



Managing Police Relationships: Affinities Between Police Researchers and Crime Journalists

Dr Cian Ó Concubhair
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Core study

- Ethnography of police-media relations in England
 - 3 years of observational fieldwork
 - 9 years of ongoing study England & Ireland
 - Book in 2025
 - *The Communicative Architecture of Policing*
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Crime Reporters & Police Researchers

- 1 year observing crime reporting journalists
 - Interviewed dozens of others
 - Ongoing conversations with a handful
 - In early field notes, I began to note practices & values that were similar or 'the same' as my own
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'The Conspiracy'

- First affinity I noted, from Angelique
- Described drawing sources into 'the conspiracy'

'...as the journalists talk to their sources, they share the 'angle' of their story – not trying to trap or trick sources into divulging information: as Angelique says, naturally trying to draw them into "the conspiracy".

...by divulging themes and opinions on what I am seeing and where I think it fits into the broader narrative of the research when discussing things with my research subjects – unless I think it will alienate them or get them on the defensive – which is similar to how some journalists treat sources'

Extract from observational fieldnotes

'The Conspiracy'

- Tactical disclosures to sources to encourage trust
 - Aim to loosen source's instinctive caution around sharing sensitive insider information
 - A strategy I found myself employing with both journalist and police participants
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Access & Exclusivity

- Like many police researchers, crime reporters depend on access to get information
 - Two forms: formal and informal access
 - Formal: often mediated carefully controlled by communications workers in policing
 - Informal: sources journalists had cultivated without organizational authorization
 - Information sharing here could be a crime
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Access & Exclusivity

- Journalists prized informal access
- Viewed as higher value information
- ‘Deeper’ insights
- Though I found key reason was ‘exclusivity’
 - being ‘the first’ to publish
- Informal access facilitated exclusivity



Access & Exclusivity

- Access for researchers can be different
 - Authorisation can still produce high quality data
 - But depends on how mediated/controlled that access is...
 - Exclusivity for researchers also a high professional value
 - To be 'the first' to discover novel insights
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Ethics and Source Protection

- Informal journalistic sources often seek confidentiality
 - Journalists assert ‘journalistic privilege’ when police or courts require disclosure of source identities
 - Lots of affinities with scholarly guarantees of confidentiality
 - Though the ‘right’ to resist police/court disclosure demands not a core part of scholar’s professional identity
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Conclusion

- Things we can learn about method and ethics from (some) journalists about police source management
 - Particularly in the informal realm
 - Worth critically interrogating our own professional commitment to source protection
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