

REVIEW OF *POLICING THE MEDIA: STREET COPS AND PUBLIC PERCEPTIONS OF LAW ENFORCEMENT**

by

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Book: *Policing the Media: Street Cops and Public Perceptions of Law Enforcement*

Author: David D. Perlmutter

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The late 1990s saw a slate of books by criminologists focusing on the intersections of popular culture and criminal justice, including *Popular Culture, Crime and Justice*, a volume edited by Bailey and Hale, *Making Trouble: Cultural Constructions of Crime, Deviance and Control*, edited by Ferrell and Websdale, *Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society* by Nicole Rafter, and many others. Each of these relied on content analyses of various crime topics as their main methodology. In contrast, Perlmutter utilizes visual ethnography to address how real police are influenced by media images of their role. Perlmutter spent three and a half years as a participant-observer with the St. Louis Park, Minnesota Police Department, a relatively small force in a relatively crime-free area. He explains why content analyses are inadequate: “Simply reviewing the content of TV cop shows and then producing a checklist of divergences is not in itself a satisfactory approach to the issues. Real cops do not refrain from attempting to mediate reality themselves. When they go on call, they take into account public expectations” (p. xii). It seems, then, that Perlmutter’s intention was to go beyond simple description and to explain the implications of the media deluge for both viewers and police. He did this well.

The book is intended to be used by students, practitioners, and scholars in both criminology and communications. It is built on the premise that, while the average US citizen sees countless hours of mediated police: “We have almost no contact with real live police officers, and, if it occurs, it is usually brief and in some moment of inconvenience and irritation or after a trauma” (p. 28). Thus, we should all be able to learn from the text, as we all “learn” from the media.

Chapter One, “Viewing and Picturing Cops,” describes a theme Perlmutter repeatedly turns to; that police feel that the public, based on their understanding of mediated policing, expect something to always be happening. Perlmutter says: “To some extent, the officer in public is always ‘on’” (p. 10). The officers he worked with were especially concerned that the public would think that they were boring and that they do nothing, “No matter that doing ‘nothing’ was actually something important indeed” (p. 16). This chapter, in essence, offers the reader a glimpse into how the police officers that Perlmutter works with view their “opponents,” the mediated police. In fact, Perlmutter says, they have a “love-hate relationship with their televisual and cinematic counterparts” (p. 13).

Chapter Two, “All the Street’s a Stage,” looks at police behavior through the lens of dramaturgical analysis. The main point stressed is that police officers know they are under constant public scrutiny, not just to perform, but to perform in the ways that mediated police do.

Chapters Three and Four provide overviews of prior literature regarding mediated police. The most useful part of the book comes from an eleven-page section in Chapter Three, where Perlmutter synthesizes his findings with those of other researchers to create a description of mediated cops, streets cops, and the effects of the difference in the way that role is conceived. For instance, Perlmutter describes the level of action for mediated cops as “never a dull moment,” while for street cops it is “tedium and adrenaline” (p. 41). The effect is that “discordance between the stereotype and the reality creates some embarrassment for street cops when perceived by observers” (p. 42). Regarding the issue of heroes and villains, the media present clearly defined good and evil characters, while the street is characterized by “the good, the bad and the gray” (p. 44). One effect of this is that “everyone in real life seems to conceive of themselves as aggrieved victims” (p. 44).

Chapter Five is devoted to an analysis of the “Front Stage and Back Stage” of policing. The front stage refers to what the public actually sees. This section reinforces the mantra that image is everything, especially to police. Perlmutter relays the story of how he once fell asleep in the police car and was chastised by officers who told him: “It’s pretty embarrassing when people see a cop falling asleep in the cruiser” (p. 67). As Perlmutter notes later “a cop can afford to look mean, brutal, or callous, but not ridiculous” (p. 68).

The back stage involves the “hidden transcripts” of policing – the feelings, attitudes, and assumptions about fellow officers and the job itself, as well as moral judgments about the public and superior officers. In regards to complaints about the job, Perlmutter states: “Complaining is not deviance – literally everybody does it – but it is a strategy of empowerment that may, in the end, serve both the employee and the organization” (p. 75). Those most subject to police ridicule, however, are those dubbed “the asshole” and the families they perceive as inept. “The asshole” describes those who fail to recognize that the police are in charge of their encounters. That parents are clueless is also a commonly held police stereotype. Further, the general public is both criticized and applauded for not knowing their rights. While officers make fun of people who do not know when to call the police and who fail to recognize that criminals lie, they also feel that “if people really knew the law cold, the whole system would grind to a halt” (p. 80). Especially problematic for police are teenagers, and their back stage discussions highlight their contempt for this group, as well as the lack of respect they have noticed in return.

Chapter Six, “The (Real) Mean World,” describes how cops see themselves as separate from the rest of society, based on their perception that their work is unique. They then begin to develop an “us versus them” mentality, which is reinforced by such symbols as the wearing of uniforms. As Perlmutter notes: “The basic point is that cops believe that when they show up, people look at them and see a cop, not a human being but someone in a uniform” (p. 102). Perlmutter goes on to compare this with the definition of minority status, arguing that cops perceive their own minority status. Perlmutter proceeds to detail how the police feel that they lack the respect of the public: “Contempt of cop is a serious violation of the unwritten laws of

the street” (p. 107). The section ends with an excellent description of the “lies” told by statistics about crime and policing. Cops, like no one else, can understand the weaknesses in official numbers – based on changes in policing agenda that result in over-policing of particular areas, as well as the fact that so little crime enters the official reports based on their own handling of various situations.

Perlmutter ends the book with Chapter Seven, titled “Real Cops and Mediated Cops: Can They Get Along?” Here he explains that the way media affect police, and by logical extension, all of us, is not simplistic. At times police seem to both denounce and support the stereotypes presented in the media, as if they were equal parts wrong and ideal. The final note is an important one, in that Perlmutter asks how much we really want to know about the reality of policing.

This text provides a useful glimpse into what police regularly do on the job, how they perceive their work, the police subculture, crime statistics, and the effect of media portrayals of police. There are several things that are bothersome, however. One is that, at times, Perlmutter seems to become repetitive. For instance, the notion that police feel they are expected to always be in action is an important one, but need not be mentioned in all of the chapters. It is sometimes as if he did not bother to organize the material under the chapter heading he provided, rather just spewing ideas randomly. Another point of criticism is the excessively jargonistic nature of some of the text. While Perlmutter claims to be trying to tell the story in the words of the police officers – a key strength of ethnography – readers often get mired in the language of academe. Additionally, some of the conclusions that he draws do not seem to be based on his observations. For example, as noted above, Perlmutter concludes that complaining in the “back stage” has normative functions, such as empowering the officers, yet readers are apt to question what event or exchange occurred that drove him to this assessment.

The book would be quite helpful to students of policing, as Perlmutter and others make a good case for the importance of including studies of popular culture in the classroom. The jargon may make it difficult for students in introductory courses, however. The utility of the book for practitioners is probably minimal, at best. The most valuable parts are those that allow people who have little knowledge of the actualities of policing a chance to see what it is like, which would clearly not be helpful to those already in the profession. Criminologists interested in the ways that media effect crime, criminality, and the criminal justice system will generally find *Policing the Media* an interesting departure from the traditional content analysis. It can provide a rich way of engaging students in critically assessing their own “reading” of media, as well as their own assumptions about police and policing.

ENDNOTE

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