Police-Media Relations: The Nature of "Media Communication Training" and its Effects on Public Opinion[1]

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Abstract

The connection between law enforcement and the media holds great significance. Engaging with the media is one of the most important ways to communicate with the public. The media acts as a bridge connecting the public and the police department to communicate the department's message to the community. This research explores how police media interactions impact public views of law enforcement. This study specifically examines the effects of "media communication training" on the public's impression of the efficacy of a police department. The focus is on city police forces in the United States, which cover regions with a population of over 100.000 inhabitants. The data for this research was collected via self-administered surveys sent out by mail in the year 2000. The results of this study show that if police officers undergo training in media communication to develop good relationships with journalists, the law enforcement agencies' image in the news media will benefit. As a result, an improved portrayal in the news media boosts public perception of the police department. It is advised that law enforcement agencies provide their staff with training in media communication in order to improve their department's reputation in the press. Additionally, police departments should focus on improving their image in the media to have a positive influence on public perception.

Keywords: *Police, Media, Communication, Media Communication Training, Police-media Relations, Police-Public Relations, Police Image*

Jel Codes: *H83, L88*

Polis-Medya İlişkileri: "Medya İletişimi Eğitimi"nin Niteliği ve Kamuoyu Üzerindeki Etkileri

Öz

Polis ve medya arasındaki ilişki çok önemlidir. Halkla etkileşime geçmenin ayırt edici yollarından birinin medya ile iletişim kurmak olduğu açıktır. Medya, toplum ile polis teşkilatı arasında bir bağlantı görevi görür ve teşkilatın mesajını halka iletir. Bu çalışma, polis medya ilişkilerinin etkisini ve halkın polis algısını şekillendirmedeki önemini incelemektedir. Özellikle bu araştırma "medya iletişim eğitiminin" doğasını ve polis departmanının etkinliğine ilişkin kamuoyu üzerindeki etkisini araştırmaktadır. Araştırmanın evreni, ABD'de 100.000 veya daha fazla nüfusa sahip bölgelere hizmet veren belediye polis teşkilatlarıdır. Bu çalışmanın verileri, 2000 yılında postayla gönderilen ve kendi kendine uygulanan anketler aracılığıyla toplanmıştır. Bu araştırmanın bulguları, polis memurlarının muhabirlerle olumlu ilişkiler kurmalarını sağlayacak medya iletişimi eğitimi almaları halinde, polis teşkilatının haber medyasındaki imajının iyileştiğini ortaya koymaktadır. Sonuç olarak, haber medyasındaki imajın iyileşmesi, kamuoyunun polis teşkilatı hakkında daha olumlu düşünmesine yol açmaktadır. Polis birimlerinin, haber medyasındaki imajını güçlendirmek için personeline medya iletişimi eğitimi vermesi tavsiye edilmektedir. Ayrıca, polis departmanları kamuoyunun algısını olumlu yönde etkilemek için medyadaki imajlarını iyileştirmeye odaklanmalıdır.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Polis, Medya, İletişim, Medya İletişim Eğitimi, Polis-Medya İlişkileri, Polis-Halkla İlişkileri, Polis İmajı*

Jel Kodu: *H83, L88*

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INTRODUCTION

The connection between law enforcement and the media plays a critical role. Interacting with the media is a vital method for communicating with the public. The media acts as a bridge between the community and law enforcement, helping to convey the department's message to the community. A strong media relations department is essential for every law enforcement organization as it fosters transparent communication and cooperative partnerships between the agency and the media. Good media relations contribute to the development of good community relations, which in turn results in community support for the organization.

In many cases, the media is legally allowed to cover news events, which can be advantageous for the organization. Furthermore, the media can aid in solving crimes by releasing information about suspects or other individuals sought by law enforcement. Media representatives are more likely to assist a law enforcement agency if the agency has a track record of collaboration and a good rapport (Law Enforcement Policy Center, 2019:1).

The relationship between law enforcement and the press is vital. According to Vance (1997), public opinion surveys indicate that the public is more supportive of the police when they engage with the public. One effective method to interact with the community is using the media for communication. The media, particularly news outlets, acts as a connection between the police department and the community in order to communicate the department's message to the public. According to Boyle (1999), only a small number of public agencies are central to media news.

It is clear that a small number of police organizations in the United States have designated media relations departments or public information officers that interact with the media, specifically the news media (Lovell, 2001:2). There is a lack of research on how "media communication training" impacts the media's view of police quality. The roles of Public Information Officers (PIOs) in police-media and public relations, as well as police-press offices, are not well understood in the literature on the connection between police and media. As a result, this research examines the impact of police media relations on public perception of law enforcement and their significance. In addition, this study also investigates how "media communication training" impacts the public's view of police department quality.

1. LITERATURE REVIEW

In Great Britain, Miller and Dinan (2000) noted that the media has the biggest impact on how the general public views public organizations. With the influence of culture and experience, Scotland Yard in England has implemented significant alterations to its communication strategy. Boyle (1999) points out that these modifications acknowledge the importance of the media in garnering public backing, a crucial element for the efficient functioning of the police. Moreover, it recognizes the functional impact that the media can have on decreasing crime. According to Boyle (1999), veteran journalists note a noticeable shift in the connection between the British police and the media over the past few years.

As stated by Lovell (2001), given that the mass media plays an important role in shaping societal perceptions, the power to influence media content has become essential in managing impressions and public relations. Klaehn (2002) contends that the mass media is a crucial but often overlooked factor in shaping public opinion, public issues, and governmental policies within democratic systems. US law enforcement has been striving to enhance its image since the racial riots of the 1960s.

Additionally, policing today deems public information as crucial, particularly with the rise of technology and media influence in society (Motschall & Cao, 2002:153).

While the media can help shape a positive image of the police, there is a constant tension in the relationship between law enforcement and the press. Both work towards increasing their interests; the police seek to prevent crime, uphold public peace, and establish a favorable image to earn public support. Alternatively, the media seeks methods to increase their viewership and generate profits (Mawby, 2002:305). Casey (2023) conducted research on almost 7,000 Metropolitan Police employees and asked their opinion on why they believe the reputation of the Metropolitan Police deteriorated, with 93% attributing it to "negative media coverage". Metropolitan Police hold the media responsible for worsening reputation.

Alongside advancements in democracy and technology, shifts in policing methods like community policing have boosted the presence of police departments and promoted a more adaptive approach to policing for both the general public and the press (Thompson, 1995:52). Additionally, advancements in technology like the internet, cable TV, and satellite technology, as well as changes in media organizations, played a significant role in the dissemination of information about the police department to the public.

As previously mentioned, police agencies have been compelled to reassess their communication methods, public perception, and visibility due to democratization, civilianization, technology advancements, evolving policing approaches, and media organization shifts (Thompson, 1995:134). Furthermore, in such circumstances, police forces started to reorganize and improve their organization and assets in order to enhance public relations and media (Mawby, 2002:307).

Moreover, as a result of advancements in both policing and technology, the police have implemented a proactive approach to impact the connection between law enforcement organizations and the media. In addition, they have implemented multiple measures to cultivate a perception that may influence public opinion in a favorable manner. In relation to this, law enforcement is now setting up media relations departments staffed by certified public information officers with backgrounds in media communication and journalism. The primary responsibility of these officers is to engage with the media to promote the goals of the police department.

To enhance regular communication between the police and the press, Scotland Yard established a police-media office in 1919 (Lovell, 2001:41). In reality, the United States started establishing media relations divisions in the mid-1980s, with professionals in the field in charge (Illinois Criminal Justice Information Authority, 1995). According to Skolnick and McCoy (1984), numerous big American police organizations allocate full-time officers to establish and manage media relations. They also talk about how well these officers work to enhance the department's reputation.

Cooke and Sturges (2009) examine two police departments in the East Midlands. The case studies show that although police and media collaboration is not a new occurrence, UK police forces are now more proactive, strategic, and professional in their interactions with the news media. The media rely on the information provided by police press relations units to report the news.

Reporters called the PIO the police department's "mouthpiece." The Public Information Officers also plan and coordinate press briefings, determining the spokesperson, timing, and target audience. They showcase significant events such as local gatherings, ceremonies, and days of apprehension in order to boost their reputation among the public. A press conference

provides the perfect platform for departments to unveil new programs, achievements, and arrest data, making it a valuable opportunity (Chermak, 1995:28). PIO or police departments that interact with the media on a regular basis should make an effort to learn everything there is to know about communication techniques (National League of Cities, 1993). Due to the rapid growth in public information offices and personnel, state and national professional associations are now providing PIOs with training and development opportunities (Motschall & Cao, 2002:153).

PIOs need to be proactive in addressing scandals, garnering public and political backing for strategic initiatives, and sharing information to meet media requests for effective communication. The legitimacy of police organizations relies heavily on their efforts. Despite the important role they play in shaping public perceptions of police organizations, there is limited understanding of how public information officers view their interactions with the media (Chermak & Weiss, 2005:501). Law enforcement is facing intense scrutiny for a variety of policing practices. The modern PIO is responsible for ensuring that organizational messaging connects with the public and showcases the importance and honor that police agencies bring to their communities (Institute for Law Enforcement Administration, 2024:1).

Guffey's (1992) study found that each American police department had a specific media spokesperson. The research analyzed 32 law enforcement agencies. Yet sometimes, this role was only temporary or as required. At the conclusion of his research, Guffey suggests that police departments should assign a PIO, introduce media education and training for all staff, develop a comprehensive media relations policy, and provide conflict resolution training for PIOs.

A Florida study by Surette and Richard (1995) looked into the tasks of PIOs in law enforcement agencies and their training in dealing with the media. Approximately half of PIOs had experience in mainstream media before, and all PIOs received extra training after being appointed. Research conducted by Mawby (1997) on 43 police departments in England and Wales that were under the jurisdiction of the Home Office found that 93% of the police forces offered media training, and 60% of media relations departments employed one to five individuals.

Ultimately, after a comprehensive nationwide investigation, Chermak and Weiss (2002) found that 80% of the police departments had full-time staff responsible for managing media engagements. In order to guarantee adequate skill in handling media interactions, every PIO had completed at least fifty hours of focused instruction.

Training in media and communication enhanced the understanding of PIOs. It demonstrated to PIOs and their team how to establish different contacts and uphold good relationships with the media while maximizing their communication effectiveness both at the local and national levels (Rosenthal, 1997).

In my opinion, the training provided to PIOs, as well as the content of that instruction, plays a significant role in shaping a positive perception of the police among the public and media. The environment in which the police and the media work together is ideal for building good relationships. As Chermak (1995) explains, journalists in the media are hesitant to risk their relationship with law enforcement officers because they fear losing access to important information. Alternatively, the police use the mass media to communicate with the public and work on building a favorable perception of law enforcement. There is a mutual dependence between law enforcement and the media.

Chermak and Weiss (2005) utilized data gathered from a nationwide sample of police media personnel and determined that

both the police and media appreciated their mutually beneficial relationship, albeit for varying purposes. Police PIOs acknowledge the influence of the media and strive to leverage it for organizational promotion. News reporters are content due to the fact that law enforcement supplies information which enables them to create crime-related news articles effortlessly.

Furthermore, providing efficient instruction to PIOs will enhance the connection between the media and police, contributing to a positive police image within the community. In Mozee's viewpoint, media personnel typically welcome a professional PIO based on his experience as a media director and media relations teacher (Mozee, 1987:280). I believe that by offering efficient training to officers in charge of media interactions, police departments can build a favorable image by means of the media.

2. THE DATA SET

The data is acquired from the ICPSR website, which stands for Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research. This information comes from a survey. The information was gathered in the year 2000. Self-administered mail surveys were sent out nationwide to collect data from local law enforcement departments across the United States.

Police departments included in the 1999 National Directory of Law Enforcement Administrators comprised the sampling frame. Targeting local police agencies that serve communities with more than 100,000 persons, a survey was distributed to police departments around the country.

Seventy-six percent of the people responded to the survey. The research aimed to study how police officers influence the public's view of law enforcement by engaging with the media and serving as PIO. The survey questions covered multiple areas, including the presence and type of media plan in the department, the number of full-time police PIOs, the educational and professional backgrounds of PIOs in media-related fields, the goals of police media relations offices and PIOs, the strategies employed to achieve these goals, and how the police-media interaction affects the reputation of the police and the public information office, both before and after implementing the current media plan.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study utilizes a causal model with two stages. Because the dependent variable was at the ordinal level, I employed "poisson regression" in the initial phase. Additionally, I had the option to utilize "ologit" regression initially, however, I opted for "poisson regression" to preserve the predicted values ($\hat{Y}$). In the second phase, the dependent variable was also at the ordinal level, so I opted for "ologit regression."

3.1. Dependent Variable in the Initial Phase

In the initial phase, the dependent variable is "the portrayal of police in the news media." In order to assess this factor, a question at the ordinal level is posed: "Overall, how would you characterize your department's reputation in the news media?" The coding for this variable assigns 0 to "poor," 1 to "fair," 2 to "good," and 3 to "excellent," while -99, -9, and -8 are coded as missing values. This variable contains 2 missing values, resulting in a missing data rate of 1%.

3.2. Dependent Variable in the Second Phase

In the second phase of our model, the dependent variable is "the public's perception of the police department's quality". I

measured this variable with an ordinal-level question: "How would you generally characterize public opinion on the quality of your department?" This variable is assigned code 0 for "poor," code 1 for "fair," code 2 for "good," and code 3 for "excellent." "Missing" is represented by the codes -99, -9, and -8. This variable contains 2 incomplete data points, resulting in a missing data rate of 1%.

3.3. Independent and Control Variables in the Initial Phase

The explanatory variable in the initial stage of the model is "the capacity to establish a positive relationship with reporters". I measured this variable by utilizing an interval-level question: "What impact has media communication training had on the ability to foster a positive rapport with journalists?" The effectiveness of media communication training is rated on a 1 to 5 scale. "Missing" is assigned a code of -9. This variable contains 62 missing data points, accounting for 32% of the total data.

The initial control variable in the first stage is "the development of a media policy/strategy by the department". I assessed this variable by asking a nominal-level question: "Does your department possess a written media policy or media strategy?" In this variable, the code for "yes" is 1, the code for "no" is 0, and the code for "missing" is -99, -9, and -8. There is a single missing data point in this variable, and it accounts for 0.5% of the total data.

The second control variable in the initial stage is "The frequency of interaction with the news media." To assess this variable, I employed an ordinal-level query asking: "On average, how often does your department interact with the news media?" This variable is coded as 0 for "not at all," 1 for "monthly," 2 for "weekly," 3 for "daily", 4 for "more than once a day," and -99, -9, and -8 for "missing." This variable has no missing data, and the percentage of missing data is 0%.

"Providing media communication training annually" is the third control variable in the initial phase. To gauge this factor, I employed an interval-level inquiry: "About how many hours of media training are provided annually"? The codes for "Missing" are -99, -9, and -8. There are 86 missing data points, making up 44.3% of the total data.

"Whether public Information Officer makes contact with the media" is our fourth control variable in the first stage. To measure this variable, I used a binary-level question: "Who within your department has routine authorization to communicate with media"? "Missing" is coded -99, -9, and -8. This variable has 2 missing data, and the missing data percentage is 1%.

"The content of media training (arranging a press conference)" is our fifth control variable in the first phase. To measure this variable, I used a binary-level question: "Please indicate the content included in the media training provided by your department"? "Missing" is coded -99, -9, and -8. This variable has 67 missing data, and the missing data percentage is 34.5%.

3.4. Independent and Control Variables in the Second Phase

"The estimated variable in the second stage of the model is the initial stage's predicted value ($\hat{Y}$ =police image within news media)." There are 86 missing data points for this variable, making up 44.3% of the total data.

In the second stage as well, the second control variable is "The frequency of communication with news media." In order to assess this factor, I employed a question of ordinal level: "How often does your department communicate with the news

media on average?" This variable is coded as follows: 0 for "not at all," 1 for "monthly," 2 for "weekly," 3 for "daily," 4 for "more than once a day," and -99, -9, and -8 for "missing." There is no missing data in this variable, and the percentage of missing data is 0%.

The initial control variable in the second stage is "the media policy/strategy that the department has developed". I employed a nominal-level question to assess this variable: "Does your department have a written media policy or media strategy?" This variable is coded as 1 for "yes", 0 for "no", and -99, -9, or -8 for "missing." This variable contains one missing data point, representing 0.5% of the total data.

"The number of reports on TV portrayed the police department or personnel in a biased or unfair manner." I utilized an interval-level question to assess this variable: "Within the last month, how many news stories on TV showed a biased or unfair portrayal of the police department or its personnel?" The codes for "Missing" are -99, -9, and -8. This particular variable is missing 27 data points, resulting in a missing data rate of 13.9%.

The fourth control variable in the second stage is "the number of stories that gave a biased or unfair portrayal of the police department or its personnel in the newspaper." I employed an interval-level question to assess this variable: "How many news stories in the newspaper in the last month provided a biased or unfair portrayal of the police department or its personnel?" "Missing" is encoded as -99, -9, and -8. There are 24 instances of missing data for this variable, accounting for 12.4% of the total data.

3.5. Hypotheses

In the initial phase, I theorized that if police officers undergo media communication training to create positive relationships with reporters, the department's image in the news media will enhance.

In the second phase, I proposed that when the department's image in the news media improves, the public's opinion of police departments also increases positively.

4. FINDINGS

Table 1 demonstrates a statistically significant and positive relationship between "The quality of police image in the news media" and "The ability of media communication training to create a positive relationship with reporters." Simply put, when police officers undergo media communication training to build positive relationships with reporters, the department's image in the news media improves significantly (b+ and p<.05).

Based on the results, whether the department has written media policy/strategy, the frequency of communication with news media, and offered media communication training per year have no impact on the quality of police image in the news media.

Table 1: The Quality of Police Image in the News Media

VARIABLES	THE QUALITY OF POLICE IMAGE IN THE NEWS MEDIA*		
	Unstandardized Coefficents, (S.E)	Probability	T test
The ability of media training to create a positive relationship with reporters	.1957542 (.042)	**0.000**	4.58
Department has a written media policy/strategy	.0129542 (.097)	0.895	0.13
The frequency of communication with news media	-.0164283(.031)	0.606	-0.52
Offered media communication training per year	.0011746 (.001)	0.534	0.62
Public information officers make contact with the media	-.0165208(.083)	0.843	-0.20
Content of media training (arranging a press conference)	-.0367434(.058)	0.531	0.63
N	104		
R Square	0.0137		

*Statistically significant coefficients (p<.05) are bolded, and standard errors are provided in parenthesis. The data came from a survey conducted by the Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice in 2000 and titled the "National Survey of Police-Media Relations". "How would you characterize your department's reputation in the news media on the whole?" is the question posed for the dependent variable. "Fair" is coded as 1, "good" as coded 2, "poor" as coded 0, and "excellent" as coded 4. The missing variables are coded as -99, -9, and -8.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics of Answers Regarding Quality of Department's Image Within News Media

Variables	n	%
The quality of police image within the news media		
Poor	2	1.0
Fair	26	14.4
Good	103	53.1
Excellent	63	32.5

I had to run the "white test" to address the issue of heteroskedasticity because the "hettest" command with poisson was not working in the initial stage. The white test indicated that the model exhibits heteroskedasticity (X2=2.2684 > h=.71). I refuse to accept the null hypothesis of homoscedasticity and choose to support the alternative of heteroskedasticity. In order to fix this issue, I employed the "Robust" function in STATA and reexecuted the "poisson regression."

The statistical analysis in the initial phase supported our first stage hypothesis. Therefore, it can be argued that offering media communication training to police officers is an effective method to enhance the positive portrayal of police in the news media and foster good relationships with reporters.

Table 3 shows that there is a significant relationship between the "(Ŷ) police image within the news media" and "the public opinion regarding the quality of the police department." In similar words, when the department's reputation in the media improves, the public's perception of police departments also improves.

Table 3: The Public Opinion Regarding the Quality of Police Department

VARIABLES	PUBLIC OPINION*		
	Unstandardized Coefficents, (S.E)	Probability	T test
(Ŷ) Police image within the news media	1.929131 (.877)	**0.028**	2.20
Department has a written media policy/strategy	1.282516(1.042)	0.218	1.23
The frequency of communication with news media	.2130112 (.273)	0.436	0.78
The number of stories presented a biased or unfair description of the police department or personnel on TV	-.1236786(.087)	0.159	-1.41
The number of stories presented a biased or unfair description of the police department or personnel on newspaper	.146875 (.131)	0.262	1.12
The number of stories that have appeared on TV and reflected positively upon any aspect of police department	-.0134751(.044)	0.762	-0.30
N	85		
R Square	0.0710		

* Statistically significant coefficients (p<.05) are bolded, and standard errors are provided in parenthesis. The data came from a survey conducted by the Rutgers University School of Criminal Justice in 2000 and titled the "National Survey of Police-Media Relations". "How would you characterize your department's reputation in the news media on the whole?" is the question posed for the dependent variable. "Fair" is coded as 1, "good" as coded 2, "poor" as coded 0, and "excellent" as coded 4. The missing variables are coded as -99, -9, and -8.

Having a media policy/strategy, the frequency of engaging with news media, biased/unfair stories about police on TV/newspapers, and positive stories on TV about the police do not impact public opinion on the police department's quality. In the second phase of the examination, we can account for 28% of the dependent variable.

Table 4: Descriptive Statistics of the Public Opinion Regarding the Quality of Police Department

Variables	n	%
The public opinion regarding the quality of police department		
Poor	0	0
Fair	15	7.8
Good	100	53.1
Excellent	77	40.1

According to the data presented in Table 4, it is apparent that 40.1% of responses indicate that the public regards the department's quality as excellent, with no instances of negative opinions regarding the police departments.

CONCLUSION

This research analyzed the features of "media communication training" and how it affects the public's view of the "credibility of police image" in the media. Even though there is not much study on the unique qualities of media communication training and how it affects how the police are portrayed in the media, existing research indicates that the way the police are depicted in the media strongly influences public views of them. In this aspect, this study confirms previous studies and offers a new viewpoint by emphasizing the importance of media communication training for law enforcement agents. This training helps to build positive relationships with journalists, which in turn improves the police organizations' reputation in the press. Therefore, the more positively the public views the department's quality, the better its image is reflected in the media.

Summers (2024) talks about a collaborative report prepared by tree media groups in England; Society of Editors, the Crime Reporters' Association and the Media Lawyers Association. The joint report suggests key recommendations to improve trust and relationships between officers and journalists, benefiting the public. The goal of the report is to aid in rebuilding the crucial relationship between law enforcement and the traditional media, including local and national reporters. The report offers the following suggestions (The Police and The Media: Repairing the Relationship-Report, 2024:5-6):

- It is important for police forces to prominently display their press office contact information on their website, including any after-hours availability if needed.

- All forces must be ready to pick up the telephone in order to address any press inquiries.

- Press officers should disclose their names when speaking on the phone in order to establish professional connections with the media.

- Press officers should have the authority to give reporters as much advice as they can.

- It is recommended that forces continue to rely on emailed press releases as their main way of communicating with the media instead of just posting information on the internet.

- It is important to have a system in place to notify the national media about stories, whether it be through a basic email contact list or software that sends email alerts.

- To avoid panic from social media speculation, misinformation, and rumors, law enforcement should give advice during significant events both for reporting and non-reporting purposes.

- Officers should strive to engage in a trusted conversation with reporters and make an effort to give consistent updates during significant investigations, offering both information that can be shared with the public and confidential background briefings.

Building strong relationships between agencies and media representatives is crucial for fostering transparency and promoting positive community-police relations. This can also help organizations share information efficiently and solve crimes faster. Establish strong connections by consistently providing public information in a timely, accurate, and unbiased manner while also interacting with media representatives ethically and courteously.

It is recommended that in order to improve public perception, police departments should prioritize building a positive image in the media. Furthermore, in order to enhance their reputation in the news media, it is important for them to provide media communication training to staff members who are in charge of dealing with the media. The training should cover the mentioned recommendations and concentrate on building positive relationships with reporters.

ETİK BEYAN VE AÇIKLAMALAR

Etik Kurul Onay Bilgileri Beyanı

Çalışma, etik kurul izni gerektirmeyen bir çalışmadır.

Yazar Katkı Oranı Beyanı

Yazarın katkısı %100'dür.

Çıkar Çatışması Beyanı

Çalışmada potansiyel bir çıkar çatışması bulunmamaktadır.

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