

Object and Arbiter: The Police and the *Los Angeles Times*, 1996-2006

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Abstract

This paper examines the treatment of the police in the *Los Angeles Times* between 1996-2006 through content analysis and supplemental interviews of police officers as well as reporters from print, radio and television media. After a brief review of the history of the fortunes of the Los Angeles Police Department and the *Los Angeles Times* during the years under study, the paper describes patterns of police coverage. The content analysis revealed an increase in international stories, a decrease in stories of local interest and a dearth of articles that applied critical analysis of, or skeptical regard to, police actions. The content analysis and interviews revealed that police departments and the news industry were undergoing opposing shifts: while there was a rise in the tendency of police departments to professionalize their communications (with departments' Public Information Officers increasing dramatically in stories over the years of study), there was also a steep decline in the resources news outlets were devoting to coverage of the police. These opposing tendencies, when correlated with the shifts in police reporting revealed in content analysis of the *Times*, can help explain why the paper provides its readers with less sophisticated and political police coverage. In effect, police are more often used as "witnesses" of fact rather than objects of analysis. This lack of vigilance over police actions hinders improvement in police/community relations in Los Angeles.

Keywords: police, *Los Angeles Times*, reporting, professionalizing police communications

1. Introduction

Most Americans get their information about police activities from media sources. This is true despite the reality that policing is the most intimate of state interventions into private life. Moreover, when surveying people as to their impressions of the police and their day-to-day work, people are much more influenced by the notion of policing presented to them in fictionalized portrays in television and film than by any real-life exposure. While procedurals may taint public understanding of the police, one of the primary sources of "reliable" information about police actions is local media. (Dowler 2003) Furthermore, the struggle of American newspapers to stay solvent since the late 1990s has had yet to be understood consequences to local governance. This is a time of changing priorities and new challenges to popular media and local police forces. This paper seeks to understand this changing landscape of media consumption and police media sophistication by tracking police coverage in the LA Times from 1996-2006.

There are several reasons for this period of study. First, this ten-year time frame includes the rise of the Internet as the ascendant source of news and devastating competition for print press in particular. Second, initially I partook this study to understand the role of 9/11 in coverage of policing and while it was in some ways overshadowed by changes in reporting, there are still patterns that can be seen in press coverage in the years before and after the attacks. This paper considers changes in policing press coverage in the post 9/11 two ways. First, I track patterns in police coverage in the *Los Angeles Times*. Second, I conducted a series of interviews of both representatives of the police force and local media outlets, including TV, radio and print, in order to get their take in changes in reporting and changes in police communication during this time. What I found was a "perfect storm" of reduced reporting chops and increased media savvy and manipulation by part of the police themselves.

The timeframe under examination here was a period of expanding federal reach into policing, the onset of the Department of Homeland Security and the "War on Terror." I undertook this study in order to see if this time of shifting policy foci was matched by changes in press coverage. I supplemented this content analysis with eleven interviews of newspaper journalists (3), television and radio reporters (3) and current/former police officers and consultants (5) about how both the news coverage given to the police and reporters' relationships with the police have changed. My hypothesis was that I would find less critical coverage of the police in the wake of the attacks and shifting priorities in

news coverage. For example, in New York City there was a marked decrease in criticism of police after September 11 despite the fact that several police controversies, including racial profiling, the sexual assault of Abner Loima and shooting death of Amado Diallo, were still receiving widespread public attention immediately before the attacks (McArdle 2006). While I went looking for changes in police coverage after September 11, I discovered that the reporting on police had been undergoing qualitative changes years before the attacks took place. First, reporters, crunched for time and funding by media companies making massive cuts, were far less able to investigate the people and events in situations where the use of police force was involved. Moreover, these resource and time-strapped reporters were now quite often relying on an increasingly professionalized communications division in the police force for details on the scenes of crime. This research has led me to the unsettling conclusion that- police forces are not only subject to an extremely low level of scrutiny by the paper, they are quite often given the power to act as main witness and arbiter of facts about stories that feature them. In most circumstances, the paper seldom report anything beyond what their professional, protected sourcing from the police told them about police-civilian interactions or altercations. Following Couldry, Livingstone and Makham, I argue this two-fold dynamic is important to public participation in local policy and policing. Coverage of local events is fundamental to active engagement (Couldry 2010). Thus, the ramifications of lack of reporting implicate the viability of collective action when it comes to the most fundamental aspect of state/citizen interaction: that of policing.

My research has led me to question whether Los Angeles neighborhoods have been offered the promise of reform with one hand only to have it taken away with another. The hard won reforms of the last twenty years and real progress of William Bratton to better community relations may be, in action, little more than façade. Not that the recently rescinded consent decree was not characterized by institutional change, but that in terms of community-police relations, the foundation may be shallow. To be more explicit, I ask whether the accountability promised through the hard-won institutionalization of community policing is not lost again when a professionalized communications wing of law enforcement exerts such strong influence on the telling of police stories. After reviewing recent histories of the *Times* and LAPD, I ask these questions through content analysis of the paper and select interviews.

2. Material Studied

Utilizing the Lexis-Nexis search engine and the keyword “police,” I gathered a random sample of articles from the *Los Angeles Times* having to do with police over the ten-year period of 1996-2006. All manner of articles that mentioned the police were included in the sample. I then used a random number generator to choose three articles for every month. This means that I gathered 36 articles a year, or 360 articles total. I then did a content analysis of the articles. I concentrated on issues such as where the story was located (local, national or international), whether the main issue was crime or police conduct, if the article contained any criticism of police and what role the police were given as actors in the story. I also looked at thematic issues, the complexity of the story, and whether the article was an editorial or reporting.

Through this process I combined some basic statistical information about the kinds of coverage in the paper – whether the story is about local police forces or police across the country or the world, for example - with a qualitative content analysis of the texture of the stories being written. I gained a sense of general trends through the years, but did not have a large enough sample to consider month-to-month shifts. I worked these themes into my interviews in order to get a more nuanced understanding of the phenomena.

The sample has some limitations. First, I do not know the size of the audience for the paper on any given day, and second, I do not know the extent to which the audience reading the stories were reading them online or in the paper edition. Thus I am unable to theorize about the audience reaction to changes in police coverage (whether they have a larger or smaller audience) nor about the impact of the website, something of obvious interest to those concerned about the shifts from “new media.”

I also conducted a series of seven interviews of representatives of police and reporting to add context and understanding. These open-ended interviews lasted about two hours each and addressed themes discovered through the analysis of *Los Angeles Times*.

3. Methods

I approached the articles I read by employing “frame analysis.” Norris, Kern and Just explain what scholars are looking for when they investigate framing this way: “The essence of framing is selection to prioritize some facts, images or developments over others, thereby unconsciously promoting one particular interpretation of events.” (Norris 2003). Further, I sought to investigate the most common narrative flow of policing stories and find what Jonathan Fiske refers to as the “dominant” text (Johnson-Cartee 2004; Norris 2003; Perlstein 2002, Entman 1993). It is through this process that I tried to understand how coverage of policing has changed in the *Los Angeles Times* between 1996 and 2006.

My frame analysis of the *Los Angeles Times* also allows us to see an instance in which large economic changes impact local politics. Newspapers have been an important conduit for understanding (and creating) public moods and scholars have long looked at the framing narratives of news stories in order to connect the content and structure with cultural phenomena (Entman 1989; Lippmann 1922; Mansfield-Richardson 2000, Norris 2003; Combs 1993). Indeed the role of newspapers in democracy, particularly considering their evident demise, is a topic of considerable contemporary scholarly and pundit concern (Dorroh 2008 / 2009). In this content analysis, I believe we can see how the declining power and prominence of the *Los Angeles Times* has also shaped a new “information regime” about the place of police in the public life of southern California, an area with a history of police controversy.

3.1 Interviews

As mentioned above, I supplemented my content analysis by conducting a series of interviews, each lasting about two hours. I asked questions about relations between the police and press and how it has changed over time, about the impact of economic pressures on newspapers, television news and radio outlets, and about the “craft” of reporting on police. The interviews largely confirmed trends I identified in my content analysis, namely the growing importance of police spokespersons, the general professionalization of communications from southern California police departments and the decreased resources allotted to reporting in print, television and radio.

4. Area Descriptions

4.1 The Los Angeles Police Department, 1996-2006

The majority of the articles about police in the *Los Angeles Times*, although to a lesser extent toward the end of the study, were focused on the Los Angeles Police Department. The period immediately preceding 1996 was a turbulent one in the history of the LAPD. The department was criticized for corruption, but critiques were more often voiced about the perceived racism of the department, methods of police enforcement and brutality.

Following two consent decrees resulting from lawsuits in the 1970s and 1980s (Newton 2006), the department was forced to hire from a more diverse pool of applicants; it thus moved away from its standard of white male recruits of specific height and weight as well as its preference for candidates of a military background (Barker 1997).ⁱ That shift in hiring led to a department marked by tensions between the older, pre-1980s hires and newer officers (Barker 1997). Older officers sometimes felt the newer hires were not as physically tough and had not had as rigorous of training but the impression – and reality - that the LAPD did not reflect the demographics of Los Angeles continued despite changes in hiring. Only recently did the LAPD claim to have an ethnic makeup similar to the city itself (Herbert 1997;LAPD 2008).

The biggest single scandal in the ten-year period before 1996 was the Rodney King beating, the trial of those police officers who had been involved in the incident and the riot that followed the officers’ acquittal. The March 1991 video-recorded beating and arrest of King was followed by the Christopher Commission’s investigation into both the incident and larger systemic problems within the LAPD. The recommendations the Christopher Commission offered in its July 1991 report included calls for community policing, community meetings with department members and a civilian review board. These recommendations became something of a public mandate after the post-trial riots in April of the following year (Walker 2007). The vestiges of this riot mark the first years of my study. Willie L. Williams was appointed chief in 1992 because he promised to commit to the changes outlined by the Christopher Commission. Williams was succeeded by Bernard Lewis in 1997, but Lewis was quickly replaced by Bernard Parks, who also came into office with promises of reform (Herbert 1997). Calls for police reform were only heightened by the 1997 Rampart Scandal, which began with officer Frank Lyga’s shooting of officer Kevin Gaines. In 1999 William Bratton, the former police chief of both New York and Boston, was put into office as Chief of Police, a position he held until October 2009.

All four police commissioners were brought in with the expectation that they would improve police/public relations. By many accounts relations have improved since the early 1990s. However, the LAPD still does not enjoy widespread community trust and support. In general, Chief Bratton was thought to be more available to the press than his predecessors. Some reporters find that while William Bratton had a generally good relationship with the media and understands its importance to public perception, this sentiment is not shared by the rank-and-file of the LAPD, who generally avoid the press.ⁱⁱ

While the media savvy efforts of Chief Bratton helped improve the reputation of the LAPD, the September 11 attacks dramatically shifted public attention away from police conduct toward terrorism and a conception of cops as “first responders” as well as away from crime and toward terrorism. (McArdle 2006). Furthermore, the newly instituted Department of Homeland Security developed a relationship with the LAPD and provided it with significant equipment and education. The Department offered the LAPD training to deal with hazardous materials and the possibility of terrorist attack (Helfand 2008). The LAPD had already begun a nation-wide push toward information integration and

data management before the attacks but increased its efforts there considerably afterwards (Chen 2003). And though my sample featured no press coverage of this, the LAPD designed the Counter Terrorism and Criminal Intelligence Bureau with the Department of Homeland Security's funding under the auspices of the "War on Terror" (LAPD 2014).

4.2 The Los Angeles Times

It was not just the police force that was subject to institutional upheaval in the years after 1996. The *Los Angeles Times* also went through new ownership and several different editors over the 1996-2006 period. In 2000, for example, the paper was reorganized and the "local" section was changed to the "California" section and the *Times* came to place less of an emphasis on local reporting (Cleeland 2008). That same year the paper was bought by the Tribune Company, which owns a dozen papers, including the *Chicago Tribune*. Most recently the Tribune Company announced a 50-50 layout of advertisement to news and more local coverage (Perez-Pena 2008). The paper's content-to-advertisement ratio mandates have had an impact on the number of stories the *Los Angeles Times* produced. The total articles the paper published declined from 134,386 in 1996 to 67,563 in 2006

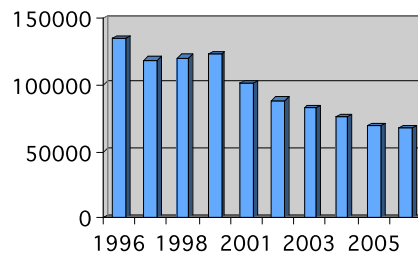


Figure 1. Total Number of Los Angeles Times Stories, 1996-2006

Many media scholars argue that newspaper reporting has evolved from a present-tense and fact-based presentation toward an analytical, historically-minded and interpretative writing form (Donovan 1992; Barnhurst 1997). The stories I found in my random sample, however, are marked by a decrease in sophistication, length and thematic breadth. My research can only testify to the decline of analytical reporting within the parameters of stories involving the police, but this decline may very well be true throughout the *Los Angeles Times*.

Further, the importance of media consumption, and print journalism in particular, and its relationship to democratic participation and the public is an issue of particular concern for those interested in media studies. The extent to which media in general connects a population with common cultural touchstones and public concerns, or alienates people in their homes away from public participation (Putnam 1995) is up for debate. However, as Couldry, Livingstone and Markham state in their summary of the two assumptions of much media research

The first assumption is that, as citizens, we share an orientation to a public world where matters of shared concern are, or at least should be, addressed...The second assumption is that public connection is principally sustained by a convergence in the media people consume. (Couldry 2010)

Certainly, this holds true when considering coverage of police, especially local police, in print media. Therefore, an analysis of news coverage is of critical importance when considering impressions of police conduct and of potential citizen participation in police reform.

Thus when I find that certain aspects of police coverage were consistent, such as interest in criminality over police accountability, or a general lack of critical coverage of the police, there are consequences beyond journalistic accuracy. In short, it is well documented that a public that is misinformed about crime and policing often demand from their politicians that are "tough on crime." These policies, in turn, have been found to be disastrous both to the criminal justice system and to the California budget. However, when we see growing professionalization in police communications and a lack of critical eye toward police activities in any way, beyond the general tendency to unquestionably accepting police accounts, but treating them simply as witnesses to actions partaken by others, we need to consider the consequences from seeing the police as narrators or simply witnesses, rather than agents with agendas of their own. This public perception of police is one that is particularly troubling when we consider the police as an agent of the state. Police, by definition, are not neutral, but are state-mandated actors. Therefore, because they are seen as witnesses rather than actors, the critical mechanism communities need to make valid assessments of their police, and by extension, state, is lost. Police simply cannot be viewed as a neutral witnesses and encourage public participation in community governance and vigilance over there own place at the same time.

5. Results

5.1 *What Held Constant: A focus on crime but not on police agency or culpability*

Certainly, there were patterns of police coverage that stayed the same throughout the period of study. First, stories that involved the police were more likely to be about a crime (often local) than about police actions specifically. Second, the paper rarely featured stories that represented the police as *agents*, as subjects whose choices and actions figure in the reporter's descriptions of how events unfolded. Instead, the police figured in reportage as storytellers and descriptive context givers.

As one might expect, police stories are usually crime stories. The "typical" policing story was one of a local crime in which the police do little else than provide (unquestioned) information. My interview with a southern California community editor provides some context for why police most often emerge in news stories as witnesses describing a crime. She notes that crime stories, particularly local crime stories, are very popular and tend to be the most viewed on the paper's website. Further, she expressed frustration that many reporters do not venture beyond the version of the crime presented by the police. She even joked about difficulties getting reporters "off the desk" and out into the field, claiming that reporters would often rather get their information from the police department and write the article from there.ⁱⁱⁱ

Of the 36 stories I sampled each year, the number of "interesting crime stories" ranged between 8 and 11.^{iv} The exceptions were 1998 and 2001, when such stories spiked and made up at least half of the monthly sample.^v My analysis of these stories confirmed a conclusion arrived at in other studies – that these pieces are largely about street crime and/or violent crimes and do not accurately represent either the most common type of crime or use of police time (Simmons; 2005; Manning 1997).

This tendency of police to play the role of narrator rather than agent in these stories is embodied in the article, "Bicyclist Hit by Police Car Slightly Injured." This story about a minor 1997 Oxnard incident covers the accidental hitting of a twelve-year-old bicyclist by a police cruiser. A local officer investigated the case and the officer driving was found not to be at fault. The accident is described this way in the report:

Officer Karl Duyer was traveling eastbound about 15 mph in the alley running parallel north of the 300 block of Questa Del Mar about 3:15 pm when Israel Lopez dashed into the alley and was struck, according to Oxnard Officer Michael Gregson, who investigated the accident....

The youth was guilty of three minor infractions, although he will not be fined, Gregson said.

"He didn't have any breaks on his bike and crossed the road in an unsafe manner," Gregson said. "He wasn't wearing a helmet."

What is curious about the story is the mixture of dry fact-based detail, which one might expect from a police report, with a dramatic (and unchallenged) narrative from the officer in question. In the middle of a dry recitation of facts, we are told by Officer Gregson that the boy "dashed" into the alley. As well, the article uses direct (and uncorroborated) quotes from the officer: "He didn't have any breaks," he "crossed the road in an unsafe manner," and "wasn't wearing a helmet" to establish that the boy was found to be at fault. The article also ends with a sad / funny scene in which the reporter notes that "The youth later walked away from the scene, because the front wheel and handlebars on his bike were bent." the story is clearly not framed as a serious story about a pressing event, but it is worth noting what other angles were available to, but not chosen by, the reporter. Considering the growing literature on minors early encounters with and trust in institutions, along with the decided probability that this was not a happy event for the young bicyclist, this could have been a story of youth alienation.(Goldsmith 2005) At the very least, the boy or his family could have been asked about their perspective on the incident and whether they feel he is entirely at fault. In this story, the police are the only source and their version of reality is taken as a given.

However, this tendency to give officers the role of storyteller does not always benefit the police. Lacking agency within a story's narrative, the police also do not make decisions or waiver but simply serve as a source of facts. When reading through the articles I looked for stories where the police were "acting" in the story, when they were actually described doing something instead of saying something (i.e. running, arresting, investigating, etc). I've termed these kinds of stories as ones of "police policing". What I found is that police are not commonly described as actors. At most police were characterized as doing something in the story slightly less than one-third of the time.^{vi} The most articles (10 out of 36) in which the police figured as actors came in 1996. This tendency did not change after the September 11 2001 attacks.

5.2 Patterns of Change in Police Coverage

5.2.1 The Decline of Local Coverage and the Growth of National and International Reporting

One thing that has clearly changed from 1996 to 2006 is the geographic terrain that gets covered in these reports. In 1996, thirty-three of thirty-six stories about the police were local stories. That is, the event in question happened within the greater Los Angeles area and was not a story covered throughout the country. My hypothesis was that the public and the paper would be more international in their imaging of police and that policing would be connected to terrorism. There does appear to be a significant drop in local police stories between 2000 and 2001. In 2006, there were 14 local police stories compared to an average of 20.73 and a highpoint of 33 in 1996. However, while there was a significant drop in 2001, the number of local stories declines steadily throughout the period of study.

Table 1. Local Stories 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
33	27	31	27	26	16	19	13	15	16	14

In contrast, while national stories did not have any particular pattern, international stories did go up. The 1996 sample did not have any international stories while 2004 had 14 and 2005-2006 had 10 respectively. The average was 5.82 stories a year. This may have to do with a general increase in interest in international geo-political issues since 2001.^{vii} Starting in 1999, the year when the “California” section –to which most local reporting was now delegated - debuted and was accompanied by a decrease in local reporting, the number of international stories went up every year before peaking in 2004.

Five of the 22 international stories in 2003 and 2004 were about Iraqi police. Iraq is the only country to have been covered in more than two reports (Australia and India had two each). In general those international police stories were about the war on terrorism. Here again, we see a decided shift in how the police are framed. For in these international stories, policing is presented more as a component part of geo-politics than a matter of local order. Iraqi police were always described with reference to their role in the conflict and their capacity to secure some kind of sovereignty for the Iraqi government. In general, the international stories tended to make less distinction between the identity of the police department and that of the local state. There are a series of stories on Iraqi police that stand out as notable exceptions. In 2006, the paper often successfully tracked the shifting relationship between the Iraqi police and its various alliances. One article discussed the renewed efforts of the American military to train Iraqi police officers who were often accused of extrajudicial violence. The article explained the hierarchy of the police agencies, the past problems and dynamics of the current force.^{viii} But such detailed reviews of political machinations among parties with different passions and interests did not otherwise emerge in the paper’s international police coverage. In most stories the reporters would refer to police actions as state actions, something not generally done when reporting on American police.

5.2.2 The Sharp Decline of Politics in Local Police Stories

What I found interesting is that while there was no real pattern in the number of “political” stories over the ten-year period, there was a qualitative shift in the stories themselves.^{ix} Mostly, the political stories after 2001 have a different context. With the exception of a 1997 story about Peruvian rebels holding hostages in the home of the Japanese ambassador, the pre-2001 articles were all stories about local politics. Stories about a new administrator or local department shake up were more frequent subjects of discussion.^x These kinds of stories largely disappeared. When they did appear, though, they were marked by more nuance than those international stories that presented the state and their police forces in an uncomplicated relationship. Since 2001 those policing stories that are explicitly about politics are international. There are far fewer stories about the interaction of politics and policing on a local level. So even though those few local stories about the politics of policing are more complex, they are far outnumbered by international stories that, by and large, simplistically equate police with the state.^{xi}

5.2.3 The Disappearance of Police Reform Stories

While stories about the politics of local policing in the Los Angeles Times sharply declined, one key component of “police politics” – police reform – essentially disappeared. Despite the Rampart scandal, the Rodney King trial and riot and the continuingly tense relationship between the LAPD and its constituencies, police reform was practically a nonissue in the *Los Angeles Times* after 1998.^{xii} This dearth of reportage persisted despite the fact that the consent decree mandated significant reforms from the LAPD during the years between 1996 and 2006. In fact, after 1998 there were no stories about reforming the police in my sample with the exception of a story about an officer asking to see a woman’s breasts during a traffic stop.^{xiii} The highest number of stories about reform was eight in 1997 and it went down from there.^{xiv} The majority of those reform stories involved the aftermath of the Rodney King Riots –attempts to hire a head of the civilian review board, for example.

5.3 Change in Police Culture

Clearly the nature of coverage of policing stories changed in significant ways between 1996-2006. When considering the extent of these changes, and that the defining characteristic of each is the interplay between budgetary constrictions on reporters on the one side and increased media savvy on the other. Moreover, the total lack of police reform stories and the startlingly cheap and superficial coverage of policing is in need of some specific explanation. When looking for cause, I think it serves the research to consider the impact of budget restrictions, police savvy, and the overall change in the culture of policing. In order to ascertain the lived experiences of these changes, I conducted a series of interviews. What became clear is that the nature of the relationship between police and media has changed, although it is generally based on the same type of fears from both sides. Furthermore, the combination of police spokespersons, the 24-hour news cycle and budget cuts for reporters did not go unnoticed by those in the game.

5.3.1 The Distrust of Police for Reporters and Competing Explanations for the Cause of Distrust

Given the *LA Times*' scant coverage of police brutality, its nearly and frequent inclusion of police in crime stories in which officers appear as narrators rather than agents, it would seem reasonable to expect that relations between the paper and the LAPD would be relatively amicable. But the orientations police personnel and reporters have toward the coverage of police stories tells another story. The representatives of the police expressed concern that reporters are "out to get them" and will take any opportunity to say something negative about police actions. Convinced that any missteps will result in a negative article or quote, police personnel stress that trust needs to be developed between police and individual reporters in order for police to be comfortable and lament the fact that they feel they interact less and less with those kinds of reporters.

The reporters I interviewed expressed a similar anxiety about their relations with the police. But their misgiving had little to do with any tough coverage they provided individual offices or the force in general. Rather they believed that the fraught nature of police-press relations grew out of deficient time and resources devoted to beat reporting. All the reporters or editors interviewed stated that they felt that one of the disadvantages of relying on younger, less experienced and lower paid reporters to do the crime / police beat was that they did not develop trust with local police. Because police fear of what reporters will write or say, they often end up not talking to the press and relying on police spokespersons. This expectation that reporters will write unjustifiably negative stories about the police makes it near impossible, my reporter interviewees contend, for the press to talk to police and therefore unable to do serious reporting, positive or negative.^{xv}

5.3.2 The Decline of a Reporting Corps and the Rise of Police Communications Professionals

My research suggests that the claim made by reporters I interviewed – that officers distrust them because they have been given less time and resources to develop relationships with the police is more empirically verifiable than officers suspicions that reporters are apt to provide them with unjustifiably negative coverage. This is because the police stand as the only source of factual information about the crime in question in most of the crime stories reviewed in this ten-year sample. And these sources were, troublingly, well removed from the circumstances of the crime.

The growing use of police spokespersons allowed for a less politicized and more one-dimensional presentation of police actions. During the first year of this study there were no mentions of police spokespersons in the *Times* coverage. During that time, a police officer, usually the watchman on duty who did have some media training, spoke to the press "Police Spokesperson" or "Public Information Officer" does not appear in the text of the paper until 1998. However, by the end of the period studied, it was more common to see a "police spokesperson" quoted than an actual police officer working onsite or on patrol. Sixteen articles used PIOs in 2006 with an average of 15 per year from 2004 to 2006.^{xvi}

As police spokespeople become more prevalent as sources, the role of police in the story has shifted from that of the fallible witness to the frequently omniscient narrator. For example, a story from January 2001 about the arrest of thirty-two who were street racing individuals in the East Valley uses the police as knowledgeable guides to an unfamiliar terrain, quoting "Senior Police Service Representative Spence Leafdate" as stating "For years, a subculture of mostly teenage and young adult racing enthusiasts has been gathering in remote areas, setting up roadblocks and drag racing in front of impromptu crowds" (Liu). Thus, it is the police spokesperson, rather than the reporter's investigation, interviews and conversations with the parties involved, that provides for the history of the issue and explains its relevance. No other sources are quoted in the article to describe street racing. There is also no description of police actions in this article (other than arresting, which they are not always noted as doing).

The authority of police in these *LA Times* articles often extend beyond the former's interpretation of events or neighborhood history, the police also sometimes speak for common sense, judgment or decency. Police officers are often used as the voice of moral order in a sea of salacious content. For example, a story from March 2005 covered the shooting of a fifteen-year-old girl in front of her high school as she was leaving school for the day. It is the police

representative who states, “She is completely innocent,” and notes that “She was just leaving school where her aunt normally meets her” (Simmons 2005). So here, it is the police, not a family member or friend, who establishes the innocence of the victim and provides heart-rending details about the young woman’s daily routine.

As their role as agents has disappeared in the narrative, the police have taken on a new role as arbiters of the “truth” of the crime. Often enough they act as surrogates for the reader, representing the thoughts and emotions that he or she might have when encountering a gruesome crime. Thus, the role of the police in these stories does not differ that greatly from their role in crime dramas. Just as in any number of cop shows the audience is meant to identify with the show’s lead actor –a police officer- and that character reacts to the bad behaviors of criminals with the kind of moral indignation the audience enjoys and respects.

The police spokesperson is charged solely with dealing with the press. Individual police and sheriff’s offices vary greatly in the organization of the police spokesperson.^{xvii} In a small district, it is not uncommon to find that the police spokesperson is the Public Information Officer in the mayor’s office in a small district. In larger forces, a police officer may be specifically trained for the position. In still other departments the Public Information Officer may be a former reporter or public relations professional.^{xviii} But however varying the institutional organization and whether or not he or she is a sworn officer, the police spokesperson is not directly involved in any police work or investigation. For those interested in maintaining the local press as a conduit for oversight of policing activities, the emergence of this office is an obvious problem. The reporter is now two degrees of separation from anyone actually involved with the event in question. Though longer stories usually included a quote from a second source, it is not uncommon to see a story about a local or national crime for which the only source for the story is someone who did not have anything to do with the actual events at hand and with an obvious agenda. Even in longer stories, typically more than 300 words, reporters seek out multiple sources to set the scene and gain some background, but not go very far in its analysis of the policing, who was in charge of the investigation or why this organization was settled on. For example, a story about two bodies found buried under a concrete slab behind a home in Colton, CA describes the local police and FBI involvement, but only quotes the Colton Police Chief and a “source” who states that the FBI is leading the investigation. In fact, the Colton Police Chief did not even want to reveal (officially) who was in charge of the investigation. The reporter only got one unofficial quote.

Even more significant than this growing distance between reporters and those involved with the event in questions, is the fact that it is more difficult to get at critical information about police actions when dealing with professionals trained to present the police only in a positive light (Chermak 1995). Reporters also complain (particularly those from TV who are under the heaviest time pressure) of having to wait for PIOs to get to the scene and get to them with a statement. Interestingly, they state that this process itself can lead to sloppy reporting as desperate TV reporters speculate about the events because they have no hard information in time to go live.^{xix} Clearly, police departments, including the LAPD are increasing their dependence on PIOs to speak to the press and thus relate to the public and the *Times* reporters are increasingly obliging the LAPD’s dependence. PIOs are professionals at dealing with the press and getting a pro-police message across.

6. Discussion

The results of this study of the *Los Angeles Times* and my interviews of police and reporters led me toward a few interconnecting conclusions. First, police stories continue to be most often stories about crime. Second, despite the historically contentious relations between the LAPD and many communities in Los Angeles, relations that were particularly contentious right before and during the period of study, the paper tends not to cover issues of police brutality, harassment and reform. This is most notable in the last seven years of the sample. Third, there has been a decrease in local police coverage and an increase in international police coverage. Fourth and related, local police coverage was decreasingly merged with an analysis of local politics while the increasing number of international stories tended to conflate police actions with state actions. Finally, there was a dramatic increase in reliance on Public Information Officers by the press. Generally speaking, there was a decrease in both length and sophistication of articles. When conducting interviews, I found that police and press representatives identified two interweaving dynamics: the rise in police department use of PIOs and the decline of newspaper expenditures on experienced reporters whose length of time on the beat would allow them to develop trust from the police. These two dynamics led to reporters so overly reliant on police as sources of the story that they were unable to assume the skeptical, even potentially adversarial approach to produce more analytically sophisticated news stories.

Table 2. Consistent and New Characteristics in Police Coverage

Constant	New
Focus on Crime	Decline of Local Stories
Lack of Police Culpability	Increase in National and International Stories
Lack of Police Acting	Sharp Decline of Politics in Local Stories
	Disappearance of Police Reform Stories
	Dramatic Increase in Use of Public Information Officers

In the United States, the police are fundamentally a local institution. Despite the onset of Homeland Security and the accompanying growing connectedness between law enforcement and intelligence communities, there is still a great deal of autonomy among city police departments and county sheriffs.^{xx} The best conduit for police-community interactions, therefore, is still public discussion and publicity at the small scale, local level. While I have criticisms of community policing that go beyond the scope of this paper,^{xxi} I do believe that community policing has the most success when there is space for informed communication. One of the only ways that is possible is through rigorous press coverage of police departments. Rigorous coverage of the politics of policing allows readers to see some levels of flux, flexibility, fighting and negotiating in their relationship with the police force rather than understanding the force as a simple, monolithic institutional structure. Furthermore, covering police reform efforts potentially allows one’s readership to grasp the democratic power they exercise as citizens over the police. By not providing substantial coverage to the ongoing LAPD reforms, the *LA Times* makes it easier for readers to see their police force as “beyond politics.” Reporter dependence upon PIOs only further fosters the potential for a deterministically minded and demobilized citizenry.

The increase in use of PIOs is only surprising in how pronounced it is. Scholars have noted the rise of the Public Information Officer in the lexicon of police-media relations over the last twenty years. While some scholars have argued that police and media relations improve with the introduction of a Public Information Officer (Guffy 1992), it is important to consider the qualitative impact on reporting that follows from this new, funneled point of police access for reporters. My research suggests that the result of an under-sourced and time-deprived press corps coming into contact with a professional distributor of information from the police department is a less sophisticated form of police reportage. This can be seen in the decline in both the topics covered and the complexity of analysis over the years of study. As Steven Chermak tells us, the professionalization of the police/media relations may serve the self-interest of both organizations. Chermak notes, “Strategically disseminating some types of information and blocking inquiries for other types of information is critical for organizational survival.” (Chermak 2005). This professional relationship may aid news editors who have to make decisions about how many reporters are needed to cover police stories. It may also reduce headaches for police chiefs when recent policing actions are under scrutiny.^{xxii} But it effectively frames out a space in which civilians may want to consider their political interests and police accountability to them.

Related, police, in this new glossy and professionalized communication, lose their status as actors and become only smooth objects whose edges have been sanded away. The most obvious reason the agency of police disappears in these *LA Times* stories is due to the very concrete fact that the individual police officer no longer has much of a “role” in newspaper stories. Because the PIO-reliant reporter never encounters the officers as subjects whose actions partially determined what took place during an event, the reader does not encounter those officers as “actors” in the story who followed procedures, relied on discretionary force, was compelled into a quick decision or had an impact in some other way. While other scholars have pointed out that the rise of the Public Information Officer has been going on for years now, this paper demonstrates that the business of reporting is increasingly beginning to engage in something of a symbiotic relationship with the rise of the PIO. This police-force professionalization of relations on with the media, combined with reporting changes brought on by cost-slashing publishers, has led to a lack of critical inquiry into police actions.

If one considers the peculiar position of police in a democratic society, the disappearance of the police as actors and speakers in newspaper stories becomes a deeply troubling problem. As Gary T. Marx puts it:

A defining characteristic of police is their mandate to legally use force and to deprive citizens of their liberty. This power is bound to generate opposition from those who are subject to it. It also offers great temptations for police abuse and abuse on behalf of the authorities controlling them (Marx 2001).

In a liberal democracy, an important mitigating factor in any police tendency towards abuse is the role of the press to inform the public of police behaviors. In recent years civilian review boards have served as an important check on police power and those review boards are inevitably the result of public outrage over police behavior (Loader 2001). Public outcry has also led various police departments to conduct their own research and implement policies to improve police-community relations (Police Assessment Resource Center, 2006). But for any of these institutional solutions to

work, communities need consistent and reliable information about police behaviors. The diminished place of police in newspaper coverage may well lead to lack of public oversight into police activities and even increases in police abuse.

7. Conclusion

Peter Manning describes the police as conforming to particular dramaturgical narratives ---“fighting” crime in a story with a beginning, middle and end rather than traffic management and paperwork (Manning 1992; Manning 1997). This research suggests that the narrative form of police coverage is also rather structured. In this relatively recent narrative, the police are generally not actors but owners of facts (which, considering their obvious stakes in how a story is perceived, is problematic in itself). Manning’s work also explores how a press focus on the crime-fighting aspect of policing rather than a concrete analysis of their day-to-day impact on the public order is detrimental to both the public and the police. This research suggests that police are talked about in reference to crime fighting, but all the teeth have been taken out of the analysis.

Furthermore, this lack of press scrutiny allows the police to shift from their formal role as enforcers of the law to symbolic and literal creators of law and “order.” As Walter Benjamin points out in “On Violence,” through impunity, selective enforcement and action, the police create the law that they are called on to enforce. As police coverage has decreased, and press reliance on the Police Information Officers has increased in this period I have studied, it stands to reason that what southern California police say becomes law. There is no other check on their actions if no one is watching or analyzing what they do.

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ⁱ Barker outlines the tensions between “old” and “new” police on pages 7-17 of *Danger, Duty and Disillusion: The Worldview of Los Angeles Police Officers* Prospect Heights, Illinois: Waveland Press.

ⁱⁱ Anonymous Television Reporter A. Personal Interview. May 2, 2008.

Anonymous Television Reporter B. Personal Interview. April 21, 2008

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ⁱⁱⁱ Anonymous Newspaper Editor. Personal Interview. January 3, 2008.

^{iv} By “interesting crime story” I mean a article where the police are present and may or may not be actors, but the focus of the story is a particular crime.

^v Number of “interesting crime” stories, 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
18	9	18	9	22	10	10	11	8	12	13

Average = 12.27 stories out of the thirty-six story sample every year

^{vi} “Police Policing” stories 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
10	5	6	7	1	2	6	7	9	5	4

Average 6.2 per year out of 26 articles sampled per year

^{vii} International Stories 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
0	3	1	4	6	5	9	8	14	10	10

viii Moore, Solomon “Police Tied to Death Squads; U.S. military officials say they suspect Iraq’s highway patrol, staffed largely by Shiites, is deeply involved in torture and killings” *Los Angeles Times*, Feb. 21 2006 A1.

ix Political Stories 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
6	8	2	7	5	6	5	2	7	7	7

x For example: Baker, David R. “Ballot Listing Angers Police Officers Assn” *Los Angeles Times: Ventura Valley Addition*, August 30, 1996. Pg 3

Haynes, Bonnie “Police Funds Will for Office Workers” *Los Angeles Times: Orange County Edition*. September 26, 1996. Pg 3

Kass, Jeff “Police Union Declares Contract Talk Impasse” *Los Angeles Times: Orange County Edition*. August 21, 1996. Pg2

Shuster, Beth “New Proposal Scales Down Police, Fire Bond Requests; City Hall: Council is given \$1.7 billion package that deletes plan to replace Parker Center” *Los Angeles Times*. July 10, 1998. Pg 5

xi For example, a short article in 2002 equates the Zimbabwe police with the ruling party without explanation. (September 29, 2002 A22)

xii Brutality or Police Harassment Stories, 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
3	1	4	1	0	2	2	1	2	3	2

Average 2.1 articles a year out of 36 article sample

xiii Chong, Jia-Rui “Orange County; Witness: Cop Asked to See My Breasts” *Los Angeles Times*. Feb 6, 2003 page B3. This 259 word story noted that the officer was fired and quoted the defense attorney’s claim that “asking a women to show their breasts is not a crime.”

xiv Police Reform Stories, 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
8	8	6	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

xv Anonymous Television Reporter A. Personal Interview. May 2, 2008.

Anonymous Television Reporter B. Personal Interview. April 21, 2008

Anonymous Newspaper Reporter A. Personal Interview. April 16, 2008

Anonymous Radio Reporter. Personal Interview. April 30, 2008

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xvi Use of Public Information Officer, 1996-2006

1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006
0	0	3	10	15	11	9	9	18	11	16

xvii Anonymous Police Chief. Personal Interview. April 14, 2008

xviii Anonymous Police Consultant. Personal Interview. April 25, 2008

xix Anonymous Television Reporter B. Personal Interview. April 21, 2008.

xx Manning, 2006.

xxi I am working on a manuscript about the limitations of the concept of community policing as a tool of reform because it has no clear definition, is mistakenly conflated with zero tolerance policing and, following Steve Herbert, is requires onerous community effort based on a unrealistic idea of how cohesive communities can be.

xxii Anonymous Newspaper Editor. Personal Interview. January 3, 2008.