Primary Visibility

Brodeur (2010) notes that visibility is one of the defining features and primary means of policing - specifically of uniformed patrol. The visibility of police agents is tied to public perceptions of the police profession, and the professional public police have always been concerned about the management of appearances and impressions (Manning 1999).

Visibility is interactive, and it is important for us to consider the dynamics of interaction. The most direct and comparatively unmediated form of visibility relates to our own lived experiences and direct, first-person observations. This is primary visibility. This form of visibility was dominant prior to the advent of mass media.

Secondary Visibility

Secondary visibility refers to images of and accounts of policing experienced through the consumption of mass media, including newspapers, television programs, and other modes of visual and narrative content delivery. Policing has traditionally been a topic of interest for mass media outlets.

The significance of secondary visibility is that it extends awareness of policing activities beyond the dynamics of direct experience. As Goldsmith (2010: 914) notes, “People often far removed from particular settings could be made aware of policing activities and thus be able to enter into a moral assessment of those actions”.

Initially, and throughout the 20th Century, the secondary visibility of policing was shaped by the creation and distribution of policing news by a relatively small assemblage of mass media outlets. These media gatekeepers (professional journalists and broadcasters) often developed symbiotic relationships with policing organizations.

The New Visibility

Goldsmith (2010), drawing on Thompson (2005) describes an important and ongoing social transformation that has profound implications for police visibility and accountability. We are moving from

- **The viewer society**, characteristic of a synoptic age, in which “… a large number [of people] focuses on something in common which is condensed” (Mathiesen 1997: 45).

- **The media producer society**, characteristic of a ‘post-broadcasting age’, where pervasive viewing has been supplemented by the emergence of technologies that have radically redistributed the means of recording and disseminating images and narrative. Ubiquitous cell phone cameras and social networks have allowed members of the public to make images of policing visible to a broad audience while bypassing traditional gatekeepers of the synopticon. The privately-recorded 1991 video of the beating of Rodney King at the hands of the LAPD was broadcast through traditional media outlets, and it acted as a catalyst for public criticism of the police. The 2007 cell phone video of the death of Robert Dziekanski at the hands of the RCMP was also broadcast, as well as being posted on YouTube. The 2009 death of Ian Tomlinson at the hands of the Metropolitan Police was recorded by a private citizen and subsequently released to the Guardian.

Thompson notes that “[T]he making visible of actions and events is not just the outcome of leakage in systems of communication and information flow that are increasingly difficult to control; it is also an explicit strategy of individuals who know very well that mediated visibility can be a weapon in the struggles they wage in their day-to-day lives. (Thompson 2005: 31). An illustration of this active embracing of the new visibility as a means of facilitating police accountability is the emergence of specialized apps such as Open Watch, designed to enable the covert recording of encounters with authorities, including police.

In the context of the new visibility, becoming difficult for policing agents to control the images of policing that are presented to the public, to manage impressions, and to prevent disruptive disclosures. Police, traditionally agents of surveillance, are increasingly subject to sousveillance - the recording of activities (and interactions) by participants.

As Goldsmith (2010: 915-916) argues, “In terms of both public perception and formal accountability, the police are losing their ability to ‘patrol the facts’ (Ericson 1989). While many details remain unclear, it seems highly probable that the new capacities for surveillance of policing inherent in these technologies may increase the police’s accountability to the public, while decreasing their accountability (Ericson 1995). Much, if not all, of that accountability, however, is likely to take place in the court of public opinion rather than through courts of law and other institutionalized channels of public accountability”.