

WOMEN POLICE IN THE MEDIA - FICTION VERSUS REALITY

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Media, Police and Women. Three small words with big connotations and loads of complexity and scope. I will concentrate on the ways women police are portrayed in two major forms of media, first in the general news media and second how they are portrayed in television/film drama. I will also discuss how women are portrayed in general in the media, how this relates to images of women police and the complicated relationship between depiction of the real and depiction in fiction. The under-representation or very low visibility of women police in general news reporting and stereotyping in tv shows come up as two of the main issues concerning our portrayal in the media.

Most of you will have your own experiences, opinions and ideas about the media and will appreciate the murky line between fiction and fact and the difficulties of creating an image against (& in spite of) the backdrop of the traditional, male culture which exists in both policing and media organisations.

Stereotyping, double standards, sexist behaviour & demeaning attitudes are all problems confronted by women police and remain so in our media portrayal. But times are changing and as we achieve better conditions and greater equity in the job, our related media image shall also improve.

The mass media sets a powerful agenda for public opinion. It is important to realise that it selects themes, items and points of view. It is a force which reflects opinion and constructs opinion - the line between these two operations is of course blurred, and the degree to which this reflects or changes society is open to debate. Media in the form of print, radio & TV news has an obvious and profound effect on the community's attitude toward both police, women and women police.

Less obvious but just as important is the impact that television drama has on public perception. There is a strong interaction between 'real-life' reporting and fictional portrayals and both feed off each other. As the media ranges into the realm of creativity, so too, fictional representations directly affect actual, social perceptions. Incredibly enough audiences do believe what they watch on fictional cop shows, particularly when it is validated by the actors using real life images in the form of uniforms and props. In Australia, 'Blue Heelers', 'Police Rescue', 'Water Rats', 'GP', 'Home & Away', 'Phoenix' & 'Janus' are all good examples. The impact of cop dramas from overseas also needs to be recognised.

TV influence operates in a subtle or incidental fashion through reinforcing or shaping individuals views about men and women. It is not just one demeaning image or character that sways public opinion but the cumulative effect of negative, outdated stereotypes that makes a difference over time on a conceptual level. The repetition of certain images in both factual and fictional media ultimately make them seem real. EG.

So, if we accept the view that much of the community's beliefs are shaped by the media (because lets face it, only a minority have had direct contact with us), what would the public perception be of women police?

Overall there is a very positive image of female police - they have in fact contributed very well to the police image - particularly in this present climate. Publicity received in NSW from the '80 years of Women In Policing' celebrations last year was only positive and this was at a time when some of the most shocking Royal Commission revelations occurred. Certainly in contrast to many of our male colleagues, reports on police women are good. Our main problem would seem to be rarity of appearance in general news. Ironically women police are portrayed far more in drama than in real life media coverage.

It is acknowledged that women in general do not receive balanced representation in Australian TV & newspapers and when portrayal is achieved it is predominantly negative. This under-representation holds true for women police but compared to most depictions of women I believe we are in a much healthier position with regards to positive portrayal as we are in an occupation which holds authority & power in society.

On 18-1-95 a global media monitoring project, which was coordinated in Canada, analysed women's participation in the news from eighty countries. (Aust. report produced by the National Women's Media Centre, Sept. 1995) The project concluded that women reach their shelf life at just 35. Men over 35 are ten times more likely to be interviewed than women over 35. Similarly if you are between 18-34 in an influential position, you are half as likely to be interviewed as a young man in a similar position. The only category of news where women are portrayed more than men, is in the role of "victim".

One of the results of the project showed that 94% of police interviewees were male and 6% women. My own content analysis accords with this. NSW police women make up more than 14% of police so we are clearly underrepresented in media reporting.

When women police do receive media coverage it is by and large positive - there are very few negative reports, this is a comment in itself when you consider the current focus of most police reporting (corruption, turmoil, internal conflict etc). The current perception is that police women are much more ethical and honest. This conclusion is consolidated as women police continue to be conspicuous by their absence in adverse findings at the Royal Commission and I.C.A.C. (there is speculation as to why this is so - natural, exclusion from male culture, social conditioning etc.) So when a story like that concerning Wendy Hatfield comes along, the media have a field day. It had all the elements of great fiction - at the time Wendy Hatfield clearly fulfilled the need for a fictional heroine and once again the murky line between fact and fiction appears.

The Wendy Hatfield story is a good example of how a policewoman was held up by the media to be the honest, shining-light future of policing by the media after her appearance at the NSW Police Royal Commission to give evidence as an "honest" Kings Cross Police officer. (It is interesting to point out that whilst 4 male Kings Cross police also gave similar "honest" evidence they didn't make headlines or photo coverage.) Naturally it helped that she was young and good looking! Very soon after this appearance it was revealed that she had an alleged personal relationship with an alleged drug dealer. She was subsequently 'crucified' by

the media - details of the relationship were scrutinised and whether she did the wrong thing or not, the point is that a man would not have suffered the same dizzying fall.

I would suggest there is an element of danger in women being perceived as a group of homogenous, cleanskin, "heroines" as the media will treat us even more harshly when we do make mistakes. We should be careful to present a realistic image. As women become more and more integrated into all levels of the evermore, complex policing role, women police will undoubtedly be shown to make mistakes - this is human. We must be prepared to accept accompanying flak for such mistakes as long as it is realistic criticism. I believe that we need to be portrayed as the diverse, multi-faceted human beings that we really are.

Traditionally there has been a focus on policewomen as "firsts" for example, first female Dog Squad operative, first negotiator, first Mountie, first Airwing, first highway patrol etc. Now women have achieved representation in every section within the police it will be interesting to see if the media will find a new light to present us in or perhaps they will now simply treat policewomen as equals (but this is doubtful).

Because the media is such an influencing force, it is important that we capitalise on any opportunities to help raise our profile that may present themselves in our roles as women police. Positive policing stories are notoriously hard to achieve. The proliferation of women's magazines in popular press is an exclusive domain for the potentially positive portrayal of women police. Whilst I'm not suggesting that you necessarily actively seek out publicity I would encourage you to use any media opportunities that may present themselves and use them to your advantage, demonstrate your professionalism and ultimately improve the amount, the quality and the range of our representation.

As a project coordinator at the Marketing & Media Branch for the NSW Police Service, part of my role is to liaise and facilitate requests from the film, television and advertising industry. I read a lot of scripts involving police and have a direct opportunity to influence the portrayal of police in these mediums and feel well placed to comment on how women police are currently being portrayed. Learning about this industry has been eye opening. It has highlighted the degree of ignorance which exists about our role and the reliance on stereotypes in the depiction of police women & policing in general. The issue of confidentiality is also important with regards to lending our image to fictional representations.

In our involvement in assisting the film & television industry we have guidelines which include positive portrayal of policing. This occurs through a script review process and as a female police officer in this role there is plenty of opportunity to promote & highlight women police. Naturally we do not have editorial control and suggestions on police portrayal are always open to negotiation. When we receive a request from a production company for assistance in the form of uniforms, advice, props etc. there is always room for compromise. We do not demand total authenticity, which would never happen as there are far too many creative processes in producing a TV show and, besides, it would make really boring viewing!

Some productions are now realising, that there is good drama to be found in using female police without resorting, to stereotyping or role reversal or replacement (that is denying sexuality altogether by replacing a man's role with a woman). Use of women in police roles often does not always occur to scriptwriters, producers or researchers, until it is suggested. More often than not, they take on these new ideas with great enthusiasm and from that point onward, are more than happy to incorporate women police in their storylines - eg. GP recently included females in their State Protection Group operations team even though there is not one in real life; Home & Away have replaced their old male Sgt with a female Senior Constable as he was too boring!

Naturally enough, police are the greatest critics of the ways in which they are portrayed in Australian drama. There is a dilemma here - that is the difficulty of allowing researchers, scriptwriters enough access and information to make something credible and authentic without compromising confidentiality or procedural matters of a sensitive nature. Despite the acclaim that the ABC productions, 'Phoenix' and 'Janus' received by police for its realism, concerns were raised in the Victorian Police that too much access was given to the researchers, as it gave away far too much real life practice and procedure.

By definition a stereotype is devoid of subtlety or complexity. Ill advised use of stereotypes tends to reinforce prejudices and constitutes an assault on the dignity & diversity of the individual. Most women hold contempt for stereotyping, they demand choice in their lives and are not prepared to fit any easy mould. Whilst there have been improvements in recent times, there is a way to go. This research seems equally applicable to women in policing. We have to contend with both sex and occupational stereotyping.

Certainly sex trait stereotyping is alive and well in TV shows (& media reporting). These are the most common types of stereotypes women in general suffer and may be also be applied to women police:

1. **The emotionality of TV women.** On TV, women are much more emotional than men. It is one of the many ironies of the representation of emotion that violence and aggression are not counted as being, a display of emotion. Women are often portrayed as flustered, in crisis, sensitive, fearful & anxious, often dependent on male help and support in both personal and professional situations, moodiness and neurotic. Lisa McCune of 'Blue Heelers' is often seen doing the soft stuff - making the tea, comforting, the victims. This is an easy trap to fall into. My own branch is involved in producing training videos, posters and television commercials. Whilst we are very conscious about gender balance there is still a tendency to place women in the more compassionate roles - whether this is stereotyping or merely a reflection of real life is probably open to opinion. (At the same time we also don't want to lose the gender difference!)

2. **The sexuality of TV women.** Television women are nearly always physically or sexually attractive no matter what their role. Much more emphasis is placed on their looks than men. The tendency for casting of policewomen is glamorous & beautiful if they are playing a major role, but if it is a minor extra part they are usually frumpy, fat, ugly & tough! Emphasis is placed on a women's youth and "decorative" features instead of her intelligence, ambitions or

desires for her own self fulfilment. An interesting development in emphasising gender differences in drama is the technique of 'unresolved sexual tension' between partners. It keeps the audience 'hanging'. Women police have proved extremely handy for this and it is becoming more common.

EG. 'Blue Heelers', 'Water Rats', 'The X-files', 'Cracker' etc.

3. **The power and competence of TV women.** In sitcoms men and women are found to be equal (eg. 'The Thin Blue Line') In crime drama men are far more likely to be dominant even when professional status is irrelevant. Men are usually seen to give the orders and advice except of course if it is about a traditional female topic. In Australian & British drama this is slowly changing - WaterRats has a good gender mix portrayed in their command - a female Chief Supt, a female acting tactician, and a senior female detective. The Bill is seemingly "gender indifferent" - female Chief of Detectives and women police in all sorts of roles.

4. **The assertiveness and ambitious nature of women.** Female characters who hold successful jobs are portrayed as 10 times more likely to be unsuccessful in marriage than housewives. You rarely see a policewoman portrayed as happily married with children they are usually either lesbians, divorced or single. EG. 'Water Rats' has 3 main female characters - one is gay, one is divorced and one is single. Even Helen Mirren's character in 'Prime Suspect', whilst one of the most powerful and realistic portrayals of a police woman, inevitably depicted her success at work at the suffering of her personal life. U.S. TV show, 'Cagney & Lacey' broke new -round by depicting a detective trying to balance work with a husband & kids (and its accompanying problems).

The early portrayal of policewomen in drama helped breakdown some of the barriers in terms of public perception and the capability of women police. Shows such as 'Policewoman', 'Charlies Angels' & 'Cop Shop' portrayed independent & powerful women. Back in the early 70s when these shows were originally created it is theorised that the 'fathers' of the US film & TV industry acknowledged the force of feminism by embracing roles such as female police, detectives and private investigators as they showed women actually enforcing rather than challenging the patriarchal laws that many feminists believe oppress them. (It is also more likely that they realised the potential market for such characters!)

In retrospect the portrayal of these policewomen was highly problematic (eg. Angie Dickinson as Pepper Anderson never worked with another woman, she only wore high heels & tight fitting clothes; Lynda Stoner is best remembered for her chest rather than her police work in 'Cop Shop' & 'Charlies Angels' only ever operated under the close yet invisible guidance of "Charlie" and are remembered more for their haircuts than their work). But whether or not you subscribe to above theory the shows were partly responsible for initiating a public awareness of the role of women police and the beginning of an acknowledgment by the industry that policewomen do play an important role in both society & drama.

If you have a problem with the way you believe women police have been portrayed in TV shows, write to the producer. On the whole I believe that they welcome the feedback. Our involvement with the film & television industry in NSW is based on an agreement that they

want reality & authenticity in return for positive portrayal of the police. Often what they end up showing is based on ignorance and like any commercial product they do not want to alienate anybody. So if it is brought to their attention you can assist with change.

In conclusion, women police are generally well received in most forms of the media. Certainly in television drama shows our role has been embraced and we are usually portrayed well despite some stereotyping, which is often excused in the name of "dramatic license". In news media coverage our portrayal is usually positive and women police are perceived as more honest and ethical. Our main downfall is under representation and a seeming reluctance to put our hands up to be involved if given the opportunity. Partly this will be overcome as women achieve more command positions. Working in a traditional male occupation there seems to be a tendency to believe that women police views may not be taken seriously. Be assured that international industry research indicates that female authority figures in the media are as motivating as males. Media skills for police will become much more important in the future. If you are good "talent", and you can try and achieve this by applying for media skills training courses, you will be sought after to represent your Organisation.

Whilst our image as women in policing is relatively unscathed, I don't think we should assume it will always be so and would encourage you to use any chance you have to raise the profile and consolidate our positive and professional portrayal in the media.