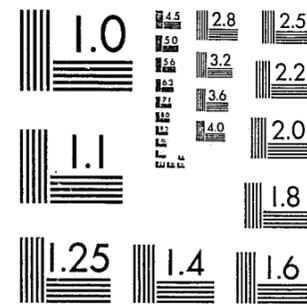


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International Summaries

A Series of Selected Translations in Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice

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The Police Press Agency as an Intermediary Between Crime and Criminal Reporting

The accuracy of the news media in crime reporting has often been criticized. In an attempt to control the flow of information, Police Press Agencies were established throughout much of Germany. This article assesses their impact on crime news.

By Karl-Heinz Reuband

Introduction

Analyses of media reports on crime in West Germany have made it sufficiently clear that the image of reality portrayed there does not necessarily have much to do with the actual overall crime picture; unusual, spectacular criminal cases are generally overrepresented. The reason for this image of crime has remained unexplained up to now. Definite conclusions cannot be drawn from analyses of media report content; however, possible influences might be the type of material available, the selection criteria, or a combination of these factors.

This essay, which deals primarily with available material, aims at clarifying the extent to which the choice of certain information sources predetermines the structure of crime reports in daily newspapers. The police press agency was selected for study for two reasons. First, police press agencies are one of the most important information sources on crime for big-city dailies. As a rule, the written press report contains a large proportion of news about local events. Second, police press agencies provide the most direct connection to criminal events. As reference is continually and systematically made to crimes recorded by the police themselves, the police press report relates more directly to the course of crime than the other sources used by reporters. The extent that the image of reality is modified at this stage is of special interest.

¹Die Polizeipressestelle als Vermittlungsinstanz zwischen Kriminaltaetsgeschehen und Kriminalberichterstattung" (NCJ 60801) originally appeared in *Kriminologisches Journal*, v. 10, n. 3, pp. 174-186, 1978. (Juventa Verlag, Tizianstrasse 115, 8 Munich 19, West Germany) Translated from the German by Kathleen Dell'Orto.

To investigate the questions raised, the results of explorative interviews with employees of police press agencies in four West German cities (Hamburg, Cologne, Bonn, Duesseldorf) are examined. Also included are an analysis of the written press reports prepared by the Hamburg police press agency and an analysis of items actually printed by Hamburg newspapers.

The Institution of the Police Press Agency

Police press agencies represent an attempt to centralize and monopolize information about crime. This system had advantages for both reporters and police. Instead of granting the greatest access to reporters with the best contacts, police now disseminate information to all the media. The advantage for the police is better control of information flow, making a uniform press policy possible. In many cases, cultivation of unofficial contacts is not excluded, but it has become the usual rule for the agency to dissociate itself from unofficial reports in cases of doubt. This is also true of reports that derive from sources other than the police.

Police press agencies are found today in most large cities of the Federal Republic of Germany. They have existed for varying lengths of time and therefore have different traditions. In most cases, police officers, i.e., members of the organization from which information is to be communicated, function as police press representatives; former reporters (usually reporters who once had covered police activities) serve less frequently in this capacity. In some cases a police press agency includes both police officers and former reporters. The number of full-time press agency employees varies from one person to a fairly large staff, e.g., a director and five police report officials in Hamburg.

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Types of Information

Information from the police sector is usually communicated officially in written press reports, which may differ in scope according to the publication policy. Some press agencies tend not to include more stories than newspapers can use. Other agencies provide an oversupply so that a choice is possible. The press reports range in length from 13 to 16 stories in Hamburg, to 4 to 8 stories in Cologne and Bonn.

Thematically, a report may contain information about crime, traffic (e.g., accidents), and other areas (e.g., a runaway pig, broken water pipes). Results of an analysis of the criminal reports in Hamburg show that information on crime in the years 1969-76 constitutes about one-half of the events reported (45 to 53 percent). The other half consists of traffic information (26 to 30 percent) and other occurrences (18 to 24 percent). A higher proportion of crimes was reported in 1977 (65 percent); whether this signals altered emphasis in police reporting remains to be seen.

Information from the police sector may also be orally transmitted. If further important events are reported after the police report has been completed (around 3 or 4 p.m.), the news is telephoned to the editorial staff before the final deadline. (This usually involves no more than one or two stories daily in Hamburg.) Furthermore, press agency employees are available to provide reporters with further information on the press report and other questions. Press conferences are held only under special circumstances (e.g., major crimes, disasters, or special pursuits).

Sources of Information

The press representative can avail himself of various information sources in preparing the press report, including bulletins of police patrols, daily reports of the criminal police, night and morning reports of the criminal division, and information gathered from various stations, or, in Hamburg, reports of "further results," special night reports, and telephone or teleprinter communications of officers and station chiefs on events potentially relevant to the press. Because of the structure of the information sources, a slight overrepresentation of the more serious criminal cases reported seems likely.

In addition to the formally structured information flow, news is supplied according to the principle of voluntary assistance. Indeed, police service regulations require that newsworthy items be routed to the press agency. But what newsworthy means is open to interpretation. For this reason, the police press must cultivate contacts with station chiefs and individual officers and carry on internal public relations work. Caution must be exercised so that use of internal police information does not cause difficulties for officers who are active in a given area (which may occur if journalistic needs are overemphasized).

Information is also gathered on the initiative of the police themselves; for example, in Hamburg, one of-

ficer spends each morning inquiring about current, potentially newsworthy events in the separate divisions.

Informants must be rewarded for their services, be it through public attention in the form of interviews with reporters or through friendship. At times it is also advisable to ease the disappointment of press agency employees when reported information is not used by the media.

Selection Criteria

The press agency must choose items from the total number reported, frequently by using information which it has gathered itself from the departments. Two general principles determine both choice and subsequent adaptation. The first factor is police needs and regulations. Thus, search operations are included in press reports when publicity is expected to increase the operation's chance of success. On the other hand, restraint is practiced in crimes that relate to the private sphere (e.g., suicide, sexual crimes) and in internal police procedures, or in investigations that are in the decisive state of resolution.

The second basic principle for selection and formulation of news items is the perceived needs of journalists: serious crimes and everyday items with a special twist are preferred. Thematic variety in the items is sought. The items reported are structured with an eye to journalistic interests, and details are supplied to attract reader attention. Journalistic needs are also considered in setting a minimum number of items. The minimum is intended to enable reporters to fulfill their police reporting obligations. If there seem to be too few items, less spectacular events or less significant material are used.

The Relationship Between Reality and Representation

Describing selection procedures in the police press agency says little about the actual degree of selection or about the distortion caused by it. Quantitative analysis of press reports and comparison with officially recorded everyday crime must be performed. In the following paragraphs the extent of selection is analyzed on the basis of the Hamburg police press reports for the years 1969-77. The kind of crimes portrayed and the development of crime reporting are correlated to the actual crime situation.

First results indicate that only a fraction of crimes have any chance of being included in the press report; i.e., in the time frame studied, not more than 0.5 to 1.5 percent. In keeping with the findings on information sources and selection criteria of the police press agency, the chance of inclusion varies according to the nature of the crime. Violent crimes are more likely to be found in the report than property crimes, but property crimes are more common than other crimes; violent crimes are consequently overrepresented in the report. In the period under consideration, violent crimes make up 6 percent of the total crimes but between 15 and 40 percent of crimes in the press report. The representation of crime in the police press report thus reflects reality only in a limited manner (Table 1).

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Table 1:* Reporting on crime in the police press report (in percent)

Crime Groups	1969	1970	1971	1972	1973	1974	1975	1976	1977
Violent crimes	15	14	17	21	32	26	37	40	33
Property crimes	83	81	78	70	59	63	54	44	52
Drug crimes	1	2	1	2	1	1	3	3	2
Other crimes	1	3	5	7	8	10	6	13	13
N=	1,838	1,827	1,659	1,392	1,113	983	831	1,067	2,022

*This table is an exact representation of the original

Table 2: Composition of the police press report (absolute numbers)

Year	I. Type of Item					
	Violent crimes	Property crimes	Drug crimes	Other crimes	Traffic events	Other items
1969	258	1,447	25	x	1,044	881
1970	253	1,482	32	60	911	711
1971	277	1,295	11	76	804	606
1972	289	975	34	93	827	598
1973	352	655	16	91	591	379
1974	261	622	6	94	530	373
1975	312	447	26	46	498	318
1976	428	469	28	142	516	435
1977	676	1,058	31	257	593	476

Year	II. Items and Crime Statistics (CrimStat)			
	Number of crimes according to CrimStat	Report items on crimes	Total items	Crime items to CrimStat (percent)
1969	124,839	1,838	3,655	1.5
1970	133,969	1,827	3,449	1.4
1971	133,255	1,659	3,069	1.2
1972	137,279	1,392	2,817	1.0
1973	134,016	1,113	2,803	0.8
1974	137,703	983	1,886	0.7
1975	150,526	831	1,647	0.6
1976	156,098	1,067	2,018	0.7
1977	175,750	2,022	3,091	1.2

The relationship between trends in crime reporting and trends in officially recorded crime is also problematic. The number of crime stories in the press report continued to decrease between 1969 and 1975, only to climb steeply after 1975. Comparison with yearly crime figures shows that there is no connection to the course of recorded crime (Table 2). The changes in reporting must therefore not reflect real shifts but modifications elsewhere. As the number of news items for traffic and other crimes also changes, fluctuation is probably not specific to crime reporting. The possibility also exists that modification in the behavior of the criminal police has reduced the flow of information. It is more plausible that the changes are the result of generally altered behavior by the press agency.

Crime Trends and Crime Reporting

Analysis of the annual figures on press report news stories shows that the reporting and the real course of crime proceed independently of one another. It is possible that connections between reporting and the course of crime actually are responsible for the transformation in the publication policy of the police press agency (over a long period), i.e., when long-term changes are excluded and short periods not extensively affected by changes in publication policy are taken as the unit for calculating the correlation. In the following paragraphs the hypothesis will be tested by comparing the monthly, not the yearly, figures and by considering changes in publication policy as a potentially disruptive variable

in the analysis. If the partial correlation between the number of monthly crime news items and the number of crimes (keeping the variable "year" constant) is calculated, however, no significant relationship is evident ($r=.04$).

The same usually applies when analysis begins at the level of individual types of crimes: the partial correlation for property crimes, drug crimes, and other crimes also proves insignificant ($r=.04$, $-.01$, and $.02$). Only in the case of violent crimes can a greater value ($r=.12$) be found. The tendency of the police press agency to report serious crimes, which is to some extent encouraged by regulations, and the described tendency of police press representatives to select serious crimes thus appear in this case to cause criminal events to be reflected, if only slightly, in press reports. The correlation may be greater for individual violent crimes such as murder and bank robbery.

At the same time, analysis results indicate that the tendency described in the interviews to make up for a lack of serious criminal cases by considering other, frequently less serious cases does operate on a monthly basis. If the partial correlation coefficients are calculated for the variables of violent crimes and property crimes (holding the variable "year" constant), the value is $r=-.15$. If the year 1972, which deviates from the pattern, is left out of the calculations, the partial correlation coefficient is $r=-.35$. If there are few violent crimes, property crimes tend to be included more frequently in the police press report. On the other hand, drug crimes and other crimes do not seem to have the same balancing function when violent crimes are lacking, perhaps because they occur so much less frequently than property crimes that they are considered insignificant.

Reception of the Press Report in Daily Newspapers

It is possible that the media receive an image of crime that was already tailored by the police press to the needs of the media. However, the media may select a disproportionate number of stories about violent crime from the relatively extensive number of stories furnished by the police press agency. To settle the issue, news items printed in Hamburg daily newspapers during 1975 are analyzed.

The analysis suggests that only some of the news items from the Hamburg police report find their way into the newspapers. News items on crime and on other non-criminal events have the best chance, and items containing traffic information the worst.

Items on crime make up 50 percent of the press report, while they constitute 66 percent of the newspaper items. Traffic items comprise 31 percent of the press report and only 9 percent of the items used in newspapers. The "other" items have values of 19 and 26 percent.

If only the times on crime are considered, violent crimes are once again most frequently used. They constitute 6 percent of total crime, 37 percent of the police press report, and 47 percent of the newspaper articles taken from reports (Table 3). Violent crimes also have the best chance of being placed on the newspapers' front pages with greatest public exposure: they are the subject of 68 percent of the items on the front page. In comparison, property crimes have much slighter chances of being publicized. Thus, the image of crime in the media proves to be the product of a successive selection process which, starting primarily in police press agencies, continues through the various levels of selection to overrepresentation of violent crimes and consequently to a transformation of reality.

Table 3: The composition of crimes in criminal statistics, police press reports, and newspaper articles taken from the press reports (in percent)

Crime Groups	Criminal Statistics	Police Reports	Items Used	
			Total	Front Page
Violent crimes	6	37	47	68
Property crimes	77	57	39	19
Drug crimes	1	2	4	-
Other crimes	16	4	10	13
N=	47,150	258	248	31

Note: The figures refer to March, June, September, and December 1975. Stories appeared in the Hamburg daily newspapers (*Welt*, *Hamburger Abendblatt*, *Hamburger Morgenpost*, and *Bild*).

END