

Bridging the Gap: Exploring Police-Media Relations in Malaysia

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ABSTRACT

The Malaysian police and media have had a very volatile relationship. Both are similar, that is responsible to address community issues, crime and crime prevention, yet different as in their perceptions on each other. Through qualitative interviews with *Polis Diraja Malaysia* (The Royal Malaysian Police) and reporters, this study explored the dynamics of the police-media relations. In particular, the researchers were able to unveil perceptions of both police and the media on each other, the strategies used by the police in dealing and building the relationship with the media and also factors influencing the relationships. In general, the findings collected from this study suggest that there was no explicit difference in media relations practised by the police from the conventional media relations practice in the corporate world. Findings from our study illustrate that, from the crime reporters' points of views, the police (also played a role as public relations practitioner/media relations specialist) essentially did not understand the needs and demands of journalism. We found that the police had a good relationship with the media at all times; this was rather different from the viewpoint of the media on the police. Our findings of this study attested to the fact that PDRM acted as a media agenda builder.

Keywords: *Media relations, police-media relations, dynamics, police, PDRM.*

INTRODUCTION

Almost all organisations and agencies, be they government or non-government, need public relations professionals to manage their public image and reputation as well as to disseminate their organisations' information to the general public. If it is to be effective, it must be incorporated with the help of the media. The media have been described as a critical conduit of information to the public about what is happening in the world and the community. The world has to be explored, reported and imagined (Price, 1992), paralleling a famous quote from scholar Walter Lipmann (1922)—*the world outside and the pictures in our head*—highlighting our need for media to paint a picture of the world for our understanding. Since the emergence of media and even now with the social media such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, etc., the public is able to satisfy their appetite for various, immediate and accurate information about any events and issues they are interested in, and these include issues pertaining to crime, justice and community.

Policing organisations have recognised the power of the media and have attempted to use this power to transmit effective messages to the public in order to demonstrate transparency, legitimacy, accountability and effective police-community relationship. Boyle (1999) suggested that the relationship between the police and the media have undergone a period of transition in which the police services have had to transform themselves into demonstrably accountable organisations that provide a value-for-money service to the public. Part of this change is policing organisations are responsible to get the facts to the

public, to appeal for witnesses and to reassure the public, by giving road traffic safety or crime prevention advice and reduce the fear associated with the incident (Kingshott, 2011). If it is to be efficacious, the media act as a primary means for the police to communicate with their neighbourhood constituencies because policing organisations are insurmountably the key primary providers and definers in the production of crime news (Chermak & Weiss, 2005; Murray & Alyce, 2014).

Most citizens seldom have direct face-to-face contact with the police. Much of the public's understanding of policing organisations, information about crime and crime control is not just from their direct experience. Instead, most of their understanding is mediated (Bloustein & Israel, 2006). On that count, gaining public trust and support in policing organisations hinges on how the media portray the police force and how the members of public perceive the police through the media. This "complex loop of interdependence" is depicted as a triangle and has been recognised by many research (Christmas, 2012; Cooke & Sturges, 2009; Kešetović, 2007). According to Chandler (2008), *the media relations triangle* is, from the public relations spectrum, best understood as a model with three points, representing the news media, the organisation (in this case policing organisations) and the public (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Media relations triangle

Based on the figure above, the media, exist at the apex of the triangle, depend on the policing organisations for information pertaining to crime of which the information is considered newsworthy information; the police depend on media coverage for help in crime prevention and detection, and in the promotion of a positive image of policing work; and the public depends on the news media, be it traditional media (i.e., newspapers, magazines, radio and television) or online media (i.e., the Internet, Facebook, Twitter, blog, etc.) for help in understanding the policing organisations and the world outside. The public also offers the media information through social media in this digital age such as video recordings of their encounters with police personnel (i.e., traffic stop). Being civilians, the public also acts as information providers by giving tips (i.e., crimes, criminals).

Most of the research conducted in this area is centred on the field of criminology and criminal justice. These studies are mostly done in Canada, Australia and England (Chibnall, 1977; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1987, 1989, 1991; Grabosky & Wilson, 1989; Hall, Critcher, Jefferson, Clarke & Roberts, 1978; Schlesinger & Tumber, 1994). However, very little has been done in a multidisciplinary approach to media and police specifically to the relation between the two parties in Malaysia. This is evident during the *Bersih* rally where Amnesty International (2011) reported that global media portrayed violent repression by the Malaysian police as a violation of human rights standards similar to Hong Kong police

receiving backlash for their violent attitude during its protest and the emphasis that the police have extremely poor skills in dealing with journalists, both in the field and at press conferences (“HK police bids for consultant training”, 2019; Zafra & Maydell, 2018). Considering the lack of police-media relations study especially in Malaysia, this paper aims to provide an in-depth understanding of how the media and the police work. It will also seek to identify whether the police practise the relationship-building element that is prevalent in the academic literature as being the most important aspect of public relations. The research setting was in Malaysia, looking into *Polis Diraja Malaysia* (PDRM) (The Royal Malaysian Police) in dealing with the news media.

POLICE-MEDIA RELATIONS

The relationships between public relations practitioners and reporters or the media have been described by many as symbiotic (Boyle, 1999; Cooke & Sturges, 2009; Guffy, 1992; Johnston, 2013; Mohamed Ariffin, 2016; Shin & Cameron, 2002; Supa, 2014) as the professions are interdependent, mutually supportive and also competitive. Previous research regards the relationship between practitioners and reporters as a source-reporter relationship and confirms the influence of public relations on the news content (Colistra, 2012; Shin & Cameron, 2002; Mohamed Ariffin, 2016). This source-reporter relationship has further extended to police-media relations, in which both entities need each other very much to serve citizens of the nations. Nevertheless, the relationship between the police and the media is far more complex (Chibnall, 1977; Christmas, 2012; Cooke & Sturges, 2009; Kešetović, 2007; Reiner, 2008).

The police need media to distribute information pertaining to crime news and crime prevention to the general public while they are vigilant in disclosing information to the media. The police have to be objective in evaluating what are the appropriate facts that can be released without jeopardising the investigation. The law must be fair and unbiased, so that much of the information released to the public are sub-judice (Kingshott, 2011).

From a reporter’s perspective, the known facts may lead to what they perceive to be as obvious conclusions. However, often the assumptions of the reporter that led them to such conclusions may be included in their report and are often assumed to be facts. Reporters try to write “stories,” and it is hard to tell a good story without knowing all the facts—or, perhaps suspecting what the facts are, but not being free to state them as such because of libel laws, invasion of privacy laws, or the reluctance of the police to go on the record. Thus, in the limited time of the publication cycle, journalists do the best they can to tell what they know in an engaging and accurate way (Wilson & Ibrahim, 2018). But this is very difficult. The news media, on the other hand, is obsessed with newsworthy information. Reporters are required to meet publication deadlines. The media are challenged to balance public accountability, reporting on alleged police infractions while maintaining working relationships with police officers that they need to elicit information from. Reporters are bound to work with the police to gather information that is critical for substantial portions of the daily news (Becker, 1967). Therefore, the police-media relations are indeed tensed. However, law enforcement agencies have developed strategies to manage this relationship (Ericson et al., 1989), and that is why police-media relations play such a significant role in every policing organisation.

This study explores the relationship between the police and the media, and communication strategies used by the police in communication with the media and public. In order to achieve these objectives, this study raises the following research questions:

RQ1: How do the police and the media view their relationship with each other?

RQ2: What are the communication strategies used by the police to disseminate information to the media?

RQ3: What are the factors that influence the building of effective media relations?

METHODOLOGY

Participants

This article is informed by data drawn from in-depth qualitative interviews. To select the sample, the researchers used purposive sampling method to ensure the samples are indicative of the specific group of reporters and police needed for this study. The criteria for participation were police personnel who were assigned to Public Relations Department of the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) at Bukit Aman and at a position to make decisions in relation to the dissemination of information to the media. Nevertheless, while at the time of the interviews, these officers had left for other departments and other District Police Headquarters (IPD). The selected reporters had more than 10 years of working experience in the crime beat and were at a position to make decisions about the selection of news stories. These journalists were familiar with the progress and development of the police officers' rank and position, and have worked closely with the selected police officers. These journalists and police officers were, in fact, familiar with the styles, newsroom culture and police protocol. Initially, when the study was conducted, the researchers selected nine reporters from the major dailies, namely *The Star*, *Utusan Malaysia* and *Sin Chew Daily*. It was found that six of the selected reporters had less than five years working experience of which were unable to make decisions about the selection of news stories and did not have a proximate relationship with the selected police officers. The informants have been anonymised, with their titles and identifiers for this article in Table 1.

Table 1: Interview codes

No	Title	Years	Identification
1.	Senior Police Officer (PR)	2	Police Officer 1(PO1)
2.	Senior Police Officer (PR)	2	Police Officer 2(PO2)
3.	Senior Police Officer (PR)	2	Police Officer 3(PO3)
6.	Senior Reporter Chinese	20	C Journalist 1(C1)
7.	Senior Reporter English	15	E Journalist 2 (E2)
8.	Senior Reporter Malay	18	M Journalist 3(M3)

Interviews

At first, the researchers interviewed the first police officer (PO1) through a journalist contact after which the researcher was recommended to other informants. The researchers used semi-structured interview with a prepared interview protocol that consisted of a series of open-ended questions to elicit the accounts of experiences from informants on ways in which building the police-media relationships, their views with one another, and strategies used by the police to disseminate information to the media.

The interviews were conducted in English and sometimes mixed with Bahasa Malaysia (the national language of Malaysia) when certain terms were unable to be addressed using English. Each interview of the police officers lasted about 30 – 45 minutes which at the request of the interviewees were recorded using handwritten notes instead of tape recording whereas interviews with the crime reporters were tape-recorded and lasted about 45 minutes resulting in almost 2 hour(s), and 20 pages of text.

Data Analysis

All the data collected from the interviews were transcribed verbatim in English. The researchers listened and translated all transcripts into English independently. The researchers then had iterative discussions if there were any discrepancies of the narratives found. After that, the researchers used the meaning condensation approach to analyse the interview transcripts (Kvale, 1996). Meaning condensation involves the process of structuring the information for analysis through transcription, identifying essential ideas emerging from the text and bringing out meanings based on participant descriptions and researcher interpretations. The researchers began data analysis by reading and re-reading the transcribed texts to get a sense of the meanings being expressed. The researchers highlighted salient words, phrases and sentences. After that, the researchers clustered the units of expressed meanings into broad categories and condensed the large text into brief statements. Then, the researchers interpreted the essential meanings of the categories and presented them under themes. Findings were presented according to themes that emerged. The heart of this study lies in ascertaining the strategies that are used to ensure better police-media relationship and the factors that contribute towards the building of effective media relations.

RESULTS

Based on the analysis of factors which influence and affect the building of effective media relations, the reoccurring themes amongst police personnel were the inner need to exercise greater control over what information is released to the media and how this information is released. The need to avoid biased, inaccurate or misquoted information in the depiction of the organisation, themselves or the crime itself seem to be a motivating factor to ensure that the information disseminated is filtered and which media organisation or media personnel are allowed the “privilege” of this information seems to be at the discretion of the police. The police personnel were also under deadline pressures from top management to ensure crimes are solved, and there is no backlash from political parties or the public. This inadvertently becomes an issue especially when reporters are “in the way of the police” in solving crimes.

These themes seem to arise and run parallel to the interviews with the reporters. The reoccurring theme amongst reporters was the inner need to exercise greater control over what information should be gathered and used in their reporting of the story and if the need to embargo a story is crucial to the context of the story or as a means to respect said protocol.

RQ1: How do the police and the media view their relationship with each other?

Crime Reporter's Mindset

Three very important themes arise from the interviews with the reporters on their working relationship with the police. These are co-operation, routines and protocols. These themes seem to interweave with each other, and discussions with the police interviewees seem to relate to the same issues too.

Cooperation

Crime reporters rely on the police rather than criminals for the vast majority of their information. It was found that all reporters interviewed felt that it is of great challenge to work and maintain a positive relationship with the police so much so, the researchers felt that they were "piggyback riding" on each other. In fact, informant E2 did not have a problem with the authorities having some amount of influence in the decision making, but he felt that the police need to understand their (reporters') demands that is "...to know that a story becomes news today and no news tomorrow".

The police and the media are interdependent. The former need the media to help solve cases and to create awareness amongst the public about the crime, while the media need the police for newsworthy cases to be highlighted and to fill pages for the crime beat. However, informant C1 revealed that sometimes the police played favouritism and were concerned that some online media were not allowed into press conferences to the point that police personnel were hostile towards them (online media). Other issues raised were the fact that PDRM was also selective (sometimes) in the selection of media and the dissemination of information: "*This would clearly be an obstacle to the information gathering and news writing process*", he shared adding that "*...this is not co-operation when you only refer to one news media because it is your favourite*". This inadvertently hinders the cooperative nature of both parties.

Routines

The reporters were agreeable that the police do not understand the routines and news culture of media, including deadlines, the different beats, news sections, order of news editing, competition and hierarchy of decision making. Informant E2 shared:

They [the police] think that whatever they say must be published or will be published, they don't know about news value or page space. Sometimes, the police personnel will request or push to have a particular article written a certain way. This cannot be done as it all depends on what is the news selection for the day and this being a decision by the editors.

Being unfamiliar with journalism practice puts a strain on this relationship as stories need to be cleared for publication by editors in the newsroom, and being unfamiliar with deadlines, police personnel that cannot be reached for comments, verification or are uncooperative disallow for a story to be written effectively. This, in turn, becomes an issue as the police then perceive the media as being sensational or accuse them of misquoting the police when the story goes to print with minimal or no verification.

Protocols

Informant M3 mentioned that it was tough if one does not know how to deal with the police:

It's all about protocols [such as all information should technically come from higher authority i.e., most information should be officially provided through press conference and not through personal conversation etc.]. If you are not familiar [with these], then it will be tough being in this beat. That police personnel do not have news sense and so they do not see the importance of the story at hand, their delay or reluctance would ensure some other press would scoop us.

Police Mindset

All informants were positive about their role in enhancing their relationship with the media, to the point that they mentioned going out of their way to accommodate the media. Most police events involving the public are well-covered by the media. Thus, naturally, all events regarding crime prevention, law enforcement (e.g., operations, etc.) will have to be informed to the public through conventional and social media, but at some point, the police blame the media for misreporting or over sensationalising. Two important themes arose which include co-operation and police culture.

Cooperation

There seems to be a very good working relationship between the police and the media. According to PO1 who headed the Public Relations Department for two years mentioned that he maintained a very close and personal relationship with all media regardless of their inclinations or orientations.

I was prepared to do this because, by and large, I was firm and shared only information that will not jeopardise PDRM (e.g., ongoing investigations or pending cases). I stood firmly by [for] what I said and I did not simply give unnecessary comments. Fortunately, members of media, professional as they are, mostly knew of these terms and mutually respect them.

He mentioned that most of the times, he is accessible to journalists via email or mobile phone any time of the day. Despite that, he mentioned that responding to media queries would not be immediate as they had to work within an organisational or situational constraint and this was out of their control. Informant PO3 who spent two years in public relations and currently a senior investigating officer (CID) mentioned that he had a good relationship with the media to the point the media seem to occasionally tip him about cases. He shared "*...the reporters are sometimes so well connected that they let us [the police] know if something has happened and they are first on the scene*".

The love-hate relationship generally depends on every individual officer. If an officer has a friendly and easy-going demeanor, then working with the media is easier as there is less likely a push and pull feel to the relationship but a more tolerable and giving in relationship. Informant PO2 concurred with this and stressed that:

We try our best to continue providing the best for the media and try to be accommodating in the process. Nevertheless, there are situations where this cooperation is questioned as we [police], being a government agency is tied to the constitutional constraints such as the Malaysian Official Secrets Act, therefore, we are disallowed and refrained from providing additional information which may be detrimental to the case being investigated or maybe an issue to national security.

The Official Secrets Act (OSA) is another law that obstructs journalists who, in their professional duty, seek information, especially from government establishments. Their routine task becomes more overwhelming especially when the law that went through a series of amendments over a period of time is made vaguer, or all-encompassing, in terms of its very definition of official secrets.

Police Culture

The interview data revealed that police culture emerges uniquely from the organisational setting. According to Crank (2015), culturally shared meanings represent how police think about their working environment and how they think about their lives. Police culture lies in the role it plays in the everyday functioning of police officers. One of the environments the officers work in is the occupational environment which consists of his or her relationship with the general society (Paoline, 2003). All the police personnel interviewed agreed that it was important for the reporters, who are part of this society, especially those covering the police to understand police culture. They stated that “...*this would include understanding the formal setting, hierarchical structure and authority which would enable a smooth communication or a difficult one*”.

The Malaysian police exist in a formal setting, drawing on *tatatertib* (discipline) which is the discipline or disciplining of police officers in ensuring the image of the police force is not tarnished and *tatacara* (protocol) which is influenced by the classes or segments of hierarchy. These include lower-level participants, middle-level participants and top command. Most of the police personnel in the public relations department in this study were middle-level participants. They were assigned or allowed to give comments and controlled the information flow to the media. In reality, though, crime reporters engaged in the collection of information from all participants—receiving tips from lower and middle participants and receiving verification of this information from top command. It is believed that officers are expected to create, display and maintain their authority (Manning, 1995). This would include coercive authority which is forced upon on other – journalists included.

RQ2: What are the communication strategies used by the police to disseminate information to the media?

Findings were based on interviews with officers who are or have served in the public relations unit of the Royal Malaysian Police. Strategies or channels used by the police to disseminate information to the news media are many and varied although it is thought to be more conservative in terms of actions practised over the years.

Press Conferences

Press conferences have been a standard procedure for disseminating information to the media. Although it is said (by the reporters) that there have not been proper briefing notes

given to the spokesman who can then disseminate key messages or copy points to the media, according to Informant PO1, there have also not been details attached to the programme in terms of agenda or synopsis if an event is being organized for the media, and this can in some ways lead to the media not attending the event or misconstruing an event. Informant PO2 concurred that:

We have regular Pressers [PCs] by the top management at HQ level and at [the] state level we have the state police chiefs and district police chiefs to speak on various issues [mostly updates on criminal cases of public interest]. We have constantly been requested to comment or speak on matters pertaining to police as well. Over the years, our relationship with the media becomes better and more cordial. My philosophy is simple: There is no need to become adversarial to the media.

Press conferences would also include the issuance of press statements or speeches in the form of documents by the public relations department. This would entail information crucial for an investigation. Most times the press conferences are called to address developments to a major case being investigated, positive and successful outcomes such as raids or drug busts where contraband that had been seized are mentioned.

These sorts of press conferences are controlled by the public relations department where most times they classify events according to criteria that are beneficial to themselves, compiling statistics on performance measure such as the number of types of offences committed as well as arrest data as concurred with Chermak (1995). The media relations department decides what statistics to compile, how they are compiled, what should be released to the media, how it should be released and sometimes which media should be given this privileged information.

Media Centre

The media centre was organized to enable media personnel to have a place to hang out and write stories with the ability of Wi-Fi and internet service. This has not been tremendously successful as the media intend to rush to crime scenes and not be present at the media centre. Nevertheless, Informant PO2 mentioned that he felt the media centre is where the press conferences are held, and today all if not most police contingents have a media centre to cater to the reporters. These media centres are wired and have CCTV's and are accommodating for officers and reporters. This seems to be disagreed by the media who claim that the media centres are not effective, as the police do not treat the news speedily and they (the police) will disseminate news that they (the police) deem fit for them.

Technology

PDRM has provided media personnel with access to information on its Facebook page, with 636,000 members, it is also connected to Twitter and YouTube. The PDRM's Facebook page seems very popular with media personnel, and PDRM provides information about its successes, wanted list, crime prevention, notices of press conferences, press statements and photographs on the page. According to PO1, PDRM created an unofficial WhatsApp group for its crime reporters where information can be passed on to crime reporters about crime cases or press conferences, and it has also become a place for discussions amongst PR

personnel and the media. This was a way most informants mentioned they used to communicate with crime reporters.

According to Informant PO2, sophistication in technology such as SMS, WhatsApp and e-mail has enabled him to constantly stay in contact with the media fraternity and almost literally round-the-clock 24/7:

Even now that I am taking a study break, enquiries keep on coming from the members of the media. As much as possible I will not let them down. We try to go the extra mile in allowing everyone the privilege of information. When we allow them to come you are allowing them to write the right things even if they [media] manipulate you can't manipulate much.

Technology, especially ICT is widely used in PDRM. Informant PO3 supported that:

We are working on improving the content of the information so that the public will be better informed about policing in the country. So far, the official Facebook account of PDRM is quite popular with very encouraging number of fans. The same trend is also seen in PDRM's Twitter account which has created a more personalized connectivity between police and crime reporters and this has enabled for a more positive relationship.

PO3 stressed that as much as possible, PDRM uses all channels or media to communicate with the public. This includes electronic, printed, and social networking sites such as Twitter, Facebook, portal and YouTube. Technology, especially ICT is widely used in PDRM, and they are working on improving the content of the information so that the public will be better informed about policing in the country. So far, the official Facebook account of PDRM is quite popular with a very encouraging number of "fans".

It was found that the Royal Malaysian Police (PDRM) had quite strong ties with the media although these ties were sometimes specific to certain mainstream media. Informant C1 mentioned that there were times certain interviews were given to certain newspapers and the media had heard about it. They were not too happy and made it clear that that was not the way.

We had to rectify this situation. We had to ensure that all the media had the information. Sometimes, we as officers from the public relations department have to also play the role of pacifiers to the media to soothe ruffled feathers.

Informant E2 and M3 also agreed that the Facebook page was a platform where the media can get information from (including pictures) and this is also a way where the public can also interact with the police. This seems to be a *new* method compared with the more *traditional* methods of doing things such as emails and faxes.

RQ 3: What are the factors which influence and affect the building of effective media relations?

Four main themes arose from the entire research and interviews with the crime reporters and police personnel as being the basis of the factors which influence and affect the building

of effective media relations. These include the themes of professionalism, information control, and newsroom culture and source protection.

Professionalism

An important issue that has risen is professionalism, in which the police generally follow a time-honoured regimented tradition and therefore adhering to hierarchy in terms of seniority and superiority is pivotal. Professionalism here also includes *tatatertib* (discipline) and *tatacara* (protocol) and reporters who do not understand this will be unable to work hand in hand with the police and ultimately will become a problem. Informant PO1 opined that:

Sometimes when you work with reporters on the field you have to understand that at the end of the day, they put up their reports to the editors accordingly. But the editors also have certain obligations to sell the news and they must make the headlines or titles shout for attention – the ‘man-bites-the-dog’ kind of news. So, I have a couple of such experiences and when countered for response, the poor reporters said “Sorry abang, saya dah letak tajuk tu, tapi editor buat tajuk lain!” [I’m sorry bro, I placed that headline but my editors changed it]. Then again, I handled the situations as best as I could, knowing everyone has a job to do.

Informant PO3 stressed that it is difficult when reporters want information which may jeopardise investigations. There may be some information which may seem *innocent* by civilian standards but to the police, it is this little information that can ensure the criminal escapes. At the same time, Informant PO1 also stressed that the information given to the media need to be transparent in the sense that it should be *clear* and *to the point* because the media can misconstrue or misinterpret the information. As Informant PO3 states:

Today we record everything. Sometimes we have video recordings also. So when we are misquoted, we always look at the recordings for clarification.

Informant PO1 mentioned that more can be done such as the police officers can visit the media organizations to touch base with media management and possibly get a *feel* of the news production and a round table discussion of what the media can do and how the police can help and vice-versa.

According to Informant E2, in 2008, external public relations consultants were brought in to help revamp PDRM image but these consultants did not do anything different to what is being done today. The public relations training series was a programme which was introduced and received positive feedback from the police personnel interviewed. However, the programme stopped for the lack of budget.

Newsroom Culture

The reporters were also under pressure as they are required to report their stories on a quick deadline as they have an online version and a print version. Informant C1 mentioned that deadline pressure is made even more important as it is influenced by competition by other newspaper organizations which inadvertently influence circulation and readership.

Many reporters who have been in the crime beat and have been working with the police seem to find it easier as they have become accustomed to the *tatatertib* and *tatacara* mentioned above. This allows the police to see crime reporters as one of them and not as “the enemy”.

Source Protection

Police sources are primary gatekeepers of information, and selection of appropriate sources is a central concern of the reporters as this determines the quality of the accounts. In most crime stories, the police are relevantly referred to to confirm the details of the case. In terms of sources, reporters frequently use anonymous sources as well as official sources to gather information. Source transparency is used where it deals with how much detail is provided about a source identity (Carpenter, Daniere & Takahashi, 2004). Transparency applies to sources that have some information provided about their background.

Although some scholars say that using the unnamed sources shifts the onus of defending the truth of the information from source to the reporter, informant C1 says that because of the rules and regulation of the country, the reporter is unable to ensure source transparency as they (crime reporters) have to protect their sources. This is concurred by an informant E2 who states that he would not want to put his source in trouble because of one story. He normally strikes a deal with his source (the police) in that he would get details from the source but get someone else (another police contact normally a higher ranking officer) to confirm the story. Findings also revealed that in some cases reporters were hauled up by the police to determine the accuracy of their stories. The interviewed reporters mentioned that they would check and re-check facts and confirm facts with people of authority (especially the police) as the use of higher-ranking police officers confirming the stories were prevalent.

Firstly our source has to be someone we can trust and we have to be confident with what we write ensuring that the facts are correct so if someone is doubtful with our news, we have proof that what we wrote are facts which are true.

The important fact is to ensure that all information is backed up with facts and figures to avoid any unnecessary problems like hearsay. In terms of confidentiality of sources, all reporters mentioned and agreed with the fact that unnamed sources were normally police officers themselves and explained that certain police officers were disallowed to speak to the media but they were the ones who had the most information compared to the official statement released to the media which omitted some issues. Even though they (police sources) may not direct crime reporters in making decisions but the action and reaction of the sources generally help contribute in the crime reporters' decisions on what they are to do and how they are to do it. There is a great compromise between the two groups of people. The dilemmas which exist is the fact that the sources may not want to reveal facts of the case, and the fact that crime reporters are crossroads of ensuring stories are confirmed by sources before it is sent to be printed versus ensuring stories are written with a deadline pressures against speculating facts which may or may not be accurate because the sources are not giving information or confirming a story.

Nevertheless, there have been, of course, a large number of high-profile stories where police agencies or a specific officer or group of officers have committed some type of wrongdoing, and thus media coverage of policing will be negative. Although not favoured by the police—the reporters revealed that it is necessary as it shows they are not biased towards the police, and this is a way to enhance the relationship.

DISCUSSION

This study provides a rich context of the police-media relationship building in Malaysia. In this study, we explore the complex nexus between the Malaysian Royal Police (PDRM) and the media. The researchers are able to unveil perceptions of both police and the media on each other, the strategies used by the police in dealing and building the relationship with the media and also factors influencing the relationships. In general, the findings collected from this study suggest that there is no explicit difference in media relations practised by the police from the conventional media relations practice in the corporate world.

Findings from our study illustrate that, from the crime reporters' points of views, the police (also play a role as public relations practitioner/media relations specialist) essentially do not understand the needs and demands of journalism. The current finding complements Supa's (2008) study, which he found that major complaint about public relations practitioners expressed by journalists involved in his Ph.D. study was mainly the practitioners do not understand what the journalists' work entails, including management structure, job assignments and deadlines. While the police practise media relations as public relations practitioners do, we argue that insufficient understanding of media functions and practice would generate hostile feelings towards public relations among the media. We revealed that they have a good relationship with the media at all times; this is rather different from the viewpoint of the media on the police. Supa (2008) attested that public relations practitioners harboured positive viewpoints towards journalists, but not the journalists towards public relations practitioners. In his study, he found that public relations continue to view themselves as valuable and equal contributors (or disseminators) of information. Our findings resonate with Supa's finding in which the interviewed police also believe themselves as resourceful and reachable. One possible explanation for the difference of viewpoints of the police and the media on each other is because the police continue to distribute their information in the same way that they have always done. Thus, crime reporters have got used to it. However, this is not appreciated by the crime reporters as the manner in which the information or news is delivered is too rigid and controlled. The police request the media to understand the police culture, but very rare do the police learn to understand the working environment and media culture. To certain extent, it seems that the police deliberately use the media to gain exposure for their policing organisation in that they recognise the power of media in formulating public opinion.

Central to the idea of media relations is the interplay of source and the media. The use of sources underpins the role of media relations professional. The role of sources has often been regarded as the key influencer (Carlson, 2009; Sherwood, Nicholson & Marjoribanks, 2016; Wilson & Ibrahim, 2018). These sources have influential power to affect the media agenda, and one of the main strategies that public relations practitioners use to do that is to provide information subsidies (Sherwood et al., 2016). Information subsidies come in the form of media releases, media conferences, fact sheets, speeches, etc. The advent of technologies has transformed the practice of media relations specialists sending

the information to the media (Mohamed Ariffin & Ahmad Ishak, 2010). Findings from our study illustrate that the police still rely on the conventional manners of distributing information to the media, that is using press conferences and media centre. The rationale behind this is that the police are able to control the information and verify and confirm some important queries through face-to-face communication with the media. This effort is critical and crucial to the legitimacy of police organisations. Having said that, PDRM does leverage social media such as Facebook, Twitter and WhatsApp to engage with the public and the media. Social media enable the police to have full control over the information.

Our findings of this study attest that PDRM act as media agenda builder. The subtlety of the information from the crime reporters is revealing in itself as to the fact that the police certainly have some amount of control on who should speak to the media, how much can be said and which media should be given the “privilege” of information. This reasoning is logical, especially given evidence from previous research regarding the police control over the nature of crime reports (Altheide, 1985; Crandon & Dunne, 1997; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Lovell, 2002; Wilson & Ibrahim, 2018). Based on the current study, the ability of the police to influence the information presented in the news varies by the type of stories covered. Some stories further police objectives because police personnel decide what is presented and how it is presented. For other stories, however, police have to struggle to control the information presented about themselves and expend time and resources to ensure positive portrayal and minimize hurtful information (Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Kasinsky, 1994). Police struggle to control the information presented in crime incident stories, taking precautionary steps to influence as much of the news production process as possible to protect the organization from harm. The institutionalization of public relations spokespersons has been the most effective step taken to promote the department or respond to potentially harmful information. Young reporters are unlikely to question the activities of police officials because they are in the process of developing contacts in the department. They need police information to satisfy daily story requirements. Veteran reporters are so ingrained in the news production process that they do not produce negative stories because they fear to sacrifice their reliable contacts. Nevertheless, a loss of control by the police over the content of information may threaten their authority and legitimacy within the social order (Meyrowitz, 1986; Kingshott, 2011).

LIMITATIONS

While the current study is among the first to gain an understanding of police-media relationship in Malaysia, some limitations hamper the ability to generalise the findings to other government agencies. Due to the nature of the study, the samples of police officers and crime reporters in this exploratory study are relatively small. The accessibility to the police officers, especially, was restricted. As such, they were not forthcoming in responding to the researchers as civilians. Apart from that, the researcher (the first author) was unable to record the interviews with the police officers as they disallowed any sorts of recording. On this count, the researchers could only record using handwritten notes. Besides, the sample size for crime reporters could not be generalised to the entire population of journalists in Malaysia as many senior crime reporters have either left or retired. Many of whom who are currently in service do not have adequate experience in dealing with the police.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, changes in the police force are not easily accepted, adopted or adapted, unlike media organisations. Nevertheless, there have been some positive changes by PDRM to keep up with times. The media must engage the police in their activities as much as PDRM must engage the media frequently and consistently. The police should be open to new public relations methods and avoid regimented and conservative strategies to build rapport with the media. In this digital era, they should go the extra mile in adopting technology for their benefit as the media being the fourth estate is constantly evolving and is ahead in terms of information gathering and news dissemination. There should be transparency and interactivity between media personnel and PDRM's top management to bridge a link in understanding each other's needs and wants. After all, media relations is all about relationships.

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