

Probation and the Role of Public Relations

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Summary: Are the media and public relations of any relevance to those working in criminal justice? Does the wider public understand what probation is about? Can Probation Officers benefit in any way from good media and public relations handling? In light of the controversies in England around the relationship between the police and the media, is engaging with the press the road to ruin for probation? Should Probation Officers just get on with the business of working to challenge and change offenders' behaviour and leave media and public relations to the PR industry? This paper seeks to address some of those issues.

Keywords: Media, criminal justice, Northern Ireland, public perceptions of probation, influencing policy.

Introduction

Much has been written about the relationship between the police service and the media following the phone-hacking scandal in England. Most of the focus has been on the Metropolitan Police Service, and in particular its relationship with the now defunct *News of the World*. Scotland Yard's Head of Communications, Dick Fedorcio, resigned in 2012 immediately after the force opened disciplinary proceedings against him in the wake of allegations about his relationship with a former *News of the World* executive. Some high-profile police officers were also embroiled in the scandal, which led to the resignation of Assistant Commissioner John Yates and Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson.

In the wake of these revelations and the establishment of the Leveson Inquiry, questions have been asked about how the media operates and

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how it interacts with the police, one of the largest organisations within criminal justice. Concerns have been raised about press intrusion and harassment and, in particular, the media's treatment of victims of crime. The Dowler family, whose daughter Millie was abducted and murdered in 2002, appeared before the Leveson Inquiry, which was a judicial public inquiry established to investigate the culture, practices and ethics of the British press, as did Gerry and Kate McCann, whose daughter Madeleine was abducted in Portugal in 2007. Both families gave powerful testimonies of the impact of press intrusion at a time of profound shock and grief.

Against this backdrop of mistrust and corruption, it is easy to forget the importance of good communications and public relations in helping to reduce crime, reduce the fear of crime and assist in making communities safer.

Good media relations have been essential over the years in assisting police services to apprehend offenders, deter would-be criminals and protect victims of crime. Appeals for information, public warnings and crime prevention advice have all been disseminated by the media and have undoubtedly saved lives and prevented crimes.

Sir Hugh Orde, President of the Association of Chief Police Officers (ACPO) and former Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland (PSNI), said in his witness statement to the Leveson Inquiry:

The media play an important role in holding the police to account, and the police have a duty and in my judgment an obligation, to inform and engage with the media as representatives of the communities we serve. At a local level the media have a role in helping disseminate information about crime, while at a more strategic level we need the media to understand the complexities of policing so that it is effectively and accurately communicated to the public we serve. (Orde, 2012)

In other words, Sir Hugh argues that the police need the media, and the media have a role to play in providing information about crime and ultimately helping reduce crime.

Probation Officers in PBNI and the Probation Service are all social work qualified. Just as police in England have had a controversial relationship with the media, the relationship between social workers as a profession and the media has not always been an easy one. On many occasions social workers, particularly in the field of child protection, have

been depicted in negative and unflattering terms in the news media. The College of Social Work, in its evidence to the Leveson Inquiry, said that in a survey of 736 social workers, 91% of respondents felt that media coverage of social work is generally unfair and inaccurate. Feedback was classed around four themes, one of which was ignorance, including poor understanding of the complexities of social work.

Against this backdrop, it is timely to consider if, and how, the Probation Service can develop its relationship with the media and public relations in order to achieve positive results. With that in mind, this paper reflects on three questions: Does probation need the media and public relations at all? If it does, how can probation best use the media and public relations? How, if at all, does that relationship assist probation in its key objectives of making communities safer by challenging and changing offender behaviour?

Does probation need the media and public relations at all?

The relationship that probation has with the media and public relations is on an entirely different scale to that between the police and the media. By its very nature, probation does not provide the same volume of information of interest to the public. For example, in December 2012, the PSNI placed 47 news releases on its website covering issues such as burglaries, giving crime prevention advice, and providing statements on disorder. By comparison, in December 2012, the PBNI placed six news releases on its website in relation to community service, programme work and public protection; London Probation Trust, Greater Manchester Probation Trust and Merseyside Probation Trust placed two, seven and one news releases on their respective websites. The volume of information that probation organisations are providing to the media is much less than that provided by police.

However, while probation may not have reason to disseminate as much information as police organisations, is it still important to have a relationship with the media?

In order to answer that we need to consider firstly what public relations and media management mean. The very term 'public relations' can at times be perceived as a dirty word, an attempt to manipulate the media and the public and 'spin' away negative stories. Public relations itself has suffered from an image problem. Alastair Campbell, former Director of Communications for the Labour government, speaking in 2002 after he

stepped down from the post, admitted that public relations tactics used in Downing Street did not always have a positive effect (Anonymous, 2002). ‘Accusations and counter-accusations of spin and obsession with trivia harmed voters ... The press on one side, saying we just spin you a line the whole time, then us on the other side, saying that you are obsessed by trivia ... The victims are the public who don’t think it has anything to do with them whatsoever,’ he said.

However, if we look at the definition of public relations in its truest form, it is not about ‘spin’ or manipulation but rather about better engagement and effective communication. From this perspective, we can start to consider whether it is an asset or an obstacle to probation.

The Chartered Institute of Public Relations (CIPR) defines public relations as follows:

Public relations is about reputation – the result of what you do, what you say and what others say about you. It is the discipline which looks after reputation, with the aim of earning understanding and support and influencing opinion and behaviour. It is the planned and sustained effort to establish and maintain goodwill and mutual understanding between an organisation and its publics. (CIPR, 2013)

In order to determine whether probation needs to use the media and public relations, we need to consider whether probation needs to increase understanding and support of its work.

Do the public understand probation?

Maruna and King (2008, p. 339) observed that: ‘Over the last decade or more, probation has developed a distinct public relations problem in the USA and the UK’. Exploring the available evidence about public understanding of community sentences, these authors assert that: ‘Although the probation brand name has survived 100 years in the UK, nearly every other aspect of probation work has undergone a process of explicit rebranding, sometimes several times over, over the last 10 years as probation in Britain has also undergone its own period of feeling “uncomfortable, threatened, unsure of its role, and not at all confident of its social or political credibility”’ (Maruna and King, 2008, p. 340). They point to a number of high-profile cases and their portrayal in the media

in the UK that may have impacted on public confidence and support of community sentences and probation supervision.

McNeill (2009, p. 15), examining the issue of public opinion and credibility, reminds us of the complexities of public opinion: 'First of all, there is no public opinion; there are different opinions from different members of the public; different opinions from the same people depending on what you ask them, how you ask them, what mood they are in and, probably, what has happened to them in the last 24 hours'. McNeill goes on to say, however, that as regards community sanctions, ignorance is a fundamental problem.

The issue of lack of awareness or ignorance also resonated at the Westminster Justice Committee as it heard evidence on probation practice in 2011. Christine Lawrie, Chief Executive of the Probation Association, explained: 'One of our problems is that if you look at other public services such as health and education, most people have a general knowledge from their own experience of what they are like but most people do not have one about probation' (Justice Committee, 2011).

An Omnibus survey was carried out in Northern Ireland in 2009 and again in 2012. The survey asked about knowledge of probation and effectiveness. The fieldwork for the first survey took place between 1 September 2009 and 30 September 2009, during which time 1,201 interviews were completed and there was a response rate of 62%. In the 2012 survey, just over two-thirds of respondents (68%) had heard of the PBNI. This was a slight increase on the finding in the 2009 survey, when 65% of respondents had heard of the organisation. The level of awareness was higher in Eastern Council Areas than Western Council Areas (76% compared with 58%). The level of awareness in the Belfast City Council Area was 71%. Respondents were asked to indicate whether they were aware of some of the services that PBNI delivers. Awareness was highest in terms of PBNI supervising community sentences, working with offenders in prison and working as part of the multi-agency public protection arrangements. At 44%, the level of awareness was lowest in terms of PBNI's provision of a Victim Information Scheme.

In terms of awareness and understanding and providing context, an Omnibus survey carried out in 2012 in relation to policing found that 84% of respondents had heard of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. The Policing Board is similar to the Probation Board in that it is a non-departmental body. However, its awareness level is much higher than that of the Probation Board. Therefore, it could be argued that in Northern

Ireland there remains a real need to build levels of awareness of probation with the wider public.

In comparison to other public bodies such as the Policing Board, there remains a lack of awareness and understanding of the PBNI. Of interest in the 2012 Omnibus survey is that one of the areas that PBNI has invested most heavily in promoting through communications and public relations has been that of the public protection arrangements – 77% of those surveyed were aware of this work. This might suggest that media and public relations have played some role in raising awareness of the role of the public protection arrangements. However, an area that has had limited media exposure and public relations work has been PBNI's work in prisons, although awareness levels of that area also remain high.

It is clear from the Omnibus survey that PBNI still has much to do in terms of raising its profile, raising awareness about its role in local communities and building understanding about the complexity and range of its work. One of the key ways to build this awareness is through a multi-faceted communications and public relations strategy.

How can probation best use the media and public relations?

If probation suffers from a lack of understanding and awareness, how can it best use the media and public relations to assist in changing this?

Cousins (1987, p. 57) said that 'most probation areas have sought to undertake public relations work but much of what has been done has been limited because the approach has been reactive and ad hoc. To be effective there is a need to have an overall public relations policy.' It is the view of the author that such a policy needs to focus on three main areas – internal communications, external communications and public affairs or building relationships with stakeholders.

PBNI is coming to the end of a three-year communications strategy that was developed and approved in January 2010. The aim of that strategy was to build awareness and increase understanding of probation in Northern Ireland. Most important in that strategy is the underlying principle that communications and public relations are not solely the job of the communications unit or PR professionals, but it is the role of every person employed by probation to play their part in explaining successes, correcting inaccurate information and increasing understanding.

Probation, however, not only has an opportunity to build awareness through proactive use of the media and public relations; it can also help

define and help shape the criminal justice system in Northern Ireland. That takes courage. That involves participating in debates, and indeed initiating debates, about crime, punishment, reoffending and victims. It means sometimes giving the public difficult messages. It means reaching out to communicate in a way that people easily understand.

A recent example of this proactive media approach related to the reopening of a hostel for offenders in North Belfast in November 2012 in the face of opposition from some members of the local community. The Probation Board along with partners who work in public protection organised a proactive media briefing to explain to the media why the hostel had to reopen and how it contributed to community safety. Media were invited to see the hostel for themselves, and open days were organised for the local community and stakeholders to see the facility and meet staff. Proactive media interviews were arranged and inaccurate information was corrected. The result was that a highly controversial media issue was neutralised by agencies engaging with the media and stakeholders, committing to be open and transparent and putting into practice the philosophy of ‘seeing is believing’ by enabling people to see the hostel and the security in place. A difficult issue was dealt with by having a proactive communications plan in place.

However, in adopting a proactive communications plan for probation it is essential, especially considering developments in England and the treatment of victims in particular, that sensitivity and due regard be given to the feelings and wishes of victims of crime. For example, many have argued that probation, in order to communicate, must tell a human story. However, that should not be done at the expense of the wishes of victims.

How does an effective relationship with the media assist probation in making communities safer by challenging and changing offenders’ behaviour?

It is clear that probation needs to continue to raise awareness of its work, and can do this through the use of media and public relations. However, apart from raising awareness of their work, for Probation Officers working in courts, prisons, the community and with victims, does engaging with the media actually assist them in any other sense to make communities safer?

With this in mind, we need to consider whether the media can actually shape or influence criminal justice policy, and policies in relation to how

Probation Officers carry out their work. There have been debates about whether the media simply mirrors public opinion or whether the treatment of crime in the media influences public opinion (see for example Beale, 2006, p. 397).

We also know that the media is an important source of information for the public in relation to crime. In the 2010/11 British Crime Survey, respondents were asked what sources of information had given them their impressions in relation to crime. The media was an important source of information on crime in the country as a whole. The most commonly cited source was news programmes on television or radio (59% of respondents). Other common sources were local newspapers (32% of respondents), tabloid newspapers (30% of respondents) and word of mouth or information from other people (28% of respondents). However, what this paper is concerned with is whether the media and public relations have the potential to shape and change criminal justice policy.

There are a number of examples of the media running direct campaigns in order to influence and try to change criminal justice policy. One such campaign was run in Northern Ireland in relation to abolishing the practice of 50% remission. The campaign was launched in 2006 by the *Belfast Telegraph* after it emerged that Trevor Hamilton committed the murder of Strabane pensioner Attracta Harron just weeks after he was released from jail halfway through a seven-year sentence for rape. The 'Justice for Attracta' campaign achieved widespread public and political support and in 2008 the Criminal Justice (NI) Order introduced new public protection sentences and restructured the existing sentencing framework, bringing an end to automatic 50% remission for all sentenced prisoners.

Deborah McAleese, crime reporter for the *Belfast Telegraph*, reaffirmed that in her view, there was a clear link between the campaign run by her newspaper and the subsequent legislation: 'The campaign gave voice to the public concerns that offenders who posed a high risk of reoffending were being automatically released from prison. The public's concern was raised by the paper with the Prime Minister and the European Parliament and eventually the policy was changed and new public protection measures put in place.' She also stated her belief that the media represents the more 'common view' about how the public feel about criminal justice issues and can often bridge the gap between the views of the public and the policy-makers. It gives a voice to the public on issues they may feel

very strongly about, and without the media they might not have the opportunity to be heard.

Ms McAleese cites a recent example where the *Belfast Telegraph* successfully challenged reporting restrictions in a serious sexual abuse case ('Unmasked', 29 November 2012). The media had been prohibited from naming the defendant, who was convicted of sexually abusing young children over a long period of time. The paper believed that providing this man – a highly regarded public figure – with anonymity was unfair, especially as to identify him would not have identified his victims. She asserted that without the media's intervention in this case the public would never have known what this man had been involved in.

I began this paper by referring to the *News of the World's* relationship with the police and the subsequent demise of that newspaper in light of allegations of corruption and phone hacking. In its final edition it claimed that its 'naming and shaming' campaign, which led to the introduction of the Child Sex Offender Disclosure Scheme (CSODS), proved the paper was in fact a force for good. The naming and shaming campaign was controversial and was blamed for attacks on both sex offenders and other members of the public. However, it did show the media's ability to highlight and keep an issue in the public domain for a sustained period of time.

So does the media really have the potential to shape or influence criminal justice policy? What do the policy-makers themselves think? The Department of Justice in Northern Ireland says the answer must be a qualified 'yes' (Patterson, 2013). The media does indeed have the potential to influence on a range of public policies, not just criminal justice, as either a reflector of public opinion or an influencer of how policy is received by the public. The media can contribute to the range of views sought by government on public policy issues, including criminal justice, not just through specific lobbying campaigns or headline stories but also in a much more passive way – the mere fact that there is a free press and policies are under scrutiny demands that the public interest be a factor when decisions are being made by governments.

Are there any examples of where this has worked? We have already looked at cases where it could be said that the media played a role in how policy evolved. However, the Department of Justice says there is a difference between the *potential* to influence and *actual* examples of where policy was changed simply as a result of media attention. It states that policy is rarely radically changed as a result of one element in the

formulation/development process, although there may be examples in extreme cases (Patterson, 2013). Policy choices are more usually influenced by a range of responses, including of course the media, but also wider public interest, general responses to policy consultation, key stakeholders' views, political opinion, etc. All of these can lead to shifts in emphasis. It is therefore difficult to say that the media alone changed policy in any of the examples illustrated above.

Does the media mirror public opinion or does it influence public opinion?

Interestingly, crime reporter Deborah McAleese states that, in her view, while the media does mirror public opinion, it sometimes takes the lead by revealing things that the public would not otherwise know. She asserts that it would be unfair to say that the public are easily influenced by the views of the media and are unable to form their own opinions.

However, the Department of Justice says that the media can do both, but is at its most dangerous when it becomes solely an instrument of influence (Patterson, 2013). This is where the presentation of policy can play to all sorts of agendas and objectivity can be lost. For example, it is in no-one's best interest to use the sort of emotive and low-level language that is seen in the media's presentation of sex offender risk management policy. The 'sex perverts', 'paedos', 'sex monsters' terminology only raises public fears and plays to that agenda, with little mention of the enormous amount of work carried out by probation, police and others to aid public protection. Nor does it in any way help to protect children. The stereotypical image of 'stranger danger' is so far from the truth in the majority of sexual crimes that it actually benefits the individuals who are perpetrating the most abuse – those known to the child through family connections; ordinary people from all walks of life. No-one wants to give that message – why not? Is it because it's too unpalatable for some?

Whatever the reason, the fact remains that these messages just make it harder for society to accept the truth about much of the sexual crime committed, and harder for children and others to report abuse. This is where the conflict lies between the commercial impetus for the media and its responsibility to contribute to the wider social agenda – in this case to help bring sex offenders to justice and protect children.

Another example relates to the recent criminalisation of squatting in empty residential properties, under section 144 of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012. The media has played a major role in shoring up a popular perception of squatters as organised

gangs of thugs, layabouts and revolutionary fanatics; as social ‘parasites’ who steal people’s homes. The persistence of this view across the media belies the fact that little is officially known about the squatter population, their backgrounds and motivations, or the relationships between squatting, homelessness and vulnerability. The negative portrayal of marginalised populations in the media is particularly dangerous against the backdrop of a rise in the populist model of penal policy-making, in which the government consults ordinary people, especially those impacted by crime and disorder, when formulating and implementing policies to tackle such problems (Johnstone, 2000, p. 161). Research has indicated that such consultation often leads to harsher and less tolerant policies, driven by punitive passions and prejudices rather than attempts to address the underlying social issues that may cause such problems. While this populist model is often portrayed by the government as a triumph of democratic politics, its methodologies are skewed to elicit more punitive views on crime (Hough, 1996, p. 191), often linked to the portrayal of the offender in the media. It is important that the risk of irresponsible manipulations of the public’s fear of crime through negative stereotyping and rhetorical strategies framed to carry powerful resonance in the media – and sometimes led by the political agenda of the day – be countered by honest, balanced and proportionate messages from reliable sources. The Law Society’s statement that section 144 was ‘based on misunderstandings by the media of the scale of the problem and a misunderstanding of the current law’ (Baksi, 2012) underlines the importance of responsible engagement with the media to inform public debate.

Whether the media alone influences and changes the direction of criminal justice strategy, it certainly has the potential to highlight and drive forward campaigns on many elements of criminal justice policy. With the media’s campaigning ability, it is relevant to consider whether probation could benefit by encouraging news organisations to campaign for particular legislation or in a particular direction.

In England in 2011, the National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) worked with others to raise awareness and seek a change in legislation through a high-profile communications and public affairs campaign in relation to stalking. Harry Fletcher, Assistant General Secretary of NAPO, and Laura Richards, co-founder of Protection Against Stalking (PAS), said of the campaign:

Our success was achieved in a remarkably short time. The key was all-party support for the independent inquiry, where victims' voices were heard and frontline practitioners were taken seriously; a wide range of organisations backing the campaign; the individual lobbying of MPs and peers; and support of political parties. It was time-consuming and intense, with more than 20 detailed briefings and dozens of press releases produced, but it worked. (Fletcher and Richards, 2012)

Rather than leaving it to the media to dictate the agenda, in this case the probation union chose to seek to influence and change the agenda using the media and public affairs as the tools to do so.

Are there lessons from the examples above as to how probation might consider using a developed relationship with the media to help in its core aim of making communities safer?

Brian McCaughey, Director of PBNI, believes that there are real opportunities – particularly in light of the devolution of policing and justice – for organisations such as probation to get their message out and influence policy for the better (McCaughey, 2011). While the media has a role both in a campaigning capacity and more subtly through reporting accurately on community sentences and the role of probation, he believes that probation can also influence politicians and those responsible for policy and legislation directly: 'I believe that devolution brings real opportunities to enable organisations like probation to engage more actively with the media but it is just as important to engage directly with the decision makers'. In his view probation works, and that is a message that should be confidently communicated with the media and policy-makers.

Similarly in the Republic of Ireland there appears to have been an increase in the use of media over the past 12 months to disseminate the message that probation works. The Director of the Probation Service, Vivian Geiran, a prolific social media user, published an article in the *Irish Times* in December 2012 and has developed a probation e-newsletter for stakeholders entitled *Probation Works*. The author anticipates that the use of the media by probation in that jurisdiction will increase in order to rebut inaccurate information and effectively explain the role of the organisation to a public that doesn't fully understand the complexities faced by officers trying to prevent reoffending and make towns and cities safer.

Conclusion

There is still much work to do in raising awareness of what probation is about, what Probation Officers do and how they contribute to community safety. John Grace, writing in the *Guardian* in February 2013, says that ‘The probation service may be fairly anonymous but we’d sure as hell notice if they weren’t there’. Clearly those working within probation still have a job to do to explain their role and the valuable contribution they make to safer communities.

Proactive use of the media and public relations can help to raise awareness, as much of the information the public receive in relation to crime continues to come from the media. But that use of media must take place within carefully constructed boundaries with a clear engagement protocol and communications strategy in place. Paramount to all communications must be the protection of the rights of victims.

However, the use of media and public relations can do more than simply raise awareness; it can also help shape the environment in which probation staff operate. Public relations and the use of media are as relevant to frontline probation staff as to senior management or those responsible for PR and communications. A probation organisation that is willing to be open, transparent, engaging, and courageous has much to gain from adopting a positive approach to using the media and public relations.

There is a need for the media and the wider public to be given accurate information about offending and public protection, and there is a need to dispel many of the myths currently peddled by some elements of the media, particularly around issues of sexual offending. These may be unpalatable messages for some, but there is an onus on professionals who work in public protection to continue to try to shape the debate and inform the media and wider public opinion about the true nature of abuse and patterns of offending.

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