

Police force and Media in the Netherlands

Facts, fiction and the politics of image

In the fast paced, dynamic world where the police and citizens find themselves in, one concept has come to dominate the agenda: 'the media'.

Both in public perceptions about societal changes, primarily in the domain of safety, and in popular imagery about the police force – consequently in the police force's self-perception and actual position in the face of mayoral authority, Public Prosecutor and 'The Hague' – the media have come to play an increasingly significant role. Not so much because it were suddenly possible to measure the exact influence of the 'mass media' as well as the Internet on popular imagery and actual behavior, but as a result of the increasing popular - including all factions in the political constellation surrounding the police force – belief that 'the media' have become a paramount factor. Furthermore, this is by no means restricted to situations of crisis.

The primary developments in the general field of media have been the following: the volume has increased, new means of communication like Internet and mobile telephony have joined, and competition between existing mass media has become harsher, certainly in the case of nationwide television stations. This proliferation and urge for competition, as well as the demise of many traditional newspapers have had – along with the larger awareness and disgruntlement of citizens – large consequences for the police force. New opportunities arrived, yet simultaneously new dangers came into existence.

The opportunities provided by new, above all commercial, television stations were employed by the police force in the form of assisting or broaching of many documentaries, shows of fiction or special broadcasts (like *America's Most Wanted* or *Crimewatch* in the UK) about 'police work'. Various goals were aspired, from calling attention to growing insecurity in society and increasing workload in the police force to improving the force's public image.

The lively embracement of the medium television coincided with the explosive increase in series and programmes about 'the police', which the stations were broadcasting, either original or syndicated. This insatiation was cause for some negative side effects for the police force as well. The line of demarcation between fiction and non-fiction occasionally blurred, in the need for new programs some media went searching for drawbacks of police action, and in reality-shows the privacy of victims or suspects was sometimes not sufficiently observed. Consequently, after the previous brief period of open interaction with television networks, most police forces returned to a more reserved, preponderating and stringently formulated policy towards the medium.

Concurrently, for the last one and a half decade both the police force and the Public Prosecutor have increasingly professionalized their regular media instruction. Of course, this does not entail that all 25 Dutch police forces have the same ideas about media instruction policy. On the contrary, nearly every force has a different policy, due to not only regional disparities but also to different conceptions about public relations. While one police force puts more importance to public relations and corporate communication, another believes in direct communication and interaction with civilians on the ground, and yet another force believes that every event or

incident should be seized as an opportunity to propagate through the media the force's vision about certain matters.

One poll, conducted among 350 police press officers, clearly exhibits the differences in views about media instruction. Also, a general desire to remain autonomous and not to be bothered by the undeniable tendency to centralize all media instruction came across. Yet, the poll also showed that police forces, on some points, do want increased collaboration amongst themselves, and more centrally organized steering and assistance.

Despite the differences, the tendency towards a more reserved and directional media and public information policy has steadily increased, much to the grief of the traditional crime reporters and the many *hit-and-run* journalists, who are nowadays a familiar sight in the world of media. Police forces point out the new privacy legislation and the several times sharpened guidelines and directives from the Public Prosecutor, as cause for the more reserved information policies. This assertion is however merely partially correct. It appears to be, that most journalist express a negative verdict on the current information practices of both the police and Public Prosecutor. These are regarded as being in contravention of the democratic obligation to provide citizens with transparency about incidents and public policy. The increasing reservedness in the matter of informing and the growing importance of 'image' within both the police force and Public Prosecutor, coincided with the quality media's own, partly due to financial reasons, decreasing interest in police matters and crime. The little attention that the quality press had for police matters, was deliberately presented in a reserved fashion, with concerns of privacy and rehabilitation in mind, and because the tacit conception that the severity and nature of crime is primarily a question of perception.

The results cannot be described as other than remarkable: an explosive increase of attention to police and crime on television, and a decrease in newspapers. Only since recent years, notably after 2002, newspapers started paying more attention to police matters. However, this was mostly due to general reporters instead of traditional specialists: the increasingly retrenched 'expensive' police reporters. The resulting insufficiency in expertise and manpower of newspapers has been partly owing to the fact that in recent years, the professionalized media information of the police force has been the most utilized source for police-related reports by newspapers, at least in the case of two examined national newspapers. Consequently, among other effects, the reports about 'the police' have been mostly positive in tone.

All the aforementioned developments – the professionalizing of information by the police force and Public Prosecutor, explosively increased interest of citizens and television stations for crime and the decrease in expertise of newspapers – have nevertheless caused boomerang effects concerning matters of police and crime. The most important being the rise of an incident-orientated culture. Because police force and Public Prosecutor control the regular information, only incidents are left as an instrument for 'the media' to satisfy both the public need for an 'alternative version' and to restore their own self-respect as independent journalists. Incidents though, are capable of, like a radiograph, exposing the true balance of power and organizational structure within institutes. The big drawback of this is however, that government bodies like the police force are likely to lose in one instance the benefits of professionalizing. Since 'politics' have for the last few years also increasingly been

victim to the incident-orientated culture, severe detrimental consequences to the institute of the police force, which is already under pressure from various sides, are not unlikely, due to the debates about 'polity', an elected mayor and a 'national police force'.

In conclusion, it is evident that the media and police force have grown apart. In order to settle the large rift between the police force and media, a change of attitude on the part of both is necessary.

The police force, and Public Prosecutor as well, need to expose more clarity and transparency in regard of what the media and the public ought and need to know about their actions and views. In a democratic and constitutional state like the Netherlands, the current restrictive public information policies are not only counterproductive, but also in contravention of the necessary transparency. The media have to take up their monitoring task more forcefully and with more harmony.

In this respect, the following is advised:

- The journalistic effort should be aimed more efficiently, and 'politics' need to be convinced of the need for new (legal) guidelines in the matter of openness of information by the police force and Public Prosecutor. One of the recommendations this book concludes with, is the restoration of deliberation between Public Prosecutor, Mayor, police force and 'media', and the reflection on new agreements.
- Both the police force and the media need to be more conscious of the fact that mutual influencing is only possible to a certain extent.
- Nevertheless, the relation should be structured according to new agreements (or a broad code of conduct), while maintaining the freedom of action of all parties involved.
- In any case, the current mutual distrust needs to be diminished, in order to prevent a further juridification of the relationship. The unfamiliarity and contortedness on the part of the police force and Public prosecutor needs to be diminished, in exchange for more expertise and trust from journalists.
- Likewise, on the part of (local) authorities and municipal councils, a clearer information policy is required.
- All parties involved have to take more into account the power of the impact of images and emotions on public opinion; besides, it is recommended that all parties acquire more knowledge and understanding of each other's actions and working methods.
- The media need to specialize more in research, and not be satisfied with merely being a serving hatch for the information provided by police and Public prosecutor.
- Add to this, further professionalizing of police media instruction is urgently needed, especially on the subject of services concerning the various aspects of police work.

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