



**HAL**  
open science

# The Viewer and the Viewed. Circulating Images of the Police, between Professionals, the Mass Media and the Public

Michaël Meyer

► **To cite this version:**

Michaël Meyer. The Viewer and the Viewed. Circulating Images of the Police, between Professionals, the Mass Media and the Public. *Penal Issues*, 2012, 5, pp.1-4. hal-00836065

**HAL Id: hal-00836065**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00836065>**

Submitted on 20 Jun 2013

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# Penal Issues

## CESDIP

Centre de Recherches  
Sociologiques sur le Droit  
et les Institutions Pénales

UMR 8183

[www.cesdip.fr](http://www.cesdip.fr)

## The Viewer and the Viewed Circulating Images of the Police, Between Professionals, the Mass Media and the Public

**Michael MEYER** is a post-doctoral fellow at the University of Lausanne and associate researcher at the CESDIP. He reports findings from his thesis in sociology (2011) devoted to an analysis of policing viewed through its interactions with media-shaped social imageries. He takes special interest in the new « media-linked risks » for officers on the streets, including copwatching, as well as in the development of public relations by police departments.

In everyday life, we all experience literary, televised, or motion picture encounters with the police. It is impossible to mention, or analyse, the police as an entity without being assailed by innumerable images, emotions, and media-informed stereotypes. How can we, as sociologists of the police, include this powerful imagery in our analyses? How can we study this *media double*, whose influence is so hard to quantify but so easy to observe in the everyday relations of officers with their own professional activity and with the public?

### Methodology and Conceptual Framework: Studying the « Media Double »

Fieldwork was conducted in Switzerland between 2006 and 2009, within the city of Lausanne police department. We paid special attention to the motorized emergency police service (*Police secours – PS*) patrols and those of the neighbourhood foot patrols.

The investigation rested on an original method in which snapshots were taken during ethnographic visits. The pictures collected, along with a corpus of media imagery (including photos in the press and amateur video films found on the Internet), were used as elicitation material for interviews with officers.

This methodological procedure facilitated a sort of visual study of how officers on the streets control their appearance and of their strategies for taking possession of, justifying or denouncing how the media treat their profession. The visual method served as catalyst, opening many new paths for exploring police visibility and the circulation of media-informed policing imagery in actual intervention situations.

The physical presence and the self-presentation efforts of police officers in the street are necessarily caught up by symbolic elements rooted in the media-staged spectacle of the police. Training courses for Swiss officers say nothing about the mythology of the police, yet the concept affects the way officers behave in front of TV or press photographers' cameras or again, the smartphones of citizen-reporters.

Observations in French-speaking Switzerland show, first, that police officers themselves are regular consumers of the new media programs based on policing themes, including reality shows, docu-fictions, and embedded journalism. They watch them at home, but also at work. During breaks at police stations, newspapers and on-line videos are familiar parts of on-the-job social life. Newspapers and magazines circulate, and may be found on cafeteria tables, on the seats of their vehicles, in their offices. Computers provide opportunities for collective viewing of pictures issued by the administration or broadcast for the general public. Private or professional smartphones are often used to take or view pictures connected with their professional activity. This trend is particularly salient since some Swiss police departments are in the midst of a technological transformation<sup>1</sup>. They are considering having the police use Facebook and Twitter, introducing tablets and computers on board of vehicles, and having officers carry bodyworn video cameras during interventions. In Geneva, every cantonal police officer (*policier cantonal*) has been given an *iPhone* with dedicated applications for policing work, the idea being to relieve the telephone exchange and to make officers more independent on the ground. In Berne, Lucerne and Bâle as well, the district police departments have developed public applications for smartphones that enable them to circulate prevention messages in real time, along with personalised warnings.

These uses of computerised tools do of course raise some issues as to the vagueness of present legislation, procedural codes and actual practices. For example, the paradoxical demand for « police officers' protection of personal image », as expressed by many street officers in Lausanne and French-speaking Switzerland, illustrates the legal and organisational challenges involved in the integration of media-based devices in police work.

<sup>1</sup> The French national police department is experiencing the same switch. On December 11th 2012, its spokesperson announced a « small cultural revolution », with the creation, by the administration, of *Police Nationale* accounts on *Facebook*, *Twitter*, *Dailymotion* and *Flicker*, not to mention the creation of its own website (source : Sicop, *Police nationale*). The *Gendarmerie nationale* has had its own Facebook page since May 2011, and the *Préfecture de police* since 2010 (source : <http://laef.info>).

## The Organisation of Swiss Police Departments and their Public Communications

In Switzerland, police departments are structured along the lines of « subsidiarity », provided in the Swiss Constitution and central to the country's federalism: public safety policies are implemented by the 26 cantons, or in some cases by the municipalities (*communes*). Each police cantonale is in charge, in practical terms, of law enforcement, and of investigative policing throughout its jurisdiction. Both the location of the various police stations and the organisation of work are defined by the laws of the *canton*. At the federal level, the *Office fédéral de la police (fedpol)* serves mainly as a coordination and information centre for national security purposes. The prerogatives and size of *polices communales* are extremely variable. Whereas most respect municipal regulations, others, such as the Lausanne, Berne and Zurich polices, have the same criminal investigation competences as those usually ascribed to the *police cantonale*.

This substantial autonomy is also visible in the differences in training and the latitude consented in relations with the public and the media. Chronic recruitment problems in recent years have sharpened competition between police departments, resulting in a race for media visibility. One indicator is the multiplication of « press and public relations » departments. Nowadays, every *police cantonale* and large city police department has recruited specialists in « public image management » (media liaison officer for the Geneva *Police cantonale*).

### The social power of images

As a group, police officers worry about how the media depict their profession. According to Lausanne's officers, the media are one of the main sources of influence on public opinion<sup>2</sup>. They in fact view their media double as a threat to their professional identity and to their work on the streets. According to them, the criticism voiced by the population is the result of inadequate police portrayal by the media. Above all, they are very concerned about the disappointments caused by excessive, unachievable media-generated expectations. Since they cannot always live up to the hero stereotype, officers feel threatened by their media double, far too brilliant to be equaled on a day-to-day basis. Giving up their heroic aspirations (one indication of which is the cynicism displayed toward any sort of media representation) is becoming an element of professional efficacy and self-protection for the street patrolmen, while these are most susceptible of being portrayed and of becoming media embodiments of the profession.

What makes the media so powerful, then, is primarily their ability to impose the standards of a realism to which officers themselves refer when judging their own work. More broadly, the media models also produce anticipations and speculations among those citizens who actually meet up with the police. From this standpoint, it is easier to observe fictional images in their relationship to police practices, since they produce incongruous contaminations. For instance, some individuals, when stopped by the police on the street, immediately demand a « lawyer appointed by the court » or « the right to make a phone call ». Such demands are meaningless in Swiss criminal procedure (at least at time of the field work for this research), but point up a background of (mostly North American) media portrayals of the police.

Like spectators watching a screen, officers and their public develop expectations as to the protagonists, narratives, dialogues, tone of voice, and many other theatrical signs of « good » police action. Thus, many of the interventions observed in Lausanne interacted with the media world: when, for example, officers respond to citizens' reproaches with justifications contrasting the imagery to their « real working conditions »: « We aren't in *CSI: Miami* here. We can't just bring in a forensic police technician just by a snap of the fingers » (says an emergency service officer).

### Living up to one's media double: the social tragedy of police visibility

Media models make officers feel they have to live up to the stereotype's requirements and theatricals. More frequently, they prefer to show their audience how unreal that model is, since the gap is too great to be filled. As one emergency service officer put it: « If we were in a TV series, we'd all be shot dead before the credits were over ». When questioned about how the media affect their work, Lausanne officers say they fear negative effects on cooperation with citizens. They feel they are « better informed », and feel it is part of their professional duty to take the time, occasionally, to set straight the « illusions » created by media treatment. Sometimes, too, they try to anticipate them, to defuse the blocked situations they would produce. Officers amusedly predict that some citizens will demand costly, inappropriate operations such as forensic ballistics for a window broken by a stone. While they are amused by the media-informed background that shapes victims' perceptions, they are also apprehensive about reactions to their refusal to take those measures. To get out of that deadlock and appease the irate citizen, officers may sometimes promise to do forensic work they know cannot be done. This white lie seems easier to cope with than the revolt of a citizen disappointed with the efforts of the police.

Officers feel that the public expects some sort of « act » from them. As one local policeman says: « *People want an immediate reaction. They want the police to arrive on the scene and solve their problem on the spot. They want to see police officers police the situation ... We can't always give them what they want, because what they want often only exists in their mind or in their favourite TV series* ». With public satisfaction now linked to media models, Lausanne officers agree that paradoxically, their profession suffers from isolation. Although they are present everywhere in the media, their actual practices are hardly visible or only in the form of a few clichés: « *The police was never as visible as it is now. You can't turn your TV on without happening on some police series. And every day, in the papers, you have articles about some police action somewhere ... But that doesn't mean that people know what we do. They know what we do in the newspapers, that's true, but they don't know anything about our work on the ground* » (PS officer).

Given this ignorance, officers develop standardised answers to explain their work. Justifications countering media images are one of the most-used options:

[When a man demands that the person he suspects of having damaged his car be arrested]

« *We aren't on TV here, first we take down your complaint, then we'll arrest someone if necessary* » (PS officer).

[When a driver isn't given a ticket for not wearing a seat belt]

« *You see, contrary to what you read in the papers, not all officers give out tickets right and left. Prevention is another aspect* » (policeman in a local police station).

By putting it that way, the officer explains police action, makes it describable, justifies his own way of doing things and tells the claimant how it should be understood. This is educational work, the officer is a socialising agent teaching citizens how the police – and more broadly, the administration – functions, and the way it takes action. To do so, media references provide a valuable common denominator in dialogue with citizens. This way of addressing them represents a peculiar language, very widespread among young Lausanne officers. The latter, more than their elders, seem to feel the need to justify their authority by contrasting it with media models. Media exaggerations are viewed as potentially sapping their action. According to Everett Hughes, this gap represents a « social drama of work »<sup>3</sup>. To be more accurate, the outward appearances of policing evidence the tragedy of the visibility of their work, inasmuch as the latter can rarely live up to the media-induced ideal of dynamism and vociferous action.

<sup>2</sup> In France, a study found that 94% of young officers, at the end of their training, felt that the media give a negative image of their profession. See GORGEON C., 1996, Socialisation professionnelle des policiers : le rôle de l'école, *Criminologie*, 29, 2, 146.

<sup>3</sup> HUGHES E., 1976, The social drama of work, *Mid-American Review of Sociology*, 1, 1, 1-7.

## Media-induced risks: the example of copwatching

The physical and psychological risks and the moral dilemmas of police as a profession are now well known and are explained during basic training in Switzerland. But digital technologies, imagery and the media have given rise to new challenges for the profession. The vivid tension between police action and media representations is particularly well evidenced by a phenomenon such as copwatching, which is to say citizens' initiatives in which the police are put under surveillance using imagery and the Internet.

Police action, and perhaps above all crowd control, is surrounded by imagery. Each intervention feeds into a repertoire of visual representations and social imaginaries susceptible of re-emerging on other occasions, and which will serve as a pretext for other rallies (in response to filmed police violence, for instance). The presence of video cameras may then restrict police action by imposing reminders of past action (there or elsewhere, real or fictional), but also by imposing a reminder that images can be circulated to a wide public. If copwatching is taken seriously by police forces in western countries, it is because this practice involves major media-informed risks for officers on the streets.

The officers' constant concern with keeping control of their image is a primary component of the stress associated with the visibility of policing in public places. Over-mediatisation of that institution then weighs most on uniformed officers. Rather than a conspiracy against the right to information, the aggressive reactions of some officers against photographers and amateur video-takers may be understood as a response to the stress produced by picture-taking and its potential uses. « *It's so easy to take pictures. People are all there with their cameras. They use them as if that could prevent us from intervening* » (PS officer).

Rather than contributing to appeasement and interaction, copwatching actually tends toward formalist withdrawal. In fact, the visible presence of a recording device incites officers to be tougher and makes any closeness and conciliatory attitude impossible: « *You can't talk with them. So you have to limit the damage for yourself* » (PS officer). By attempting to prevent misuse of power, the filming a police intervention mainly urges officers to get over the visibility ordeal as fast as possible, but leaves them no leeway for informal routines and no space for discretion.

The social media, but also the phenomenon of « citizen-journalists » paid by the traditional media<sup>4</sup> have deeply modified the officers' relationship to the crowd present on the scene of an intervention. Officers are all aware that their voice and acts

<sup>4</sup> For instance, the Swiss editions of the free newspaper *20 Minutes* offer pay for photos sent by witnesses of occasional events. These « reader-reporters » are given 50 Swiss francs for a picture published in a regional issue and 100 francs if it is published in several editions (French and German-speaking).

may be recorded, and be turned into a pretext for media criticism of the police as a whole. Each and all are enjoined to be a guardian of the « public image » of the police, and may be obliged to vindicate their own image. This prospect is especially problematic for the person's career. As Lausanne officers told us, « being noticed by the media », even under legitimate circumstances, means taking the risk of becoming a threat to the image of the squad, and having one's career considerably slowed down.

## Policing the media: the social imaginary as a resource for police work

There are, however, some potential benefits for institutions that accept the « media game » (says second in command, Lausanne police force). The Swiss police have certainly not been impervious to the galaxy of images surrounding them. They have reacted by adopting some kinds of mediatisation, which they now use in portraying themselves to the public. This PR counter-attack aims at turning the social imaginaries into assets for the police institution. The earliest such initiatives, at the turn of the century, took the form of a good many media productions issued by the police departments themselves. In the context of tension between the police forces and the population, media depictions of police figures are summoned up because they are still one of the easiest things to share with citizens. Recreational TV programs provide stories with positive narratives and values, since viewers are believed to be most receptive to the representations found in the newspapers, radio and television. The way this social imaginary is engineered to be shared (and for police PR it is often no more than a strategy) most explicitly shows the way police work is contaminated by the media, and how behaviour conforms to media stereotypes.

In 2009, for instance, the Zurich *police cantonale* invested over 80,000 € in the production of a film entitled *CSI: Züri* (Mélanie Buchanon, Suisse, 2009). This 45-minute film, imitating *CSI*, the popular North American series<sup>5</sup>, is used to inform police personnel of « quality » standards for « customer satisfaction ». A short version in video clip format is broadcast to the general public to support recruitment campaigns.

Recruiting does indeed provide a good opportunity for forays into the media. For the 2010-2011 recruitment campaign, the Geneva and Vaud canton police departments invested in the most up-to-date computer technology and used the most recent radio and television references. The former department went into interactive photography, with « *More than a mission – the Geneva police force is recruiting* » (« *Plus qu'une mission – la police genevoise recrute* »)<sup>6</sup>, nominated for the Best of Swiss Web

<sup>5</sup> *CSI – Crime Scene Investigation*, CBS, USA, began in 2000.

<sup>6</sup> Website: <http://www.missionpolice.ch>.

2011, which rewards the best creations of the year. The Vaud police department devised a series of radio and television subjects entitled « *At the heart of action – the Vaud Police cantonale is recruiting* » (« *Au cœur de l'action – La Police cantonale vaudoise recrute* »)<sup>7</sup>, including a 22-minute film on an « ordinary day » with the police force. With the slogan « take the actor's role in your life », the campaign focuses on the vocabulary of show business (acting, casting), applied to recruitment into the police<sup>8</sup>.

Our count, done in French-speaking Switzerland between 2009 and 2011, found that all police forces, taken together, were depicted in 32 moving or fixed sequences of images for presentation or recruitment purposes projected in cinemas, on television, or on official police websites, but also shared on the Internet for the general public, such as *YouTube*, *Dailymotion* and *Facebook*. The same trend is to be found in France, where the Police department's recruitment blog has shown a total of 50 videos presenting its services and interviews with its personnel since 2008<sup>9</sup>.

These video films and interactive sequences resort to the same codes and dramaturgy as fiction, which are often helpful in making the story of police action seem more natural, as they are designed to fit the spectators' visual and narrative habits as curried by the mass media. Using fictional repertoires makes this police self-promotion easily comprehensible to the public. As James Sheptycki puts it: « (...) not forgetting that the synoptic gaze of the media is interpreted by a public with a high degree of 'media literacy', naturalistic accounts given by police about actions undertaken need to be carefully scripted lest they seem incomprehensible to their audience »<sup>10</sup>.

## Efficiency and visibility

Media tools have become, then, the ground of an on-going battle over recognition and justification of police work. They involve a repatterning of the relationship between *efficiency* and *visibility* in police work, with the latter becoming a crucial factor for the former. Under these conditions, by demanding that the police speak out publicly and by imposing a debate over policing, the media compel the police to account for their acts. This is particularly salient in federalist Switzerland, where tensions and competition between police forces, especially for recruiting, make it especially important to give a good, highly visible image of the institution and its members.

In this context, the constant threat of mediatisation of deviant police behaviour and of media scandals is often viewed as a

<sup>7</sup> Website: <http://www.policier.ch>.

<sup>8</sup> That same year, the French *gendarmerie* used a similar slogan for its recruitment campaign: « Becoming a gendarme. Taking the actor's role in your life... for other people's lives ».

<sup>9</sup> Website: <http://www.blog-police-recrutement.com>.

<sup>10</sup> SHEPTYCKI J.W.E., 2002, *In Search of Transnational Policing. Towards a Sociology of Global Policing*, Aldershot, Ashgate, 109.



means of keeping a watch over police activities. Now this possibility is often neglected (or little used) by journalists, who prefer the *status quo* by which they can maintain some connivance with their information sources within the police. This dependency is openly recognised by officers, who pride themselves in being an « inescapable source »: « *Journalists are usually careful to report what I say accurately, without deforming the meaning (...) It's in their own interest as well, since I'm their main source within the police department. In other words, there's no way getting around me* » (says media liaison officer, Lausanne Police department).

Usually, then, the media demand of public justification of police action turns into offers, by police PR officers, to speak out publicly. In Switzerland, those officers produce innumerable communiqués and press conferences, give journalists direct lines, text and email them alerts, put them on call, and give them guided tours.

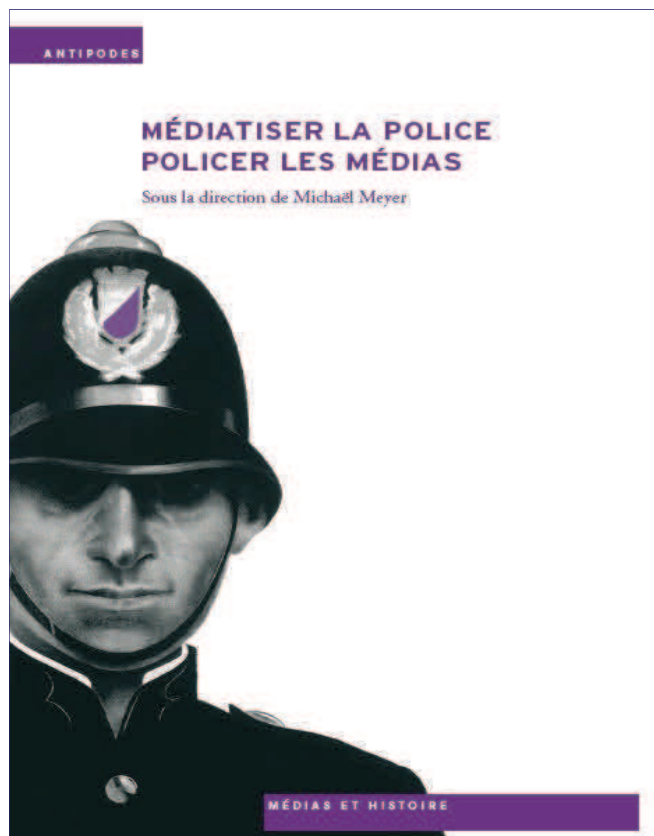
### Taking « media illusions » seriously

The stakes involved in public safety may be viewed, then, through the many interactions between the police world and imagery. The police officer's media double contributes, positively and negatively, to defining and publicly justifying police action. American sociologist Peter K. Manning, a seminal analyst of the police institution, convoking the vision of the police as criminal chasing heroes, reminds us that media references should be seen as very « real » components of police work: « *These mediated illusions are real in that they are central to shaping perceptions that are the bases for all forms of social control* ».

**Michael MEYER**  
([michael.meyer@unil.ch](mailto:michael.meyer@unil.ch))

#### Further reading:

- MEYER M., (dir.), 2012, *Médiatiser la police, policer les médias*, Lausanne, Antipodes.  
 MEYER M., 2011, *Pour une sociologie visuelle du monde policier. Regards, visibilité et médiatisation de la police lausannoise*, Thèse de doctorat en cotutelle internationale, Lausanne-Nantes, Université de Lausanne-Université de Nantes.  
 MEYER M., 2010, *Copwatching et perception publique de la police. L'intervention policière comme performance sous surveillance*, *ethnographiques.org*, 21 (Website: <http://www.ethnographiques.org/2010/Meyer>)



ISBN : 978-2-88901-048-6

<sup>11</sup> MANNING P.K., 2003, *Policing Contingencies*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, préface, ix.