

Review of *Good Cop/Bad Cop: Mass Media and the Cycle of Police Reform*

By

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Book: *Good Cop/Bad Cop: Mass Media and the Cycle of Police Reform*
Author: Jarret S. Lovell
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Jarret S. Lovell describes the purpose of this book as an account of those occasions when new media served as a force for police accountability and reform. He argues that “at key times in the history of policing agencies have fallen victim to technological cultural lag, allowing for the media to serve as vehicles for the protest of police practices, resulting in the adoption of new administrative or organizational practices.”

By “new media,” Lovell is describing technological advances in media coverage, (i.e., the advent of televised nightly news or camcorders such as that used to record the Rodney King arrest). By “technological cultural lag,” Lovell is describing a discovery and enlightenment period where it becomes apparent to police that a certain new technology will likely be available to capture their behavior far into the future.

Lovell suggests that a certain amount of cultural reflexivity occurs in policing based upon media portrayals of policing. The thesis of cultural reflexivity relative to police and the media suggests that policing is both a reaction to, and an influence on, media imagery. Reflexivity represents a process wherein people shape and reshape their behavior according to evaluations of their presentations. Thus, police performance, in terms of what the police actually do, and police performances, in terms of the construction of police work, are mutually reinforcing. Whereas the police may try to shield many of their activities from public view, new media, and especially electronic media, penetrate the shield of police secrecy potentially threatening the legitimacy of the persona that the police have carefully constructed. The intrusiveness and expanding pervasiveness of mass media makes the construction of a favorable police persona increasingly difficult for the police to achieve. Police now find themselves attempting to repair a damaged public image and engaging in the reactive construction of a positive police image.

Lovell examines the nature of police work as part of the constructionist framework where the meanings and responsibilities of law enforcement are derived through a process of symbolic interaction. Within this framework, Lovell argues that certain images of the police are glorified and/or vilified depending upon media portrayal and public acceptance of those portrayals. He discusses, at length, the good cop, bad cop, rogue cop, bumbling cop, and super hero cop, all of whom have adorned movie screens,

television series, broadcast news outlets, and internet sites. For example, early media portrayals of the police (i.e., *Keystone Kops*) satirically portrayed police as bumbling idiots. Clint Eastwood's role as Dirty Harry Callahan placed the image of a rogue cop out to do what he defines as "the right thing," regardless of bureaucratic strictures and organizational rules, squarely in the public's eye. Broadcast media picks up on trends and replaces old images and values, just as the bumbling cop image was replaced by *Dragnet's* Sgt. Joe Friday insisting on "just the facts."

Lovell suggests that the advent of broadcast news in 1956 was a national mirror reflecting widespread social instability to the masses. The early years of televised news represented the beginning of the medium's "cultural lag" when its power to transform social arrangements and political awareness had not yet been contained. The police and the public lacked the foresight to predict the impact of this new information technology on social or cultural patterns.

Because the police looked bad on the nightly news during the 1960s riots and urban unrest, police input into the newsmaking process was to become a starting point and an area of central importance during the transition between the professional model of policing and the development of community policing. Police had to learn how to manage and, in a sense, co-opt the media. The history of police-media relations suggests that although the police regularly engage in cultural reflexivity, they have traditionally adopted a reactive approach toward using the media for purposes of public relations. They have engaged in impression management only when confronted with scandal. Until recently, Lovell argues, police public relations has been primarily for purposes of damage control, while everyday police interaction with news reporters has been limited to publicizing neighborhood crime or requesting community assistance in crime prevention.

Lovell attributes the reticence of police to proactively confront the news media to: (a) a profound failure on the part of the police to understand the centrality of media in a free society and the importance of media to the maintenance of the legitimacy of public officials, including police; (b) police avoidance of reporters because of the belief that the news media has a misunderstanding of the role of law enforcement in society; and (c) the belief that police working with news media falls outside the normal scope of traditional everyday police work. The inference to be drawn is that for these reasons, the police deal with news reporters at a distance, while withholding certain facts, cutting off access to particular reporters who do not treat police well, or establishing a level of organizational secrecy. This constitutes a negotiation over control of news content and, by extension, a negotiation over the quality of the police image that is broadcast into the public eye.

Lovell suggests that in subtle ways the media influences policing patterns through the reinforcement of policing definitions and roles, including the construction of the police as crime fighters, the "good cop" fictional persona, and the "bad cop" of police work – an argument that, at least on the surface, appears intuitively palatable. The book concludes with what Lovell describes as a new paradigm of policing. This paradigm recognizes mass media as a conduit to the public. It is in this new paradigm that much of Lovell's argument loses its power. There is a distinct tendency to overgeneralize

“policing” as being the same in all places at all times under all conditions. That tendency rests on empirically shaky ground. Lovell discusses the creation of “media managers” within police departments as something that has occurred in all police departments. This, too, is empirically unsound. The strength of this book may lie in its history of the media and examination of the historical portrayals of police throughout the years. Proposing a new paradigm of policing focused solely on police-media interactions and relationships seems counterintuitive by its exclusion of socio-political forces that shape the direction, focus, and force of policing in contemporary society.

ENDNOTE

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