

Using communications to best advantage – advice and tactics for SIOs

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Context

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Why change?

- Times have moved on; the world in which we operate is different
- Jo Yeates (Avon and Somerset), Nikkita Grender (Gwent) Raoul Moat (Northumberland); significant watersheds in influencing our thinking about how we manage media, public communication and engagement during a live investigation
- ACPO Murder Manual (2006) and Media Guidance for senior investigators in major investigations (2003) now very narrow in scope – general approach still applies but you must consider the wider communications landscape

theguardian Monday 10.01.11

A contempt for the law

Media coverage surrounding the death of Joanna Yeates has stretched the Contempt of Court Act to the limit. But is it time for the legal system to get tough - or reform it? By Josh Halliday and Steven Morris

"The speed of publishing since the advent of online and social media means reporters can no longer get away with just having one solid line on how an inquiry is going. If the police hold an afternoon press conference, any line will be old news by the next morning. This explains why so much coverage is speculative and why, when a suspect is arrested, reporters try to dig up all the background they can."

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The world in which we're working now

- "Media handling has been acknowledged as a critical skill of the SIO" - Substitute "communications and media handling" for media handling
- Twitter & other social media is now, this minute; broadcast, print and social media aren't far behind; demand for material is voracious and 24 / 7
- Highly competitive arena; strong drivers from editors to get the best scoop and the best exclusive; bottom line is newspaper sales and viewing figures
- Demise of 'specialist' crime reporters & trusted long-standing relationships; implications for our ability to give 'off the record' guidance and steer
- Rise of 'community' reporters / film makers / image takers

Means...

- More difficult to 'contain' news of crime; less likely to be in full control of when and how news is released
- Faster pace and greater demand from media as soon as crime is in the public domain
- Much greater & more detailed scrutiny of investigation from Day 1, from journalists who don't necessarily have an understanding of the legal framework in which we (and they) operate

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How we can help you

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Role of the communications team

- Support, Support, Support – we're on your side and our role is to help you
- Buffer and interface between you, your investigation team and the media
- Advisors on all aspects of communications and media handling:
 - Broadcast and print media: 24 hour line into the community & potential witnesses
 - Online and social media – investigation, communication, community intelligence & reassurance
 - Printed materials – letters, newsletters, posters, flyers
 - Face to face – street briefings, public meetings, community reassurance
- Strategic guidance and tactical options throughout
- Practical management and housekeeping of all communications activities from Day 1 to the end of the trial and sentencing

But most importantly...

- Trust Us and Tell Us, in real time. We need to work as one.

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Planning communications and media - 1

1. Proactive planning

- Set clear strategic communications objectives & key messages at the outset to provide coherence and structure (& checks and balances) for ongoing decisions about communications & media
- Identify a single spokesperson & be prepared to be with the investigation for the long haul through to trial & sentencing
- Media will want the SIO (& we would always recommend that too) but be clear about the time commitment – you have to see it through to the end once you're identified as the face of the investigation & the pressure will become greater rather than lessen
- Consider two spokespeople for public facing communications; one for the investigation & second uniformed officer with good local connections for community reassurance
- Agree clear communication approach with the lead officer from Corporate Communications; who will deal with day to day, hour to hour, minute to minute media enquiries? Lead briefings? Do interviews?

2. Timing

- Be on the front foot from the outset; brief regularly (& with little if necessary) to avoid information vacuums & media speculation

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Planning communications and media - II

3. Structure

- Ensure Corporate Communications lead is in your 'Inner circle' of briefing & set aside 10/15 mins daily to discuss overnight media coverage, public feeling, victim / family perspective etc
- Regularise the time for media briefings so that media know when to expect them & stick to it

4. Tools and tactics

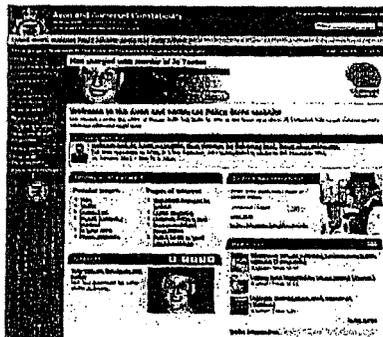
- Define your audience – who do you want to reach? Likely to be multiple audiences depending on nature of crime & the community in which it occurred
- Don't be constrained in your thinking – different audiences will respond best to different communications channels
- Do be aware of the power of the media at large as an investigative & operational tool; reconstructions, witness appeals, identification of offenders, public warnings
- Don't be overly defensive or risk averse; be open and transparent as far as possible but agree boundaries with the Communications Team & be consistent in maintaining them
- Do be prepared to support Communications Team in devising strategies to avoid damaging speculation about investigative leads whose integrity you want to preserve

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Establishing web & online presence

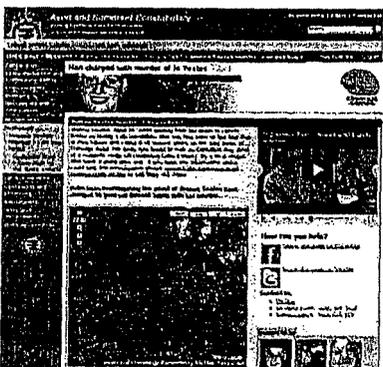


Homepage

- Homepage banner and spotlight images
- 1440 inbound messages went to the investigation team via the form on the website

Newsroom

- Newsroom story with regular updates
- Updates automatically pushed out via twitter with #joyeates "hashtags"
- Updates automatically appeared on dedicated section (see below)
- Story e-mailed out to subscribers (currently 15,000+ subscriber base) and media contacts
- Briefings filmed / uploaded to YouTube and embedded as well as images



Dedicated section

- Set up special website address – www.avonandsomerset.police.uk/jo
- Interactive Google map showing key locations
- Video play list showing most recent video release first
- Image gallery of Jo
- Facebook and Twitter sharing tools
- Secure on-line contact form sending messages direct to the incident room
- Twitter widget showing discussion around the case and our updates
- IP address logging for investigative purposes

Local pages

- Localised community safety article in the Clifton area
- Downloadable advice leaflet (the same as distributed physically in the area)

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Critical factors to consider & be aware of

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Media impact on investigation

1. Contempt

- *"We have our own lawyers internally saying they don't know where the line should be drawn. And editors overrule lawyers at which stage there is no comeback."* (senior tabloid executive)
- Attorney General's position on contempt legislation unlikely to change so potential for naming of suspects pre-charge is high; anonymity of social media increases the risk

2. Leaks or investigative journalism?

- Media speculation on lines of investigation can get out of hand
- Interference & amateur sleuthing mean SIO must be prepared to reconsider detail / timing of investigative strategy to retain integrity of investigation
- Need to be aware of potential for 'jigsaw identification' of crucial investigative strands through mass media enquiries about lines of investigation; work closely with Communications lead on diversionary tactics for putting them off the scent

3. Intimidation & harassment of family and witnesses

- Relationship between FLO, SIO & Communications lead is key in advising & supporting family on media tactics, and protecting witnesses from journalists

4. Accuracy

- Be prepared for media use of 'experts' whose views may not always coincide with yours
- Accept the inevitability of some inaccurate reporting & misrepresentation

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Media impact on you

- Prepare for the 'ten day turn': media likely to ask questions about your experience as an SIO & potential for bringing in another / more senior SIO or outside force to help
- Don't under-estimate the additional personal pressure of being 'the face of the investigation'

So...

- Avoid obsessively watching the news / reading the papers; ask the Communications lead to give you a daily summary of coverage & any issues arising that you need to consider
- Mentally set aside a set time each day – probably after the daily briefing with your investigation team – to talk to the Communications lead & brief the media (the latter may not be necessary or desirable every day but regular briefings will help us to retain more control and reign in speculation)

And...

- Remember the Communications Team are there to help and support you; use them to help ease the media and communications pressure on you.

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