealing qualitative interviews with journalists, penetrated the exclusive circle of Fleet Street specialist crime reporters—a group that by then felt its ‘glory days’ were long gone ([1977](#)). Chibnall was first to treat

² Instead those authors were explicitly concerned with reporting on deviance, in both its criminalised and non-criminalised forms.

³ Categorisations undertaken by the journalists—not the police—something that Hall *et al* assumed differently ([Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#)).

the relationship between journalists, and their principal sources for information about criminal events—the police—as a distinct topic for critical inquiry. In doing so, he also illuminated and critiqued the ideological underpinnings of crime reporting identity, and its relationship with policing. Among UK research, Chibnall’s study from 1975 stands alone ([1977](#), [Mawby 2010](#)) in offering a deep ethnographic account centred exclusively upon crime reporting journalists. Later observational work by Schlesinger and Tumber in the 1980s and 1990s on newsrooms and elite crime news sources ([1987](#), [1994](#)), and more recent work on police-media relations by Mawby ([2002](#)), and Lee and McGovern (based in New South Wales, Australia) ([2014](#)) has sought to build on Chibnall’s ground-breaking insights. Most of this scholarship has, however, drifted away from a deep consideration of crime journalists as dominant actors, towards a greater emphasis on the role, practices and power of police communications in the production of crime and policing news.⁴ Indeed, not since Schlesinger and Tumber has a crime and media-focused study undertaken observation within a British newsroom.

The most significant research examining the construction of representations of deviance, disorder and crime is that undertaken by Ericson, Baranek and Chan in Toronto in the 1980s. Theirs is an ambitiously wide body of work that maps an expansive picture of this social construction of reality: from an examination of which institutional sources of crime information journalists exploit ([1989](#)), to the process and culture of crime reporting ([1987](#)), and on to an examination of published crime and deviancy content ([1991](#)). Though well over 30 years old, and having been bypassed first by the emergence of 24 hour television news in the 1990s, and then by the internet, Ericson *et al*’s remains the most powerfully relevant and inspirational account for my own work.

⁴ Some current and former crime journalists have also published largely romantic accounts of their work, such as ([Brunt 2007](#)), and more recently ([Campbell 2015](#)).

A key lesson from these older studies is the central importance that deviancy—specifically crime reporting—seemed to play in the production of news content in order to ‘fill’ a particular news output in print or broadcast form. Crime was, at that time, an excellent generator of news content of the type which readers were assumed to find interesting. The primary sources of crime news—the police and the courts—provided journalists with a consistent and steady flow of content to meet their daily or weekly quotas for publication ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#)). Chibnall, in a conceptualisation not unlike Garland ([2001](#)), credits media focus on crime at that time in large part to the political system’s search for legitimation ([Murdoc 1973, Chibnall 1977](#)). In the context of the mass social and industrial unrest in 1970s Britain and Northern Ireland, and the crisis that disorder presented to hegemonic power, reporting on crime during this period saw the press ‘become a repository and disseminator of the collective fantasies of the established order as it struggles to keep chaos at bay’ ([Chibnall 1977](#)). In all three books in their series, Ericson *et al* explain that deviance and control are ‘the core ingredients of news...’ ([1987](#)). Deviance and control (both criminal and non-criminal deviations from what is considered social and, more importantly for Ericson *et al*, *procedural* norms) is, for journalists,

... the defining characteristic of what journalists regard as newsworthy ... they define not only the object and central character of news stories, but also the methodological approaches of journalists as they work on their stories. ([1987](#))

1.2.1 Newsworthiness: The (News) Values of ‘Reality’

All these early studies of crime reporting focused on the values that were employed to identify stories worth covering. The identification and labelling of these ‘news values’ became an important part of the project of accounting for crime reporting culture, while

also understanding how that culture shaped the production of crime news. The disconnect between the ‘reality’ of social issues (for example, crime, and the empirical statistics relating to its preponderance) ([Fishman 1980](#)), and their reporting features heavily in these critical engagements with the practices of newswork. In an effort to filter through the mass of relevant ‘realities’, or source information, journalists observed or interviewed in these studies deployed filters, or conceptual themes ([Fishman 1980](#)), to organise information into a format that was presentable and publishable. These highly structured evaluative processes, which embody numerous levels of structural, ideological and cultural programming, are a dominant feature in this process of constructing reality in news. This ‘working ideology’ ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#)) of journalism was self-described by reporters as some combination of learned skill, and natural talent, under a number of similar, ambiguous terms of art, such as having a ‘nose for news’, and understanding that which is ‘newsworthy’ ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Tuchman 1978](#), [Fishman 1980](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#)). Noting a distinctly middle class moralistic crusading tendency within the journalistic attraction to crime news, concurrent with its fetishising of violence ([1977](#)), Chibnall provides a crime-centric, exhaustive list of ‘news values’ or ‘professional imperatives’, which constitute what is ‘newsworthy’: immediacy; dramatisation; personalisation; simplification; titillation; conventionalism; structured access; and novelty ([1977](#)). Jewkes has reformulated these, enumerating 3 foundational news values: crime; negativity; and novelty, with 12 secondary values: threshold; predictability; simplification; individualism; risk; sex; celebrity; proximity; violence; spectacle; children; and conservatism ([2015](#)). Mawby added another 12 variations complementary to both Chibnall and Jewkes:

- (1) The unusual, bizarre and shocking;
- (2) wealth and crime;
- (3) celebrity;
- (4) malpractice;
- (5) scale/magnitude;
- (6) attractive white people;
- (7) a ‘good’ victim;
- (8) young people (especially when involved with anti-social

behaviour); (9) graphics; (10) violence (though this was relative to the geographical location); (11) human interest; and (12) relevance to readership ('It could be me'). (2010)

Whichever taxonomy is employed, these identified features of the core working ideologies of journalists, which remain largely critically unexplored by those journalists, portray journalism as a processes of construction of reality, acutely biased towards particular types of content.

1.2.2 Commercial and Economic Logics

The shaping of the role of the journalist in our 'mediated society', and its status as a repository of knowledge, is, in many studies, described as acutely informed by the commercial nature or purpose to which that knowledge is put to use by journalists (Chibnall 1973, Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987, Critcher 2003, Jewkes 2015). This external economic pressure to source and select 'stories' for their entertainment value (Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987), and corollary unit sales and advertising value, marries with a further internal 'economic logic of news reporting' (Fishman 1980), including pressures of minimum publication requirements, and publication deadlines (Schlesinger 1987). For Fishman, guided by the Marxist intellectual trend of that era, this core economic logic of journalism is at the root of routine journalistic practice and ideology—principally a journalistic cultural obsession with the highly predictable bureaucratic world:

Whether one is turning lumber into toothpicks, people into clients, or court files into news stories, the flow of raw materials must be controlled or at least made predictable. (1980)

Yet even where the external economic logic is less relevant, such as in public broadcasting, the push to feed into and out of the news cycle—the thirst for content—dominates the organisation of newswork (Schlesinger 1987).

1.2.3 Ideological Mythologies and Structural Biases: Objectivity, Impartiality, and Bureaucratic Sources

Working within increasingly diverse, pluralistic societies, journalists were found ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Schlesinger 1987](#))⁵ to rely heavily on bureaucratic sources as they offered identifiable, accessible and ‘authoritative’ information, which could meet the more superficial, institutionally self-legitimizing, ideological features of journalism: objectivity and impartiality. The journalists⁶ often ignored the wealth of alternative documentary source information, from ‘officialdom’ or academia, privileging the ‘performatives’ of news releases and interview quotes ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#)). For Chibnall, this fetishisation of official accounts by news media meets a core precept of journalistic working ideology—‘structured access’ ([1977](#)). This concept found support in Becker’s ‘hierarchies of credibility’ within society, where perceptions of élite bureaucratic power also presupposed more complete knowledge, engendering those sources with the highest credibility ([1967](#)). Researching published crime and policing news, Hall *et al* similarly argued ([1978](#)) that journalists are ‘structurally biased towards very powerful and privileged sources who become “over-accessed”...’ ([Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#)). Chibnall, interestingly, found many of his journalist participants uncomfortable with this core feature of journalism—one they suggested was forced upon them by editorial decision makers ([1977](#)).

In contrast to this more conspiratorial account of media-source relations, Schlesinger found ‘[m]ost news...[to be] constructed within a framework of firm

⁵ Ericson *et al* also identify the ideal of the ‘fearless investigative reporter’ as another crucial, internalised myth generated for both external legitimacy purposes, and as a stabilising feature of journalistic culture and identity—particularly in the contemporary context with a rapidly unravelling traditional economic basis for journalism (Ericson *et al* 1987, 358).

⁶ Though Freedom of Information access, and internet source availability may have shifted this significantly: see ([Cooke and Sturges 2009](#)).

expectations which are used to guide the deployment of available resources' (1987).⁷ Not only is it important to ensure a free flow of information from reliable sources, but the nature and content of those stories must also fall within a predictable realm. These insights suggests a critically unflattering account of day-to-day, routine journalism—particularly crime and policing news—as a relatively closed, self-constructing, hermeneutic loop of reality: resources govern predictions of stories and sources—which determined the news content (dominated by the bureaucratic account)—which later informs the prediction, producing a stable economic outlook for that particular news beat.

Fishman found that this same (economically motivated) demand for predictability, consistency, and order from the source material, led journalists to 'clean up and repair flawed bureaucratic proceedings' (Fishman 1980) in their reporting. Thus constructing a reality of state operations that is not only dominated by the resource sensitivities of media organisations, and therefore that state's account of itself, but also airbrushed to conform to the journalistic idealisations of order. This provides an idealised, self-legitimising vision of journalism that is comprehensive in its coverage,⁸ and with full and free access to the decision-making forums of the powerful. It also provides, without coercion, a veneer of orderliness, legitimacy, and transparency to State exercises of power. Each time news is reported, these mutually reinforcing conceptions of order and legitimacy are reproduced and affirmed. This obsession with constructing and reproducing conceptions of social order and conformity is a prominent feature in Ericson *et al's* study of published news (1991).

⁷ That their news work was such a highly structured process, was a revelation to some of his research subjects, who had internalised a mythology of their work as being random in its sources, content, and practice. Schlesinger 1987, 47. Chibnall also found crime journalists to maintain a self-perception of themselves as explicitly non-ideological, neutral, collectors and processors of information (1977, xiii).

⁸ As Fishman found journalists often 'filled in' the details of meetings or events they had missed (1980, 109).

From these accounts we begin to see how the structures and practices of crime and policing reporting draws journalists within the wider infrastructure of policing through its selection biases, and need to idealise content. Through these processes of communicating crime and policing news, journalists were not inclined to engage in adversarial journalism in challenge to policing. Indeed, they sought to perform a key legitimisation function in policing by constructing visions of order.

1.2.4 Journalistic Autonomy: The (Malleable) Layers in Crime News Construction

All of this—ideology, culture, structure, varying combination of each constituting ‘newsworthiness’, each woven into the ‘processes’ of newswork—were found to be the determiners of what information was sought, who it was sought from, how it was evaluated and reported, and what was excluded as irrelevant or lacking interest ([Chibnall 1977](#)). For Fishman, this leads to a paradigm of journalism that is largely uncritical of, and indeed reinforces the established ideological order ([1980](#)), and which can be manipulated into closer conformity with dominant ideologies through increasing workloads, speeding up journalistic work practices, and chronically understaffing (a permanent feature of his field research) ([Tuchman 1978](#), [Fishman 1980](#)). While journalistic autonomy was the oft-rehearsed meta-norm ([Schlesinger 1987](#)) of the profession, news production was more a product of the constraints on the norm, than the norm itself.

Though not cited, these accounts lend ethnographic support to theorists such as Hall *et al*, whose content analysis generated an account of reporting on deviance, disorder and crime that reinforced hegemony, with police as the ‘primary definers’, and journalists reproducing those accounts as ‘secondary definers’ ([1978](#)). It also paints a picture of almost total dependency by journalists on bureaucratic sources, where reality is a

construct of two systems of knowledge production: the bureaucratic account, and the largely uncritical journalistic account—each with multiple levels of production and reproduction of knowledge ([Fishman 1980](#)).

1.2.5 Organisational Overlap and Subsumption: Mutually Reinforcing Legitimacy

Ericson *et al* drew on Habermas ([1975](#)) to argue the purported ideological core of journalism—‘objectivity and impartiality’—and the perceived independence and integrity of the news media makes it an ideal ‘vehicle for making claims in the public culture that one’s organizational activities are right and just’ ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#)). In this way, media access and management became a core strategy for public (and private) bureaucracies—such as those involved in policing—to manage public legitimacy. Combined with participation in what Ericson *et al* characterise as ‘the administrative apparatus for controlled reform and change’ ([1987](#))—i.e. the performance of legitimation—these components underlying media coverage of deviance place the news media firmly within the broader institutional apparatus of the state, and specifically within the crime and justice system.

The news media on this account, then, occupied an interesting position: a formally independent, yet deeply embedded, component of institutional governance, social control, and policing. Presupposed, though uninterrogated, in these accounts is the monopoly news media played on mass communications infrastructures during this time. This ideologically liberal democratic insurance policy on news media monopoly of mass communications situated journalism as the dominant communicator of constructions and conceptions of social order. Its monopoly and perceived independence was felt to bestow on journalism, and its messages, a distinct quality of legitimacy. Aside from this,

participating in the process of defining deviance, and advocating reform, is an exercise of substantial political power ([1987](#)).

1.2.6 Contested Spaces: Intra- and Inter-Organisational Complexity and Journalistic Autonomy

These accounts might make it attractive to conclude by characterising crime journalism of the 1970s–1990s as an agency- and autonomy-free space, where journalists were little other than communications bureaucrats, constructing and reproducing the accounts of reality provided by those in positions of power. The content-based accounts of hegemony by writers such as Hall *et al*, appear then to be proven largely accurate. Indeed, Schlesinger and Tumber, reflecting on Habermas’s ideals for a pluralistic ‘public sphere’ of discourse, bemoaned the decline of Britain’s proud tradition of independent public service broadcasting during the Thatcher administration as evidence of Habermas’s prediction of the ‘refeudalisation of the public sphere’ ([1994](#)). Yet, in their research findings, Ericson *et al* and Schlesinger and Tumber emphasised evidence of conflict and inconsistency between source and journalist, which permeated the entire communicative process of policing. For example, government bureaucracies offered competing and contradictory accounts—sometimes motivated by their own ideological agendas. ‘Informal’ police sources⁹ provided accounts that challenged those of ‘official’ sources ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)),¹⁰ and journalists enthusiastically ran those critical stories.

Hall *et al*’s particular theoretical contribution of ‘primary’ and ‘secondary’ definition, in which the media occupied the inferior position of power in the process of

⁹ Explained in greatest detail by Chibnall 1977, and of particular interest to Schlesinger and Tumber 1994.

¹⁰ Though this poses interesting questions in the post-Leveson era, where little or no informal police sources.

constructing deviancy, is similarly challenged by Roberts *et al* (2002), and Greene (2008). They note how news media organisations in the Anglophone world have a well-documented history of setting criminal justice policy agendas. In England in particular, they point to ample evidence of significant power among the national tabloid press. On these accounts, journalists actively resisted the ‘official story’—though often in an attempt to satisfy that core journalistic ideological precept of ‘novelty’ (Chibnall 1977). Chibnall, Ericson *et al*, and Schlesinger and Tumber, each detail examples of journalists rejecting the official line on criminal justice events offered by the police press office, and seeking out information from their own carefully cultivated informal or unofficial sources. Even Fishman, who appears generally committed to a hegemonic account of crime journalism, introduces *Manufacturing the News* with a richly descriptive account of New York City journalists fabricating a crime wave, despite evidence to the contrary provided by the city’s police force (1980). The ethnographic literature of crime reporting is ripe with examples of journalists and editors offering their own definitions on events or patterns of events, or challenging definitions from official sources with counter-definitions (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994).

Yet this strict reading of a particular nuance of Hall *et al* might itself be challenged: though the process of constructing deviance and social order is a much more dynamic process than their inferential account gave credit to, the effective consumption of crime journalism within policing communications, and its overarching assumptions, makes this critical insight largely moot. In being structurally inclined towards sources of the powerful, the media are inevitably subsumed by those hierarchies and their logics (Ericson, Baranek *et al*. 1987). There may be conflict within the ‘autonomous’ fringes of hegemony, but the hegemonic structure remains essentially unchanged (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994).

Ericson *et al*'s wider empirically-led project explored the blurring of lines between journalist and source organisations. As the reporter embedded deeper into the world of the source, she adjusted her practices to suit that world, and internalised its ideology. Likewise, as the source developed a relationship with a particular journalistic organisation, or agent of that organisation, they shaped their interactions to the needs of that journalist. The source becomes a reporter ([1987](#)), as they construct a reality of their world that is digestible for the journalist, and the news organisation's consumers.

1.2.7 The Power of Media

Ericson *et al* offer the strongest, and most sustained, empirically-grounded theoretical challenge to Hall *et al*'s seemingly rigid hegemony-guided taxonomy of the relational structure between media and source. For Ericson *et al*, much of the functioning and exercise of organisational power in contemporary society centred on 'the production of information and its conversion into knowledge' ([1987](#)). Writing before the explosion of information technologies and their mass commercialisation in the mid to late 1990s, they described a world where many centres of power privileged this production of knowledge as their principal objective. In this way, control over information and knowledge had become among the most significant means of governance and social control ([1987](#)). The production of symbolic representations of that information and knowledge is also a central feature of the activities within what they describe as the 'Knowledge Society'. Drawing on Foucault, in the Knowledge Society '[t]he exercise of power over the population and the accumulation of knowledge about it are two sides of a single process: not power and knowledge, but "power-knowledge"' ([Sheridan 1980](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#)). In a society that is highly socially stratified, this power-knowledge relation means knowledge, or 'cultural capital' is also highly socially stratified ([Ericson, Baranek et](#)

[al. 1987](#)). Knowledge also feeds into social and cultural dynamics of inclusion and exclusion within certain communities of knowledge.

The primary resource of this society is knowledge. The primary mode of production is communication (the transformation and reception process) within communications systems (the organisations and institutions within which transformation and reception take place). ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#))

For Ericson *et al*, journalists occupied ‘a unique position in the knowledge society’ ([1987](#)),¹¹ as they are not bound to focus on one, or a small number of institutions or organisations.¹² This gave news media organisations a significant degree of autonomous power, as structurally significant ‘knowledge linkers’ ([1987](#)), and ‘cultural institutions’ ([1987](#)). Though they were dependent on sources, they decided which sources to use; they affirmed who the ‘authorised knowers’ ([Tuchman 1978](#)) were (though they also describe a ‘deviance defining élite’ that is highly resistant to incursions by outsiders) ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#)), and in this way exercised a significant amount of what Castells would later call ‘communications power’ ([2009](#)). But, because of this wide scope of potential sources, journalists themselves did not carry highly specialised bodies of knowledge, as other organisations and occupations must—indeed, specialist knowledge was seen as not particularly desirable among reporters and editors, as it limited journalist flexibility for redeployment to other news beats ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Mawby 2002](#)). Ericson *et al* argue that the central power of journalists was to ‘visualise’ deviance to the public: to define what and who was deviant, and define who and what were

¹¹ In *Visualising Deviance*, Ericson *et al* warn against the dismissive attitude of the academy to journalism, explaining: “...the news media are one of the most important and powerful institutions in society. As such, the news media are deserving of very serious attention indeed, which includes academic scrutiny of their preferences and procedures” (1987, 10).

¹² Interestingly, Ericson *et al* suggest the increasing pluralisation in advanced democracies, along, we can assume, with expansion of public accountability and transparency mechanisms for governance, has pressured journalists to rapidly broaden the scope of organisations they report on (1987, 15).

authoritative sources of information and definitions. This power allowed journalists and media organisations to police ‘organisational life for deviations from their conception of the order of things’ (1987), giving themselves a ‘watchdog role’ with regard to proper community order.

Ericson *et al* comfortably concede that external structural and cultural forces influence the news organisation’s practices of selection of sources of knowledge, but emphasise the enormous complexity in the interaction between internal and external culture and structure:

News organizations produce and reproduce accounts of relations among authorized knowers in bureaucratic roles, and these accounts convey aspects and images of social, cultural, political, and economic order. (1987)

Criticising alleged tendencies in critical ethnographies of journalism to characterise news media organisations as ideologically and procedurally homogenous phenomena (1987), they instead focus throughout on the interpersonal conflicts within news media—as in all bureaucracies—that contribute to the creation of the group ideology and culture. In spite of what Ericson *et al* characterise as the ‘dominant normative view in the academic literature that journalism is characterised by consensus among its practitioners’ they ‘found persistent and pervasive differences, divisions, and conflicts’ (1987). They encountered autonomous resistance as routine. ‘Through skilful mobilization of organizational resources the journalist can create some autonomous space in which to practise his craft’ (1987).

Through this resistance, Ericson *et al* unveiled the complex idiosyncratic power of journalists, which informed their culture and practices in source management and the construction of crime news. Somewhat remarkably, this is the first and last account of

crime reporting¹³ to take seriously journalism as a distinctly powerful, culturally rich, institutional player, both in its own right, and in relation to its dealings with sources.

1.3 Police Communications

The performance of communications functions in policing has generated an even narrower field of academic interest over the past 40 years. Chibnall ([1975](#), [1977](#)), Mawby ([2002](#), [2010](#)), and Motschall and Cao ([2002](#)) each provide varying levels of historical background to the development of formal media policies and practices by the police in England and the USA, before developing their contemporaneous qualitative and quantitative research findings in relation to media (Chibnall), or the police (Mawby, and Motschall and Mao). At a theoretical level, the literature on police communication revolves around key questions of dramaturgical and strategic exercises in (self-)legitimation ([Mawby 1999](#), [Mawby 2002](#), [Motschall and Cao 2002](#), [Reiner 2008](#), [Cooke and Sturges 2009](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)), and, less commonly, democracy and accountability ([Crandon and Dunne 1997](#)). The latter thematic focus on accountability receives much less attention as there is a subtle but consistent dismissal in the literature of the notion that crime and policing reporters ever have, or ever could, operate as an accountability check on policing ([Finnane 2002](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)).¹⁴ Journalists, for many of these accounts, were too dependent on the police as sources to engage in ongoing systemic critiques of the police and wider criminal justice system. Ericson *et al* sees the police engagement with the media along largely instrumental grounds, but which are generally resistant to conspiratorial interpretations:

¹³ Mawby, has, on a number of occasions touched upon the power of news media, but typically from the lens of police communications and interrogating the latter's power. See ([Davies 2014](#))

¹⁴ Though Crandon and Dunne 1997, and Mawby 2010 seems to suggest they can and perhaps once did.

‘it is not possible to sustain empirically an instrumentalist view of the media élite and their governmental and corporate allies pulling the strings by which news workers dance’ (1989). The underlying consensus in these studies—each based in Anglophone liberal democracies—is that the development of police communications capabilities and strategies are a natural evolution of their need to legitimate in public-facing ways (Mawby 2002).

1.3.1 Competition, Control and Consensus: Police Image Management and Performative Accountability

Ericson *et al* chart how sources, such as the police, organised to engage with and exploit the news media in order to communicate with the media organisation’s readers, listeners, and viewers. They detail a discursive competition for control over the relationship between source and journalist, which played out in a manner that achieved a degree of consensus, to ensure relational maintenance, even when engagements were bitterly disputed by the source (1989). This allows the institutional source to ‘refine their accountability in terms of news discourse, which in turn allows them to achieve organisational accountability to the publics that concern them’ (Ericson, Baranek *et al.* 1989, Cooke and Sturges 2009). The dynamic also helps explain the increasing role and importance of PCCUs within police forces, whose aim is to achieve just that kind of refined, presentable, and digestible source information (Mawby 2002, Motshall and Cao 2002, Chermak and Weiss 2005).

Ericson *et al* also note how police, as news media sources, actively managed the media to limit the exposure of their ‘back regions’ to public scrutiny (Goffman 1959, Ericson, Baranek *et al.* 1989). Chibnall notes that though journalists could over time gain greater access to these ‘back regions’—an example of organisational overlap and subsumption—they rarely if ever reported on information that came from that enhanced

access, as to do so would jeopardise the source relationship and future information flows (1977).¹⁵ Journalists themselves internalised the organisational culture, logics and objectives of policing, and developed strong personal connections with their sources, and loyalties to their source organisations (Chibnall 1977, Mawby 2010). In this way, the police drew journalists into their legitimisation exercises (Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989). This police objective of demonstrating or performing accountability to their publics, encouraged a high level of police facilitation of the media, to the extent that contemporary police buildings were increasingly designed to include press briefing rooms, in some cases designating space of specific reporters (Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987, 1989). Ericson *et al* found police, like other sources,

...compete for access to the news media in order to traffic in their preferred values for signs ... they seek to defend their organisations against others' imputations of deviance ... while advancing their own claims about the deviance of other organizations and how they should be controlled. (1989)

The overarching aim of the police, according to Ericson *et al*, was to gain 'access', not mere 'coverage' in the media, while limiting exposure to private culture and practice (1989). This strategy sought to both manage the image of policing communicated to the public, and pursue a performative form of public accountability in the process. This justified the expense of communications for the police (1989), and explains why PCCUs became ubiquitous (Mawby 2002, 2010), and not just confined to forces that have experienced major scandals affecting public trust and confidence.

Ericson *et al*'s account, replicated more recently by Mawby, challenged accounts¹⁶ that described police-media relationships in terms of asymmetric dominance by the

¹⁵ Chibnall also discusses the personal relationship that develops between crime reporters and police, and how this personal connection also militates against any tendency towards 'burning' their sources.

¹⁶ Ericson *et al* again directed their criticisms towards Hall *et al*.

police. While policing goals were clearly instrumental, they placed police organisations in positions of dependency on the media, and the latter's own legitimacy, which was built on the ideological values of independence and impartiality. The 'light' adversarialism in the relationship described in the preceding section, also seems to have served to legitimate both the media and the police, with both drawing on these ideological precepts of the media. Ericson *et al* view the absence of direct police source control over content framing, and their finding of a lack of remedies against 'unreasonable coverage', as evidence of the power of the news organisations, and the dependency of source organisations on those outlets (1989). Yet, police and media pursue different objectives through their interaction, which can create tension when they conflict (Mawby 2010). However, both police and media relations are characterised by their 'complex loop of interdependence' (Reiner 2008).

1.3.2 Police Legitimacy in the Era of Heightened Visibility

Grounding his analysis within wider cultural shifts in politics and bureaucratic governance in 1990s UK, Mawby connects the noticeable upscaling in importance, and formalisation of police communications to an earlier 'managerialist turn' in governance (Mawby 2002, Chermak and Weiss 2005, Mawby 2010). This turn recast police-public relations (at that time perceived to be in crisis), as a service provider–consumer relationship, with an increasing emphasis on 'high visibility policing', to connect with their consumer public (Boyle 1999, Mawby 2002, Motshall and Cao 2002). This managerialist turn in policing, which was most significant under the New Labour governments (Mawby 2010), was also pursued during a significant shift in media technologies, with the emergency of 24 hour news media, and mobile communications technologies. This furthered the increased visibility of policing, and the demand by

journalists for more crime information to fill more output demand ([Mawby 1999](#), [Goldsmith 2010](#), [Greer and McLaughlin 2010](#)). The response of elite police decision makers—specifically members of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO)¹⁷—to the perceived crisis in policing was captured in the strategic policy document *Setting the Standards for Policing: Meeting Community Expectation*. This in turn led to the Quality of Service initiative, ‘which attempted to implement a greater degree of accountability and openness in the police and their dealings with the public’ ([Boyle 1999](#)). Central to this new approach was the media: to communicate and legitimise this new philosophy and use it to improve public reputation and perceptions of accountability. Boyle notes:

A central component within any such strategy would be the role of the media, both as a channel for information and as a vital aspect of image management for an organization which relies heavily on the support of the public if it is to successfully tackle crime. ([1999](#))

Finally, as the political salience of ethno-cultural diversity and inclusion gained greater prominence, policing was required to communicate with a more diverse range of publics in order to achieve a comprehensive legitimacy in the community ([Cooke and Sturges 2009](#), [Mawby 2010](#)). In combination, these overarching structural and ideological shifts mandated greater and greater bureaucratic emphasis and energies in image management ([Mawby 2002](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). Mawby suggests this police paradigm of ‘high visibility’ in multi-mediated forms represents a manifestation of Mathiesen’s dual conception of the panopticon/synopticon of governance and control in advanced democracies ([Ericson and Haggerty 1997](#), [Mathiesen 1997](#)). As police surveillance powers and technology over the public expanded rapidly, so too did the visibility of public institutions such as the police to the wider public ([Mawby 2002](#)).

¹⁷ Replaced by the National Police Chief’s Council (NPCC) in 2015.

In light of more recent radical developments in communications technologies Lee and McGovern have added further theoretical weight to the study of police communications. Employing a conceptual combination of Buadrillard (1994) and Garland (2001), they argue the new paradigm, of constant high-level visibility, increasingly governed by rapidly evolving, and hyper-responsive media platforms, has seen policing become ‘hyperreal’ (Lee and McGovern 2014). They also credit the formalisation of managerialist and consumerist communications infrastructure and ideology as part the broader shift towards responsabilisation in governance theorised in Garland’s *Culture of Control* (Lee and McGovern 2014).

1.3.3 Professionalisation of Police Communications

In their histories of crime reporting in England, Chibnall (1973, 1977), Campbell (2015), and Mawby (2002) describe the conflicted relationship the various police forces in England have had with the press. For example, depending on the personalities of the Met leadership, and their views on the necessity of media engagement, the Met’s hierarchy could be hostile and closed to the press (Chibnall 1977, Mawby 2002). During these periods of élite police closure to journalists, specialist and generalist crime reporters were usually able to exploit informal or unofficial police sources (Mawby 2010) (and, occasionally, informal criminal sources) (Campbell 2015) within the police for information—sources cultivated using what might now be considered deeply unethical means (Chibnall 1977, Filkin 2012, Leveson 2012). During other periods, such as the appointment of Robert Mark as the Met’s Commissioner in 1972 (Chibnall 1977), changes in police leadership lead to conscious shifts towards formal, proactive and open media engagement strategies.

The earlier work of Chibnall, Tuchman, and Ericson *et al* also noted the existence of PCCUs in their embryonic stages of sophistication and professionalism. PCCUs represent the institutional outcome of the often informal, and largely inconsistent and *ad hoc* media provision by police forces in the UK, USA, Canada and Australia. The development and rapid expansion of 24-hour mass news media communications during the early 1990s, combined with the emergence of a political culture fetishising greater and greater transparency.¹⁸ This forced police to establish formalised mechanisms to satisfy the exponential growth in demand for information, and growth in their own institutional exposure to the public ([Boyle 1999](#), [Mawby 1999](#), [Mawby 2002](#)).¹⁹ Significant policing scandals, such as the murder of Stephen Lawrence and the Hillsborough disaster in the UK ([Mawby 1999](#), [Mawby 2002](#), [Cooke and Sturges 2009](#)), the Los Angeles riots in the USA ([Motshall and Cao 2002](#)), and subsequent perceived declines in public trust and confidence in the police ([Mawby 1999](#), [2002](#), [2010](#)), have contributed to a political appetite for police to demonstrate openness and accountability. In the UK in particular, which contains one of the most competitive print news media markets in the developed world ([Jewkes 2015](#)), with a history of criminal justice agenda setting by the press ([Roberts, Stalans et al. 2002](#), [Cricher 2003](#), [Green 2008](#), [Dean 2013](#), [Jewkes 2015](#)), police hierarchies perceived significant pressure to respond to news media demands for information on operations. The expanded presence of PCCUs reflected ‘...a definite shift [in policing] from reactive media relations to more proactive corporate communications activities’ ([Mawby 1999](#)).

As these now ubiquitous PCCUs have become more established within policing—indeed, becoming a mandated component of policing under government strategies

¹⁸ For a philosophical critique of this, see ([O’Neill 2002](#)).

¹⁹ Reiner offers a more cynical interpretation of this development in Police communications strategies and practices, in which Police viewed the news media as a threat to their secrecy, so they sought to control them, see ([Reiner 2008](#))

designed to manage public fear of crime (and confidence in the state's capacity to manage law and order) ([Mawby 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#))—PCCUs have developed into highly professionalised components within police forces ([Surette 2001](#), [Motshall and Cao 2002](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [McGovern and Lee 2010, 2014](#)).

Mawby notes how this established and growing focus on communications strategies, has created police forces that are media savvy, at a time of dwindling journalistic resources ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)), shifting the power asymmetries further in favour of the police ([Mawby 2010](#)). For Doyle, this development has increasingly seen police forces adopting media logics and practices, to reconstruct themselves to suit the needs of the media organisations—again reflecting the theme of organisational overlap, cultural subsumption and the strong organising force of communications ([Doyle 2003](#)). PCCU managers aim to develop long-term relationships within the media, and seek to develop clear media strategies for anticipated controversies ([Mawby 1999](#)). These new well-resourced PCCUs allow their police forces to exert greater control over policing messages to their various external publics, and, with the advent of new media platforms, the chance to circumvent the traditional news media middle-men. Lee and McGovern note how PCCUs 'now serve as a channel through which almost all information and communications about police activities and the like are managed and disseminated...', with some suggesting this has granted police a communications monopoly in the police-media dynamic ([Finnane 2002](#), [McGovern and Lee 2010](#)). PCCUs have themselves achieved organisational autonomy within policing, exerting their own power in managing communications strategies, and through the decisions they make to withhold information, as well as the decisions to release information ([Mawby 2010](#)).

Much of the literature on PCCUs (particularly from the USA) has explored the shift towards civilianisation as units have become more professionalised ([Surette and Richard 1995](#), [Surette 2001](#), [Motshall and Cao 2002](#), [Chermak and Weiss 2005](#)). PCCUs

quickly became staffed by a civilian majorities ([Mawby 1999](#)), with professional backgrounds and expertise in public relations and journalism ([Surette 2001](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). Lee and McGovern discuss the somewhat ambivalent perspective of self among former journalists in PCCUs in New South Wales Police ([2014](#)), where working for the ‘other side’ creates an unnerving sense of ideological betrayal. Surette’s ([2001](#)) findings suggest journalists in particular find these positions attractive, given the stable nature of the work: unlike media and journalism in the contemporary communications economy (see 5.5.1 below). For their part, while appreciative of the formal and structured provision of external communications ([Mawby 2002, 2010](#)), journalists are found to be suspicious of and resistant to PCCUs ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)).²⁰ This suspicion and resistance again seems to substantiate Ericson *et al*’s challenge to the dogmatic critical claims of media domination by police, and reflects journalistic commitment to their ‘core’ ideological precepts in defying State attempts to ‘tame the [communications] system’ ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). Journalists, by necessity, engage with PCCUs, but remain sceptical and conscious of the promotional agendas of the units.

Lee and McGovern also found police involved in operational sides of policing to be somewhat suspicious of these civilian ‘newcomers’, believing them to be another level of bureaucracy aimed at containing controversy ([2014](#)). This is reflective of a more general suspicion of media among the operational ranks of policing (see 6.2.2.4 below)—most of whom rarely if ever come into contact with media—as external communications roles are typically confined to elite decision makers within bureaucracies ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987, 1989, Boyle 1999](#)). This breakdown in traditional police-media

²⁰ This suspicion and cynicism would at times appear well-founded: see the very recent and ongoing controversy over South Yorkshire Police’s communications strategy during the Hillsborough disaster inquest, and the allegations made by a civilian member of its PCCU. See ([BBC 2016](#))

relations raises the prospect for journalists to create critical space in their coverage of policing, paradoxically at a time when their role in communicating images of policing is rapidly declining in relevance. Additionally, the divisions between rank and file, chief police officers, and PCCUs in the context of policing communications raises interesting questions about the management of police reputation and image, and the ‘natural’ exclusion of lower level decision makers within a bureaucracy due to sociologically observed phenomena such as Becker’s ‘hierarchy of credibility’.

1.4 Contemporary Features of Policing and Media in England

In the run up to, and during my fieldwork, policing and news media in the English context had experienced a number of notable scandals and crises. When I finally began fieldwork in 2016–2017 (see 2.4.3 below), the academy was only beginning to come to terms with what had occurred in the previous five or six years. In this section I outline these key background features which served as significant structuring forces on the fields I focused on in this thesis.

1.4.1 ‘Phone Hacking’, Leveson, and Filkin

The most significant of these contextual scandals and crises was rooted in the police-media relationship: specifically the relationship between the London Metropolitan Police and the London-based British national news media (particularly the tabloid press). In a series of revelatory articles in *The Guardian* newspaper from 2009–2011 Nick Davies exposed systematic use of unlawful investigative practices—principally ‘hacking’ of voicemail services of targeted individuals—by journalists across various national titles. In response to the growing scandal, which eventually implicated his director of communications Andy Coulson, Prime Minister David Cameron ordered a public inquiry

under the Inquiries Act 2005. The terms of reference for Part I²¹ of the Inquiry charged the Chair, Lord Justice Brian Leveson, with investigating

... the culture, practices, and ethics of the press, including:

- (a) contacts and the relationships between national newspapers and politicians, and the conduct of each;
- (b) contacts and the relationship between the press and the police, and the conduct of each;
- (c) the extent to which the current policy and regulatory framework has failed including in relation to data protection; and
- (d) the extent to which there was a failure to act on previous warnings about media misconduct. ([Leveson 2012](#))

The inquiry called hundreds of witnesses, and took oral testimony from some of the most powerful figures in British public and private life. Despite its particular police-media origins, the most significant aspects of the Inquiry's findings and recommendations centred around national governance and regulation of the press: in particular the recommendation for a statutory press regulator to replace the existing Press Complaints Commission, which the inquiry found inadequate ([Leveson 2012](#)). Its findings and recommendations also placed a heavy emphasis on privacy rights and interests, data protection, and the vulnerability of the individual private citizens to the power of the British national news media.

Perhaps given the anticipated focus of Part II's terms of reference, and fearing interference with ongoing criminal prosecutions, the Inquiry's examination of police-media relations was noticeably more truncated. It did, however, make certain findings and recommendations in relation to the governance and control of information flows between policing and media. In particular, it recommended increasing transparency from chief officers on their contacts in the news media ([Leveson 2012](#)), and encouraged a

²¹ Part II, which was due to investigate unlawful conduct by media organisations, and corrupt payments to police officers, was delayed pending prosecutions. However, once all prosecutions had concluded, Part II was not commenced, and now seems highly unlikely to be revived: ([Agerholm 2018](#))

much more careful consideration of policy on the release of ‘off record’ sensitive police information to journalists. These broadly mirrored the report commissioned by the London Metropolitan Police earlier in 2012 by Elizabeth Filkin ([2012](#)). Filkin set out more detailed recommendations in relation to the governance and control of information, focusing on transparency and the recording of police-media contact in order to facilitate information audits. Her report also called for a cleansing of the improper ‘leaks’ culture of information disclosure in the Met ([Filkin 2012](#)), in favour of a more general culture of transparency through ‘impartial provision of information’ to all publics, not merely the news media: a change which should also be resourced appropriately ([Filkin 2012](#)). In exploring this ‘leaks’ culture in the Met, both Leveson and Filkin noted the variety of reasons individual officers disclosed to journalists, including personal grudges ([Leveson 2012](#)), and even political gain ([Filkin 2012](#)).²² One of Colbran’s police participants suggested some ‘street level’ police might leak for self-aggrandising purposes ([Colbran 2016](#)).

Despite the significant cultural impact of Leveson on popular discourses around policing and crime reporting, it has attracted little academic attention in criminological and policing scholarship. On the narrow question of its impact on police-media relations, Mawby has contextualised the crisis within the history and culture of scandal in policing ([Mawby 2017](#)), and offered some grounded reflections on the inherently symbiotic relationship between policing and media ([Mawby 2014](#)). Only Colbran has undertaken notably empirical work on the matter. Employing qualitative interviews of senior police officers in the Met, and journalists with national news media organisations, Colbran found a general ‘chilling’ effect on police-media information flows, and critiqued the combined impact of Leveson and Filkin on both the integrity of the criminal justice system ([Colbran 2016](#)), and the health of British democracy ([Colbran 2018](#)). In the

²² See also ([Silverman 2012](#))

former contribution, Colbran's elite interviewees credit Leveson and Filkin's chilling effect on the release of information to journalists with an increase in publication of unreliable stories that jeopardise criminal prosecutions. Somewhat surprisingly given both Leveson and Filkin's determinations that much 'informal' police disclosure to the media was motivated by personal or professional self-interest, Colbran accepts these claims in her overarching conclusions without interrogating them against any available data. In the latter contribution, the attempts by police to achieve transparency through other mass communications channels (namely social media) instead of news media (which are viewed more cautiously post-scandal) is dismissed as compromising healthy democratic culture. Given the well-publicised origins of the Leveson Inquiry, it is perhaps curious that Colbran does not in either piece problematise the police-media relationship. Though she ([Colbran 2018](#)), like Mawby ([Mawby 2010](#)), speaks of asymmetries in power between policing and news media, the nature and structure of that power is left unexamined. Finally, while Colbran concedes her studies are London-centric, her conclusions are nationally-encompassing, and fail to adequately appreciate the distinct dynamics of policing and media in London's global city.

1.4.2 The Austerity Era

The impact of economic policy responses to the 2008 financial crisis in England and Wales resulted in a decade of budgetary reductions in policing ([Loader 2016](#), [Loader 2016](#)). These cutbacks necessarily saw reductions in police numbers, increasing civilianisation of certain policing roles ([Loveday 2006](#)), and the controversial introduction of private sector contractors to core policing functions ([Taylor and Travis 2012](#)). Under what is now described as the dominant political ideology of austerity—pervasive in

contemporary policy discourse in most advanced western democracies—policing in England and Wales, during my fieldwork period, expected to achieve the same or better outcomes, with less resources ([Thornton 2015](#)). This resource-constrained reality also saw a decline in ‘law and order’ rhetoric, and its exponential resource demands ([Loader 2005](#)), and a rise in the rhetoric of ‘evidence-based’ policing ([Loader 2016](#)). Due, perhaps, to consistent lowering in crime rates in the UK noted above, and the political fallout across Europe following the 2008 crisis, it appears that criminal justice no longer maintains the political value and salience it once held ([Loader 2016](#), [Loader and Muir 2016](#)).²³ These material and ideological declines in the relevance of criminal justice during this period may also go some way in accounting for the substantial and unprecedented reorganisation and reduction of policing in England and Wales.

1.4.3 Media Structure and Economies

The rapid globalised emergence of the information technology and digital revolution has effected a paradigm shift in news media ([Castells 2009](#), [Castells 2010](#))—particularly print media—structures, practices, and, perhaps most significantly, economic models ([Currah 2009](#)). In the UK, with its long history of highly competitive mass-distribution national print media, the financially driven restructuring and re-organisation has been particularly acute. However, the impact on local printed news media markets has been most dramatic, with the closure of large numbers of established titles, and the threat of job losses ([Burrell 2009](#), [Oakely 2013](#)). In the context of the 1970s and 1990s Chibnall ([1977](#))

²³ Loader suggests the rise to symbolic dominance of terrorism and migration as another possible explanation for this decline.

and Mawby (2010) had charted the decline of the specialist crime reporter—bemoaning the loss of specialist knowledge of the criminal justice system within the profession—the issue facing many news media organisations is whether there are sufficient resources to pursue any form of investigative journalism. Indeed, many titles remain in a struggle for survival (Matthews 2017). While Mawby’s anxiety (2010) that the ‘citizen journalist’ phenomenon might undermine the traditional media’s crime reporting structures has not materialised, the sharp reduction in general media resources due to advertising revenue collapses has left journalistic infrastructures in the criminal justice and policing field seriously diminished (Currah 2009). This massive retrenchment of journalistic manpower and resources in the field, particularly outside the London hub, is most visible in criminal courts throughout England and Wales, where the decline in court reporting is now a growing cause for concern for lawyers and journalists alike (Greenslade 2016).

1.4.4 Police-Media Power Relations

The fallout from the phone hacking scandal appears to have had a distinct impact on the police-media power relations settlement. Mawby concludes that the impact of Leveson, in which he felt the police’s reputation was largely preserved, while the press’s was publicly flagellated, resulted in a further shift in their asymmetric power relationship in favour of the police (Mawby 2014). The Filkin Report’s recommendations appear to have had nationwide repercussions for police-press relations (Preston 2016). Colbran has concluded that, civilianised PCCUs are likely to increasingly dominate the police-press relationship, expanding the capacity of elite police decision makers to monopolise control over the construction of both their image, and the nature of social order and deviancy in contemporary England (Colbran 2016, 2018).

Yet, despite concerns over shifting and exacerbated imbalances in the power relationship between policing and media, little emphasis has been placed on mapping its structure. Beyond general discussions of the centrality of the relationship to police legitimacy ([Mawby 2002](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)) and a diagnosis of a culture of control by police in communications ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)), the distinctiveness of the police-media power relationship is largely untheorised. Perhaps most surprisingly, despite the ongoing and well-documented financial and revenue crises in news media, its impact on the power dynamics in policing and media has enjoyed only passing reference ([Colbran 2018](#)).

1.5 A World Ripe for (Re)Consideration?

This section offers a portrait of substantial structural and cultural flux. Earlier literature on crime reporting was undertaken during an era of economic security and success for news media, long before the crises that have threatened the future of news ([Rusbridger 2018](#)). Police corporate communications has been an emergent phenomenon for several decades, but the disruptive regulatory responses flowing to the phone hacking scandal has, a few have suggested, disrupted some delicate balance in power between policing and news media, the value and importance of which is not questioned. Despite much talk of the central importance of police-media relations for the legitimacy of policing, accountability for coercive power, and the health of democracy, no single study has attempted to comprehensively account for the cultural complexity of that relationship. Perhaps most extraordinarily, the ongoing crises in journalism that predated and outlived Leveson, and serve as a perfect illustration of the culturally and economically destructive power of social media, have attracted no serious critical attention in discussions of the deeper power mechanics of policing and media. The deeper cultural nuances beneath the

business of public transparency, accountability and legitimation of coercive state power in the ‘information age’, remains under-explored, and untheorised. Finally, like Leveson, Filkin, and, as we shall see, the British news media system more broadly, questions around crime, policing and news media have been decidedly London-centric.²⁴ In summary, what we have studied has been narrowly focused and/or lacking in the necessary cultural depth and critical sophistication, or wildly out-dated considering the changes over the past 40 years.

1.5.1 A Call to Arms!

In response, this thesis calls for a departure from the metropolis, and resistance to the temptation to follow the trend towards intellectual fetishisation of the ‘global city’, and its diversity, wealth, and cultural power ([Georgiou 2013](#)). It seeks to consider and describe the nature and shape of police power, media power, and police-media relations on the periphery ([Souhami 2018](#)) of the capital’s gravitational forces. It also calls for a meaningful return to the field and observational methodologies in charting the cultural depths and diversity of the relational structure of policing and news media. In particular, it calls for a serious reconsideration of the journalistic field, and the impact its crises have had on the culture and identity of journalism, and on the power relationship with policing. It calls for a comprehensive observational study of the relationship between policing and media, in a single policing area, to capture the cultural dynamics of both sides as they pursue, in competitive tension, their goals of power and legitimacy. This also requires a comparable return to the field of police communications, and the opportunity to see how Leveson, Filkin and social media technologies have impacted on the culture and practices of police legitimation. Ultimately, with the back-to-basic

²⁴ Mawby alone has gone beyond the metropolis to study the regions: ([Mawby 2002](#))

ethnographic methodologies necessary for that critical reconsideration, this thesis also seeks to theoretically reconsider the police-media relationship, in light of the insights gained from peripheral interrogations of police and media power.

1.5.2 Research Questions

The key questions this thesis asks are as follows:

- What does the day-to-day production of knowledge on crime and policing look like beyond the metropolis, in the small cities and provinces in which most citizens inhabit?
- How have the key events and trends such as Leveson and social media impacted on the relationship between policing and news media in this local context?
- What do the deeper power relations mechanics between policing and media teach us about the structures of local governing power?

2 My Methods

From the outset of this thesis I consciously sought to differentiate my methodological approach from the limited list of others who had previously researched police communications and police-media relations. However, as I learned is often the case, the process of achieving that aspiration inevitably took on a life of its own ([Mason 2002](#)). In this chapter I account for my methods in researching the local newsmedia and police communicators of the Odditon area. While my research method was intended to be novel for police communications, it never sought to offer novel insights into the particulars of that method. In that respect, this chapter cautiously wears its methodological theory lightly, while ensuring to pay due homage to those who both inspired me, and who helped me understand what I had done. This account consciously includes a rich description of the idiosyncratic aspects of my own background. In offering my methods for scrutiny in this deeply ‘positioned’ style, I invite readers and critics to arm themselves with their own contextually rich understanding of me as the sole narrative re-teller of my journey.

This chapter begins with a ‘confessional’ history of myself, and my interests as I entered advanced graduate study, a reflexive approach inspired by some of the most compelling contemporary ethnographers of criminal justice I have encountered ([Rios 2011](#), [Goffman 2015](#), [Souhami 2020](#)). It follows with a description of my research design, and discussion of what worked and did not work in the field. It then describes the various fieldsites and participants in my study, and my rationales for sample selection. This chapter then gives a detailed account of the complex challenges I encountered in negotiating access to my key fieldsites. The chapter concludes with a wide-ranging discussion of my methods in the field, reflexivity, and ethics.

2.1 Early (Cultural Programming and) Interests

The most fitting point of departure for this chapter's recapitulation of my endeavours in the field/s²⁵ of policing and news media is the root origin story of my interest in the topic. Beginning my undergraduate educational experience comparatively late in life (my mid-20s) in 2009, coincided with (and was in part caused by) one of the most dramatically uncertain periods in North-Western Europe since the end of the second world war. The worst years of the financial crisis saw Dublin, where I studied for my undergraduate law degree in Trinity College, experience deep and profound economic shock,²⁶ and social and political turmoil. As hundreds of thousands of young people became economic migrants ([Smyth 2013](#)), there was a notable surge in anti-Government sentiment throughout the city ([Worley 2017](#), [Hilliard 2018](#)). After the initial shock of Ireland's financial meltdown in 2008–2010—in which many of my own family and peers also emigrated—a stable, two-party, right-of-centre coalition Government involving the Irish Labour Party and Fine Gael was elected in 2011. But that initial stability waned once the considerable retrenchment of the Irish state's financial capacity began in earnest.

The timing of the financial crisis was unfortunate for journalism generally which was already to experience revenue 'bite' from declining newspaper circulation and the rise of social media ([Newman 2009](#)), and Irish titles were not spared ([Cawley 2016](#)).

²⁵ Though space limitations constrained further exploration of this point, throughout this thesis the question persisted of whether this was a study of two central fieldsites (police communications and news media), or just one—namely the local mass communications infrastructure of governance—with two institutional participants. Though unexplored here, this question heavily influenced my thinking in the final substantive chapter, which deals with what I call the 'local governance field'.

²⁶ Property values, which had formed the basis for nearly a decade of growth in the Irish economy, declined as much as 70% from their peak in 2007. See ([Kelly 2009](#), [Brennan 2018](#))

Having failed to anticipate collapse of the property bubble—indeed many had perpetuated a widely discredited ‘soft landing’ narrative ([Mercille 2014](#))—mainstream journalists were beginning to experience angry feedback from a seemingly traumatised public who could now communicate directly with them on social media. Indeed, as all the major national titles profited considerably from a property bubble ([Mercille 2014](#)) that put hundreds of thousands of young home owners into a decade-long spiral of devaluation and negative equity, the close connections of news media to centres of public and private power came under intense scrutiny on online discussion fora.

The life of a student at this time was, despite the uncertainty over the country’s economic future, extremely exciting. I had the extraordinary and rare privilege for that era of having a combination of disposable time and relative financial security, thanks to Ireland’s ‘free’²⁷ university fees system, and a generous state-funded ‘back to education’ income allowance. This allowed me to observe—online, on the streets, and in pubs and cafes of the city—a reckoning over the function of news media in a republican democracy. I also participated and debated with the thousands of other un- and under-employed young Irish in the new online fora that were flooded with highly politicised discussions.

Over very long coffee breaks outside Lemon on Nassau Street with my old, and similarly political, friend Fergus, then a doctoral student in history in Trinity, we speculated vaguely about the prospects of genuine revolution. As enthusiastic students of Ireland’s lengthy revolutionary past—and present—we wondered if conditions were right for something terrifying and enthralling to happen. By the time Nick Davies in *The Guardian*—which I had been an avid reader of since my teens—began publishing his dramatic series of exclusive stories on ‘phone hacking’ by News International’s *News of the World*, I had already developed a proudly knowing and hostile attitude to the ethics

²⁷ ‘Free for all’ in form, if not substance.

and critical capacities of journalism. The slightly self-satirising frankness of this opening account should not detract from its crucial importance in shaping this project.

From my current position as narrator, perhaps of questionable reliability, it is surprising now how little impact my own experiences of news media coverage seems to have had. Aside from the collapse of the Irish economy, which left me, a stone mason, without many employment prospects, my other motivation for entering higher education in 2009 was an attempt to avoid a long prison sentence. In March 2009, I had been arrested for cultivating large amounts of cannabis for sale. My prosecution began in September 2009—the month I began my law degree in Trinity—and trundled along until full hearing in December 2010. I pleaded guilty to the most serious drug dealing crime in the Irish Criminal Code, s15A of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977. s15A, along with murder and possession of a firearm with intent to endanger life, is among the handful of crimes in Ireland with mandatory minimum sentences. The benchmark for s15A is 10 years in prison. However, the Irish constitution, as interpreted by Irish courts, have created significant judicial discretion, allowing for much shorter sentences. Still, I was expecting a lengthy custodial term when I went before the Circuit Criminal Court in Galway in late 2010. After hearing my plea, the judge decided he would have to consider sentence, and sent me on remand to Castlerea prison for a number of months. No doubt because I was by then attending Ireland's most illustrious law school, and had glowing references from an eminent professor, when I returned to court in 2011, I was given a 5 year sentence suspended in its entirety. Walking free from court, I ended a remarkable period in my life. Later that night as I drank beer and watched TV in my mother's sitting room, text messages began to flood in from friends and lecturers in Trinity: my case, and its curiosities, had made it into the national news. This added to the already extensive coverage the local newspapers in my home county of Clare of the case. Some crime reporters from national tabloids tried to contact me via social media. I ignored them, and

interest died quickly. Despite the discomfort of national attention, and the shame some of my family felt at having my picture in local newspapers, I felt that the media coverage was to be expected, if unfortunate. While the local coverage seemed, in my reading, a little kind, if not sympathetic, I worried about the obvious impact it might have on my future career prospects in my newly chosen path. Yet, despite these expected regrets, my experience of criminalisation and media coverage has not consciously motivated this path of research on crime, policing and media. Indeed, as the idea of advanced study began to take shape in my mind towards the end of my undergraduate degree in 2012–2013, my history served as a disincentive against pursuing criminal justice research: a view shared by some of my academic mentors.

As my legal education advanced post-conviction, it coincided with the emergence of the ‘phone hacking’ scandal. This, combined with more local discourses about the performance of Irish journalism in the run up to, and during the financial crisis, generated a strong interest in legal and political theory accounts in the role of news media in democracy. In my third year (of four) of my law degree in Trinity, I took a course on media law, which focused on the many litigated cases of media abuses of power and position in relation to individual privacy: what would become a core question in the Leveson Inquiry. This course also examined the Irish constitutional and regulatory context and philosophical underpinnings, which conceived of journalism as a pre-requisite, but also a threat to the functioning of a democracy. I also took courses in criminology and penology, which allowed me to read broadly across critical scholarship. I developed a particular interest in penal populism, and wrote a long essay about journalistic irresponsibility in coverage of major criminal events (I was particularly inspired by David Green’s exploration of media and political reactions to the killing of Jamie Bulger ([Green 2007](#))). By the time my undergraduate degree was coming to an end in 2013, I decided that I would pursue doctoral study on the regulation of news media.

When my degree came to an end in the Summer of 2013, having failed to find a funded masters degree in law, in August I was lucky enough to be taken on as a research assistant on Professor Marie Keenan's substantial qualitative study in University College Dublin. *Sexual Trauma and Abuse: Restorative and Transformative Possibilities* was focused on victim and offender experiences of the criminal justice system, and was designed to explore alternative, therapeutically-informed accountability mechanisms in cases of sexual violence and abuse. This role provided my first exposure to both qualitative methods, and policing and criminal justice research. The role allowed me to interview police officers, and write critically and creatively about police practices and culture.

During my year-long work on this project, a highly significant public controversy emerged in Irish policing. Beginning in early 2014, a series of disclosures (the controversy would culminate in the 'Disclosures Tribunal' ([Charleton 2018](#))) were made by whistleblower Gardaí (members of the Irish national police force, An Garda Síochána (AGS)) to prominent left wing Irish politicians regarding the improper suspension of 'penalty points' for driving offences. What began as a marginal issue raised in the Dáil (the Irish parliament) by outspoken independent Teachtaí Dála (members of the Irish parliament) Clare Daly and Mick Wallace, evolved into a crisis for both AGS and the Irish Government, particularly as the victimisation of both whistleblowers became public knowledge.

By the conclusion of the political side of the controversy in 2016, it had resulted in the resignation of two Justice ministers (one, Alan Shatter TD, was forced to resign), and two consecutive Garda Commissioners: Martin Callinan and Nóirín O'Sullivan. As the scandal increased in complexity due to the backlash against those who had spoken out, a core cohort of Dublin's crime and policing journalists became implicated in a campaign by senior AGS officers to discredit the whistleblowers (see, e.g. ([Cunningham 2018](#))). That those same crime and policing reporters, who had close ties to senior

officers in AGS, had also failed to cover the penalty points scandal—with one of the most prominent among them having been a beneficiary of the improper and unlawful suspension of points ([Cunningham 2018](#))—put the relationship between Irish policing and newsmedia under scrutiny.

By the time I arrived in Oxford to study for the BCL law degree in late 2014, my research interest in media power and the genuine ability or interest of journalists to hold other forms of power to account had narrowed onto the particulars of the relationship between police and journalists. Added to my broad education in media criminology, which overwhelmingly casts crime and policing journalism's published products in highly unflattering terms, I was now distinctly suspicious of the culture and practices of crime reporting in national newspapers in both Ireland and the UK, and the health of its relationship to its primary sources in policing. As research access to the Irish police force AGS is extremely rare and difficult to come by ([Olinger-O'Brien 2016](#)), even for those without criminal records, I decided the UK, with its stronger recent history of facilitating research, offered far more possibilities.

2.2 Design and Planning of Research

2.2.1 Early Research Plans

Reviewing my early research design for this chapter revived some forgotten thoughts. Most striking perhaps was the relative low importance I had attached to the newsmedia relationship in police communications. 'The communicative architecture of policing' in 2016 had in mind a broad conception of police and criminal justice communications and production of knowledge. I wanted to move beyond the seemingly uncomplicated, and already researched, police-media relationship. My proposed research design in the 'qualifying test' for transfer of status at the end of my first year of the DPhil included a

variety of other communicative actors in policing: particularly the Police and Crime Commissioner (PCC) and institutional ‘partners’ of policing (specifically social care).

In 2016, PCCs were still a relatively recent phenomenon, and their disruptive status on police governance was a point of interest for a number of researchers in the Centre for Criminology in Oxford. George Whitshow, the PCC in SEP, had his own small communications team,²⁸ and I thought it worthwhile exploring the impact this had on, as I put it, the crime and policing ‘communications ecosystem’. Once in the field, I quickly realised that, in SEP at least, the PCC was somewhat of a marginal figure for journalists. For example, while Ricky, *The Post’s* crime and policing reporter, thought Whitshow was a ‘nice chap’, he infrequently sought him out for comment on day-to-day crime reporting. When covering a politically sensitive policing story—such as the police budget—the PCC did become an important source. Happily for Ricky, and unlike chief police officers in SEP, the PCC was far easier for local journalists to directly access for informal conversation. Ricky and Mido had developed a clever strategy for bypassing his communications team, by calling his home phone which remained listed online from another previous elected role.

During my police communications fieldwork, the significance of the PCC in the day-to-day culture and practices of police communications continued to fade. This is not to say that the PCC is unimportant for police communications: but, in SEP at least, the PCC seemed to me, and the journalists I observed, to serve essentially the same function that other elected figures had served before the creation of the role. Crime reporters like Ricky would use these political actors to help build a story, and often to generate some

²⁸ I later discovered during my fieldwork in SEP’s corporate communications department and through interviewing attendees at APComm Conferences that not all PCC’s had their own independent media teams. Some PCCs shared the media team of the police force they were in control of: something which some PCC media officers noted was inconsistent with the accountability function they were supposed to provide over policing.

leverage over the police media team by getting a quote or ‘line’ from them, which they would use to try to force some response. By the time my fieldwork was coming to an end, my interests on questions of identity and communications power in the functioning of police-media relations and police communications pushed the PCC further to the periphery of my study, and I decided to not pursue fieldwork with him.

My initial research design also included a significant focus on the communications dimensions to police ‘partnership’ arrangements, particularly interagency working on child abuse investigation and child protection. At that time in 2016 I was also involved in a large audit of the Irish police force’s (AGS) role in child protection ([Shannon 2017](#)). The child sexual exploitation scandals in cities around England also seemed to dominate public discourses around policing at that time, and I was particularly interested and affected by the debates given my own previous research experience on sexual violence. These background and environmental factors undoubtedly informed my early research programme, and I had hoped to, at the very least, interview people from other institutional partners on questions of communications. I did informally discuss some of these questions with social care professionals in the SEP area as part of the above Irish policing audit in early 2018, by which time it had become clear that communications were a minor and infrequent dimension of this part of interagency policing in the SEP area. The theme of ‘vulnerability’ did, however, emerge in my police communications fieldwork (see 5.4 below), though the partnership dimension was far less prominent than I had anticipated. ‘Partnership’ with other agencies in communications did feature somewhat in my fieldwork: principally police partnership and collaboration with fire and rescue services. These observations emerged primarily by way of complaints by police communicators that they were routinely expected to take the ‘comms lead’ in incidents where they might only play a marginal supporting role, as their fire and rescue ‘partners’ did not have sufficient communications

resources, or were actively ‘dumping’ media inquiries onto police. Interestingly, this mirrored the broader debate and discourse on the operational side of British policing at that time, which saw police forces picking up the slack caused by cuts to mental health and social care ([HMICFRS 2018](#)). While this was, in and of itself, an interesting finding, it was not nearly as significant as I had initially anticipated. On the media side, I found that journalists were largely oblivious or apathetic towards the increasing cross-agency complexity of contemporary British policing, and they were practically (because the police tended to respond)²⁹ and culturally inclined to prefer sources based in policing over social care. Though they were interested in child sexual exploitation prosecutions, when police attempted to communicate the complexity of the crimes this tended to turn the journalist off, frustrate them, or cause them to adopt an attitude of scepticism towards the information.

Perhaps less surprising was my accurate anticipation that social media technologies were ushering in a change in police communications. This had been identified in the limited relevant literature ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)), though its significance, particularly on crime and policing reporting, had been radically under-accounted for—and remained so in subsequent literature ([Colbran 2016](#), [Colbran 2018](#)). The Leveson inquiry as a source of inspiration loomed large in my initial design, but was, I was pleased to discover, less dominant in the research questions than I had remembered: perhaps an indication of early scepticism over the significance attributed to it in a broader context of radical change in journalism and mass communications. Indeed, the early research design rightly anticipated that I would likely find local newsmedia in

²⁹ This was not how many reporters in *The Post* felt—believing that other services, like fire and rescue, were better at answering. But I rarely if ever observed journalists contacting fire and rescue services, and on many of the occasions I did observe this, they were referred onto the police. I tended to credit this to a deeper sense of goodwill among reporters towards certain institutional sources, such as fire rescue, and health worker trade unions.

crisis: though my expectations fell far short of the magnitude of that crisis in local newspapers.

Finally, the most surprising aspect of this retrospective on research design was seeing how little time I had planned to spend observing in the key fieldsites in policing and newsmedia. I had planned to spend a mere month in the news media locally, 4–6 weeks with the police communications department in SEP, and two weeks with the PCC: around 2.5–3 months observational fieldwork in total. However, once my time in the field eventually began, its focus evolved and changed organically as it had in various ethnographies I read, and was no doubt influenced by, during this time ([Venkatesh 2009](#), [Rios 2011](#), [Goffman 2015](#)). Once I had access to a site, I felt the urge to immerse myself for as long as I was welcome in order to ‘hear and see’ as much as possible. I often felt as though I was not truly getting a handle, and was intuitively resistant to ‘moving on’ with to another site. I also, as is discussed below, feared that each fieldsite might be the last that I could get access to, and so sought to maximise all opportunities. My time in the field also diverted my attention away from an anticipated focus on a larger number of distinct communicative actors, and onto the importance of each fieldsite’s complex and richly diverse culture. In the end, I spent around five months from early March 2017 to August 2017 observing in various local newsmedia fieldsites, and around another five months from mid-November 2017 to mid-May 2018 observing in SEP’s communications department.

2.2.2 Why Observational Ethnography?

Early in the planning for the research it became clear that observational ethnography was the most appropriate method to be employed. The Leveson Inquiry and its Report which had provided such inspiration and focus for the project, was itself putatively focused on

the culture, practices (and ethics) of the British press. Throughout the inquiry, the progress of which I monitored obsessively, it occurred to me the adversarial approach to public inquiries like Leveson had some quite obvious drawbacks. Despite the legal fetish for adversarial interviewing approaches to discovering truth ([Simon 2012](#)), it seemed that journalist participants on the defensive in front of a judge and public jury were unlikely—whether intentionally or unintentionally—to give a nuanced account of their day-to-day work and the culture that surrounded it. If I wanted to understand the practices and culture (particularly its manifold unconscious components ([Eagleton 2000](#))) of a profession with a sophisticated foundation mythology as journalism possesses ([Hess and Gutsche 2018](#)), observation would be essential. As Ericson *et al* noted in their own account of method in *Negotiating Control*,

Ethnographic research is most appropriate for ascertaining the distinctive news culture that arises on each beat, and the spatial and social practices that are in accord with that culture. ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#))³⁰

Much of the existing literature on police communications and police-media relation that I had encountered was either survey ([Surette and Richard 1995](#), [Surette 2001](#), [Chermak and Weiss 2005](#)) or interview based ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Colbran 2016](#), [Colbran 2018](#)). Only Mawby had undertaken any observation in a police corporate communications department, and this was limited to a few weeks during the 1990s ([Mawby 2002](#)). The most recent scholarship from Australia ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Colbran 2016](#)) relied exclusively on qualitative interviews. There were a number of outstanding ethnographies of crime and policing journalism, but the most recent of those was in the late 1980s/early 1990s ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#), [Simon 1991](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#)). No study had yet observed both

³⁰ See also ([Van Maanen 2011](#))

police communications and newsmedia as part of a single project. Even Ericson *et al's* highly influential (for me at least) three-book ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1991](#)) account of the production of crime and policing news did not observe the police from their perspective, instead focusing on interactions with police when embedded with journalists ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#)). Given the importance and impact of Leveson on media and policing discourse and policy in this past decade, it was apparent that a deep study of the relevant cultures was an appropriate development of the literature. Given the importance of the police-media relationship in the production of knowledge on crime and policing, it was clear that both sides, and the interface, of that relationship needed study, in a single policing area. Focusing on a single policing area would allow for a deep understanding of the complex mechanics, collaborations and competitive tensions of the process.

My methodological choice was also, I am somewhat embarrassed to admit, influenced by romantic ideas I had cultivated in my first year of the doctorate from reading various classic American journalism ethnographies in the 1970s ([Tunstall 1971](#), [Tuchman 1978](#)). Having grown up in a tourist pub on the Atlantic coast of Ireland, I also arrogantly believed I could effectively charm my way into gaining access to challenging fieldsites: charm I assumed was an essential precondition to the kind of antiquated (and, I later realised, unethical) 'gung ho' early ethnographies I fantasised about undertaking. These delusional preconceptions were happily shattered quite quickly once I began to negotiate that access: some small justice against my own ego and its patriarchal machismo. While I believe these latter factors can be distinguished from the good reasons for choosing observation, they certainly added encouragement towards research questions that required those methods.

2.2.3 Interviews

Qualitative interviews formed a central methodological pillar of my early research design. My initial fieldwork, hampered as it was by access delays to the two main fieldsites, was exclusively interview based. Before I began observation, I undertook 7 semi-structured interviews with journalists. I had planned to interview participants from each fieldsite after my observation periods ended, and had also toyed with the idea of using focus groups. These would have been used to clarify themes that emerged during the observation period. However, my observation period in each fieldsite lasted much longer than I had anticipated. My data set was highly enriched by the time I started to analyse and write up, and having done some unstructured interviews during the observation period, I was not confident that I would learn anything new until I had fully come to terms with what I had. Once I had written some draft chapters on the media side, I did some informal follow up semi-structured phone interviews with some of my key journalist participants, and some additional ones I gathered along the way, to get their input on my findings. By the time I was in a position to do follow up interviews, or host any focus groups with the police communicators, I had already moved back to Dublin to save money during my final write up, making it difficult to negotiate and arrange. But most of my clarifying questions could be, and were, addressed by phone and email conversations with the corporate communications department manager, Joan.

2.2.4 Theory?

The question of whether I should develop a distinct set of ideas or higher concepts prior to my fieldwork emerged as a design issue towards the end of my first year. During that year, David Garland generously ran a workshop for doctoral students in the Centre for Criminology. From that conversation, I took the approach that it was better to develop

my concepts after having done the empirical work, as the concepts should explain what a researcher has seen. However, during my transfer of status *viva*, one of my examiners, Ben Bradford, disagreed with this approach—particularly with reference to the question of police legitimacy. In his view, I needed to have a solid conceptual foundation in order to identify what I needed to look for.

In the end, I opted for the Garland approach. The generous account is that I believed it would be more intellectually honest to immerse myself into my fieldsites to see what emerged, fearing that, particularly given my strong opinions on journalism at that point, I risked tainting my observations and findings. While police legitimacy was in my mind, it was not to the forefront. I had no idea it would become among the central points of interest of the project. The less generous account is that I was lazy. The truth was somewhere in-between. I did have some theoretical insights into (police) legitimacy, but they were based on my legal and philosophical interests, and were therefore all normative accounts. That my ‘untainted’ findings on police legitimacy (see both 6.1.1 and 8.1 below) are complimentary to Bradford’s most recent work on police legitimacy I think adds power and authority to his, and Martin’s new ideas ([Martin and Bradford 2019](#)).

2.3 Fieldsites and Participants

2.3.1 Selection

The selection of the SEP area for the study was based on a number of strategic rationales. SEP had a history of participating in research with the Centre for Criminology in Oxford, and my supervisor Professor Ian Loader had some good contacts among the chief officers there. This prior and ongoing research relationship was the dominant reason for selecting it, as I believed it would ease access negotiations. A secondary but

important reason in favour of the SEP policing area was that it contained a diverse array of news media organisations: including a number of well-established local daily and weekly newspapers, a number of commercial radio stations, and a local BBC News outpost, which contained a number of local radio stations, and a television news operation that produced a local slot on BBC television news.

I selected *The Odditon Post* as the primary news media fieldsite as it was a daily local newspaper (i.e. it produced a new newspaper 5–7 days a week), which I imagined (correctly) would mean they would commit more resources to crime and policing stories. I also actively, and with some success, sought participation from other news organisations in the SEP area, including *BBC Odditon*. As I came to understand—through fieldwork—the particular and potentially idiosyncratic nature of police-media relations in the SEP area, I employed modest snowball sampling techniques through *The Post*'s editors to find another daily local newspaper in a neighbouring policing area: *The Evening Crier* in Sunnyside. Journalists and editors in *The Post* also put me in contact, and vouched for me, with a number of former journalists and editors that had worked at *The Post*, who I then interviewed.

While I was vaguely aware that police communicators had their own professional representative organisation (Mawby had mentioned one of its previous incarnations in his study (2002)), I had not initially considered it—The Association of Police Communicators or APComm—as a fieldsite in my study. However, once I made contact with SEP's corporate communications department (CCD), the general manager Joan and media manager Emily recommended I attend APComm's annual national conference to get a sense of 'what was going on' in police communications. These three-day-long APComm conferences became valuable fieldsites, generating enormously rich data on police communicator culture and identity. As well as excellent observation opportunities, these conferences also gave me access to police communicators from around the

country's different police forces. I undertook around 20–30 unstructured or semi-structured interviews of various lengths at the two APComm conferences I attended. Though here the lines between 'interview' and 'participant observation' are somewhat blurred, and probably tend towards the latter category.

2.3.2 National vs Local

No doubt influenced by a desire to make my findings more 'relevant', in my initial research design I had proposed interviewing police communicators in London's Metropolitan police, and crime and policing reporters from national news organisations. As my fieldwork evolved, however, I consciously avoided the Met as I came to understand the dynamics of that force as far more influenced by national media and politics than the local areas I was becoming ever more interested in (an interest that would help develop my concept of the local governance field – see 8.1 below). I did, however, pursue and interview several national crime, policing, and home affairs journalists at the beginning of my media fieldwork. Anticipating that national tabloid journalists—themselves the target of much criticism in Leveson—might be suspicious of my research, I focused on broadsheet national titles, and non-commercial national broadcasting news organisations. I was also concerned that a national tabloid journalist might be more inclined to write critically about an 'ex con' like myself doing policing research, which might jeopardise my access to SEP. *The Odditon Post* was itself a tabloid in form and culture, so I decided the risks of getting a distorted insight into journalism culture by focusing only on national broadsheets would be well mitigated.

I contacted these national crime or home affairs journalists through social media—mainly Twitter, though I had some success with LinkedIn—and by email (if I could find their email address). The vast majority of these requests were ignored or went

unseen. In the end, I interviewed five journalists from national news organisations. These were all relatively short interviews—40–90 mins—which focused exclusively on the health of their relationship with the police (almost all of them spoke only about the Met, though they disputed my characterisation that they were heavily Met-focused).

2.4 The Trials of Access

Discussions of access and its challenges were present in the Centre for Criminology throughout my first year of my doctorate. More experienced researchers described worrying experiences of having access abruptly withdrawn by prisons and immigrant detention centres. I took helpful methods courses on research design and planning and ethnographic approaches to fieldwork, which often mentioned the difficulties that access can pose. Throughout my fieldwork I worried about whether or not I would or should disclose my own criminal history as part of access negotiations, or once on site. I fretted over whether to disclose at the outset, and, at the very least, get my rejection in early. I worried that if I did not disclose, that a participant or gatekeeper would inevitably Google search my name and see coverage of my prosecution and conviction for drug dealing less than a decade before, and my access might be withdrawn after I was committed to that particular fieldsite. I also reflected deeply on the ethics of disclosure.³¹ In anticipation, I scoured the literature for others who had experience of seeking access to powerful and/or secretive sites ([Monahan and Fisher 2015](#)), and who themselves might have something they were concerned about disclosing ([Phillips and Earle 2010](#)).³²

³¹ In *The Post*, I disclosed my conviction to Ricky and Mido in the pub one night early in my fieldwork. I did not disclose it to the editors in *The Post*, and I do not believe Ricky or Mido told them either.

³² While the idea of myself as a ‘convict criminologist’ had preoccupied my advance preparation for fieldwork, once in the field I rarely found the distinct insights my ‘life of crime’ provided were particularly relevant to interpreting what I was observing. However, I found the excellent reflections in ‘convict criminology’ to be stimulating and

2.4.1 The Police: Round 1

Despite the risks of interrupted access, I decided in consultation with my supervisor on a ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy regarding my conviction: some, potentially limited access was better than none. Early on in my access negotiations with SEP’s CCD manager Joan, she indicated I would have to go through a vetting process. She asked if I had ‘anything to worry about there’, to which I responded that I did have a conviction. Perhaps surprised by my answer, she responded by asking ‘was it worth it?’. I recall mumbling something along the lines that it was ‘the reason I am here with you today’. I submitted myself to SEP’s vetting, and after 6 weeks, I was told by Joan that I had passed. As my conviction was from Ireland, I suspected that the vetting process did not look beyond the UK, though I did not risk confirming my assumptions. In the end, my criminal past did not pose any obvious (to me at least) obstacles to my gaining access to any fieldsites. But I did have many other access challenges with SEP.

The initial chronology in my research design planned to begin observational fieldwork with the police communications unit in SEP, and continue with the news media. This was based on the naive assumption that once my criminal history did not pose a challenge, SEP would be an easier fieldsite to negotiate access to due to my supervisor’s connections. I had also met SEP’s Chief Constable on a number of occasions and discussed my proposal, and he had expressed (what I later confirmed was genuine) interest and enthusiasm for the project to proceed.

I began emailing and calling SEP’s media team manager Emily around mid-April 2016. This was long before the project successfully received Central University Research

a welcome reminder of the distinctiveness of my understanding of the fields in which I was embedded. See, in particular, ([Earle 2018](#))

Ethics Committee (CUREC) approval from the University's Social Sciences Division, at the start of September 2016. I had hoped that by beginning access negotiations well in advance of ethics approval, I would be able to start fieldwork immediately after getting permission to proceed. After a month of non-responses to multiple emails, I managed to get hold of Emily on the phone after contacting a senior officer who was friendly with the Centre for Criminology. After that, as requested by her, I provided an outline proposal of my project. Negotiations continued in fits and starts from then until January 2017, by which time I concentrated my efforts on Joan the general manager, and Emily's superior. I was never refused access, and indications from Joan were that I would eventually succeed. I just had to be patient. After meeting with Joan in January, she indicated that I could probably begin the following month. By the time I managed to meet Emily and the media team, and present my proposal in person, it was mid-February 2017.

That February meeting was frostily received. It became clear that my evolving relationship with *The Post* and my plan to observe in that newsroom was a major concern for some members of the media team. Despite these (at that time) unspoken concerns, after the meeting Emily implied that I could begin my research the following day. I distributed consent forms for the media team to review and sign, and advised them to contact me if they had an issue. I arrived back in SEP the following morning prepared to begin my research. Emily informed me that there was a problem: the media team were refusing to sign the forms. I was advised to go away and write out my proposal (for the third time) to be distributed among the media team to review. Emily also insisted that I seek out other participant news organisations in the SEP area to observe in addition to *The Post*, in order to get a 'broader picture of the media context' they operated in (i.e. to see news organisations they did not feel they had a bad relationships with—an approach I was in agreement with).

By this point in my notes, I was extremely frustrated. I had begun to suspect that the delays were designed to block my access. I emailed my supervisor Ian to vent frustrations, but was also conscious that I could not go ‘up the chain of command’ with my complaints for fear of poisoning whatever access I might be able to force. I was also annoyed—despite agreeing with Emily about the need to broaden my understanding of news media in the area—at what I perceived as an attempt to control my research agenda by dictating which journalists I could observe. I had only managed to negotiate access to *The Post*: other news organisations in the area were, at that time, far from enthusiastic. It seemed that the media team were making my access to them contingent on my getting access to various media fieldsites who might not wish to participate.

I was at this time also uncertain about where opposition within the team was rooted: in the manager Emily, who I had learned had been the target of particular hostility from some editors in *The Post*, or more generally across the team? In my frustration, I made a regretful and ill-advised attempt to bypass Emily by reaching out to one of the media officers who had seemed enthusiastic about my research when I presented to the team. I found his email address on SEP’s website, and contacted him to see whether there were any specific questions or concerns I could address among the media team. He did not respond. I later learned he reported my contact to Emily, and this, I was advised by Joan, had cooled the team’s enthusiasm about my proposal even further.

The decision to persist with the Odditon site may seem somewhat foolish. However, by February 2017, I felt I was bound by research funding time limits to stick with SEP while there was still some vague prospect of success. Despite the mounting delays—which were eating deep into the second of my three years of funded research time—I feared that access negotiations could take even longer if I had to begin from scratch elsewhere. I had not planned any contingency alternative fieldsites: an oversight I

often self-flagellated over. It was also clear that trust—so central to the police-media relationship (see 4.2.2.1 below)—was lacking in my budding research relationship.

I had by then secured access to *The Post*. Taking stock in early 2017, I decided to set out and try to make the most of that single, confirmed opportunity.

2.4.2 The Media

In late 2016, while I waited for SEP to respond to my requests, I had already set about negotiating access with *The Post*. Mido, *The Post's* local government reporter, was my primary gatekeeper and confidant for news media. We had met through a shared friend. This friend arranged our first 'meet and greet' date with Ricky the crime reporter for *The Post*, at a pub quiz in Odditon. While Mido was enthusiastic about my proposal, and clearly keen for me to see the value of the hard work young local journalists like them were doing, Ricky was much more cautious. Ricky feared my observations and findings might be a threat to his reputation with his boss, Diane: he was worried that talking to me before I had spoken to her might get him in trouble. Such was the power of the hierarchy in *The Post*. But, he agreed in principle to participate. From then, I stayed in touch with Ricky and we went for coffee and chats a few times. I also met with the court reporter Penny, who I planned to spend time with. These meetings served as both interviews and access negotiations. I wanted to begin my immersion with my participants well in advance of my arrival, to help build trust so that I could maximise the quality of my access from the outset. They also allowed me to hedge my bets if access was refused.

Mido and Ricky arranged for me to meet Diane the general editor of *The Post* in November 2016. An imposing, impressive editor, our access negotiation ended up being a quasi-interview in which she described the challenges facing the local newspaper industry. She agreed to permit me access during the meeting. The idea that I might be

able to shed light on the inner workings of SEP appealed to her, though I did not explain that it would be quite a while before I could publish my findings. We agreed I would come back to her when I had finished my observation in SEP.

When by mid-February 2017 it became clear that access to SEP was far from achievable, in a desperate attempt to mitigate damage to the project, I immediately sought access to *The Post's* newsroom. Where I had initially planned only a month in *The Post*, the prospect that SEP would deny access forced me to consider a far more substantial immersion in crime and policing journalism. It had, after all, been decades since a serious ethnography of crime reporting had been undertaken. I also considered seeking out a different more amenable police force to study, but the disjuncture between the two sites seemed deeply unsatisfactory, so I did not seriously pursue that option.

I began my observations in *The Post* in mid-March 2017. Given uncertainties over my access to the SEP's media team, I left my end date purposely ambiguous with the editors. In the beginning, I was expected by both editors and journalists to give detailed advance notice of when I would come into the newsroom. After a few days, I tested to see whether I could come in unannounced: this was rebuffed politely. However, within a few weeks, I had a high degree of freedom over when I could come in to observe. In the end, I was permitted to observe until late June 2017 in *The Post*, the conclusion made diplomatically clear when Diane the editor noted with faux surprise 'Oh you're still here' on a number of consecutive days.

Accessing my other media fieldsites was far easier. BBC Odditon—once their managing editor heard I was observing in their main competitor *The Post* (who they consciously denied competing with)—were enthusiastic participants. Their 'publicly accountable' public service broadcaster status, combined neatly with my 'at Oxford' status to lubricate negotiations. In Sunnyside, *The Evening Crier's* editor Deb admitted she was ambivalent about letting me in. However, her partner Phil, *The Post's* chief copy

editor, enthusiastically vouched for me, and my move there seemed quite effortless. I observed in both sites through July and August 2017. In neither of these fieldsites did I enjoy the same degree of freedom to access the newsroom. Both sites carefully limited my access to two weeks maximum, though once inside I was free to float around and ask to observe whatever I wished.

Through the entire media fieldwork part of this study, the only outright refusal of access I experienced was from an online-only news site in Stocktown called *DigiNews*. Marge, the editor of *DigiNews*, had participated in a long semi-structured interview in which she had agreed to allow observation in principle at some future time. *DigiNews*' corporate parent company subsequently began a rather radical cost-cutting rationalisation of the organisation. By the time I sought access in August 2017, Marge explained that the cuts to resources meant she did not feel comfortable trying to facilitate access. I also suspected from our conversations that she did not think her superiors up the corporate management ladder would appreciate an outside observer floating around during a time of significant change and reduction.

2.4.3 The Police: Round 2

As my time with the newsmedia naturally began coming to a close, I restarted my access efforts with SEP. By then, I was confident that even if access was denied, I had enough interesting and rich data from on local news media to write some positive original contribution to the field. Working primarily through Joan the CCD manager, who was broadly sympathetic and supportive of my efforts, I agreed to present my research proposal again, this time to the entire CCD in SEP. In October, I prepared 20 minute presentation which I gave to 30-40 members of the CCD. The reception was muted, if

not openly hostile. Consent forms were distributed to all members of the CCD. All the internal communications team refused consent.

After this presentation, I once again met with the media team to negotiate terms of access. Joan explained before that she had made clear to them that the Chief Constable wanted it to happen. While I was heartened by the continuing interest from the hierarchy, I was anxious this would undermine my trust-building quest. In this somewhat emotionally fraught encounter—one of the media team became quite agitated and raised her voice—issues about my personal relationship to named journalists in the area were raised by a number of media officers. It was clear that some believed I might leak information I acquired through my privileged access to journalists in *The Post*. That someone from *The Post* had recently made a freedom of information request for details of their individual pay and benefits was, somewhat understandably, a source of intense sensitivity.

The team specifically opposed the proposed length of observations (4–6 weeks), and it was strongly suggested that my time in observing should be limited to a couple of days—a week at most—as this ‘would be enough to see how things were done’. We negotiated a month of observations, for no more than two hours a day, three days a week, as the team feared facilitating my access would be onerous for them—a complaint I observed them make later to journalists seeking their own enhanced access. Though far from ideal, I decided to accept this, and work to extend access by building trust.

I finally began my observation in SEP in early November 2017—18 months after I first began access negotiations. I began observing for a maximum 2 hours a day, three days a week. After a few weeks of this, I stayed longer, and the media team seemed happy to ignore my extended presence. As the CCD was deep in the heart of SEP HQ, accessing the office was challenging. As my level of vetting was seemingly less enhanced than for other kinds of more sensitive research access, I was not given an access card to

get through security. As a result, every time I arrived someone from the media team had to come to reception to chaperone me through the building. This meant I also did not have much freedom within the building when I was there, and could not move freely around different teams in the CCD to avoid exhausting particular participants by my presence. It also served to announce my presence to everyone in the office.

Once I started observations, tensions did abate quite quickly, though caution about my presence never really disappeared for some members of the team. It was not until late February when managers in the CCD began asking when I planned to finish up. I was able to push full time observations until April, and finished finally in late May 2018.

The consequences for the access delays on this project were substantial. Observation in SEP did not end until the summer of 2018, a few months before my funding ran out. In order to fund myself beyond, I began teaching law in Lady Margaret Hall in Oxford. The substantial term-time teaching and administration burden of this position made it extraordinarily difficult to make meaningful progress in writing, and pushed my write-up into a fifth year.

2.5 In the Field

Including the period where I conducted interviews, along with the months of hanging out in and around Odditon, and ‘chatting shop’ with *The Post’s* journalists Mido and Ricky before and after I got access to the fieldsites, my fieldwork spanned more than 2 years. Including some breaks of a week or two for Christmas or summer holidays, and gaps between fieldsites, I spent around 10 months engaged in direct observation. In my newsroom fieldwork, I was permitted to stay on site for full working days—though I usually only stayed on site for around 5 or 6 hours to avoid tiring people out. I tried to spend 3 days a week at each site, though for BBC Odditon and *The Evening Crier*, I

covered full working weeks in each to get the most from my time-limited negotiated access. In SEP, I normally spent 2–3 hours, 3 days a week in the CCD. The APComm conferences were three days long each: in 2017 I stayed for the full 3 days, and in 2018, due to teaching commitments, I stayed for 2 days.

My approach to observations was quite similar across all fieldsites. In newsrooms, resource declines and the emergence of social media platforms as a generator of ‘leads’ on local stories meant that journalists spent much more time at their desks in the newsroom than out ‘on patch’. Only Penny, the court reporter, was routinely out of the newsroom to go to court. The editors Diane and Paula—both committed to a more traditional vision of local journalism—tried to encourage reporters out into their news patches. They did this by being liberal with permitting requests to leave the newsroom during the day. However, they still expected young reporters to produce a lot of copy, which disinclined reporters towards asking to leave. On days where I was observing Penny, I went to court with her, and watched trials and sentencing hearings in the Crown Court in Odditon, a pleasant 15 minute riverside walk from the newsroom. On days when I was with Ricky or another reporter, this usually involved being sat beside them at their desks, or just behind them peering over their shoulder as they worked. I would listen to them as they spoke to sources on the phone, and then ask them what the source had said at the end of the conversation. The other means of communicating with sources and finding stories was on social media and through email. To observe these interactions, I would peer over participant’s shoulders and watched as they used different platforms. When Ricky or another reporter was going out to a press conference or to cover a story ‘on patch’, I would try to tag along and observe as they interacted with sources. While Ricky did end up developing informal sources in SEP, this was after my fieldwork ended so I did not get to observe any encounters or conversations he had with them. I did observe him engage with a number of other

institutional sources he had cultivated himself, these were in local major employers and trade unions.

I adopted broadly similar strategies of observation in SEP. I would sit behind media officers or digital communications workers and observe over their shoulder as they worked at their desks on their computer, answering emails from journalists and police officers, writing press releases, and logging what information they had released and to whom. I would tag along as they went out to ‘facilitate’ a meeting between news media and frontline officers. I listened as they spoke to inquiring journalists on the phone, and to police officers from whom they were seeking information for a press release.

Though I tried to make my presence as unobtrusive as possible,³³ by sitting quietly as far outside of their personal space as I could manage while still observing what they were doing, I would often chat with them and ask questions about what they were doing if I needed it explained. Given the intense workloads journalists bore, I was acutely conscious that I should not interrupt or distract them for their sake. I was also concerned about maintaining the good will of the editors, who might ask me to leave sooner if they felt productivity was affected. I adopted the same approach in SEP’s CCD, more for my own status insecurity reasons than because police communicators held significant workload burdens.

Across all fieldsites I tried to rotate observing different participants doing different jobs so as not to exhaust or annoy them. In *The Post*, while Ricky was my main focus, I also spent a lot of time with Penny the court reporter, and other choice reporters doing interesting or relevant work. I also spent a few weeks on the editorial side, moving across all aspects of news production. Similarly in SEP, I moved around individual media

³³ For an insightful comment on the challenge of avoiding being ‘a participant’, see ([Fine 1993](#))

officers, and beyond the media team to observe the digital police communications team, and the campaigns team.

Before beginning my fieldwork, I had fantasised about engaging in higher levels of participation than some scholars I met had described undertaking—particularly ethnographers of education and the arts. After a month in *The Post*, one of the editors approached me to see if I was interested in writing in a fortnightly column they had about education. Seeing this as my chance to meaningfully participate and increase my immersion in local journalism, I enthusiastically agreed. I spent hours writing a short piece around 300 words long on a topic of my choosing. Confident that I had ‘nailed’ the balance between intellectual and engaging, I handed it to the editor who later emailed me to politely compliment me on the ‘good effort’ in the piece. I was very pleased. However, the column I wrote never made an appearance in the paper—nor was I ever asked again to contribute to it. There died my delusional ambitions for serious participant observation. In my access negotiation with SEP, one media officer joked that they would put me on the phone to see what they had to deal with—though I remained open to the possibility, the topic was studiously avoided by said media officer once I was on site.

My primary mode of data collection in both observations and interviews was hand written notes. I took copious amounts of field notes, filling nearly 9 A5 booklets. From the outset in each fieldsite, I decided to explain that I would take contemporaneous notes of what was going on. I would transcribe what I was hearing and seeing and thinking as it occurred. The only times I did not take contemporaneous field notes was when I was out of the newsroom/office following a participant around. On these occasions, I would type out field notes from memory at the first opportunity later that day or the following day.

Occasionally my note taking made some participants visibly anxious—though far less than I had anticipated—if I noticed what appeared to be anxious monitoring of my

scribbling, I immediately turned my notebook over for them so they could review what I was writing. This strategy worked well, and on each occasion the participant was happy to hand them straight back to me. Those who bother reading were surprised by how 'boring' what I had noted was. The media officers in SEP refused to read the notes, and joked that they were not censoring me. On a couple of occasions in both main fieldsites, midway through discussing what was perceived to be a highly sensitive topic, or a joke they feared was risqué and might make them look bad, I was asked directly not to note what was said. I always complied with these requests and assured the participants that they would not be included. Otherwise, I managed to capture the vast majority of what occurred in a fair amount of detail.

I had planned on my days out of the field to spend time transcribing and developing my hand written notes. This rarely happened. I found observational fieldwork exhausting, and I struggled to develop notes in a useful or insightful way when I still felt very close to what had occurred. As my fieldwork dragged on into the end of my funding, I took on a teaching job, which consumed a lot of energy and time when not in the field. The vast bulk of my transcribing and analysis took place only after I had concluded all observational fieldwork. This approach enabled sufficient distance and time to reflect critically and attempt to theorise what I had seen.

2.6 Ethics

Long periods of embedded observation in fieldsites pose significant ethical challenges.³⁴ This is particularly so, when participants occupying key observational fieldsites are in opposition, tension or competition to one another, as was the case for my chosen

³⁴ For an excellent, example rich, discussion of the harm ethnographic research can cause when care is not taken in establishing 'field relations', see ([Atkinson and Hammersley 2007](#))

relational study. In large part due to the process of seeking ethics approval from the Social Science Division in Oxford, I was from the outset of my fieldwork sensitive to impact I as a researcher might have on my subjects, and very concerned that my research would not harm any participants. My ethics approval was principally concerned with appropriate levels of informed consent for my subjects: covered in carefully drafted consent documents designed for each category of participant. I emailed most of my participants a consent document, and received affirmative consent either in email or in person when we met to begin observation or the interview. For a handful of participants, I acquired oral consent after explaining the project and my obligations to them. On the few occasions I had the opportunity to provide printed consent documents, I struggled to get people to provide me with a signed affirmation of their consent. They would take them with them for study, and though the person might later agree to participate, the form would not be seen again.

The other chief ethical practice of this study was anonymisation. Given the sensitive nature of the relationship between police and media, and the routine need on both sides for confidentiality,³⁵ I decided at the outset the safest approach was to anonymise all aspects of the study: fieldsites, organisations and participants. This requirement became centrally important in my access negotiations with SEP's media team, who became obsessed with this guarantee as a protection for them against any reputational harm they believed I might pose to the force and themselves. Indeed, on a few occasions, some communications staff suggested (for, I believe, genuine reasons) that I could or should not observe a particular incident, as including it in my findings would make the force identifiable. In these cases, I explained that the anonymisation

³⁵ For an excellent discussion of the challenges of confidentiality requirements in criminological research, and strategies deployed to manage those challenges, see ([Israel 2004](#))

process included removing or modifying details of incidents that would make the force identifiable, and I was, in the end, eventually permitted access.

That participants in both fields were, in many respects, powerful actors, did inform my ethical considerations and choices. Indeed, their power is a central analytical concern of this study. Yet, powerful institutions and organisations with hierarchies necessarily create vulnerable individuals lower on the internal ladder of power. The young and inexperienced journalists I studied were vulnerable to workplace pressures (bordering at times on bullying) created by the guardians of occupational culture: editors. Though police communicators I observed tended to be more empowered and protected, they were still subject to a twin management hierarchy in being answerable to both chief police officers and their civilian managers. It was important, then, that I not make people doing their work ‘wrong’ identifiable to their managers. This added a further layer of complexity in the anonymisation process.

Informed consent and anonymisation cannot capture the complex and nuanced ethical challenges that emerged in the field. For example, I became acutely concerned about my status as an older, well-educated and experienced male in the eyes of my main journalist participants Mido and Ricky. Ricky had been to university, but was somewhat immature, and Mido had completed his A-levels and the journalism practice course. Perhaps more significant was the need to maintain confidentiality between the different primary fieldsites. In SEP in particular, I was exposed to highly sensitive information about ongoing operations that journalists like Ricky would have relished knowing. Indeed, during my time with *The Post*, he and others commented that it would ‘be great’ to have me ‘on the inside’ in SEP so that I could feed them information. In each instance I firmly disabused them of the idea—pointing out that I was similarly bound to not share information about them with the police. While they all conceded this, in later meetings Ricky gently tried to ‘pump’ me for information about inner workings in SEP.

The temptation to allow participants from one side to view me as being ‘on their side’ ([Becker 1967](#)) of the tense relationship with the other was strong. It seemed that if I allowed participants to believe this, by not positively challenging the assertion, I could improve my access. Sometimes I took the opportunity to point out that I was trying to be ‘objective’, but on occasion when I felt like my position and access were vulnerable, I allowed participants to believe that I shared their perspective. After my initial rejection by SEP, in my frustration and fear that I would not be permitted access, I allowed myself at times to indulge in sharing the view *The Post’s* journalists had of the media team. I thought that perhaps they were hiding something, or that they were simply not competent. In writing up my findings, I have tried to critically interrogate my field notes and recollections to root out such fleeting biases.

2.7 Reflections

Given the hierarchical culture of machismo in local newspaper newsrooms like *The Post*, much of the chat that I participated in was ‘laddish’ ‘banter’, richly informed by the ‘gallows humour’ other ethnographers of both policing and media have observed ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Loftus 2010](#), [Campbell 2015](#), [Olinger-O'Brien 2016](#), [Souhami 2020](#)). Having worked in restaurants, kitchens and pubs for many years, and served an apprenticeship as a stonemason, this environment was familiar to me. Though I was careful to keep some distance to allow for accurate observations, once I acquired access to the newsroom in *The Post*, I quickly connected with the reporters and editors. It often occurred to me that, at least some of the time—particularly when I was actively included in the dialogue—I was being assessed: what Souhami describes as ‘a test of my marginal position’ ([2020](#)). While the race and gender dynamics of the newsroom favoured me as a white male, I was also a foreigner and a student at a renowned university. Derisive

references to ‘political correctness’ were commonplace, and it seemed that some of the editors wanted to assess whether I shared their jaded, cynical worldview ([Becker 1967](#)). This raised the well-known challenge for ethnographers of balancing the desire to maintain high levels of access to maximise data collection and its quality, with the risk that by being disingenuous, one manipulates and does ‘symbolic violence’ ([Van Maanen 1979](#), [Souhami 2020](#)) to their participants. My approach, when asked, was to try to be authentic in my views, though to avoid, if at all possible, broadcasting them unsolicited (see Fine’s excellent discussion of the lies ethnographers tell ourselves ([1993](#))). I was grateful that conversations like this never strayed into overtly sensitive topics of race, gender or disability: allowing me to avoid truly testing my integrity. *The Post*’s occupational culture was, however, broadly sympathetic to trade unions, and I chimed in approvingly from time to time when discussing stories they wrote supporting union action.

The atmosphere was significantly less ‘laddish’ in SEP’s CCD, but long stretches of good-natured ‘banter’ were still common. As I felt my position in SEP was far more precarious than any of the other fieldsites, I was consciously much quieter, anxious not to draw too much attention to myself, or fearing I might say something that would trigger their sensitivities to risk (see 6.4 below). Still, I tried to be friendly and open.

When any participant asked personal questions I was happy to share. I became quite close to Mido my primary gatekeeper for *The Post*, and also Phil the chief technical editor who subsequently became the general editor when Diane left for a more secure and lower stress role in corporate communications. After my fieldwork I would go for pints or coffee with both for catch-ups—some of which revolved around their work, but lots around our personal lives. Much later, I also invited both Mido and Ricky to my wedding. When my time in *The Post* came to an end, I was surprised at how attached I had become to the people there. They had been generous with their time and were

mostly open and enthusiastic about my presence—much more so than I experienced in SEP, though that latter experience did evolve into a positive one. Ultimately, I felt I could relate more to the local newspaper journalists than any of my other participants. I had grown up working long, stressful hours in my extended family's all-consuming pubs and restaurants, and had worked as a cook in kitchens until my early 20s. I had also trained as a stonemason before going to University. I understood and empathised with their occupational spirit of solidarity, and their cultivated attitude of *faux* defiance to authority, but also their cultural fetishisation of long hours and 'hard work'. That they were the underdog in the new media era, experiencing gut-wrenching crisis and the unravelling of a proud industry due in part to corporate greed, also appealed to my own left-wing, workplace rights political sensibilities.

My outsider, non-British status never appeared to be an obstacle. Being a white English-speaking neighbour, who some felt a vague sense of guilt and responsibility towards, perhaps helped. In truth, it seemed that my Irish accent assisted in insulating me from class judgments: a common experience I discussed with other foreigners working in England. That I was 'from Oxford University' seemed to add further to my curiosity value for many of my research participants. Across all my fieldsites and my interviews, Oxford seemed to carry substantial cultural capital: capital I did not shy from leveraging where access seemed like it might be difficult. But, once I was within, I tried to downplay or ignore the university. In *The Post*, where all but two or three journalists were my age or older, I was acutely conscious of the power-dynamics between some participants and myself. In particular, both Mido and Ricky were a number of years younger than me, and despite their confidence and savvy intuitions about power, they also seemed at different times impressed and intimidated by my education. Generally, in the newsmedia fieldsites I was treated as an interesting oddity. In SEP, while my Oxford credentials seemed to

assist me greatly among chief police officers, among the ordinary police communicators it only seemed to add to their caution and suspicion.

My own criminal history featured largely throughout this project. I worried constantly that it would be the reason for access denial or withdrawal. I worried that I would alienate or upset participants I did not share it with. I wondered if participants were researching me online. Before I undertook this fieldwork I had consciously been open about my past life of cannabis cultivation and dealing, sometimes for my own amusement at the shock value it could carry. However, through fieldwork I was plagued with fears about its consequences for the project and my future career: anxieties that have as yet remained. Yet, despite these fears, for some participants who I shared with such as Mido and Ricky, my criminal history seemed to add to my gravitas. That my crime was generally thought to be 'low level' no doubt helped. In terms of the impact of my convict experiences on my method, I have struggled to identify where that background informed a particular approach I undertook. While I entered my fieldwork with a strong suspicion of journalism, based primarily I believed on events subsequent to my conviction, I left those fieldsites with a deep empathy for its workers. Given my then recent experience researching policing and child protection in Ireland, I entered policing broadly sympathetic to police work, if quite burned by the process of negotiating access.

3 Constructing and Policing the Community

3.1 Introduction

The role of the local news media in constructing and augmenting the nature of community has received scant sociological attention. The early Chicago school, which began with a hyperactive interest in the development and change of the modern American city at the turn of the 19th into 20th centuries ([Park 1922](#), [Park 1925](#), [Park, Burgess et al. 1925](#), [Park 1929](#), [Janowitz 1967](#), [Barth 1980](#), [Stamm 1985](#), [Sampson 2012](#)), did explore the function of the community press³⁶ in those dynamic changing urban spaces ([Park 1922](#), [Janowitz 1967](#), [Barth 1980](#)). However, it appears that studies of community and newsmedia bifurcated, with the latter settling into communications studies, and the former in sociology and anthropology ([Stamm 1985](#), [Georgiou 2013](#)).

This limited literature did suggest, at least in the US context, that the local and community press performed an important function in building and shaping a sense of belonging and attachment to place and identity ([Janowitz 1967](#), [Stamm 1985](#)). Local ‘ethnic’ newspapers in cities such as Chicago were also found to be an important driver of integration for the diverse array of recent European immigrants in the city around 100 years ago ([Park 1922](#)). More recent scholarship in the US has taken these conclusions, and merged them with an asserted high cultural and constitutional value in local

³⁶ ‘Community press’ in the US context of large cities are quite distinct from their ‘local’ press. Unlike European print news media markets, which are highly centralised, American print-news media centre around their dispersed large cities. Local city newspapers, at least for much of the 19th and 20th centuries, were the dominant news organisations, with no genuinely popular daily national newspaper. Community press are newspapers which serve a hyper-local neighbourhood within a larger urban area. See ([Janowitz 1967](#))

journalism, to savagely critique corporate consolidation of local media in the US, and claimed negative consequences for community cohesion, diversity and safety ([Klinenberg 2007](#)). However, none of this older, narrow, field of US-centric scholarship demonstrates an interest in the cultural self-perception of local journalists in their role in constructing these communities. Nor, more importantly perhaps, does it consider how such a journalistic role identity might shape the production of knowledge. More recent scholarship, enamoured with the phenomenon of the ‘Global city’ and the central role of communications in constructing it, also ignores journalistic culture dimensions to the relationship between community and media ([Georgiou 2013](#)).

However, in my fieldwork, it quickly became clear that the local journalists in the Odditon area, and beyond, considered community construction (or at least representation) to be a central role in their professional field. This community-constructing role governed the relationships journalists had with the sources they used—including who should be a sources, and what kind of source status they might have. This role also shaped how journalists constructed their news stories. Through their vision of what the community was and ought to be, journalists constructed a social and communicative framework on which to produce their stories. Through their source networks and management practices, journalists identified, defined and regulated the component parts of their representation of community.

Through my newsroom observations, it became apparent too that among the most significant manifestations of the crisis in journalism (a central concern across both media chapters of this thesis) was rooted in the manifold challenges to this role and its performance in the contemporary mass communications ecosystem. The crisis in that role also impacted significantly on the relationship between journalists and sources, and the news construction process. Indeed, one of the major challengers to this journalistic role in the Odditon area were the local police, Southern England Police (SEP), who were

seeking to exploit news communications technologies and platforms to build their own vision of the community, to be directly received by members of that community.

In this chapter, I ignore any role or impact local newsmedia might play in actually affecting social cohesion, solidarity, integration and attachment to place among a community's membership: this was far beyond my research focus or capacity. Instead, this chapter provides an innovative exploration of the cultural role local journalism in England has undertaken in constructing a communicative vision of their community. Understanding how and why journalists go about trying to construct community is essential to appreciate related questions of how journalists interact with institutional sources, such as the police, and how the information regarding such institutional sources—such as crime and policing news—is constructed and disseminated. In this way, the journalistic role of community construction must be understood as a foundational feature in the production of knowledge on crime and policing. Community construction is also a key facet of journalists' role identity, the legitimation of which is explored in more detail in the next chapter.

This focus on community is a significant departure from existing scholarship examining police-media relations and crime and policing news. While it does bear some relation to the accounts which describe journalist's constructing or representing visions of social order—which crime and policing reporting performs an important role ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1991](#))—I suggest community provides a richer concept to explore the nuances and complexities of journalistic culture, media-source relations, and the construction of crime and policing news.

3.1.1 Building the Odditon Community

Eddie Prince began with and continued to discuss the 'ambassadorial role' of the editor of the local newspaper for the town – meeting with the local MPs,

answering reader's letters. This was in relation to his time in Sunnyside (at *The Evening Crier*), which he spoke of very fondly – this editorial position, like that of Diane in *The Post*, is 'not really hands on... not really involved in the day-to-day production of the newspaper'.

The editor makes more strategic decisions in the area of legal responsibility, advertising, circulation. 'The editor is the ambassador for the town' – this was the role he had when he was editor of *The Evening Crier* ten years ago. He did write back then, as he felt it was good to lead by example. 'This has all changed now, as the entire newspaper model has changed over the past decade – streams of editors have left – massive consolidation of the industry' – for example he noted 'I had 14 titles under my remit in Stockton (The *Stockton Patriot*)'. Things he did while at Sunnyside, like write letters to each MP before Xmas, were not done there by the time he took over as general editor.

[Before in] Sunnyside there was strong 'community journalism' – this is at the heart of local journalism – 'you live in the community that you serve'.

(Interview notes with Eddie Prince, former editor of *The Evening Crier*)

In Oddington, a key role undertaken by the city's local newspaper, local radio station and the local television station is the construction of a communicative representation or vision of that city. The local news organisations have claimed the exclusive role of identifying what and where the community is; who is part of the community; what are the institutions of importance within that community; and what are the community's values. Central to this asserted role is the policing of that community: the policing of its boundaries, its people, its institutions and its values. For some local news organisations—such as the broadcast platforms in *BBC Oddington*—an interesting and visually or aurally stimulating representation of that community was the primary goal. For others—such as Oddington's daily newspaper *The Post*—the authenticity or fidelity of that representation of the community was a dominant concern.

This community-constructing and policing role in local journalism is in many respects in crisis, and under challenge from a number of directions—all of which originate in the changes to mass communications wrought by the digital revolution. Before social media, aside from the somewhat limited role performed by advertising,

journalism in cities like Odditon controlled the means to both construct representations of the community and disseminate those representations *en masse* to the members of this community. The rise of social media technologies and platforms has shattered this effective monopoly. Ordinary members of the community can now generate their own competing representations of that community, and disseminate it across a potentially enormous audience. Institutional sources—such as local government and local police—can now become what Castells calls ‘mass self-communicators’ ([Castells 2009](#)). Increasingly, these sources believe that they need no longer work through, and with, journalists to construct and shape a particular meaning of community in the minds of members of that community. The promised land of social media has instilled a confidence that they can do much of this work on their own (see 5.3 below), unmediated by journalists ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Colbran 2018](#)).

In this chapter I seek to describe the journalistic practices and cultural meaning that attach to this role of constructing and policing the community. Three principal means of constructing the community (geographic patch, institutional patch, and the routine pressure to fill news outputs) are identified and discussed. I then examine the distinct and central role of crime and policing news in constructing the local community. Finally I outline the crises that pervade the construction of the community, and conclude with a reflection on the implications of these crises for the construction of crime and policing news, and for the public’s understanding of crime.

3.2 Geographic News Patch

The most immediately identifiable conception of ‘the community’ employed by Odditon’s journalists to describe what and where they reported was the concept of ‘news patch’ or ‘patch’. ‘Patch’ was used in two distinct ways: the geographic patch and the

specialist institutional patch. The latter specialist institutional patch covered the symbolically important institutions of the city: the police, the courts, education, and local government—for each of which *The Post* tried to maintain a dedicated reporter. The geographic news patch constituted the spatial reporting territory on which they (the newspaper or reporter) claimed a right and a responsibility to report. *The Post's* patch, for example, covered the Odditon city area and its immediate suburbs—including some relatively peripheral villages (depending on the story). *The Evening Crier's* patch in Sunnyside was somewhat narrower, confined almost exclusively to the Sunnyside area. *BBC Odditon's* patch was much wider, encompassing parts of Odditon's surrounding county, and some neighbouring counties. Of the handful of *BBC Odditon's* private radio competitors in the area, only one seemed to produce its own news content, dedicating at most one or two journalists to the job of news-gathering and reporting. *The Post's* Odditon patch was itself divided among its reporters: each, including those with specialist patches, were (in theory) responsible for reporting on particular neighbourhood or suburban patches in the city. *BBC Odditon*, the best-resourced local broadcast news organisation in the area, did not share this practice of dividing its patch: with only a handful of reporters on rotation on any given day, only one or two were able to develop specialist knowledge of a patch in the area.

The news organisation's patch is typically constituted by a designated geographic area over which the news organisation identifies, names, and asserts journalistic authority. The patch is also confined by the reporting infrastructure and resources of the news organisation, and by peer or competitor/neighbour news organisations' territorial claims. The boundaries of patch can, however, be remarkably flexible depending on the nature of a particular news item (see 3.2.4 below). Both the spatial nature of patch, and the flexibility in how journalists approach their respective patches, help illustrate the constructive nature of this journalistic idea of community. Community, here, is not

necessarily constructed from a place which members of the claimed territory believe themselves to belong to. However, the success of a newspaper in selling papers, or driving local online reader traffic—indicators that the people of the area accept the asserted idea of the community—is much prized by journalists. Those who are selected as members may, of course, come to identify with this concept. Indeed, the literature on ‘community ties’ and belonging suggests a complex web of cognitive, structural and process-based features contribute to individual’s sense of belonging to a particular community, part of which can often be loyalty to sports teams or local news organisations ([Stamm 1985](#)).

3.2.1 Monopoly over the patch

Dominic tells me that *The Crier* has never had any real competition within this patch – only thing was a private radio station, which is gone now.

One of the striking characteristics of contemporary local journalism in England is the lack of diversity of news organisations in particular cities and town. This is particularly the case among newspapers, which have, as in other newsmedia markets ([Klinenberg 2007](#)), undergone dramatic ownership changes. The corporate takeover of the provincial press in England has led to significant and ongoing consolidations ([Matthews 2017](#)), which has narrowed the diversity of news organisations outside of London.

But these recent, commercially-driven efforts to remove or consume competitor titles in a particular geographic patch predates the corporate takeover of local news in England. Harry Maguire, the retired veteran crime reporter for *The Odditon Post* explained *The Post’s* gradual purchase of all the titles in the area. This early (1960s–70s) rationalisation resulted in the centralisation of both editorial and journalistic resources for those, more provincial and rural titles within *The Post’s* city centre office. This consolidation of the news market in the area, which mirrored nationwide trends, left *The*

Post with a near monopoly over the printed advertising market around Odditon. This had made *The Post* an enormously profitable news operation until online news collapsed newspaper circulation by the late 1990s and early 2000s. As revenues began to stabilise *via* online news, this revenue pivot was followed by the rise of social media. Both served to decimate the advertising market for newspapers ([Rusbridger 2018](#)).

At the start of my fieldwork in late 2016, there was one small independent weekly newspaper in the city competing with *The Post*. By 2018 it had closed. As *BBC Odditon* claimed a much wider territory, leaving its journalistic resources stretched, this also left *The Post* with an effective monopoly over the creation of news for the Odditon patch. This was reinforced by the dependence broadcast media like *BBC Odditon* had on *The Post* for leads on local Odditon stories.³⁷

This monopoly on the Odditon patch gave *The Post* an exclusive and largely uncontested space through which to construct their vision of the Odditon community. This in turn reinforced an attitude in its newsroom that *The Post* was the *authentic* voice of the city.

3.2.2 The neighbourhood patch

Though often discussed in reverential tones by editors, the neighbourhood patches in *The Post* were rarely considered worthy of interest by their responsible journalists. Even where a story was considered of high news value, reporters might share or delegate the story to another reporter: a practice not seen specialist patches. Even in serious homicide cases, I observed journalists handing over a good lead to a peer in the newsroom who was not as busy. This apparently relaxed approach to neighbourhood patch sharing was in sharp contrast to the territorial culture over specialist institutional patches. In the latter

³⁷ This dependence on newspapers by BBC broadcast news journalists for their stories is noted by ([Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#))

case, it was not unusual for journalists to call each other out for encroaching on their specialist patch—indeed claims that someone had ‘stolen’ their stories was the source of long-standing animosity for some in *The Post*.

If journalists in local newspapers such as *The Post* had once been deeply embedded in their local neighbourhood patches—as people like Harry Maguire, and editors like Diane and Paula claimed—it was clear that they were now no longer capable, or interested in doing so. Part of the reason for this purported shift seemed rooted in the inability of reporters to get out of the newsroom. Local newspaper journalists are now required to shoulder substantial workloads from their specialist patches along with the other plethora of reporting duties routinely ‘dumped’ on them by editors on the news desk. For many reporters—particularly those with heavy specialist patch workloads, such as Penny (*The Post*’s court reporter)—their neighbourhood patch was something they sought to be relieved of. Penny explained feeling guilty for rarely doing stories on her neighbourhood, and described being hassled by news editors for this failure, despite her producing large numbers of court reports which were among the most popular news stories with readers. Similarly for Ricky—the crime and policing reporter—who enjoyed writing human-interest stories, and who was comfortable chatting with people in the neighbourhood, the neighbourhood patch was regretfully overlooked, and a small pleasure when the opportunity arose. This seemingly growing lack of interest in these neighbourhood patches was also no doubt reinforced by the much higher value attached to institutional patch news stories. While editors would frequently pressure reporters to ‘look after’ their neighbourhood patches, these stories were rarely as popular with the readership.

This treatment of neighbourhood patches illustrates an important tension within the journalistic vision of their community. While some journalists, such as Eddie Prince and Diane, spoke superficially about being ‘of’ the community—particularly its imagine

working class core identity—the institutional components of the city (the police, politics and education etc) were privileged. This privileging was both structural (in the organisation of journalistic labour) and cultural (in the routine reaffirmation of institutional news in the hierarchy of local news values). As a result, the institutional sources, and their respective specialist patches, dominated the ‘important’ representations of the Odditon community.

3.2.3 Human interest stories

While information from institutional sources dominated the construction of the community, journalists also prized ‘human interest’ stories. These typically involved either a stand-alone personal story from a local citizen—such as a historically-oriented piece involving an interview with a veteran on a war commemoration date (of which I observed numerous examples)—or a highly personalised account of a local citizen’s experiences (usually negative) with some institutional source. Accounts of victimisation (from ‘appropriate’ victims – see 4.2.1.3.1 below) crossed over both ‘human interest’ and crime news, and were much sought after.

Ricky takes a call from “Derek” (victim – owner of site burgled) – about a burglary – Ricky wants details – he knows that people were arrested but wants to know why the crematorium was targeted. Ricky is asking how they got in? Did they do a lot of damage to the place? But notes that they did not take anything – “Will the crematorium have to adopt more security measures?” Asks “what would you say to these people who do these sorts of things?” “Will you still be able to operate?” ... “How do staff feel about it?”

Derek explains that the garden tool cupboard was [forced] open.

Ricky wants to know the cost of the materials in the premises? If they are afraid of being revictimised? Are they angry? “Do you want to know why this was done?”

“Do you think this is disrespectful? ... 5 arrested? ... use of angle grinders is serious – not like kids hopping a wall to get in... do you have CCTV”.

Derek seems to be distrustful of Ricky – he has had bad past experience with the press ... Ricky responds by emphasising the local nature of the *The Post* – “we are not trying to do anyone” – explains the preventive goals of *The Post*’s coverage – then returns to the expensive nature of the equipment

...

When Ricky hangs up he voices frustration with the distrustful attitude the source had to him as he was a journalist – very annoyed at being equated with the behaviour of the nationals [national newspapers].

Covering the ‘human/community’ angle on a crime story, as here, reinforced the authenticity of *The Post*’s vision of the community through their personal immersive connections to its ‘people’. When this role was challenged or questioned, as it was here by the ‘good citizen’ Derek, journalists were acutely sensitive to it. In this way we see how the authenticity of their representations also often required that the relevant members of the community ‘buy into’ the authority of *The Post* to create such visions. Journalists sought therefore to report on their interactions with the community’s membership, demonstrating to their readership that while they may not be from Odditon (as most of them were not), they were still very much ‘of’ the city. For example, Gwen—a *Post* reporter without a specialist institutional patch—participated in a local charity fundraiser based on the popular national television programme *Dancing with the Stars*. This time-consuming and apparently quite onerous demonstration of civic responsibility—in a city she had to commute a substantial distance to daily—was run as a multi-story human interest piece. These highlighted both the work of a community charity (an idealised member of the community), and her own journey through the process. Gwen became a substantial part of a ‘core community values’/‘Big Society’ story, performing and embodying the values *The Post* sought to encourage/impose on the Odditon community.

Stand-alone human-interest stories typically involved the selection and representation of these ideal-types of the community’s citizenry. In *The Evening Crier*,

some pieces in this form were also designed to speak to a particular segment of their readership, and reinforce their deep community credentials to them:

On Jimmy's [a reporter at *The Crier*] phone interview, he explains it was 'just a "days of yore" profile of a local woman – not a particularly special person – just a nice piece – the older readers of the paper like these stories and features...'

Jimmy explains she phoned in on Friday and wanted to tell her story. Jimmy says that she is from 'that generation who like the local paper... it's interesting to see with that generation who have respect for the paper... they trust us... unlike the younger people who think we are the enemy... we are accused of having "an agenda" by that demographic... people see what they want in the story'

The newspaper journalists I observed enjoyed doing these stories with 'local flavour', partly because it involved a break from the relentless drive to produce content, and occasionally presented an opportunity to leave the newsroom for an interview. The stories were also the closest reporters got to the 'real' community: as opposed to the more routine institutional and bureaucratic components. Human-interest journalism in this way also served an important internal and external legitimating function for local reporters (see 4.2 and 4.3 below).

Human-interest stories were also understood to be popular with readers. For example, the digital team at *BBC Odditon* were increasing their focus on 'human-interest angles' in their general reporting. This was part of a broader change in editorial policy across the BBC to increase their 'relevance' by engaging a wider and more diverse audience share.

Sally shows me an example on the main *BBC News* homepage – points to one of the top stories:

'Kazakhstan's Rapping Babushka' (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/av/world-asia-40502231/meet-kazakhstan-srapping-babushka>) –

Sally explains that this story is something that would not have been on the

news website two years ago – the focus is much more on human interest stories now. This, Sally says, has changed how they gather news, and what kind of news stories they are focusing on.

Sally then explains that they have all been trained in SEO (search engine optimisation) – how to ‘game Google’s search algorithm’ to ensure BBC online’s stories come top of news searches. This requires them to spend a lot of time crafting headlines (while also having an eye to BBC’s ethical principles of impartiality – and the background norm of anti-salacious reporting).

They have also adopted a more ‘human approach’ to story telling – a ‘different emphasis and news judgment – less masculine – a shift in what kind of stories can be the top of the main national *BBC News* homepage.

Sally gives the example of the death of Peaches Geldoff – explains that they would never normally have led with the death of a celebrity – she was the first that the *BBC News* website had done this with, and the result was one of the biggest days of online traffic for the website.

Another example of a new news focus is an increasing emphasis on other good traffic drivers such as weather news – all these choices in terms of news coverage is being driven by data they have accumulated on audience behaviour and preferences from the website over the years.

‘AJ is doing a feature on local and regional pub games in Odditon – now looking at making it a national story on the same issue. Nobody has ever done a story on it before.’

...

AJ says the stories he wants are ballerinas, physicists – something with human curiosity angle to it – ‘... people like inspirational people – social media has really changed this focus – we now look for stories on people who are impressive.’

The deeper logics of journalists’ community constructing role identity incentivised reporting on the lived experience of the community’s members through human-interest stories. These stories also buttressed the relevance of the news organisations’ outputs to that membership. In the next chapter, we will see how both are also crucial forms of self-legitimation for the local journalists’ identity. Yet the strategy described by Sally of ‘gaming the algorithm’ to increase online audience share was not a risk-free endeavour. In the next chapter, we shall see that some journalists fear an excessive emphasis on what

is popular can erode the community building role of local journalism, and in extreme examples can also alienate the readership: both considerable threats to journalistic self-legitimation.

3.2.4 Tensions within the patch-based construction of the community

The borders of the geographic patch were policed to varying degrees by each news organisation I observed. Editors in the *The Post* and *The Crier* were generally strict about what was counted ‘in our patch’, an approach that was rooted both in their reporting capacity (where they could afford to send a reporter), and a more principled commitment to patch fidelity.

The London terror incident (Westminster Bridge attack) was yesterday – but because very little of the event was of local significance, the story ended up on page 10 in following day’s paper. This is interesting given how much attention the newsroom gave it at the time, and how much web traffic it attracted as they live-reported on it remotely using Twitter and other news sites’ material. Paula and Diane explained there was little point dedicating much serious coverage to it as they could not compete with the nationals in terms of coverage – they don’t have a reporter on the ground in London. Once they had confirmed their MPs were safe, and not doing anything of particular interest, it would not take precedence in the paper over local exclusives. Diane said if one of their MPs had been the one to try and save the police officer who was stabbed as had been done by Tobias Ellwood, they would give a lot more attention to it. I checked the local Bournemouth (where Ellwood is an MP for) paper’s website, and it had the terror attack at the top of its online running order.

(Fieldnotes, *The Post*)

Even where a news story had occupied the entire newsroom’s attention for much of the day, and where there were some connection to the community, the event was marginalised in favour of more authentically local news. The editors were also not swayed, it seemed, by intense online readership interest the story generated. Even where there appeared to be a strong city connection to a story, the editors were hesitant to approve coverage:

I note an interesting chat in the newsroom about a case study in a larger blood contamination story – it is a good case study but the woman in question lives in Warwickshire. Josie the health reporter clarifies that it was her father that was affected – he lived and worked in Odditon and was treated here too. Paula and Phil the editors on newsdesk today don't want to run the story – 'we can't' if not sufficiently local.

This careful policing of the patch's borders reflected *The Post's* editorial commitment to maintaining journalistic values and standards in the face of pressure from the corporate parent company, Shield Media, which encouraged pursuit of high-traffic online news content (see 4.3.5 below). It also reflected a cultural commitment I observed in both *The Post* and *The Crier* to constructing a vision of their community that was authentic and meaningfully rooted in the institutions and people of the area. Some stories, however, were sufficiently 'good' to override this austere rigid understanding of patch boundaries:

17:05 A Shield Media sister paper to *The Post* in a northern city sends Ricky the story they are running on the 'paedo vicar' who has committed suicide – they have the victim—who Ricky spoke to on phone the day before—under a pseudonym.

The victim has given the northern paper an extensive statement. When he spoke to Ricky on the phone the victim had said they did not want to talk – though Ricky had them on the phone for ages.

In the victim's statement they make serious allegations against the Church of England and how they sought to protect themselves over protecting children.

Ricky is a little annoyed but he understands why the northern paper got the story – the offending vicar in question just happens to live [in Odditon] now – not really a patch story, or if it is, the connection is only tenuous.

This 'paedo vicar' story³⁸ had, for Ricky, a relatively weak connection to Odditon, yet the editors had been happy for Ricky to pursue it given its sensational details crossing

³⁸ This case is discussed again in the next chapter: see below, at p 71.

multiple points of interest for the newspaper: child sexual abuse and the local Church hierarchy.

This willingness to compromise patch authenticity in pursuit of ‘good stories’ and/or those likely to generate significant readership traffic provides an interesting counter-example to the general orthodoxy. While, generally, the journalists felt duty-bound to construct an authentic representation of the city, even where those stories generated little reader engagement: journalists also intuitively understood a need to produce stories that readers would be more interested in, regardless of strict local connection. All revenue models of professionalised local journalism require, for different reasons,³⁹ volumes of readers. But it was not merely the knowledge the story would ‘do well’ with readers: the nature of the story itself, touching on serious wrongdoing by the powerful, was exciting for Ricky and the editors. This was ‘real journalism’, holding the powerful to account.

3.2.5 The Broadcast patch

BBC Odditon’s patch stretched far outside the Odditon area, encompassing a number of neighbouring counties. The borders of this patch were also far more ambiguous than *The Post*’s. This was complicated by the division of *BBC Odditon* into the three platforms it housed: TV, radio and digital (online news). Each platform had their own distinctive approach to determining their patch. Aside from reporting capacity and basic local connection, the borders of the TV patch were governed primarily by two factors: was it a ‘good story’ and were any of its competitor or parent stations covering it? The following fieldnote extracts illustrate each:

³⁹ In the *BBC*’s case, audience numbers legitimated the license fee.

After the videoconference we have a chat about judgment calls on who covers what patches – significant potential overlaps and area gaps especially given the BBC’s structure and corporate goals. London tends to have first refusal on stories. Otherwise they struggle amongst each other to ‘claim’ stories they like. For example, they like a Bareknuckle boxer story – so they call him a ‘Coinshire’ lad as they cover a part of Coinshire.

...

Interesting discussion between Nancy and Sanja (TV journalists in *BBC Odditon*) on how they decide what is theirs or not – depends on things like the kind of story (if ‘good’ they will want it as theirs); if they have a reporter who knows the area (access); if their viewers will have some connection there (Odditon residents may work/shop/socialise in Stocktown).

The radio’s patch in *BBC Odditon* appeared to be the most deeply rooted in the Odditon area, yet much of their key news programming seemed to stretch the ‘local’ connection to breaking point. One radio producer explained the norms that guided their content selection for discussion:

Content on the show is ‘local-led’ – ‘what’s the thing that everyone is talking about’ – ‘try to reflect national (and international) news in a local way’ – ‘less about localising and more about making it relevant to you’ – ‘we also try to make it relevant across the country’.

BBC Odditon journalists across the three platforms generally saw themselves as local reporting outposts for the national *BBC News* infrastructure: a local component of the national patch, which they all had duties to feed into. While getting a story into national news programming was highly prized, the hierarchy of the public organisation also required deference to the ‘big names’ in *BBC News*, should you be successful:

When I arrive in Emma (a television producer) is listening to clips – looking for something new – a fresh news line. This is not a very local story but she does not mind (I note at the time how the BBC is institutionally more nationally minded in terms of journalistic culture)... ‘We send head office our best prospects each day – they decide if they will run it on the national channels.’

When head office sends one of their correspondents down to cover a story on your patch it is called 'being bigfooted'. They may use us for the first images but then they will use their own people do their main coverage (this is where hierarchy kicks in – national channels versus local). If this happens they cannot really run the same story in their bulletin – unless we do a different and more local angle on a big local story.

Digital journalists at *BBC Odditon* were even less committed to a local Odditon patch. They unequivocally viewed themselves as a national newsgathering unit, which happened to be based in Odditon. The digital team's content aimed to feed directly into the national and regional *BBC News* pages. This national focus disinclined the digital team from treating the Odditon area as a site of importance or significance, which was reinforced by the dispersal of their editorial oversight to a team far outside the Odditon area:

I talk to Marcus a digital reporter about whether they would publish a story on a Southern England Police press release – he said 'maybe' ... But he also notes that the sub editors in Birmingham – who are the 'gatekeepers' for stories – have a higher threshold for what they will accept as a story for the digital page...

...

[Regarding the digital] editor in Birmingham, it is explained to me that they have a big operation there – they have a data unit; and engagement team – their dedicated editor represents the Odditon team when the decisions are made about who gets the homepage features slots ('it's very competitive to get one') ... Sally tells me that the news judgment between different teams is quite different. Digital is a national platform she explains, and in digital they don't do as much as radio in terms of volume of stories... they are much more discerning...

Unlike TV and radio, whose formats necessitated getting reporters and technicians out of the newsroom to capture audio and visual content for stories, the digital team's approach to newsgathering also disinclined them towards connecting with the local patch:

I ask where digital get their stories: "Press Releases – Wires – Crowdtangle the latter of which I had never heard of – but it is explained that it is a social media aggregator/monitoring tool – Sally explains that it allows them to make lists of FB pages and websites and monitor which ones are doing well

in terms of engagement etc. Sally says it does not work well for them locally but works well nationally.

At root, the digital team appeared to have developed a self-perception that encouraged and justified detachment from the locality.

I chat with AJ about the differences between *BBC* and *The Post* – how *The Post* reporters publish around 2-3 stories a day. He explains that they are more ‘selective’ here about what they publish – ‘not really a local audience... national and international.’

AJ concedes that: ‘*The Post* are better for Odditon’.

3.2.6 Conclusions on geographic patch

At multiple levels local newspapers like *The Post* and *The Crier* position themselves as the authentic voice of the community. Through strictly policing the spatial borders of the patch, *The Post* claims to construct a faithful representation of the Odditon community. Unlike local news broadcasters like *BBC Odditon*—whose news platforms and values privilege audio-visual elements—*The Post*’s threshold for newsworthiness permitted it to comprehensively report on the city. *The Post*’s publication objectives (i.e. filling the daily/weekly newspapers)—many times that of its broadcaster competitors—and rapidly decreasing reporting resources, also inclines it towards an intense focus on the Odditon area for its stories. At a newsroom cultural level, *The Post*—unlike *BBC Odditon*—also sees itself as intimately a part of the Odditon community.

3.3 The Institutional Patch

As noted above, alongside the spatial concept, ‘patch’ was also used by journalists to describe the institutional ‘news beats’⁴⁰ of the city. *The Post’s* institutional patches included: local government and politics, the courts, crime and policing, healthcare, education, arts and entertainment, and sports. Institutional patches are *the* principal means through which journalists and news organisations construct their particular representation and vision of the community. Institutional patch journalism identifies, labels, describes and polices the institutions of symbolic importance within the community.

The reason for the primacy of institutional patches in the journalistic construction of the community is twofold: firstly, and of most practical importance, the institutional sources around which these specialist patches were organised provided reliable and consistent sources of information which could be used to create news stories.⁴¹ These institutional sources typically contained professional communications staff to facilitate journalists’ queries, and who produced regular press briefings which could be easily used to create news content in order to meet the journalists daily news production obligations. This pressure to meet the news organisations’ output quota structurally inclined reporters to focus on these institutional sources.

Secondly, these institutional sources were deemed by journalists to be the most symbolically important dimensions of the community. Though not necessarily borne out in their own readership data (see 4.3.1 below), journalists explained that these patches

⁴⁰ ‘News beat’ the term used by journalists in the US: though adopting the US terminology would possibly have avoided confusion, I have adopted the terminology of my research participants in developing this concept.

⁴¹ Heavy reliance on institutional sources for the construction of news has been observed repeatedly in the literature. See ([Tunstall 1971](#), [Chibnall 1977](#), [Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#), [Tuchman 1978](#), [Fishman 1980](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989)

were built around the institutions ‘the people want to read about’. Others offered deeper normative justifications for these patches, based on conceptions of civic duty—‘service’ to the people/community—or based on the media’s role as an accountability mechanism (‘truth to power’ etc) ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#)).

The institutional patches of *The Post* were almost exclusively concerned with public power, rather than private power. The only exception was the sports desk, whose journalists primarily reported on the privately-owned local professional football team, Odditon United. While major private sector employers in Odditon were often of interest to the news organisations, and a handful featured regularly in prime reporting position while I was doing my fieldwork, no distinct patch attached to them.⁴²

Whether rooted in the structural bias towards information access in these institutions, or a cultural perception in local journalism that they were the most important, or both, this privileging of the institutional features of the journalistically-determined geographic patch had also evolved a hierarchy of importance within newsroom occupational culture. Local government/politics and crime and policing both, for different reasons, sat near the apex of importance. The former, despite regularly attracting low levels of reader engagement, held high cultural value among journalists: political power is a central concern of journalism ([Tunstall 1971](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1989](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1991](#)). Crime and policing (including criminal court reporting) on the other hand consistently attracted the highest readership interest.

⁴² Mido, *The Post*’s local politics/government reporter discussed Diane’s various attempts to get add a local business reporting role onto his primary local politics reporting, which he successfully deployed various strategies to resist, primarily to avoid being overburdened with work.

3.3.1 The local newspaper as an institutional archive for the community

At lunchtime each day, the various editors of *The Post* would gather at Conference in what was once the Group Editor's office in the corner of the abandoned part of the newsroom. Here each candidate news story was subject to ritualised and often harsh critique by the predominantly male editorial team. Each would draw heavily upon their individual and the newspaper's collective knowledge of the city to determine if the story fitted into an existing pattern of institutional behaviour or failure.

12:30 conference – Diane the editor sits behind the desk, we all – newsdesk, Sport and subs [sub-editors]) sit in a circle around her – while each person – beginning with sport, runs through the 'Live list'⁴³ and forward planning⁴⁴ – explains a story to her. Diane interrogates each, questions the angle⁴⁵ being taken on it – and if she feels something is being missed, asks why it hasn't been picked up on. A laddish joking vibe in the room – everyone pitches in and offers their thoughts on a story – quite an open collaborative discussion on what is a good way to explore a story – whether they have done anything on it before – they are mining their shared institutional knowledge of the city and its politics. But highly deferential to Diane – a very clear hierarchy – if she wants something done, she does not like to hear reasons for why it has not been done.

...

(notes from a later Conference meeting)

Diane interjects with a tip on a village's opposition to a development. Drawing on her background knowledge of the community to identify and also enrich stories – I also note that although Diane is not local, she has a number of years experience there – but not that many. I suspect her dedication to the role places a duty on her to immerse herself in the area. She does live near Odditon. I am reminded of what Eddie Prince said about the role of the editor in our interview: 'ambassadorial role'.

The search for, or sensitivity to, patterns in the life of the city was not confined to Conference, and operated as a strong organising norm in the news-gathering and production process by journalists. Indeed, patterns of institutional behaviour deemed

⁴³ The list of stories planned for the following day's newspaper.

⁴⁴ The list of stories expected to be produced for various future newspapers.

⁴⁵ The critical or normative position the newspaper would adopt in approaching and building the story.

pathological carried substantial newsworthiness and were always deemed worthy of exploration ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1991](#)):

Eddie comes over to Ricky and asks about the stabbing at the end of May – the Townsend [[a suburb of Odditon](#)] murder – in print. Eddie says he cannot find the article online – Eddie has gotten Hannah (another reporter) to talk to her contact (in the police) and see what’s going on – [Eddie] thinks there has been an arrest – perhaps related to another recent murder? Eddie feels like there is a connection between the two killings – Eddie clarifies to Ricky that if it is just ‘regular crime stuff’ that’s fine – but he wants to make sure there is no feud going on that they need to be aware of.

The Post also possessed a material archive on Odditon, which was divided between the newsroom’s library, containing older hard copies of the newspaper, and the digital archive of more recent newspapers, contained on Shield Media’s shared intranet. As *The Post* had made their librarian redundant, few of the young reporters had the time or inclination to explore the now dark, dusty and chaotically disorganised library as a resource. When writing a story, reporters did search the online archive looking for stories related to an issue or theme they were working on. Identifying patterns helped enrich and flesh out a story, but also buttressed the authority behind their community-building role through contextualising the story in the history of institutional failure: a written history they controlled.

Senior journalists such as Paula in *The Post* and Deb, the editor in *The Crier*, placed high cultural value on their physical libraries as an important resource for the newspaper and the community. The library provided a deep connection between the newspaper and the city or town it was located in. In providing a comprehensive and detailed history of the city, it also provided an important public service for its community ([Webster and Habte 2019](#)).

...Deb explains how they had to really fight Shield Media [*The Crier*’s parent company] to keep their library in the move following the sale of their city centre home building. ‘They [Shield Media] wanted to dump it – they just

don't see the value of the library for stories – it's an archive of the city – historic stories are good for advertising – they also ignore the material connection this kind of a resource gives them [the paper and Shield Media] to the town.'

Along the walls of *The Post's* enormous (and now mostly empty) open-plan newsroom, there were a variety of photographs charting the evolution and change of both Odditon and *The Post*. The near 100-year history of *The Post* in Odditon was a source of shared pride, as it was for *The Crier's* journalists in Sunnyside. However, this connection to the community was of little interest to the newspapers' distant corporate parents—an attitude which fed into journalists' hostility to management. For example, one senior editor in *The Post*—who soon left for related reasons—bitterly recounted a visit from a Shield Media executive to *The Post's* newsroom. The executive had commented that the old historic photographs on the newsroom walls should be removed, as they made the newsroom look out-dated: 'it should look like Google in here'. The irony of such an observation when the newsroom building itself was decaying due to chronic underinvestment was not lost on either of us.

This idea of the local newspaper as a living institutional archive of the city is central to local journalists' ability to construct their *authentic* vision of the community. Ownership of this resource adds authority and legitimacy to their asserted right to identify and label the institutions of public importance: to construct the institutional representation of the community. It also provides an important resource for the newspaper to police their own representations, by offering 'empirical' data to back up the labelling of certain institutional actions as deviant. That their primary competitor in the BBC lacked such a deep connection to Odditon only added a greater sense of authority to their claim of authenticity.

The structuring of journalistic labour around the specialist institutional patches similarly reinforces this living archive status. In creating, entrenching and inheriting the

institutional patch, the newspaper builds an authoritative culture around that specialist role, which feeds the cultural belief that they are the appropriate determiner of that institution's history, and the legitimate evaluator of its current. Taken together, the material and conceptual aspects of the newspaper as an archive of the city were key legitimators of journalists' community role identity.⁴⁶

This powerful self-conception of the newspaper as the living archive of the city served to inform journalists' interactions with institutional sources. It empowered journalists to make routine demands on institutional sources for privileged access and exclusive information.⁴⁷ The emergence of the distinct communications culture within sources such as the police, with its own growing communicative history and archive, fundamentally challenged this key source of journalistic authority in their source relationships.⁴⁸

3.3.2 Ownership of an institutional source

The need for reliable and useful sources of information ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#)), combined with a strong cultural understanding of what sources of power mattered/counted in the community, creates a complex structural and cultural tendency towards heavy reliance on institutional sources in their communicative representation of the community. When brought together with the journalists' community-constructing role identity—and the exclusivity expected within that role (see 4.3.7 below)—it generated a powerful sense of journalistic ownership over the institutional sources. This

⁴⁶ The centrality of self-legitimation of role identity by journalists to the production of crime and policing knowledge production is addressed more expansively in Chapter 4 below.

⁴⁷ See below, at 4.3.7.

⁴⁸ See above, at 4.1.4.

authorised journalists to both construct an idealised version of that source, while also claiming the exclusive right to police it.

When sources were seen as highly facilitative of journalists' needs—e.g. face-to-face, exclusive access to 'real' frontline investigating police officers (see 4.3.7.2 below)—journalists treated the source as 'one of ours': highly idealised representative examples, embodying the best of the community's values. One such example was the former Odditon Police Commander Daniel Richards. Richards had an engaging, personable, 'everyman' demeanour and was seen by journalists and police communicators as 'media savvy'. He was also a 'local boy', who had 'worked his way up' through the hierarchy of SEP to achieve high rank by a young age. In one of Ricky's interviews, Richards described being police commander of his home town as his 'dream job'—one he regretted leaving as he continued his inexorable rise through SEP's ranks. Richards embodied a variety of *The Post's* community values: meritocracy, hard work, family values and loyalty to the community. This, and his wise management of *The Post*, meant he was often the subject of positive, even protective, treatment from the paper.

However, source 'ownership' also manifested itself in adversarial relationships with institutional sources. During my time with *The Post*, the relationship between the newspaper and SEP was poor. Shane Jordan, a former news editor, suggested this was a historic hostility. Younger reporters, such as Ricky and Mido, laid the blame on Leveson's fallout. Most tension I observed appeared the result of SEP's resistance to access demands from *The Post*. Indeed, SEP communications staff complained regularly that *The Post's* journalists treated SEP 'like they own us'.

Institutional sources regularly experienced hostility when journalists' 'right of access' was resisted or constrained.

Mido texts Paula, explaining an interviewee (later turns out to be an NHS Trust meeting he had attended) is saying he now has to go through a

communications person even though they had agreed Mido could interview today.

Paula calls him back immediately... Mido puts Paula on to a woman at the NHS trust and Paula asks what the problem is – Paula challenges her on why she is not releasing a document to Mido – ‘[This is] not standard procedure... It is bizarre in terms of transparency not to give us the report... what do you want the reporter to do?’

Paula is furious – she says it is a publicly available document, but they are not permitting the press to remove it. Paula wants to speak to someone higher up the chain of command – wants to speak to the person who made the decision/policy on not releasing the document.

Paula explains to me that Mido was chased out of the meeting when he took a copy of the draft – she is annoyed – wondering aloud with Diane (who reinforces and amplifies her vocal outrage) as to how long the policy has been in place. Diane chimes in ‘what have they got to hide... we can do a story on their refusal to hand over the document.’

Paula explains to me that sources like the NHS ‘need to trust us’ – they won’t run a story without going back for comment. ‘Trust is essential – if they trusted us they would have released the report’. Paula tells Mido that they are going to do a story about it.

Paula then asks about the new shopping centre development story again – gets outraged at the response – sounds like the PR company managing the development spoke to the BBC national journalists and ignored *The Post’s* request – ‘wanky PR shit ... excuse my language’

When institutional sources persevered in constraining the access the journalists felt they were due—whether being given a copy of a particular document, or having their questions answered satisfactorily—journalists would threaten to write negative stories about the source’s lack of transparency. Often, if the police refused to answer particular questions, this was noted in the story. On one occasion SEP required journalists’ questions to be submitted in advance (which the journalist described as ‘vetting’) of a press briefing over a public safety incident. When the police refused to answer questions deemed overly speculative or beyond their expertise, the journalist posted screenshots of their answers on Twitter to illustrate broader claims of lack of police transparency.

3.3.3 Verification and the Hierarchy of Source Credibility

Verification is woven through the routine practices of ‘good’ news-gathering and construction: at least where the story emerges from a non-institutional source. Tip offs from members of the public or organisations that were not part of the preferred institutional apparatus of the community required verification: in part to ascertain the status of the non-institutional source,⁴⁹ and also to protect the authenticity of the journalists’ community representation. Verification typically involved querying the information with the relevant institutional source. As noted by other scholars ([Becker 1967](#), [Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#)), this privileging of preferred institutional sources reflects a ‘hierarchy of credibility’ in determinations of ‘truth’.⁵⁰ Another feature of the hierarchy of credibility, or trust in sources, saw journalists seeking to protect their preferred sources from challengers. For example, in one incident a local charity alleged a racist incident had occurred in a public park. BBC journalists were extremely cautious about labelling it ‘racist’, particularly after it emerged one of the alleged offending group happened to be a local Fire Chief—a source familiar to local journalists:

Joseph comes over to update me on the story of alleged racist attack in the park ...

Joseph seems to have spent quite a bit of time on this story – appears to be approaching it with care and caution – wants to make sure to get this [the Fire Chief’s] side of the story – Joseph feels he is a credible source (this person is a fire chief – someone they have done stories with before in that role – they have a file on him).

... Joseph is clearly more sceptical of the [victim] family’s side of the story now. Joseph’s increasing scepticism seems to be at least in part rooted in the refusal of the family to hand over video evidence, a lack of transparency which Joseph feels is suspicious.

⁴⁹ See Chapter 4 below, at section 4.2.1.3.1.

⁵⁰ See Chapter 4 below, at section 4.2.2.

Ricky in *The Post* also covered this story, and the paper was even more circumspect in its coverage, refusing, unlike the BBC, to use ‘racist’ in its headline on the incident. Ricky had clearly also spoken to the Fire Chief—who seemed to have proactively contacted local media about the incident. While Joseph in the BBC was keen that they tell ‘both sides’ of the story, it was very clear from all the coverage of the incident that the preferred institutional source was immediately considered more credible. While, it was not unusual for journalists to develop stories based on an initial lead given by a ‘concerned citizen’, these stories were always ‘verified’ with the relevant institutional source. This process allowed the journalist to hedge their community constructing activities against the symbolically important community institutions that served as their dominant sources.

3.4 Pressure to Fill! The Routine Construction of news/community

3.4.1 Routine Strategies for Creating the Community

The last key means through which news organisations construct visions of the community centres around the need for news content to fill the particular news output objective: the daily/weekly newspaper; the news bulletin; the current affairs programme. This routine pressure to fill necessitates a temporal routinisation of news-gathering. Calendar events within the community that are consistent and reliable generators of news content constitute the routine construction of the community. Public holidays, annual fairs, Christmas, school holidays, May Day: all provide a predictable source of community-relevant content that fits neatly within both geographic and institutional/thematic patches. Like the geographic patch, this temporally-routinised construction of news also serves to ground the representation within the lived experiences of the audience/readership. By proactively building the news output in this

way, local news organisations create a representation of the city's community as a routine: a historically-grounded community, with a shared culture and identity ([Hall 1992](#), [Robel and Marszolek 2018](#)), with predictable rituals for reinforcement.

William the sports editor explains a lot of their content is pre-determined by the day they are writing – for example cricket is on Monday, Wednesday and Friday at this time of the year. Saturday has the youth cricket. 'We sponsor a youth football league – this gets the cricket some space during the football season'. William says they never put the schools page online – 'the only thing we require people to pay for by buying a newspaper'.
(Fieldnotes from *The Post's* sports desk)

Other strategies were also routinely deployed to generate news content. The increasing availability of data on public bodies through transparency measures also provided rich potential when tip offs or press releases were in short supply.

... [Ricky] says he has very little material on the go today – he is 'scratching' for stories – he is considering looking at some FOIs on SEP. He has a list of topics he found online – likes the idea of getting details of the most expensive police investigations, but he needs to word it carefully or else the police will refuse and say that fulfilling the request will be too expensive for them to comply (a ground they can invoke to refuse requests).

He tells me he got the list from a website called 'FOI Friday' (<https://davidhiggerson.wordpress.com/tag/foi-friday/>). This website used to send out lists of FOI ideas – he tells me that FOI has been really valuable to journalists: it gives new levels of access – 'but need to word them carefully'.

The intense drive to fill was also shaped by the aesthetics of the particular platform or medium. In the case of radio news, a source's usefulness is determined as much (if not more so) by how well they are able to perform when interviewed by a journalist. 'Chatty' or 'engaging' sources become part of the routine construction of news, as they are returned to for comment on contemporaneous news. Just as the drive to fill inclines journalists towards reliable institutional sources, the needs of the medium incline them

towards particular personalities who over time can evolve to become the symbolic embodiments of the community.

3.4.2 Routines for interpreting the community

Mirroring the routine strategies and practices designed to generate news content, journalists also deployed routine normative lenses through which to interpret, evaluate and portray that content. Values of ‘good governance’ predominated, with fiscal profligacy seemingly the principal bureaucratic sin of interest. In the following extract, Ricky’s coverage of an environmental crime is examined almost exclusively through the lens of fiscal imprudence—blended with a darker, indirect, racial undertone.⁵¹

Ricky makes another call about the illegal ‘superdump’ story – to the county council – ‘the problem... it costs hundreds of thousands of pounds for taxpayer... do you understand people are annoyed that it’s returned... where does the council go from here ... who do you think is doing it? ... it’s been going on for years ... since 1993 ... how are you going to catch them... it’s a difficult one ... understand you don’t want to say... is it right to say that CCTV was vandalised ... what do you say to people who say it’s never going to get solved ... case of manpower on the ground ... how much is it going to cost to remove...”

Ricky goes straight over to Paula to update her after the phone call – Ricky is annoyed – pushing the cost issue with the story – annoyed at them ‘tip-toeing around’ blaming the Travellers. Says his favourite ‘it’s a disgrace’ line a few times.

⁵¹ In this case the ‘superdump’ was located beside a Traveller halting site. Ricky’s view—perhaps informed by off-record information I was not privy to—was that the people living on the site were responsible for the dump and its reappearance. He wanted to get an official on record to blame them, so he could do the same in his story. While questions of race did not arise frequently in my fieldwork, this was a particularly memorable example of what appeared to be racist assumptions of wrongdoing. Even now, it is hard to escape the feeling that had the dump been situated beside a working class housing estate in the industrial heart of Odditon, where *The Post’s* main readership lived, the assumptions would have been different. My sensitivity to this kind of racism, and perhaps not to others that may have been present, is no doubt rooted in my being Irish, where anti-Traveller racism is highly normalised.

He is particularly annoyed that the council is shutting down their side of the story – said to him they have given enough information out – now they are worried it is turning into a ‘negative story’ [i.e. racially-charged].

Ricky then goes back and updates his piece on the superdump – redrafts the introduction to focus on the cost, and the fact that there [are] no suspects being sought.

He works in an email response from the council’s press office – finds it hard to get first lines down – blocked – goes over to Mido (‘my Consigliere’) for advice on how to word and structure the piece with the angles he wants to take. He’s excited now that he is in the flow – makes his presence most felt when he feels like he is on to something – stomps around the office – big presence – lots of noise – quite funny.

Specialist patch reporters also drew on their own knowledge of the history of institutional sources, and on the collective knowledge of the newspaper in its archive of reporting, to interrogate the behaviour of public bodies and identify patterns of perceived misbehaviour (see 3.3.1 above). This specialist knowledge of the patch also provided for editorial consistency on a particular theme, and, importantly, made the production of new news content more efficient by enabling journalists to fit contemporary information into preformatted critical approaches:

Next job – the ongoing strikes story – Ricky goes back through past newspapers – looking at how he covered this story before – uses a paper from the stack on his desk. Refreshing his memory – he wants to stick to the theme/angle they ran in the past.

Throughout my time at *The Post*, I observed journalists engaging in the routine review of documentation following well-trodden news ‘angles’. For example, on one of his specialist patch stories, Ricky reviewed publicly accessible attendance records for the local authority police and crime panel, looking for patterns of poor attendance. I was drafted into the exercise—one of my few opportunities at participant observation. However, this routine mining of official data for typical examples of institutional failure occasionally pursued atypical critical angles. For example, Ricky also explored crime

statistics looking for patterns suggesting a negative impact from austerity on local policing budgets (somewhat ironic given the pre-interpretive expectation of fiscal profligacy). Editors, however, met Ricky's enthusiasm with thematic conservatism—cautioning against departures from routine, towards what they feared was narrative complexity:

I chat to Ricky who is doing a story on crime statistics – he pitches the story to Eddie, his editor today on the newsdesk – the idea is that he would connect the statistics released publicly today to the comments made by the Police Federation chief about the impact of cuts to the police budget. Ricky wants to show a correlation or connection between the reduction in resources and the rise in crime across the SEP policing area (but particularly the areas around the city and in the city that are relevant to their readership – in their patch).

Eddie demands a review of the stats with Ricky

Ricky is talking about the cuts to certain frontline policing services – traditional neighbourhood stuff – to cover more complex kinds of crime that the police are focused on now: 'Joe Public don't care about this (the more complex crimes)?'.

Eddie is sceptical about the link, he wants Ricky to come up with some evidence that the rise in petty crime and violent crime is related to the drop in neighbourhood policing.

Tells Ricky to first concentrate on identifying what crimes have been rising – he likes the bigger narrative Ricky is getting excited about but wants Ricky to focus on getting the basic story – the actual figures – correct, before he starts picking it apart and developing hypothesis about the correlation.

Ricky is very excited – bangs on the desk to emphasise the points he is trying to develop – says 'we can get multiple bites of the cherry on this' (i.e. more than one news story) – Eddie and the rest of the newsroom are mildly amused by his behaviour.

The effect of these particular, highly-structured and routinised strategies for meeting news output goals was to construct an often simplistic and cynical representation of the community's institutions as wasteful, inept, disorganised, and, in the worst cases, corrupt. While time-constraints and editorial pressure militated against nuance, some journalists, such as Ricky here, attempted to explore broader and more complex themes, such as

austerity and institutional stress. Yet, even these forays were policed by the editorial hierarchy who asserted the ultimate authority to determine what constituted the appropriate policing of the community alongside their final say on what constituted the community.

3.5 The Role of Crime and Policing News in constructing the community

3.5.1 Geographic Patch

Crime and policing news provides a key journalistic theme around which local news constructs the community. Crime stories, with their richly descriptive and emotive accounts of crime scenes and surrounding neighbourhoods, construct visual representations of the community. In *The Post*, when a crime story was breaking, such as a serious assault or homicide, they immediately dispatched a reporter to the location, partially in the hope of getting information from the public, or less likely, from the police. However, capturing pictures of the scene were also crucial: ideally by their photographer, though now, due to cuts in photographer numbers, more likely by the reporter on their smartphone. For *BBC Odditor*, the need for visual representations of such scenes was essential. These representations play heavily on audience curiosity around crime,⁵² and their sense of physical insecurity,⁵³ grounding their account of the familiar. Crime stories inevitably always included comment in some form from the police—balancing the construction of the community under threat, with the prospect of security being restored by the appropriate community institution ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1991](#)).

⁵² Crime news features high on the audience news preferences ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#))

⁵³ See, e.g. ([Pearson 1983](#), [Garland 2001](#), [Ramsay 2012](#))

Ricky was desperate to build his relationship with SEP such that he would have regular access to a neighbourhood Sergeant: access that would move to different parts of the city every four to six weeks. This was a standard local crime reporting approach, a primary objective of which was to create a reliable source of exclusive, highly-localised community crime news. But this granular, neighbourhood-by-neighbourhood approach to crime news complemented their community-building through neighbourhood geographic patches. It sought to signal to the readership that the paper was engaged with the micro-local issues of the city. Crucially, it allowed the newspaper to join the policing of these social problems, through their highlighting and labelling the harms to the community, and occasionally in calling for action. At a time when SEP, and other police organisations, were cutting back substantially on community policing, it allowed the local newspaper to demonstrate their community credentials while exploiting the insecurity of their readers.

3.5.2 Institutional Patch

Local newsmedia tended towards positively representing the police as guardians of the community's security.⁵⁴ In identifying closely with the interests of the police—public safety, crime prevention and detection, victim vindication—the newsmedia seek to construct a vision of a community which prizes social order ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1991](#)) and security. However, as noted above, the police are also an important source of stories on institutional failure and incompetence: crime news provides a valuable platform for journalists to police the police. Local crime and security issues, and their

⁵⁴ In numerous interactions across local news media organisations and platforms I noted complaints from journalists that the relationship with the police was in the latter's interest as they were both 'on the same side' in the business of crime control.

solutions, are characterised as straightforward (i.e. not complex) social issues,⁵⁵ which journalists claim a high degree of exclusive⁵⁶ authority to comment on. Perceived failures to deal with ‘simple’ crime problems are therefore ripe for critical appraisal by the press. Combined with a cultural perception among journalists that despite negative coverage, the police still ‘need’ journalists (for victim appeals etc.), this sees crime and policing news provide an important forum for journalists to police the institutional apparatus of their community. The police are not alone among criminal justice agencies within the policing remit of the local journalist. How, and in what quantum, punishment is imposed is also part and parcel of their policing role:

Diane asks Ricky about a story she wanted to do about ‘paedophiles getting suspended sentences’ [this relates to people being convicted of possession of child abuse images, and their getting suspended sentences] – Ricky explains he is in discussion with Penny about the story. Diane presses him about it – the case she is considering involved the offender distributing images of child abuse – ‘nobody seems to be facing prison’...

Ricky says that Penny wants to talk to lawyers to get a comment on this – and Ricky wants to do an FOI on it – he or they think they need to break it down into different kinds of offenders. Ricky wants the figures to back up the story.

Journalists’ authority to police the criminal justice system is typically rooted in claims of ‘what the people want/expect/need from their police’. In appropriating democratic authority—the voice/representation of ‘the people’—journalists source legitimacy for their asserted role in police governance and accountability by constructing their own embodiment of the community. This community construction is also strategic, as it seeks to leverage access to the source. On numerous occasions, particularly where criminal investigations were ongoing, I observed journalists speak amongst themselves and to the

⁵⁵ For example, Ricky, and others, reacted with irritation and suspicion when police attempted to explain certain aspects of crime statistics which indicated a rise in sexual offences as down to changes in both labeling by police and improved reporting culture among victims.

⁵⁶ ie by downplaying the value or role of experts: see ([Green 2007](#))

police about ‘the public needing answers’, even where I had not observed anyone calling or emailing the newsroom to demand them. If an institutional source failed to provide the expected or demanded response, this was an offence to the journalist or newspaper in their embodiment of their imagined community.

Through the construction of crime news, the newspaper also constructs a vision of the community divided between members worthy of empathy, praise and solidarity—victims of crime—from those worthy of scorn, hatred and shaming: the offender. The simplistic framing of community relations between good and evil⁵⁷ sees local journalism at its most retributive—claiming to embody the community’s true emotions for violating its values—while conspicuously playing on readers’ sense of insecurity. When this exclusive role was threatened or constrained, it elicited immediate suspicion and hostility:

Paula gets an email from John in SEP’s media team regarding the rape sentencing – he tells Paula that their response hopes to empower victim’s to come forward (this is in relation to the decision by SEP to refuse to give mugshots of the convicted rapist as the victim asked the police not to, as she did not want to see his image in the newspapers) – Paula and others in editorial cynically unpacking the message – very hostile – feel the police are being inconsistent.

I note that this interaction between Paula and SEP is very interesting – SEP are refusing to release the image as the victim has told the police that she does not want to see his image. Paula and the rest of the editorial are worried that this might set a precedent – and about other potential victims.

They point out that he is a repeat offender – a predator...

The crime and policing patch enables local journalists to realise much of the personality of their imagined community. No other news patches in the city provide for simple, yet compelling, narrative binaries between the righteous and the wrong. By associating closely with the police in their role as community guardians, the local journalist also seeks to enrobe their constructed community with the veil of coercive power and legitimate

⁵⁷ Headlines in *The Post* routinely described those convicted of crimes as ‘evil’.

violence: influence over which they actively desire.⁵⁸ This patch also allows for a form of institutional policing which enriches their self-perception as the ultimate accountability check on that state power.

3.5.3 Routine Construction of News/Community

Crime and policing news is also one of the most important sources of routine news to fill the newspapers ([Tunstall 1971](#)). The criminal courts, bound by high constitutional principles of ‘Open Justice’, provide a wealth of easily-accessed stories, which require little effort in developing a source relationship.⁵⁹ In *The Post*, criminal court news was consistently the most popular with readers online. Penny, the paper’s court reporter, rarely went to the Magistrate’s court, concentrating on more ‘serious’ court reporting of major trials, which the Crown court facilitated. In any event the Magistrate’s court helpfully provided a weekly press release to local news organisations in Odditon. This was quickly and effortlessly⁶⁰ converted by Ricky or Penny into a hugely popular court news ‘NIB’.⁶¹ Crime news flowing from police sources was also a valuable source of fill. Even during periods of sour police-media relations, there were always news items such as witness appeals, missing person appeals, and other routine information contained in police press releases that are consistent in structure, and predictable in form.

Crime and policing news provided many important opportunities for local journalists to define, construct and police the community. But the growing communicative confidence of policing, along with other institutional sources, following

⁵⁸ For further discussions of this, see Chapter 4 below, at pp 57, 61, 75, and 92.

⁵⁹ While not necessary for sound court reporting, experienced journalists still sought to develop relationships with courts staff and lawyers which could be advantageous if they missed part of the case, or explaining aspects the reporter did not understand.

⁶⁰ A near ‘cut and paste’/‘churnalism’ task, though none described it as such.

⁶¹ ‘News in Brief’: a short news stories around 100 words long.

the digital revolution poses a practical and existential threat to this asserted role of local journalism.

3.6 Crisis in Constructing Community

The self-appointed role undertaken by local newsmedia in constructing and policing the community faces significant challenges: challenges that underpin a distinct crisis in contemporary journalism. While local news media such as those in Odditon still maintain an important role in both creating a representative vision of the community,⁶² and agenda-setting in that community, there has been a critical loss of exclusivity in the performance this role. The reordering of mass communication power (discussed in detail in the next chapter), occurring most significantly in the past decade with the rise of social media, has robbed journalism of its effective monopoly over mass-communication-based representations of community.

3.6.1 Social media and the reordering of communicative representations of community

Mass communicative representations of places like Odditon are no longer the exclusive domain of newspapers such as *The Post*. Social media platforms such as Facebook have facilitated the exponential growth of a rich diversity of non-journalistic representations of community (Cohen 2018). Whether a Facebook group for the neighbourhood allotment, or the police providing updates on crime incidents through their Twitter account, each provides an alternative challenge to the local journalist's once exclusive vision of the community. These new mass-communicative actors—'mass self-

⁶² Online news has expanded potential local newspaper audience reach well beyond the capabilities of print.

communicators’ (Castells 2009)—can now assert their alternative claims about what and where the community is, who is part of it, what its values are, and what are the institutions of importance and interest in that community.

This loss of exclusivity poses practical and existential challenges for local journalism. Practically, institutional sources reimagining their own role as distinct mass-communications actors (see 5.3 below) undermines a key basis for journalists to leverage access: where once sources depended on local newspapers to get their messaging out, they can now put out their own messaging to compete with the press. Existentially, the local news media revenue model based on the material fruits of its community building work (i.e. establishing a local audience) seemed to presupposed exclusivity: a diversity of alternatives (most of them free) is eviscerating the revenue model around which established newsmedia evolved (see 4.1.2 below). Both facets of this crisis in journalism featured prominently in my newsroom observations in *The Post* and *The Crier*. The experience of crisis manifested in daily, frustrating resistance to access demands by sources, and the collapse of newsroom reporting resources. Both fed into a newsroom culture desperately asserting its right to exclusivity by pointing to its own institutional legitimacy (principally their historic rooting in the community), and professional values and practices (which were also under threat by the crisis).⁶³

3.6.2 Police as Publishers

After a press briefing in SEP HQ Ricky talks about how SEP said to him in the meeting that they now see themselves as a news provider rather than just an information source – they are going to put less emphasis on serving the news media.

We chat about this idea – Ricky discussing how likes on the Facebook post of your story does not necessarily equate to readership and reach (though *The*

⁶³ See Chapter 4 below, at section 4.3.2.

Post and other newspapers employ these same logics too in terms of defending their own status and legitimacy).

The emerging competition in community representations appeared most acutely in institutional sources such as the police self-styling their communications work as ‘news’ publication, rather than mere source information for journalists. In the case of SEP, its social media ‘channels’ were characterised as an unprecedented opportunity to bypass the traditional newsmedia ([Colbran 2018](#)), and ‘get their message’ to the community, unmediated/untainted by journalists with their own agendas. SEP’s media team in particular, was frustrated that they were required to respond to the idiosyncratic geographic patch interests of news organisations like *The Post*. For SEP, their community ‘patch’ went far beyond Odditon. SEP’s media team believed their responsibility was to construct a representation of policing that spoke to the wider geographic area SEP covered. This new approach to facilitating what was conceived of as ‘public interest’ information access and transparency (see 6.2.1 below) necessitated resource investment by policing in social media, and rationing journalistic access due to its resource burdens on the police (see 7.2.2 below). While this police communications strategy posed an obvious existential threat to the access-dependent crime and policing journalism in Odditon, journalists instead characterised the development in terms of a threat to good governance and accountability: which they, as ultimate determiners of the values of the community, could exclusively provide.

Unlike their attitude to the emergence of mass-self-communicators in the form of bloggers or ‘citizen journalists’—who journalists dismissed, regardless of their reach—journalists took the phenomenon of ‘police as publishers’ seriously. Competition from the sources upon which much of their news production depended had the potential to make their largely uncritical/non-adversarial crime and policing reporting redundant.

3.6.3 Professionalisation and centralisation of communications in institutional sources

An important feature within the contemporary local mass communications field is the increasingly professionalised and centralised nature of institutional source communications (see 5.2 below). The emerging potential of social media has catalysed this pre-existing trend,⁶⁴ incentivising increased investment in centralised professional communications teams within sources such as the police. One senior police officer characterised this as an increased strategic investment in response to a perceived need to ‘fill the gaps’ in representation of crime in the community, precipitated by the decline in local newspapers. In contrast, one former editor described the trend towards centralised communications teams as a bureaucratic cost-saving measure.

In SEP’s case, where once there were media officers distributed across the policing area in local police stations—allowing journalists to develop fruitful informal relationships—now the entire media team was housed in SEP’s HQ. Mido identified this trend as particularly problematic, and felt it compromised the important community building role of the local newsmedia:

‘Same thing has happened in the County Council as in the police – they want control over narrative.’

Press officers: ‘give them an inch and they take a mile; it’s a war of attrition, there are more of them than of us reporters – they’ll win more control – justifying themselves. Some I don’t mind, they are okay, they can be knowledgeable – as long as they don’t try to shut it (the story) down.

‘In the police it is dangerous to have press officers like this. Can’t get access to investigating police officers without press officer supervision – it is toxic for accurate crime reporting.

‘The press officers don’t really understand the areas they are writing about – they don’t know the locality like the journalist and the police officer do. We know the city. They are not serious about information accuracy like we are –

⁶⁴ A number of former editors at *The Post* described this trend as pre-dating the emergence of social media in the late 2000s.

you cannot just Google a street name – first thing you are taught as a journalist – you need to verify. The only thing we have as a selling point is that we are local – the police don't get that.

For journalists like Mido, the increasing detachment of institutional sources from their local community creates challenges for accurate reporting, and more broadly for cultures of institutional accountability. In contrast to local newspapers, like *The Post* and *The Crier*, who prided themselves on their deep connection to, and knowledge of the community, institutional sources have removed their communications capabilities from the community, and staffed them with professionals with little or no connection to the city.

3.6.4 Losing the connection to community

'It's hard to connect with the community in the digital age – the things people expect us to do – we don't get to go out on patch much – not as much as we should – it's hard to get the reporters the time to do it – such huge demands on their time as it is.'

(Interview notes with Marge, editor at local online news organisation *DigiNews*)

...

Paula also notes how many more stories journalists now can produce/are expected to produce as compared to previous generations of local journalists – much more productive (suggesting this is a good thing). But Paula also notes that the journalists now are in a bubble (i.e. stuck in the newsroom) – 'they need to get out on patch more – we (her and Diane) want them to be proactive (rather than reacting to stories that come up on social media; and reacting to the communications strategies of their institutional sources). But they (the editors) '[also] don't want to tell them to go out – when we had set patch days they went out and didn't come back with anything [any stories]... it's about getting the balance right between proactive and reactive and getting paper filled.'

(Fieldnotes from *The Post*)

The inability of local journalists to escape their newsrooms, and connect face-to-face with the city's people poses another major challenge to their role of community building.

The collapse of the local news revenue model ([Matthews 2017](#))—another disruptive corollary of the digital revolution—has decimated newsroom reporting capacity. Combined with the almost effortless potential of social media⁶⁵ and press releases to satisfy the ‘fill’ requirements of the newspaper, reporters and editors have little opportunity or incentive to leave the office. This structural development makes it difficult for reporters to cultivate the kinds of prized informal contacts within sources that produce exclusive news stories, reinforcing their dependence on those sources’ official communications channels. The general crisis in local news, and the loss of meaningful career progression, results in enormous and rapid turnaround in reporters and editors. The seemingly unending⁶⁶ hollowing-out of experience robs local news of its institutional knowledge of place, undermining its role as an institutional archive of the city, furthering the newsroom’s disconnect with the community. The result is a news product that struggles to differentiate in any meaningful sense its vision of the city from that of its institutional sources.

3.7 Conclusion

In this chapter I have described and theorised a new way to conceptualise the role of local journalism: one in which the constructing of a communicative vision of the community is central. The journalists’ conception of the community governs both the spatial and institutional focus of the reporting, and shapes the relationships journalists seek to develop with institutional actors such as the police. The community role also empowers journalists to police their creation, to decide the objects to include, and which

⁶⁵ Among the greatest ironies of the digital revolution is how it has both created the conditions for the death of local newspapers (by robbing advertising revenue), while also dramatically improving the reporting potential of those news organisations.

⁶⁶ I arrived in *The Post* after it had already experienced years of cuts, yet within a year of my leaving it had lost all its editorial team, and a large number of its best young reporters.

to exclude from their territorial claim, and to evaluate the conduct of those within that territory. This role of constructing the community, is a role central to the identity of the local journalist—particularly the local newspaper journalist.

The digital revolution has dramatically disrupted many of the ground rules upon which this identity was based. This disruption threatens their community role, and erodes the power relations that determined their interactions with the symbolically key institutional sources of their community, such as the police. As we shall see in the next chapter, these disruptions should also be seen as a threat to the capacity of journalists to self-legitimate their role identities. This crisis of community construction is but one feature of the broader self-legitimation crisis in journalism. Both crises, and related phenomena in mass communication power relations are augmenting the flows of information about crime and policing, and the production of knowledge about the criminal justice system.

4 Audiences, Sources and Newsroom Values: Self-Legitimation in Contemporary Local Journalism, and its Crises

4.1 Introduction: Concepts and Contexts

In this chapter I explore the role of journalistic self-legitimation in how journalists construct both their relationship with audiences and sources, and their professional and occupational values. This chapter departs significantly from recent scholarship examining the relationship between police and media, which has given much greater prominence to the policing side of the inquiry ([Mawby 2002](#), [Mawby 2007](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Mawby 2014](#), [Colbran 2016](#), [Mawby 2017](#), [Colbran 2018](#)). Instead, this chapter's focus on the cultural concerns of journalists as they construct their social world returns to earlier critical scholarship that took seriously how internal dimensions of journalistic culture and practice might shape the production of knowledge ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#)). However, where these earlier studies of journalism—particularly crime journalism—were undertaken during a period of economic security and success, and political dominance for print journalism, my research took place during a period of genuine existential crisis for many of my participants and their professional peers. Perhaps as a result of that context of crisis, questions of journalistic identity and professional self-legitimation featured prominently in my fieldwork findings. Unlike that earlier literature then (and, puzzlingly, the most recent scholarship), my research explores how attempts by journalists to build, maintain, defend and reassert their professional

identity impacts upon their relationships with institutional sources like the police. It examines how the manifold crises of contemporary journalism affect the flow of information from those sources to news media, through to its construction into mass-consumable crime news. This chapter thereby outlines and conceives of new cultural forces within journalism, centred around crisis, that increasingly shape the production of knowledge on crime and policing.

4.1.1 A Question of Self-Legitimation Rather than Legitimacy

The categories of journalistic self-legitimation described in this chapter emerged while undertaking my fieldwork, crystallising during later analysis. The rich literature on legitimacy and legitimation from political theory and organisational sociology ([Beetham 1991](#), [Suchman 1995](#)) has heavily informed my post-fieldwork conceptual refinements. In particular, Barker's account ([2001](#)) of the role of self- or endogenous-legitimation (as opposed to legitimacy) by 'rulers' (i.e. political leaders) has helped my theorisation of the complex cultural phenomena around self-legitimation in newsrooms. Management studies and organisational sociology ([Suchman 1995](#)) takes seriously the conceptualising of legitimacy as some concrete value that flows/exists in and between organisations and their audiences/constituents by virtue of cultural pressures brought on by structural form ([DiMaggio and Powell 1983](#), [Zucker 1986](#), [Meyer and Rowan 1991](#)), or which can be strategically harnessed through audience manipulation ([Dowling and Pfeffer 1975](#), [Ashforth and Gibbs 1991](#)). These 'strategic' understandings of legitimacy are also implicitly accepted in the police communications scholarship ([Mawby 2002](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). Barker's concept of self-legitimation instead focuses on the inward perception of legitimacy/authority as a cultural feature of governing elites trying to establish or maintain their identity as rulers: detached from the 'audiences' who are

traditionally considered to count most for legitimacy in both political science ([Beetham 1991](#), [Beetham and Lord 1998](#), [Barker 2001](#)) and organisational sociology: 'the public'.

Legitimation is an activity in which rulers engage. They claim that they possess a distinguishing, specific monopoly of the *right to rule*, of 'legitimacy' ... To talk of legitimation is to talk of something that people do, a contest between rulers and their opponents, or between competing sides in a civil war ... To talk of 'legitimacy' ... is to actualise what may be actual to the participants, but is to the observer simply a metaphor or hypothetical state or abbreviation employed by those whom she studies. ([2001](#))

Barker's concept of endogenous-legitimation focuses on the performances, rituals and values of those in particular roles, which they deem appropriate for that role: the legitimation practices of that role or identity.

Those who practice [self-] legitimation most do so in relation to their own referential hinterland, rather than to the wider community. Legitimation is an activity conducted in the first place within groups, and only secondarily between them ... Legitimation is principally a statement about a person issuing an instruction, making a demand, or stating or implying a wish. It is a claim or expression made by or on behalf of that person to assert the special and distinctive identity which that person possesses, which [that] identity justifies or authorises or legitimates the command by legitimating the person issuing it ... this conceptualisation of ... legitimation gets beyond the limitations of ... 'legitimacy as a resource' ... ([2001](#))

Self- or endogenous-legitimation by rulers speaks most compellingly to the behaviours and power dynamics between journalists and their sources that I observed in the field. My methodological approach, and its inherent limits, did not result in a study of journalistic or source legitimacy in the 'strategic' sense ([Dowling and Pfeffer 1975](#), [Ashforth and Gibbs 1991](#)): i.e. whether the public audience actually trusted or believed journalists. Nor was I particularly concerned with journalistic legitimacy in the normative account ([Parsons 1960](#), [Connolly 1984](#), [Green 1988](#)): whether the journalists I studied met internal or external moral or ethical ideals of journalism. I do, however, touch on both these accounts of journalistic legitimacy in my exploration of self-legitimation, as

they represent the asserted objective for both journalists' and sources' self-legitimation endeavours. For example, many of the phenomena I observed were enrobed in the rhetoric of democratic legitimacy—itsself an important and powerful mechanism of self-legitimation for journalists, and other power holders in this study. However, the indicators that might be assumed as sound proxies for democratic legitimacy—newspaper circulation, online audience share, or surveys of public trust and confidence in journalism—did not typically function in this way, if they featured at all, in the newsroom. Instead, I came to understand much of what I observed in the newsroom to be internally-focused—as responses to material and cultural threats to key aspects of journalistic identity. This chapter, then, explores the role of journalistic self-legitimation in local news media's attempt to reassert their power and status within the governing apparatus of the community.

4.1.2 The Revenue Crisis in Local Journalism

The same new mass communications technologies that have disrupted the journalistic monopoly over constructing mass communications-based representations of the community, have also disrupted (if not destroyed) the revenue models upon which local journalism (specifically local newspapers) were constructed. Even before the emergence of social media technologies in the late 2000s ([Martinez 2018](#), [Zuboff 2019](#)), the public, whose appetite for news remains to this day robust ([Newman 2019](#)), had ceased paying for the news they acquired from newspapers ([Faulconbridge 2019](#)). For the past two decades, newspaper sales have suffered steep and ongoing declines ([Greenslade 2009](#), [Matthews 2017](#), [Mediatique 2018](#)) as their readers sought the same content online for free, and largely rejected or bypassed various early pay wall attempts by newspaper providers ([Jenkins and Nielson 2018](#), [Newman 2019](#)). The arrival of social media in 2007

merely served to entrench the long-heralded collapse of the printed form ([Rusbridger 2018](#)). Added to this, the advertising revenue that has been the financial lynchpin of local newspapers since their emergence in the 18th century ([Matthews 2017](#)) had, by the time of my fieldwork, almost totally disappeared. The most recent calamity to befall this essential lifeblood to local newspapers the result of the remarkable, rapid cannibalisation of advertising revenues by the digital technology giants Facebook and Google's ([Rusbridger 2018](#), [Adshead, Forsyth et al. 2019](#), [Zuboff 2019](#)). This loss of paying readers and advertisers have combined to create an ongoing, decade-long catastrophic revenue crisis in journalism, with a resulting evisceration of newsroom resources and infrastructure.⁶⁷

4.1.3 Media-Institutional Source Power Relations

While the material and cultural consequences of the revenue crisis now permeates all aspects of contemporary local journalism, particularly local newspaper journalism, the mass communications power of local newspapers, in many ways, seems intact. Through those same technologies that have destroyed their income streams, journalists have accessed the potential for greater audience reach without the material and infrastructural costs of print expansion. According to Castells, running alongside coercion, power also manifests as a communicative endeavour: 'the construction of meaning ... through which social actors guide their action' ([2009](#)). For Castells, the ability to influence and shape a group's understanding of their social world, is perhaps more significant and effective than brute force:

Power over minds is more important than power over bodies. Power over minds, moreover, should not be understood as a pure manipulation

⁶⁷ In the loss of advertising revenue, and to a lesser extent, the loss of newspaper sales revenue. See ([Mediatique 2018](#))

mechanism, but as the ability of certain discourses to be internalized and accepted by individuals in an effective communication process between senders and receivers of discourses. ([2016](#))

‘Mass communications’ is the most important instantiation of this form of power, with newsmedia occupying a central role within it:

...mass communication, the communication that potentially reaches society at large, is shaped and managed by power relationships, rooted in the business of media and the politics of the state. Communication power is at the heart of the structure and dynamics of society. ([Castells 2009](#))

If local newspapers’ have maintained or expanded their audience share through online audiences,⁶⁸ in theory this should allow them to continue to ‘set agendas’ ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#)) and identify and label the issues of importance for their audiences: an act of significant mass communication power. The internet and emergence of ‘mass self communications’ ([Castells 2009](#)) in the form of social media and related platforms has certainly shattered the effective monopoly⁶⁹ once enjoyed by journalism on mass communications in the form of ‘news’.⁷⁰ But, despite the diversification of actors in mass communications, local newspapers in England—for those who want to get local news at least⁷¹—remain the most important source of information on the community: whether consumed in digital or online form.⁷² During my fieldwork, various people I spoke to in the Odditon area mentioned local news stories they had read ‘on Facebook’ or similar: with a little investigating I usually found these stories were by *The Post*. While the phenomenon of the ‘citizen journalists’ had been anticipated as the great

⁶⁸ Though current trends suggest younger audiences are not just disinclined to buy a local newspaper, they are also less and less interested in local news: see ([Cairncross 2019](#))

⁶⁹ Admittedly one which often attracts not insubstantial state interference.

⁷⁰ See Chapter 3 above, at section 3.6.

⁷¹ See decline in interest in local news among younger readers in Cairncross Review, (n 3).

⁷² Recent comment on studies which track audience’s move away from newspapers and onto online and social media for news consumption, often fail to explain that the local news on social media is generated by local newspapers: often placed there by those newspapers to attract readers. See for example ([Hermida, Fletcher et al. 2012](#))

disruptor of news media power, in Odditon there were no notably popular bloggers writing on local issues. In many ways social media was a boon for local news. With guidance and training from their corporate parent, journalists at *The Post* had evolved sophisticated strategies to exploit the potential of social media, with much of their online audience now coming through those channels instead of their home website.⁷³ In short, it seems that despite the proliferation of mass self-communicators, local newspapers like *The Post* have maintained a significant capacity to shape community members' understanding of that community: particularly their understanding of institutional sources.

Habermas ([Habermas 1991](#), [Habermas 1996](#)) describes a central role for news media—particularly the emergence and growth of newspapers—in recounting the historic emergence of the 'public sphere' in bourgeois civil society of 18th century. While not yet realised ([Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#)), or perhaps not realisable, the 'public sphere' is Habermas's normative ideal of coercive power: a public space where private individuals can communicate their views and interests to the state apparatus to achieve a form of 'constitutional consensus' ([Castells 2009](#)) on how state power ought be exercised. The proper functioning of this 'public sphere' is an essential precondition for the legitimacy of state coercive power. Without genuine consensus, exercises of such power are domination. Journalism, in an ideal form, was for Habermas an important part of this story. Early newspapers set down the first mass communication infrastructures, with the potential to reach entire communities and states. Through mass communication of ideas to private individuals, and the sharing of debates on issues of public importance, newspapers constrained and militated against abuse of state power. It is interesting, perhaps, at this point to note that this role for journalism, drawing on liberal theories of

⁷³ The Reuters Institute in the University of Oxford has produced excellent research charting similar strategies of local newspapers around Europe in managing their 'transition to digital': see for example ([Jenkins and Nielson 2018](#))

Mill and de Tocqueville, featured widely in the self-conception of journalists: an important source of their professional self-legitimation.

On Habermas's account, while newspapers helped the emergence of the 'public sphere', the increasing overlap between editorial and advertising interests corrupted the role of newsmedia in this process (part of what Habermas described as the 'refeudalisation' of the public sphere ([Habermas 1991](#))). Instead, newspapers 'became an institution of certain participants in the public sphere in their capacity as private individuals; that is, it became the gate through which privileged private interests invaded the public sphere.' ([Habermas 1991](#)). It is doubtful that there were ever a time where newspapers were not largely dependent on advertising revenues ([Benson and Neveu 2005](#)), or where newspapers did not privilege the interests of certain elites ([Matthews 2017](#)). Yet, Habermas's account is helpful in providing a conceptual tool to examine the mechanics of power relations between news media and institutional sources (the latter as component manifestations of state) in the construction of a consensus to legitimate state power ([Herman and Chomsky 1988](#)).

One reading of this account—where editorial autonomy or sovereignty ([Tunstall 1971](#)) has been corrupted by advertising interests—would not distinguish between news media and state: both are now engaging in the corruption of the public sphere, in domination. This would seem consistent with Castells' later refinements in his exploration of communication power, which suggest little separation between state and media in the exercise of power, whether coercive or communication based. However, I offer a different reading, more consistent with the power relations between sources and news media I observed. It is useful at this point to separate communication power from coercive power—and treat the business of journalism as that of communication power, i.e. the creation of meaning and guides for action for audiences.

During my fieldwork it became particularly clear that the mass communications power journalists could exercise through and to their audience/readership is certainly not the only power they were interested in. In ways, and for reasons that are both consistent (in the functioning of the press as a constraint on coercive state power) and inconsistent (the self-interested reasons for doing so) with Habermas's normative ideal, the journalists I observed sought to convert their communications power into other forms of power, namely political/coercive state power. As we shall see below, journalists' relationships with sources were, in part at least, premised on a belief that they could influence institutional source decision-making, and that they *should* exercise such influence. This interpretation of a localised phenomenon would seem comparable, then, with national trends in news media politics of crime and justice explored in Chapter 1 (see 1.2.7 above).

In this way, the power relations between sources and media—the conversion of communications power into coercive power⁷⁴—can also be seen as a self-legitimising part of journalistic identity. That they believe they should influence political power—indeed that they have *a right* to influence political power⁷⁵—was a central part of local journalists role identity ([Barker 2001](#)). Successfully converting communication power into political power—measured in a variety of ways, explored below—satisfied a central part of their sense of authority, and the cultural self-belief that they as journalists had a rightful claim to sit at the decision-making table of governing power.

⁷⁴ The concept of 'power conversion' features in international relations literature, specifically where countries attempt to convert economic power into 'realized' (i.e. global political power) see: ([Jr 2004](#))

⁷⁵ One reinforced and constitutionalised by more than a century of liberal political-legal thought.

4.1.4 Revenue Crisis/Legitimation Crisis

In my newsroom fieldwork I observed journalists constructing their sense of authority and legitimacy from manifold distinct sources: some empirical, and others normative; some rooted in external audiences, and some were internally focused. Changes and perceived challenges to these sources of endogenous-legitimation have precipitated a crisis in local journalism: a form of crisis of confidence caused, I suggest, by a crisis in self-legitimation. Perhaps the most important mechanism in this crisis of identity/legitimation crisis is rooted in both journalists' and source's interpretation of the revenue crisis, and how those interpretations have fed into the mechanics of their power relations.

In my observations in local newsrooms and within SEP's communications department (CCD), I noted that institutional sources were affected with a growing sense of communicative empowerment rooted in the perceived potential of social media. Sources now believed they could do much of the work of communicating *en masse* to particular audiences without news media assistance. For some this was clearly rooted in a desire to bypass⁷⁶ newsmedia, and the resources and legitimacy risks dealing with newsmedia were perceived to carry.

However, in parallel with this rising sense of empowerment, sources also evinced a perception that news media, in particular local newspapers, *had lost* mass communications power. Sources routinely challenged the power of local news in the community, shifting the dynamics of source-media power relations. SEP had interpreted the revenue crisis, and the infrastructural losses experienced by newsrooms because of it, as reflecting a decline or collapse in mass communications power. Not only were SEP trying to bypass newsmedia, they also believed that newspapers could no longer exercise

⁷⁶ For discussions of the desire of police organisations to bypass news media through social media see ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Colbran 2018](#))

the mass communications power they once monopolised. If sources no longer believed local newspapers had communications power, then there is no need to engage with them, or to facilitate privileged forms of access.⁷⁷

This denial of journalists' communications power, and the corollary denial of access to or influence over state power, also denies an important part of journalists' role identity: it denies their asserted *right* of access to state power. I suggest these denials of power and access by institutional sources—rooted in their interpretations of the revenue crisis—is a central driver of the legitimisation crises in local journalism. Where local journalists once sourced part of their sense of self-legitimacy from their relationships with institutional sources in the community—e.g. the respect they were afforded by way of access to those sources, and the status that level access conferred upon them within the hierarchy of governing power in the community—these routes to self-legitimacy are now curtailed.

From the perspective of crime news construction, this denial of communications power also has significant implications for the flow of information out of police organisations, and how we as a public know about crime. Recent empirical and theoretical contributions on crime and policing news construction have privileged superficial accounts of source control in the production of crime and policing knowledge ([Mawby 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Mawby 2014](#), [Colbran 2016](#), [Mawby 2017](#), [Colbran 2018](#)). In this chapter I demonstrate that self-legitimation of journalism through relationships with its perceived audiences and sources, and though its own cultural values governs much of the selection and evaluation of information, and the production of knowledge by journalists. Viewing the mechanics of source-media power relations through the lens of self-legitimation provides an important new way to

⁷⁷ Access here is comparable to what Chibnall calls 'structured access', ([Chibnall 1977](#))

understand the cultural processes underpinning the production of knowledge on crime and policing.

But the self-legitimation challenges for journalists do not end with the denial of communication power by their sources. For the remainder of this chapter I will build on the previous chapter, and continue to map the practices and cultural values that are central to journalistic identity, and the challenges they face as a direct consequence of the revenue crisis.

In the mapping stage, I identify and examine two principal sources of journalistic self-legitimation:

- *external, source, or audience* self-legitimation—e.g. journalistic actions designed to build, maintain or repair an institutional source's, or readers' view that the journalist or news organisation possesses legitimacy
- *internal or professional* legitimation—e.g. journalists doing 'good' journalistic practice ('that's how it ought be done').

These internal and external categories of institutional/cultural endogenous-legitimation are key organising features of local journalistic practice, and an important component of the cultural identity of journalists. The strategies designed to satisfy these various legitimation needs of journalism also feature throughout journalists' attempts to negotiate access to sources, becoming part of the information governance framework in which journalists compete.

4.2 Audience and Source Legitimation

Two external categories generate a rich source of journalistic self-legitimation: the sources of information from which news content is constructed, and the intended

audiences for that news. Sources and audiences are also divided between the ‘general public’ and the institutions of power in the community. Both are, at different times and in different ways, intended audiences and sources. Local journalists construct news using information from the ‘general public’, and from institutional sources. This news is also constructed in a manner that envisages both these components of the community as target audiences for those stories. Self-legitimizing behaviours, rituals and habits constitute and regulate how local journalists use their sources to construct news, and that news is also shaped to legitimate the journalists in their relationship with their audiences.

4.2.1 The Public Audience

For news organisations like *The Post* and *The Crier*, the public audience—the purchasers of papers, and online readership—were often treated as a proxy for the democratic ‘legitimacy’ of their journalistic efforts. At a practical level, journalists drew on this idea of their authority, distinct from the communicative power that might attach to it, when negotiating access to an institutional source. When their access demands were met with perceived delay, resistance or denial from the institutional source, claims such as ‘our/my readers want to know’, ‘the people want to know’, or ‘the public have a right to know’ were asserted to force access compliance. If resistance persisted, then details of the news organisation’s audience ‘reach’ (circulation figures, readership or audience data)—indicators of their potential mass communicative power—were occasionally noted to enhance the underlying threat that non-compliance might be damaging to the source. In one interaction I had with Diane, the editor of *The Post*, she detailed the

paper's daily online reach—60% penetration of adults in Odditon⁷⁸—in response to perceived attempts by SEP to bypass the paper via their own social media channels.

Journalists did on occasion express anxiety about their responsibilities to their readership, particularly where an incident involved risks to community safety:

Mido gave an example of where a police helicopter was over Odditon – he called SEP press office to ask ‘what’s going on’ – they said they don’t have that information – gave him a number for Yorkshire (central command for police air units or something) – and when he called that number, they didn’t understand why SEP were being so unhelpful. ‘Irony is that the twitter account for that helicopter is quite good.’

He emphasised that they were not just being ‘hypersensitive’ – people in Odditon were asking *The Post* what was going on via Twitter.

However, direct demands by the public audience on journalists to pursue a particular editorial line on a story appeared rare. Indeed, when readers did criticise an editorial line in comment sections or on Twitter or Facebook, journalists were inclined to dismiss them as unrepresentative:

Ricky has a scan of the comments under his short online story on the fire engines he encountered on his way in – laughs at one that criticises it for being a ‘non-story’.

Whereas when public audience comments supported the editorial line, they would often be quoted—unverified—to enrich their authority in subsequent reporting. The more routine deployments of the public audience *qua* democratic legitimacy were among the various attempts by journalists to convert their asserted mass communication power into coercive state power.⁷⁹ The end-goal being a desire for insider recognition by, and influence over, those with substantive state power: a seat at the decision-making table of

⁷⁸ For which they were routinely commended by Shield Media as being one of their best performing local titles.

⁷⁹ The concept of ‘power conversion’ features in international relations literature, specifically where countries attempt to convert economic power into ‘realized’ (i.e. global political power) see: ([Jr 2004](#))

governing power in the community. It was important for journalists that key institutional sources in the community, like the police, recognised and respected their role in the governance architecture of the community.

Diane noted how slow SEP were to give information – she mentioned an ‘alleged’ kidnapping ... she was very critical of how slow the police were to give them updates on an ongoing case of such serious concern for the public. Diane explained how they ‘could help’ the police with their investigations – they like helping the police – [they are] ‘on the same team’. Diane wanted to run reconstructed pictures of the perpetrators on the front page – to do up posters to get the public’s attention and generate information for the police. Instead, she called SEP’s Comm’s Dept head who didn’t know anything about it.

(I noted at the time:) This was a clear example of *The Post*’s unhappiness with their status⁸⁰ in SEP – this is absolutely crucial – the question of status, and loss of status in the community and among powerful decision-makers. Lots of what I am seeing in *The Post* suggests this is big – challenge to their self-identity and sense of legitimacy in challenging elite decision makers.
(Fieldnotes, *The Post*)

Through these two understandings of the journalists’ relationship with their public audience—as democratic representative or a manifestation of communicative power—journalistic identity is enriched. Potent Burkean⁸¹ ideas within journalism’s culture, and beyond, as the ‘fourth estate’ of government are fed by both the public audience, which provides both a *democratic constituency*, and source of (communication) *power*, possessed of governing character.

4.2.1.1 Self-Legitimation Through the Management of Public Audience Trust

Though journalists I observed or interviewed never mentioned any perceived lack or loss of public audience trust in journalism (though survey research has repeatedly shown it

⁸⁰ This idea of the newspaper’s status in the eyes of the symbolically important community institution of the police is obviously quite intimately connected to the journalist’s role in constructing and policing the community: detailed in the previous chapter.

⁸¹ ([Carlyle 1840](#))

has),⁸² strategies for managing trust were a significant part of the news construction process. In particular, the emerging strategies for managing and developing audience reach in the social media revolution were augmented by a concern not to undermine the confidence their audience had in their news output. Those social media technologies and platforms, which offer unparalleled potential for news organisations to expand and refine audience reach, also necessitated new approaches for the packaging and presenting news content, to best tap into this vast potential audience resource.

Eddie notes a change in the ranking of stories online by readership volume when he uses a picture that gives less information ('generic') – he uses the Giraffe—a chain restaurant on Main Street—closure example – Eddie used a picture from Google Street View that was quite zoomed out so you could not clearly see the name of the restaurant – the story jumped from 6/7th in the order of rankings to 1st on 'most read' really really quickly – Eddie says he is careful about doing this as they don't want to 'alienate' people – don't want it to be just 'clickbait' – this is misleading. But, they do also want the increased traffic (as this is how they are evaluated by Shield Media their owner and advertisers) – 'they want people to click on the article from social media – so don't want the image to give it—the story—all away...'

...

Eddie notes for my benefit that this works well for crime stories too. I ask about whether they get negative feedback on this strategy from readers – he says not something that readers complain to them about. The main complaints are about advertising and pop up ads – or the website thinking people are using an adbocker when they are not...

Here Eddie describes for me the delicately balanced and artful approach he employed as a digital editor to drive reader traffic through social media, while avoiding descending into the much-reviled (by 'real hacks') 'clickbait'. The public audience should be respected. Their trust—apparently assumed in virtue of their continuing to read, if not pay for the newspaper's reportage—should not be abused. The cultural expectation in *The Post* was that journalists had a responsibility to maintain a good trusting relationship with the public audience—even if readers did not complain about those corporate-

⁸² See ([Newman, Fletcher et al. 2017](#), [Newman 2019](#))

mandated/encouraged strategies⁸³ deemed by journalists to be pathological to trust. But if lack of respect for the public audience in the form of ‘clickbait’-like strategies for attracting engagement still resulted in high volumes of readers, how was ‘trust’ being calibrated here? As noted above, when readers complained about the quality of reporting in comments sections, journalists were often inclined to dismiss these criticisms as something akin to ill-informed trolling. I suggest the answer lies partially in cultural self-legitimation. Demonstrating respect for the public audience by maintaining a trusting relationship helps situate ‘good’ (ethical) journalism within the broader framework of ‘good’ governance, with which journalists seek to be associated with.

Public audience trust management strategies were also an important feature of traditional news-gathering practices and techniques. In the following extended fieldnotes extract, Paula, the News Editor at *The Post*, couches her editorial control and direction over Ricky’s approach to reporting on a serious crime story in terms of the public audience’s need for information:

Paula wants more details on the Nearville rape case – need more detail as had done a piece on it – she doesn’t want to leave readers hanging.

Ricky calls SEP immediately – gets Brian on the phone – Ricky asks for ‘guidance’ on the story – at the same time he is speaking to Brian he is checking the SEP website for press releases on the story. Ricky is passed on to Suzanne (a media officer) ... Ricky emphasises their need in *The Post* for guidance – that they don’t want to leave their readers hanging or reading too much ... between the lines (leading to inaccurate reporting). Ricky asks if there is still an investigation open on the incident? Is the victim still getting support from the Police?

Ricky then returns to his need for guidance on the story – says he needs off-the-record guidance from them so he doesn’t write anything that is misleading or misrepresents the story. They appear to tell him that an allegation is still being made – to which Ricky says he does not understand. He is empathetic when talking to them – understands they are in a difficult situation there – understands they cannot say someone has lied – that they could not or should not do that – he just wants to know if the allegation has been withdrawn. Thanks them.

⁸³ See section 4.3.5 below.

Ricky immediately goes back to Paula to update her and debrief her on his talk with SEP. He tells her that SEP won't give her any more details – they then exchange their views that they don't want their readers to be unnecessarily concerned that a rapist is on the loose in the area.

Paula says 'we cannot mislead our readers'. Ricky brings up an earlier incident where they felt SEP lacked competent information management – the public, he says, are still uncertain about what happened back then. Ricky and Paula ... vent their frustration at the lack of trust shown by the press office towards the press –

Paula suggests they should adjust the NIBs on it to credit SEP with any ambiguity in the reporting.

Again, public comments demanding updates on crime stories were extremely rare in my observations. When they did occur, they were not in any significant numbers. Yet the duty to keep the public audience 'up to date' on an ongoing case featured prominently in how newsgathering was approached, and in journalists' engagement with institutional sources. In this way, reporters' persistent follow-ups were obligatory duties to their constructed, yet evidently disengaged or ambivalent, constituency.

Some journalists, like Ricky, did occasionally evince scepticism about how engaged any of *The Post's* audiences (of which he considers the police were one) were with the detailed nuances of their crime and policing reporting:

Ricky ... spoke about how rank and file police officers are, like the general public, largely disengaged from most of the coverage – and if they do pay attention, they are not attuned to particular or specific patterns within the organisation's trajectory – except perhaps a general perception that the pattern is of decline.

Controversies over 'fake news' were featuring heavily in national and international news during my time with *The Post*. While it did not appear that either *The Post's* sources or readership were making serious allegations that they were purveyors of 'fake news'—beyond the occasional anonymous comment, which they inevitably dismissed with sarcasm—the paper enthusiastically participated in a national 'Trusted News Day'.

Eddie has done a day long blog on ‘Trusted News Day’ – includes lots of ‘action shots’ (pictures and videos of people in the newsroom)... ‘UK-wide fighting fake news project... see how our journalists work... ask us questions (to which they get 2 responses...)’ I check the online ‘most read’ section and note it is not even in the top 20 ‘most read’ stories.

The blog contains topics like ‘How do you know what fake news is?’... it notes two weeks of columns before on ‘Fighting Fake News’. It also talks about the root cause of the problem being in social media... young people not buying the newspaper... includes videos of Eddie and Alex – the latter talking about court reporting... they refer to the newspaper’s political balance and neutrality...

Though expressly designed to demonstrate to the public audience that *The Post* was a professional and trustworthy news organization, the impression that it was designed to shore up newsroom confidence was hard to avoid. The not insubstantial effort to put the blog together for the day—eating into Eddie’s already over-burdened working day on the news desk—did not really appear designed to attract audience attention. Journalists were, by their own account, experts at drawing audience attention. As the digital editor, Eddie was very familiar with what would attract audience engagement, and his blog did not conform to any of the routine online news values. But ‘fake news’, like other forms of mass communication competition, posed an existential threat in the eyes of the journalists, and this, it seemed, was the appropriate response. It also reinforced the sense among reporters that, despite the changes to the mass communications ecosystem, they were still ‘doing things right’, once again associating themselves with the values of good and responsible governance.

4.2.1.2 Public Audiences as Sources

The construction of news media content is dominated by information gathered from institutional sources, such as the police, the courts, local government, education and the

NHS. Yet, the self-conception of journalists I observed suggested a hierarchy of credibility with the ‘ordinary citizen’—an idealised member of the public audience—somewhere close to the apex. Consistent with the vision of journalism as the ‘fourth estate’ of government—an independent accountability check on state power—this account held that it should be the accounts of the disempowered citizen that journalism searches out, identifies and magnifies.

In practice, reporters and editors I observed were reluctant to rely too heavily on information provided by non-institutional sources. Institutional sources were routinely privileged over the ordinary public: both for inspiration for stories, and for the process of verification of information through the hierarchy of credibility. Even when a non-institutional source’s account drove a particular story, it was extremely rare for a story to not include substantial input from the institutional source.

In contrast to my observations however, Mido described editorial over-enthusiasm with regard to the value of non-institutional sources and the stories they provided leads for. Mido, who served as both the local government and politics reporter, and chief reporter for *The Post*, had built a well-developed network of credible and reliable institutional sources. Unlike Ricky, who struggled with his sources in the police, Mido’s sources would happily provide informal off-record guidance and insights. As a result, he found being directed to follow-up on complaints by hostile members of the public frustrating, and were, he felt, a waste of time. Yet, in my observations in *The Post*, this kind of ‘fools errand’ was not common.

Mido’s view does, however, illustrate the tension between the real and constructed hierarchy of credibility in the production of news. Frontline reporters who produced stories privileged institutional sources in order to meet the requirements for consistent, reliable and authoritative news content. Editors reinforced this through the organisation of workloads, but also, by expressly requiring institutional source input in

verifying stories. I observed editors refuse to publish stories built from accounts by ordinary members of the public if an institutional source refused to comment, despite no legal risk. But the governing ideology of newsrooms, managed and regulated by editors, constructed an image of their journalism privileging the public audience as sources. The distance between the two reflects a tension in the self-legitimizing approaches of journalism: whether to be a part of the institutional hierarchy of governance—the governing power interest—or to be a representative of ‘the people’, the democratic interest.

4.2.1.3 A Hierarchy of Audience Sources

Despite these tendencies towards privileging institutional actors over the ‘ordinary’ member of ‘Joe public’, the latter were still an important source in the production of news. With the growth of new communications technologies and social media platforms, the public, and the information they hold on areas of interest to journalists, are also far more accessible to journalists than earlier eras of tight relations with institutional sources. Combined with the increasing levels of professionalization, and perceived informational control in institutional sources’ media teams, the general public may indeed become an even more significant source of original, exclusive stories for journalists (something, somewhat ironically, journalists have issued grave warnings over ([Colbran 2016](#))). Yet, even among public audience sources, journalists operated a hierarchy of non-institutional sources. This hierarchy of credibility within the public audience served to both legitimate journalistic role identities within the community, while insulating the journalists from perceived threats to legitimacy.

4.2.1.3.1 Citizen Sources

Non-institutional sources were more enthusiastically employed if they were judged a 'legitimate' member of the community. Examples included community 'heroes', who distinguished themselves through voluntary work for the good of their community, and those who embodied other values of the community, as determined by the news organisation. Similarly, sympathetic 'victims' of institutional actions or inactions were also given high status, usefully reflecting a failure by the community to meet requirements of 'good governance'. I characterise these non-institutional sources as 'citizen sources' to reflect the civic virtues that they embodied, or on which their journalistic representation was constructed.

Establishing the credibility of a citizen source, by verifying their background and the absence of impugning characteristics (which might push them into non-citizen source territory) was an important part of the news construction process. This could be done by having a quick chat with the putative citizen source and getting their background information, and by searching for and through their online histories. Once their status was established, citizen sources' accounts were not subject to the same levels of critical scrutiny as other sources. Reporters and editors were comfortable treating their claims at face value, not requiring further verification through the hierarchy of credibility.

In 'good news' stories, citizen sources helped local news organisations construct the ideal vision of the constructed community, fleshing out the normative content of their creation. When citizen sources were victimised, they provided valuable leverage against target institutional sources—i.e. the potential for journalists to access the source's institutional power through the threat of their mass communication power—as well as a platform for the news organisation to demonstrate their community policing credentials. For example, just as my fieldwork was beginning, *The Post* covered a case involving the

tragic drowning of a teenager. The family were highly critical of how SEP had managed the search, and how they communicated with them. *The Post*, no doubt attracted to a story of police communications failure (given their own complaints and criticisms of SEP's CCD), began fiercely advocating on behalf of the family. *The Post's* approach to the police magnified the criticisms of the parents, and downplayed the responses of the police. While the strategy of leveraging SEP in such a sensitive case did not improve access—indeed it seemed to undermine it—*The Post* still felt empowered at having advocated on behalf of vulnerable members of the community against powerful institutional forces.⁸⁴

Even when reporters were sympathetic to an institutional source, the need to legitimate their community credentials generated powerful countervailing obligations to citizens sources:

Dominic and Carol have a chat about a story she is working on involving someone claiming they have been sanctioned by DWP [Department of Work and Pensions]. She has just spoken to DWP – all off-the-record – they say he has not been sanctioned – he just keeps missing meetings – the support worker missed the last one (subject is a vulnerable adult) – they discuss how DWP make vulnerable adults jump through hoops now – but Carol concludes he ‘should go to his meetings’.

But Dominic says that they have to be seen to be fighting his corner – focus on how he is surviving on hand-outs from friends – even though DWP are processing his claim and trying to work with him. Carol follows up with her DWP source – she explains the angle they will take and clarifies what was off-record – she tries to be empathetic on the phone – explains they have to be sympathetic to how he has been ‘surviving’.

Carol tries gently to get a comment from the official DWP source.
(Fieldnotes, *The Crier*)

This interesting example could easily be interpreted as proving Mido's above point: journalists were overly enamoured with the accounts of the public, even when they believed they had gotten it wrong. Yet the overwhelming general tendencies towards

⁸⁴ Similar was observed by ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#))

institutional sources that I observed in the newsrooms suggests this example is more illustrative of the complex web of self-legitimizing pathways open to local journalists, rooted both public and institutional sources/audiences.

4.2.1.3.2 Non-Citizen Sources

Those who did not embody or reflect the civic virtues of the imagined community, or indeed the defining characteristics that qualified for membership of it, were also occasionally employed as sources. When deemed non-citizens, journalists treated a source with caution, scepticism, and occasionally contempt: another instantiation of their policing of the community. For example, in relation to a planning dispute, a member of the public proactively engaged *The Post*:

The story is a planning permission case – a man saying he is being victimised by the council – wants to change his house from a Grade II listed building so can make more changes and renovate. Diane is sceptical of him.

Diane's attitude towards this source appeared linked to certain class loyalties of the newsroom's culture. Examining the type and location of property in question, Diane suspected that the source was a wealthy, upper-middle class resident in the affluent rural surroundings of Odditon. While such a source might on their face seem an ideal candidate for citizenship status, *The Post*, no doubt influenced by the demographics of its historic readership, cultivated a distinct working class identity. This was despite nearly all of its younger reporters and editors (who were the majority of the newsroom) having university degrees, and decidedly middle-class backgrounds. This class identity of the newsroom—and therefore that of their imagined community's membership—was reinforced regularly by taking speculative class-based editorial positions in conflicts that were deemed class-sensitive.

In another instance, video footage of a dispute between a cyclist and a bus driver—submitted by a member of the public by tagging *The Post* on social media—was assessed in accordance with this class-based standard of Odditon citizenship:

Paula asks Diane for advice on the story about the bus driver and cyclist altercation ... Diane notes that there is no swearing – ‘a very polite argument’. Diane doesn’t want to put the video up on their site – they cannot be sure what happened as the video could only be showing a limited part of the encounter. She is sceptical of the sender – ‘it’s a loaded social media post’. They agree it would be popular online, but not it’s not clear to them what has happened.

Here the class symbolism that cycling represented to *The Post’s* editors (all of whom commuted by car through bicycle-dominated Odditon) was weighed against a bus driver’s assumed working class identity, with the latter judged to have better position in the hierarchy of credibility.

Members of the public or groups who challenge community conventions or norms also struggled to achieve citizen status as sources. Even when they appeared to conform to a citizen source ideal—for example a victim of serious crime—falling foul of the newspaper’s understanding of appropriate behaviour for that role saw them scrutinized on grounds of credibility. In one instance, Ricky became privy to the trial of a member of the clergy for a historic child sex offence. The now-adult alleged victim had publicly protested against local senior clergy Odditon over their handling of the allegations. This politicised behaviour by a victim appears to have pushed them ‘beyond the pale’ of *The Post’s* ideal of victimhood, leading to serious doubts about their credibility.

A Shield Media paper in Castletown sends Ricky the story they are running on the ‘paedo vicar’ who has committed suicide – they have the victim, who Ricky had spoken to on phone, under a pseudonym. He has given the Castletown paper an extensive statement (when he spoke to Ricky on the phone he had said he did not want to talk – though Ricky had him on the

phone for ages). In his statement he makes serious allegations against the Church and how they sought to protect themselves, over protecting children.

Ricky is a little annoyed but he understands why Castletown got the story – the offending vicar in question just happens to live here now – not really a patch story, or if it is, it is only tenuous.

Ricky sends the Castletown story to Connolly and Diane – Diane says she can vaguely remember the victim protesting – she says she is not sure if he is reliable – she tells Ricky to be careful in his wording – the victim could be ‘crazy’ – could be making it up – he is not confirmed as the victim. Diane says these are very serious allegations about the Bishop of Odditon – the victim is saying that he made disclosures to the Bishop. But I note they all silently agree that they have to run with this story. Ricky calls and tries to get a comment from the Bishop on it.

This example, first noted in the last chapter,⁸⁵ is particularly illustrative of the complex balancing of legitimation concerns when dealing with non-citizen sources. The source here had openly and vocally challenged an important symbolic representation of authority within the Odditon community. This source’s attack on that symbol’s hierarchy made Diane nervous. Additionally, the source did not conform to an ideal-type of a disempowered victim seeking support from the newspaper. Even where other important public institutions appeared to believe this individual—namely the police and CPS—they approached this victim with caution. Denying them citizenship status, and the treatment that status resulted in their reporting, insulated *The Post* from threats to their own credibility in the eyes of the public, or institutional sources.

Using sources personally connected to wrongdoing; those who themselves had been convicted of a crime; or those engaged in other questionable behaviour—the antithesis of citizen sources—posed some interesting challenges for the journalists in *The Post*. While following-up on what was believed to be a series of related violent retaliatory attacks on suspected child groomers near Odditon, Ricky spoke to a source in the neighbourhood, whose son was imprisoned for unrelated reasons:

⁸⁵ See Chapter 3 above, at 24.

Eddie comes over to Ricky, who updates the former about what he has found out – Smith [the victim of assault] was in jail – now out on bail for current investigation. His brother was also attacked in this incident – attacked by teenagers in the area. Ricky explains to Eddie that his source on this is ‘part of the scum’ – her son is in jail – ‘he isn’t an angel’ – but was not into child grooming. He was part of a gang that drove the wrong direction up Main Street. This source reckons that it was a vigilante response – Eddie says they need to get this confirmed – get the identity of the victim – don’t say vigilante – ‘let people fill in the blanks’ – need another source other than ‘this bad lad’s stepmother’.

Whatever the value or the veracity of a non-citizen’s account, the hierarchy of credibility—serving as a tool for legitimation management—necessitated that it be marginalized to at best a supporting account. In another case, using or identifying a particular non-citizen source—affiliated with far-right hate groups—was viewed as extremely high risk by *The Post’s* editors.

Eddie wants to put a video up on the website – I ask who sent it in – and Eddie replies a ‘very untrustworthy source’ – [he] pulls up the ‘source’s’ Facebook page – it has ‘Knights Templar’ logo and material on it – white nationalists? – very creepy. Eddie is not clear if the video is related to the tweet – video is of the source and ‘EDL’ (English Defence League) mates following cops arresting a young man of what looks to be South Asian heritage – in the video they are shouting ‘scum’ at him.

Eddie is not massively happy with the quality of the video. Some swearing too. He will need to edit it out. Eddie is also not happy about giving this guy credit for his video – the video was taken outside Odditon Central police station – the ‘source’ sent it to *The Post* – asked him if he could use it anyway – ‘we always ask even if on a public profile’ takes some ‘stills’ from the video – ‘probably get away with it’ – i.e. not using.

Eddie then decides he is ‘gonna go out on a limb... don’t want to credit him... don’t want to be associated with the EDL... he’ll probably kick up a fuss.’

...

Eddie does a Twitter search to see who is discussing and sharing information about the incident – sees a lot of EDL-type activity – says he is worried he ‘might be opening a can of worms with this’ – the tweet says the person being arrested had ‘attacked an EDL Angels member’ – Eddie says they seem to be targeting the area, but there are no CSE cases on in the court today – Eddie says they may be just hanging around to make trouble.

Ricky is also checking this out – he sees the EDL saying that they are there to show support to victims, but the only relevant type of case running today in that court are historic sex abuse cases – he seems confused.

Paula intervenes and says to stay away from giving the EDL any coverage – ‘that’s what they want’.

Eddie says that they still need to cover the arrest – wants to see if they are connected.

Connolly comments that they seem to want to trial to collapse – to validate their claims that the system is corrupt.

Ricky is going to run with a report that the EDL are gathering there – also wants to run with the story on the arrest – Eddie is very anxious about this all now – wants confirmation from the police first. Eddie is very worried about getting entangled in what is going on with the far right involvement in these protests outside highly sensitive criminal cases – and concerned that the paper might be seen to be legitimising the EDL.

Eddie, on Facebook, runs the story with a picture still from the video – connecting the police tweet to the EDL’s claims – but qualifies it by saying the police have not yet released more details – Eddie emphasises that this is a ‘situation where we really need guidance from the Police...’

Here Eddie and Ricky’s desire for interesting contemporaneous material was significantly curtailed by the risk they believed the non-citizen posed to their reputation. They were also acutely concerned with not legitimating the source by using their content. A non-citizen source with membership of an organization such as the EDL—with its own distinct vision of what English communities were—could seriously compromise the self-legitimation of their community constructing and policing role. That their readers, the police, or some other symbolically important community institution might see their coverage as ‘inflaming tensions’ in a highly sensitive area only increased that risk.

The concession Eddie made was to use the material but not to credit the source, bending *The Post’s* own editorial rules by falling back on the absence of a legal obligation to do so. Eddie’s compromise should be viewed through the lens of self-legitimation, as a balance of legitimation risks. Here the risk from the non-citizen source outweighed the internal self-legitimation provided by their editorial policies and values (i.e. ‘good

journalism’). The risk from the EDL was rooted not in the content from the source (which would typically have attracted substantial online reader numbers), but in the non-citizen status of the source. No matter the nature and veracity of their information, non-citizen sources risked undermining multiple avenues for journalistic self-legitimation, and journalists employed various strategies for managing that threat. In this case that strategy involved compromising on journalistic standards, and desperately calling assistance from sources at the apex of the hierarchy of credibility (see 7.2.5 below).

It is useful at this point to take stock, and reflect on the relevance of public audiences—citizen and non-citizen alike—as sources in crime and policing news. When citizen sources are in play against the police, we have seen that their use by journalists can both legitimate the identity of journalists as guardians of the community’s interests, as well as providing a potential leveraged avenue to access that source. When non-citizen sources are in play, journalists fear publishing content without police verification and confirmation. In those cases, scepticism of non-citizen sources, and verification with institutional sources insulates journalist from the self-legitimation risks. These various self-legitimation concerns in source relationships guide and structure the kinds of information journalists choose to use in news construction.

Understanding the importance of self-legitimation in journalists’ engagement with sources is essential to understand contemporary police-media relations. For example, Colbran—among the very few to examine contemporary police-media relations in England—predicts the loss of journalistic access in the police-media relationship will compromise accurate reporting of crime and policing. Colbran suggests that with the closing down of access, journalists are becoming reliant on unreliable (i.e. non-institutional) sources ([Colbran 2016](#), [Colbran 2018](#)). However, the cultural need to self-legitimate through careful construction and management of source relationships as described here, suggests, in local news media at least, that commitment to institutional

sources will persist, even where relations are poor. Local journalists identity seems too deeply rooted in the governing components of the community to rely too heavily on non-institutional sources.

4.2.2 Institutional Sources as Audiences and Power-Holding Peers

The construction of news is dominated by information gathered from institutional sources, such as the police, the courts, local government, education and the NHS. Hall *et al* characterize these institutional sources, and the privileged position they occupy as ‘primary definers/interpreters’ of particular social issues or topics ([Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#)). Borrowing Becker’s concept, these ‘primary definers’ sit within a ‘hierarchy of (source) credibility’, ([Becker 1967](#), [Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#)) which privilege the ‘more powerful’ (than the media) institutional sources. For Hall *et al*, this was a relationship generated by an inevitable capitalistic power-relations dynamic of ‘structured dominance’ which subordinated journalists. Others have doubted this account of the tendency of journalists towards institutional sources, questioning the failure to recognize the autonomous power of the media.⁸⁶ I suggest this hierarchy is rooted at least in part in journalists’ concern for credibility within the institutions of power, as it is in their need for reliable information about the symbolically important institutions of the community. For the journalists that I observed, their institutional sources in policing were also important audiences for their work. As with other audiences, they sought to influence their worldview. In order to be recognised as key legitimate power holders in the community, journalists sought the recognition and

⁸⁶ In their study of crime reporters’ relationships with police sources, Schlesinger and Tumber challenge this subordinate status ascribed to journalists in the media-source power relations structure. Ericson *et al* similarly offered an account of empowered and autonomous journalists *vis-à-vis* their sources. See ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#))

approval of other key power holding peers such as the police, who were themselves perceived to carry significant levels of public legitimacy.

Remembering the division between communication power and coercive/state power described above, where journalists hold the former, my observations suggested that among the reasons for privileging institutional sources was an attempt to influence those sources—to gain access to the table of governing coercive power in the community. Privileging ‘those in the know’ or ‘official knowers’ in accounts about those same sources legitimates journalist’s status with regard to those institutional sources, giving them a sense that they are part of the official coercive apparatus. As we shall see in the Chapter 8, this is intimately bound up in the mutual cross-legitimation of different power holders within the local governance field.

As noted in the introduction, I observed institutional sources interpret the revenue crisis in local journalism, and the diversification of mass communication voices through social media technologies and platforms, as a loss of communication power. Journalist’s perceptions that an institutional source views them, or their news organisation as having status and power in and over the community, is an essential feature of journalistic self-legitimation. If a journalist is deemed to have lost authority in their relationship with a source, or are refused recognition by that source,⁸⁷ this is a cause for concern and frustration. As well as compromising the ability of a journalist to leverage access from an institutional source (i.e. convert communicative power to state/coercive power), and generate exclusive news stories from that access, the loss of authority also undermines an important facet of their identity as important power holders within the community.

⁸⁷ This is comparable in to Barker’s description of state ruler’s reactions to non-recognition by international peers in fora like the UN. ([Barker 2001](#))

The legitimation of local journalism relies on a perception that they too are part—indeed a valuable part—of the official governance infrastructure of the community: that they have power and status in that community. Good relationships with institutional sources legitimate that part of their identity.⁸⁸ How the revenue crisis has been interpreted by institutional sources—most notably by the police—therefore creates a crisis in the ability of local journalists to legitimate among the most important features of their identity.

4.2.2.1 A Question of (Lack of) Trust⁸⁹

The journalists I observed often described this form of self-legitimation derived from their relationships with institutional sources in terms of ‘trust’. More ‘trust’ in the relationship meant the journalist could get more exclusive access to the source, which in turn generated more highly valued stories. Having more ‘exclusive’ stories enriched the sense of success and empowerment of a journalist: even if the readership or public audience were not engaged, trust meant the source was cognisant of their important status in the community, and/or recognised the communicative power they commanded. High levels of trust in source relationships also enabled journalists to provide a more ‘authentic’ vision of the community in their news construction, helping to legitimate their community building ventures.

This question of trust—or lack of trust—was omnipresent in local news during my fieldwork even beyond journalists’ relationships with sources. The seemingly

⁸⁸ It should be noted that not all journalists, or indeed all local journalists, legitimate themselves in this way. For example, Riz Hooper and Eleanor O’Reilly, editors of the new independent local newspaper *Ear to the Ground* expressly identified as non-access journalists. Their journalism expressly privileged ordinary citizens, though they did seek input from institutional sources in building their stories. However, their approach was certainly atypical, and was also a conscious response to failures of existing legacy local newspapers.

⁸⁹ Borrowed from (O’Neill 2002).

unsuccessful (in audience engagement terms at least) ‘Trusted News Day’, noted above, was part of a broader attempt by journalists to demonstrate their trustworthiness, through pointing to their professionalism, values and practices. Concerns about trust were central to evaluations about the relationship between policing and local news media. ‘Off-record guidance’ was infrequently, and often reluctantly, offered by the SEP’s media officers to *The Post’s* journalists. This ‘lack of trust’ was, in response, denounced and resented. While *BBC Odditon* fared better—a response rooted, it seemed, in SEP’s belief that the BBC still commanded significant mass communications power—they also complained that SEP obstructed ‘appropriate’⁹⁰ levels of access. For journalists in *BBC Odditon*, the collapse in police trust in local journalists was also, at least partly, attributable to newspaper journalists’ own behaviour. A number of BBC journalists diagnosed non-specific allegations of incompetence by *The Post* were as a primary cause of the souring of relations. Though accusations of incompetence in the BBC were similarly plentiful among *The Post’s* reporters.

Instead of answering queries directly, media officers in SEP would often direct journalists to press releases put on the website. This allowed for consistency and control over what information was released—part of the broader post-Leveson reforms in police information governance (see 7.2.4 below). However, reliance on publicly available press releases eroded journalistic exclusivity—a key news value—providing another ground for frustration and complaint by journalists. That SEP media officers—many of whom were former journalists—would routinely deny much-valued exclusivity was another manifestation of the absence of ‘trust’ and an unprofessional lack of respect for the needs of the journalists. They complained openly that ‘the police don’t trust us’, a state of affairs they felt was puzzling as local news media were ‘on the same side’ as the

⁹⁰ All local journalists spoke of the duty of transparency on state institutions, though most seemed far less interested in transparency in the form of making all information publicly available—something which would potentially compromise exclusivity.

police. This access was additionally frustrating, it was explained to me, as journalists felt they ‘could help’ the police, if only they were brought within its decision-making process. *BBC Odditon* journalist Tom Baker went so far as to say to the Chief Constable at a police press briefing that the police should ‘use us’ more when undertaking different kinds of operations.

For reasons already noted above, these perceived poor levels of trust between local journalists and police—as most symbolically important community institutions—generated a distinct legitimation crisis for journalists. Yet, while reporters complained about trust, transparency, and the needs of the community for additional information on crime and policing issues—delivered exclusively by *The Post/BBC*—the public did not appear to complain about a lack of police transparency. Indeed, the crime reporting Ricky was able to do within the confines of the relationship with SEP were very popular with readers, and his crime stories were often among the most read online. Instead of a journalistic concern over a crisis of public-facing transparency, accountability or democracy, it seemed the routine access denials by SEP meant more that journalists were unable to legitimate their identity as an important institutional player in their own right within Odditon.

Many journalists identified the source of this collapse in trust, at least in the policing context, as the Leveson Inquiry, and the changes to police-media relations it ushered in. Others, however, like Paula in *The Post*, identified a much broader shift towards ‘control’ among institutional sources in the public sector. Across local and national news organisations, in both print and broadcasting, journalists mentioned the increasing difficulty they faced in getting responses from national and local government. Jonah George, a crime reporter in a national television news broadcaster, felt the UK

Government's relationship with the news media was at that time far worse than the police-media relationship.⁹¹

This frustration at the loss of 'trust' often manifested in nostalgia for the 'golden age' of local journalism, when relations with institutional sources like the police were very close. Eddie Prince, a former senior editor of other titles in the Shield Media group—including a one-time chief editor of *The Evening Crier* in Sunnyside—spoke longingly of an era where the local newspaper was treated appropriately as a respected and valuable power holder in the town.

The way the news is managed now by the police – Post-Leveson – there used to be a good relationship – in Sunnyside we had a good relationship with the Chief Super and Chief Constable. We set up an alert card for autism – helps police deal with a situation where they are dealing with someone with autism – gets them an advocate... The Chief Super – we had monthly briefings with them – we knew what was coming in terms of stories – we got off-the-record briefings – they asked for restraint on publication which we provided – there were operational benefits for them in having a close relationship with the local newspaper – this all took place on a foundation of trust – we couldn't get that with SEP. Leveson changed things – but SEP themselves also have an agenda. The media are a 'match' – we can be a very powerful instrument. Why don't the police use us proactively to improve their reputation? This failure to engage collaboratively with the press is regretful, as fear of crime is a key issue.

A variety of responses emerged from the legitimisation challenges posed by the loss of trust from, and/or access to, institutional sources. While journalists in *BBC Oddity* were frustrated, some saw benefits to the increasingly professionalised communications teams, who could provide them with the audio and visual content they needed. Others developed new strategies for negotiating access with institutional sources, using alternative formats for news stories:

⁹¹ Here it should be noted that Jonah George, like all journalist for national news organisations I interviewed, primarily dealt with the Metropolitan Police, whose press office were noted to be much more responsive and professional (and undoubtedly better resourced) than the local police forces in the regions outside the capital.

Gigi [a radio journalist in BBC Odditon] says she has found the press office good in SEP – ‘they are more open to longer-term stuff – much harder with breaking news to get them to respond’.

For the BBC, there were alternative routes to legitimation. The lack of specialist reporting roles in *BBC Odditon* also no doubt helped limit the need to legitimate through strong personal relationships with sources.

For *The Post*, which was (unlike the BBC) enduring the traumatic material consequences of the revenue crisis on its newsroom, the loss of trust among institutional sources precipitated angry and adversarial responses. When met with denial of access they routinely responded by furiously denouncing the sources’ denial of their communicative power—to reassert their status and power in the community to the source, and to themselves:

I ask Paula to talk more about trust – or lack thereof – between institutional sources and the local press. Paula says ‘Odditon Health (NHS) don’t deal well with criticism...

They don’t realise how important we are’
(Fieldnotes, *The Post*)

4.2.3 Summary

In this section I have examined how journalists construct and legitimate their identity from a combination of audience and source management. In terms of audiences, we have seen how for both the general public, and particularly institutional sources as audiences, doubts have arisen in relation to the power of local news journalists. We have also seen how, in relation to source management, the heavy reliance on institutional sources through the hierarchy of credibility is rooted in the need for journalists to legitimate key components of their identity. Journalists structure their engagement with different categories of audiences and sources along self-legitimizing lines, and this shapes

how news stories are identified and constructed. Viewing the relationship between journalists and their audiences and sources through the lens of self-legitimation allows us to see the importance of legitimation in the process of knowledge production.

Alongside the crisis in confidence generated by the 'loss of trust' in source relationships, and the parallel denial of the communication power of local news organisations, these phenomena also pose challenges for news gathering. Access denial is an affront to their status as power holders in the community, while also blocking important avenues of source verification on information.

4.3 Newsroom Self-Legitimation and Crisis

The space in which the most intense self-legitimation of local journalism occurs is in the newsroom. The practices, values and occupational culture of newsrooms constitute and legitimate the identity of local journalists. The newsroom is also the site of most intense crisis in local journalism, in which the revenue crisis has crystallised, suffocating the capacity of journalists to meet the values of the profession, and thereby to legitimate themselves. Newsrooms as physical spaces provide journalists with daily reminders of the collapse in their news gathering capacity and strength. In *The Post* the decimated newsroom now occupies a mere fraction of the vast open-plan office space that once struggled to contain it. In *The Evening Crier*, the newsroom occupied⁹² a corner of a single storey, in a large, empty, town centre building built to house the vast number of newspaper workers who once occupied it.

The day-to-day news-gathering and constructing practices that constitute journalism's working ideology are also being undone by the revenue crisis. The few remaining editors struggle to free their reporters from the unending and overwhelming

⁹² By the time of writing, *The Crier* had left their historic office building and moved to an industrial estate outside the town.

responsibility to produce, in order for them to connect with their patches they claim to ‘serve’. The evolution of online news, and the corollary loss of meaningful deadlines for daily outputs have fuelled an endless drive for new content. The collapse in advertising has driven a punishing thirst for online audience traffic, corrupting the values of ‘good journalism’. Finally, the preference gap between journalism and audiences is undermining long-held cultural assumptions about what values constitute ‘newsworthiness’, fundamentally challenging role identity of journalists in their imagined communities.

4.3.1 Journalistic Preferences v Audience Preferences

The increasing availability of information on the popularity of a story with readers challenged professional and aesthetic values. What was considered ‘good’ reporting—e.g. local government and politics—often attracted low online traffic, while court reporting based exclusively on a Magistrate’s press releases attracted some of the highest interest ever week. Knowledge of readers’ news preferences⁹³ in the local journalism I observed highlighted internal tensions between the different approaches local journalists employed to self-legitimate in the newsroom. On the one hand, local journalism’s professional values demanded journalists cover key patches like local government; craft news stories carefully with an appreciation of aesthetics; develop informal source relationships; and produce as many exclusive stories as possible: to build an authentic, comprehensive and quality vision of the community. The reasons for doing so were couched both in terms of ‘doing it right’ and ‘making that extra bit of effort’, but also in terms of their responsibility to their readers: ‘what they want/expect/deserve’.

⁹³ Boczkowski and Mitchelstein offer an in-depth exploration of the consequences of increased knowledge of reader’s news preferences, and how they diverge from journalists’. ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#))

13:30 – Phil (The Post’s chief sub-editor) gets the reporters over to look at pictures he is planning on using for their stories. He has Zoe come over for a chat about the ‘I’ll get you’ picture...

Phil: ‘I’ve got a vision in my head now [for how he wants the story to look on the page of the newspaper] ... Get it out for how I want it to look ... we quite like to use ‘rag out boxes’ – showing off that we know what we are at – they are just a copy of a page—a story we have followed up on from before – it’s an old school trick – bit of a space filler – but it shows the reader that you have been on top of the story since the start – use the front page that originally had story as a ‘box’ ... I will always put a byline in a certain ‘leg’ of copy...”

(Fieldnotes, *The Post*)

But the aesthetic values Phil sought to be consistent with here—a time-consuming endeavour, contrary to Shield Media’s policy—were performed without the input for the readers he speaks of. The only evidence of audience opinion on the aesthetic values of the newspaper came from newspaper sales, which had collapsed. Despite greater understanding of the public audience’s preferences from online traffic, many reporters and editors attempted to remain committed to these traditional news values. These values were asserted and practiced despite growing pressure from the corporate hierarchy in Shield Media to respond to readers’ preferences. Journalists—particularly older and more experienced editors in *The Post* and *The Crier*—actively resisted pressure to ‘play the game’ of manipulating audience interest and engagement with the online news site, with a proud culture of contempt for what was seen as audience-enticing ‘clickbait’ news content.

In short, a cultural understanding about what the public audience wanted helped shape or inspire the professional practices and values of journalism. Performing these practices and values legitimated the aspects of their identity that sought a form of democratic approval. Reliable information about reader preferences undermined this crucial form of self-legitimation, threatening the established norms of journalism’s autonomy culture. This has generated an adaptive self-legitimizing response of defiance

and resistance—identifying the corporate hierarchy as the source of the threat, rather than the romanticised reader’s preferences.

4.3.2 Newsworthiness and Self-Legitimation

‘News values’⁹⁴ or ‘newsworthiness’⁹⁵ broadly captures the cultural norms and practices that govern the spaces, institutions, people and themes around which a journalist’s content is constructed; how those objects of interest are constructed in that content, and how that content is evaluated by peers or superiors. Newsworthiness guides what journalists report on, and how they report on it. In constituting the vast bulk of the labour of journalism, news values also serve as the key means through which journalists internally legitimate their professional identity. Producing stories that are consistent with the norms of newsworthiness is ‘good journalism’: how journalists should perform their role in the community.

Prior to the digital revolution, journalistic culture was relatively autonomous in this respect, maintaining a stable independent occupational understanding of ‘newsworthiness’. Rusbridger’s recent personal account of a career spanning journalism’s ‘golden era’ through to the contemporary crisis and adaptation, describes an editorial culture that operated under vague assumptions about the importance and popularity of the various components of newspaper reporting. Without regular and sophisticated readership behavioural data, a complex series of cultural judgments were made about what readers would want to find in their newspaper, what they would find interesting, what would be popular with lots of readers, and what was good for them to read

⁹⁴ The literature on news values in crime and policing journalism is well-developed, though none engage with the role of such values in legitimating the identity of journalism: see ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#), [Mawby 2002](#), [Jewkes 2015](#))

⁹⁵ What Ericson et al described as journalists’ self-critically unexplored ‘nose for news’ (Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987)

([Rusbridger 2018](#)). The ready availability of data on audience news preferences has brought the tension between these often mutually exclusive sources of journalistic self-legitimation into clear focus ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#)).

4.3.3 What's Important to Cover?

Ricky notes a story on the new operating model in SEP (he works on this story sporadically through my time in the newsroom). He is having issues getting responses to his questions from SEP – nothing two days after he sent a query.

...

Ricky's story here relates to claims by Owens (the then Chief Constable) last year that community policing will be protected under any future budget cuts. Ricky is wondering how this could be possible given the serious funding cuts that have taken place, and the further cuts planned. The Police Federation have told Ricky (or he read it on their website) that 70 odd police officers are to be cut from the force – but it is a good question I think.

Ricky reckons this is not a 'sexy' story, it won't get huge hits online, but it is something that he and the paper *needs* to cover.
(Fieldnotes, *The Post*)

Local newspapers like *The Post* have evolved a complex conception of 'public interest' (a dominant news values) journalism, reflected in the main institutional patches they covered. These areas of reportage included local government, education and health, and planning decisions. These 'public interest' patches and their stories may have attracted plenty of readers' interest, but their inclusion qualified primarily on the basis of a judgment that it was 'good for' the readers to be exposed to this information.⁹⁶ This creation of 'good citizens', well-informed about their local bureaucracies, government and public services, sits neatly into journalists' highly idealised vision of their community and its membership. Thus, mutually reinforcing their sense of obligation to commit resources to patches that may not attract the attuned attention of large volumes of their

⁹⁶ ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#)), [Rusbridger \(2018\)](#)

readers. Reporting on these public interest patches therefore served to legitimate a host of elements of journalistic identity.

This self-legitimizing desire to cover ‘important’, if unpopular, news was far easier when their news was delivered exclusively in the newspaper format, disallowing readers to pick and choose what news they paid for, and were potentially⁹⁷ exposed to. When studies have asked loyal readers to particular newspapers, they have indicated that they like having ‘important’ public policy and governance news in the paper, even if they rarely read it ([Rusbridger 2018](#)).

4.3.4 What’s Popular?

Crime and policing news commands both ‘public interest’/‘what’s important’⁹⁸ and ‘popularity’ news values. Threats to the security of the community⁹⁹ are deemed important to cover, while also being consistently popular with readers. Like sports, crime and policing stories were believed by journalists in *The Post* and *The Crier* to have been a key driver of newspaper sales, and were known to drive much online readership. Greater audience share improved the value of their advertising space. As well as the key to the revenue model, audience reach as noted above also represents the communication power of the news organisation, itself a key form of leverage in asserting news media power in the local governance field.

When the printed newspaper was the primary medium for print-newsmedia organisations to deliver their output, these dominant news values of importance and popularity, and the rich vein of internal legitimation each provided were mutually

⁹⁷ Though most journalists accepted a large number of readers purchased the paper to start at the back page, where the sports coverage began.

⁹⁸ Interestingly, others disregards the public interest nature of crime and policing news ([Boczkowski and Mitchelstein 2013](#))

⁹⁹ A key difference between local and national crime news is the reader is more likely to be impacted by the former.

complementary. Access to audience preference data created by the dramatic shift from paper to online has disrupted the traditional assumptions regarding newsworthiness by local journalists. Combined with the corollary collapse in advertising revenue brought about by the move to online, the complementarity of news values has been significantly eroded. The loss of newspaper advertising income has driven a corporate management-inspired demand to capture dwindling online advertising revenues. This thirst for traffic¹⁰⁰ is gradually reorienting news values away from ‘the important’ and towards ‘the popular’. What in printed form had been mutually complementary norms of journalism are now in competitive tension, disrupting sacred ground on which journalists self-legitimate.

4.3.5 The Thirst for Traffic, and Resistance

During my fieldwork, editors like Diane and Paula in *The Post* and Deb in *The Crier* still prided themselves on their resistance to pressure from their parent company to pursue traffic and audience reach. They believed the online strategies that Shield Media encouraged were dishonest and disrespectful to readers. However, Shield Media’s policy directives to editors encouraged journalistic resources away from ‘public interest’ journalism and onto content that would drive online traffic. While its various titles were still producing paper versions, senior editors explained that the ‘online first’ policy—where new stories were put online before the paper edition was published¹⁰¹—reflected a long-term corporate strategy to abandon the printed form altogether.¹⁰² This transition

¹⁰⁰ See variously: (Wilson , Deloitte 2016, Herrman 2016, Sweney 2018)

¹⁰¹ Diane ignored this policy as group editor, and encouraged the withholding of stories so that those who paid for their news would have some added value over those who only read online.

¹⁰² For example, though *The Post* putatively operated a subscription system, I found it impossible despite weeks of contacting Shield Media’s subscription service to buy one. Diane explained that this was one part of the bigger strategy of killing off print, but not

away from print to exclusively online was premised on a web traffic volume model for generating advertising revenue: the more readers on the site, the higher the potential advertising take.

However, experienced senior editors I spoke to were sceptical that online advertising, at that time being cannibalised by the big tech players local newspapers depended on to enhance their reach ([Rusbridger 2018](#)), could sustain ‘real journalism’. They believed it was important to try to protect ‘public interest’ reporting for as long as possible from the industry-wide urge to cull. The drive for bigger online readership numbers inevitably encouraged more of a focus on stories that would generate traffic. This was also compounded by the ongoing cuts to newsrooms reporting resources, leaving less scope for editors to free up reporters to do the ‘important’ stories. In engaging in these acts of resistance, experienced journalists, and their younger protégés, set themselves against the owners of the paper. These small acts of defiance, committed as they were to maintaining professional standards, helped bolster newsroom confidence. Even though younger reporters in *The Post* complained about the pressure Diane and Paula placed them under, they all felt lucky to be part of a newspaper that was still committed to high standards.

While individual journalists certainly wanted their content to be read, high traffic content did not appear to be particularly prized. For example, while the Magistrate’s Court report generated substantial readership, because it was effectively a ‘cut and paste’ job, it carried little prestige for Ricky and Penny who shared the task of reporting it. Journalists, in *The Post* at least, had been taught by editors to value ‘proper’ reporting.¹⁰³ When my fieldwork moved on to *The Crier*, it was striking to see editors who appeared

before the last bit of advertising and paper sales value could be extracted from those readers who diligently bought the daily paper in their local news agent.

¹⁰³ Ericson et al note the central self-legitimising importance of ‘mythologised’ aspects of standard journalistic practices aimed at ‘objectivity’ and ‘impartiality’, see ([Ericson, Baranek et al. 1987](#))

far more resigned to the fate Shield Media had planned for local journalism. *The Crier* had by then done away with most of the ‘public interest’ institutional patches, unable to commit their few remaining resources to specialist roles. Though courts and crime generated substantial online traffic, *The Crier* no longer had a dedicated court reporter as it was cheaper to buy copy from a freelance court reporter. That the stories were not exclusives did not bother their readers. They also relied heavily on police press releases for their crime and policing copy, and were not at all as suspicious of their local force’s agenda.

This hollowing-out of specialist patches and the deprioritisation of ‘important’ journalism significantly disrupted the role identity of journalists in the community. Unlike reporters in *The Post*, who were over-worked and underpaid—yet who remained adversarial and committed to ‘public service’ journalism—reporters in *The Crier* were notably more muted in their dealings with sources. For example, as with SEP, *The Crier*’s local police service was unreceptive to inquiries. Yet the reporter who tended to deal with the police appeared largely unbothered by this. Denial of access did not precipitate an adversarial relationship with the source, nor did the journalists there seem particularly interested in attempting to cultivate informal source relationships in the police.

4.3.5.1 *The BBC’s Thirst for Traffic*

AJ says the stories he wants are ballerinas, physicists – something with human curiosity angle to it – ‘BBC News want it – it’s the biggest news page in the world (in terms of audience engagement) – people like inspirational people – social media has really changed this focus – we now look for stories on people who are impressive.’
(Fieldnotes, *BBC Odditon*)

The BBC provides an important counter-example here. The threats to, and loss of professional pride and confidence in local newspaper journalism brought about by the increasing focus on traffic over public interest journalism was not experienced in *BBC*

Odditon's digital team. For people like Sally—the senior digital reporter—the national pivot in the BBC from ‘serious’ journalism towards popular stories was an attempt to become more ‘relevant’ to the public audience. That *BBC Odditon's* digital team did not see themselves as a local news organisation for *Odditon*, and lacked any of the deep institutional connections and source relationships of local newspapers, made this transition much easier.

Note the BBC's desire for traffic is interesting in terms of legitimacy – as they are not advertising funded it is intuitively puzzling that they would need to focus on increasing online market share. But their legitimacy in terms of the license fee no doubt depends on their being able to justify that fee in viewership or listenership or now readership numbers.
(Fieldnotes, *BBC Odditon*)

The response within the BBC's corporate structure to a perceived legitimisation need, generated by the license fee model, was to pursue ‘relevance’ through traffic and audience engagement. Interpreting their thirst for traffic, and reducing ‘serious’ journalism, was seen by the digital reporters as positive.

4.3.6 Get it Right, or Look Stupid

The importance of getting information in a story correct, or getting the correct angle in a piece, is central to the professional values of journalism. From the perspective of good professional standards, the need for accuracy—at least in terms of certain more basic claims to truth—can be straightforwardly accounted for in terms of management of litigation risks. Mistakes in journalism can be costly, even catastrophic, and journalists are sensitive to standard legal and financial risks of defamation. However, ‘getting it right’ also buttresses the self-conception of journalists as competent professionals, and trustworthy sources of authority. Early in my fieldwork I got a call late one evening from Mido. He wanted to discuss a story he was working on involving a young woman who

had made allegations that she had been the victim of very serious crimes. *The Post* had invested significant time and resources into covering the story, including a front-page ‘splash’ using e-fit images of the alleged suspects, as described by the young woman to police. It was clear even from my own interaction with people in the city that parents in Odditon were worried about their children’s safety after reading or hearing news about it. The police investigation was covered in extensive detail by *The Post*, and other local news organisations, including regional branches of the BBC and ITV. This was a big story, with national interest.

However, after a period of time SEP grew slower and slower in their release of information—eventually saying they had stopped looking for suspects, but were continuing their investigation. While SEP gave some limited and cautious off-record guidance, the press team there said they were not going to comment further. Mido, covering crime reporting for Ricky that evening, called me to complain about SEP’s decision. Mido believed SEP’s communications position at that point clearly implied the young woman’s allegations were false. This left *The Post* in a quandary. On the one hand, they had invested significant energy in trying to help the investigation. In doing this they had risked, as they now saw it, their own reputation by promulgating an inaccurate story that had stirred up a lot of fear in the community. While *The Post* had in this instance done nothing wrong—they merely enthusiastically conveyed the information they were given by SEP—the instinctive response here was to blame the institutional source for this inaccuracy and the impact they feared it might have on their reputation.

On the other hand, the source of the inaccuracy was a young woman, who the police had made clear was vulnerable. Mido said he did not want to call her a liar. But, he explained, *The Post* had run a big campaign on this case, and now felt they were left with the responsibility for telling the public the truth without further guidance from the police. He felt that they would look stupid, and anything they wrote based on the

police's press statement would in effect blame the young woman. The failure of SEP to help sort out any lingering confusion among the public risked, to Mido's mind, compromising their credibility in the eyes of the community. He felt that if they could blame neither the young girl, nor the police, *The Post* would look stupid. He believed the root of the problem was a failure by the police to trust them with more off-record insights: though it was not clear to me then, or now, how this might have helped.

In the end, *The Post* blamed neither the young woman or SEP, and the coverage stopped abruptly. Throughout my time in the newsroom there, I never observed journalists dealing with any backlash from readers about the story, despite it being a case of serious genuine concern among the population. This sense that they would 'look stupid' in the eyes of the public did not appear to materialise, but the affront to their values remained, and their sense of professional competence bruised. The incident was returned to again and again by journalists when met with access denials by the police. For them it represented the paradigm example of the problem with police communications policy: they did not understand the position of the newspaper, and the risks its journalists were taking.

As well as exemplifying the self-legitimizing news values that govern local journalism, this example is illustrative of other features of news construction. In particular, the dependence on institutional source input for stories—to the degree of paralysis—is wholly consistent with the legitimation-focused hierarchy of credibility. *The Post's* reporting, even when they felt they looked stupid, remained committed to this hierarchy as a safeguard for legitimating their identity. But the refusal by those sources to engage in incidents like this generates a legitimation crisis for journalists: their commitment to accuracy—a key professional legitimator—pushes them towards institutional source verification. In failing to engage—driven in part driven by a denial of

communicative power, and by a loss of trust—the institutional source creates a multi-layered inability for journalists to self-legitimate.

4.3.7 Access and Exclusivity

As a descriptive concept, access covers how easy it is for a journalist to communicate with a source, how easy it is to get a source to answer questions, and on whose terms and how does the journalist communicate with the source. As a journalistic value, access to institutional sources both situates, and evaluates a journalist's position within the wider information governance framework. It reflects how successfully a journalist has converted their communicative power, or perceived communicative power, into other forms of power and status in the 'wider field of power' (see 8.1 below). Access in this way provides the potential for a seat at the decision-making table of governing power, where they are privy to insider information, and, at the high end, potentially having their views and opinions on a matter taken into consideration. By crystallising, naming and making comprehensible these dynamics of media-source power relations, access also legitimates aspects of journalistic identity by accounting for the success they have achieved in accessing and influencing official governance architectures.

Access is also form of capital. Journalists use it to leverage other forms of access from other sources. It assists them in managing their relationship with their editors—at times used to carve out or insulate a degree of autonomy in their work. Finally, as a key value of journalism, access also serves as an important internal source of self-legitimation. The greater the degree of access a journalist has within a particular source, such as the police, the more credible their source information, and the higher the quality of their output.

The most highly prized access includes high levels of communicative openness on the side of the source, exclusively to the particular journalist or news organisation. The best exclusive access is based on a highly trusting, often intimately personal relationship between the journalist and source ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). This type of face-to-face access, on neutral ground—in a café or, more rarely now ([Filkin 2012](#)), a pub—enables the journalist to draw the source into what Mido described as, ‘the conspiracy’, where richest source information flows effortlessly. This access is the rarer informal¹⁰⁴ type—i.e. outside official communications channels—with source’s ‘frontline’ workers, not their corporate communications or PR intermediaries.

For example, in their relationship with police, local journalists I observed and interviewed sought to develop personal, informal relationships with police officers, particularly Detectives dealing with serious crime. They resisted, and attempted to circumvent, the official mediated access through a police communications professionals, even where the latter could provide better quality¹⁰⁵ information from a journalistic perspective. Ricky, after a year in his specialist role, and a few months after I completed my fieldwork in *The Post*, had finally begun to build informal relationships with police. At dinner one night he explained to me with pride that he had not had to deal with the press office in SEP for quite a while. The informal contacts that he had met through extra-curricular activities were providing him with a healthy stream of exclusive insider accounts of SEP’s inner workings. Unfortunately, Ricky was not willing to let me meet them.

¹⁰⁴ In much of the literature, such sources are often described as ‘unofficial’, see: ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Schlesinger and Tumber 1994](#))

¹⁰⁵ Police communications departments and media teams often had better access to relevant police officers than the individual officers journalists might cultivate. They could also provide information in formats most useful to journalists, such as mugshots of suspects or those recently convicted, CCTV footage, and other material helpfully produced in ‘press packs’.

Yet, as with many of the most important parts of newsroom values, access did not appear important for audiences. A story derived wholly from a police press release was as likely to attract large numbers of readers as one derived from an informal source. But, for committed professional reporters like Ricky and Mido, informal access provided evidence that they had achieved status in their role, a view reinforced by their editors and fellow reporters.

4.3.7.1 Strategies for Access

Journalists I observed deployed a variety of strategies to achieve access, some of which rely on personal characteristic of charm and empathy, others relying on coercion and the leveraging of access through threats of negative coverage. References to their authority as journalists also played an important role, playing on the rituals of transparency (see 6.2.1 below), which conveniently, only they could mediate. For example, Mido—who preferred to avoid more confrontational or adversarial forms of access development (to seemingly great success)—described drawing his institutional sources into ‘the conspiracy’:

I note...that as the journalists talk to their sources, they share the angle of the story they are going for quite a lot – not trying to trap or trick sources into divulging information: as Mido says, naturally trying to draw them into “the conspiracy” (I note here that I also do similar by divulging themes and opinions on what I am seeing and where I think it fits into the grand narrative of the research when discussing things with my research subjects – unless I think it will alienate them or get them on the defensive – which is similar to how some journalists treat sources ...).
(Fieldnotes, *The Post*)

On the other side of this strategic line were editors like Paula and Diane, who demanded access to institutional sources by relying on a combination of their asserted community authority and power, and abstract constitutional ‘good governance’ principles of press

freedom and institutional transparency. As access operated as a proxy for their own authority within the community, and their role status within the institutional framework of governance in that community, when it was challenged or refused, it generated crisis responses verging on the extreme (see 3.3.2 above):

Viewing access dynamics between journalists and some institutional sources such as the police through the lens of mass communication power helps explain some of the crisis reactions of editors like Paula. In their eyes, audience reach suggested their power had been enhanced by the digital revolution. Journalists across different news organisations and platforms spoke of their unprecedented and increasing reach through online channels. When institutional sources dismissed this power by denying access, it also dismissed to irrelevance a key means through which journalists could assert their power-holder status in the field of local governance.

4.3.7.2 Exclusivity

‘Exclusivity’ generally means that a particular news story was published by a journalist or news organisation first, from a story they developed, rather than relying on the reporting of other journalists/news organisations. Exclusivity also overlaps closely with access. For example, the development of informal sources of information within institutional sources, such as the police, can produce original and exclusive news stories for a journalist or a news organisation. In this sense, access can also be exclusive.

Again, though exclusivity was a high journalistic value in the newsroom, it did not appear readers were particularly concerned with which news organisations covered a particular story first. Audience preference data suggest this is largely irrelevant.¹⁰⁶ However, editors in *The Post* routinely reinforced this news value when evaluating stories

¹⁰⁶ ([Schroder 2019](#))

‘pitched’ by journalist. If the journalist could argue or guarantee that a story was an exclusive, it was more likely to get a positive endorsement from the editor. If an editor positively endorsed a story with a sufficient degree of enthusiasm, a journalist could request that they prioritise that exclusive story over other news production targets the newsdesk might direct towards them. Exclusives are a source of praise from the hierarchy, and a means of achieving professional self-legitimation for reporters by honing their craft in front of their peers and superiors. Exclusivity was also an opportunity to carve out and protect a degree of journalistic autonomy.

The media team in SEP had during my fieldwork begun to respond to some queries from journalists by issuing a specific press release on their website, or occasionally issuing general responses through social media. This approach to general non-exclusive disclosure of information was justified as a new regulatory requirement of Leveson and Filkin. This practice infuriated journalists, as it by design killed their exclusive ownership of a story. Emily, the media team’s manager in SEP, later told me that her view was that the information *The Post* were seeking was ‘their [the police’s] material’ (internal reference to ‘our content’), not the journalist’s, and they could disseminate it as they saw fit. This attitude was viewed as highly provocative by journalists in the area, illustrating for them the lack of understanding of news cycles and journalists’ needs—and an underlying lack of respect for their power and status—rooted in incompetence. As well as souring relations with SEP, the inability to secure exclusivity compounded the self-legitimation challenges experienced by the denial of access.

4.4 Conclusion

This chapter has ultimately sought to construct a culturally-informed understanding of journalistic identity, and the central role that identity formation plays in police-media

power relations. The unique insights derived from extended newsroom observations during a period of acute crisis in local journalism has helped create a highly original account of key structural and cultural features of journalistic production of crime and policing knowledge.

Building on existing scholarship, which rightly identified the importance of institutional source relationships in the construction of crime and policing news, this chapter has reconceptualised source-media relations through the lens of self-legitimation. Well-established concepts such as the hierarchy of credibility have here been repurposed to help understand underlying attempts by journalists to buttress and maintain their sense of professional authority and empowerment. In contrast to claims by journalists, and police that the fallout from Leveson is the key disrupting force in the production of knowledge on crime and policing, this chapter argues the power relations between policing and media have been subject to much deeper structural change. Most significant in this regard, this chapter has examined the implications of the revenue crisis in local journalism. This chapter demonstrates how the denial of journalistic mass communications power by institutional sources such as the police is among the most important drivers in the reordering of mass communication power relations. This denial poses challenges for journalists to legitimate a key facet of their professional identity: namely, the desire to convert communications power into access to state coercive power.

The crises around which this chapter is focused have allowed for a novel re-interrogation of the nature of media-source relations in the news construction process, placing self-legitimation as a key organising feature in information governance framework. On this view, journalistic cultural self-legitimation shapes who journalists gather information from, and how that information is constructed into news stories. The central role of self-legitimation in sources relationships has also sown the seeds for a multi-level crisis of legitimation in journalism. The denial of their communicative power

by sources like the police, and the corollary loss of access and exclusivity by those sources, has created a negative legitimation feedback loop for journalism. Instead of opening the potential for a more adversarial form of local journalism, this loss of access is compounded by the material constraints of the revenue crisis.

5 Constructing and legitimating police communicator identity

5.1 Introduction: Context and Overview

In stark contrast to the crisis among local journalists in Odditon and Sunnyside (mirroring trends across the entire local newspaper industry in England), the police communicators I observed were experiencing an emerging, buoyant period in their professional culture. Where local newsroom resources were being eviscerated with round after round of demoralising cost-cutting exercises by their multi-national parent companies, police corporate communications departments (CCDs)—in spite of wider controversial police cuts across austerity England (see 1.4.2 above)—were enjoying investment and expansion. When I arrived in Southern England Police’s (SEP) CCD to begin my fieldwork, the department had just hired a number of new staff with experience in digital communications and social media campaigning. These new recruits were sought to help SEP tap into the perceived vast potential offered by social media, and pursue existing and more ambitious police communications ends. Greater demand from local print journalists for crime and policing information (see 7.2 below) was also necessitating the expansion of the police media teams within CCDs: those responsible for managing the informational interchange between police and journalists. At the Association of Police Communicators (APComm) annual National Conferences¹⁰⁷ I attended, despite austerity in policing and increasing responsabilisation of police communicators, the focus

¹⁰⁷ Rebranded as their ‘Annual Academy’ in 2019.

of discussions and atmosphere was imbued with professional confidence. Attendees and presenters there described and strategised about the new spaces and opportunities in which they could make a difference.

This apparent¹⁰⁸ material growth in police CCD resourcing seemed to generate—though perhaps more likely coincided¹⁰⁹—with a growth in self-confidence among police communicators. Media team members in SEP—who were drawn overwhelmingly from local print journalism—were first and foremost very relieved to have found a job within their professional skill set, which enjoyed security, decent pay and conditions, and the possibility of progression. But, these police communicators also now found themselves in positions of significant power and responsibility in policing. Where once, perhaps, they were marginal players in the presentation and governance of policing ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Mawby 2002](#), [Mawby 2010](#))—dominated as that was by big police personalities among the senior officer ranks, and their informal relationships with favoured crime reporters ([Loader and Mulcahy 2001](#), [Loader and Mulcahy 2001](#), [Mawby 2002](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Mawby 2017](#))—police communicators were now *the* key gatekeepers of police information and its release to external audiences (see 6.3 below). This enhanced power—in part a product of both Leveson-driven exclusivity, and social media-driven communications power—over police image work ([Mawby 2002](#)) had, I found, given police communicators a status of growing importance within operational police decision-making. Police officers of all ranks relied heavily on their media team to prepare, strategise and coach them in how to engage with journalists. The digital team taught

¹⁰⁸ More experienced journalists I interviewed like Shane Jordan felt that SEP had in previous decades been much better served in terms of media officer resources. He explained that when he had been a crime and policing reporter in the SEP area well over a decade before my fieldwork, there was a media officer in each large police station in the SEP area. As part of broader cost-cutting and rationalisations, the entire communications function had been centralised, leading to a decline in the number of media officers to manage press demand.

¹⁰⁹ Indeed, police communicators despite their growth complained about under-resourcing.

police officers how to use social media and how to maximise its use for particular operational or legitimisation objectives. This ‘media consultants to the frontline’ (see 5.4.2.2 below) status gave police communications workers privileged access to the pinnacles of the operational policing¹¹⁰ hierarchy: access which, as with journalists, served to legitimate their growing professional status through close proximity to elite decision-making. Indeed, the seeming exponential growth of professional media responsibilities that were laid on the police communicators I observed—a remit that had by then expanded to cover the management and protection of vulnerable individuals and victims of crime (see 5.4.2.4 below)—led them to assert they were ‘frontline policing too’.

The centralisation of police communications personnel in SEP away from individual police stations where many had once been stationed, and into SEP headquarters, has also assisted the potential for the development of an autonomous police communicator identity. Centralisation of media officers away from daily face-to-face engagements in the police station with local journalists established critical distance from former peers. This distance in turn, it seems, helped incubate a new professional identity, in some features similar, but ideologically distinct from the values of journalism. Added to this, the widening of recruitment into police communications beyond the vast pool of former journalists, to include other forms of professional communicators—such as those from digital corporate campaigning and ‘change management’—has also been critical to the emergence of this new identity. The fusion of these diverse communications logics within the policing setting has necessitated the construction of a new identity for police communicators.

¹¹⁰ By ‘operation policing’ and ‘frontline policing’—terms I use frequently throughout the remainder of the thesis—I mean to describe sworn police officers, rather than civilians. Though I concede civilians are often involved in operational frontline policing matters, they are rarely considered so—a source of significant frustration and tension for those non-sworn police workers, particularly police communicators (see 5.4 below).

An essential part of this process of constructing police communications as its own cultural field—a critically important, but qualitatively distinct, part of the policing field—has been the quest for empowerment. Above all other aspects of contemporary police communications: social media technologies and the potential communications power they possess, constitutes the single most important source of cultural empowerment. The power to construct and control *the* mass communications network of the police offers the potential for today’s police communicators to liberate themselves from dependency on their relationship with the press, and to permanently reimagine and reconstitute their relationship with, and within the operational hierarchy of policing. One of the most telling illustrations of the communications empowerment of the profession can be found in the change to the self-identity away from the label or ‘public relations’ towards ‘police communicators’:¹¹¹ with the emphasis shift suggesting communicative autonomy and exclusivity. In this way, the mass communications power potential of social media has achieved a crucial cultural status for police communicators, with the practices and rituals of social media ‘police image’ work legitimating their identity ([Barker 2001](#)).

The thirst for recognition of professional status and power shapes both the relationship between journalists and police communicators—as the latter seek to assert their dominant position over the former in terms of communications power—but also the relationship with operational policing. Police communicators I observed sought to attain, and then assert their perceived communications power over operational policing to control the flow of information about policing, but also to leverage greater access to elite decision-making over state coercive power.

¹¹¹ For example, the Association of Police Public Relations Officers at some point in the late 2000s or early 2010s changed their name to the Association of Police Communicators.

This cultural dimension to police communications has until now attracted no direct critical attention in the literature. Part of this reason is no doubt methodological: the limited body of research emanating from a handful of researchers in the Anglophone academic world has tended to rely on survey data and qualitative interviews. Only Mawby (2002) undertook any period of observation in a police CCD. His valuable contribution was, unsurprisingly given the dearth of knowledge about the field, focused on mapping the day-to-day practices of police communicators as they sought to legitimate policing. However, as was evident from the media section of this thesis, and will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter, questions of culture, identity and power are central to rituals of legitimation. In particular, over the next two chapters I will show that we cannot understand the legitimation of policing, without understanding the culture of the key police legitimation workers: police communicators.

This chapter charts the emergence of this distinct new police communicator identity through their professional practices. It explores the quest for status and empowerment by police communicators, in opposition to and within the fields of journalism and policing. It details the central role of status, knowledge and communications power to the legitimation of this new professional identity, and examines the various sources and routes to police communicator self-legitimation.

The chapter is organised around a number of key themes: it firstly deals with the transition from past professional lives into police communications. The chapter then describes and theorises the concept of ‘police as publishers’ of news, rather than sources for news publishers. It also examines the concept of police communicators ‘on the frontline’ alongside operational policing, and details the role of shame, Leveson, and control in constructing police communicator identity. In particular, the themes of ‘police as publishers’ and ‘frontline police communications’ dominated my field observations in

both SEP CCD, and at APComm Annual Conferences, and offer important cultural touchstones in the (re-)construction of police communicator identity.

5.2 From the Newsroom to the Comms Room: Professional Context and Training, and the Re-Construction of a Police *Communicator* Identity

5.2.1 The CCD

In SEP's CCD—my primary police field side—I undertook my fieldwork at a time of substantial, painful, and later politically significant ([Quinn 2019](#)) retrenchment of police budgets. Despite budget constraints and the challenges this posed for the legitimation of policing, management and workers in the CCD were themselves engaged in an ongoing and (perhaps surprisingly) successful campaign to increase their staff resourcing on the media and digital communications teams. Capitalising on the collapse of local newspaper industry from which they overwhelmingly drew their recruits, the media team within the CCD had by the close of my fieldwork increased from six to eight full time staff. The digital team there had also increased from one to three full time staff.

Of the media team, five of the initial six had worked in local news of some form before coming to work in SEP: four of those had been local newspaper reporters. As their title suggests, SEP's media team were expressly and primarily responsible for managing SEP's relationship with the news media. They were the contact point for all journalistic inquiries to SEP: filtering, facilitating and monitoring access by reporters. The media team also wrote SEP's press releases, and disseminated these releases to interested reporters and on their 'own channels' (e.g. official SEP social media accounts).

The digital team in SEP were primarily responsible for the management and development of SEP's social media presence. They actively monitored the various social media accounts that were either centrally controlled in HQ, or run by community-based

frontline police officers. SEP had, by design, only a handful of Facebook accounts (though by early 2020 they had proliferated somewhat), preferring local officers to use Twitter accounts (which they also strictly controlled the numbers of) to create a distinct local policing area (LPA) identity. The digital team were also responsible for creating multimedia content for dissemination on police social media accounts, but also *via* traditional news media in the form of pre-prepared media packages. This multimedia content variously included mini-documentaries about aspects of policing that attracted little or no media interest, along with on-the-ground live video footage of police operations.

SEP's CCD also included a campaigns team who created various 'big issue' police communications campaigns around 'new' criminality and public safety. One permanent staff member had sole responsibility for researching, designing and promoting police campaigns. The CCD also occasionally hired temporary staff to help with research work for campaigns. During my time, SEP's campaigns focused on issues like domestic violence and modern slavery. Campaigns also drew upon the digital and media teams for relevant skills and support in creating and disseminating content across their various communications 'channels'.

The CCD managed a community alert system, which tens of thousands of residents across the policing area had signed up for. The alert system allowed the CCD to communicate bespoke police text messages to member residents in particular neighbourhoods. Most of these were police information and public safety messages tailored to that area. While research suggests that this approach to police communications—directly engaging the policed community—may be effective in impacting public perceptions of police 'legitimacy' ([Hohl, Bradford et al. 2010](#)), during my observations it did not attract much of the department's energy, interests, or resources. The community alert system did not have a distinct staffing. Various teams in

the CCD used the system, particularly the community engagement team, but also administrators across the various LPAs. The system seemed to be principally a channel for ‘reassurance’ (see 6.3.4 below) or ‘risk communication’ ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)) messaging to older demographics. As it was not a significant focal point of CCD activity or interest, I did not spend much time observing its operation.

The CCD also housed the internal communications teams, and other teams tasked with designing and producing branded police communications products like information leaflets. Though I interacted occasionally with the internal communications workers, I did not focus on their work, and in any event, they all refused to participate in my research. I also did not spend any time with the design team.

As noted above, the media team were, bar one member of staff, all drawn from local journalism. Media officers in SEP were mostly in their early to mid-30s. The digital team were relatively young (early to mid-20s), and, compared to the media team, professionally inexperienced—though two of the three had had short communications careers before policing. One had been a social media manager for a major global brand, and had travelled internationally as part of the job. Another had worked in-house in digital communications in the private sector. All had studied some form of digital communications or media in university. The rest of the CCD were drawn from a diverse array of communications and non-communications backgrounds. Some had worked in the public sector as ‘change management’ communications workers. Others had worked in a variety of clerical roles within policing, and had drifted into communications. Some had come from human resource management backgrounds.

5.2.2 Training the Comms Identity

Training opportunities for police communicators appeared, during my time in SEP, confined to the media team. When the CCD could spare them, media officers were sent on an ‘intensive’ week-long ‘Police Communicator’ course provided by Lincolnshire Police.¹¹² This course focused on media law, and gave a general overview of the different aspects of the police communicator role, including: crisis communications management, social media, dealing with victims and their families, media campaigns, and broadcast interview techniques. The media officers who had attended the course said it was positive, if short. However, they normally did not get an opportunity to attend the course until after they had been in post for many months, if not more than a year. The primary training of all police communicators I observed in SEP took place on-the-job. Given the sensitive nature of the information and the perceived risks involved in the work, new police communicators were slowly and carefully given core responsibilities. For example, it was many months before a new media officer went ‘on call’ overnight or on weekends—an important part of media officers’ working time duties. The issues that tended to arise ‘on call’ were often highly sensitive and time-pressured, and were felt to require significant amounts of in-house experience before a new media officer could be trusted to make the right decisions. While the Lincolnshire Police course was open to police communicators outside of media teams, none of the other public-facing communications workers I observed in SEP had taken the course, though a few hoped to be given the opportunity to do so in the future.

Along with being the space where police communicator practice was taught, the absence of significant and compulsory formal training for police communicators left much of the job of constructing the professional identity of police communicators to the

¹¹² Lincolnshire Police also offers an advanced 3-4 day long ‘Strategic Media Handling Course’ designed for police communicators with a few years of experience, or senior police officers. A few, but not all, of the media team in SEP had done the course.

workplace.¹¹³ Arriving into the CCD, new workers who brought past journalism and communications experience with them sought to flesh out their new, shared role identity, and its norms by reappropriating and reconceptualising their previous professional lives. Members of the digital team, drawn from private sector corporate communications and advertising, primarily viewed their role in terms of brand development and protection, and the expansion of audience reach. The media team, drawn predominantly from journalism, reconstructed the values and practices governing the production of crime and policing ‘copy’ to reflect what they perceived to be the rigid impartiality of policing and its power. Media officers, whose role necessitated daily, and often stressful, hostile interactions with their former journalistic peers—who occasionally reminded them of their ‘betrayal’ in becoming a police worker—also attached great significance to formal police-media governance arrangements. These arrangements were themselves helpfully constructed around enumerated normative frameworks such as the College of Policing’s Authorised Professional Practice (APP), and the ‘service level agreement’ between the SEP media team and the local news media in the SEP area. Both frameworks were a direct response to the Leveson and Filkin recommendations on police-media relations, and sought to structure police communications towards formality and transparency. However, both frameworks also clearly sought to affirm the privileged status of journalists—a feature that seemed to be lost in police communicator rhetoric, if not practice. The media team’s commitment to particular interpretations of these formalistic frameworks had the advantage of giving somewhat concrete benchmarks for professional success—a valuable commodity given the uncertainties of success in the police legitimacy game ([Bottoms and Tankebe 2012](#), [Beetham 2013](#), [Tankebe 2013](#), [Bottoms and Tankebe 2017](#), [Martin and Bradford 2019](#)). Indeed, members of the media team like John and

¹¹³ All members of the CCD I observed and interviewed had university degrees. Some had studied media, communications or journalism, and some had done general Humanities degrees at elite Russell Group institutions.

Nigel consciously cultivated their sense of professionalism around these norms, and often spoke of having done ‘good work’, or being ‘disappointed’ in having failed to achieve the standards they interpreted from these normative frameworks. For example, John described his frustration with the local weekly newspaper in Poppy Rise—a city within the SEP policing area—which remained hostile despite his view that they were meeting their obligations under the ‘service level agreement’:

‘It’s a bad relationship. A journalist there was arrested before – now they are very hostile to the police – they are now only interested in stories that are critical of the police.’

In John’s view, the editor of *The Democrat* wants things to go back to the way they were with police-media relations in the 1970s. The editor said to John that he is not really into online news – telling him ‘print is where it’s at – it’s the heart of journalism’.

John is frustrated by the meeting – lots of the complaints *The Democrat’s* editor raised they feel they are already addressing – but the paper does not engage when they facilitate contact with officers...

The editor also said to him that they get a better response from Middleshire Police – John responded to him that they (Middleshire Police) have a smaller patch compared to SEP – as a result, they have less work.

The editor complained about them not answering the phone too – he also noted Middleshire Police doing press releases on sentencing – John responded by pointing to all the content (including sentencing reports) they send out which they refuse to use.

John’s commitment to the ‘service level agreement’, and pride and disappointment when expectations attached to it were not met or recognised, illustrates the growing sense of a police communicator professional identity: one rooted in the regulatory frameworks which sought to govern it.

5.2.3 A National Police Communicator Identity

The construction of the ‘new’, social media empowered professionalism in police communications was also rooted within a national police communications context. Communications managers in SEP, like Emily and Farah—neither with backgrounds in journalism or policing—drew heavily on their membership and status within the national police communications organisation APComm to legitimate their status in policing, and in opposition to a perceived hostile media. At the annual APComm National Conferences, the mythology of police communicator identity was forged around narratives of police communicators standing front and centre alongside chief officers, as they faced various crises. At APComm attendees also called for consistency in approaches to police communications to help build and present a consistent national ‘police voice’ ([Loader and Mulcahy 2001](#), [Loader and Mulcahy 2001](#)) to the media and public. This push for consistency through national frameworks, and policies of professional cooperation and mutual aid helped bind disparate groups of police communicators together with a common goal. These efforts also helped legitimate this newly confident identity through the increased communications power such unifying efforts were believed to generate. Various police communicators I spoke to at the APComm conferences described how attending had energised them with enthusiasm and self-belief about the importance of their role in policing, and how to do it better. For example Stacy, an experienced member of the media team in SEP, described attending the annual conference positively in terms of the solidarity and support it provided:

‘It’s great to see how others are working – it’s a lonely profession –you’re in a bubble – you’re competing against yourself most of the time – I particularly enjoyed the crisis comms exercises.’

This new emerging professionalism was similarly buttressed by the affirmation of chief police officers at APComm conferences, who chimed in with supportive assertions that police communicators ‘are frontline too’ (see 5.4 below):

Simon Bailey (Chief Constable of Norfolk Police): Noting that attendees at APComm have made repeated reference to their frustration that HMICFRS consider communications to be ‘back office’ – comms (communications) is not back-office – comms is part of the operational policing team.’

Chief officers characterising police communications as ‘frontline’ helped affirm its distinct professional status in policing, and supported the perception that communications is a central part of elite decision-making in the governance of police/state coercive power.

5.2.4 Professional Pride, Ambition and Aspiration

At both a national policing and individual force level, ideas of professional pride, ambition and aspiration served as key drivers in the emerging ‘new’ professional identity in police communications. APComm conferences in particular, which were built around group discussions of perceived success or failure in experimenting with new strategies, helped cultivate a sense that the profession was exploring ‘uncharted territory’¹¹⁴ for policing and communications. The collective emphasis on professional pride and aspiration in the exciting new social media-based communications frontiers also helped ease the transition for individuals from the newsroom to policing: a move often tinged with shame (see 5.5.1 below).

APComm conferences were spaces in which newly-appointed police communicators could seek mutual self-affirmation and professional solidarity from more

¹¹⁴ The most common discussions of ‘uncharted territories’ included the widespread belief among police officers that social media might solve legitimacy issues they felt they had with ‘problem demographics’: e.g. young, black males.

experienced peers. For example, the 2017 conference opened with the then Chair of APComm, and head of communications for Greater Manchester Police, Amanda Coleman, entreating attendees to ‘be proud’ of the work they did in British policing.

‘It’s been a challenging year for comms with two major terrorist incidents in Manchester and London...

There have been big changes in police communications since 2013 – we are trying to do everything: provide support to victims; deal with vulnerability.

It’s an addictive job – we have a positive story to tell about policing.’

Later in that same conference, a senior media officer from Greater Manchester Police recounted her experiences dealing with families of victims of the Manchester Arena attack earlier that year, offering a normatively rich account of the professional values and motivations of police communications workers:

‘Our approach to the victims’ families came from the heart – I am not the expert... I’ve just done it... We all came into police comms because we are interested in helping people.’

Again at the 2017 conference, the Chief Constable of Staffordshire Police, Gareth Morgan (in his role as National Police Chiefs’ Council lead for media), advocated for a robust professional character in the face of a complex and often hostile media environment:

‘There is discomfort in policing – the undermining of the “sovereign nature” of its image... but don’t be defensive. Be bold. Be creative...

With no training or concrete roadmap for their work from a police hierarchy that had little understanding of digital media, SEP’s newly formed digital team drew inspiration from other police forces in Britain, and elsewhere in Europe.

Roger: ‘This force (SEP) is good – senior officers are committed to being transparent... Surrey and Sussex are really good on social media – they are where we’d like to be...’

...

I sit with Guy today... he is doing SM (social media) monitoring – reviewing the main SM accounts for the force. He also looks at the Munich police Facebook for inspiration. Also looks at a Swedish account – Polisen Nykoping.

Similarly, various presentations at APComm conferences identified and venerated various non-British police social media accounts believed to be doing ‘good’ digital police communications. For example, the Reykjavik Police Instagram account, which published pictures of police skateboarding around the city, was described by a number of presenters as ‘interesting’ and ‘cool’.¹¹⁵

SEP’s digital team had a workplace WhatsApp group, which they used to ‘brainstorm’ new approaches to social media, and to share ‘interesting’ or ‘fun’ ideas they had found online. They also used the group for peer-review and support on drafts for social media posts they were developing. Their enthusiasm for developing new creative and effective approaches was clear, and the WhatsApp group—which they were active in outside of working hours—helped foster a sense of ambitious creativity.

For the ex-journalists in SEP’s media team, whose former professional identity was constructed around a mythology of ‘speaking truth to (state) power’, their challenging professional identity transition was eased by the perceived meaningful nature of their new work. For example, their role protecting victims of crime or their families from media intrusion helped construct and legitimate a vulnerability-sensitive insider

¹¹⁵ This promiscuous approach to constructing a normatively shallow police communications culture might be contrasted sharply with British operational policing, steeped in its own history, tradition and values: along with the complex legal and political norms—most importantly Peelian legitimacy—that sought to govern it. Such a contrast helps illustrate both the absence of a normative framework in police communications, but also begins to demonstrate potential differences in opinion between police officers and communicators about key ideas of legitimacy.

component of police communicator identity. For those who had come from the commercial advertising and media sectors, the ‘interesting’ nature of police work, and the access they now had to ‘the frontline’ of policing, provided refreshing and unexpected meaning and value to their work in police communications:

(Fieldnotes from trip to Poppy Rise with Nigel to observe execution of warrants on Operation Goldfile) After I arrive at the meeting point, Roger and the new digital team member Colin also arrived... I chatted with them about the work – whether they liked it compared to their previous media work. Roger talked about how much he enjoyed the work – he hadn’t expected to enjoy it – but he finds it really interesting.

Particularly for the younger, media-savvy police communicators, that doing police work of this kind could be ‘fun’ or interesting came as a surprise: a number had quietly admitted they were only a few years previously suspicious of police communications activity. That they could do ‘good work’ was an added bonus to the strange transition.

5.3 Police as publishers

Long before I was eventually given access to begin my fieldwork in SEP CCD (see 2.4.1 above), I became aware of an emerging feature in police communications behaviour that was of particular concern to journalists. Journalists in *The Post*, *BBC Odditon* and *The Evening Crier* and elsewhere repeatedly complained that the police ‘think they don’t need us anymore’. This fear was evidenced early in my police fieldwork. In my first access negotiation meeting with the CCD in SEP, the media team’s manager Emily explained that as they could now produce their ‘own (crime and policing ‘news’) content’, and release it on their ‘own (social media) channels’. These new production and communications capabilities, she concluded, meant the police/CCD ‘don’t need them (journalists) anymore’. The general manager of the CCD, Joan, explained this was a view shared by the chief officer in charge of SEP communications: Deputy Chief Constable

Shawn Wright. Indeed, he encouraged the CCD to develop more of their ‘own content’ for direct public consumption, bypassing local news media which were felt to attract an unreasonably disproportionate level of resources. This, it was assumed, would enable SEP to cut out the communications ‘middle men’ in journalism, and go straight to the various non-journalist publics they were ultimately interested in communicating with.

The possibility of police ‘bypassing’ the news media raises some obvious questions for police accountability and, indeed, practicality.¹¹⁶ However, the idea of ‘police as news publishers’—rather than police as a source for news publisher—examined here focuses instead on the practices and cultural power the idea commanded in reimagining of police communicator identity. Once liberated from dependency on journalists in order to construct publicly-digestible representations of policing, and to access mass communications infrastructures—essential to deliver police messages efficiently across the spatially and culturally diverse communities they policed—police communicators sought to construct a new identity around these features of their emerging communicative empowerment. At the very least, as the following field notes extract illustrates, a growing consensus around the implications of ‘police as publishers’ encouraged police communicators to question just how much energy and resources they needed to commit to managing journalists’ demand.

(Fieldnotes from Open Forum Session on Media Handling at APComm Conference 2017 – this was an open discussion involving a number of participants, with a lot of audience interaction, so I was not able to attribute quotes).

“What is [our] priority? To support the police – and not pander to press – to also provide operational support wider channels – we don’t just do press relations...

...

¹¹⁶ Colbran concluded recently that, despite their best efforts, all indications are that police will never be able to truly bypass the media: ([Colbran 2018](#)).

Are they (the media) still useful? 25% of our communications resources go towards servicing media demands – and, we are trying to reduce that.

Who are our audience/s now? Is it the police? Is it the public? How do journalists feel about us bypassing them? It obviously causes anxiety – it risks damaging the relationship.

Do the public trust us more than the media now?

...

But there is never coverage of good news stories...

...

What is your priority: the media or the public? The latter – and to do it through our own channels. The press are now using our content for themselves.

Police communicators' interpretation of their own communicative empowerment in the face of perceived news media decline justified increased investment into the production of police communications department's 'own content', for distribution on their 'own channels'. Along with the empowering mass communications potential offered by social media, this 'police as publishers' role identity was also legitimated by interpreting the revenue crisis in local news media as a collapse in journalistic communications power. For example, SEP's Chief Constable (CC) characterised the move towards the *practices* of 'police as publishers' as a necessary response to the collapse of local news media reporting infrastructure and capacity. The CC believed SEP needed to publish more of their own content on their own channels, as the local news media were no longer in a position to deliver police messaging to the community. On this account, 'police as publishers' was a *necessary* response by policing to maintain general good governance practices of transparency (for more on this see 6.2.1 below), and to ensure operational police communications on risk and public safety could reach relevant publics. As noted in the media section above, this judgment problematically conflates the revenue crisis in journalism with a decline in communications power (see 4.1.4 above).

With increasing proportions of police communications resources being diverted into ‘police as publishers’ endeavours, police management began to question why they should privilege individual queries from small local news organisations. Responding individually to these inquiries, which could often be quite repetitive, was time and resource intensive: particularly in light of the post-Leveson requirement that all interactions with journalists had to be individually logged (see 7.2.4 below). Though police communications was enjoying increased investment in order to achieve ‘police as publishers’—this remained a period of stringent budgetary austerity. Servicing complex and increasing news media demand looked to chief officers in SEP like a double-spend. Coupled with a strict interpretation of the Leveson and Filkin reports regarding the meaning and permissibility of journalistic ‘exclusivity’ in access, police press releases were entrenched as the primary means of releasing police information. As all journalists (and eventually all publics) would have equal access to these standardised channels of disclosure, this, it was assumed, would cut the demand on individual police communicators, who would not have to answer individual inquiries on the same incident. As the ultimate aim was for these police press releases to be directly consumed by the public, they increasingly took the form of a news article in style and form. Ex-journalists in the media team were able to employ their journalistic sense of ‘what the reader wants’ in creating a more engaging piece of police information. The increased emphasis on press releases as the dominant means of information disclosure had the additional benefit of its processes being subject to high levels of monitoring and control (see 7.2.4 below). Press releases left a digital paper trail through emails and online publication—an essential part of the post-Leveson and Filkin police information governance system. Press releases were also routinely subject to multiple rounds of editorial oversight from other members of the media team and relevant investigating police officers.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Whether this latter police involvement can be described as police editorial oversight is

To recap then: SEP, and other police forces, were investing more of their limited resources into ‘police as publishers’ ventures as they believed the local news media were unable to do the mass communications work they needed: police as *replacement* publishers. These increasingly expensive ventures then put pressure on existing features of the police communications strategy, which was heavily geared towards information release through local news media: the police as *bypass* publishers. This internally contradictory set of self-reinforcing logics around ‘police as publishers’ then increased the tension on police-media relations in the SEP area. Even though, as we will see in the next chapter, news media still dominated the energy and attention of public-facing police communications: the ideology was shifting in another direction—and police communicator identity followed the latter.

The following sections set out the component parts of ‘police as publishers’ as an operational strategy, and detail the cultural power these strategies gained in the reconstruction of police communicator identity.

5.3.1 ‘Our Own Channels’

Earlier forays into police forces’ own externally-focused ‘mass’ communications networks saw the development of various ‘community alert’ systems which relied on earlier, pre-social media, communications technologies like house-to-house leafleting, and later, text messaging services. Aside from door-to-door leafleting, these quasi-mass-communications¹¹⁸ networks relied on members of the community to sign-up to the service, which would deliver information to the most relevant neighbourhood in the

an interesting question. In most of my observations, this ‘sign off’ was to confirm facts in the release—facts which could only be confirmed by investigating officers. But, it seemed that in rarer situations involving highly sensitive information or cases, senior officers were needed to approve specific wording: if not formally, then informally.

¹¹⁸ ‘Quasi’ in that the technologies allowed ‘mass’ communications with an entire neighbourhood or community, though confined to that neighbourhood or community.

community. While effective ([Hohl, Bradford et al. 2010](#)), they were treated by the CCD as more limited.

Whether due to a desire to ‘bypass’, or ‘replace’ local news media, the police communications department in SEP engaged in intense efforts to develop and expand their own mass communications networks across various social media platforms. Like the local journalists I observed who sought to enhance their audience reach through social media, police communicators were similarly experimenting with a variety of strategies to increase user engagement across their own channels. When I began my fieldwork in SEP, the media team’s manager Emily pointed to the number of followers the SEP Facebook account had (in the region of 100,000, and growing) as one of the primary reasons the police ‘no longer needed the media’. At this time, the digital and media teams also tried to expand SEP’s ‘presence’ (*qua* audience share) on Twitter, and the ‘newer’/‘younger’ platforms: Instagram and Snapchat. Their Twitter ‘engagement drives’ took the form of various ‘Tweetathons’ the CCD organised in conjunction with an operational police officer who could provide expert insights on the ‘frontline’:

(SEP are running a Tweetathon with a police officer) – Naomi (from the media team) is consulting on it – she is designing content and planning an evening in the office to do it – this one will run from 5-11pm...

There is a chat between Naomi and Roger from the digital team about strategies for making the most of the exercise. They want to make sure to detail the pressure police resources are under. They also discuss the aesthetics of the tweets ‘less is more’.

They also chat about the new 280 character limit on Twitter, and whether they should include certain standard information, such as which number to call if you have seen an incident etc.

This is Naomi’s first Tweetathon – they are normally done by the digital team for recruitment drives – this is unusual for the media team – this one is about raising awareness on bad use of 999 emergency number, which is overwhelmed with calls. The increase in calls is due to dumping on police from other services – but Naomi says that they have to be careful as people are very sensitive about being told how to use 999.

The different social media platforms were understood by the CCD as providing access to different demographics and audiences in the community. This necessitated bespoke communications strategies and values for each in order to enhance their general audience share:

Guy (from the digital team in SEP) reviews SM channels ... he explains that Twitter is the most important platform for journalists. Instagram is more for young people – it requires ‘friendly content’ – ‘things like dog pics do well’. The Facebook audience is ‘older and angrier’. Youtube is ‘unpredictable’ – ‘we don’t open comments on our Youtube content – it is troll city’.

I ask about Snapchat? – ‘it’s less corporate/regimented than the other platforms allow – it’s more fun – I’m looking forward to getting out and using it in the field – it’s more like Instagram – the audience on Snapchat respond well to positive stories... the police mounted/horse unit do a good job on it.”

I note how use of animal images seem important for the demographics on these newer platforms.

Each of these police ‘channels’ also posed their own challenges and risks in development. As with *The Post*, the main SEP Facebook account was, at that time, the dominant component of SEP’s mass communications network, generating the bulk of their online traffic. However, Facebook—like Youtube—was seen by police communicators as particularly hostile, with many of their audience engaging in highly critical, and sometimes abusive and unlawful¹¹⁹ activity in the replies under posts. Roger on the digital team regularly bemoaned how they ‘can’t win on Facebook’ due to the toxicity of the comments beneath their posts.

But, despite these drawbacks—including levels of criticism and abuse not experienced in their engagement with journalists—the development of this seemingly autonomous mass communications power through social media was agreed by all in the CCD to be a positive use of resources. As well as helping to ‘replace’ the transparency

¹¹⁹ Such as racist or other forms of proscribed ‘hate speech’, information that risked contempt of court, or information that might jeopardise a successful prosecution.

infrastructure of the news media, these channels also enabled them to ‘bypass’ the editorial agendas and pushback they often encountered from local journalists. That the latter might, in normative terms, undermine the former duty was rarely, if ever, admitted. This failure to recognise the role of, or need for, news media as a robust accountability mechanism reflects, perhaps, a deeper aspect of general police culture: one which denies its institutional frailty.

5.3.2 “Our Own Content”

5.3.2.1 *The Police Press Release*

The availability of these new, ‘police-controlled’ mass communications networks in turn shaped the development of police communications outputs. Press releases had, as the name suggests, originally been designed for journalistic consumption: to then be re-conveyed in journalistic style to the mass public audiences to which news media had exclusive access. These press releases would often contain information that was ‘off-record’, ‘not for publication’, or ‘guidance’: i.e. information that was not for general public consumption, but which should inform the journalists’ reporting to avoid compromising police operations or successful prosecutions. Press releases were traditionally considered low value in crime reporting circles, who prized exclusivity (see 4.3.7 above). However, SEP CCD interpreted the Leveson Inquiry, Filkin Report and the College of Policing’s APP as suggesting rigid aversion to police facilitation of journalistic ‘exclusivity’. This hostility to journalistic exclusivity encouraged greater use of press releases—given to all journalists in the relevant patch—as the primary means of releasing information to the media. Though journalists resented and complained about the loss of exclusivity, this approach at least continued to recognise the dominant mass

communications power of journalism: they still enjoyed privileged access to sensitive information that the public did not.

However, the emergence of the police's 'own channels' of mass communication through social media was increasingly seen as a reason to make press releases for direct consumption by the general public, who they ultimately wished to communicate with. Some journalists complained that on occasion when they made their own inquiries or requests to the media team, the media officer would release that information *via* a publicly-available press release on their website and social media accounts: a practice I observed on a number of occasions.

The Stocktown Patriot request for an image is at issue – Suzanne thinks the police officer is dealing with getting the picture for the journalist who asked for it, but she wants the image in case other media want it too. She says it might be worth putting out a press release, if they hopefully get a conviction – 'good if we can put it out on our own channels' ... would like evidence to demonstrate that the police are taking crime seriously – any extra information that 'helps to tell the story' is very welcome.

Where once, only crime and policing reporters in the area received releases, now police press releases were written as a police 'news' story, and were published on SEP's own website, which had a dedicated open-access 'news' section. Selected press releases—particularly sentencing reports—were also routinely 'published' on SEP's main force-wide Facebook and Twitter accounts. That responding to a unique inquiry from an individual journalist *via* press release—an approach not clearly mandated by any post-Leveson guidelines I encountered¹²⁰—might antagonise journalists was not considered.¹²¹

Other police forces were at the time of my fieldwork seeking to push this approach even further. Some police communicators I spoke to at APComm conferences

¹²⁰ In fact, the College of Policing's APP directs police forces to respect independently generated media exclusives, though this duty is qualified by operational need, and expires once the information is in the public domain ([Policing 2017](#)).

¹²¹ Some media officers in SEP were conscious of and sensitive to the need for journalistic exclusivity—and advised journalists they would respect it.

explained that publishing their ‘own content’ on their ‘own channels’ was now their primary concern—cementing their status as ‘news publishers’. For example, at APComm 2017, a media officer in Derbyshire Constabulary explained during an interview that her media team’s new policy was to delay emailing press releases to journalists by 10 minutes. Instead of giving local journalists privileged first access (if not individual exclusivity), the media team published press releases on their own websites and social media channels first. This privileged the media team there and its ‘own channels’ with the exclusivity prized by journalists. The media officer enjoyed mentioning that this new policy particularly antagonised the local newspapers. She explained the plan was to continue the approach, as it was ‘only right’ that the media team, who had ‘done all the work’ in researching and writing the ‘story’, got the reward of exclusivity.

5.3.2.2 Multi-media Police News

Beyond the media team in SEP, the digital team’s work was overwhelmingly focused on the production of SEP’s ‘own (multimedia) content’:

Roger explains that when they (the digital team) have time they try to work on video projects – ‘Guy’s current one (video project) is in Busyford – it’s about a PCSO doing work in a food academy – teaching kids how to cook – the project helps to keep them on right track.

‘We are always working on our own video content – unless we are being reactive to social media developments or an ongoing operational incident – but even when we are out and about – we are often capturing our own footage to put it out on SM (social media). 50% of [our] time is spent on developing video content – 50% for the rest (social media channel monitoring)... Our priority is SM – but if it gets quiet, we can spend time helping out on other things...

The digital team were very proud of the audio-visual content they produced. Their insider communications role in the police force allowed enviable levels of access to frontline policing, enabling the creation of representations of policing they believed were

well produced and authentic ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)), while also meeting distinct operational policing needs:

Colin is really animated – Alpa (the campaigns officer) and Roger interviewed a victim of sexual assault – video recorded her telling her own story – the piece will have big emotional impact – it doesn't include details of what she experienced – 'It has echoes of what we say about groomers – about how groomers work...'

At APComm conferences police communicators presented and discussed the variety of successes different police CCDs were having in creating their own police news content. With increased resources, and the rapidly declining cost of digital multimedia production and editing, they were able to 'push the boundaries' on what kind of content police could produce and disseminate. These endeavours sought to replicate the aesthetics and form of journalism and documentary filmmaking, while ensuring the inclusion of operational policing goals. The following extract details a dramatised documentary film produced by Leicestershire Police about the grooming, rape and murder of 15-year-old Kayleigh Haywood in November 2015.

Catherine Oakes and Natalie Proffitt – from Leicestershire police – presenting on their documentary film 'Kayleigh's Love Story'.¹²²

What were the comms goals during investigation? To manage the national press and engage with the community – keep them up-to-date.

We are a really small team – just after restructuring – but we have lots of multi-skilled personnel.

We developed lots of content to feed the press during the investigation. Community engagement work was concentrated in one online space. We created some visual products for all content outputted.

Aftermath: A CSE campaign had been in the pipeline before her case – but no other story would have had the same impact in the community – if you read the messages she sent to one of accused – you got a real sense of how he groomed her.

¹²² The film was published on Youtube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WsbYHI-rZOE>.

Then we went to the victim's family – 2 weeks after the body was found – FLO (family liaison officer) felt it was okay – the family were brought in immediately – they understood that this had significant preventive value. They just wanted it to look like her – to be her.

5 days of shooting – 7 months work in total. We consulted 250 experts and stakeholders – then re-edited the film on the basis of feedback from 50 private screenings.

We did not want any general public release until every child over 11 had seen it – we also wanted to ensure the necessary supports we going to be available beforehand.

We then had structured screenings – for family and closest friends. There were no parental decisions to withdraw children from screenings – we then had more than 50 disclosures from children after screenings.

There were 1 million views by midday on the day of general release – 36.6 million views to date. The film was picked up by Unilad channel.

The campaigns officer did just this film for 1 year. The entire team were involved in one way or another.

£30k total cost (the investigation cost around £1 million). But it became a departmental focus for a long time

Through examples like 'Kayleigh's story' we can see how the production of police digital multimedia content for mass general consumption allows police CCDs to pursue distinct agendas—in this awareness about child grooming risks—without bowing to journalists' interests and informational demands. It also enables police forces to create and disseminate a vision of policing that is uncontested. As well as serving to enhance the perceived communications power of police organisations (noted in the viewership numbers)—legitimising a major new part of police communicator responsibilities—these qualitative features of creating police content also help to legitimate police communicator role identity by drawing them closer to operational frontline policing and its ends.

5.3.3 Proprietary Attitudes to Police Communications

The increased emphasis on producing police communicators' 'own content' generated a proprietorial attitude among police communicators—particularly management—towards that content. This sense of ownership also extended over the raw police informational material on which police 'news' was based, and impacted the CCD's attitude to news media: local journalists in particular. For example, when I began my access negotiations with SEP, Emily, the manager of the media team, explained that the relationship with *The Post* was particularly poor as 'they (*The Post*) think they own us'. She complained that *The Post* placed an excessive and disproportionate level of demand on the media team, who had a much wider responsibility to service journalists from the broader SEP area beyond Odditon. When Emily pointed this out to *The Post's* reporters and editors, they claimed they had a right—grounded in their (the media's) understanding of 'good governance' standards of transparency—to access the information. Emily dismissed their claim, and, ignoring this asserted 'constitutional' role of the press, insisted that the media team, in fact, 'owned' the police information. Emily's view was that the media's interest was principally commercial, whereas the media team had an obligation to control the release in a manner consistent with the relevant 'policing purpose' (see 6.3.2 below).

The reasons or need for police CCDs asserting such exclusivity—a high journalistic value—were not clear. If the express policy objective of police communications—as per the APP—was to assist in achieving transparency (*qua* legitimacy), it is difficult to see why police exclusivity should matter. More coverage across more channels would surely increase transparency. Claiming exclusivity was also acutely antagonistic towards *The Post* and other journalists I observed. The police communicators who held this proprietorial attitude offered their growing communications power, and its capacity to reach their intended audiences as a justification for their proprietorial attitude to police information. That they could do it alone was reason

enough. This suggests that *claiming* ownership, and *asserting* their communications power, was a part of the empowerment and legitimation of this new police communicator identity. As illustrated by the example from Derbyshire Constabulary,¹²³ it also seemed as though *denying* journalistic exclusivity was another side to the police communicator self-empowerment coin.

5.3.4 Problematising ‘Police as Publishers’

5.3.4.1 *The Denial of Journalistic Communications Power: Local vs National News Media*

These proprietorial claims over police information, and the assertion of effective exclusivity in access to, and dissemination of, police ‘material’ were premised on a combined perception of journalistic decline in power, and police communicative empowerment (see 4.1.4 above). Police communicators often dismissed, or denied the continuing value, importance, capacity and/or power of the news media in communicating with the general public. Along with the practical consequences for police-media relations, through their assertions of exclusivity, and denial of journalistic power and relevance, police communicators also constructed their new identity in the spaces they believed journalists had retreated from.

Despite their bold assertions of press irrelevance, and growing confidence as mass communicators in their own right, police communicators (and a number of senior operational officers) also spoke of the ‘art in capturing the media’s interest’. Reference was made—particularly by chief officers like Gareth Morgan, the NPCC lead on media—of the need to build and maintain good working relationships with local journalists. Police communicator practices, such as withholding information on politically-sensitive

¹²³ See above, p 12.

topics like historic sex offences, in order to manage anticipated negative press coverage (primarily from national titles, rather than local),¹²⁴ demonstrate a persistent belief in the news media's power to shape public understanding of police and criminal justice.

This apparently contradictory approach to news media power between beliefs and practices often bifurcated along the local/national news media division. In SEP, the media team were especially anxious when unwanted national news media attention came their way, and treated national press coverage of 'good news' police stories as a major success to be proud of. While the local/national distinction was not a significant part of police communicator discourse, it was implicit in their practices and debates that national press and broadcast news enjoyed more privileged levels of access and facilitation by police communicators than their local peers.¹²⁵ APComm annual conferences also had a heavy emphasis on 'crisis comms' strategy: where the prospect of attracting negative national press attention dominated.

Within SEP's media team, the management of national media inquiries and attention was often a source of stress and anxiety. In contrast, when the media team wanted attention for a particular witness or information appeal, or for a particularly successful police operation, their strategy sought ideally to attract national news media attention through their social media dissemination. Indeed, when an incident did attract substantial interest from national news media, this was routinely prioritised over any local news media demand:

Brian (media officer) notes that on Friday there were so many queries on the crash from the nationals that they could not get to normal email queries from

¹²⁴ As described by Will Harris, a communications manager at Cheshire Constabulary, in his presentation at the APComm Annual Conference 2017 (24 November 2017).

¹²⁵ It is important to note that police communicators, despite their denial of local media power, were also anxious about negative coverage from those same media outlets. This practical approach to 'negative legitimisation' is dealt with in the next chapter, but does not, I suggest, undermine the role of denial of perceived media power in police communicator identity construction.

the local press – some local press were understanding about this – but some don't care about it as the incident is not on their patch.

While this distinction between national and local news media is clearly an important dimension to understanding the mass communication power relations between police and news media, it also illustrates an important facet to contemporary police communicator identity. The police communicators I observed in SEP and at APComm conferences perceived their profession to be in the ascendant over local journalism, not national journalism. Some spoke of their frustration when journalists failed to respect them, or failed to realise or accept (local) journalism's diminished status in the increasingly diverse communications ecosystem, of which the police were now a part. They advocated a reconceptualising of their relationship with the news media—which was generally agreed to be in flux—around the recognition that the police no longer depended on the mass communications capacity of the local news media.

We need to be strong when dealing with the media. We need to establish a relationship of respect... Sometimes we are just an easy target for journalists – there are times when you have to hold your ground – to support your organization... We must learn to deal with journalists – do not punish news organisations – we need to learn to trust them – this is key ...But we also need to master the art of bespoke comms – the media are just another stakeholder – we need to understand the correct medium and message, and what is our desired feedback. We need to know what is the most effective way to deliver it (the message) – it could be a micro-blog.

We have to stop being loyal to news organisations – be loyal to the message and the community.

Don't disrespect journalists – but know that they are no more important than a kid with a microblog...
(Interview with APComm 2018 attendee)

This local/national distinction in perceived communications power provides a helpful way to conceptualise the interplay between perceived communicative empowerment and police communicator identity. While national press attention for a police force like SEP was not rare, the vast bulk of news media demand was local. Yet, the intended target for

most denials of media power were also local. Like the local newspapers discussed above (see 3.2.1 above) then, police communicators' sense of communicative empowerment through social media was locally rooted. Their perceived communications power was largely in the community domain, where they also enjoyed key symbolic status within the local governance infrastructure (see 3.2 above).

5.3.4.2 Bypassing the (local) Press?

The findings in some recent literature ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Mawby 2017](#), [Colbran 2018](#)) that police are actively trying to 'bypass the press' was clearly borne out in my observations of police communications practices. As noted above, senior operational police officers and police communicators made no secret of their intent to reorient police communications policy and resourcing towards production of their own content, and the development and expansion of their own channels. In both design, and rationale, police communications outputs such as press releases are increasingly targeting non-journalistic publics. More recent innovations in police communications, such as the digital team's audio-visually rich social media content, are unequivocally intended for direct consumption by general audiences.

However, the insights from the previous section illustrate the complexity of police-media relations at local and national levels. Even at the local level, police communications campaigns that I observed always contained a substantial amount of planning and design aimed at generating local journalistic interest. Local news media were always invited in to press briefings, and were given 'media packs' for what the media team felt were 'big stories'. The media team were also disappointed and complained if local news media did not cover a news stories they felt was important: including criticising journalists for not properly 'serving their readers'. That the BBC

across England refused on policy grounds to use police multimedia content was a source of ongoing frustrations for CCDs.

Some content was almost exclusively directed at local news media. For example, in SEP, witness and missing persons appeals were, for obvious reasons, specifically designed with an eye to capturing local news media interests. Indeed, the media team had developed thresholds of seriousness to limit the number of appeals they would publish: rationing their engagement with local media for fear that local journalists would not publish important appeals, or give them due prominence, if they became saturated with them.

...Suzanne gets a call from a police officer – regarding a missing person – she tells them that they will only do appeals if they are high risk – explains that they don't want to undermine the seriousness of high risk missing persons. She asks 'will it become high risk? When will it be reviewed?' She takes details of the incident – assessing if it is near serious. Explains the policy again – 'we don't want to put out too many missing persons reports – need to prioritise wanted persons reports. She advises them to use other means first – to wait until there is significant concern for their welfare.

Suzanne explains that if it gets to high risk, the team can consider getting paid advertising on Facebook (don't need to pay the papers). She explains to the officer that they really struggle to get coverage for some missing persons in the media.

It seems, therefore, that despite the assertions by police communicators that they 'no longer need' the local news media to communicate their messages to their publics, they remained at least structurally inclined towards recognition of local news media power. This tension between the rhetoric of police communications identity and its practices suggests also that the persistence of local news media in police communications reflected a deeper cultural attitude of recognition of the media's power holder status in the community (see 8.1 below).

5.3.5 'Police as Publishers' as a driver of cultural empowerment

These mechanics of police–(local) news media power relations situate a significant part of the construction of police communicator identity within the perceived decline of journalistic communications power. The imagined retreat of journalistic power in this sense posed an opportunity to be exploited by new technologies, resources and strategies. In parallel with the denial of local news media power, police communicators also sought to legitimate their asserted new capacities and power by emphasising the creativity and success of their endeavours. At APComm annual conferences, as attendees and presenters encouraged one another to resist 'pandering to' the media or 'public opinion' (i.e. social media trends) in their approach, they also called on the profession to 'be brave' and creative in creating a consistent and authentic message about British policing. In these forums which served primarily as spaces for intense mutual self-affirmation and empowerment ([Barker 2001](#)), police communicators and senior operational police officers entreated one another to 'be proud' of their achievements both in terms of creatively expanding their audience 'reach'. CCDs who had managed to 'crack' the challenge of police engagement via the 'new' platforms of Instagram and Snapchat, with their harder-to-reach (for policing) demographics, were commended and held up as examples to others. The following extended extract from a discussion forum on increasing audience engagement on social media at APComm offers a valuable insight into increasing confidence in police communications to learn, experiment and improve as ever more vistas of mass communications opportunities unfold for policing:

(Hand written notes from DCC Gavin Stephens & Ruth Silver forum: Developing a National Digital Engagement Strategy. APComm Annual Conference 2017, Wednesday, 22 November 2017).

(The facilitators opened with a presentation on a national survey they had undertaken examining 'Digital Engagement' in policing)

“...SM allows immediate access to vast numbers (of public), but it won't help in developing a new national plan ... policing is failing to use social media – we are not using the feedback data to understand the community.

We can affect behavioural change through communications ... we can also use it to signal victories too – tell the positive stories.

...

We don't yet have national standards, supports, or training for police use of social media. We need more organised routine sharing of best practice – but with SM – good practice can spread quickly.

...

‘Where are we as a service in relation to SM – what kind of improvements can we achieve over next 4–5 years. We are a bit better than other organisations in the public and private sector... But we are in danger of being very narrow-minded... We need to get over that comms won't *own* SM – the public want to do *core policing* online.

One policy view is that we should be doing less fluffy stuff – that we should focus on pure operational policing content, as it is better for public confidence – not all puppies and police dogs.

The other policy view is that it is not binary – there is a role for the softer side of police comms too – people like to engage with us in that way.

...Need to give operational police officers support and training, the confidence to use the technology – there is some great community work based on the fluffy stuff.

...We want a consistent and coordinated voice for UK policing – it would be very powerful.

...

We can use social media for positive policing purpose – we can change behavior among the public.

This extract illustrates the importance of social media technologies—with their potential to generate audience share, and enable ‘behavioural change’ in crime and policing terms—in constructing and legitimating the role identity of police communicators. Despite strong evidence of a structural or cultural tendency to resist fully committing to the proclaimed values and practices of ‘police as publishers’—through a combination of top-down direction from the police hierarchy, and intense internal discussion and mutual

self-affirmation among police communicators, the idea provides a highly potent source of self-legitimation for the evolving project of constructing a new police communicator identity.

5.4 'We are Frontline Too'

Among the most distinctive features of contemporary police communicator culture is the collective desire to be seen, not as a profession providing 'backroom administrative' support to 'the frontline', but instead as a key component of operational police work. At APComm conferences, attendees consistently asserted that they were 'frontline too', and voiced their frustrations at not being recognised as such. Chief officers chimed in with these sentiments by emphasising—typically through illustrative narratives of crisis—how police communicators are a key presence with them on 'the frontline'. In SEP's CCD too, police communicators relished being 'on the frontline' of major criminal investigations or operations. While some aspects of this phenomena were uncontroversially understood to have direct operational and public benefit: as with 'police as publishers', the idea of police communications as 'frontline policing' was, it seemed, more importantly a key driver of cultural empowerment and self-legitimation.

5.4.1 Police Communicators as the Operational Frontline

An emerging feature of this 'frontline' role identity focused on the preventive or deterrent effect police communications could have in areas like counter-terrorism. Here, police communications were not merely on the frontline *alongside* operational policing. Instead, in these spaces, the communications skills, capacities and power of police communicators meant they alone could perform this essential operational police work.

Case study discussion sessions on preventive communications

...Presenter from the Centre for Protection of National Infrastructure starts first – her talk is on ‘hostile reconnaissance’ – explaining how comms can have a role in exploiting a hostile’s (e.g. terrorist’s) vulnerabilities, which include desires and emotions like the need to succeed, the need for information, and their paranoia.

A communications manager from Thames Valley Police gives examples from their policing of the Royal Wedding (between Meghan and Harry) – she talks about the SM (social media) campaign they undertook as part of the operation, ‘which highlighted and explained what kind of preparations the police are doing – this was designed to give the hostile a sense that they are going to have to do a lot to succeed in any planned attack.’

‘Prey on their paranoia. We employed terms like the ‘wedding ring of steel’ (not their term, but they happily used it) to describe the high security zone around the town of Windsor which were then picked up and used by news media – but be mindful – there are two audiences – the normal public and the hostiles – so make sure to also frame messaging in terms of assurance for former. Give the impression that protective security are everywhere – direct your comms to show that the police are covering unexpected areas.’

‘Security minded comms was a core operational tactic – we put lots of information out in the open about it – you need to control and influence information to encourage ... the hostile to believe that they would fail.’

‘We also had strong, trusting relationships with our gold and silver commanders. We were allowed lots of comms freedom... we had total access to the security strategy and intel (intelligence) – chief officers allowed comms to adjust our approach accordingly.’

(APComm 2018, fieldnotes)

This carving out of a distinctive operational policing role for police communicators in crime prevention sees the fusion of police communications power with state coercive power: the power not just to shape a potential offender’s understanding of the world, but also to change their behaviour through fear of the coercive might of the police. For some police communicators, the prospect of being more closely associated—perhaps even wielding—coercive power was very exciting.

This frontline operational identity was reinforced by the increasing responsabilisation of police communications, at a time of dramatic budget restraint and retrenchment across British policing (see 1.4.2 above). For example, during my

fieldwork, various police communicators noted the increased reliance on communications staff to achieve other policing goals in community policing and youth justice, allowing operational officers to be redeployed to plug gaps in (other) frontline service delivery. These changes were undertaken despite police communicator complaints of inadequate resourcing and training, and their genuine scepticism about the effectiveness of communications alone in these fields. Through their complaints and resistance,¹²⁶ police communicators joined frontline police officers in their frustration and concern with the effects of fiscal austerity in policing. Though this kind of ‘frontline’ work was viewed negatively: the combination of responsabilisation, and vocal resistance to it, allowed police communicators to situate themselves alongside frontline officers and in sharing their burdens and criticisms of policy.

5.4.2 Police Legitimation Work as Frontline Police Work

The key role (see 6.2 below) that police communicators play in constructing, managing and protecting communicative representations of policing was also an important source of legitimation for their ‘frontline’ policing role identity. Throughout my observations of police communications, both within SEP CCD, and during my attendances at APComm conferences, police communicators sought to forcefully situate their legitimation work in policing as an important component of frontline policing: actively blurring the distinction between operational policing and legitimation work.

¹²⁶ For example, during my time observing in SEP, the media team complained about being over-stretched, and then lobbied police management successfully for greater resources and improved cover.

5.4.2.1 *Protecting the Chief*

As chief officers serve as the public face of the force, this embodied burden necessitates close working relationships with police communications to manage the construction of their, and as a consequence the entire force's, media image. When the reputation of the chief constable is under threat, the media team's expertise is immediately drawn upon.

[Presentation by Head of Communications at Norfolk Police on the fallout from the Chief Constable's response—in particular a perceived failure to take public fears seriously—to public and media reaction to arrival of Travellers in town]

'It was declared a critical incident due to the social media response and concern over the media response – ...this decision to escalate was taken in conjunction with senior officers.'

'We had been putting out tweets on "fair representation of the facts" – but the community did not feel the same. The Chief Constable and I were perceived as sounding defensive in interviews – laying bad over bad and compounding the crisis.'

We decided we needed to apologise. It was carefully planned – which was important. Once we began to respond 'properly' – the public on social media, and news media became less critical.'

'In the meantime officers on the street felt that they had been thrown under a bus by the Chief Constable... The perception was that we were not listening to people's concerns – so we had a public meeting to try and rebuild public confidence – we got an angry response – but chief officers went out to apologise – and the crowd changed.'

(APComm 2017, fieldnotes)

This account from Norfolk Constabulary saw the media team not just assisting and advising the chief officer, but its media officers themselves sharing some of that personalised embodied reputational burden. In major policing crises, the media team see themselves as not merely supporting the chief officer facing a hostile audience: they too become part of the police force's 'public face', in this case issuing their own apologies alongside the Chief Constable. These accounts, routinely amplified by chief officers at APComm conferences, perfectly illustrate attempts by police communicators to situate

reputation management as a form of frontline operational police work, with themselves as its champions.

The following example from Wiltshire Constabulary during the Salisbury nerve agent attack illustrates another avenue for the blurring of the operational and legitimacy divide. Here police communicators purposefully capitalised on the attractiveness of the chief officer as ‘the face’ of the organisation during a crisis, and employed his positive image to manage and protect genuine operational concerns. Alongside their ‘frontline’ position as chief architects of this successful strategy, police communicators also sought to emphasise their central role in both advice-giving and decision-making through the crisis in its entirety.

[Presentation by Head of Communications for Wiltshire Constabulary about the communications strategy around the 2018 Salisbury nerve agent attacks]

...International media – we had weeks of exposure – the incident was stuck on the front pages – an insatiable appetite for it.

The strategy involved two key objectives – public safety and public reassurance – both were very difficult to manage.

Transparency? Where we could be transparent we were. We were often the only agency talking – we had to fill the void.

...

The Chief Constable was the public face – it was good for public reassurance to have senior uniformed officer to do ‘regular, honest heartfelt’ comms – we did not want jargon... etc ... A local reporter started a Twitter hashtag #KierCrush – playing on the attractiveness of the young CC Kier Pritchard.’

In the Salisbury example, the narrative retelling of the crisis positions police image work alongside, equivalent to, or the same as symbolically important aspects of operational policing work in areas of national security and counter terrorism. These accounts of crisis, which invert and blur distinctions between police operations and legitimacy, serve

as important narrative drivers behind the mythology building in police communications identity.

5.4.2.2 Media Consultants to the Frontline

As well as being advisers to and defenders of the chief officer during crises, police communicators much more routinely find themselves as consultants to less senior officers on police operations and campaigns. In SEP, police operations and campaigns typically had at least one member of the media team attached. Investigating officers would seek counsel from the media team on how best to structure the release of information about the investigation, and what kind of reactions they might anticipate from news media. This consultative role gave media officers regular access to elite decision-makers throughout the operational policing hierarchy, and they often developed close working relationships with the most experienced and senior investigating officers. Depending on the nature of the operation, this access to the frontline could also often enable a degree of influence over operational decision-making: most likely in relation to the governance of operationally sensitive information. In this way, media officers converted a combination of their knowledge about the news media, and their understanding of the police force's communication power, to affect influence over the operation of state coercive power. This quality of routine access in turn provided a rich source of empowerment for their frontline role identity.

Police operations in SEP are divided into gold, silver and bronze levels to denote their importance and seriousness. Being attached to a gold operation provided media officers with the most significant forms of access in terms of the police hierarchy, the nature of the police/state power being employed, and also operational prestige. In my time with SEP's communications department, I observed most of the media team

participate in gold (and all other class of meeting) operational meetings between the ‘gold/silver/bronze commanders’ (the senior officers overseeing the operation). More often, this involved ‘dialling in’ remotely on their office phone to listen in, and contribute to the relevant meeting. While their level of involvement in discussions varied depending on the sensitivity of, and media interest in, the case, operational commanders generally took their views and recommendations seriously, according significant value to their insight and expertise on news media values and practices, as well as media law and contempt of court.

Suzanne is on a call with the Gold meeting for an operation she is working on. She explains to the Gold commanders that some comments on their Facebook page have been deleted as they might jeopardise future prosecutions.

Suzanne explains that the media interest has died off as there has been a charging of suspects – they (the media) know they cannot release much more information due to risk of prejudicial information.

Suzanne explains lots of other things on the news cycle to the commanders – factors like the snow. She also notes that the media are reporting that the victim was pregnant – even though they (the media team) have not disclosed that info.

Suzanne advises on whether there is a need to give more details – she says to do so only if there is an investigative need – she defers to them on this.

...Suzanne thanks them for being kept updated – says she will update as more media inquiries come in.

This fieldnotes extract from SEP also hints at another important feature of the consultative role media officers play in the power relations between the police/state power and news media power. Suzanne’s expertise highlights the nature and extent of potential media power to shape the public’s understanding of a criminal event (communication power), and the performance of the police in investigating it. She can also explain the structural limits placed on that power *via* the law (another instantiation of state coercive power), which demarcates the space in which police power can be

exercised without fear of some legitimisation risks (dealt with in chapter 6). In short, Suzanne’s expertise as a former journalist and experienced police media officer helped set some of the parameters for the exercise of police powers.

The high levels of access¹²⁷ and influence provided by this consultative role also engendered a sense of partnership between police communicators and frontline operational policing. Again, in situations where a media officer was designated as the ‘media lead’ for a particular police operation or campaign, that media officer would formulate the media strategy for the operation, facilitate access between the news media and the operational commanders and investigators, and construct pre-prepped media packages to be provided to journalists. The designated media officer—or, to draw an operational analogy, ‘tactical media officer’¹²⁸—would also act as the principal port-of-call for the senior investigating officers, who would often seek guidance on style, presentation and strategy for their media interviews. Media officers generally remained attached throughout the life of a campaign or operation, taking exclusive ownership and responsibility for it. This continuity with a campaign, and personal connection to the senior operational police officers saw those media officers become heavily invested in the outcomes of those operations, and gave them a powerful sense of standing side-by-side with operational policing on the frontline.

I have a long chat with Brian (SEP media officer), who I am sitting behind today, about Operation Rinse – Rinse part one – it has 11 defendants. The jury has just gone out to consider their verdict – Brian is prepping a press release statement in advance of possible bad outcome – i.e. no convictions.

The SIO (senior investigating officer) wants Brian to prep the statement – it is FOIable (is subject to Freedom of Information) – but Brian is not worried about that risk – they expect a mix of convictions and acquittals.

But the operation has involved lots of work – it is hugely complex – Brian familiarised himself with the case before he began writing – read the

¹²⁷ Media officers were often the only civilians who participated in these meetings.

¹²⁸ Thanks to Richard Martin for providing this excellent analogy.

prosecution opening note – it was very hard to read – very disturbing and sensitive information – it is not to be shared with the media – but he need[s] to understand the prosecution’s case before he can write about it – the press release includes, very importantly, the array of reporting restrictions on some defendants connected with other related operations.

Brian is relieved that there will be some separation between the jury finding and sentencing – can space out the burden of work.

This consultative role is among the most important sources of content and legitimation for the frontline role identity of police communicators. These duties gave police communicators ongoing intimate levels access to the ‘real frontline’, helping to form strong professional relationships with operational police officers, and engendering the strongest sense of ownership over particular police operations. These duties also, importantly, provided some of the most immediate forms of access to the decision-making architecture over state coercive power, helping to situate their authority and power within it.

5.4.2.3 ‘Command and Control’

By being positioned in touching distance of frontline operational policing through their media consultant roles, police communicators—specifically media officers—are given perhaps their most tangible stake on the frontline. But even when police communicators find themselves disconnected from the frontline, their frontline identity can be legitimated through their knowledge work¹²⁹ in researching and translating frontline operational policing. This particular knowledge of the frontline is garnered through their access to the police ‘command and control’ log.

The ‘command and control’ (C&C) log in SEP was the operational police communications system, used by police dispatchers in the command centre and frontline

¹²⁹ This might be compared with Ericson *et al*’s description of journalists in the 1980s as key ‘knowledge linkers’ (1987).

police officers. The C&C log provided a somewhat detailed contemporaneous account of frontline police officer activity: what police officers did and saw, recounted as they were doing it. Media officers in SEP had access to the C&C log, which allowed them to monitor ongoing police operations, or to retrospectively review a particular event as it was logged moment by moment. Media officers primarily used the log when dealing with media inquiries about breaking, or recent crime and policing stories, or more low-level local occurrences that the media team were not routinely briefed on. Navigating the C&C log required learned familiarity with the operational shorthand used by the dispatch officers in central control. But, once learned, it enabled access to unfiltered and highly detailed contemporaneous accounts of police action, usually including highly sensitive information.

The C&C log provided an alternative, if impersonal, connection to the frontline. The privileged access to such detailed and sensitive operational information enhanced the sense of knowledge authority police communicators had in their dealings with news media and the general public. While not reflecting a genuine material connection to the frontline, C&C log access enabled the construction of frontline status for media officers in the eyes of the news media. C&C access, and the frontline knowledge it provided media officers, also shaped the power relations between the media officer specifically, and the journalist. As with the consultative role for media officers, C&C access enhanced the power behind the media officer's information gatekeeper status, by giving them greater knowledge and understanding, which journalists desired. In the literature, previous incarnations of police media officers were felt by journalists to lack knowledge ([Chibnall 1977](#), [Mawby 2010](#)). The contemporary media officer, who also now enjoy a structurally enhanced status ('consultative role') within policing due to the effective ban on informal contact between journalists and frontline policing (see 7.2.4 below),

possessed greater levels of access than before.¹³⁰ As such, this facet of their frontline status empowered police communicators in their dealings with the press, through their ability to access and control sensitive police information.

5.4.2.4 Supporting Victims and the Vulnerable

Mirroring the rise of vulnerability as an operational policing priority in Britain,¹³¹ supporting and advising victims of crime has also become a routine part of police communications work. The College of Policing's APP on media relations presupposes a significant role for police communicators in managing victims of crime, with SEP's own 'service level agreement' also setting out these duties. In practical terms, this role saw investigating officers tasking the media team to assist victims in preparing for media engagements, and media officers were responsible for giving advice to victims on what to expect in terms of media attention. The most common aspect of this work involved assisting families in writing tributes to a deceased victim, which the media team would then publish in a press release. Media officer also performed a protective role with particularly vulnerable victims, providing a buffer against, and dealing forcefully with, journalistic intrusions. Media inquiries about victims were typically run through the media office, and victims also directed their requests to the media around things like withholding certain information or images through the media team. Depending on the nature of the offence, victim and media interest, this allowed police communicators to become, like police, defenders and protectors of the vulnerable:

Presentation by Lyndsey Dudley – Senior Press officer in GMP – talking about how she handled the Manchester Arena attack.

¹³⁰ It should be noted, however, that in the eyes of the crime reporters I met, police communicators had insufficient access and knowledge.

¹³¹ See e.g. ([Victims' Charter](#)).

Supporting families through it – ‘this may not work for you... It came from the heart... I am not the expert... I’ve just done it... We all came into police comms (communications) because we are interested in helping people...

The media strategy prioritised families of victims right at the top – but we couldn’t help them at that time... We couldn’t look after families as we didn’t know who they are. We tried very hard to get information on who the families were. We needed to go to meetings with FLOs (family liaison officers). We needed to explain how the media would be interested in the case – that there would be much bigger interest than just the local or even the national news – they would have international news organisations interested in speaking to them.

...

We kept having to say to victims, ‘I am not a journalist’ – they’re afraid of journalists – we explained repeatedly to them that they could still trust us to have their interests at heart. We helped them write the tributes. But the coroner wouldn’t allow us to put names out for 6 weeks, at least not from official sources – so the GMP (Greater Manchester Police) logo was removed from all the tributes (as could not confirm the deaths). The GMP account only tweeted one tribute.

It is unfair to not provide media support to all families – it shouldn’t just focus on families enthusiastic about engaging with the press. Eventually the coroner agreed to allow all the names to be confirmed. We told families that it was okay to do media. We attended TV interviews with families. Through later months we continued to facilitate media for the families.

...We followed through to the victims’ funerals with our support.

There are lots of requests for things like documentaries – we are facilitating families engaging with the documentary makers.

Looking to the future? The Inquests are ongoing – but we are still available for families and we make sure that they know we are...

...

Choose journalists who will be sensitive to victims when helping to facilitate media access...

Lyndsey says she is annoyed they are not considered frontline policing. ‘People forget about comms. They also forget how to communicate with victims – how to use warm human language.

(APComm 2017, fieldnotes)

As can be seen from this extended fieldnotes extract, more serious policing events/crises saw some police communicators positioned in highly sensitive protective roles for

victims and their families. This protective role extended to decisions, as suggested here, about which journalists would be given what kind of access to victims: a protective approach which they believed drew on their own expertise and knowledge about the news media in their community. Through paternalistic logics and practices of victim management like those suggested in Lyndsey's account above—media officers could bypass the strict prohibitions on exclusivity interpreted in Leveson (as the information here is not 'owned' by the police, but the victim), and exercise a qualitatively different form of information governance and communication power. While victim management was often seen by police communicators as an additional, complex burden in their duties, in some instances it helped place police communicators front and centre on the frontline in terms of both paternal and communications power. Police communicators, mirroring the investigating officers, became personally invested in the welfare of victims, and the success of police action 'in their name'.

5.4.2.5 The Procedural Form of the Frontline

Police communicators aped the language and procedural form of operational policing. For example, discussions of the rules on custody limits for interrogating suspects generated enthusiastic discussion, with police communicators impressing upon each other, or the particular inquiring journalist their detailed knowledge of police procedure. Police communications outputs also mirrored those procedures in their timing, structure, and language. By mimicking the procedural form of operational policing, police communicators sought to construct their own labour and identity in the shape of procedurally regulated state power. By talking like the police, they became the police.

Police communicators also generated their own practices of police ‘risk decision-making’ ([Policing](#)) and governance. For example, each morning the entire SEP communications department sat together to be briefed by one another on the various ongoing police operations. The briefings placed heavy emphasis on the identification and categorisation of immediate and serious risks, and the targeting of efforts and resources to manage and control those risks. As an observer it appeared that the combined effect of these features of CCD culture in SEP was, at those moments, to saturate the working environment with a sense of tense immediacy and presence on ‘the frontline’.

5.4.3 Summary

Like the phenomenon of ‘police as publishers’, the idea of police communication as frontline policing is a powerful driver of the reconceptualisation of police communicator identity. However, unlike ‘police as publishers’, the rise of ‘frontline police communications’ is not *directly* rooted in the mass communications power disruptions of social media technologies. Instead, frontline police communications reflects a perceived reordering in the hierarchies and governance of police power. Police communicators—in part, no doubt, due to perceived changes in mass communications power—now perceive themselves—and are routinely told by chief officers—to be key components in the elite decision-making processes of police power. Combined with the rigid interpretations of Leveson, this has seen police communicators move from the margins of police bureaucracy, to position their role identity in the trenches of frontline operational policing.

5.5 Turncoats, Leveson, and Control in Constructing Police Communicator Identity

This final substantive section of the chapter moves from examining the practice-centred features of police communicator identity, to the more esoteric dimensions to the reconstruction of that culture.

5.5.1 'A Mug's Game'

There were few roadmaps to guide the transition from previous professions—principally journalism, advertising and corporate communications—into police communications. That police communications in SEP was itself divided into a number of distinct specialist roles—including media officers, campaigns, and digital communications—added another layer of difficulty to this challenge. For journalists in particular, the lateral movement across professional, but also normatively-dense ideological and identity divides, created a certain crisis in their role identity. Though a week-long police communicator training course was available, in SEP this was typically undertaken many months, if not more than a year, after a police communicator started working in the CCD.

SEP's CCD, as compared to the strictly enforced editorial hierarchy of the local newspapers from which most of the media team were drawn, was not organised around a rigid hierarchy. The digital team, a new part of the CCD, were given a high degree of autonomy in organising their working time, and in the case of some teams, a high degree of editorial autonomy within certain strict reputational risk thresholds. Taken together, it gave the impression that they were largely self-directed in designing and building the nature of their police communications roles. In particular, the uncertain dynamics and evolutions of the social media technologies, on which police communicators now increasingly depend, made some experimentation inevitable.

The media team in contrast, faced with the daily onslaught of large number of occasionally hostile media inquiries, had little or no time, or space (in terms of risk threshold) to engage in creativity or experimentation in developing their new roles and its identity. Perhaps in response to these immediate pressures, some of the media team appeared to have reached out and grasped the hard normative frameworks offered by the College of Policing's Approved Professional Practice (APP), the 'service level agreement' with local media, and their own interpretations and speculations on the content of Leveson and Filkin. In this way, these frameworks in some sense served not just as the guides upon which they should structure their relationship with, and management of news media, but also as a source of professional authority on which to construct their identity.

During my news media fieldwork, journalists routinely described their former peers who had left news to work 'on the other side'/'the dark side' of corporate communications as 'traitors' and 'turncoats'. Some of this, particularly among younger journalists, seemed to be genuine hostility. For example, Mido compared these people, along with journalism academics who began as reporters, as 'failed journalists', and held them in mild contempt for 'betraying' the deeper professional and constitutional values of 'holding truth to power' by becoming an information gatekeeper for the powerful. In contrast, the ever-pragmatic Ricky, and many older reporters and editors who were themselves seeking better pay, conditions and work-life balance, were more understanding of people who made the move. The news industry was in crisis, with few if any future career prospects even for the ambitious and committed.

This conflicted journalistic attitude towards the move into corporate communications persisted among those who had made the transition. The media team in SEP, dominated by former journalists, demonstrated a significant degree of sensitivity when I asked about their transition. Brian, for example, described his previous job

working in a small local weekly newspaper, which he described as in the process of dying. Before he left, he attended few editorial meetings, and was working almost totally from his home. This isolated working life still demanded very long hours, for very poor pay, in one the most expensive regions of England. He explained he could barely afford his rent, let alone consider purchasing a home. It seems as though around the time he moved into police communications, he also became a father. While not perfect, the move into police communications had enabled him to buy a house, and he, like others, really appreciated the peace of mind and enriched family life that the job security and generally predictable working hours allowed. The media team's lack of hierarchy, and the general working culture of SEP CCD also provided much more scope for autonomy.

Yet, while I found the welfare and wellbeing rationale behind their transition perfectly understandable, Brian, like the other former journalists, remained defensive about the move. Brian described those who continued to work in local newspapers, with its poor pay and conditions, as participating in a 'mug's game'. Others on the team shared these derisory sentiments about local newspaper journalists, speaking of the lasting scars they endured from the abusive and bullying work environments in local newspapers. However, despite this, and the frequent frustration and hostility to local journalists, the former journalists on the media team also often spoke sympathetically of the challenges facing young local reporters. These sympathetic sentiments, which sometimes informed their dealings with journalists, were part of the wider echoes of their past professional lives which survived the transition, and which were repurposed to construct the new professional identity. For example the shift from newspaper or broadcast news required the use of the same or similar research skills, and an adjusted editorial style that continued to rely on certain journalistic instincts:

15:06 – Brian deals with a witness appeal – in relation to an aggravated burglary. Brian goes to the command and control log to get additional

information on the ages of the victims – there is a clear formula or script involved in these kinds of reports – the officers give lots of information – the media officer refines it – gets it to fit into the script – fleshes out the ‘quotes’ (i.e. makes them up) to fit the message – appeal for witnesses ... administrative aesthetic.

I ask Brian about how long it took to learn the script[/style] for press releases – he says not long – he had already been reading a lot of SEP releases when he was a journalist – just copied the style when he started here.

Nigel says he does not follow the script as much which he credits to his background as a broadcast journalist rather than a print journalist.

Stacy notes how she knows to move certain details up the page – e.g. one of Nigel’s press releases today – high value perfume stolen – she put the price value at the top of the press release. She gives another example of one stylistic change based on journalist values and aesthetics that resulted in the story being picked up in the major tabloids. Stacy was really proud that it got picked up... I spot the coverage in *The Sun* when I look it up.

That police communicators would draw heavily on their previous professional lives is perhaps obvious: those past experiences were the reason they were so attractive to police CCD recruiters. But this process of becoming ‘journalists on the inside’ (see 6.2.2 below) created both important opportunities and challenges for police communicators to build and legitimate their new role identities.

5.5.2 Leveson as a Cultural Feature of Police Communicator Identity

While, throughout this thesis (see 7.2.4 below) I question the practical significance ascribed to the Leveson inquiry in shaping contemporary police-media relations ([Colbran 2016](#)), ‘Leveson’ had achieved a significant cultural significance among police communicators: particularly, for obvious reasons, those on the media team. Police communicators often referred to ‘Leveson’—rather than the specifics of the APP, which sought to interpret and apply its findings and recommendations—as an important normative touchstone in explaining the constraints on their role when faced with critical journalists. Along with setting the boundaries on the role, Leveson was also used to help

construct their ‘new identity’, which departed from the ‘old days’ of police-media relations. This ‘Leveson’ served to empower their status within policing, by positioning police communicators as they key governors of police information and facilitators of all access to the operational hierarchy.

For those who did not have a background in journalism, speculative ideas about the meaning and significance of Leveson and the APP for the governance of police information, helped constitute the internal norms of their new professional identity: one which was in direct conflict with the media. Emily, the media manager, came from a ‘change management’ communications background, and was particularly focused on the APP. In our meetings and interviews she often referred to it with lofty significance: as both a guide to conservative and adversarial media relations, and the reason that conservatism. Particularly in a context where relations with local media were poor, the APP was an important source of authority for Emily to reinforce her role in managing and controlling journalists’ demands.

5.5.3 Control

Other scholars ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)) have identified a Garland-esque culture of control ([Garland 2001](#)) as a dominant feature of police-media relations in Australia. In my own fieldwork too, the desire to exercise control over all police communications was a prominent, but by no means the most important, feature of my findings. This culture of control in police communications—manifested in an intense sensitivity to police reputational risk, and the desire to manage and control those risks—was rooted in the central role police communicators play in constructing and legitimating representations of policing. When combined with the broader information governance responsibilities placed on police communicators through their enhanced levels of access, and close

working arrangements with external audiences, police communicators experienced intense gatekeeper anxieties (see 6.4 below).

In this respect, while ‘control’ is now certainly a significant dimension to the practices of police communications culture, its origins and nature bears little relation to the ‘hysterical denial’ woven through the late-modern penalty theorised by David Garland. In fact, many of the practices of control I observed reflected a genuine belief in police communicators’ own power and capacities to govern and control the construction of police representations. In this sense, control reflected a deeper cultural empowerment in police communications.

5.6 Conclusion

In this chapter I have offered an account of an emergent ‘new’ police communicator culture in the ascendant. In contrast to the journalists they engaged with on a daily basis, police communicators are, through a combination of increased resources, status and communications power—rooted directly or indirectly in the emergence of social media as a perceived viable mass communications alternative to news media—empowered and confident. Through resourcing and technological and experiential expertise, police communicators now believe themselves in a position to either ‘replace’ or ‘bypass’ the media, and in doing so, constructing their new identity within the perceived new mass communications power of policing. Through a combination of this new asserted mass communications power, and their expertise in the media and communications fields, police communicators are also constructing their identity ‘on the frontline’ of operational policing. This identity is in turn fuelled by the perceived power, and access to state coercive power, this status allows. Finally, I have described more nuanced and subtle

dimensions to this new identity: rooted in the attempt to transition from past professional lives to new policing roles.

6 The Labour of Police Legitimation

6.1 Introduction: Overview, Theory and Context

This chapter moves from examining the key constituent parts of police communicator identity—who they believe they are as a professional class, and how they assert and legitimate that identity—to an examination of the work with which they are principally responsible for: the legitimation of policing. Police communicators are, at the overarching organisational level, *the* key police legitimacy workers. While there is some—perhaps, as will be seen, increasing—role for police communicators in operational policing: their work, as I observed it, was primarily concerned with trying to build, manage and maintain police legitimacy.

This introductory section begins by returning to theory, with a detailed examination of the question of police legitimacy. This section then outlines the cultural context of police legitimation in police corporate communications. This section then recaps, and provides an overview for the remainder of this chapter.

6.1.1 Theorising Police Legitimacy

Questions of police legitimacy—the authority to exercise state coercive power of a particular, often violent, form—have emerged from the margins to occupy a central space within criminology and policing literatures ([Michael, Robert et al. , Tankebe 2013](#), [Martin and Bradford 2019](#)). Initial contributions to the discourse drew upon early Weberian accounts of legitimacy, rooted in ideas of collective recognition of institutional authority ([Reiner 2000](#)). Subsequent scholarship offered deeper critical reflections on the so-called ‘Peelian principles’ of legitimacy putatively governing police power in various

parts of the Anglophone world ([Reiner 2010](#), [Conway 2013](#), [Loader 2016](#)). These contributions have on the one hand, attempted to remedy conceptual ambiguities around legitimacy ([Bottoms and Tankebe 2012](#)), and on the other, sought to add some substantive normative weight to ideas of police legitimacy ([Loader and Sparks 2013](#)), by employing more sophisticated accounts legitimacy from political theory ([Beetham 1991](#), [Mawby 2002](#)). Others again have sought to construct and refine a concept that reflects findings of, and which is workable within, empirical studies of normative compliance with the law and attitudes to the police ([Tyler 2006](#), [Bradford, Jackson et al. 2009](#)). More recent scholarship has reconstructed ambiguous concepts of ‘trust’, ‘confidence’ and ‘legitimacy’ by drawing on more sophisticated normative accounts of authority from legal theory and political philosophy traditions ([Bottoms and Tankebe 2012](#), [Bottoms and Tankebe 2013](#), [Tankebe 2013](#), [Bottoms and Tankebe 2017](#), [Martin and Bradford 2019](#)). ‘Procedural justice’ theories of police legitimacy—rooted in ideas of legality and fairness, which studies have overwhelmingly found to be driven by public perceptions of process-based considerations including fairness, shared values and rule compliance—have dominated the literature on police legitimacy in both theoretical and empirical strands ([Martin and Bradford 2019](#)).

In the limited literature of police communications, questions of legitimacy have, perhaps predictably, occupied a central focus of theoretical and empirical inquiry ([Mawby 2002](#), [2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Mawby 2014](#), [2017](#)). In order to reach beyond the narrow segment of the population who have contact with police doing their work, mainstream theories of police legitimacy generally require some species of mass public audience/s imprimatur (what Bottoms and Tankebe call ‘audience legitimacy’ ([Bottoms and Tankebe 2012](#))). This, in turn, necessitates access to mass communications infrastructures through which to do police ‘image work’ ([Mawby 2002](#)): the management of the police reputation among relevant populations ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). While

these studies have provided some important insights into the strategies and practices of police organisations engaging in this kind of legitimation work, they have—like the broader literature on police legitimacy—focused on narrower, operationally-focused, procedural justice-centred concepts of legitimacy ([Loader and Sparks 2013](#)). Perhaps more significantly, while one study briefly mentions the concept of power-relations between police and news media ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)), questions of communications power ([Castells 2009](#))—constituted in the mass communications infrastructures police legitimation work depends on—and its relational structure between police, and other players in the governance field, have been curiously absent.

Martin and Bradford have recently offered a compelling review and critique of contemporary police legitimacy theoretical scholarship ([Martin and Bradford 2019](#)). They carefully examine, and suggest refinements to the enthusiastically received ‘dialogic approach’ to police legitimacy developed by Bottoms and Tankebe ([2012](#)). This ‘dialogic’ approach divides police legitimacy between an internal, institutional conception of legitimacy (‘power holder legitimacy’), and external ‘audience legitimacy’. Police legitimacy on this account is, accordingly, a construction of both conceptions in dialogue with one another, with the internal concept in a degree of ongoing self-correction in response to the external. By incorporating the internal ‘power holder’ conception of police legitimacy to their approach, Bottoms and Tankebe sought to remedy a perceived excessive focus on ‘public audiences’ in legitimacy scholarship. This reorientation seeks to incorporate important theoretical reflections on the often self-constructed nature of authority by Weber ([2019](#)) and Raz ([2009](#)), and more recent offerings by Barker ([2001](#)). Martin and Bradford commend this move, but offer some important challenges and refinements to this turn towards the internal dynamics of institutional legitimacy. In particular, they point to the central importance of carefully distinguishing between and theorising ‘micro-’ and ‘meso-levels’ of police legitimation (what Bottoms and Tankebe

call ‘senior’ and ‘more junior power-holders’ (2012): i.e. the legitimisation work undertaken by individual officers in contact with ‘the public’ on the frontline, and that undertaken at what Martin and Bradford take to be the ‘meso-level’ by police forces—the ‘corporate police voice’ (Loader and Mulcahy 2001). Martin and Bradford challenge Bottoms and Tankebe’s seeming minimising of the importance (at least from the perspective of police organisations) of this ‘meso-level’ legitimisation work by policing, and suggest a greater theoretical and empirical focus on the latter, given both the energy police organisations invest at this level, and its implications for general public understandings and judgments of policing.

Most intriguing is Martin and Bradford’s critique of the perceived failure of those theorising and testing the ‘dialogic approach’ to move beyond a dominant focus on the public as *the* key audience in the mechanics of police legitimacy building—a problem Bottoms and Tankebe had themselves highlighted (2012). Perhaps rooted in an underlying normative commitment to democracy (see, e.g. (Beetham 2013)), this flawed emphasis, they contend, misses some important functional power relations features at the heart of the police legitimacy business in liberal democracies. In short, they argue that police legitimacy is not merely a construct of a ‘legitimacy claims’ dialogue between police and the general public: there are a variety of other important ‘audiences’ (or, indeed, as I suggest, other ‘power-holders’) in the broader governance framework that interact in the construction of police legitimacy. Among other institutional players such as policing authorities, Martin and Bradford point to the failure of Bottoms and Tankebe to seriously consider the distinct audience/power-holder nature of newsmedia, rather than as a mere route to the ‘real’ general public audience. In seeking to remedy these important limitations, Martin and Bradford draw on existing legitimacy theory (Berger and Zelditch 1998) and situate the construction police legitimacy within the mechanics of institutional power relations in the broader governance architecture.

Among police communications researchers, only Lee and McGovern in their 2014 study of police communications note, in passing reference to Bottoms and Tankebe's dialogic approach, this internally-focused, institutional form of 'self-legitimacy' ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). However, perhaps due to the methodological limitations of qualitative interviews, and their study's curious disinterest in the distinct cultural dimensions of police communications, questions of police 'power holder' self-legitimacy are left unexamined. So too is any critical appraisal of the role and status of the news media as a power holder or distinct audience in the governance field in which police operate. The legitimation work (assumed to be) focused on *public* audiences consumes the entirety of their analytical focus. Despite initially arming themselves with new theoretical insights in this field, their valuable study ends up replicating the same assumptions of earlier work, and of their subjects, in finding that this business of police legitimacy really is all about public audiences.

In the earlier substantive chapters of this thesis I examined and employed Barker's account of 'endogenous legitimation' ([2001](#)) in my analysis of my observational data of both newsrooms and police communicators. This account of cultural self-legitimation strongly argues that understanding phenomena of culture and identity—and their relationship to power—are critically important to questions of institutional or what Bottoms and Tankebe call 'power holder' legitimacy. But these questions of culture, identity and power are not merely relevant to the autonomous cultures of the journalists and police communicators I have thus far examined. This police communicator culture is, after all, primarily responsible for making the 'legitimacy claims' of the police organisation directed externally to the 'public audience' (among other potential audiences/'power holders'), and internally to the organisation itself. So, as police communicators seek to legitimate their police force in the eyes of 'the public' and other audiences/'power holders' (such as the newsmedia) in the mass communications and

governance fields, they are also legitimating their own professional role identity. Taking the added cultural insights provided by this study, I suggest further refinements to the dialogic model as amended by Martin and Bradford: one that takes seriously police communicators as a distinct class of ‘power holders’ within policing, making their own legitimacy claims to others, and themselves, at the same time they make legitimacy claims for the police.

6.1.2 Background and Culture: The Diversity of Legitimation Logics in the CCD

Just as former journalists in the media team in SEP drew upon and re-appropriated the skills and values of their past professional lives (see 5.2 above), those who had formerly worked in corporate communications and advertising drew on those experiences in doing their new work. Indeed, most staff in SEP’s CCD had been hired to enrich it with their specialist knowledge and experience (even if, as in the digital team, they were relatively inexperienced in their working lives). Journalists were hired onto the media team so that the police could better manage news media demand on the organisation. Former public relations and advertising professionals were hired to exploit the new potential of social media in constructing a strong policing brand presence. These differences in terms of background and experience were reflected in the differing approaches and strategies deployed in service of police legitimation. For example, ex-journalists on SEP’s media team—which was principally concerned with managing media demand and risk—never really discussed the growing power of police as communicative actors in their own right. While they were increasingly inclined to construct press releases for direct consumption and release them on ‘their own channels’, they did not talk about their ‘social media numbers’, nor did they seem to think they ‘no longer needed’ the

media.¹³² Indeed, if this claim were true, then the resource-dense media officer role, which, in day-to-day labour terms, was overwhelmingly centred on news media management, would be in many ways redundant.

In contrast, their media team manager, Deb—who came from a public sector ‘change management’ communications role, rather than journalism—regularly referred to SEP’s increasing number of followers, implying the communications power that flowed from that (see 5.2.2 above). Though the digital team—drawn from digital advertising, media and private sector corporate communications backgrounds—often found themselves monitoring for risky activity on SEP’s social media account, they were presumptively hired to enhance SEP’s social media presence and produce ‘their own content’ for those ‘channels’.

Given the lack of consistent or significant formalised training for all police communicators (see 5.2.2 above), it was perhaps understandable that police communicators would import their own understandings and approaches to the business of legitimating policing. As a result, police legitimisation work that I observed seemed heavily informed by the logics of journalism, branding and advertising. The media team judged what might pose a risk to the ‘legitimacy’ of the police in the same way that journalists did: not on any theoretical view of what police legitimacy was, or empirically-based understanding of what might affect it. While they certainly believed themselves to be trying to communicate with the general public, their legitimisation efforts were almost exclusively governed by the understanding and expectations journalists had of the police.

¹³² At APComm conferences I did encounter some ex-journalist media officers who expressed views about their own communications power and declining need for the news media. However, the most vocal I encountered had been centrally involved in producing a major multimedia police communications campaign—such as their own documentary film—suggesting this experience had been somewhat important in their self-empowerment through denial of press power. The nature of debate at APComm conferences, as discussed in the last chapter, also encouraged a particular emphasis on cultural empowerment, which almost always included some form of denying journalistic power.

Their dialogue was overwhelmingly directed towards, and in response to, the news media. This was, of course, in sharp contrast to the dominant cultural rhetoric among police communicators, which denied the persistent importance of journalists: the key tension within their working ideology and its practice.

Guy, on the digital team, described the image of policing in particular brand terms: Marmite. While part of their remit was supposed to be general audience reach enhancement through social media (ignoring the lack of social media penetration among key older demographics), that team's public relations and advertising legitimization logics also encouraged their activities towards engaging on platforms that had friendlier audiences. As they felt they 'couldn't win on Facebook' due to perceived hostility that was ubiquitous on that platform, they strategized about redirecting their efforts into Instagram and perhaps Snapchat, where they felt they could place their representations of policing with less negative feedback. These spaces also had the benefit of containing predominantly younger demographics, which SEP and other police forces were keenly interested in accessing. This combined desire to promote a positive image of the police brand, and avoid controversy or criticism, also encouraged an emphasis on stories that were very likely to generate positive engagement. Their legitimacy claim making for police was therefore also informed by the distinct cultural norms and algorithms of the particular social media spaces and platforms they used to promote their message: a legitimacy dialogue within and with a platform-community.

The different backgrounds and experiences of different types of police communicator, then, informed different logics and practices of legitimacy claim making. While the media team concerned themselves with monitoring risks and threats coming from news media coverage, the digital team looked to 'jump on' whatever was trending to promote their own 'positive' police stories and messaging. They would ride the tailcoats of the trend by 'jumping on as many hashtags as possible', with the hope of

increasing engagement and audience reach. For example, if someone on the team knew about an upcoming national or international ‘awareness day’, they would attempt to connect police work to that theme in a social media post, and attach the relevant hashtag in the hope of attracting attention and engagements.

Of course, these different categories of police legitimization work—what I roughly label positive and negative police legitimization—often branched across the different teams in in the CCD. The media team were often engaged in attempts to promote positive images of policing in constructing press packs for distribution among crime reporters, who were, despite repeated claims to the contrary, a primary target audience for this image work. Similarly, the digital team was often engaged in the monitoring and management of perceived risks to police legitimacy on social media platforms. While earlier studies have identified and theorised some features of this ‘positive’ legitimization work ([Mawby 2002](#), [Mawby 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Mawby 2014](#)), little has been said on the ‘negative work’ I describe here. This, I suggest, is again due to methodological differences between those studies—which were primarily interview-based, and ultimately police-focused—and my own research. In those studies the cultural dynamics of police communications—a central focus here—are left largely unexamined. Similarly, little is said in those studies of the complex mechanics of power relations in the mass communications field—the other dominant analytical concern of this research—and how identity, culture and empowerment feature in the legitimization of police work.

6.1.3 Overview

This chapter, then, offers a culturally (*communications* culture, rather than the well trodden path of police culture) fine-grained descriptive account of the phenomena of legitimization in policing in the mass communications ecosystem. It describes the strategies and

professional values of police communicators as they seek to speak of policing to different audiences, including the police organisation. This chapter continues the work of the last chapter, in exploring the nuances and complexities of the emergent police communications culture, and how the legitimisation of that identity shapes the legitimisation of police work. In agreement with Martin and Bradford, this chapter also problematises and challenges claims and assumptions made by both police communicators themselves, and by scholars of police communications, regarding the nature of the intended audiences for that legitimisation work. In particular, it interrogates the significance of the new social media-based approaches to public-facing police legitimisation, suggesting that much of this legitimisation work mirrors journalists' rituals of self-legitimation. In other words, these new channels do not in fact offer the mass communications power potential over the general public that is assumed by the many actors in this field who fetishise the power of new technology. Instead, the work of trying to exercise this putative power is a ritualistic self-affirmation of police communicators' own identity.

Ultimately this chapter concludes that much police legitimisation work is in reality far less concerned with the public audiences promised by social media. Instead, this chapter finds that police legitimisation work is overwhelmingly constituted by two contradictory and polarised drivers: an ongoing dialogue with the persistent holder of both mass communications power—the news media; and attempts by police communicators (rather than the police organisation as a whole) to legitimate their own professional identity, by asserting their own mass communications power over journalists. The remainder of the chapter is organised around the two descriptive categories of legitimisation I noted above: positive and negative police legitimisation. First this chapter deals with the broad category of what I call 'positive police legitimisation' work: the work of constructing an independent, positive representation of policing. Then, it examines what I call 'negative police legitimisation' work, centred on the diverse

features of the governance of police information: the work of identifying, managing and controlling anticipated or perceived threats to police legitimacy.

6.2 Positive Police Legitimation

The positive police legitimation work I observed was undertaken by both police officers (typically senior or chief officers), and police communicators. Some components of SEP's communications department, such as the digital team and campaigns team, were principally concerned with legitimation of the positive type. While all police communicators monitored for risks and threats in the communications sphere and beyond, these teams were primarily concerned with researching and building communicative representations of SEP, which they believed would legitimate the organisation in the eyes of the general public.

6.2.1 Confessional Norms: The 'Good Governance' Rituals of Transparency

Perhaps rooted in broader managerialist changes in Britain during the 1980s and 1990s ([McLaughlin and Murji 2001](#), [Mawby 2002](#)), the 'constitutional' governance values of transparency and accountability appeared from my observations and interviews to occupy a cultural baseline for senior police officers. Though they accounted for a small proportion of my observations, chief police officers in SEP and from other forces often spoke in terms of organisational and/or professional duties of transparency. In the few direct media engagements by chief officers I had the opportunity to observe in SEP, they employed strategies that sought to legitimate these high-level governance values. These approaches usually offered a narrative of contrite acceptance of responsibility for failure in public-facing performances, which seemed to consciously avoid defensive tones: even

if ‘backstage’ ([Goffman 1959](#)) those senior officers were highly sensitive to accusations of institutional incompetence.

For example, following the release of a HMICFRS audit on SEP’s performance, the Deputy Chief Constable (DCC) spent an afternoon fielding calls from journalists about the report and its critical findings. As in other contexts where I had the opportunity to observe the DCC, he was up-front about organisational failings, and quick to accept criticisms—at least to inquiring journalists.¹³³ While the DCC’s approach was to recognise institutional weaknesses or failures, he also balanced these concessions by robustly emphasising that SEP was a police organisation that learned from its errors. He also forcefully pointed journalists to the ‘positive news’ in the report, which identified where SEP was doing ‘good work’, and in some instances—namely crime recording—doing it ‘too well’ such that they were recording more offences than had, as he claimed, been reported.

The DCC’s skilled approach seemed effective. Combined with his confidence and charisma, the DCC made a strong impression on the journalists who interviewed him, and most concluded their interviews happy to repeat back to him his core message of overall good performance within and by SEP, and its capacity to ‘learn from its mistakes’. To describe this elegantly effective approach to transparency and ‘public accountability’ as simply ‘spin’ perhaps does a disservice to what was certainly not a secretive approach to identified failure. But the DCC’s seeming ease at controlling the tone and direction of most interviews also suggested he had little to fear from engaging with journalists on sensitive issues.

It also appeared clear that the primary audience towards which these rituals of accountability were directed were journalists, not the general public. The journalists

¹³³ In private, the DCC was slightly critical of the HMICFRS Report’s methodologies, and particularly critical of the media strategy surrounding its release, which he felt slightly misrepresented some of its findings in order to attract media attention.

monitored these reports. The journalists asked the questions. The more skilled journalists had institutional memory and an understanding of longitudinal narratives in police performance (see 3.3.1 above). While in this HMICFRS report's case, as in other similar instances, some energy and resources were put by the media team into creating press releases in response to the report, most of SEP's communicative energy went into responding to what they perceived were the relevant competing 'power holders': the news media. The DCC did the face-to-face interviews, but was supported by a number of media officers who facilitated the interviews and prepared him on what to expect from which journalists. Perhaps in one sense this is all that the established institutional structures for state accountability expected. But, viewed one way, it might be hard to see this kind of public accountability as having much normative depth: the emphasis on 'putting on a show' for a potentially hostile press suggests the endeavor was more about satisfying the cultural expectations of what good governance 'looks like' in British democracy.

Added to this somewhat superficial 'good governance' culture among chief officers in SEP, the force was also subject to a complex web of statutory and non-statutory police rules requiring transparency in relation to identified failures. For example, The College of Policing Authorised Professional Practice (APP) on Media Relations ([Policing 2017](#))—the principal normative framework around which the media team were directed to organise their work—also places transparency at the centre of its guidance in achieving 'Peelian' concepts of police legitimacy. Similarly, by the time I began my fieldwork in 2017, reforms by the then Home Secretary for the Coalition Government (2010-15), Theresa May, meant that police disciplinary hearings were held in public.¹³⁴ While, as will be detailed in the chapter below, police communicators were often anxious about releasing information they regarded as a potential risk to SEP's

¹³⁴ Office (2015)

reputation, their practices were still generally directed towards disclosure. The vast majority of the work undertaken by police communicators in SEP was, after all, concerned with making information about policing publicly available through a variety of communications channels. The APP encourages or presumptively requires that police forces disclose information in relation to criminal investigations and charging, along with a wide variety of other policing activities. It advocates and necessitates a facilitative approach to journalists in a variety of contexts, while seeking to stamp out problematic aspects of media relations identified in Leveson. The broader governance arrangements and decision-making of police forces, which now include Police and Crime Commissioners (PCC), also occurred increasingly in full ‘public’ view. Journalists enjoyed full access to periodic reviews of police force performance before the PCC, and the annual release of Policing Plan. All of this is consistent with what Mawby calls the era of ‘high visibility policing’ in Britain ([Mawby 2002](#)).

In my observations these norm/s of transparency were interpreted and realised in a variety of ways. These practices of transparency, then, were also shaped and informed by a police communications culture that was being reimagined and reconstructed in light of perceived disruptions to mass communications power relations. While for many chief officers the news media remained *the* key audience for their established rituals of accountability, the social media-led disruption of mass communications power structures left the role and status of journalists and the news media in the process of legitimating other norms transparency ambiguous. Some police communicators discussed journalists as having a mere ‘stakeholder’ status, comparable to victims of crime, or other community organisations: one audience, among many. A small number—all in the context of APComm discussions—talked of journalists as having some more enhanced status in the process of legitimating policing. In SEP’s communications department, the consensus—seemingly consistent with the APP

guidance—viewed the news media in purely instrumental terms, as a means of communicating with the public: the primary audience for their good governance legitimisation. As one attendee at an APComm conference put it:

The media are a conduit to the public – our role and responsibility is to the public. Our remit is to be transparent to the public. National news organisations are much more powerful than our own channels – so we have to service those journalists needs to access their channels.
(APComm 2017, fieldnotes)

This view of the general public as the end-goal for police transparency, but with journalists as a necessary intermediary, created an internally justified space in which police communications workers sought to manage the influence of journalists with their perceived independent agendas. Gaining control over the narrative—and therefore the media—was a clear objective for police communicators in their attempts to realise *public* transparency:

You need to know how to “feed the beast”¹³⁵ (the media) – it’s about management – you need to know how to keep them happy. Every force has a nemesis paper or journalist – you then end up having force-wide hostility to them – you need to make sure you try to maintain or build good relationships with journalists. You need to get them to understand our demands – but then they often forget after a few months ... but then senior officers tell us to give information to the media – they bypass us and our role – we then lose control of the information and the narrative – this is hugely frustrating. Do we challenge senior officers on their media strategy? Yes we are their advisors. Our job is to educate them on what we do – need them to respect our role and understanding.
(APComm 2017, fieldnotes)

Despite the central legitimisation role seemingly accorded to ‘the public’ in these various approaches to realising this norm police transparency, news media persisted in attracting the overwhelming majority of police communications energy. Again, it was journalists who asked most of the questions: regardless of which ‘channel’ the police communicated

¹³⁵ See 7.2.5 below.

on. Despite the common claim that police communicators ‘no longer need the media’ in contemporary mass communications, this attitude to journalists reflects a subtle recognition of the power of journalists to, at the very least, negatively impact the reputation of the police. But, as is demonstrated in the previous chapter, the idea that police communicators had their own communications power in competition with journalists was a central part of their new role identity. This seeming desire to legitimate their sense of communicative empowerment structured the presentation of their work as ‘public facing’, despite the reality that their attentions were usually dominated by journalists.

Taken together, this labour of legitimating the norms of police transparency is constituted through a variety of highly ritualised activities. Police were transparent to journalists because that is what elite ‘good governance’ values in liberal democracy expected, and because journalists were powerful communicative actors in their own right. Police communicators also sought to ‘speak to’ the general public through their new channels: another form of self-legitimating social media ritual constructed from past professional lives and premised on communications power they believed their new role identity possessed.

6.2.2 ‘...we’re the journalists for the police force’¹³⁶

Both Mawby (2002, 2010) and, more significantly, Lee and McGovern note the evolution of ‘police public relations’ units in England and Australia into teams concerned with ‘the full production of news’ (2014). Borrowing from Baudrillardian theory, Lee and McGovern theorise this phenomenon of ‘simulated’ representation of ‘hyper-real’ police work, which they see as a central pillar of this police communications work. They situate

¹³⁶ Comment by Roger from SEP digital team.

this phenomenon within their broader analytical schema of ‘control’ ([Garland 2001](#)) and the ‘taming’ of information flows, in which the state exploits the opportunities offered by technological change in the context of Mathiesen’s account of the ‘viewer society’ ([Mathiesen 1997](#)). Despite the compelling and significant theoretical weight brought to bear on this point, Lee and McGovern’s research offers no careful descriptive account, or critical interrogation of the culture features or practices of this phenomenon of ‘journalism on the inside’. Nor indeed, despite the central importance they accord to the business of legitimating police in police communications, do they spend much time describing what this looks like, or who the real audiences might be.

6.2.2.1 Values and Style

In my own observations, I noted the many ways the positive legitimization work of policing mirrors that of journalism. Just as journalists are concerned with processes of verification in constructing a story on policing to avoid legal jeopardy and violating professional values, police communicators carefully research their communications outputs to ensure accuracy and authenticity. As journalists strive to access and develop lasting personal relationships with frontline officers to enhance the quality of their information, so too do police communicators, who, despite their status as key legitimization workers for police, often struggle to find relevant frontline officers, or to convince them to do communications work of various sorts. Journalists and police communicators also share a desire to construct an authentic representation of the community: though with different focal points of power. The differences between both accounts tended to follow an expected pathway, centred upon contrasting visions of the nature of contemporary police work and community.

In doing their positive ‘police image’ work, police communicators borrowed heavily from their past professional lives in journalism, advertising, public relations or corporate communications, re-appropriating their skills in service of constructing an idealised vision of policing. For example, in the media team, practices such as ‘subbing’ (sub-editing) press releases and social media posts saw former journalists re-enacting the rituals of journalism on ‘the other side’ of the source-media relational divide/nexus. The values and aesthetics of journalism also crept into the press releases written predominantly by former journalists in the media team. Occasionally, tabloid-style puns found their way into the headlines of press releases on the sentencing of convicted criminals. But this ongoing creation of police communications identity and the work that constituted it was not an identical reincarnation of journalism. With the express dominance of police legitimisation in the labour of police communicators, the tone and style of police communications was carefully policed and self-policed. Press releases were expected to reflect an ideal of police impartiality. Forays or experiments by police communicators into perceived risky aesthetic territories of informal ‘banter’ and humour were frowned upon. Images of police work being done in an informal or comic way were deemed risky. For example, during one major public event, a video of uniformed police officer dancing with members of the public was put on one of the official Twitter accounts. Once spotted by the digital team, it was immediately referred to senior police and media officers for review. While there was some discussion about its potential positive legitimating value—it was getting lots of likes and positive comments—caution won out, and they directed it be removed.

6.2.2.2 Constructing an accurate and authentic vision of policing

Through their writing and publishing of press releases, social media posts and community alerts, police communicators were particularly concerned with constructing an image of policing that they believed was accurate and authentic ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)). SEP's digital team—the only members of the CCD to speak directly about transparency culture—felt that the force was good on transparency. This, they suggested, made it easier for them to get access to officers, and also meant they had to self-regulate less in terms of the kinds of information that they could release.

News media interests in policing tended, they felt, to be narrowly focused on a short list of crime and policing issues and events. Through their 'own channels' and the development of their 'own (multimedia) content', the digital team felt they could construct a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of the often under examined (by journalists) aspects of police work. By 'reporting' on 'the fun sides' of policing, the digital team also felt that they could contribute towards the various recruitment efforts that SEP were undertaking at that time. This 'new' kind of police legitimization work—aimed at showing the diversity of 'real' policing in the community, but also with an eye to operational/recruitment goals—was premised on their capacity to speak directly to 'the public' through their cultivated social media audiences.

But these logics of authenticity and accuracy were not confined to constructed police images in 'new media' channels. Press releases were also governed by a complex set of checklists and procedures designed to accurately capture a particular incident—typically a sentencing report or witness appeal. These checklists required certain minimum informational details to be provided to the media team before they would draft a press release, and were designed to facilitate access for journalists by gathering the information journalists would normally ask for in advance of queries. The checklist was based on the media team's insights as former journalists, and their experience in dealing

with media queries before. However, as well as anticipating journalists' demands, the media officers also wanted their press releases to serve as a 'news report' which they published for direct public consumption on their website. With this wider scope of external audiences in mind, the media team sought to provide a comprehensive account of the particular incident, and wrote it with an eye to attracting the interest of the 'general public'. However, despite this ongoing attitudinal and style shift in the production of press releases, 'public' audience engagement with press releases often appeared minimal. Though SEP had their own 'news' section on its website, it was not suggested many members of the public accessed it—it seemed generally accepted it was most useful for journalists. The primary police communications channels through which they sought to deliver their press releases to the general public were social media. Despite much-vaunted audience 'reach' on SEP's Facebook account, most publications seemed to attract little attention—Facebook posts, which were felt to get most attention, typically had fewer than a dozen likes—from a population of a few million. In the end, the audience who demonstrated the most intense interest in press releases remained local journalists.

6.2.2.3 Police Communicators as Translators of Policing

An important part of the job of constructing an accurate and authentic vision of policing involves the translation of operational language and information into a form that can be understood by non-policing audiences.

08:56 –Nigel takes a call from a journalist at *DigiNews* – Nigel says to them he will get back to the particular journalist about the query relating to an incident involving someone entering water – Nigel says he will take a quick look on the Command and Control communications log to see what happened... After the call Nigel goes onto it and does a search. He then goes to Google maps to visualise what he can see in the police log. Nigel sees that a man was in the river. Got a ticket for wasting police time.

In this extract, Nigel employed a variety of techniques for constructing the image of this relatively trivial policing incident. The C&C log gives media officers high level access to contemporaneous and operationally relevant and sensitive information, but that information must be translated and edited before it can be passed on. The process requires particular linguistic and aesthetic skills, as well as a degree of expert insider knowledge about policing to both understand the nature of the information, and to convert it into consumable content for external audiences in the media and broader community. A routine part of the work of media officers and other police communications workers I observed in SEP involved their immersion in a sea of operational information, which they gathered and refined into a short, digestible communication outputs. This process again mirrors much of the work of the local journalists I observed, who sought to immerse themselves within their specialist patch, with its own language and norms, which they then translated into the style and form of copy which their news organisation produced. This work enabled police communicators to make day-to-day operational policing ‘highly visible’ (Mawby 2002), by offering immediate and relevant insights into the frontline. At the same time, this work also helped embed police communicators within the police organisation, and increasing expertise in doing it helped legitimate their professional status. It is notable again that that vast majority of this translation work was driven by routine journalist inquiries.

6.2.2.4 Access

But before the translation of operational information could be done, the police communicator like the crime reporter must gain access. Some routine forms of access, such as the media team’s access to the C&C log, were relatively unchallenging to achieve. For example, media officers attached to a particular police campaign or operation were

usually required to attend and participate in meetings (see 5.4.2.2 above) of the senior officers overseeing the operation, giving a motivated media officer prime opportunity to develop a network of connections with operational police officers. These relationships might then later prove valuable for media officers when they sought insightful and privileged forms of information about operations, or when they needed to find a ‘talking head’ to speak to journalists. As with the journalists I observed in *The Post* and elsewhere, SEP’s media officers sought to cultivate trusting relationships with frontline police officers, which would enhance the quality of the operational information they could access. As well as helping to legitimate their professional role identity (see 5.4 above), this kind of frontline access served practical needs of media officers in their meso-level legitimisation work for the police force. For example, access was essential to the careful presentation of operationally-sensitive information about a case:

On the death at Oranvale – unexplained – Suzanne wants to ‘agree a line’ with the duty officer overseeing the case– he wants to know if next-of-kin have been called – she works on press release... then calls the officer back to discuss what she will put in the press release. The death is unexplained but not suspicious. They agree the guidance will be that they are still looking for next-of-kin. Suzanne calls the journalist back at the Stocktown paper... asks them to hold back on photos and any information that might ID the deceased – she then calls another journalist at *DigiNews* (2 had called – not clear if the one before was *DigiNews* too).
(SEP media team, fieldnotes)

In this case, having ready access to the relevant operational police officer for a case helped Suzanne to construct a press release that accurately reflected the state of play of the investigation, managing the desired coverage in the media, while also not divulging risky information. In broader terms, Suzanne’s access in circumstances such as these structurally supplant the need for journalistic access to the frontline: Suzanne’s privileged position in terms of her status within the police organisation and the trusting relationship

with frontline officers, allowed better access to the kinds of information journalists—who many frontline officers did not trust—would want.

However, as with journalists I observed, police communicators also often found it difficult to get access to some investigating officers.

15:40 – Brian gets an email from a Detective Inspector about a documentary – Brian calls him back – the officer is now retired from SEP – he dislikes press stuff, but ended up getting really into an in-depth documentary about a highly publicised murder in the SEP policing area that he was the lead investigator on.

Brian is aware the BBC locally are pissed off at all the access the documentary crew got on this story... Brian and Emily wonder why they could not get the investigator]to do more press stuff. He was excellent in the documentary.
(SEP media team, fieldnotes)

Media officers told me that many police investigators actively disliked participating in media work, with many often ignoring emails and calls from the media team or others in the communications department requesting their help in either facilitating access for journalists, or in the creation of the communications department's 'own content'. For example, Roger and the digital team tried to produce a video piece on roads policing that would go 'behind the scenes' and visit SEP's driver training school. This 'unveiling' of little observed (because of lack of journalistic interest) aspects of routine policing was, for the digital team, an idealised kind of public-facing legitimisation work. Getting this kind of unique access also helped legitimate their own professional role identities. The manager of the centre appeared enthusiastic about the idea, and the team drove out to the centre spending much of the day discussing their ideas. The centre's manager was very charismatic, and regaled the team with amusing and compelling anecdotes about advanced police driving courses they ran. The action-focused nature of the discussion excited the digital team, but they were particularly enthralled by the manager himself and his story-telling abilities, which they felt would be excellent for the piece. However, when

they proposed that he be interviewed, the tone of the conversation changed. He said he would not do any on-camera participation himself, and the team's enthusiasm immediately died. Afterwards as we drove back to the office, Roger explained how disappointed he was that the manager would not participate, and that he believed the refusal was based on fear of being on-camera. A few months later when I checked back in to see where the idea had gone, Roger said it had never really taken off.

Some police officers found media exposure to be stressful, and others were felt by police communicators (and inevitably then by journalists) to be poor performers in front of a camera or microphone:

Roger from the digital team discusses their attempts to find and manage talking heads for their own digital content... 'I use a lot of positive feedback – lots of police are nervous – they seem fine until they are on camera, then they go blank – I have learned to give positive cues when filming – I nod encouragingly when the officer is on point with what they are saying – it is really important that everyone knows the right messaging that we want on an issue – learned this through experience and when things going badly.

Over time and with experience, Roger explained, he had gained the confidence and insight to know when to question an officer on camera, to ensure they did not say something inaccurate or 'off message'.

Despite their sense that SEP possessed a good culture of transparency, Roger and the digital team also complained about bureaucratic constraints on their work by both management in the communication department, and the operational policing hierarchy.

Note written after a conversation with the digital team. Roger and the digital team were very interesting on their frustration with how slow sign-off can be from the police organisation – challenges like officers going off-rota – or just not responding – these things hinders their ability to be reactive – and to put good new material up on SM. I point out to Roger that the journalists and the media team complain about the same problem...

These difficulties were rooted in the sign-off requirement placed on police communicators before they could publish. Like with journalists who often needed institutional source input before they could run a story, police communicators required frontline officers to review their various outputs prior to publication. These requirements were rooted in institutional risk aversion around the disclosure of information—particularly, as with journalists perceived legal and/or reputational harms in getting it wrong (see 4.3.6 above)—but compromised the ability of the digital team to produce contemporaneous content, which they felt was immediately relevant and reactive to dynamics of the public sphere on social media. This desire to be ‘more reactive’ in their communications work was based on a perception by the digital team—whose expertise was in social media campaigning—that in order to successfully operate in that communications space (which they believed was rooted in certain forms of positive audience engagement), they required a high degree of autonomy in the quality of their access to the frontline. During my time with SEP’s digital team, they were beginning to successfully achieve greater degrees of freedom. For example, they joined local journalists who were brought out to observe the execution of warrants as part of the major Operation Goldfile. Roger and the team brought their own cameras, and caught volumes of live action content of police breaking down doors, pulling handcuffed suspects out of their homes, and seizing contraband. As with the local journalists who went along, for the digital team this was high value access to exciting frontline activity that would allow them to construct the ‘best’ picture of SEP’s police work in the community.

While some of the material created from this activity did generate decent levels of engagement on their social media channels—typically a few thousand views—it rarely attracted anywhere near the level of engagement that something like an animal picture might. Indeed, the digital team were well away that there were somewhat crude but

effective strategies that could easily generate significant engagement without necessarily undermining what they felt was public trust. If public audience ‘engagement’ could be driven through communications that cost less to produce, why commit the resources and energy? As I saw with the journalists in *The Post* and *The Crier* who often went to, and beyond, ‘the extra mile’ in producing news they felt ‘the audience deserved’ (see e.g. 4.3 above), I suggest many of these high cultural values of police communications had less to do with public audience legitimation than it did with the self-legitimation of police communicators as professionals.

6.2.2.5 A human touch

Despite the rigorous impartiality of police power the communications department sought to emulate in the tone of their press releases and social media activity, police communicators also sought to ‘humanise’ the tone of their efforts.

Nigel is finishing up a press release – it contains some semi-scripted crime prevention advice – the press release is done with quotes that Nigel has manufactured – ‘we do this to show that we are not just a faceless organisation doing the investigations... it’s great if they (the police officers on the case) put a quote in the press release request form... in their own words... it adds weight to the press release... a powerful message from someone involved in the investigation...’

Nigel names the officers who he quotes – Nigel notes how the Serious Organised Crime project he is on has officers who are reluctant to be named in press releases.

Nigel describes the formula for writing a press release: ‘...we add some off the cuff quotes where there is no officer quoted...’

As Nigel explains in this extract, incorporating an aesthetic of an individual police officer’s ‘voice’ to the construction of police communications is part of their attempt to legitimate police messaging for public audiences. In attaching real or manufactured police officer quotes to a press release, the media officers in SEP also felt that the operational

objective might be better met as humanisation adds to the overall communicative power of the message. However, as the overwhelmingly dominant audience for press releases remained—despite hopes for their ‘own channels’—the newsmedia, the attempt to ‘humanise’ the voice of the police is perhaps better viewed as an attempt to sate journalistic demands for quotes from ‘talking heads’. Journalists liked and often requested quotes from officers (see 4.3.7 above), and were more likely or happy to use a press release if it contained them.

6.2.3 Visualising Policing in the Community

Attempts to legitimate through humanising or personalising the voice of policing also underpinned efforts by police communicators to visualise ‘community policing’. In contrast to the general direction within SEP towards centralising communications—placing greater control over the representation of policing in the hands of the CCD—SEP also sought to decentralise the communicative representation of community policing to ‘the frontline’. Community-based officers who had undertaken the appropriate internal training ‘package’ on Twitter were given supervised (by the digital team) control of various local police Twitter accounts, and were encouraged by the CCD to generate content that represented the ‘authentic’ community. Within this group of police officer communicators the digital team identified ‘social media heroes’, who the digital team and CCD management felt produced the best content. Despite the overarching desire to enhance the mass communications ‘reach’ of SEP, the barometer for success as regards this content was not centred on the level of engagements. Indeed, while some of these ‘heroes’ often voiced concerns to the digital team about the lack of public engagement with their posts, they were reassured that this was not the most important success benchmark for SEP. Consistent with the concern that the style of

police communications reflect the impartiality of police power, and the general reputational risk averse approach of the CCD, ‘heroes’ were those who instinctively knew to avoid risqué topics and tones. The best ‘heroes’ were those who were enthusiastic and creative (within narrow, and constrained terms) users of their Twitter account—particularly those with a good eye for visual content—but whose activity was wholly consistent with the perceived values of the organisation, and who kept ‘on message’.

As part of my fieldwork I spent a day following one of the digital team’s favourite ‘heroes’, a Police Community Support Officer (PCSO) called Nora based in the photogenic town of Pynton, on the outskirts of Odditon. My observations coincided with an annual summer festival in the town, and we spent the day walking through crowds of people that thronged the narrow medieval streets. Aside from a call out from a concerned resident about a bicycle that had been parked suspiciously on the public road, Nora’s role that day was mainly to be present and seen at the event, and meet members of the community. She took copious amounts of photographs on her phone of the festival parade, and of local residents in fancy dress—many of whom knew her on first name terms. Nora then placed an edited selection of those images on the SEP local Twitter account that she ran. The images constructed a vision of a wholesome provincial town, with a strong and engaged community spirit immersed in ubiquitous symbols of English nationalism.

This kind of police image work in the community—notably devoid of controversial content or edgy humour—was the paradigm representation of community policing sought by SEP corporate communications. Subsequent reviews of Nora’s Twitter activity reinforced a vision of SEP embedded in an idealised representation of English rural and suburban life. But who were the intended audience/s for these rich visions of community policing? Unsurprisingly perhaps, given the nature of the platform,

the Twitter account under Nora's control had relatively (as compared to the size of the area her account covered) few followers. While her pictures from my day of observation did attract a few dozen 'likes', most of her posts had few if any interactions. At APComm conferences attendees and presenters occasionally mentioned how the preferred social media platform for this kind of community policing—Twitter—did not tend to have the most active users in the area. The evolving elite view was that followers and engagements were less important—especially for judging the success of policing in getting specific messaging out on major incidents. While members of the community might not actively follow the local police Twitter account, they could still check it if they were looking for particular information. If this consensus reflected the reality of the emergent role of this kind of community police communications, then its legitimation role was perhaps quite narrow. If actively used, these accounts could provide members of a community with potentially helpful information: something akin to dialogue Bottoms and Tankebe envisage. But these kinds of community-related messaging—not unlike that provided through the older community alert system—could be done centrally. Equally, in mass communication power terms—the capacity to make legitimation claims about community policing to that policed community—this resource intense local activity was again fairly limited. Yet, despite uncertainties over their effect and value, social media accounts were in very high demand by frontline officers who felt they could achieve more in terms of operational goals (safety/deterrence etc.), and community engagement (particularly 'hard to reach' demographics) than evidence suggested they could. This again raises the question of whether having active social media accounts has more to do with internal forms of institutional or role identity legitimation: that police officers, like police communicators, felt some social media presence and activity has become an essential part of the self-legitimizing rituals of police transparency.

6.2.4 Campaigning Comms

Aside from asserted operational objectives (i.e. crime awareness and control), the communications activities attached to named police operations, such as Operation Rinse (child protection), also provided an ideal platform to construct idealised representations of police work. For example, Operation Goldfile (serious organised crime) was accompanied by a carefully designed and promoted communications campaign, including stickers placed on police cars, branded pens and other stationary, etc. The communications campaign around Goldfile sought to construct a vision of SEP police work as collectively focused on tackling a diverse range of serious organised crime, but which was also sensitive to emerging police responsibilities in vulnerability.

Operation Goldfile was headed by DCI Paddy Lough, who energetically promoted the operation on his own, personal¹³⁷ Twitter account, by regularly adding pictures taken on his own phone of seized contraband, and videos of armed police in action. The local newsmedia, who were enthusiastic and grateful for what they perceived as high-level access to frontline policing, were also actively courted as part of the operation. Crime and policing journalists were given much-desired frontline access in the form of ‘ride alongs’ with police officers, allowing them to observe the execution of major warrants as part of the operation: a highly privileged form of access. Journalists uploaded videos onto their news organisations’ social media channels of themselves closely observing—positioned on the side of the police—as doors of houses were forced open, and suspects dragged out of their early morning slumber. Reporting of these ‘ride alongs’ typically garnered extensive front-page coverage in the local newspapers.

¹³⁷ Unsanctioned by SEP CCD, but approved of given his skills at staying ‘on message’.

While the majority of Operation Goldfile’s representations were centred around dramatic exercises of coercive police power,¹³⁸ DCI Paddy Lough—who, much to the relief of Nigel, the media officer in charge of Goldfile, chaperoned journalists on these ride alongs—also sought to draw attention to the vulnerability dimensions of the operation. For example, during one morning’s large warrants sweep, involving a few hundred officers, DCI Lough repeatedly mentioned the ‘safeguarding’ work the police were doing at each location. Though vulnerability did not feature much in the subsequent stories written by those journalists, it was clear that DCI Lough wanted to ensure that the messaging around one of SEP’s biggest operations was consistent with broader policing trends in vulnerability. These efforts dovetailed neatly with the main communications campaign in SEP during my observations, *Seeing Vulnerability*, which sought to raise awareness about the different facets of vulnerability such as child grooming, modern slavery, and domestic violence.

As well as facilitating access to local crime and policing journalists, major police operations like Goldfile also enabled SEP’s own digital team to collect what they perceived as high value dramatised visual representations of police exercising coercive power. Roger and the team were given their own ‘ride along’ access for these events, and they excitedly captured video footage of police swooping in on various properties, forcing entry, arresting suspects and seizing weapons and drugs. Despite their desire to construct a more comprehensive and nuanced picture of police work, the digital team were inevitably more interested in privileging more muscular representations of policing, which they felt would generate more significant engagement. Afterwards, however, when I asked ‘how well’ these videos had done on social media, Roger responded that they had

¹³⁸ Paradigm examples of the ‘hyperreal’ representations of dramatized police work discussed throughout police-media and police legitimation literature. See ([Mawby 2002](#)), [Mawby \(2010\)](#), ([Reiner 2010](#), [Lee and McGovern 2014](#), [Mawby 2014](#))

merely done ‘okay’ with a few thousand views on social media. Considering the substantial resources involved, these videos paled in comparison to the most successful police social media posts, which were all animal-centric...

Ultimately, the core focus of these ‘ride alongs’ was to facilitate the kind of ‘exclusive’¹³⁹ access local journalists demanded. Journalists enjoyed enhanced access to the DCI Paddy Lough on these ventures, and got to interview other chief officers connected to the operation: something the digital team did not get to do. This kind of campaign work can be seen as serving two legitimisation goals in policing: firstly, it legitimates the relationship with another major power holder in their governance field—journalists—by recognising the latter’s status through privileged access provision, which also performed the traditional practices of police transparency. Secondly, given the popularity of this content among local news media audiences, it actively exploits the mass communications power of news media and legitimates the police organisation in the eyes of the community who have a substantial thirst for these kinds of images of policing. However, as we learned in the media chapters above, the more routinely gathered non-exclusive forms of police information could also generate similar levels of public audience interest (see 4.3.1 above). Exclusives did not seem matter much, if at all to the general public. This suggests that the first of these legitimisation goals were the more important of the two: the ongoing dialogue with the persistent power holders in the news media.

¹³⁹ Consistent with the APP’s interpretation of Leveson, all local journalists were invited out on these ‘ride alongs’. However, the content they generated was ‘exclusive’ in the sense that reporters were given an opportunity to create their own content on the frontline and time to report on it well before the police released their own content on their ‘own channels’.

6.3 Negative Legitimation

6.3.1 Information Governance and ‘Policing Purpose’

Given their status within the police organisation as key legitimisation workers, police communicators—particularly media officers—enjoyed privileged access to highly sensitive police information. In their role as ‘media consultants’ to operational police officers (see 5.4.2.2 above), media officers were given ongoing direct access to information on a variety of police operations. This role also necessitated access to information about serious threats to the reputation of policing. This remarkably privileged level of access not only helped to legitimate the status of police communicators within the police organisation (see 5.4 above), but also generated a governance culture around information control and management. This section on negative police legitimisation, then, explores the diversity of practices and features of this culture of information governance. Where earlier police communications literature ([Lee and McGovern 2014](#)) has spoken of ‘risk culture’ ([Beck 1992](#), [Ericson and Haggerty 1997](#)) in the context of the communication of risk to public (e.g. public safety campaigns), I consider risk in the context of information that poses or may pose a reputational risk to the police organisation.¹⁴⁰

The most obvious forms of information governance in service of legitimisation involved the limitation or withholding of information that was felt by police communicators to pose a threat to the reputation of the organisation. Where some internally- or externally-mandated duty necessitated disclosure of information deemed

¹⁴⁰ Police communicators also actively engage in information governance practices in the service of operational matters: controlling information that might jeopardise an ongoing investigation or prosecution. While this kind of information governance is not directly relevant to the negative legitimisation work of interest in this chapter, this type of governance work does feed into the general culture of information governance in police communications, informing the gatekeeper anxieties that permeate the media team.

risky, police communicators engaged in an anxious ‘wait and see’, monitoring news media pick up. Should the journalists’ attention fix on the disclosure, a variety of strategies would be deployed to ‘manage the fallout’. For example, in the following extract, the SEP media team waited with bated breath, as they were required to release information about an internal disciplinary investigation into a senior officer:

Emily consults with Stacy and Suzanne about a press release they will need to write about a misconduct process dealing with a senior officer based in Poppy Rise – Emily is explaining potential outcomes of the hearing on Thursday...

These misconduct hearings are now open to the media as part of a transparency initiative brought in a few years earlier, so lots of people will be in attendance.

One part of the process has been fast-tracked – allegations the officer was interfering with the disciplinary investigation itself – this is a narrow part of alleged misconduct, but it is enough to get him dismissed without having to run through all the other allegations against him.

The media team are very concerned about the reputational risk if the wider misconduct hearing has to go ahead – they are all hoping he just gets dismissed on the basis of this one point.

Emily advises Suzanne to tell the media they won’t be doing interviews on it – tells Stacy to make the statement very bland...

...

Stacy moves on to drafting a release for the misconduct hearing. After she reads details of the allegations she wonders aloud how she can write it up in a good way.

The entire CCD—the media and digital teams, and anyone else monitoring social media or media activity—and chief officers, were all responsible for monitoring reputational risks or threats emanating from the broader communications and governance fields. Once potential risks were identified, the media team set about managing through monitoring, responding, challenging, or minimising it.

In the heat of the moment, the line between what counted as an operational and reputational risks was often blurred. Given the particular evolution of their role identity (see 5.4 above), from the perspective of police communicators all risks were, of course, operational. As a result, the media team in SEP operated under a precautionary governance logic, treating all information relating to an ongoing operation as presumptively a risk to reputation. When a policing incident is ongoing, particularly in moments of ‘crisis comms’, the liberal disclosure of information as it emerges, could, particularly if inaccurate, later create significant problems from a reputation perspective. As we saw in the media chapters above, journalists relished the opportunity to punish institutional sources for bureaucratic errors. Unless there was felt to be a genuine risk to public health or welfare, slowing or arresting the flow of information was the general feature of the media team’s approach to disclosure.

6.3.2 On ‘Policing Purpose’

In this regard, the concept of ‘policing purpose’ emerges as the dominant norm of the information governance culture in policing. The informational concept emerged from the College of Policing’s APP on media relations ([Policing 2017](#)):

The starting point for understanding policing purpose should be one of openness and transparency but, in some situations, the benefits to the public of being open and transparent with information are outweighed by a conflicting policing purpose.

Along with these ‘good governance’ informational principles, the APP’s definition of ‘policing purpose’ also included operational policing objectives and legal duties: ‘protecting life and property’, ‘preserving order’, ‘preventing and detecting offences’, ‘bringing offenders to justice’, ‘any duty or responsibility arising from common or statute law’. This definition suggests that once disclosure did not inhibit operational policing

activities, there was a strong presumption of making information freely available. The rationale underpinning this particular governance approach was the assumption by the APP that ‘transparency’ enhances ‘legitimacy’ (*qua* public support and cooperation with policing). On perceived reputational risks rooted in police failings, then, the APP expects that openness will, in the end, be good for legitimacy. While—taking available evidence into consideration ([Bradford, Jackson et al. 2009](#), [Hohl, Bradford et al. 2010](#), [Stanko, Jackson et al. 2012](#))—we might be sceptical of the empirical validity of this approach to legitimacy, as an information governance norm, it is relatively straightforward. It is also consistent with the self-legitimizing ritual of transparency noted above (see 6.2.1 above).

Yet, despite the seeming clarity of the norm, and the commitment to it by managers like Deb, police communicators exerted much energy monitoring, identifying and then limiting or controlling disclosures deemed reputational risks. However, it is easy to conceive of this kind of risk governance culture as focused on and constituted by the relationship between police and the public/s they police. Indeed, that is the assumption that underpins much of the literature in the field. What became clear, however, in my observations was that this risk governance culture was almost entirely focused on the news media: how journalists would find, interpret and report on the relevant information. Partially underpinning this approach was undoubtedly a series of beliefs about the power of the news media to shape those publics’ understanding of crime and policing (see 1.2.7 above). Yet, the autonomous power and agendas of the news media was what the police directed their energies towards. Take, for example, the following comments from the National Police Chiefs’ Council lead on media, which situate police communications risk wholly within the police-media relationship:

Chief Constable Gareth Morgan discusses Cressida Dick’s speech to the Association of Editors – ‘the challenging divide between interesting to the public vs public interest.’ He discusses particular examples under the presentation title ‘Have I got news for you’ – ‘interesting stories’. He talks

about the example of Humberside police in Halloween dress: this resulted in criticism of police spending by the national tabloids. Humberside police challenged the media coverage, ‘but well made points won’t generate the same activity.’ Morgan then discusses the campaign involving police wearing ‘nail varnish’ to highlight exploitation of migrant workers/modern slavery in Bristol.

‘What is the policing purpose here – what is behind these campaigns? They are risky, but there is risk in everything valuable.’

(APComm 2017, fieldnotes)

In recognising the news media as a distinct power holder in the governance and communications field—rather than a mere conduit to the public audience—we might begin to see how the concept of ‘policing purpose’ evolved in operation to include reputation management. By treating reputation management as a constituent part of ‘policing purpose’, the police communicators I observed elevated negative legitimisation work, and the information governance culture and values attached to it, to quasi-operational status along with those enumerated in the APP. This move, in turn, served to legitimate police communicator role identity: moving reputation management and protection in the face of journalistic intrusion to ‘the frontline’.

6.3.3 ‘Keeping an eye’

As noted in the media section of this thesis (see 3.4.1 above), freedom of information (FOI) requests are now a key tool deployed by journalists to access institutional source information, as well as a strategy for leveraging other kinds of access. It was something of an irony to discover during my time in SEP that the internal architecture for the processing and management of FOI requests there also included an alert system, warning the media team of potential reputational risks. While the media team did not deal with FOI requests, they were routinely notified about all FOI requests from journalists.

An FOI request comes in from the information management department, which is not part of corporate comms... ‘They notify us of all FOI releases – here *The Sun* is asking about incidents of indecent exposure. Part of the request has been refused as it is too expensive to process – the department requires more detail before they will complete it. But it’s useful to hear about what they are interested in.’

As many FOI requests by journalists were almost always directly or indirectly related to perceived police performance failures, the media team liked to know what stories might be coming down the line for them. They often discussed ‘keeping an eye’ on a story as the journalist’s inquiries continued. Though the media team were—I assumed by institutional good governance design—removed from the FOI decision-making process, the advance warning of imminent disclosure, or even refused inquiries, was invaluable in enabling the media team to develop strategies to minimise anticipated reputational risk.

Information governance strategies for managing potential reputation fallout also included internal ‘if asked’ guidance on how to respond to anticipated stories. For example, during my time with SEP, ‘spit and bite’ guards used on those subject to police restraint and arrest had generated some controversy in national police policy conversations. Their use also emerged in HMICFRS inspection reports, and The College of Policing issued ‘if asked’ guidance to all forces about how to respond consistently to media inquiries (see 5.2.3 above). The media team, working in conjunction with frontline police officers, also developed their own internal and locally-relevant ‘if asked’ guidance. However, while this strategy might prove useful in helping the media team to manage a story once it broke—giving them a clear roadmap for how to get their own messaging (i.e. ‘spin’) on the issue out into the public domain—‘if asked’ policies posed their own reputational risks by themselves being subject to FOI. In one notable example, I observed Suzanne from SEP’s media team giving a lengthy phone consultation to a senior investigating officer in relation to the publicising of the prosecution of a well-known VIP. Suzanne cautioned the officer against formally asking the media team to

draft an advance press release or ‘if asked’ guideline, as this would be subject to FOI: resulting in potential greater reputational risk.

Standard inquiries from journalists to the media team also regularly triggered risk and information governance strategies by the media team. For example, following the publication of the SEP Police and Crime Plan by the Police and Crime Commissioner, a journalist from one of the major national tabloid newspapers began inquiring about what appeared to be an innocuous detail buried deep within the document. Though the information seemed to the media team and management somewhat trivial, the line of inquiry alerted them to potential reputational harm from media coverage of it. In one of her consultation calls with a senior operational officer, media officer Naomi advised that she would attempt to find out ‘what his angle on the story’ was. This involved familiarising herself with the complex procedures around the particular operational issue, and then returning the journalist’s queries unanswered with follow-up requests for further clarifications before she could assist. While this risk assessment process was undertaken, the media team and myself speculated about what standard critical line the journalist would take: ‘soft on crime’, or ‘police incompetence?’ Naomi discovered that the journalist was focusing on certain cost-cutting operational changes SEP were considering as part of the broader austerity implementation agenda:

I chat with Naomi – she is dealing with the query from the journalist from a national tabloid – she now knows he is doing a negative article on a low-level crime investigation pilot SEP are planning on rolling out – where officers not sent out to investigate – ‘he had been sniffing around it earlier after the PCC briefing – they (management in SEP) were surprised he picked it out – it was buried in the report – which is 500 pages long – his pieces is taking the line “police being lazy” in not going out to interview victims of minor crimes – and they’ve got no money.’

‘Now he is also querying reference in the same briefing to change in how SEP deals with cannabis factories: SEP is considering options in how to reduce demand – but no details were given in the PCC report – but the journalist queried it specifically – Naomi asked the operational strategy department to see what they are planning on doing with this – and they are

thinking about leaving landlords to deal with leftovers/clean-up (once police have removed evidence I assume).’

Naomi notes she thinks this is ‘a terrible idea’ – but she thinks she won’t tell him the details – which she concedes looks bad as there is reference to it in a publicly available document. She adds: ‘it should not have put it in there if hoping to not answer a question about it’. But, it is not a decided-on policy – so she feels she can refuse – either way it will look bad she feels.

...I note to her that I think the strategy department’s proposal is probably FOI-able.

Naomi is deciding on when to respond to him – considering waiting till the end of day, so she can avoid his response later today. She expects he will be agro (aggressive) with her refusal.

(I note at the time that this is interesting, as I suspect she might give guidance if she thought his coverage would not be negative – but they know it will be).

I ask if the SEP strategic policy unit will change the proposed policy after her consultation – she does not know – she is sympathetic as they have been tasked with reducing costs – it is a big ask so have to consider everything – I tell her that kind of proposal looks normal enough to me...

This extract is highly illuminating. In facing off against a potentially hostile inquiring journalist, negative legitimization strategies of information governance easily overcome any positive rituals of transparency. Examples like this illustrate the importance of distinguishing news media as an audience—or more likely a distinct power holder in the governance field—from the general public. Despite pervasive claims of their growing communicative dominance over journalists, police communicators at a deep cultural level intuited the power of news media to negatively shape public understandings of police action. While rarely expressed, this deeper understanding of the power relations fundamentally shaped negative police legitimization work towards governance and control of the newsmedia.

6.3.4 Policing Public Discourses and Fears of Crime

Management of public fear of crime provided an additional, curious dimension to the business of legitimating policing. On a number of occasions throughout my fieldwork I observed police communicators treat potential changes to public attitudes to crime prevalence, and increased fear of crime, as a risk that the police had a responsibility to manage. The treatment of public fear of crime as an object of governance was seemingly grounded in an empirical assumption that increased fear of crime in the community might create perceptions that the police were failing to deal with the crime.¹⁴¹ At APComm annual conferences, where ‘moral panics’ (Cohen 1972) about particular crimes were routinely described and discussed, these were typically treated as reputational risks. For example, in an extract noted earlier (see 5.4.2.1 above), the Chief Constable of Norfolk Constabulary, Simon Bailey, and his corporate communications manager Nicola Atter, described a social media-driven moral panic that developed in the seaside town of Cromer over the arrival of Travellers to the town. The event, initially minimised by Norfolk Police and their communications team quickly evolved into a perceived serious threat to the credibility of the Chief Constable to run the force effectively. What is particularly notable in that account is the conscious positioning of the more concerning reputational risk element of the event in the language of operational policing (i.e. ‘critical incident’). That example is also interesting as it points to two, often interrelated and mutually reinforcing, intended recipients/audiences of the ‘legitimacy claims’ of the police: the news media, and ‘the public’ on social media. Here, Norfolk Police (seemingly in harmony with Bottoms and Tankebe’s account of ‘dialogic’ legitimacy), respond to social media ‘community’ outrage over a particular failure to appropriately demonstrate

¹⁴¹ While fear of crime management was sometimes grounded within operational considerations—particularly in crisis communications where avoiding panic during something like an ongoing terrorist attack, or serial sexual assault investigation, was deemed an operational priority—most of my observations appeared to be reputation-focused.

to ‘the public’ that they are listening. The response is to incorporate that learned experience into future legitimacy claims of this sort. But, we should again question the veracity of treating the responsive dynamics of a social media platform as ‘the community’. I suggest it is better to treat such platforms as a distinct wielder of communication power: and therefore a power holder in their own right. Additionally, the background fear in this example remains the news media: Norfolk Police were highly motivated to quell online anger for fear of how journalists might report on it. The clear implication here is that whatever about convincing the online representation of the community, the real power-holders the police were focused on were journalists.

In SEP, police communicators often unselfconsciously strategised about how to deal with public fears of crime that might be generated by news media coverage of a particular criminal event:

14:16 – Brian is dealing with an email query from a reporter from *The Royal Citizen* (a local weekly in one of the SEP area’s counties). She has a crime reference number – she also asks if there are any public safety messages SEP wants to send out with her report on the crime.

On the latter, John says that they only normally do safety/prevention messages if there has been a serious crime or there has been a spate of offences.

Here, John is wary of the press ‘scaremongering’. The crime query relates to a ‘smash and grab’ out of a car. There is no CCTV or no witnesses – it seems incredibly trivial to him.

Brian notes that he could delay responding and point to the ‘service level agreement’ between SEP and the local media – but the reporter has a reference number and Brian can find it on the C&C log easily and deal with the query quickly.

Brian then confirms the nature of the incident, the location and that it is still being investigated. The reporter is not going to be able to work it up into a ‘big story’.

SEP’s media team also attempted more direct strategies to intervene and manage in discourses of crime in the media. For example, on a number of occasions SEP media

officers demanded a ‘right of reply’ in, or in response to, critical news stories about the police. If refused, some media officers—particularly John—would threaten to make formal complaints to their editor, or the relevant press regulator.

During my fieldwork, Odditon and other parts in the SEP area had recently experienced a number of high profile cases of sexual violence that had attracted national media attention. As a result, the media team carefully monitored coverage of ongoing rape, sexual assault or child sexual abuse investigations. While I was not made aware of any recent research on local attitudes to crime or policing, the CCD—based, I assumed, on their monitoring of social media activity—variously described the community as being ‘sensitive’ or ‘edgy’ about these events. This perceived fear of crime generated strategies to manage or control anticipated social media discourses (*‘qua public’*) and news media coverage. On one occasion, where Suzanne understood that multiple sexual assaults over a short period were thought by investigators to be unconnected, she made sure to emphasise this in the press release to avoid a panic about a potential serial offender loose in the community. These kinds of ‘reassurance’ messaging was regularly disseminated across social media and news media channels, seeking to demonstrate that the police were ‘aware of an incident’, were ‘attending the scene’ or were ‘responding’.

Along with their positive legitimisation role, the digital team were also responsible for carefully monitoring social media for discussions about crime and policing in the SEP policing area. They then notified the media team who—with their media expertise, occupied a superior decision-making position in the CCD hierarchy—advised on appropriate communications responses to manage or neutralise a perceived risk. Occasionally, and with great caution, this might involve directly responding to the controversy on SEP’s social media accounts. If the relevant risky discussions took place in replies to one of SEP’s own Facebook posting, this activity could be deleted.

‘Misinformation’ activity on social media platforms was also an increasing focus of police communicator information governance strategies. At APComm’s annual conference in 2018, a communications officer from Nottingham Police described dealing with an online campaign by supporters of parents prosecuted for child abduction. As perceived public support (on social media) shifted towards the parents, and away from the police and prosecutors, police communicators sought to directly intervene on social media platforms to challenge and correct ‘misinformation’ about the case, as well as issue warning where discussions were at risk of contempt. Similarly, Kate Quilly, the Head of Corporate Communications for Warwickshire Police and West Mercia Police described the challenges of dealing with the online campaigns orchestrated by the family of a disgruntled retired police dog handler. The ‘Police Dog Ivy’ story ([2016](#), [Murphy-Bates 2018](#)) emerged when the dog handler’s family began an online campaign highlighting the refusal of Warwickshire Police to allow the dog to retire with its handler, who the dog had lived with. The campaign was wildly successful, eventually attracting national and international news media attention. Social media activity focused on the incident was intense, and the Chief Constable was singled out repeatedly for criticism. A core part of the communications strategy was to try to counteract inaccurate or misinformation: though this was made more challenging when the dog Ivy died due to police negligence. The Police Dog Ivy story perfectly illustrated the complex mass communications power relations involved in police legitimating on social media platforms, where individual members of ‘the public’ can leverage the perceived potential power of the medium to try and manipulate the police into action. It also illustrates how social media platforms are not neutral mass communications infrastructures moulded to the distinct needs of police communications and legitimation: indeed, these experiences suggested that traditional news media were much more reasonable in their response to such errors: particularly when they were ‘kept on side’ in terms of access.

At this point, it is worth reflecting on the nature of these perceived reputational risks and crises—particularly the ones centred on social media activity. Throughout my observations in SEP, there were no clear guidelines or barometers for how much negative comment or activity constituted a threat to the reputation of the organisation. As with their reactions to negative news media coverage—the only tangible impact of negative comment was often confined to the reaction of those working in the CCD. My impression was that police communicators routinely over-estimated the significance of threats posed by comments on social media and traditional media. Indeed, the available evidence on public perceptions of the police suggest that negative media coverage—and we might tentatively assume social media coverage—has a negligible impact ([Stanko, Jackson et al. 2012](#)). For police officers—particularly senior ranking officers—the fear of the unknown combined with a fetishising of the power of new communications technologies certainly fed in the assessment of the power and risk inherent in social media. For police communicators, most of whom were young enough to have deep familiarity with social media spaces, the reasons were different. Literature on risk culture suggests the governance reactions and logics—particularly of the precautionary variety as here—bear little proportionality to the risks posed ([Beck 1992](#), [Ericson and Haggerty 1997](#), [Hudson 2003](#)). I suggest there are also strong cultural reasons for this sensitivity to perceived reputational risks on social media. In the last chapter, I argued that in order to legitimate their new identities, police communicators invested heavily in the communicative empowerment potential of social media to help liberate them from dependence on journalists. This investment might also have fed into the general risk governance culture that over-estimated the reputational threats from social media activity.

At the same time, the distinctions between operational and reputational risks in these spaces were also ambiguously drawn. This active role in ‘policing’ reputational risks

and misinformation about police operations in the public sphere inverted the frontline/backroom relationship with operational policing. When it came to the governance of the mass communications space, ‘frontline’ operational officer faded into the background, while police communicators assumed a ‘frontline’ policing role (see 5.4 above), protecting police operations from media intrusion and the risks they pose to an investigation.

In these two ways, the cultural dimensions to police communications can be seen to play a crucial role in the negative legitimation of policing. The self-legitimation of that identity shapes the information governance culture of policing, and the social relations between police and newsmedia. These critical insights help to problematize pervasive assumptions about who the relevant audience is for much police ‘legitimacy claim’ making.

6.4 Legitimator Anxieties

These various dimensions to the labour of negative legitimation and information governance carried significant burdens of occupational stress. The daily routine work of identifying and managing risks or threats to the reputation of the force, often in the face of hostile journalist or public (social media) reaction, was challenging. The responsibility of being a key decision-maker regarding information disclosure into the public sphere seemed to create a pervasive anxiety among police communicators. While some media officers, such John and Naomi, seemed comfortable with these daily challenges, many in SEP were conscious of the high level of access to sensitive information they enjoyed, and worried that they might accidentally divulge too much through their close interactions with journalists. Indeed, my own experience of negotiating access with the media team in SEP was in large part rooted in the intense anxiety among a number of the media

officers that I would leak information to the local journalists in had observed (see 2.4 above). On a number of occasions I observed media officers in SEP actively resist clear attempts by journalists to cultivate closer personal relationships with them, as they understood the efforts were designed specifically to leverage access to the high-value police and crime information the media officers held. For example, I observed a BBC reporter try on a number of occasions to engage Nigel in awkward small talk during press briefings—offering his number and looking to meet up for a chat about some ideas he was working on. Nigel, clearly uncomfortable, politely resisted, and later complained to me that the reporter was ‘always trying to get pally with me’: something he understood was not permitted under Leveson. Like the journalists they increasingly sought to supplant, police communicators were also concerned about not violating legal restrictions on disclosure, such as court order. The risks in this regard were magnified by the seemingly widespread practice of relying on police officers to recount the events in court instead of attending themselves.¹⁴²

Information gatekeeper anxiety was among the most prominent themes to emerge from my field data. Particularly for media officers, who were required to simultaneously perform multiple information governance tasks with distinctive aims of reputation development, maintenance and protection, these stresses seemed to reinforce the general occupational culture in police communications towards risk aversion and control. When drafting press releases on highly sensitive events such as suicide or child abuse, media officers were anxious that their press release both provide an accurate account of what occurred, without damaging the reputation of the force through insensitive or unlawful disclosure of too much detail. Police communicators also worried about not having access to enough information to deal with emerging reputational threats, or that they may not understand the complexities of police procedure to respond

¹⁴² ([Sharman 2017](#))

to media queries. In the following extract from my fieldnotes, the information deficit created by Suzanne's distance from the frontline in a highly sensitive area was the cause of significant stress.

Suzanne calls Busyford Council – *The Loyal Uttonian* (a local weekly newspaper) had just called SEP media office about an incident involving the police – an eviction?

Suzanne asks which officers were involved. They (the media office) don't know so cannot comment to the press query. Reporter said (to Suzanne) the officers are giving advice on it (the eviction). Suzanne thinks this is unusual.

Suzanne is anxious. Worried about SEP relations with the specific community (Travellers). Suzanne wants to know what has been said by the police officers on the ground. She says to the person at the other end of the line that she will say to the journalists that they were there in a support role. She then fills an enquiry form.

These legitimator anxieties reinforced distrust of journalists, increasing the likelihood that a media officer would identify and label a particular piece of information as posing a reputational risk. For example, on one 'ride along' Brian facilitated for local crime reporters, we were all waiting outside a house after the warrant had executed. It was very early in the morning, and I was quite tired from lack of sleep. Though I generally kept my interactions on these 'ride alongs' to a minimum—preferring not to interfere in the dynamic between the journalists and police—in this instance I somewhat thoughtlessly asked Brian a question about police liability for property damaged in a search. Brian stared at me nervously, before murmuring that he 'wasn't sure', before awkwardly joking that I had 'caught him out' with the question. The journalists present, in any event, were not interested in what I might be getting at: they were appreciative to be present for some 'real police work'. Later, when we were back in the car alone:

Brian scolded me for asking hard questions he couldn't answer there (jokingly – but later a little more serious) – he said he was concerned about being ambushed by the journos (journalists) during these chats – he was concerned they would lay a trap for him – it was clear my thoughtlessness in front of

them unsettled him. However after I apologised he said he was glad I was there as it was nice to have someone ‘on my side’ when dealing with the journos.

(SEP media team, extract from fieldnotes written at the end of the day)

As noted above, my own research relationship with journalists in *The Post* was another illustration of this gatekeeper anxiety-induced hyper-sensitivity to perceived risk. That I might secretly hand information over to my ‘friends’ in journalism resulted in a year-long delay in my gaining access to the SEP communications department.

6.5 Conclusion

This chapter has examined the practices and values of two broad categories of police legitimisation—positive and negative—from the perspective of the police workers who are now principally responsible for it. Informed by the insights on the identity and culture of police communicators, this account of police legitimisation has departed from the dominant public audience-centric accounts of police legitimisation. Instead, in line with some recent suggested amendments to the ‘dialogic model’ of police legitimacy ([Martin and Bradford 2019](#)), this chapter has critically interrogated these performances and rituals of transparency to ‘the public’. It has suggested that, in truth, much of these positive labours of legitimisation are rooted in the self-legitimation endeavours of police communicators as a distinct class within policing. It has also suggested that the negative labours of police legitimisation are centred around the dynamic power relations between police and news media. Here, I depart from the existing literature, and conceive of news media and journalists not just as an audience for police communications, but also as power-holders in their own right within the governance field. In the last chapter below, I explore this governance field in its entirety, blending the distinct ethnographic accounts of identity, culture and power in the journalistic and police communications fields.

Before doing so, in the following penultimate chapter, I examine the informational and communications nexus between policing and news media.

7 The Architecture of Contemporary Police-Media Relations

7.1 Introduction

While the focus of this doctorate began as one centred on the relationship between police and newsmedia, it evolved—through methodological design and necessity (see 2.2.1 above)—into a broader project that focused on the individual cultural and structural features of each side, becoming two distinct ethnographies in the process. This chapter returns to the issue in point: the contemporary structure and cultural features of police-media relations in England. In truth, the pathway to understanding each side as stand-alone subjects of critical examination and theorisation has repeatedly crossed into the study of the other. Through seeking to understand the distinctive features of the individual occupational cultures, and how questions of identity, power and legitimacy constitute those cultures, the relationship with the other has repeatedly come into view. As we saw in the last chapter (see 6.1.1 above), the project of building and legitimating the culture and identity of policing, is in part constituted by policing’s ongoing ‘dialogue’ with audiences and ‘power holders’ such as newsmedia. Likewise, as we saw in the media section (see 4.3.7 above), the self-legitimacy/legitimation of access-based local crime journalism in significant part depends on their interactions with policing as a key institutional and symbolically important source in the community. In these ways, the nexus of their interactions can be viewed as among the most important structuring features of each side’s identity and culture: interwoven cultures which, in turn, tightly govern the production of knowledge on crime and policing. These final two

chapters, then, will undertake the formidable challenge of theoretically reconciling two distinct ethnographies of police communications and local newsmedia in England to offer a new, culturally enriched, account of police-media relations.

The first of these last chapters introduces fresh empirical data from my fieldwork, and returns to the theme of information governance, examining asymmetries in the relational nexus between policing and newsmedia through the lens of information ubiquity, control and flow. It deals head-on with the impact of the digital and social media revolution's creation of information ubiquity—events curiously absent from the existing literature on the topic—and situates police-media relations within this broader social phenomenon of enormous significance. This chapter also addresses some of the key issues identified in recent literature, particularly the impact of Leveson. In this regard it challenges the basis of claims about the material impact attributed to Leveson—specifically concerns about transparency and accountability in policing, and public safety—by identifying other important structural and cultural forces affecting the governance of information in the police-media relationship.

7.2 Information Ubiquity and Governance, and Tensions in Police-Media Relations

Perhaps unsurprisingly given the nature of the informational focus of the police-media relationship, questions of information governance and control permeate the principal themes that emerged in my field observations. Police-media relations today are situated within, and shaped by a context of both information ubiquity generated by the digital revolution, and attempts—particularly by powerful private actors ([Zuboff 2019](#))—to govern and control that information. The police-media relationship is one, as we have seen, fundamentally premised

on the transfer of information from police to journalists (formerly in exchange for access to mass communications infrastructures under the latter's control). This section deals with the tensions that emerged in that informational relationship as I observed them—tensions rooted in the disrupting influence of information ubiquity. It explores and unpacks a number of distinct tensions within the relationship, and interrogates these findings against claims in the literature that changes to the governance and flow in information are rooted primarily in Leveson ([Colbran 2016](#)).

7.2.1 The Curious Example of Mugshots

Despite the prevalence of lofty 'good governance' rationales in journalists' accounts of challenges in their relationship with police—namely that police resistance was rooted in desires to avoid accountability—it was the small things that served to fuel tensions between the sides. For journalists in the SEP policing area at least, the routine, day-to-day disputes which structured the police-media relationship centred on access to a seemingly non-contentious or sensitive pieces of police information: police mugshots. These official police photographs of suspects, routinely taken as part of the charging process, were among the most important components of the informational exchange from police to journalists. 'Mugshots' provided journalists with a valuable (on their account: essential), visually enriching dimension to a crime story. Officially sanctioned images such as mugshots were of particular value to local newspapers in the SEP area—such as *The Post*—but they were also an important visual aid in the production of television news stories, where live action video footage of a suspect could rarely be gathered.

The high journalistic value placed on mugshots was often supported by audience preference data in my news media field sites: when mugshots were included in crime and

policing stories published on social media, that story was, it seemed, far more likely to attract increased engagement. At *The Post* it was not unusual for these stories to be top of the ‘most read’ section for the online newspaper. Their importance and value for journalists peaked following a successful conviction and the closing of the narrative of the criminal event with a court report on the trial, conviction and sentencing. Post-conviction, the need to have the mugshot was intense for journalists, and editors would pressure reporters to in turn pressure SEP’s media team into providing one.

For police communicators too, the use of these mugshots was an important part of the production of SEP’s ‘own content’ for their ‘own channels’. As explained to me during an early interview with the CCD’s general manager, Joan North, sentencing reports were part of an express strategy in the CCD to demonstrate the success of the organisation at tackling crime. These ‘court reports’ were produced by the media team—who occasionally attended court and took notes, though more often relied on the investigating officer to provide them with the relevant details—and were the main police ‘news stories’/press releases which media officers published on SEP’s Facebook page. Like with journalists, the posts with mugshots often proved popular with SEP’s social media followers, and appeared more likely to generate engagements than other media team posts.

Given their high value for journalists—particularly for court reporters like Penny in *The Post*—and the routine, non-sensitive nature of the information, it was perhaps surprising to see that mugshots had become a central point of tension in SEP’s relationship with *The Post*. In my newsroom fieldwork at *The Post*, I repeatedly observed journalists like Penny and Ricky, and particularly the editors Paula and Diane, complain bitterly about delays and refusals by SEP’s media team to hand over a requested mugshot. Refusals were typically due to a rule SEP had instigated as part of their ‘service level agreement’ with the local news

media, in which SEP asserted they would no longer provide a mugshot to an inquiring journalist unless the person convicted had been sentenced to prison for a period of 18 months or more.

Delays by SEP in providing mugshots to journalists (as opposed to above refusals), of which there were many, had more complex causal origins. To ensure the accuracy of an image before releasing it to the news media, the media team safeguarded SEP against potential legal liability in defamation, or for breaches of court orders, by systematically verifying the image with the police officer who had investigated and prosecuted the offender. This process of verification often added substantial labour for the media officers in processing mugshot requests from journalists. Given the round-the-clock nature of policing, officers worked non-standard shift times and they often did not respond to emails when not at work. Sometimes this process could take several days or more.

These delays created significant issues for court reporters who generally sought to publish their reports with mugshot images on the day of the judgment, or immediately after. Publishing deadlines, journalists' high professional value in exclusivity, and downward pressures from news editors to meet minimum productivity levels combined to drive journalists into a fury when mugshots were not handed over quickly after a request. Delays in accessing mugshots served as a major focal point for general grievances among *The Post's* journalists about perceived lackadaisical approaches by SEP in providing journalists with information they believed they had 'a right to'. For the editors in *The Post* these delays were illustrative of a perceived lack of understanding in SEP of journalists' needs. Journalists also complained that the procedures governing the release of mugshots were ambiguous, and that SEP's strict 18-month sentencing rule was not consistent with the approaches adopted other neighbouring police forces they were familiar with. Given the background of perceived sour

relations between *The Post* and SEP, every additional delay or refusal seemed to inflame the moral outrage of editors that SEP were, in fact, undermining the ability of *The Post* to uphold the principle of ‘open justice’ and to hold SEP ‘to account’: all, for them, illustrative of a background absence of respect for *The Post* and its role in the community.

The dispute quickly escalated to ‘an exchange of letters (emails)’ between management in both sides, with Diane *The Post*’s editor, and Paula, the news editor, righteously listing their demands for a satisfactory change in the relationship. Diane on numerous occasions threatened to escalate matters by writing a series of op-eds highlighting the ‘lack of transparency’ in SEP: a classic attempt by *The Post* to regain leverage in access over an institutional source (see 4.3.7.1 above). Paula suggested they publish the stories with a blank mugshot: a creative and provocative variation on this leveraged access strategy, designed to suggest the police ‘had something to hide’. When, in the end, SEP’s communications manager Joan committed to remedying delays and demystifying the processes of verification that bound media officers, Paula was disappointed that they could no longer run their planned ‘truth to power’ series of articles on SEP’s ‘lack of transparency’.

Given the seeming marginality of the issue, it would have been easy to dismiss the prominence of the mugshots dispute in my field data as a mere persistently reoccurring ‘storm in a teacup’, unworthy of serious critical attention. Ultimately, however, the ‘diplomatic crisis’ dimension of this seemingly minor dispute regarding non-sensitive information governance reflected the deeper crisis in local journalism, and a critically important example of the disruption of police-media relations by information ubiquity. On the side of *The Post*, this incident reflected the deep anxiety among its editors, and to a lesser extent its reporters, that the local newspaper was not respected by SEP. As mugshot provision was routine and non-sensitive, the failure to enable such basic levels of access was

interpreted by journalists to mean that their status in the eyes of a primary symbol of public governance had declined (see 4.2.2.1 above). That SEP was itself now routinely producing its own mugshot-enriched ‘court reports’ not only antagonised local journalists—many of whom questioned the veracity of SEP’s approach¹⁴³—but also served to reinforce their perception that key, symbolically important, institutional players in the community believed them redundant.

On the police side, the mugshot ‘crisis’ reflected two distinct features of their attitude to local newsmedia. Firstly, the belief among police communicators in SEP that they no longer needed news media to undertake their rituals of transparency empowered some in the CCD—notably managers like Deb—to impose this form of informational discipline on local journalists. As they could now ‘do transparency’ *via* their ‘own channels’, demands by journalists to facilitate the idiosyncratic informational demands could be faced down. However, despite these sentiments, in the end *The Post’s* editors were able to leverage some relief from SEP in terms of access to mugshots. Threatening negative coverage of SEP, and repeatedly emphasising the importance of their role in the community, eventually paid off: though the 18-month sentence rule remained.

The second, perhaps more significant aspect of the mugshot ‘crisis’ was rooted in a less abstract challenge: SEP’s media team were struggling to manage what was perceived to be increased levels of demand from local journalists.

¹⁴³ Relying on police officers’ recollections, as the media team occasionally did with sentencing reports, was viewed critically by journalists as a high risk approach to accurately reporting on court decisions. In particular, failure to attend did not entitle a reporter to courtroom privilege, and increased the risk that a court order might be breached.

7.2.2 Demand Overload: Road Traffic News and Lazy Journalism

Alongside disputes over timely and comprehensive provision of mugshots, the perceived failure of the police to respond to journalistic inquiries about road traffic events—in particular collisions (RTCs)—provided another central point of tension in police-media relations. Complaints about slow or non-responses to inquiries about current or recent RTCs formed the basis for many journalists' assessment of poor performance on the part of the media team in SEP.

On my first day of fieldwork in *The Post* I sat alongside Gwen—a generalist reporter—as she monitored Tweetdeck and other social media sites for breaking, locally relevant stories. Information began to trickle through the Twitter accounts of local institutional sources, and under locally relevant search terms, suggesting there was a crash on one of the motorways near the city. Gwen immediately called SEP's media team to get further information so she could write a story. The media team did not pick up the phone, so Gwen left a message. Gwen went on to explain to me how they often struggle to get through on the phone, and that the media team preferred journalists to email inquiries. However, she preferred to call over emailing, as the latter would not get a timely response in order for her to report contemporaneously on the crash.

It quickly became clear during my newsroom fieldwork that RTCs and road traffic information in general was an important driver of online readership traffic (no pun intended) for *The Post's* website. RTCs that created traffic issues on the complex array of heavily congested major roads near Odditon were often highly ranked on the 'most read' section of the website. After a month or so, I accompanied Ricky, *The Post's* crime and policing reporter, in the car as he attended a meeting at SEP's HQ with Deb and Joan—managers in the media team and CCD respectively—and the Deputy Chief Constable Shawn Wright. The

meeting was to discuss ways that Ricky could get more routine access to frontline officers: in that case he was seeking a monthly ‘walk about’ with a different local Sergeant on their ‘beat’ to discuss the particular crime issues in that neighbourhood. On our way back, after what he believed was a successful negotiation, Ricky felt comfortable conceding that *The Post* placed excessive demand on the media team in SEP: particularly with regard to traffic information requests. Ricky explained that local newspapers like *The Post* had not traditionally covered live road traffic news. Given the limitation of the printed form, live traffic news had been the exclusive domain of local radio—particularly the BBC, who had a permanent rush hour presence in SEP’s traffic control centre. The advent of online news and social media had changed this. As Gwen had demonstrated to me on my first day, local newspaper journalists could now pick up on breaking news leads for traffic news—among many other kinds of breaking news—by monitoring local social media activity without having to leave their desk. Ricky explained that editors—who were themselves driven to pursue increased online readership traffic by corporate parent companies seeking to monetise the few remaining advertising opportunities online (see 4.3.5 above)—liked that traffic stories did well online, and expected reporters to cover them. If they failed to, and an editor spotted it on the BBC’s online news feed, reporters would be criticised for ‘missing the story’. However, unknown to *The Post*’s journalists, the media team in SEP did not have much better access to the traffic control centre than local newspaper reporters did. The media team’s main source of contemporaneous information, the C&C log (internal reference to description in police section), rarely had much detail on traffic events, as other emergency services tended to take the lead on dealing with the incident. Unless there was a fatality, it was often a significant challenge for the media team to get enough information on the RTC to satisfy the journalists’ queries.

This increased interest among local newspapers in covering traffic news served primarily to increase the level of demand placed on the media team to gather information for journalists. The media team resented having to do what they felt was the reporter's job. Media officers described often receiving calls from local journalists who had spotted some comment on Twitter, and asking the media team what it was about, attempting to work minimal information up into a story without leaving the newsroom or following up their own independent leads. The lack of information in the queries made it difficult for the media team to investigate the incident, putting pressure on their resources. Numerous police communicators I spoke to in SEP and at APComm conferences described journalists as having become 'lazy'. They explained their view that social media generated large numbers of potential leads for local journalists, but, because they were 'lazy', or were themselves under-resourced, the reporters then sought to transfer the labour of investigating the story onto the media team.

How do they perceive us? We've noticed a massive change – they don't do the work before they come to us – they're more demanding – they're really really lazy now – but it's not our responsibility to do the work for them... their expectations on press officers is wrong. It's frustrating to see the way it is going...

(Attendee comment at APComm 2017 discussion forum)

By the time I began my fieldwork with SEP, the Deputy Chief Constable had announced to local newsmedia that their media team would no longer respond to inquiries about minor (i.e. non fatal) RTCs. At a briefing given by the Chief Constable to which a number of editors of local newspapers in the SEP area were invited, some of them vented frustrations about what they perceived to be inconsistent approaches from different police forces with regard to information provision on RTCs. However, the Chief Constable held firm on the

policy, and while there were some disgruntled mutterings about ‘transparency’ from attendees, the new approach was generally accepted.

The CCD and chief officers described this move as part of a broader ‘demand management’ strategy in their media relations. While framed in bureaucratic language, the effort sought to assert a form of informational demand discipline on local journalists who were, it was felt, placing excessive burdens on the media team. It is notable that these two major points of tension I observed in police-media relations did not relate to questions of police incompetence—aside from allegations by some journalists that SEP was incompetent for not meeting their large numbers of queries. Journalists could write comprehensive court reports without mugshots, and traffic management information was not generally understood to be the remit of local newspapers. But both were popular, and the social media technologies and online news publication enabled them to cover the latter.

7.2.3 Managing Expectations in the Era of Information Ubiquity

SEP’s response to journalists’ complaints about delay and unsatisfactory responses to inquiries—which, in the case of *The Post*, members of SEP’s media team felt verged on the abusive—was to try to manage the expectations of journalists. The media team, many having recently departed local journalism, understood the complex causes of the increased demand to be a mixture of informational lead ubiquity through social media, and downward editorial pressure on reporters to pursue traffic-generating copy. Instead of seeking to satisfying this perceived increased demand with increased resources for the media team—something senior management would not countenance given the persistent background of fiscal austerity (see 5.3 above)—the media team sought, instead, to demystify police communications.

For example, one morning the media team invited all the editors and crime reporters from local news organisations—along with a ‘citizen journalist’ blogger the media team believed was popular—to attend the CCD to let them observe a ‘normal’ day in SEP communications. Ricky, who was about to leave *The Post* for a more promising career as a digital reporter in the BBC, did not attend. Instead, Connolly—who had recently taken over from Paula¹⁴⁴ as newsdesk editor in *The Post*—came into to see how things were done on ‘the other side’. Mirroring my own observational approach (see 2.5 above), attendees sat behind a member of the media team and watched while they answered queries. The relevant media officer would stop and explain what they were doing, taking the time to explain the complexity of the work involved in gathering information to answer the query, and then logging the interaction as was required under SEP’s interpretation of Leveson and Filkin. At the end of this ‘show and tell’ morning, I spoke briefly to Connolly for a quick catch up. I asked him in general terms if he was more sympathetic to the media team now that he had seen how it worked for himself. Connolly agreed it was good to see how SEP’s communications systems worked—though he was resistant to abandoning all scepticism.

Whether the ‘show and tell’ exercise genuinely led to changes in *The Post*’s approach is difficult to know: around the same time the media team began telling me that relations with *The Post* had improved. Some, like Joan the CCD’s general manager, felt this thaw in the relationship was more likely caused by the change in leadership with Paula’s departure from the position of news desk editor. Connolly was judged by both journalists and police communicators who encountered him as a more understanding character, less inclined to forcefully push journalists in their dealings with sources, giving them a degree of autonomy

¹⁴⁴ By the time my fieldwork ended, the entire editorial team in *The Post* had moved into corporate communications.

that Mido felt was often lacking (see 3.3.2 above). By the time I completed my fieldwork it appeared that overall the intensity of the demand from all local news organisations in the SEP area had started to drop. There seemed to be fewer days where media officers had hostile engagements with local journalists, and the atmosphere, despite significant staffing turnover at that time, was relatively relaxed. The policy decision to refuse to deal with non-serious RTCs was also felt to have had a positive impact on demand.

Despite their seeming triviality, the examples of tensions in police-media relations around mugshots and RTCs are important in illuminating the deeper mechanics of power relations between the two communicative actors, and the context in which they were placed. The ability of the police to resist these routine demands for fluid information flows, and to enforce a degree of demand discipline over journalists indicates power asymmetries in the relationship. Power asymmetries in favour of policing over news media have already been identified in the literature on police-media relations ([Mawby 2014](#), [Colbran 2016](#), [Mawby 2017](#), [Colbran 2018](#)). Yet, despite attempts by some journalists to frame the tensions over information flow in the police-media relationship around deeper normative and constitutional ‘good governance’ themes of transparency and accountability, it is difficult to view them in those terms given the routine non-sensitive nature of the content at issue. The background factor identified here—and curiously uninterrogated from the existing recent literature on police-media relations—is the disruptive impact social media technologies have had on the availability of informational leads for journalists. Similarly, the existing literature has not accounted for how the parallel decline in newsroom resourcing, and the general crisis in journalism, has impacted on police-media relations: particularly the attempts to transfer labour burdens from journalists onto police communicators identified here. Adding these insights to our understanding of police-media relations complicates the normatively

cosy narrative that these tensions are fundamentally about ‘good governance’ as has been suggested in some of the literature ([Mawby 2010](#), [Mawby 2014](#), [Colbran 2016](#), [Mawby 2017](#), [Colbran 2018](#)).

7.2.4 The Impact of Leveson and Filkin

As I have suggested at various points throughout this thesis, the Leveson inquiry’s impact on the dynamics of police-media relations was of far less significance than the themes and issues that dominated my observations: namely, deeper questions of place, identity, communications power, cultural crisis, and legitimation. Yet, Leveson did have some significant impact. The main change that I could identify was how local and national news journalists now struggle to get the informal access to senior and chief officers they once enjoyed: a primary target of critique in the Inquiry. In terms of day-to-day routine provision of information however, Leveson itself seemed to have had little immediately noticeable effect beyond the requirement that interactions are logged, and favouritism among journalists is prohibited. The biggest impact, then, has been on exclusivity rather than straightforward access. While journalists were quick to point to Leveson as a source of catastrophic decline in their access to police, as noted above, the principal disputes centred on routine, non-sensitive levels of access: which the APP, based on Leveson, encouraged access provision for. Police communicators were, on the other hand, less inclined to identify Leveson as a source of challenge for them in their relationship. In my time in SEC, it was only mentioned when journalists sought individually privileged levels of exclusive access to frontline officers.

Despite never living up to the hype of the discourse around police-media relations, Leveson—and the rarely-mentioned Filkin Report—did have some notable structural and, in

turn, cultural effects on how information was managed and released. At the routine level, Leveson and Filkin had ushered in the strict requirement that all media interactions be immediately logged by police communicators on a computer system: a digital paper trail enabling easier identification, and holding to account, of those who made improper disclosures. This strict and routine measure in informational management and control may very possibly have fed into the general anxiety among police communicators around information governance (see 6.4 above). Indeed, given the roots of this logging requirement in the post-Leveson fallout, it would be unwise to discount how a seemingly simple bureaucratic governance measure could feed police communicator distrust of journalists. This could explain and validate the perception of some of the journalists I observed or interviewed who complained that the police no longer trusted them (see 4.2.2.1 above).

A concrete example of such Leveson inspired ‘distrust’ or information governance might be found in the initial insistence I observed by SEP’s media team that a media officer must ‘facilitate’ (i.e. attend and monitor) all journalists’ face-to-face meeting with the frontline. Given resource limits in a period of high demand, this meant reporters like Ricky struggled to interview frontline police officers in the community. Yet, at the same time, documentary filmmakers had un-‘facilitated’ access in SEP to produce a television series: something that infuriated local journalists in *The Post* and *BBC Odditon*. By the end of my time with the local news media, however, it seemed that this insistence on ‘facilitation’ had begun to fade. By the time I started observing in SEP, Ricky described being ‘left alone with’ frontline officers by members of the media team on a number of occasions, suggesting any ‘distrust’ created by Leveson was dissipating. Indeed, by early 2018, I spoke to journalists from other parts of the country who felt that the relationship with policing had begun to thaw.

Some of what was described as Leveson-inspired ‘control’ by journalists in *The Post* appeared, instead, to be rooted in the particular idiosyncrasies of that paper’s relationship with SEP’s media team. For example, Ricky, Mido and other *Post* journalists often complained about SEP’s refusal to give appropriate levels of ‘off-record guidance’. Yet, other journalists I observed or interviewed from outside the SEP policing area did not mention any issue with guidance. By the time I started observation in SEP’s CCD, I noted media officers were routinely giving guidance to all reporters in the area—including *The Post*—suggesting a further thaw in the particular *Post*-SEP relationship.

What was much clearer was the sense in which Leveson had achieved an important cultural status in both policing and news media. For police communicators, Leveson served to heighten the sense of professional responsibility they had—particularly those dealing with the newsmedia—over the sensitive nature of the information they controlled, and in protecting the reputation of the police force. Improper governance of sensitive police information was now clearly seen as a potential threat to the reputation and legitimacy of policing. Similarly, the strict interpretations of Leveson that prohibited informal relationships between police officers (affecting mainly senior officers who were most inclined to speak to journalists) and journalists added to the general sense of self-empowerment and legitimation among police communicators. Leveson positioned police communicators as *the* principal gatekeepers in the relationship with journalists, supplanting senior or chief officers who were, in the past, more comfortable bypassing the media team. In this way, Leveson helped to legitimate the status of police communicators within policing as significant ‘power holders’ in their own right.

On the news media side, as editors of local newspapers could no longer pick up the phone and speak informally to chief police officers of their community—with whom they

felt they should have a close and collaborative relationship (see 3.1.1 above)—this made Leveson symbolically significant, and painful. This new level of control on informal interactions undermined the sense of status and symbolic authority local newspapers had in the community they had a key role in constructing. For day-to-day local crime and policing reporting, however, simple flows of information did not appear qualitatively different, aside from the denial of exclusivity. Yet, even for some of these non-elite journalists, the loss of high-level informal access within policing symbolised the decline in respect for journalism within the community. For them, Leveson had become a nostalgic focal point for returning to imagined ‘good old days’, when journalists had ease of access to the decision-making table of state power (see 3.1.1 above). This nostalgia, in turn, seemed to facilitate the avoidance by young and inexperienced reporters of deeper critical reflection on the major structural and cultural changes around them.

Journalists I observed also never considered the potential positives from Leveson’s hostility to exclusivity: that the ‘equal access’ approach adopted by police communicators could liberate them from having to cultivate good relations with police to maintain information flows. The need to maintain positive relations with policing was something that older crime reporters I interviewed—like Harry Maguire *The Post’s* former crime reporter—said they had felt some pressure to conform to to protect access. Viewed this way, Leveson could have facilitated more adversarial crime reporting—consistent with their self-perception of their professional role identity—as the police would still be bound to give them crime and policing information. It seemed, however, that such adversarialism was inevitably inconsistent with the deeper desire of local journalists to work in partnership with the symbolically important institutional components of their community (see 8.2 below).

7.2.5 Please, Police Me: The Desire for Narrative Disciplining

Given the general hostility journalists asserted to perceived attempts by their police sources to ‘control’ news media accounts of criminal events, it was perhaps surprising to discover how often journalists actively desired narrative disciplining by those sources. Indeed, on a number of occasions, journalists like Mido in *The Post*, and Joseph in *BBC Odditon* complained when they were not subject to narrative disciplining by SEP. For example, in one incident during my fieldwork in *BBC Odditon*, allegations by a family that they had been subject to racist abuse created a crisis for Joseph about how *BBC Odditon* should tell the story. In that incident, one of the alleged perpetrators—a ‘respected public servant’—had contacted *BBC Odditon* and spoken to Joseph, where he denied and challenged the allegation. Joseph felt this alleged perpetrator was credible—more credible, it seemed, than the alleged victims’ spokesperson, a local charity. When asked for comment on the story, SEP’s media office merely said the investigation was ongoing. The failure to provide what Joseph felt was an appropriate level of ‘guidance’ (i.e. whether the police believed the alleged victims or not) was, he said, a failure to ‘take charge of the story’. Joseph was concerned that his, and other local news organisations’ coverage, might inflame racial tensions—and it was SEP’s responsibility to stop that from happening. It was clear that as he found the alleged perpetrator credible, he was also worried about wrongfully suggesting this ‘well regarded’ figure in the community was racist: even where they were not intending to publish their names. That *BBC Odditon* had published a potentially inaccurate or misleading online story suggesting a racially motivated incident was no longer the BBC’s fault, but the police’s.

In another challenging case, noted in the media section (see 4.3.6 above), SEP’s refusal to provide further information about an ongoing investigation meant Mido and editors in *The Post* felt they had ‘no choice’ but to write a story that they felt would suggest a

young, vulnerable girl had lied to police about being the victim of a serious crime. *The Post* had dedicated significant resources to covering the investigation, leaving its journalists—even Mido who was not a crime reporter—deeply invested in the outcome. That SEP’s response—which stated simply that they were no longer searching for alleged perpetrators—may itself have been the responsible approach to managing such a delicate case, was not considered. Journalists, as in these cases, often expected an interventionist, disciplinarian approach by the police in the ‘public sphere’, to control and arrest the emergence of certain narratives, and, by implication, journalists’ own worst impulses. It was never suggested in either case that the journalists might themselves choose to stay silent on the cases, and allow their controversy to die with the natural decline in interest of social media.

For their part, police communicators I observed often complained that they were too often required to police inexperienced and incompetent journalists in order to avoid inaccurate, misleading, or unlawful information being published. For police communicators, the job of policing journalists was too often onerous and stressful:

Brian is responding to a query on ‘charge release’ (a press release on criminal charges) – ‘cash from crash’ fraud case – case involves a complex set of offences – Brian is advising the reporter in Uxminster to be careful about what they are accusing them of – guiding them on the appropriate use of language. The journalist is looking for details that are hard to give – Brian is concerned about the journalist, and by implication the police being in contempt, so he is giving limited details.

This aspect of the information governance in police-media relations is suggestive of another asymmetry in power rooted in the experience of police communicators. Despite the dismissive attitude journalists—including young and inexperienced reporters—had with regard to the experience level of media officer, most of the former journalists I spoke to had worked for a number of years in news media prior to police communications. Media officers

in SEP voiced their disappointment at the decline in quality and experience of local journalism, and (in contrast to resentful attitudes to journalism – see 5.5.1 above) spoke in quite paternalistic and sympathetic terms about the challenges facing young reporters.

More generally, both journalists and their former peers in police communications spoke of needing to ‘feed the beast’: that police should take an active interventionist role in managing and manipulating news media. By ‘feeding the beast’, police communicators were, on this account, fulfilling part of their broader public protection duties in mitigating the dangers of a destructive, and seemingly agency-free, social force in news media. The consensus was that if, post-Leveson, journalists no longer had informal access to elite sources in the police hierarchy (who, presumably, they felt were good at policing journalists’ story telling), then access and control would have to be provided through other means to sate journalistic appetites. When police forces failed to properly ‘understand news cycles’—a common allegation made by journalists I observed and interviewed—they were abdicating their duty to govern discourse on crime and policing. This, curiously uncritical, account of the essential disciplinary role of policing on the public sphere has recently found support in the literature ([Colbran 2016](#)).

In my observations, beyond the tensions created by the era of informational ubiquity in the police-media relationship, the structure and practices of police communications generally positioned them in collaboration with journalism in the construction of crime and policing news. Media teams were, after all, designed specifically to provide fodder for the media ‘beast’. Though various senior police communicators I encountered claimed they ‘no longer needed’ journalists, and journalists complained that the police were avoiding accountability, the central role of journalists remains hard-wired into the performance of police transparency rituals (see 6.2.1 above). As we saw in the previous chapter, the structure

of police communications resources with SEP remained overwhelmingly focused on facilitating and managing news media demand. While police forces have increased resources and efforts into creating their ‘own content’ and developing their ‘own channels’—activities which also help legitimate police communicators’ ‘new’ identity—news media remain the dominant focus of attention in police communications. While direct access to senior operational and chief police officers has been curtailed post-Leveson—an affront to journalistic self-legitimacy—the police communicators I observed still provided journalists with highly privileged insights through ‘guidance’. When crime reporters were brought on ‘ride alongs’ they were given highly sensitive information about major police operations well in advance in order to facilitate that kind of access. Indeed, unlike the chief officers who had once been an important, often informal, source for journalists—at best for ambiguous ‘good governance reasons’; at worst in order to keep journalists on side for political advantage (Mawby 2002, 2010)—media officers primary responsibility was to maintain the flow of information to journalists. Despite anxieties about the potential threat news media coverage might pose to a police operation, or the police force’s reputation, media officers were inclined to trust journalists as being ‘on the same’ team. Police communicators understood that, in the close community context of Odditon, *The Post’s* journalists shared a similar vision for community safety—if perhaps having a different understanding of how to achieve those objectives.

7.3 Some Small Conclusions

Ultimately, it seemed that while Leveson had disturbed informal aspects of police-media relations, the foundational dimensions of information transfer persisted. While Leveson provided some structural adjustments, with significant implications for cultures on both

sides: police information still flowed. As the chapters on news media and police communications demonstrated, the more significant changes to the framework of police-media relations are rooted in deeper structural and cultural shifts. The next final chapter returns to those deeper changes, and seeks to theorise them within a comprehensive new understanding of police-media relations situated in the local governance field.

8 Contemporary Police-Media Relations in the Governance Field: Community, Identity and the Mechanics of Local Governing Power

This final chapter serves as both a conclusion and a theoretical reconciliation. In this chapter I offer a conceptual account of the engine underpinning and feeding the power relations in policing and media, which conceives of and situates police-media relations within the context of what I call the (local) ‘governance field’. This chapter brings together the key empirically-led theoretical insights from the two ethnographies on police communications and local newsmedia, to reconceive both as component parts within a single ethnography of local governance and power: with communications at its heart. This account draws on two distinct bodies of literature—sociological field theory (specifically Bourdieu’s ‘field theory’), and police legitimacy theory (specifically the ‘dialogic model’ by Bottoms and Tankebe). This chapter maps the boundaries, contours, and hidden depths of this governance field, accounting for past and contemporary structures of the police-media relationship within it.

In departing significantly from existing literature on police communications and police-media relations, this chapter seeks to incorporate the dominant themes that emerged in my fieldwork. These insights into policing and news media emphasised the importance of place and community in both side’s efforts to build and maintain legitimacy. Along with unpacking the highly localised nature of power and authority in these fields, this chapter also takes seriously this thesis’s insights into the close interactions between mass communications power, and other forms of power—notably coercive and punitive state power—in the

complex relationship between policing and news media. Finally, this section emphasises the centrality of culture and identity in understanding the deeper mechanics of power relations within this localised field of governing power.

8.1 The (Local) Governance Field

Throughout the previous chapters glimpses of what I call the ‘local governance field’ have come into view. For example, attempts by local journalists to access what I described as the ‘decision-making table’ at which police ‘sat’ when exercising coercive state power in the Odditon ‘community’. It is in this decision-making ‘space’ that the deeper mechanics of power relations between policing and media play out: power-relations based on cross-mixing and attempted conversions of coercive power, punitive power, knowledge power, and mass communications power. Similarly, the previous police communications chapters described—through the lens of police legitimacy theory ([Bottoms and Tankebe 2012](#), [Bottoms and Tankebe 2013](#), [Martin and Bradford 2019](#))—policing, news media and the local community as ‘power holders’ and ‘audiences’ involved in the ‘dialogic’ approach to mutual legitimation. These accounts again conceived of a space, or ‘field’, in which policing and local news media as key holders of (local) power—power of different kinds—interacted, to mutually constitute one another’s sense of authority and legitimacy in the Odditon community.

Both these spatially rooted conceptualisations of the mechanics of power relations and legitimation take place within what I describe as the local governance field. This section seeks to ground and develop this concept of the local governance field, by situating my analysis within the Odditon context, and drawing on the theoretical insights that informed the analysis and theorisation in the previous two sections of the thesis. In constructing this concept of the local governance field, I draw heavily from the work of Bourdieu, and others,

on ‘field theory’, and supplement it with insights from the ‘dialogic approach’ of police legitimacy garnered from the previous chapter.

Generally speaking, the local governance field in Odditon—as it may be in all distinctively defined communities—is constituted by a set of governance-centric institutional power holders¹⁴⁵ active in ‘the community’. These include the obvious, historically-rooted, ‘traditional’ symbols of public power in England: such as local government, the courts, and the police. ‘Public’ power holders also include a variety of other important institutional components of ‘the community’—many of which were mirrored with their own local news media ‘patch’¹⁴⁶ (see 3.1.1 above)—including the local education and health services. This local governance field also includes ‘private’ power holders such as the local news media, community organisations, and charities: those non-State institutions and organisations who exercise various forms of power that shape the lives of those in the community, and their understanding of that community. In this way, the local governance field also includes local financial institutions, and mass transport and utility providers.¹⁴⁷ This, by no means

¹⁴⁵ Throughout the writing of this thesis, perhaps because of its ethnographic methodology, I have struggled with the distinction between individual and organisational/institutional/identity-based power holders. This has been particularly challenging when trying to distinguish police communicators as power holders from the power of the police organisation. As this is a study of culture, references to power holders should therefore be viewed in the latter, organisational/institutional sense.

¹⁴⁶ Given the defining role of local news media in identifying and policing these symbols of the community, the question arises as to which came first: the symbolic component of the community or the news media defining it. Firstly, this research makes limited historical claims. Secondly, and more importantly, the chronology in this regard matters little: whether the symbol of the community was recognised as such before the emergence of local news media is irrelevant. The local news media still asserted their authority to identify and label it, just as they asserted their authority to police it.

¹⁴⁷ In other jurisdictions which have not experience substantial privatization, or which never enjoyed state provision in those areas, these power holders might rightly be described as ‘public’. My crude public/private power distinction charts along state/public ownership, and the level of ‘market’ (or as Bourdieu would describe it, ‘economic capital’) influence over each power holder.

exhaustive, list seeks to capture the public and private bodies/institutions/organisations who were either centrally or marginally, directly or indirectly, involved in the ‘official’ (qua legitimate – in this case ‘liberal democratic’) forms governance of the population. In short, the governance field includes those exercising local power over local people’s bodies, and those local bodies which are subject to governance.¹⁴⁸

Bourdieu’s ‘field theory’ (1984) provides among the more significant analytical tools in the fields of sociology and anthropology (Willig 2012). Briefly, ‘field theory’ conceives of the modern social world as constituted by a rich diversity of interwoven ‘semi-autonomous and increasingly specialised spheres of action... Both within and among these sphere—or fields—relations of power fundamentally structure human action’ (Benson and Neveu 2005). On this account, a field is constituted by agents (preserving a degree of autonomy, and avoiding ‘naïve assertions of structural determinism’ (Benson and Neveu 2005)) situated and acting within their field, along with the internal and inter-field power relations, and other structural features of the particular field. A key concept for Bourdieu’s field theory is the idea of ‘habitus’—‘a structuring structure, which organises practices and the perception of practices’ by relevant agents in the relevant field (Bourdieu 1984). ‘Habitus’, then, captures how the particular field shapes the individual perceptions of its agents about their role and status in the field, and how the field’s ‘game’ should be played (Willig 2012). Other critical concepts include ‘illusio’—the degree to which a particular agent is personally committed to the field’s ‘game’ (Benson and Neveu 2005)—and ‘doxa’—the shared ‘universe of tacit presuppositions’ (Bourdieu 2005) among agents in the field, and across fields. These agent-centred components of each field are situated within a broader, structural account of a social

¹⁴⁸ My rough conceptualisations here owe much to earlier readings of Foucault on ‘bio-power’ (1977, 1978, 1986, 1990) and more recent work on penal power (Bosworth, Franko et al. 2017).

world, constituted in part through competitive tension between two key forms of power (or ‘capital’)—economic and cultural—a relational struggle that shapes all fields to varying extents.

While Bourdieu did, latterly, offer theoretical insights into what he called the ‘journalistic field’ ([1998](#), [2005](#)), this dimension of his broader project of mapping our social world has largely been undertaken by peers and protégés ([2005](#), [Couldry 2007](#), [Willig 2012](#)). On their account, Bourdieu’s field theory provides a superior, and comprehensive analytical framework to the other major theorists of journalism and mass news media. The alternative accounts include Habermas’s ‘public sphere’ ([Habermas 1991](#)), which is generally viewed as excessively normative and optimistic as regards the history, power and internal culture of news media ([Benson and Neveu 2005](#), [Couldry 2007](#)). His account of the ‘public sphere’ also conceives of the influence of economic interests in journalism as a sort of zero-sum game: once advertising became¹⁴⁹ involved in journalism, it corrupted all aspects of it. The other major theoretical alternative to field theory is Castell’s ‘media space’ ([2010](#)). The ‘media space’ account, notable for its analytical breadth in encompassing a vast array of component in the ‘network society’, fails to address the distinctive power of news media: treating it as just another cog in a broader communications field. Field theory accounts of journalism also avoid more simplistic understandings of the role of journalism within the broader structure of governing power relations. These alternative theoretical accounts often place excessive emphasis on a distinct, pathologised, structural feature such as commercialism ([Habermas 1991](#)), hegemony ([Hall, Critcher et al. 1978](#)) or capitalism ([Herman and Chomsky 1988](#), [Bourdieu 1998](#)). These accounts that tend towards the myopic and deterministic are often

¹⁴⁹ As I noted 4.1.3 at above, it is doubtful if journalism in the form he conceived ever existed without advertising.

blinded to the cultural nuances and complexity of the power relations within and across fields, and, most importantly, the potential for transformation within those fields ([Benson and Neveu 2005](#)).

While this thesis has drawn significantly on Castells' impressive, ground-breaking work on conceptualising and theorising communications power ([2009](#)), his work's inadequate treatment of other fields of power as they interact with those who exercise communications power creates an analytical limitation. Central to Bourdieu's field theory is the relational qualities within, and more importantly between different fields of action. Distinguishing itself in this way from 'new institutionalism' ([Cook 2005](#)), field theory accounts of journalism are acutely concerned with how the dynamics of other fields—particularly, for Bourdieu at least, the economic field ([Bourdieu 1998](#), [Willig 2012](#))—shape the practices and ideologies of journalism, and how journalism similarly might shape those fields. Writers on the journalistic field have described, among others, its relationship to the field of politics and social science ([Bourdieu 2005](#)), community activism ([Klinenberg 2005](#)), and medicine ([Champagne and Marchetti 2005](#)). For Bourdieu, the field of journalism was also distinctively important within 'the larger field of power' ([Benson and Neveu 2005](#)), as it is a central protagonist alongside other fields (such as politics) in the competition to construct 'the legitimate vision of the social world' ([Bourdieu 2005](#)). While journalistic field theory is decidedly open-ended in potential subject focus, the existing body of literature—led by Bourdieu, who was himself specifically concerned with the shift towards commercialisation in public broadcast news ([1998](#))—has often concentrated on national

news media and its relationship with national government, over the local.¹⁵⁰ The rest of this chapter, then, will bring field theory to the perhaps more comfortably applicable localised fields of power.

This chapter will not seek to re-analyse the entirety of this thesis's newsroom or police communications ethnographies through the lens of field theory. However, its analytical tools do enable us to reconcile both within the broader field of local power in which they operated. I argue this can be done within my Bourdieu-inspired concept of the local governance field: a regionalised sub-field of the general, 'larger field of power' ([Bourdieu 2005](#)).¹⁵¹ In particular, field theory enables us to do what existing scholarship on police-media relations and police communications—which treats the business of legitimacy in that particular relational context in largely unproblematised terms—has failed to do. By emphasising the theoretical importance of field, our understanding of police-media relations acquires greater explanatory depth by being situated within broader fields of power.

While field theory shows promise in helping conceptualise the nexus of policing and media in this local governance field, its analytical strength has limits. Given the primacy afforded to the business of legitimacy/legitimation in both fields, the particular theoretical literature on legitimacy and police legitimacy is required to supplement this general structural understanding. In order to address this limitation, in this section I appropriate elements of field theory, and blend them where necessary with legitimacy theory, to help make sense of the complex interactions I observed between policing and media. As such, this chapter should be viewed not so much as a development of field theory, but instead as a

¹⁵⁰ Eric Klinenberg, who had in other work demonstrated an acute interest in local news in the American context, perhaps comes the closest—though in this regard he wore his theory 'lightly'. See Klinenberg 2005, 2007, and Benson and Neveu 2005.

¹⁵¹ Policing scholarship has, to great effect, employed Bourdieu to help theorise change in that field of power. See ([Chan 1997](#)) and (Olinger-O'Brien 2016).

contribution to our evolving understanding of the legitimation of power, and the central role of communications as an organising force in criminal justice scholarship.

8.1.1 A Transformation in the Local Governance Field

As was argued in the previous chapter 7, the shifts in the power relations of policing and media has less to do with changes in information availability, flow, and control. I now return to the insights garnered in each of this thesis's ethnographies, and explain the deeper structural and cultural transformations between policing and media within the local governance field. In those two ethnographies, key themes were common to both, particularly cultural change and empowerment, the practices and sources of self-legitimation, and radical reorientations in mass communications power. The local governance field in which policing and news media are situated—indeed, in which they are mutually constructed and legitimated—has had its internal and external borders redrawn by significant realignments in communications power, and the perceptions of that power. I will now describe how each of these power holders have, as a result of this realignment, experienced a dramatic repositioning within their shared local governance field.

8.1.2 A Brief Outline of the New Local Governance Field

Returning to the question of mass communications power—a central theme in understanding the mechanics of power relations between policing and news media, and crucial to the rituals and practices of transparency and public legitimation. The thirst and quest for greater mass communications power was a potent engine for cultural change in both the newsrooms of Odditon and SEP's CCD. For journalists, mass communications

power—the power to influence, shape and convince mass audiences of a particular construction of the social world ([Bourdieu 2005](#), [Castells 2009](#))—constitutes a core feature of journalistic identity. Pursuit of the capacity to influence the population of the constructed community in their understanding of their social world is, as I suggested in chapter 3, among the key legitimators of journalistic role identity—and a defining feature of the *habitus* of local journalism. Why indeed would someone do the work of journalism if not to affect our understanding of the world? The particular advertising-dependent commercial or economic field which exerts significant control over local journalism ([Bourdieu 1998](#), [2005](#)) (see 3.2.4 above) combines with this aspect of journalistic role identity to make mass communications an essential pre-requisite to ‘success’ in journalism in both professional and monetary terms. The quest to command large audiences, which can then be subject to journalistic influence, is also, as I argued across chapters 3 and 4, a key tool for journalists to assert their authority in their constructed community, and important leverage for journalists to gain access to symbolically important institutional sources in the community (see 4.3.7.1 above). In the language of Bottoms and Tankebe—the mass communications power of the local news media, or the perception of that power, also marks it out as a ‘power-holder’ in their community, and its governance field. The capacity to convert that mass communications power into a form of leverage to access other forms of power—such as police power—in the local governance field, also sees it as a distinctive form of ‘capital’: a liquifiable means of exerting influence and discipline over another field.

In policing—or, more accurately, police communications—attainment, or perceived attainment, of mass communications power serves two important functions. Firstly, it empowers police communicators to potentially bypass or replace local newsmedia (see 5.3 above) in their quest to legitimate policing through rituals of transparency to the general

public (see 6.2.1 above). This quest for ‘public legitimacy’ through transparency is the defining feature of the *habitus* of police communications. Secondly, as for journalists, the attainment of mass communications power for police communicators is, in and of itself, an important source of self-legitimation (see 4.3.5 above). The perception that police communicators command mass communications power also helps to legitimate their position within policing, entrenching the importance of their role within the police organisation: positioning themselves within the policing field.

For both fields, then, this quest and competition for mass communications power structures much of the individual cultures of both the journalistic and police communications fields, constituting one of the most important sources of legitimation for each field’s role identity. But, as we saw in the previous chapter on police legitimation, actors in both fields also seek to legitimate themselves in other ways beyond mass communications power. Perhaps most importantly, the news media seek high level ‘access’ to institutional sources like the police in order to legitimate their position within the governance field and policing, legitimates itself in the governance field by seeking to resist and deny the asserted power-holder status of news media. In this way, we can see the competitive tension of both groups seeking to position themselves within the local governance field. These deeper intertwined mechanics of police-media power relations, and the manner in which they are structured, reflect a key dimension of the *habitus* of the local governance field.

An additional structuring feature of the governance field is the persistence of certain background cultural assumptions about the role of the news media in liberal democracies: a *doxa* for both journalists and senior police officers and the local governance field of Odditon, and, no doubt, elsewhere in England. This particular *doxa* is reflected in the hard normative frameworks governing police-media relations, such as the APP and the ‘Service

Level Agreement’, which by their very nature presuppose an important privileged status for journalism. Perhaps most significantly, however, it is also evident in the persistent structuring of police communications—as with all other key power holders in the local governance field—through, and in response to news media. In this sense, the shared liberal democracy *doxa* of the local governance field explains the persistent sense that I observed in policing—particularly among chief officers—that news media should be respected and treated as power holder peers: even as many of them sought to deny the basis of that power.

Conceiving of these background norms of liberal democratic governance as *doxa* of the governance field, helps to explain my, and Martin and Bradford’s (2019), identifying how and why police seek to legitimate themselves in response to, and as against, the demands and expectations of news media as power holders. Journalists, as co-members of the local governance field, share this *doxa*—illustrated by their asserted ‘rights’ to a certain minimal level of access to other power holders within that broader field. Journalists are also legitimated by achieving that access, and having their power holder status recognised by another significant power holder in the governance field. This background ‘liberal democracy’ *doxa* of the local governance field in Odditon is also glimpsed in the structure and performance of transparency rituals (see 6.2.1 above): that power holders such as the police ought to be publicly accountable to the voters/audience/policed population in the local governance field. This *doxa* also reinforces the grounding of the local governance field to a place or community—embodied by the relevant population the power holders seek to legitimate themselves before.

But the ‘game’ of the local governance field as I have described it is post-transformation: the competitive tension around mass communications power between power holders in its *habitus* is rooted in an influx of culturally disruptive mass

communication technologies. These new technologies, and the cultural logics that they generate, have restructured the perceived power of each power-holder in the field, and, in changing those perceptions of status in the field, have also transformed the mechanics of power relations between those power holders. In the news media chapters of this thesis, we saw how social media technologies, and the mass communications promise they hold, have eroded the ability of journalists to achieve the highly valued forms of institutional access. As we saw in the police communications chapters, other power holders like the police no longer believe they require news media to publicly legitimate themselves *en masse* as per their shared *doxa*, this serves to marginalise (though, because of the liberal democratic ideas around accountability, not extinguish) the role and status of news media within the field.

At the same time, the digital revolution has generated a devastating revenue crisis in local journalism (see 4.1.2 above), eviscerating the ability of journalists to legitimate other aspects of their role identity as power holders. This sees the cannibalisation of the local journalistic field consumed by the economic field. In the policing chapter, in contrast, we saw how those same technologies have served to enrich and empower police communicators to recreate their identity: an identity legitimated through the perception of enhanced mass communications power independent of news media control. When combined with the strict exclusion of exclusivity in media relations brought about by Leveson, this cultural empowerment has enabled police communicators to deny local news media communications power, and their asserted status within the governance field.

These insights on the shifting mechanics of power relations in the governance field have significant implications for our understanding of police legitimacy/legitimation. This complex diversity of internal cultural dynamics within each professional field, shapes the mutual perceptions of these key power holders of their own, and each other's power and

status in the broader governance field. Following the lessons of the dialogic model of police legitimacy, these insights expand the simple power holder–audience structure of police legitimation to provide additional explanatory depth to account for my field observations in Odditon. By introducing field theory, we can see that news media are not mere audiences for police to legitimate themselves, they are also partner power holders in the governance field. And they are partners whose status within the governance field is insecure and uncertain due to internal dynamics, and the perceptions of policing itself. This account also explains changes in police-media relations which existing literature has struggled to adequately explain. In particular, the combination of field theory with the dialogic model of legitimacy within the local governance field, captures the cultural nuances and rich diversity in the mechanics of power relations of policing and media. The persistence of the police-media relationship despite dramatic crisis and change reflects the persistence of deep cultural assumptions about the structure and governance of power in local British liberal democratic culture. Finally, the centrality of place and local identity in this account enriches the existing scholarship on police legitimacy, by addressing ‘the placeless, timeless quality in much procedural justice research’ ([Martin and Bradford 2019](#)) which the dominant procedural justice theories have been challenged on ([Loader and Sparks 2013](#)).

8.2 Accountability in the New Local Governance Field?

The question of police accountability runs throughout this thesis. Where, on their own terms, local journalists in Odditon and beyond consider themselves an essential mechanism for public accountability of institutions of power—a perspective with substantial international legal imprimatur ([Commissioner for Human Rights 2011](#))—British policing, at

least at a formal level, seems to deny or ignore this role. The normative frameworks which have sought, in response to the Leveson scandal, to govern the relationship between policing and news media, hint at recognition of journalists' 'constitutional status' in British liberal democracy without actually spelling it out. Instead, they speak of the news media in purely instrumental terms, as a conduit to publics that are policed. In the era of social media, this instrumental view has left this implied accountability role vulnerable: a concern the preceding section has sought to conceptualise and explain. The legal and cultural implications are profound, but an appropriate ethical, legal and political exploration of them is unfortunately beyond this thesis.

However, my immersive research in the local governance field does offer some rough insights into the functioning of that proclaimed (and uncritically accepted in recent literature) 'constitutional' accountability role of journalism. Briefly, I suggest that local journalism in communities like Odditon is structurally and culturally disinclined from providing the robust accountability functions their identity claims to offer. In particular, the community building and policing role, which I describe as a defining feature of local journalism's culture, depends significantly, as we have seen, on tight collaboration with institutions of symbolic importance within the community, such as the police. As noted in chapters 3 and 4, local journalists are legitimated by their levels and quality of access to institutional sources in policing. Those tight relationships disincite local news media from critiques beyond their narrow 'fiscal imprudence' and 'bureaucratic incompetence' thematic comfort zones. The post-Leveson changes have sought to cut and restructure those ties in ways that I suggest could aid the assertion of a more adversarial journalism in the local field. However, the symbolic status of policing is perhaps too valuable for journalists' perpetual

imagining of the community to take the adequate steps towards a sufficiently critical distance.

8.3 Questions Answered?

In spite of the nuance, complexity and inevitable messiness of this study's fieldwork and its findings, we have come, perhaps, to a (somewhat) satisfactory internal theoretical consistency by returning to emphasise the importance of place. Reflecting on the overarching research questions and thematic concerns of this thesis (see 1.5 above), and the chosen methodological approaches, it seems that the decision to push ahead with a deep ethnography of a single community and two important players in its governance field has borne both empirical insight, and some theoretical enlightenment. This study has, as anticipated, found the production of knowledge on crime and policing in a state of dramatic flux. But the deep cultural dimensions of crisis and legitimation of that change were not expected. The local news media fieldwork has identified the central role of community—the building, maintenance and reaffirmation of a single coherent communicative representation of place—in the legitimation of news media power. This idea of journalists as community constructors in the mass communications realm illuminates some important cultural features in local journalism. Most importantly, perhaps, are the structural and cultural obstacles this dimension of the journalistic field presents to adversarial, non-access based crime and policing reporting. Chapter 4's exploration of the crisis in journalism—one based on revenue, but manifested in part in a legitimation crisis—has argued for a radically different appraisal of the interaction between policing and news media at the local level. It has suggested that the relationship with policing not only provides an important source of raw informational material for the news production process, but also enables journalists to affirm

and legitimate their role identities in the local governance field. Taken together, the news media chapters of this thesis have brought to life an under-appreciated dimension of British public life—one too often overlooked in favour of the powerful, centralised, national news media and cultural engines based in the metropolis. By shunning London, this part of the thesis has sought to explore governing power in British life from the ‘peripheries’ in which most of its citizens inhabit.

Chapters 4 and 5 have described—from the perspectives of the ‘winners’ in policing and the ‘losers’ news media—the deep material and cultural impact of the disruptive power of the social media era. The latter chapter on the emergent police communicator culture has emphasised the radical reorientation of power relations due to the disrupting impact of social media technologies on mass communications. But these chapters have also highlighted the cultural power of perception and fetish of technology, by problematizing assumptions about the impact of tech on both sides of this communications and power relationship. In particular, this thesis has challenged assumptions about the nature of the decline in news media locally, and has argued against the alluring temptation to conflate journalism’s revenue crisis with a loss of communications power. This emphasis on cultural change and mass communications power dynamics also served to situate the major scandal of Leveson as a minor part of a much more dramatic restructuring of power relations in the governing fields.

Given the ongoing debates, refinements and developments in the field of police legitimacy, Chapter 6’s emphasis on the labour and cultural dimensions of police communications work are a timely response to Martin and Bradford’s call for greater empirical emphasis on the meso-levels of police legitimation ([2019](#)). Chapter 7 draws together insights from throughout the thesis, to highlight the structural impact of Leveson, but also to contextualise it with an appropriate assessment of information governance. As

was hinted throughout this thesis's findings, it finds that Leveson has indeed affected a rerouting of information flows through police communications departments, but questions any substantive or qualitative change to the production of knowledge on crime and policing, or police accountability. In this way it forthrightly challenges some of the more alarmists claims about the governance of the criminal justice as a whole. Chapter 8 is perhaps also a testament to the methodological choices in favour of observation and deep ethnography. The understanding of contemporary police-media relations and the broader communications architecture governing policing as situated within the local governance field is unquestionably the product of wholly immersive culture study.

Ultimately, this thesis has unveiled valuable insights into the complex web of actors in the fields of governing power that shape our lives. The emphasis on examining the nature of mass communications power, and the role its pursuit and exercise plays in the power relations within that governing field, has also illuminated the variety of powers within that field. From the standpoint of criminology and criminal justice, which is overwhelmingly concerned with coercive and punitive power, this thesis has illustrated and theorised the other power dynamics that shape that governing field of power. This should be read as a call for greater attention to be paid to power of non-criminal justice and seemingly peripheral actors in shaping the dramatic exercises of the state's most violent forms.

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