

**WHAT IMPACT WILL THE TV NEWS MEDIA HAVE
ON LAW ENFORCEMENT FIELD OPERATIONS
BY THE YEAR 2004?**

Journal Article

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

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On Law Enforcement Field Operations
By The Year 2004?**

Part I - Introduction/Background

Statement of the Problem

This article is an examination of the question, "What impact will the TV news media have on law enforcement field operations by the year 2004?"

Introduction

This article is not designed to examine what law enforcement executives should do to improve police image through the use of the TV news media; nor is it designed to cast doubt and aspersions on either the role or intentions of the TV news media or the police. Instead, it is designed to provide law enforcement with a system through which the TV news media can obtain needed information, and law enforcement can effectively manage field operations in the future.

Law enforcement field operations are central to the work of the police. Responding to calls and protecting the public are the essence of policing. How officers do this job is of primary importance to police executives and the public. The credibility and sensitivity of the police are issues on the minds of many of today's citizens. How they perceive those issues is often through the lens of the TV camera. Consider, for example, the following incidents:

In March 1991, California resident George Holliday videotaped Los Angeles peace officers subduing Rodney King with kicks, batons and a taser. A portion of this 81-second videotape was shown repeatedly to TV viewers around the world who, for the most part watched in disbelief and horror.¹

In April 1991, local Northern California TV camera crews broadcasted live footage of a hostage situation in progress. Through the plate glass windows of a Good Guys electronic store, cameras shot film and TV viewers watched while four armed gun men held fifty hostages. The audience watched as two hostages were shot by their captors. The Sacramento County Sheriff's Deputies decided to rush the building. The ensuing gun battle, shown live on TV, resulted in the death of three hostages and three suspects and injury to 12 others. Many of the hostages were wounded by police gunfire as the videotape clearly showed.²

Peace officers can expect that a TV news crew will show up at the scene of almost any crime, disaster or event to record images that will appear in a newscast or feature story. It does appear that the media is prone to consider stories of violence, pain and suffering as opportunities to present news of heightened interest to the public to boost network ratings. It is these very stories which preoccupy law enforcement in the field.

In addition to the presence of credentialed media at crime scenes, a new phenomenon is occurring. Persons who are not connected to any established media group and who have video cameras are showing up during police field operations. Such was the case in the King incident. These people, known as "free lancers", can sell their tapes to people who are referred to as "checkbook journalists" or to tabloid news programs. Clearly, this enterprise is frowned upon by the established media who view this business as a threat to their job security. The work of the police can be hindered by amateurs who may be unaware of the dangers prevailing at crime scenes such as hazardous material spills and hostage situations.

Law enforcement executives need to come to terms with the fact that the media and law enforcement are deeply entangled in a serious long-term relationship. In the history of TV, one can see prolonged interest in dramas about law enforcement. Once westerns such as "Gun

Smoke", then dramas such as "Dragnet" and "Naked City" filled the airways. Today, it is "N.Y.P.D. Blue", "Law and Order", "America's Most Wanted" and "COPS", just to name a few.³

Law enforcement provides the media with a 24-hour source of activity and information. It seems to be true, the worse the news, the faster it has to be disseminated.⁴ What is important here is that the TV news media want interesting, exciting items related to law enforcement which can be shown to the public as soon as possible.

Hannaford in his book, Talking Back to the Media, says that the public uses TV as the primary source of information and, when faced with conflicting reports, the public most often relies upon the TV report to resolve the conflict.⁵ The fact that TV is used by most people as a major source of information and entertainment gives it a special place in time. TV can help us teach one another, correlate responses and watch the future unfold. To that end, it makes good sense that the impact of the TV news media on the future of law enforcement field operations be examined. As Surette contends in his book, Justice and the Media, the justice system and the media are becoming increasingly entwined. However, the media have increased their power in that they can interact directly with the public by being at the scene of events and then indirectly influencing attitudes about the events.⁶

The impact that the TV news media could have on law enforcement field operations is connected to three important sub-issues: 1) the nature of the working relationship between local TV media personnel and police department personnel, 2) the training provided to law enforcement personnel and, 3) the police agency's policies relative to the TV news media.

The matter of the relationship between the TV news media and law enforcement personnel is of major importance. Some media folks claim they are in the business of protecting

First Amendment rights and the public's right to know. Others say they are in a business and it is their job to provide information and entertainment. On the other side, law enforcement asserts its job to protect the public and suggests that TV coverage can actually distort reality. Police say that the presence of cameras may lead to the creation of an incident, confrontation or misunderstanding.⁷ It is these varying perceptions which dominate the literature on the relationship between the media and the police.

However, on a more optimistic note, Sagen, editor of a San Diego County newspaper, the "Blade Citizen", recognized the adversarial relationship between the media and the police. She joined forces with law enforcement to do something about it. In March of 1993, the "Blade Citizen" and the Oceanside Police Department joined together to participate in a "write-along" program. Similar to the police "ride along" program where citizens go out on patrol with police to learn about their job, the "write-along" program was instituted. Here, police officers spend several hours a day working at the newspaper, attending editors' meetings and going out with reporters to cover stories. Sagen says the "write-along" program helps to break down antagonism between police and reporters.⁸

Saldana, a police reporter for the "San Diego Tribune", suggests that the "us against them" syndrome, while once commonplace, has softened and communication is generally improving between reporters and law enforcement.⁹

The impact of the TV news media on law enforcement training programs is another sub-issue for consideration. Gerberth, in an article in "Law and Order", suggests that an agency should have a well-trained public information officer (PIO) to handle news media inquiries and should establish a set of guidelines on the release of information to media representatives.¹⁰ In

addition to the PIO, police departments should consider providing all personnel, especially first-line field officers, with PIO training. A training course could include topics such as working with the TV news media at crime and/or disaster scenes. Special attention could be placed on ways to protect the safety and, in some cases the anonymity of victim(s), witness(es), suspect(s) and officer(s) during field operations at which the TV news media are present and broadcasting.

Finally, the sub-issue of the impact of the TV news media on the policies of law enforcement agencies should be addressed. Jack Drown of the San Diego County Sheriff's Department suggests that besides establishing set guidelines, an agency's media policy should set the tone for the agency-media relationship. He says that a positive policy could have a profound affect on how the public views police effectiveness and on the way media and police interact during a field operation.¹¹ Agencies should develop written directives that clearly inform officers of the manner in which they are expected to work with the TV news media in general, and specifically, during field operations.

Part II - Developing a Transition Plan

The author conducted an 18-month study designed to answer the question, "What impact will the TV media have on law enforcement field operations by the 2004?" Throughout the study, participants representing the TV news media, police and the community declared that, to improve media and police relations, training of some sort should be initiated to better the work of participants during field operations. To implement this theme, critical persons or stakeholders were identified by experts in law enforcement. Roles and responsibilities were outlined, budgetary sources were suggested and a time frame was set forth. Critical stakeholders in the study were identified as follows:

The Chief of Police: Presently, one can generally expect that police chiefs are aware of the importance of a positive, open, mutually supportive relationship between their departments and the TV news media. A corollary of the statement would be that he would appoint someone in his department to have responsibility for gaining positive media exposure. Typically, this person is assigned the position of public information officer (PIO). As any chief is in a position of leadership, he is in the best place from which to communicate the intentions, scope and design of a joint training program to the critical stakeholders. Chiefs of police should possess characteristics of the effective communicator, which are expertness, trustworthiness, and prestige within their peer group.

The Deputy Chief of Police: In theory, the deputy is the alter ego of the chief and as such, should possess characteristics such as competence and trustworthiness. Additionally, he should possess strong interpersonal skills, having an ability for listening and empathizing with officers and staff at all levels of the department's hierarchy.

The deputy chief, then, would be what managerial psychologists call the "key man". Taking his lead from the chief, the deputy could serve as the project manager for a joint training program of this nature.

TV News Media Producers: TV producers from local TV stations were identified as critical stakeholders. TV producers decide which stories are covered, direct the slant that the stories take, and decide if and when the stories air. They have influence on reporters, subjects of stories, audiences, and advertisers. TV producers are extremely wary of any outside influences that might try to dictate what and how stories are reported. However, having said this, the producers want the airways to move smoothly. They know that news media can be seen as

brash, insensitive and intrusive. They are as concerned about their image as others in any other organization. They want to gather and disperse the news with dispatch, recognizing that positive working relationships with the police will help make that happen. As the producers and their colleagues come to understand the goals and strategies of a joint training program, one can hope that they will move from a blocking stance to a neutral demeanor, maybe even to help make the change happen.

The Police Officers' Association (POA) President: Generally, POA's are the one bargaining unit that represents the rank and file in a department. With labor support, issues impacting working conditions or other meet-and-confer items can be resolved quickly, with a minimum of distraction. The association president might be a stakeholder who would resist the idea of a joint training program. Certainly, he would proceed with caution knowing that he must act in the best interest of those he represents. He would be concerned with the number of manhours required of officers and with the maintenance of police authority in field operations. However, as he is informed about the joint training at its inception and as he is kept current regarding the management of the program and its on-going evaluation, it is hoped he will move to a neutral stance, at the very least.

The City Attorney: The city attorney's interest in a program would lie in the legality of any contractual agreement entered into between the police department and the TV news media. His concern would be that a joint training program might abridge officers' and the city's protection from liability. Since he does not welcome lawsuits and is sworn to uphold the law, one can expect that the city attorney would take an active part in the development of an

agreement which would protect officers and the city from liability while preserving officers' and the media's legal rights.

The Training Staff: The quality of the training staff for a joint training program is of central importance. While many smaller police departments may not have either a police academy or a training section, they would be well advised to enlist the aid of academies of larger departments or to hire consultants who understand the teaching-learning process and who are well-versed in law enforcement field operations.

The Public Information Officer: The PIO would be automatically considered a critical stakeholder in a joint training program. Given his assignment one would expect that he would strive to improve his department's relations with the TV news media. He would provide continued positive publicity about the joint training program, while being responsive to the media's questions about the program as well as those from the public at large. He would spot negative criticism and misinformation about the program and keep his chief, deputy chief and the trainers informed.

There was no expectation that all the critical stakeholders would share the same level of commitment as that of the chief or his deputy. This was not seen as an insurmountable impediment by the panel of experts as long as the stakeholders did not actively block the project. If some were to remain neutral, this would have been acceptable; of course, the more helpful critical stakeholders become, the better.

After the stakeholders were identified as were their roles and responsibilities, an outline for a proposed training program was developed. Nine strategies were delineated.

Facilitating Change

Once the commitment plan was formed, strategies were devised to facilitate the implementation of a joint training program:

1) First of all, the chief, deputy chief, city attorney, and PIO would scrutinize a synthesis of this author's study or other relevant studies. Attention should be directed to the mission statement, main issues, scope, research procedures, findings, and proposal for a joint training program. Then their recommendations could be included in their transition plan.

2) At a subsequent session, all of the critical stakeholders should be convened in a meeting chaired by the chief. Here the main issue and sub-issues could be presented as the rationale for the program. Specific concerns could be cited regarding the police and TV news media during field operations. A general organization of a training program could be outlined, including a time frame and delineation of individuals' responsibilities for carrying out the program. The deputy chief would be named the project manager.

3) Because the trainers would figuratively serve in the front lines, their particular orientation to the program would be crucial. The deputy chief should manage this matter, elaborating on the rationale and scope of the project and leading the training staff to begin articulating and planning the training sessions.

4) The trainers could conduct very brief line-up training sessions for police personnel to introduce the proposed training and request feedback and input to the course content. Moreover, the trainers should consult other agencies for course information which may have been already developed in the subject area.

5) Special orientation for the media should be conducted by the TV producers, in cooperation with the deputy chief. Course input should be solicited.

6) An important sub-committee could also be chaired by the deputy chief and should include representation from the department's budget section and an accounting representative from each local TV station involved in the program to help others locate funding sources. While the joint training program is not envisioned to be a "high ticket" undertaking, inevitable expenses will occur such as outside training consultants. If the program includes a component to assist a department in the acquisition of media-related hi-tech equipment, as delineated in the author's proposed program, a local hi-tech firm accounting representative should be included as a member of the sub-committee.

7) As with a search for funding, publicity should be an on-going campaign. A department's PIO could disseminate to the media the purpose, calendar, events, and progress of the program. One might consider creating a videotape that succinctly states the goals, program and expected outcomes to be used for presentations to prospective supporters in industry and to inform the city's citizenry of the undertaking to improve TV news and police operations in law enforcement in the community. The TV producers could be instrumental in helping with this production.

8) A time frame for the program should be set. An eight-hour course taught in four two-hour blocks seems appropriate. Planning the instructional methods and the contents of the training program should be in line with what is known about human learning. Useful education can be achieved by providing the participants with problem-solving situations involving real-life problems. Sufficient time must be allotted for the participants to study the problems. Learning

cannot be speeded up beyond a certain point because the limiting factor is the amount of information that can be assimilated in a given time. Attempts to provide more information in a given time than the amount that can be successfully assimilated are likely to result in confusion and frustration of the learners rather than an increase in understanding.

Mixed methods of instruction should be used. Any trainer who varies teaching procedures and does not get stuck in a groove is going to hold the attention of learners better than one who is rigid. Finally, the more complete the feedback, the better will be the learning. A learner gains by knowing whether or not he/she is on the right track. Any information which is ambiguous or any misinformation will interfere with the learning of a concept.

There are a number of law enforcement field operations which could serve as useful content for a joint training program. There is no suggestion here that all field incidents should be studied; instead a representative sample of critical incidents should be chosen as they are illustrative of certain field problems involving the TV news and the police. In this vein, a range of problems such as natural disasters, riots, hazardous material spills/leaks and hostage takings could be considered.

Once the content of the course is selected and formulated, it should be presented to the chief, deputy chief, the city attorney and the PIO to ascertain its comprehensiveness, appropriateness, and validity.

9) As suggested in (8) above, an evaluation of the program should be continuous to ascertain the participants' levels of understanding and satisfaction. The trainers would be advised to keep notes of sessions and engage in candid post mortem meetings with the deputy chief. The

deputy chief should pay as much attention to the evaluations of the media as he does to those of the police.

Part III - Conclusion

In summary, the author sought to answer the question, "What impact will the TV news media have on law enforcement field operations by the year 2004?"

The author contends that, based on the information gathered in the study, if nothing new is done to address the issue, the TV news media and police department personnel will continue to interact as they do now. Information and scene footage will be obtained and broadcasted as the TV news media see fit and as the field officers permit. Viewers will receive the TV media's accounts of events and will draw conclusions about police conduct based on the information presented. The study reveals that law enforcement needs to assume a positive role in managing the impact that the TV news media will have on police field operations.

The study generated three sub-issues that were examined. The first was "What will be the nature of the working relationship between the TV news media and law enforcement?" The study showed that this relationship is most often viewed by both sides as adversarial and that unless something is done to improve this relationship both sides will suffer. The consequences for law enforcement seem obvious since the TV news media has the power to set up a direct link with viewers. On the other hand, the study shows that the TV news media are concerned about job security. Average citizens are coming forward and are providing stations and networks with information their employees have missed. The TV news media fear being replaced by free lance reporters and photographers. The advances in technology and the affordability of hi-tech

equipment only compounds the TV news media's dilemma since soon the average citizen will be able to broadcast live from any where in the nation. The study demonstrates that now is a good time to try to coax the TV news media into a plan to improve relationships.

The second sub-issue was "What will be the TV news media's impact on law enforcement training?" The answer to this question is that law enforcement will have to develop training specific to dealing with the TV news media beyond assigning a PIO to handle them. An entire department will need to be trained in order to have a good sense of the TV news media's capabilities, motivations, needs and rights. Training around police interactions and conduct as it relates to the TV news media especially during field operations should be highlighted. The training would need to be developed into a joint training course for both the TV news media and police.

The final sub-issue was, "What will be the TV new media's impact on police agency policies?" The study indicates that police departments should develop clear, concise and practical policies that set the tone for interaction with the TV news media. The policies should address law enforcement needs especially during field operations but cannot ignore the needs of the TV news media. The policies should balance the media's job to protect and serve and the police's job to protect and serve and be articulated in a joint training program.

Recommendation for Action

Certain concrete implications result from a consideration of the findings in the author's study. Of particular interest is the suggestion that a police department could set up televised discussion panels of TV media, together with the police, to describe their particular orientations

and concerns for obtaining news coverage and for carrying out law enforcement in the field. Such panels could have public appeal. Certainly, they would prove invaluable to a training program.

Recommendations for Further Study

The study suggests a rich vein for future investigators to mine! Here are some ideas:

- 1) Examine the influence of TV news media on police accountability.
- 2) Scrutinize the perceptions of the TV news and the police as they view one another's conduct in field operations. What are sources of dissention?
- 3) Study the public's perceptions concerning the usefulness and validity of information about field operations as provided by the media and by the police.
- 4) Replicate this study at another agency which may be alike or unlike the Oakland Police Department where this study originated.

ENDNOTES

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- 5 Hannaford, Peter, Talking Back to the Media, Facts on File Publications, New York, 1986, pg. 50-51.
- 6 Surette, Ray, Justice and the Media, Charles C. Thomas, Illinois, 1984, pg. 3-4.
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- 8 Booth, Wade, "Write Along: Officers and Reporters Unite", Law Enforcement Quarterly, February/April 1994, pg. 14.
- 9 Saldana, Frank, et al., "Police Press Relations: They Can Be Symbiotic", Law Enforcement Quarterly, Spring 1990, pg. 6-8.
- 10 Geberth, Vernon J., "The News Media in Homicide Investigation", Law and Order, July 1981, Vol. 29, No. 7, pg. 46.
- 11 Drown, Jack, "Developing a Good Police/Media Policy", The California Peace Officer, June 1983, Vol. 3, No. 3, pg. 13-15.

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