

## Finding the Grey in the Blue: Transparency and Disclosure in Policing

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### Abstract

Police services have traditionally valued the ability to work without ongoing public scrutiny of their investigations and operations. They can very reasonably cite the need to avoid alerting criminals to police activities that might result in their arrest and charging with offences, the need to protect police and witness safety, and the frequent need to act swiftly and decisively without obtaining special approval from relevant authorities or endorsement from public opinion. This necessary lack of disclosure concerning many police operations has often extended into a general lack of transparency regarding police activities and expenditures, to the extent that, in many countries, the police services are regarded as unaccountable and unconcerned with how public opinion perceives them. In such a climate, police corruption and arbitrary exercise of police power flourishes. This paper addresses the creation of a policing environment radically different from this through the introduction of transparency into policing in the UK and the consequent revelation of layers of grey documentation and data. The paper makes use of official documentation and case studies of selected British police forces to show how the culture of policing is being changed. The principles of open government, scrutiny, and disclosure with a view to establishing accountability, are in the process of becoming institutionalised in the UK right across government, local government, other 'public authorities' and the business and non-governmental organisation (NGO) sectors. The UK Human Rights Act 1998 sets the context, and a legal framework for this transparency is provided by the Freedom of Information Act 2000 and, to some extent, the Public Interest Disclosure Act 1998. The press and civil society are consistently using these mechanisms to call those with political and economic power to account. It has become apparent, even in sectors formerly as concerned with avoiding openness as the police service, that pro-active disclosure is the best way to meet public expectations. Police services now respond as a matter of course to freedom of information requests, organise a range of meetings to provide information and answer questions (from local officers' meetings with community groups through to major budget consultative meetings with citizens' panels), and participate in public and semi-public enquiries into aspects of the success or failure of police programmes and operations. The case studies in this paper will explore the opinions of key players in this process and draw attention to the grey information that is becoming available as a consequence.

### INTRODUCTION

British policing is now very different from the period before 2000, and this is largely an information phenomenon. Despite the fictional image of days and nights on patrol, fights and car chases, and cases solved by the brilliant insights of individuals, policing has always been essentially an information handling profession. The last few years have merely served to bring information aspects to the fore, through the strengthening systems and, most significantly, the introduction of high levels of transparency. The passing of the UK Freedom of Information Act in 2000 may, at first, seem to be the driving force behind this, but there are other influences and pressures that are arguably more significant. This paper concentrates on transparency and disclosure in policing to demonstrate the ways in which publications and semi-published, broadcast and electronic information arising from police work have been made available to the British public in ways which have genuinely revealed the grey resources that can inform people about activity in the blue-uniformed ranks of the police. All of this is comparatively new because in the past the need for not subjecting ongoing police investigations, and sometimes aspects of the judicial process, to public scrutiny has dominated the police information ethos.

In this paper we explore the shift from an ethos of concealment and confidentiality to one of transparency and disclosure mainly through the cases of two sample police forces. Their grey literature and web resources will be identified and described in the light of opinion and contextual information obtained through interviews with personnel from those forces. The paper is openly more descriptive than it is analytical. As a first step into this new and little investigated (at least as far as information science is concerned) information environment, it is worthwhile simply to describe and make some sort of initial assessment of the dimensions of the phenomenon. The content of this paper is largely drawn from observation and discussion of the activities of two police forces in the English Midlands: Derbyshire (1) and Leicestershire (2). The information materials and access obtained for these two case studies have been examined and placed in context through meetings with communications staff in both forces. The demography of the two counties makes them reasonably representative of the country (they are in the mid-lands in more senses than one) and the statistics relating to policing confirm them as worthwhile examples. Generalisations made from two cases are, of course, vulnerable to later more extensive and intensive research, but for the purposes of a preliminary essay we believe that these cases serve very well.