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Police-Media Relations

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Abstract

Police-media relations are a necessary component of the modern law enforcement agency. Police employees must know not only what information is releasable but must also accommodate news media requests for information. Police Officers behave professionally and deliver a valuable and necessary public service. Most reporters seem intent on delivering a quality story depicting the facts. It is in the best interest of the police department that those stories not only reflect the truth, but reflect favorably on the department to insure public cooperation and acceptance.

The purpose of this paper is to establish guidelines for the release of public information to news media personnel or how department personnel should respond to media requests for information. A survey of various law enforcement agencies, and the results of independent research are included. Complaints of the police and media are reviewed, as are recommendations by a local media consultant.

The conclusion outlines suggestions for formulating a media policy applicable to most small police agencies. These suggestions encompass principles of fairness, honesty, and access. The recommendations are to hire or appoint a Public Information Officer(PIO), allow reporters to ride with officers, require media relations courses, permit dispatchers to release information via the telephone, and have the PIO develop human interest stories for the local media.

Introduction

Interaction between the police and media is essential for the maintenance of good public relations. The media is a communications tool a police department can either use to portray itself as a competent and able provider of vital services or view as a vocal opponent reporting abuses of granted authority. The purpose of this paper is to identify guidelines for the release of public information to news media personnel, and procedures for how department personnel should interact with the media.

The news media and police often have an adversarial relationship in attempting to accomplish their respective missions. The media enjoys a powerful and pervasive influence on the community, and the police have a vested interest in keeping the public aware of accurate information. The objective for the police department is to properly disseminate information, and establish a cooperative, and possibly trusting, relationship with the media.

The intended audience of this paper is the police chief or his designated representative. These are the persons most likely to interface with media personnel. This paper will use information contained in legal opinions and briefs, area surveys of relevant police department policies, interviews, periodicals, and books.

The intended outcome of this research is to develop a comprehensive policy for police/media relations. Since the media is able to influence public opinion, it is important for a police department to maintain a strong and cooperative

relationship with the media. If a police department can manage media relations effectively, the department is more likely to enjoy the support of the community.

Legal and Theoretical Content

The dissemination and release of information from any government agency is controlled by law or policy. Federal government records are releasable under the Freedom of Information Act, enacted in 1966, which affirmed an assumption that government records are accessible to the people (Committee on Government Reform). The Privacy Act, enacted in 1974, requires each executive branch agency to publish in the Federal Register instructions for requesting records and a description of records maintained on individuals (Committee on Government Reform).

In Texas, disclosure of official records is regulated by the Texas Open Records Act. This law outlines how Texas state agencies manage and disseminate information. There are a number of important exemptions relating to the dissemination of law enforcement agency information. Information is public if it is collected, assembled, or maintained under law or ordinance by a government body, or in connection with the transaction of official business. This act is applicable to every government body in Texas, including all law enforcement agencies (Open Records Act Handbook, S2).

The most significant court ruling on access to police department information came in April 1976, when the Houston Chronicle Publishing Company sought

access to information maintained by the Houston Police Department. When the request by the paper for information was denied by the police department, the paper sued in court. The trial court held that certain provisions of the Texas Open Records Act are unconstitutional and granted the paper access to administrative records and certain offense information. The City of Houston lost on appeal. As a result of this ruling (City of Houston v. Houston Chronicle Publishing Company), the public has access to the following:

- (a) the name, age, address, race, sex, occupation, alias, and physical condition of an arrested person;
- (b) date and time of arrest;
- (c) offense charged and in which court;
- (d) details of the arrest;
- (e) booking information;
- (f) notations of any release or transfer;
- (g) bonding information;
- (h) location of the crime;
- (i) identification of the complainant;
- (j) the premises involved;
- (k) time, of occurrence;
- (l) property involved, if applicable;
- (m) vehicles involved, if applicable;
- (n) description of the weather;

(o) description of the offense; and

(p) name of officers and investigators.

Eventually, the Texas Attorney General established the following guidelines for records requests (Texas Attorney General ORD 127). All information in the Houston Chronicle case are releasable except the following, which is held to be evidentiary information:

- (a) information identifying or describing witnesses;
- (b) the summary of a confession;
- (c) investigator's views regarding guilt of suspect or credibility of witnesses;
- (d) statements made by informants;
- (e) record of confiscated property at the scene; and
- (f) laboratory and test results.

The most recent changes to the Open Records Act was by the Seventy-fourth Legislature which amended the Act under House Bill 1718. It changed the name of the heading from "Open Records" to "Public Information" and also addressed information maintained in any medium, specifically electronic or computer formats, codified as VTCS 552.002(c) (Texas Open Records Act Handbook S3).

Conflict is inevitable between the police and media, due to the nature of their respective missions. The police often view the media as being obstructive, interfering, and insensitive towards witnesses and victims. The police believe most reporters are only interested in profit and ratings. The media believes most

police to be obsessed with maintaining the "blue curtain", erected to maintain secrecy and cover misdeeds where officers cover for one another (Guffy 34-39).

Review of Literature or Practice

Feelings of mistrust between the police and media develop at an early stage. Selke(1984) conducted a survey of journalism students and police recruits. He found that each group was insensitive and naive regarding the other profession. Journalists appear to concentrate more on sensationalized or dramatic crime stories while ignoring other crimes considered more common, or representative of the community's crime experience. This exhibits a commercial value of crime and is reflected by the proliferation of crime related television shows. The police recruits believed journalists were liberals who were more interested in exploiting the news for ratings and name recognition than reporting the truth. Both groups shared common traits such as believing that each profession was more honest, objective, and professional (Selke 25-28).

When the journalism students graduate and take jobs in the fields, and the police recruits complete their academy training, their biases have developed to a point which strain relations. Reporters believe the police:

- (a) are obsessed with secrecy;
- (b) cover for one another;
- (c) are arrogant and discourteous; and
- (d) are obstructive and uncooperative.

Conversely, the police believe reporters:

- (a) are insensitive towards victims;
- (b) exaggerate the facts for better interest;
- (c) are arrogant and discourteous (Garner 10).

Police department members should be trained to be prepared. The media follows police stories of public interest and many citizens videotape police to document possible newsworthy stories. Officers need to be camera smart and notify supervisors if something negative is captured on film (Parish 91-93).

A former reporter, who now conducts communications training seminars for business executives and law enforcement officers recommends the following when handling the press:

- (a) Keep the discussion on subject;
- (b) Never go off the record;
- (c) Bridge from negative to positive;
- (d) Listen, think, and then respond;
- (e) Keep public perception in mind and dress accordingly;
- (f) Never lose sight of the fact the media is motivated by what is wrong, or the perception of what is wrong;
- (g) If contacted by telephone, ask for a number to call back, as this affords time to organize thoughts;

(h) When returning telephone calls, do so promptly and remember you are probably being recorded;

(l) You may think your incident is small and inconsequential, but on a slow news day, nothing is too small to write or speak about (Ammerman 16-19).

Discussion of Relevant Issues

The police department is typically the most prolific source of news in any city or community. Police-press relations are important. It has been demonstrated over and over again that through a mutual policy of confidence and cooperation, the ends of both news reporting and police administration can be served in an effective manner. Police managers have a tendency to ignore the media and the effects this can have on public perceptions. The editorial policy of every newspaper supports good law enforcement. Many editors began their careers as police reporters and have never forgotten the experience (Leonard 96).

The media's impact on the police has received little study, but should be of significant concern. The aspects of the issue that are problematic are: (1) the media's influence in developing police work and responsibility, (2) the impact of those perceptions on change, and (3) the media's love affair with police theory.

Reflecting on these three aspects, it is believed that most Americans view police officers as spending most of their time investigating felons and arresting them, often after a gun battle. The media glorifies the detective or investigator and ignored or humorously characterized the patrol officer, up until 1968 when

the "Adam 12" television series began. Many feel if the police do not conduct themselves as are viewed on television, they are improperly performing their jobs (Wadman 17-18).

As the media can influence public perception, police departments would do well to develop strategies and policies that generate positive public images. The creation of a media relations specialist, typically called a Public Information Officer(PIO)is one approach. The PIO would not only disseminate public information, but would also develop feature or human interest stories concerning the department. The ideal PIO would be either a communications specialist or a member of the department with excellent writing skills (Sullivan 95).

A PIO is also suggested during times of crisis as the chief is too burdened by other responsibilities to adequately direct media relations. A trained specialist is as essential and indispensable as any other member of a crisis support team. The PIO can keep reporters out of the way and allow other members of the department to devote their entire attention to the matter at hand (Rosenthal 19).

PIOs also bring an expertise not normally available to the chief. The PIO has established a relationship with media personnel prior to a crisis situation and better relates to their particular needs. The relationship will have been established and the department will not have to be marketed. Remember you are talking to the public and the media is your podium (Rosenthal 21).

Although the PIO concept is a good one, a problem occurs because the PIO is not available 24 hours a day. Wanting to develop a media strategy that cast

the department positively, the Reno, Nevada Police Department surveyed citizens, and met with representatives of five television stations, six radio stations, and two newspapers. The survey and meetings identified several issues relating to the department's public image. As only the PIOs could release information, the media was denied access to several stories of interest.

The result was a basic change in approach. PIOs still released information as required but other changes were also made which made every department member responsible for good public and media relations. Changes included:

- (a) an alphanumeric paging system developed to dispense releases to the various media groups;

- (b) a reduction in manpower costs relating to media relations, due to a drop in telephone requests for information;

- (c) a telephone number provided to the media giving access to the highest ranking department member at all time, to provide info in the absence of a PIO;

- (d) a request that all department members, from the janitor to the chief are encouraged to cooperate with the media;

- (e) regularly scheduled conferences by the chief.

Surveys conducted every six months have shown positive public perception has increased steadily the past eight years and media editorials are generally more positive (Weston 122).

Legal problems can develop when the media and police seek cooperative relationships. In United States v. Sanusi (Ayendi v. CBS), 9 defendants, including Babtundi Ayeni were charged with credit card fraud. The U.S. Secret Service allowed a CBS news crew to accompany agents executing a search warrant of the Ayeni residence. Ayeni subpoenaed CBS for a copy of the videotape, with CBS refusing on grounds of newsgathering privilege.

The trial court ordered an edited version omitting any confidential sources, ruling the privilege is not absolute if the information is highly material, necessary, and unavailable from other sources. The court also ruled that under the 4th Amendment, the media were private actors and not protected against liable or tortuous trespass, and the government agents may have violated the defendant's rights as the government has a fiduciary obligation to insure principles were followed and the privacy of individuals are not violated more than is necessary.

To aid in the development of a comprehensive media policy, consistent with the research, a survey was conducted of twenty-two police departments across Texas, ranging in size from 6 employees up to 3000 employees. Posed questions were as follows:

(a) does your department have a written media relations policy?

Yes: 17

No: 5

(b) does your department have a permanent assigned PIO?

Yes: 11

No: 11

(c) does your department allow reporters to ride along with patrol officers?

Yes: 17 No: 5

(d) does your department train employees in media relations?

Yes: 15 No: 7

(e) does your department allow dispatchers to release information to the media?

Yes: 4 No: 18

(f) does your department routinely release human interest stories to the media?

Yes: 14 No: 8

Conclusions

The purpose of this paper is to establish guidelines both for the release of public information to media personnel and how department personnel should respond to media requests for information.

A good media relations policy includes the following features:

- (1) the hiring or development of Public Information Officers;
- (2) allowing reporters to ride along with officers as observers, consistent with the constraints of Ayeni;
- (3) the requirement that all department members complete a media relations course, taught preferably by senior editors or news directors;

(4) allowing dispatchers to release pertinent information consistent with the Texas Open Records Act;

(5) encouraging the PIO or his designee to develop and edit police interest stories for release.

In addition, the department should consider inviting the media to broadcast crime stoppers segments or small news spots regarding crime prevention. Be honest and straightforward. Tell media representatives "why" when possible, and return telephone calls promptly. Be punctual for scheduled interviews. Although these guidelines will not guarantee that problems will never develop, they will provide guidance for department members

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