

The London School of Economics and Political Science

*Watching the Cops: a case study of production processes on
television police drama "The Bill"*

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Declaration

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Abstract

This thesis examines the process of storytelling on television police drama, *The Bill*. It explores how factors such as commercial imperatives, working processes and artistic constraints affected representation of the police. The study argues that, in the early days of the show, stories originated with the freelance writers and were based on research and observation of police work. Representation of the police was favourable, partly due to the ideological views of the makers and partly due to the format: stories had to be resolved within a half-hour timeslot, which militated against writers being able to tell stories about issues such as racism, sexism and corruption.

However, due to changing market forces in the television industry, the show reinvented itself as a serial in 2001. The exigencies of the new schedule meant less time for research. There was also pressure on the makers to attract a younger audience demographic. Stories were now originated by an in-house team and based on other media sources, setting up “media loops” (Manning 2003) and a recycling of ideas current in media culture about policing and law and order politics. Story-lines became inaccurate and controversial. Findings from focus groups with officers from the Metropolitan Police Service and the Greater Manchester Police also showed that, on occasion, story-lines concerning the handling of witnesses on the show and interview procedures had hampered officers when carrying out investigations.

The study concludes that, to echo Silverstone (1985), there is an arbitrariness at the heart of making any television show – that whether the

police are depicted favourably or unfavourably is determined as much by the need to attract a certain audience demographic and restrictions in the format as by any ideological intent on the part of the programme-makers.

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Outline of chapters

In Chapter One, I outline my research and reasons for choosing to study production processes on a popular television drama. I examine the importance of mass media images of policing in society and describe my reasons for choosing *The Bill* as a case study. I review the existing literature on the representation of the police, crime and criminals in media narratives as well as research on production processes in news and television and conclude by identifying how my research might extend the existing literature in this field. Finally, I discuss the work of Hall (1980) and Johnson (1986) and how I will draw on Johnson's concept of the "circuit of culture" to analyse my findings.

In Chapter Two, I discuss the methods employed in my study and my reasons for choosing a "mixed methods" approach, combining the exploratory nature of ethnography with interviews and focus groups. I describe my experience of gaining access to the field and my fieldwork. I conclude by discussing the ethical implications of my research and the difficulties of ensuring anonymity, when researching a world in which many of the participants are easily identifiable.

In Chapter Three, I provide a brief history of *The Bill*, before describing the roles of everyone involved in the storytelling process on the show. I explore the organisational and structural conditions that existed on the show during the 1980s and 1990s, which enabled creative staff on the show to enjoy considerable autonomy in their work. I discuss how changes in the television industry then led to radical changes in the programme's format to win back

dwindling audiences and how these, in turn, also changed working processes in terms of the creation and development of stories. Finally, I discuss how these changes had a huge impact on the culture of those involved in that process.

In Chapter Four, I analyse the origins of story ideas for scripts on *The Bill*. I note that, in the early years of the show, writers derived story material from contacts they had made in other forces, conversations they had with officers, contacts they made through the show's police advisers, going out on patrol with officers, spending time shadowing police work in specialist units and from magazine articles or news reports. I note that, in the last ten years of the show's history, stories were instead generated by an in-house production team of four or five story editors, with stories being based on other media sources, particularly other police shows. I argue that this resulted in the creation of "media loops", recycling ideas and themes from other shows, and in an increasingly distorted, inaccurate and controversial depiction of policing on the show.

In Chapter Five, I discuss the process of developing storylines on *The Bill* and, in particular, how various contingent, complex and interlocking factors – namely commercial imperatives, working processes and ideological beliefs of those involved in the creative process, and artistic constraints – all played a part in determining how and what kind of stories about the police could be told on the show.

In Chapter Six, I describe how, between February and June 2007, I observed the story creation process on *The Bill*, following the development of one

major story-line or narrative from the initial idea to final script. I describe how this story-line was created and, in particular, I look more closely at how commercial imperatives, working processes and ideological beliefs of those involved in the creative process, and the constraints of the format influenced the decision-making process on a daily basis in the creation of story-lines.

In Chapter Seven, I discuss officers' perceptions of how fictional representations of police work may shape public understanding and knowledge of policing, based on findings from two focus groups held with officers from the Greater Manchester Police and the Metropolitan Police Service. I look firstly at police perceptions of mass media images of policing and how these affect police work and the public's treatment of the police. Secondly, I examine whether police officers from these focus groups perceive mass media images of policing to have an impact on public expectations of the police. Finally, I explore how police officers from the focus groups might wish the police to be represented in crime drama in ways in which, in their opinion, might increase public support.

In Chapter Eight, I draw together my findings and I discuss the broader issues raised by my research. In this chapter, I start by discussing the effect of being an "insider" on my research and my findings and summarise the key points of the thesis. I then move on to discuss three key issues. Firstly I discuss the lifecycle of the police show and whether or not the demise of the show had been hastened by its move away from stories about the "small change of policing" towards "grittier" and more sensationalized narratives. Secondly I discuss the function of the police drama. Although Sparks (1992) puts a forceful case that part of the pleasure viewers derive from watching

these dramas derives from their “dramatic moral structure of outrage and reassurance” (Sparks 1992, p. 4), I argue that it is important to differentiate between different sub-genres of the police show. I suggest that in the case of the police procedural or what Reiner (2010) terms the “community police show” where the emphasis is on the non-crime fighting aspects of the police role, this sub-genre also has another important function – to inform as well as entertain. Lastly I address the issue of media power.. In this last section I explore the implications of the haphazard nature of television drama production and the fact that the makers have so little control over content, given such representations are so important in shaping public understanding of the police role and function in society (Reiner 2010).

Chapter One: Introduction

1. Background to the study

The first time I ever had a conversation with a police officer was when I became a scriptwriter for *The Bill* in 1990. It was standard practice for new writers to spend time at London police stations shadowing police officers, as the executive producer and script editors of the show claimed it was extremely important for writers to have a good knowledge of the world they would be writing about.

I was told to report for an early shift at Bethnal Green in the East End of London. My guide for the day was a young Asian female officer who showed me round the station and then took me out in one of the patrol cars with another colleague so that I could start to get a sense of the scope of police officers' activities during an average shift.

What was so striking about my first day with the police was how familiar and yet unfamiliar the sights and sounds of this new world were. The offices, the cells, the dispatch room, the endless corridors, the banter, the sense of hierarchy, the camaraderie, the black humour ... all these seemed as though I had seen them a million times before – which, of course, I had, in television crime series and police films throughout my adolescence and my early twenties. But what was unfamiliar were the things I had rarely seen in films or drama series – the tedium of driving round and round the streets of Bethnal Green waiting for a call, the lack of dramatic car chases or grappling suspects to the ground. I was struck by the mundanity of so much of what

the police were called upon to do: dealing with a confused old lady who had locked herself out, a young man discharged on a Friday afternoon into the community after months on a psychiatric ward, finding himself without gas or electricity and causing a disturbance in order to get help. I observed at first-hand how, contrary to the images I was so familiar with from television drama, the police operate primarily not as crime-fighters or law-enforcers but as providers of a twenty-four hour emergency service available to respond to those in need (Cumming *et al.* 1965; Bittner 1967; Bayley 1994; Reiner 2000b).

For the next thirteen years, I worked for *The Bill* as a staff writer, and on a range of other shows. But it was not until I started to study for an M.Sc., and began to read the extensive literature on television police drama and about the world in which I had played a part for so long, that I started to think more deeply about the stories I had been writing and that had regularly been viewed by anything up to eighteen million viewers. However, as I read the literature, I found there was a significant gap in the research; very little, if anything, had been written about the production of police series or the organisational dynamics, ideology and imperatives of media workers in creating such shows. There have been some studies of crime news-making (Chibnall 1977; Ericson *et al.* 1987; 1989; 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Innes 1999; Mawby 1999; 2002; 2010) and a body of work on the content of British crime/policing drama (Hurd 1976; 1981; Clarke 1986; Laing 1991; Mason 1992; Sparks 1992; 1993; Reiner 1994; Eaton 1995; Leishman 1995; Cavender and Jurik 1998; 2004; 2007; Brunsdon 2000; Sydney-Smith 2002; Leishman and Mason 2003; McLaughlin 2005; 2007; Carrabine 2008),

but there have been no studies to date of the production processes of television police dramas.

This thesis is, I believe, the first criminological study to investigate the production of police fiction, following other studies of news-making. My study is a detailed ethnography of production processes on the long running television drama, *The Bill*.

As Becker (2007) argues, any representation about society, whether a film, a novel or a police series, makes most sense:

“... when you see them in an organizational context, as activities, as ways some people tell what they know to other people who want to know it, as organized activities shaped by the joint efforts of everyone concerned” (Becker 2007, p. 15)

Although many production studies are framed in a “tripartite” structure or an integrated theoretical framework, which seeks to understand the complex relationships between media production, media texts and audience reception (Henderson 2007), the aim of my thesis is to explore the process of storytelling on *The Bill* in an organisational context. In particular, I wish to explore how commercial imperatives, the ideological frames of the creative personnel, working processes and the constraints of the format affected the construction of stories on *The Bill* and the changing representation of the police on the show. I follow Greer (2010) who points out:

“The study of media content can provide important insights into the role of expressive cultural forms in interpreting our social world and constructing particular versions of reality. But this research is at its richest, and surely has the greatest explanatory potential, when the *process* of production is considered as well as the *product* that results.” (Greer 2010, p. 3)

For that reason, my thesis will be focused solely on the production process and on the creation of stories on the show.

1.1 Research questions

In order to understand how representations of the police, policing and crime were constructed on *The Bill*, and how such depictions were affected by the organisational dynamics, ideology and professional imperatives of the personnel and institutions, I decided to ask four main research questions:

1. How was the production process organised in terms of creation of stories? Who was involved in this process? What were their roles? Did these change over time? If so, what impact did these changes have on working processes, working culture and content?
2. How did factors such as organisational pressures, commercial imperatives, constraints of the medium and ideological values of those involved in the story creation process affect stories about the police, crime and criminals being told on *The Bill*? Were some factors more important than others and, if so, why? Was this a constant or did this also change over time?
3. How were stories created? What knowledge did the show's makers draw on in order to create stories? What made a "good" story? Why were some stories rejected? Why could some stories about the police never be told?
4. How did *The Bill*'s makers work with police sources, both serving officers and the (retired) police advisers who work for the show? What were the benefits for the police in co-operating with the show? How were police advisers recruited? What was their role? Did this changed over time and, if so, why? What influence and sanctions did the police advisers have over stories? How important was authenticity? What steps did the makers of the show take to ensure authenticity?

In order to provide some context for this exploratory study, I briefly discuss why mass media images of policing are important in society and my reasons for choosing *The Bill* as a case study. I then review, firstly, the existing literature on the content of crime news and fiction, discussing the depiction of police, crime and criminals and how such representations typically diverge

from the “official” picture painted by statistics and self-report or victimisation studies found in British and American research. Secondly, I discuss the extensive literature on the changing representation of the police in television drama. In both cases, I suggest how my research into production processes extends our understanding of what Reiner (2007) terms the “causes” of media representations. I then review the existing literature on production processes in news and fiction, both empirical and theoretical. I discuss the work of Hall (1980), Johnson (1986) and Du Gay *et al.* (1997), including the “circuit of culture” (Johnson 1986) in which it is argued that each moment in the circuit of production, circulation and consumption of cultural objects “depends on the others and is indispensable to the whole” (Johnson 1986, p. 284). I then explore how this concept influenced the theoretical framework adopted by Ericson *et al.* (1987; 1989; 1991) in their study of crime news-making. Finally, I discuss the similarities between the aims of the research undertaken by Ericson *et al.* (1987; 1989; 1991) and those of my own research, and how I intend to use a similar theoretical framework based on the “circuit of culture” to analyse my findings.

2. The importance of mass media images of policing in society

For many people, the mass media are the main source of knowledge and perceptions of the police (Skogan 1990; Reiner 2000b; Mawby 2003). As Reiner (2000b, p. 138) argues, “police activity bears most heavily on a relatively restricted group of people at the base of the social hierarchy, who are disproportionately the complainants, victims or offenders processed by the police”. Moreover, as Reiner (2010) argues, even in this group where

police contact is more frequent, police activity is largely restricted to young males. It is rare for middle or upper class people to have any adversarial contact with the police other than for traffic offences (Reiner 1994; 2000b; 2003) yet, as Reiner (2010) points out, “the most crucial sectors for determining police prestige, power and resources are the majority higher up the social scale” (Reiner 2010, p. 177). For these groups, Reiner (2010) argues that the mass media are the main source of perceptions of and preferences about policing.

There is considerable evidence to bear this out. In the *Policing for London* survey, 80% of respondents said that the news media were their principal source of information about the police while 29% of respondents got their information from “media fiction” (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2002). In the British Crime Survey (2006–7), 59% of people said they got their information from television and radio news, with 10% citing media fiction. Indeed, as Reiner (2010) suggests, Sir Ian Blair, the former Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police Service, was not entirely joking in his 2005 Dimbleby Lecture on BBC TV when he observed that “lots of people in this country are actually undertaking a permanent NVQ on policing – it’s called *The Bill*”.

Reiner (2010) also suggests that, on occasion, “the media representation of policing feeds back into policing practice” (Reiner 2010, p. 178). As an example, he cites how in 2005, Sir Stephen Lander, the then newly appointed chairman of the Serious and Organised Crime Agency (SOCA), suggested that SOCA’s priorities would be “set by the brainboxes in the Home Office, according to analysis of the prominence of different kinds of crime, measured by column inches in the press” (‘UK’s Crime-Fighting

Agency Will Use the Press to Set Agenda' *The Independent* 10 January 2005).

Thus, mass media images of policing are of considerable importance in terms of shaping people's perceptions and knowledge of policing and, on occasion, helping to shape policy and practice. However, the media-constructed image of policing "does not float free of the actualities of policing, but it is not a mirror image of them either" (Reiner 2010, p. 178). The aim of this thesis is to understand how working processes, organisational dynamics and the ideological frames of the show's makers not only conspire to produce a "refraction of the reality of policing" (Reiner 2010, p. 178) but also determine what aspects of the police role and of police work are omitted from television drama.

3. Reasons for choosing *The Bill* as a case study

I chose *The Bill* for three reasons. Firstly, the show always placed particular emphasis on procedural accuracy and, for that reason, may have been seen to be particularly influential on audiences in terms of making claims for authenticity (Leishman and Mason 2003). Secondly, because of its frequency, it was possible to portray a much more diverse and broadly representative array of different kinds of police officers and police work than most series or one-off films. Lastly, as I mentioned earlier, I was myself a scriptwriter on *The Bill* and this gave me unique access to, as well as direct participant experience of, the social world of its production.

4. Literature review

Although no studies of the production processes of police drama exist, there is nevertheless a considerable body of literature on the content of police shows. This can be divided into two key areas: firstly, content analyses of patterns of representation of the police, crime and criminals in police dramas and crime films and, secondly, the development of the police procedural (or drama which deals with the everyday work of the police in investigating crime, both by uniformed and non-uniformed officers) as well as the changing presentation of the police over the last fifty years.

4.1 Representation of the police, crime and criminals

A considerable body of work has emerged on the content of images of crime and policing in the entertainment media, both film and television, mostly in the United States. In this country, there has been a major historical analysis of changing representations of crime and criminal justice between 1945 and 1991 in newspapers and film, and between 1955 and 1991 in television (Allen *et al.* 1998). The authors found that the depiction of the police in all media was represented most positively between 1945 and 1963 but during the middle years of the survey, 1964 to 1979, the image is more negative. These were the years in which a number of major corruption scandals came to light: revelations published by *The Times* in 1969 on widespread corruption among CID officers in the Metropolitan Police Service, the Maxwell Confait¹ case of 1972, followed by two other corruption scandals involving the Drugs Squad and the Obscene Publications Squad. However,

¹ Maxwell Confait was a male prostitute found asphyxiated after a house fire in Catford in 1972. Three youths were arrested, two of whom confessed to arson and one of whom confessed to Confait's murder. However, subsequent evidence revealed that Confait had died some time prior to the house fire and the youths' convictions were overturned.

in the last years of the survey, 1980 to 1991, there has been “some recovery in the overall representation of police ethics and efficiency” (Reiner 2000a, p. 60), despite revelations of further abuse of police powers and miscarriages of justice in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Reiner (2000a) concludes that underlying these shifts in representation is a “demystification of authority and law, a change in the conceptualisation of policing and criminal justice from sacred to secular” (Reiner 2000a, p. 62).

In terms of representations of crime, criminals and victims, Reiner (2010) argues that there are significant differences between the characteristics of crime and criminals reported or portrayed by the media and the picture conveyed by official statistics, victimisation or self-report studies (Allen *et al.* 1998; Reiner *et al.* 2000; 2001; 2003; Reiner 2007a) – although Reiner adds the caveat that criminal statistics used to compare with media representations are, in turn, problematic measures of “truth” (Reiner 2007a).

Three main divergences between the characteristics of crime and criminals reported by the media and the “official” picture painted by statistics and self-report or victimisation studies are found in British and American research.

Firstly, both news and fictional media over-report and sensationalise serious crimes, especially murder, crimes against the person or those with a sexual element. Studies of American shows suggest that about two-thirds of crimes on prime-time television shows involve murder, assault or armed robbery (Garofalo 1981; Sparks 1992; Lichter *et al.* 1994; Beckett and Sasson 2000). This is not a universal phenomenon (Green 2008), and in a content analysis of twenty-four episodes of *The Bill*, screened over a six monthly period in

1990, Mason (1992) found that traffic offences, followed by breach of the peace, were the two most commonly featured crimes on the show.

Secondly, offenders in both American and British television police dramas are depicted as primarily higher-status, white, middle-aged men (Mason 1992; Lichter *et al.* 1994; Reiner *et al.* 2000; 2001), unlike their counterparts in official statistics who are predominantly young, from the most marginal socio-economic groups and disproportionately black.²

Finally, another important feature of fictional crime is the high clear-up rate.

In Allen *et al.*'s (1998) sample of crime films since 1945, there were no films before 1952 in which criminals escaped capture and hardly any up to the 1970s in which this was the case. However, thereafter, offenders got away with crimes in an increasing number of films, albeit still a minority. In

American television, Lichter *et al.* (1994) report a similar pattern – crimes are generally cleared up by the police but, in a small but significant number of stories, the police do not always “get their man”. In Mason's (1992) study of *The Bill*, the clear-up rate was 90%.

Reiner (2007b, p. 142) points out that, since the 1970s, there has been an increasing portrayal of police deviance, including a tendency in both film and, more recently, in television on both sides of the Atlantic to show narratives that increasingly justify vigilante-style methods (Reiner 2007b).

² However, as Reiner (2007a) argues, the officially recorded profile of offenders is likely to be biased misleadingly towards lower-status groups on whom police activity tends to bear most heavily (Reiner 2010). In this respect, the socio-economic characteristics of offenders in media stories may actually be close to what Reiner (2007a) describes as the “ultimately unknowable –‘real’ pattern” (Reiner 2007a, p. 309) of offending.

In the next section, I trace the history of the police procedural – dramas which depict the activities of police officers as they investigate crime – and discuss in more detail some of the social, economic, cultural and organisational reasons for the changing depictions of the police and policing in television fiction over the last fifty years.

4.2 The development of the police procedural

4.2.1 Representation of the police (1955 – 1970): carers or controllers?

Reiner (1994) argues that, while it is widely assumed that the major function of the police is law enforcement and order maintenance, a central aspect of “the legitimating myth of the British police has been that they are carers rather than controllers” (Reiner 1994, p. 13).

In his 1994 study, *The Dialectics of Dixon: the Changing Image of the TV Cop*, Reiner suggests that the development of the police series, starting with *Dixon of Dock Green* (1955 – 1976), the first major police procedural to be screened in this country, was characterised by a shifting balance between images of the police as carers and controllers. Reiner argues that each shift corresponded to the changing politics of police legitimation and changes in the evolution of the television police series, while Clarke (1986, p. 224) suggests that each shift also reflected changes in public knowledge about policing and changes in public attitudes to the police. As Rafter (2006) argues in her study of American crime films, “crime film plots are fictions that draw upon widespread attitudes towards crime, victims, law and punishment prevalent at the time of the film’s making” (Rafter 2006, p. 21).

Although Rafter (2006) is talking specifically about American crime films, the same appears applicable to British police dramas. In creating a police drama, media workers are drawing on current knowledge of, and on widespread attitudes to, law, punishment and crime, and then refracting those postures through the generic conventions of television, which in turn are subject to change. Thus, each shift in the British police drama is a development in the genre in terms of storytelling, but also gives an insight into changing attitudes towards policing and law and order.

According to Reiner (1994), *Dixon of Dock Green* depicted the police above all as “carers” and created a symbolic representation of the “British Bobby” that remains a reference point to this day (Mawby 2003). The show featured working-class police officers who were an integral part of the East-End working class community they patrolled, while the series also presented a much wider conception of the police role than had previously been shown in other fictional depictions of policing, as officers dealt with a whole range of problems experienced by the local public. Dixon’s image and that of policing were also, as Mawby (2003, p. 220) points out, presented as being at one with the post-war consensus that existed at a time when policing was not perceived as a controversial national issue.

Reiner (1994) argues that the image of the police as carers rather than controllers persisted in *Z Cars* (1962 – 1978), the next significant police series to emerge in the 1960s. *Z Cars* featured the work of beat police in the fictional Newtown, based on Kirkby outside Liverpool. By contrast to the kindly, paternalistic figure of PC Dixon, Laing (1991, p. 129) describes how officers were seen womanising and gambling – a representation that Reiner

(1994) cites as being so shocking that the Chief Constable of Lancashire immediately drove straight to London to register a complaint! Although *Z Cars* caused controversy with senior police officers for its “warts and all” portrayal of the police as adults with personal weaknesses and defects” (Reiner 1994, p. 23), Reiner argues that the police were still seen as working closely with the community, albeit a fragmented one, and that crime was still presented as a result of social problems.

4.2.2 Representation of the police (1970 – 1980): thief-takers and rule-breakers

In the late 1960s and 1970s, Reiner argues that the image of the police shifted from “carers” to “controllers” (1994, p. 23), with the emergence of shows such as *Special Branch* (1969 – 1974), *The Sweeney* (1975 – 1978), *The Professionals* (1977 – 1983) and *Target* (1977 – 1978). While *Dixon of Dock Green* and *Z Cars* focused on the work of a group of uniformed officers, *The Sweeney* concentrated on two detectives, Detective Inspector Jack Regan and Detective Sergeant George Carter, who worked for “The Sweeney”, being cockney rhyming slang [Sweeney Todd] for the Flying Squad, a specialist unit operating within the Metropolitan Police Service to prevent armed robberies and investigate serious and organised crime.

Reiner (1994) suggests that “the depiction of the police in *The Sweeney* was the Dixon image on its head” (Reiner 1994, p. 24). *The Sweeney* was notable for being one of the first British detective dramas to feature police corruption, or what Hurd (1979, p. 131) describes as “the short cutting of legal niceties” in order to secure a conviction. As Mawby (2003) points out,

police series in the 1970s were increasingly situated in a society that was far more critical of the police, following the revelations in the early and mid-1970s of widespread corruption in several specialist squads in the Metropolitan Police Service, and of police malpractice and abuse of police powers. Both Clarke (1986) and Reiner (1994) argue that changes in representation of the police in *The Sweeney* were also due to two other sources. These were, firstly, changes in the American crime film genre and the American police series, which in turn influenced British television professionals and, secondly, changes in the political climate – in particular the advent of law and order politics.

Clarke (1986) argues that the new image of the police officer as rule-breaker, bending the law within certain parameters to bring criminals to justice, had its roots in the *Dirty Harry* trilogy of films starring Clint Eastwood. The character of *Dirty Harry* was a San Francisco Police Inspector who had little time for the rules of police conduct, dismissing them as “red tape” and who avenged victims of crime by whatever means necessary, often extra-legal (Rafter 2006). While *The Sweeney*’s methods were not as violent as those of *Dirty Harry*, the image of the police as vigilantes, “breaking the rules of law to achieve true justice” (Reiner 1994, p. 25), was central to *The Sweeney*. Furthermore, Reiner (1994) argues the vigilante themes of *The Sweeney* and the idea of the police waging a war on crime (Hurd 1976) resonated with the advent of law and order as a political issue in Great Britain, at a time when

crime rates were rising and in which crime increasingly came to be perceived as “the product of evil, not social problems” (Reiner 1994).³

4.2.3 Representation of the police (1980 – 1990): carers and controllers

In 1984, a new police drama, *The Bill* (1984 – 2010) was screened for the first time, following the success of a pilot episode, *Woodentop*, the year before and featuring some of the same characters. Although Reiner (1994, p. 26) describes *The Bill* in the early days of its history as a “soap opera of the community and community policing”, he also argues that the depiction of the CID in the show incorporates some of the tough culture of *The Sweeney* and argues that the police are portrayed as both “carers” and “controllers”.

Leishman and Mason (2003, p. 64) develop this argument and suggest that the images of “care” and “control” are embodied in two of *The Bill*'s characters in the show, Sergeant Cryer, whom they describe as an updated Dixon, with the same concern for the public and his fellow officers and a similarly well-developed moral code, and Detective Inspector Frank Burnside, described as an “anachronism straight out of *The Sweeney*” (Leishman and Mason 2003, p. 65). In one of the more memorable episodes in the early 1990s, Burnside flushes a recalcitrant suspect's head down the lavatory in order to extract a confession.

Reiner (1994, p. 27) situates the development of the police genre in both changes in law and order politics and changes in the representation of the police in television series. According to Reiner (1994, p. 28), in the mid-

³ By comparison, it is worth noting that, although there had been some changes to police patrol work in terms of the introduction of radios and the patrol car in the 1960s, contemporary criminological studies still represented the police as contending mainly with rain, boredom and tired feet (Cain 1973).

1980s, the Conservative government turned away from its reliance on a law and order approach because, despite significant investment in the police, recorded crime continued to rise. Crime prevention in which the public worked as partners with criminal justice professionals became central to policy. In terms of development of the police procedural, Reiner (1994) argues that shows such as *Juliet Bravo* (1980 – 1985) and *The Gentle Touch* (1980 – 1984), both with female officers as their leads, created a new feminine perspective in crime drama and a return to the image of the police as carers (Leishman and Mason 2003).

Although Reiner (1994) argues that the synthesis of the police as carers and controllers is an uneasy one, the presentation of the police during the first fourteen years of *The Bill's* history (1984 – 1998) is by and large favourable, with the emphasis on the “caring” image of the police (Mason 1992). Any police illegality is either minor and confined to a single character or confined to characters at other neighbouring stations (Mason 1992) and the police are shown as carrying out a necessary social function with integrity and effectiveness.

4.2.4 Representation of the police (1990 – 1998): carers, controllers or endemically corrupt?

In the 1990s, Leishman and Mason (2003) argue that the fictional representation of the police became more political and critical. Ironically, during the 1980s and 1990s, police powers and accountability were transformed by a number of changes in statutes and case law, most notably the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 (PACE). This act sought to

establish a balance between police powers – of stop and search, arrest, detention and interrogation – and suspects’ rights (Newburn 2009). However, there is inevitably a time-lag between commissioning of scripts and their appearance on screen – in the case of drama series, that time lag may be as great as five or even ten years – so it is inevitable that television depiction of policing may often lag behind “real-life policing”.

A number of dramas emerged during this period that portrayed the police in a more critical light than had previous fictional series. Leishman and Mason (2003) suggest that *Prime Suspect* (1991 – 2006) was the first key drama to do this. While previous dramas had looked at the role of the police – carers or controllers, force or service – *Prime Suspect* and the dramas that followed it in the 1990s were what Eaton (1995, p. 181) describes as “explorations of the underpinnings of the police force”. The first *Prime Suspect* series (1991) was about a female CID officer, Jane Tennison⁴, recently promoted to the traditionally male role of Senior Investigating Officer in charge of a murder inquiry team, having not only to prove herself in terms of solving the case but having to overcome the hostility and resentment of her almost exclusively male team (Leishman and Mason 2003, p. 95). Eaton (1995, p. 182) argues that while earlier police series in the 1970s, such as *The Sweeney*, had raised the need for rule-breaking to get results, *Prime Suspect* was the first drama to question wholesale “the values that permeate the organisation”.

Prime Suspect dramatised and criticised the “hegemonic masculinity” of “canteen culture” (Waddington 1999a), characterised by moral conservatism,

⁴ The consultant for *Prime Suspect* was a then serving Detective Inspector, Jackie Malton, whose real-life vicissitudes, I was told in a personal interview, formed the basis of many of the incidents in the first series written by Lynda La Plante.

isolation and action-based machismo (Westley 1970; Cain 1973; Reiner 1978; Chan 1997; Waddington 1999a; Reiner 2000b). The series also dramatised the sexism of “canteen culture” and how women officers were routinely excluded, both from the male officers’ socialising and from interesting work assignments (Heidensohn 1992; 2003; Brown and Heidensohn 2000).

Between The Lines (1992 – 1994) featured the work of the Metropolitan Police Service’s anti-corruption squad, the Complaints Investigation Bureau (CIB), and was the next seminal police drama to emerge in the 1990s. While earlier treatments of police corruption were primarily about the “one bad apple in the barrel” (Mawby 2003), *Between The Lines* presented what Leishman and Mason (2003) memorably describe as the “apple crumble effect”. The show dealt with the politics of policing in a way not hitherto shown on British television and showed “flexible morality at all levels of the hierarchy from the street cops, through the management cops, to their political overseers” (Leishman 1995, pp. 148–9). *Between The Lines* portrayed policing at its most morally ambiguous and constantly raised the question of “whether effective policing can be achieved without a necessary blurring of boundaries between policing and criminality” (Brunsdon 2000, p. 208).

Both Leishman and Mason (2003) and Brunsdon (2000) argue that the next significant sub-genre to emerge in the mid-to-late 1990s was what they term “the medico-detective series” – shows such as *Dangerfield* (1995 – 1999), *Silent Witness* (1996 – present) and *McCallum* (1995 – 1998). These were shows in which the main protagonists are police surgeons and pathologists

working closely with the police and drawing on the terrain of *Between The Lines*, often at odds with the police and finding that evidence is routinely “doctored”. The emergence of such shows clearly reflected the growth of forensic science in the 1990s and the desire on the part of television programme makers to reflect these changes in police work. But more than that, as Reiner (2010) argues, the fact that detective work is carried out using state-of-the-art technology is a way of “resolving tensions about policing” (Reiner 2010, pp. 193–4). Series such as *Between The Lines* and *Prime Suspect* may have raised questions about the police’s integrity and trustworthiness, but solving crime through technology and forensic methods resolves these tensions, according to Reiner (2010), by “unequivocally establish[ing] guilt through objective techniques without anything but minimal reactive force” (Reiner 2010, p. 194).

While the 1990s were notable for the new crop of critical and “medico-detective” police drama series, also popular during this period were “nostalgia” series such as *Heartbeat* (1992 – 2009) set in Yorkshire in the 1960s. Although there was a crime story each week, the emphasis in the storytelling was very much on “the human rather than the organisational or technological resources of the police” (Reiner 2010, p. 199).

As I describe in Chapters Four and Five, in the late 1990s, *The Bill*, which had hitherto rarely featured stories of police deviance and abuse of powers, became a serial rather than a series. Leishman and Mason (2003, p. 103) suggest that, while the new format retained elements of the old show and police characters were still depicted as both carers and controllers, for the first time in its history, characters who were unremittingly corrupt were

featured, while other regular characters began to acquire character flaws and major failings such as drink and drugs addiction (see section 2.2 in Chapter Five for further discussion).

4.2.5 Representation of the police (1998 – present day): fighting a losing battle and the return of the vigilante cop

McLaughlin (2007) argues there have been three separate directions for the police series genre over the last decade: tales of police officers corrupted by “the job” and fighting a losing battle – *The Cops* (1998 – 2000), *Without Motive* (2000); “investigative techno-chic” – *Messiah* (2001 – present), *Wire in The Blood* (2002 – present); and “nostalgia” policing – *New Tricks* (2003 – present), *The Last Detective* (2003 – 2007) and *Life On Mars* (2006 – 2007).

McLaughlin (2007) describes the promotional advertisements for *The Cops* as looking like “trailers for a real documentary about the depressing reality of contemporary urban policing” (McLaughlin 2007, p. 107). Focused on a fictional northern town, *The Cops* shows:

“policing as a remorseless and thankless labour in which officers are continually challenged and compromised, not only by the situations they are placed in and the people they deal with, but also by management, by colleagues and the circumstances of their personal lives.” (Mawby 2003, p. 224)

As both Mawby (2003) and McLaughlin (2007) comment, the world of *The Cops* is one of little hope, where social deprivation is the norm and the police, often despised, are helpless.

In her study of American crime films, Rafter (2006) argues that a new sub-genre of police/detective film emerged in the 1990s, which she describes as

the “critical” or “alternative” tradition (Rafter 2006, p. 131). Rafter (2006) argues that films in this genre (*State of Grace* 1990; *Bad Lieutenant* 1992) depict their police officer protagonists as being profoundly corrupted by the job that they do, “lost souls doomed to wander forever in a maze of cynicism” (Rafter 2006, p. 131). *Without Motive* (2000), a show devised by one of the co-creators of *Between The Lines*, explores similar terrain. The premise of the story is simple: a long and tortuous murder investigation of a serial killer over several years and the pressure on the murder investigation team to get a result – any result. However, where *Without Motive* differs so powerfully from other police “corruption” dramas of this era is that rule-breaking is not seen as a means to justify an end. Instead, the outside pressure exerted on the officers by the public, the media and their bosses to get a result after six years’ fruitless investigation forces the team to bring charges against a suspect, despite the knowledge that they have insufficient evidence and the series concludes bleakly by showing the personal damage suffered by the officers involved in the case as a result of their rule-breaking.

McLaughlin (2007) also identifies two other major developments in the police genre in the 2000s. Firstly, he argues that dramas such as *Messiah* and *Wire in The Blood* continue in the “forensic, psychological, ‘investigative technochic’” vein (McLaughlin 2007, p. 112) pioneered by earlier dramas such as *Silent Witness* and *Dangerfield* but with higher and more glossy production values, influenced by American dramas such as the *CSI* franchise. However, McLaughlin (2007) argues that the bleakness of procedurals such as *The Cops* (and, I would add, *Without Motive*) also permeates the new wave of forensic cop dramas, and that the protagonists of these dramas are also

disturbed and ultimately corrupted by the unbearable nature of the crimes they are investigating and the society they are dealing with. At the end of such shows, there is rarely a sense of any moral or social order being restored (Sparks 1992).

McLaughlin (2007) argues that the only escape for viewers during the 2000s was nostalgia and cites the *Inspector Morse* series. He argues (2007, p. 110) that “nostalgia for policing as craftwork and more comprehensible crime-free times” becomes more apparent in every successive series and Morse is seen to be increasingly distant and more at odds with the rise of bureaucracy within the police force. Other shows that played with the notion of whether past or present policing was preferable include *New Tricks* (2003 – present) and *Life on Mars* (2006 – 2007). *Life on Mars* is the story of Sam Tyler, a present-day CID officer from the Greater Manchester Police, who is hit by a car while hunting a serial killer and wakes up in 1973. Tyler has to adjust to a world without technology, intelligence-led detective work and any semblance of an ethical approach to policing. The contrast is, as Reiner (2010) puts it, between “the supposedly politically correct PACE rule-bound, scientifically equipped police of today and the corner-cutting, sexist, loud-mouthed but more human *Sweeney*-model, with the latter ultimately prevailing” (Reiner 2010).

However, to fully understand the genesis and development of any media text, it is crucial to understand other factors, in particular, the social, organisational and economic constraints and imperatives of the world in which these representations are created. In my thesis, I shall be drawing on this body of work on the content of crime drama and exploring whether these

factors have had any impact on a) why the characteristics of crime and criminals reported by the media differ from the “official” picture painted by statistics and self-report or victimisation studies found in British and American research and b) why representations of the police and policing vary over time.

4.3 Production research

4.3.1 Literature on the production of crime news

Very little literature exists on the production of crime news and, as mentioned earlier, there have been no studies of the production processes involved in creating television police dramas. Indeed, as Greer argues, there seems to be have been a “death of ethnography” in media criminology (Greer 2010, p. 3). There has been some work on the construction of crime news and relationships between the police and reporters in other countries, including Canada (Ericson *et al.* 1987; 1989; 1991) and the United States (Motschall and Cao 2002; Lovall 2003; Chermak and Weiss 2005). However, as this is a study about the production of images about the British police, and they differ in important respects from the police in the United States and Canada, I shall review the existing literature in this country in this section, with the exception of Ericson *et al.*’s study as this is one of the very few ethnographic studies of the process of news-making based on both interviews and observation of journalistic work.

In terms of studies of media production generally – and not just the production of crime news – Devereux (2003) argues that three main perspectives have predominated: political economy, critical theory and liberal

pluralist. The political economy approach (Hesmondhalgh 2005; 2006; Murdock and Golding 2005) emphasised the importance of economic pressures, such as media ownership, advertising and the structure of the market as influences that shape the content of media texts. The critical theory or neo-Marxist approach examines the extent to which media professionals, knowingly or unknowingly (Elliott 1972; Devereux 2003), engage in the reproduction of dominant ideologies or ideas and values favourable to the politically and economically powerful in society – transmitting a conservative, conformist view of the world and portraying capitalist society in a favourable light (Marsh and Melville 2009). By contrast, the liberal pluralist approach stresses the autonomy of media professionals and that, as a result, media content conveys a vast array of messages, some of which are favourable to the status quo and some of which are not (Devereux 2003).

One of the earliest studies of the production of crime news in the United Kingdom was *Policing The Crisis* (Hall *et al.* 1978), a study of the so-called mugging panic in the early 1970s. Taking a critical or neo-Marxist approach, Hall *et al.* (1978) argue that time pressures and the need for media statements wherever possible to be grounded in “‘objective’ and ‘authoritative’ statements from ‘accredited’ sources” lead to a “systematically structured over-accessing to the media of those in powerful and privileged institutional positions” (Hall *et al.* 1978, p. 58). As Hall *et al.* (1978) suggest, this structured preference given to the opinions of the powerful leads to these spokespeople becoming “primary definers” of topics and it is their

interpretation of events or subjects that sets the terms of reference for subsequent debates and discussions.

Hall *et al.* (1978) also argue that “since the media are institutionally distinct from other agencies of the state, they do not automatically take their lead from the state” (Hall *et al.* 1978, p. 65) and add that the media frequently attempt to find out things that primary definers would rather keep quiet. However, they conclude that the “*prevailing tendency* of the media is towards the reproduction, *amidst all their contradictions*, of the definitions of the powerful” but a tendency which is “inscribed in the structures and processes of news-making itself” (Hall *et al.* 1978, pp. 65–6).

However, Hall *et al.*’s (1978) analysis is not based on empirical work but on readings of media texts and assumptions about media processes of production. Other studies based on either interviews with media professionals or observation of production processes take a rather more nuanced approach, drawing on ideas from the political economy and liberal pluralist schools of thought and stressing the importance of economic factors and working relationships between reporters and sources (Ericson *et al.* 1987) in shaping news output. In *Law-and-Order News* (1977), Chibnall draws on interviews with specialist crime reporters, a Scotland Yard press officer and a period of observation at the Scotland Yard Press Office as well as content analysis of crime news in the national press. He argues that while, on occasion, journalists and broadcasters interpret events in ways that are unacceptable to “establishment politicians” (Chibnall 1977, p. 4), in general news output displays “a basic commitment to the established social and economic order, and a characteristic way of interpreting the world” (Chibnall

1977, p. 4). However, he also argues that this is not just a result of journalists' dependence on a limited number of sources but that news output is, in fact, the result of a number of complex and contingent factors, which leads, in turn, to the reproduction of ideas and values favourable to the economically and socially powerful:

"The economic contexts within which production takes place, the restricted time period within which the newspaper must be reproduced, the conventional wisdoms of professional journalism, the largely shared and complementary expectations of editors, sources, colleagues and readers all work towards the creation of the same type of product, which, in turn, recreates the conditions for its reproduction. Today's news is processed according to the expectations moulded by yesterday's news ... the constant recreation and reinforcement of the taken-for-granted frameworks of knowledge production." (Chibnall 1977, p. 233)

In another interview-based study, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) examine both the practice of specialist crime reporters and what they term as the media strategies of the sources crime reporters work with in constructing crime news. They also suggest that Hall *et al.*'s (1978) approach is problematic and that it omits one crucial point – that even among the privileged elite, there are inequalities of access to the media and competition for space and time in the media by official sources:

"The essentially structuralist approach of Hall *et al.*, ... is profoundly incurious about the processes whereby sources may engage in ideological conflict prior to or contemporaneous with the appearance of 'definitions' in the media. It therefore tends to ignore questions about how contestations over the presentation of information takes place within institutions and organisations reported by the media, as well as overlooking the concrete strategies pursued as they contend for space and time." (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994, p. 20)

Similarly, Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) argue that Hall *et al.*'s (1978) approach ignores the fact that on occasion, the media "may themselves take

the initiative in the definitional process by challenging the so-called primary definers” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994, p. 19) and cite examples of this, such as scandals inside organisations such as the police, in the world of business or leaks by dissident figures which in turn force what Schlesinger and Tumber term “undesired and unintended official responses” (Schlesinger and Tumber 1994, p. 19).

In the same vein, Mawby (1999) also suggests that the concept of the police as “primary definers” needs re-examination. Using a number of case studies from 1998, he argues against the idea that the police and other authoritative sources always set the news agenda. Innes’ (1999) study of the ways in which the police seek to use the media as an investigative resource also concludes that “the media is not necessarily a functionary of the police institution, it is a diverse industry with its own set of guiding principles and objectives” (Innes 1999, p. 273).

A more recent study by Mawby (2010), based on interviews with police communication managers and crime reporters, as well as a survey of police forces in England, Wales and Scotland, takes a slightly different stance. Mawby (2010) suggests that the rise of police corporate communications, coupled with organisational changes in the media such as the greater reliance of journalists on outside news sources and the difficulties junior reporters face in making their own police contacts, due to younger officers’ mistrust of the media, may be having an impact on the ability of crime reporters to “provide independent critical reporting on policing and crime” (Mawby 2010, p. 1073)

Finally, Ericson *et al.*'s (1987; 1989; 1991) three volume Canadian study remains one of the few to focus on the news-making *process*. It draws on both in-depth interviews and ethnographic observation of working processes. Clearly, there are differences between news and fiction – the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines the former as “newly received or noteworthy information about events” and the latter as “prose literature describing imaginary events or people” – but there are also many similarities. Like fiction, news is a construction; like the crime writer, journalists “tell stories, as opposed to simply reflecting reality or gathering facts” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 9). Indeed, as Ericson *et al.* (1987) argue, “the news process does not entail the reporting of a self-evident reality”; like the work of the fiction writer, it also “involves using organizational resources and occupational routines of the craft” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 19) to construct accounts. An understanding of the processes of news-making will also inform an understanding of the processes of constructing fiction and, for that reason, I review this study below, despite the fact that it is not set in a British context.

Ericson *et al.* (1987) emphasise how commercial imperatives, working processes and constraints of the medium have an impact on how crime stories are chosen, developed or rejected. They argue that the process of news-making constantly narrows what they term the “news aperture” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 9):

“Sources edit their releases and verbal statements for journalists’ consumption. Assignment editors choose only some matters for coverage, and assign them with a specific angle, so that only limited sources are used, limited questions asked, and limited answers formulated. Reporters themselves edit in the process of visualizing their stories, and choosing sources and appropriate formulations ... The editor can only work from the text he is presented with, a text that

has been edited substantially by the sources and journalists involved previously.” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 297)

Ericson *et al.* (1987) suggest that the process of news-making is “fluid and equivocal” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 178), that journalists do possess some autonomy and that newsrooms are not characterised by a consensus of norms and values but rather by “ongoing disagreement, tension and conflict between assignment editors and reporters” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 211). They argue that, while what is broadcast or printed usually is decided by what they term as the dominant ideology of those in power in a particular news setting, journalists are often able to find ways of refusing or avoiding assignments they do not wish to undertake, usually for ideological reasons (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 217). Echoing the findings of British studies, Ericson *et al.* (1987) conclude that routine working processes and organisational constraints also in turn lead to journalists reproducing ideas favourable to powerful sections of society:

“The journalist is partial to going where the power is. He goes to the person who is best placed in an organization to give an authoritative version of what appears to be the case. This person may be the least well placed to know about the matter he is asked to address, but that does not matter for the purposes of news and political discourse. What matters is that the chosen source has been authorized politically and bureaucratically to give an account.” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 360)

The result, according to Ericson *et al.* (1987), is a news output that enacts “a view of the world that is partial to particular sources and their versions of reality” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 9).

Having reviewed the existing literature on the production of crime news in this country (and also Ericson *et al.*’s work), I now discuss the literature on the processes of production in television.

4.3.2 Research on the production of television programmes

There is very little information on the processes of production of television fiction, or indeed of television programmes in general, particularly in the British context. There have been studies of particular occupational groups (Tunstall 2002) and studies of an entire organisation (Burns 1977; Born 2005) but very few studies of the production of individual programmes (Elliott 1972; Hobson 1982; Intintoli 1984; Silverstone 1985; Tulloch and Moran 1986; Devereux 1998; Henderson 2007) either in the United Kingdom or in other countries. As Murdock and Halloran (1979) point out, “paradoxically, then, we know the least about the production of the very programmes that are the most popular with the viewers” (Murdock and Halloran 1979, p. 274). Thirty years on, we still know very little about the processes and practices that shape the content of those shows. As there is so little literature, I will review studies not just from this country but also from the United States, Eire and Australia. It should be added that, drawing on my own experience as a soap opera writer in this country⁵, it seems from the literature that the process of storytelling on soap operas is fairly consistent in its methods from country to country and over time so, for this reason as well, I include these studies.

Two of the earliest and most in-depth studies of the production process in the United Kingdom focused on documentaries (Elliott 1972; Silverstone 1985). Both studies were based on interviews and in-depth participant observation of working processes over a period of several months, exploring how commercial imperatives, working processes and constraints of the format

⁵ I was also a staff writer on *Brookside* between 1999 and 2001.

helped to shape the final form of documentaries. Both Elliott (1972) and Silverstone (1985) stress that, as a result of these factors, the process of television production is haphazard. As Silverstone (1985) comments:

“There is a certain arbitrariness – a serendipity – at the heart of documentary practice. Things happen in shot that are not controlled or controllable, contributors perform less well or better than expected, the world out there imposes all kinds of constraints, sets up all kinds of practical political obstacles so that the final film is always a frail compromise, as ephemeral in its statements and judgements as its appearance on the screen.” (Silverstone 1985, p. 165)

He argues that the arbitrariness of television production means that what actually ends up on screen is as often determined “by the availability of a shot as by a clear commitment by the producer to a given line or set of observations” (Silverstone 1985, p. 16).

Elliott’s (1972) study of the making of a documentary series, *The Nature of Prejudice*, also stresses the arbitrary quality of the television production process. Looking at the generation of ideas for each of the six programmes in the series, he suggests that the processes by which researchers found people to appear on the programme and source material came from people they already knew or by drawing on what he terms “their experience of a general media culture” (Elliott 1972, p. 146). According to Elliott, this limits “the views of the world” (Elliott 1972, p. 59) transmitted in such programmes. As he puts it:

“Through these various mechanisms a new production draws on the culture of the media, thus ensuring similarity and continuity in the view of the world presented.” (Elliott 1972, p. 146)

As a result, Elliott (1972) argues that the critical or neo-Marxist approach to production research, the approach that has it that the output of the media

invariably maintains consensus and the *status quo*, is overly simplistic. In his view, those “working in the media are not able to exercise sufficient control over its output to engage in such direct manipulation” (Elliott 1972, p. 165).

He goes on to argue:

“This does not mean, however, that nothing is said, that no effect is produced, that no manipulation takes place. What is said is the unplanned product of following accepted production routines within established organisational systems. As a result it must be expected that what is said will in the main be fundamentally supportive of the socio-economic structure of the society in which those organisations are set.” (Elliott 1972, pp. 165–6)

In other words, Elliott (1972) is suggesting that dominant ideologies are being reproduced not as a result simply of media workers’ dependence on “authoritative sources”, but rather as a result of drawing on limited contacts within the media culture which in turn leads to a recycling of ideas within that culture. This is an idea to which I shall return in my thesis (see Chapters Six and Eight).

In addition to Elliott’s (1972) and Silverstone’s (1985) work, there have also been a limited number of studies of production processes in soap operas in Britain, in Australia and in the United States. Soap operas began in the 1930s in America as radio serials, which were sponsored by the giant soap powder manufacturers such as Proctor and Gamble. Those who made them wanted to create programmes that would attract female listeners and allow them at the same time to advertise their products – hence the title (Hobson 1982).

One of the earliest studies of soap operas in this country was Hobson’s (1982) research on the popular British television soap opera, *Crossroads*, set

in a motel in the Midlands. Although part of her study looks at the roles of those involved in the production of the show, the main emphasis of Hobson's work is on audience reception of story-lines and, in particular, how audiences "add their own interpretation and understanding to the programme" (Hobson 1982, p. 170). Similarly, Tulloch and Moran's 1986 study of the Australian soap, *A Country Practice*, also concentrates on how different audiences – in this case, housewives and schoolchildren – bring their own experiences to bear in watching a programme and interpret programmes differently as a result of those experiences.

An American study by Intintoli (1984) of the soap opera, *Guiding Light*, does look in depth at production processes on the show and takes a political economy approach to analysing findings. The study is based on interviews and limited observation of the filming process but not of story development. He argues that the "ultimate consideration in creating and selecting stories is that they garner and keep a sufficiently large and demographically appropriate audience" (Intintoli 1984) – "appropriate", in this context, meaning attractive to prospective advertisers and sponsors of the show. However, as Intintoli (1984) observes, a basic characteristic of production for large mass markets is uncertainty as to whether shows will actually be watched by sufficient viewers. To that end, he suggests that the makers of soap operas rely on a number of strategies to reduce uncertainty, including hiring "star" actors to attract audiences and copying what makers of such shows perceive as successful formulas. This may entail either repeating what they believe has led to success in the past or copying elements from other successful programmes.

Intintoli argues that another way in which makers of soap operas attempt to attract or indeed retain audiences is to avoid potentially controversial subjects – which, at the time he was writing, included “child beating, wife beating, incest and homosexuality” (Intintoli 1984, p. 233). He suggests that the soap opera genre is characterised by stories about community and relationships between families and friends and, for that reason, subjects such as domestic violence or incest might be seen “to tear at the fabric of community itself” (Intintoli 1984, p. 233). However, he argues that as a result of these practices and factors, the world as presented in soap operas “provides a restricted and repetitive frame for experience and a very narrow view of social life” (Intintoli 1984).

A study by Devereux (1998) on how poverty and unemployment are represented in Radio Telefis Eireann (RTE)’s factual and fictional programmes also argues that soap operas present “a very narrow view of social life”. Devereux’s (1998) study draws on a critical/neo-Marxist approach to analyse his findings and, like Intintoli’s (1984) work, is based on interviews and limited observation of production practices. His starting point is to discover why so few stories are told about poverty and unemployment on RTE, and in the case of the soap opera, *Glencoe*, set in rural Ireland, he suggests that two factors are at play. Firstly, he argues that an emphasis on humour and lovable characters in the storytelling and a fear of alienating audiences result in social issues being treated in superficial ways and potentially controversial story-lines being avoided. Secondly, he suggests that another contributory factor may be the conservative ideologies of those

involved in making the show and, in particular, the personal ideology of the executive producer who possessed a final veto on the show's content.

By contrast, Henderson's (2007) study examines the ways in which three controversial social issues – the topics of breast cancer, child abuse and mental health – were represented on three British soap operas, *Emmerdale*, *Coronation Street* and *Brookside*. Taking a political economy approach, her study is not based on observation but on interviews. She argues that commercial imperatives were the driving force in all cases behind the decision on these shows to feature these issues for the first time in British soap opera. By contrast to Devereux's (1998) findings that potentially controversial story-lines were generally avoided on *Glenroe* for fear of losing viewers, Henderson discusses how the decision to run a sexual abuse story on *Emmerdale* was part of a deliberate strategy to attract a new audience.

As one of her interviewees stated:

"The programme had an imperative over the last few years to change its audience profile which was fairly old ... with a strong base in Yorkshire. The result was to try to change that audience. To get a younger audience ... and a greater following in London and the south-east which is where the money is. Advertisers are not interested in advertising to 65-year-olds ... who live in Yorkshire. It's simply not of interest to them, and that's a fact of life" (quoted in Henderson 2007, p. 62).

Accordingly, as Henderson (2007) explains, one of the senior executives at Yorkshire Television, the producers of *Emmerdale* for the ITV network, advised the makers of the show that he wanted three controversial story-lines and, in particular, one with a young protagonist (Henderson 2007, p. 62). *Brookside* was also under similar pressure to maintain fast-dwindling audiences in the 1990s and the story introduced about the Jordache family –

Mandy, her two daughters, Beth and Rachel and their abusive father, Trevor – that culminated in Trevor’s murder was also introduced as a way to “kickstart waning audience interest” (Henderson 2007, p. 64). However, although she emphasises the importance of commercial imperatives in creating and developing story ideas in soap opera, unlike Intintoli’s (1984) and Devereux’s (1998) studies, Henderson (2007) also explores “how the availability of actors, the restrictions of sets and other bureaucratic or technical limitations” (Henderson 2007, p. 73) act as constraints on the storytelling process. As an example, Henderson (2007) cites how the sudden sacking of the actress who played the abused teenager, Beth Jordache, had a huge effect on the story-line and, indeed, triggered a furore among women’s groups when the news was announced. After her mother’s murder of her father, Beth helped Mandy to bury Trevor Jordache under the patio in their garden and when the police subsequently discovered the body, both Mandy and Beth Jordache were sent to prison. However, the announcement that the actress who played Beth was to be sacked resulted in speculation in the press that Beth would commit suicide in prison as an “exit” story. This in turn resulted in demonstrations outside the offices of Channel 4, the broadcasters of *Brookside*, by members of incest survivors’ groups. In an interview with Henderson, one of the demonstrators expressed her concern:

“Beth had portrayed this really strong survivor ... And then all of a sudden, somebody, somewhere, and I feel very insensitively, decided she would hang herself in prison so they’re saying to us as survivors, ‘You’re always the victim, you never survive’.” (quoted in Henderson 2007, p. 72)

In the end, Beth Jordache suffers a heart attack while in prison but, as Henderson (2007) effectively argues, while commercial imperatives may

shape the development of a social issue story-line, issues such as the availability or otherwise of actors may result in such a story-line being abandoned prematurely.

Although these later studies of production processes have mainly been interview-based, my research draws both on interviews with those involved in the process of story creation and on an observation of working processes. My aims in this thesis will be, firstly, to add to the limited body of knowledge that exists on the production of television drama but, secondly, also to address the question: how much control do media workers in television drama have over the content of these shows?

5. Theoretical framework for the thesis

Greer (2010) argues that, despite a number of groundbreaking interdisciplinary studies in the 1960s and 1970s, media criminology has come to be characterised by a lack of attention to the methods and theory used by key cultural theorists, to the extent that “serious theoretical and methodological engagement with the rapidly changing media side of the crime-media relationship has become increasingly rare” (Greer 2010, p. 2). He suggests that this has led to most media criminology being founded on a partial theorisation of the crime-media relationship, which in turn has led to a partial analysis and partial understanding of the forces that shape that relationship. Greer argues that:

“the interests of media criminology [should] be defined as the complex and constantly shifting intersections between crime, criminalisation and control on the one hand and media, mediatisation and representation on the other.” (Greer 2010, p. 5)

Greer (2010) concludes that what is needed in order to “capture the complexity of what occurs at the intersection of crime and media” (Greer 2010, p. 6) is an interdisciplinary approach that builds on a wide diversity of theoretical, methodological and empirical perspectives. This is what I will attempt to do in this thesis.

Most of the production studies I described above are framed in a “tripartite” structure, a framework drawing upon “all three aspects of communication – production, transmission, reception/appropriation – in order to interpret the ideological character of media messages” (Thompson 1990, p. 306). The theoretical framework of these studies draws heavily on the work of Hall (1980) and Johnson (1986) and the concept of the “circuit of culture”, which Hall (1980) describes as “a structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments” (Hall 1980, p. 128). In the next section, I discuss in more detail Hall’s (1980) and Johnson’s (1986) work on the “circuit of culture” and then explain how the concept of the “circuit of culture” will form a theoretical framework for my analysis.

6. The “circuit of culture”

In *Encoding/Decoding*, Hall (1980) argues that the active construction of meaning is a socially structured process and that, in order to understand its complexities, the communication process as a whole needs to be understood. Hall (1980, p. 128) describes the communication process as a “structure produced and sustained through the articulation of linked but distinctive moments – production, circulation, distribution/consumption, reproduction”. Each “moment” is distinct and has its own forms and

conditions of existence but is at the same time inter-connected with the others.

Hall (1980) analyses the communication process by using the example of a programme produced within the television industry. He starts by discussing the first “moment” in the circuit of communication, the moment of production, and suggests that:

“Of course, the production process is not without its ‘discursive’ aspect; it, too, is framed throughout by meanings and ideas: knowledge-in-use concerning the routines of production, historically defined technical skills, professional ideologies, institutional knowledge, definitions and assumptions, assumptions about the audience and so on frame the constitution of the programme through this production structure.” (Hall 1980, p. 129)

Furthermore, as Hall (1980, p. 129) argues, although “the production structures originate the television discourse, they do not constitute a closed system”. He suggests that television workers, in constructing a text, draw on:

“topics, treatments, agendas, events, personnel, images of the audiences, ‘definitions of the situation’ from other sources and other discursive formations of the wider socio-cultural and political structure of which they are a differentiated part.” (Hall 1980, p. 129)

Hall then argues that not only is the audience “the receiver” of the message but also “the source”, that the mechanisms used by media workers in generating texts draw on the range of conventional wisdom available in society on any topic and then relay it back to viewers in programme form (Elliott 1972). He also suggests that, through production practices, “circulation” and “reception” both form part of the moment of production and “are reincorporated back via a number of skewed and structured ‘feedbacks’ into the production process itself” (Hall 1980, p. 130). Thus, although

consumption and reception are both separate moments in the “circuit of communication”, they are at the same time part of the “moment” of the production process.

The concept of the “circuit of communication” is developed further in the work of Johnson (1986) and Du Gay *et al.* (1997). Drawing on Hall’s (1980) work, Johnson (1986) argues that each moment in the circuit depends on the others and is indispensable to the whole and, moreover, that at each point “there are changes in form: conditions or means of production: the products or texts; the different socially-located readings or uses of the product; the intersections of these with the lived ensembles already in place; the moment of production again” (Johnson 1986, p. 285).

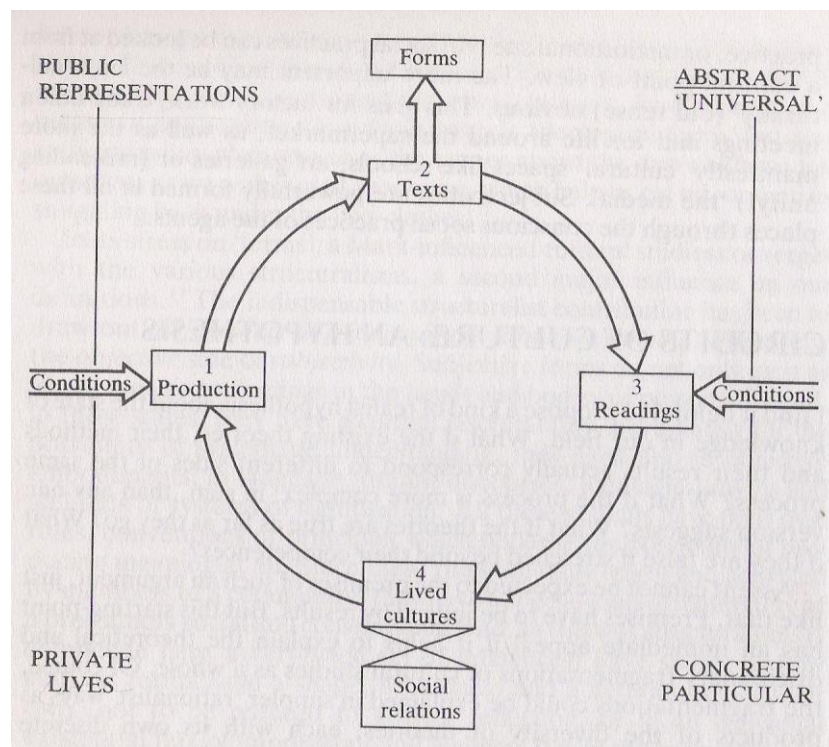


Diagram 1.1 Johnson's (1986) "circuit of culture"

Du Gay *et al.* (1997) illustrate this by using the Sony Walkman to explore what they term “the biography of a cultural artefact” (Du Gay *et al.* 1997, p. 2). They argue that the analysis could be applied to any cultural artefact to demonstrate how each moment of the circuit of culture is both separate and interlocked, and they expand the circuit to include five “moments” – representation, identities, production, consumption and regulation.

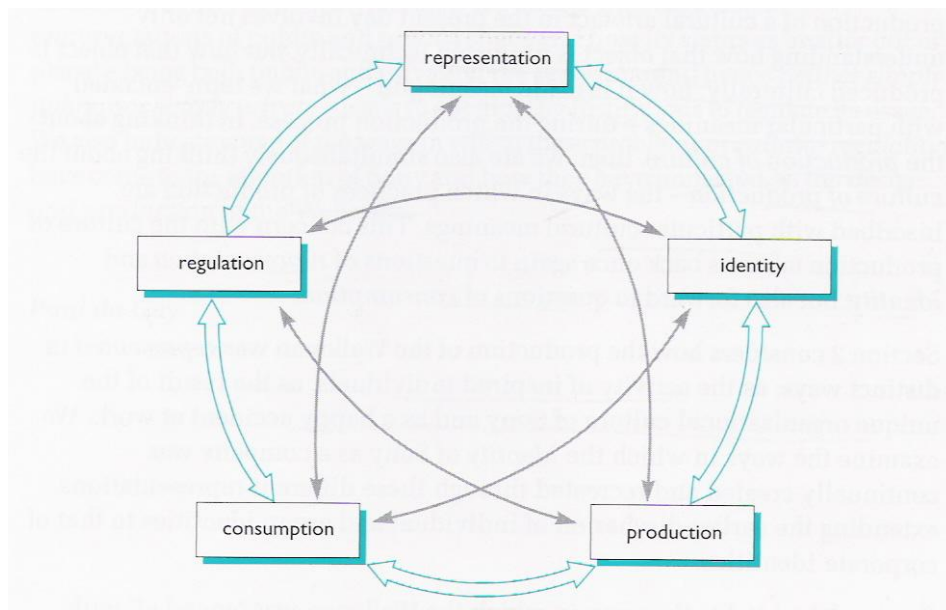


Diagram 1.2 Du Gay *et al.* 's (1997) “circuit of culture”

In their discussion of the first key “moment”, representation, Du Gay *et al.* (1997) discuss how the Walkman was represented in advertising discourse. They argue the Walkman was associated in advertising with young people and thus link the “moment” of representation with the “moment” of identities, the “moment” of establishing which social identities are associated with a cultural artefact. They then consider the production of the Walkman, and how this was represented in a number of ways: as the activity of inspired individuals and as the result of the unusual organisational culture of Sony. Having linked the “moments” of representation and production, they link

production and consumption and discuss how designers attempted to bring about an identification between the artefact and certain groups of consumers.

Du Gay *et al.* (1997) then examine the “moment” of consumption and the ways in which the Walkman was used by people in their everyday lives. They explore how some of these uses challenged the link between private and public space. Finally, they chart how these uses led to attempts by institutions to regulate its usage and how these in turn led to changes in the design and production of the Walkman.

One key production study, strongly influenced by the “circuit of communication”, is Ericson *et al.*’s (1987; 1989; 1991) work on the production of crime news. Although this study focuses solely on product and processes and not on audience reception, Ericson *et al.* (1987) claim that the news process from occurrence, to news event, to news product, to the reception of news by the news organisations and source organisations concerned is not “a discrete communication process” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 72) but rather a series of several different but interconnected processes, each one of which requires explanation because it is associated with a unique set of organisational activities. They argue:

“The author of the text draws upon the tacit knowledge of his experience to construct the text, especially what sort of account is required to achieve ‘accountability’ with the ‘audience’ (organizational superior, client, regulating agency, etc.) to whom it is directed ... Furthermore, once a text is produced, whatever meaning it had to its author, or others immediately involved in the account, can ‘escape’ them as the text is interpreted and used within other contexts of organizational relations. As the text becomes objective knowledge, it is interpreted and used by others in a manner which is external to, and independent of its creators ... Additionally the use of the objective

knowledge in the new organizational context may ultimately affect the original author, forcing him to give it new interpretations and to incorporate it for use in further accounts” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, pp. 72–3).

Thus in Ericson *et al.*’s (1987; 1989; 1991) analysis of the news process, each moment in the “circuit of communication” depends on the others and is indispensable to the whole – each moment involves distinctive changes of form, conditions of production, the products or texts, the socially-located readings or uses of the texts, the intersections of those with the “lived cultures” already in place and back to the moment of production again (Johnson 1986, p. 285).

In this thesis, I also use the “circuit of communication” to analyse my findings. Although my focus is on the moment of “production”, I use this theoretical framework to explore how this moment is informed by all the other processes. In particular, I explore how, at different stages of *The Bill*’s history, feedback from audiences (“consumption”) and input from the network (“regulation”) affected how the show was marketed to viewers (“identity”) which in turn affected “representation” of the police and had an effect on working processes or “production”.

7. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have outlined my proposed research and reasons for choosing to study production processes on a popular television drama. I have examined the importance of mass media images of policing in society and described my reasons for choosing *The Bill* as a case study. I have reviewed the existing literature on the representation of the police, crime and criminals in media narratives as well as research on production processes in

news and television and concluded by identifying how my research might extend the existing literature in this field. I have discussed the work of Hall (1980) and Johnson (1986) and how I will draw on Johnson's concept of the "circuit of culture" to analyse my findings. In Chapter Two, I discuss my research methods, research design and reasons for choosing an ethnographic approach.

Chapter Two: Research methods

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I discuss the methods I used in my study and the methodological issues involved in the research. I begin by talking about my research design and reasons for choosing an ethnographic approach. I then describe my experience of being “in the field”, researching a social world which was extremely familiar to me and the process of conducting interviews with respondents who had known me for many years. Finally, I discuss the process of analysing my data and the ethical issues involved in the research.

2. Research design

Initially I considered a study of two police dramas, *The Bill* and one other, with the aim of carrying out a comparative study of working processes –as Evans-Pritchard (1963, p. 20) suggests, “circumstances of where the societies compared have much in common structurally, culturally and environmentally would seem to offer the best opportunity for detailed and controlled comparative treatment”. However, as I discuss in Chapter One, *The Bill* was unique among television police shows for a number of reasons. Unlike many other shows of its time, such as *Between The Lines* which concentrated on the work of the Complaints Investigation Bureau, set up to investigate complaints against police officers and *The Vice* which featured the work of the Metropolitan Police’s Vice Squad, *The Bill* focused on the work of both uniformed and CID officers and not just on the work of a specialist squad. Secondly, as I will discuss in subsequent chapters, for the first eighteen years of its history, working methods on the show were

completely different to other police shows of the time. Writers were encouraged to spend time shadowing of the work of the police and to base their stories on research and observation – a practice which had not been employed on the majority of police shows since the early 1960s (Sydney Smith 2002) – with the exception of the short lived police drama, *The Cops*, which ran to three series in the late 1990s (See Chapters Four and Five for discussion of working practices on the show. For those reasons, I decided at to carry out an in-depth ethnographic study of one show alone – *The Bill*.

However, in order to fully understand how media workers were telling the stories they were about the police, and the kinds of economic, structural and cultural constraints and imperatives that informed the story choices they were making, I realised that I also needed to understand the broader working processes of the show, both past and present. As I will discuss later in this chapter, I decided to broaden the scope of my research and to interview personnel from the show's entire history and key personnel from other police series, which had been made over the last twenty-five years. By carrying out these interviews, I hoped to be able to understand more fully how changes in working processes on *The Bill* had been brought about by changes within the wider television industry and how those changes on a micro and a macro level had an impact on the people making the shows and on the kinds of stories they were telling about the police.

3. Reasons for choosing ethnography and other methodologies as a research approach

3.1 The practice of ethnography: strengths and weaknesses as a research approach

The term “ethnography” is loosely borrowed from social anthropology and Becker (2007) describes it thus:

“a classic form of social description ... a detailed verbal description of the way of life, considered in its entirety, of some social unit, archetypically but not necessarily a small tribal group. The method came to be applied and is widely applied now to organizations of all kinds: schools, factories, urban neighbourhoods, hospitals and social movements.” (Becker 2007, p. 10)

The practice of ethnography is not something that can generally be learned by formal means. Van Maanen (1988, p. ix) describes how “our appreciation and understanding of ethnography comes like a mist that slowly creeps over us while in the library and lingers with us while in the field” while Brewer (1991) describes the process as being:

“... a gradual and progressive contact with respondents which is sustained over a long period, allowing rapport to be established slowly with respondents over time, and for researchers to participate in the full range of experience involved in the topic.” (Brewer 1991, p. 18)

The focus in ethnography is usually on a few cases, to facilitate in-depth study where the analysis of data involves interpretation of the meanings, functions and consequences of people’s actions and practices and how these in turn may be situated in a wider social context. Inevitably, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, pp. 14–5) observe, social researchers are part of the world that they study and “the orientations of researchers will be shaped by their socio-historical locations, including the values and interests that these locations confer upon them”. But as Hammersley and Atkinson

(2007) argue, once the role of the researcher as active participant in the research process becomes clear:

“he or she becomes the research instrument par excellence. The fact that behaviour and attitude are often not stable across contexts and that the researcher may influence the context becomes central to the analysis. Indeed, it can be exploited for all it is worth.” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 17)

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 177) argue that, rather than seeing the effects of the presence or actions of the ethnographer on the data as a source of bias, participants’ responses to the ethnographer can in fact be an important source of information and understanding. Data should never, in their view, be taken at face value, treating some data as “true” or “false”, but instead what is at stake are the inferences drawn from them. The point is that the ethnographer must constantly be aware of how his or her presence may have shaped the data and, indeed, how all methods used affect what is seen and what is then reported.

3.2 Reasons for choosing mixed methods approach

As I discuss above, my specific research design was to observe working practices on *The Bill* over a period of months. I sat in on meetings covering the development of a number of scripts, from early meetings to discuss initial ideas, through planning meetings where these ideas were developed into a story-line or the rough outline of a script, to commissioning meetings where the show’s writers would be brought in and asked to develop these outlines further. I supplemented this ethnographic observation with interviews with key production personnel involved in the creation of story-lines, freelance writers and police advisers, past and present, on the show. I also interviewed

other media workers and police advisers from a number of key police dramas from the last twenty-five years as an additional source of data on changes in the television industry and to allow me to situate my analysis within a broader social, cultural and economic setting.

Finally, I held focus group interviews with police officers from two forces, the Metropolitan Police Service and the Greater Manchester Police Service, to ascertain how they might receive and interpret the story-lines of these specific episodes and how they thought such story-lines might affect public knowledge and understanding of policing.

I decided on a combination of ethnographic observation, together with interviews and focus groups, for the following reasons. Firstly, ethnographic research is by its very nature exploratory (Creswell 2003; Hammersley and Atkinson 2007) and a useful approach, particularly when the topic is new. Secondly, the core activity of ethnography is to investigate some aspect of the lives of the people who are being studied, and this includes finding out how these people view the situations they face, how they regard one another and how they see themselves (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 3).

Ericson *et al.* (1989) argue that:

“Only through direct observation can the analyst accurately chart the web of social relations, and the nature of cultural values, as they are struggled with in actual decision-making.” (Ericson *et al.* 1989, p. 27)

However, Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 97) suggest that participant accounts or interviews are also important for what they may be able to tell us about the people who produced them and the intellectual and social resources on which they draw. Accounts may be sources of information

about the phenomena being observed and about the people being studied but they may also be treated as “social products whose analysis can tell us something about the socio-cultural processes that generated them”

(Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 98).

However skilled a researcher is in negotiating a role that allows observation of events, inevitably some information will not be available first-hand. For that reason, from the earliest days of ethnographic research, researchers have traditionally cultivated or trained people as informants, both to get information about activities that for one reason or another cannot be observed and as a way of understanding more deeply actors’ perspectives on their social world.

As I was originally told I could observe working practices over a period of a month, although in fact this extended to a four month period, I felt it was imperative to supplement my ethnographic observation with actors’ accounts.

I wanted to discover individuals’ perceptions of their jobs and their responses to the transformations in working practices on the show and in the industry as a whole, and believed that the interview situation would be a way of allowing individuals time out to reflect upon and discuss these matters with me.

Individual interviews would, I hoped, allow me to communicate more freely with creative personnel who might find it uncomfortable talking to me in the presence of their colleagues. I also hoped that, by supplementing ethnographic observations, my interviews would be an additional source of data, particularly about activities or events I had not been able to observe, or because such events had happened in the past. But also, and crucially for my research, my interview data would give me insights into actors’

perspectives on themselves, their actions and decisions, as well as insights

into how they perceived the subcultures and larger cultures to which they belonged.

4. Gaining access: advantages and disadvantages of being an “insider”

Many ethnographies on work, and indeed on media production, are replete with examples of the appreciable amount of time it can take to get permission to sit in on and observe working processes (Silverstone 1985), with Gitlin's (1994) ethnographic study of several television shows as a notable exception.

In my case, gaining access to observe working practices on *The Bill* happened comparatively quickly. I wrote an email to the then executive producer of *The Bill*, outlining my research very briefly and asking if I could meet with him. I had an email back within ten minutes, asking if I could meet the following week at the Thames offices in Central London. The meeting was extremely short, much to my surprise. I described my research and set out what I hoped to achieve: being able to sit in on and observe story development meetings over a period of one or two months and to interview key personnel involved in the story development process. The executive producer told me that he would ask the story producer, the person in charge of story development on the show, to contact me and to set up a date for my research to start.

Many ethnographies talk about “sponsors” or “gatekeepers”, using the terms interchangeably. Hammersley and Atkinson (1995, p. 62) draw a clear distinction between the two terms, sponsorship being a term used in more

informal settings, where the sponsor often introduces the ethnographer to a circle of friends and acquaintances and so provides access to data. The term “gatekeeper” is often used, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), in more “formal” or “private” settings, where boundaries are more clearly marked, are not easily penetrated and are policed by gatekeepers. Although the executive producer, as the person in charge of the running of the show, had given overall permission for my research to take place as my sponsor, it soon became clear that, in terms of making my research possible, the story producer, or the person responsible for the generation and development of scripts and story-lines, was my gatekeeper to the work I wished to observe.

A lot of ethnographies discuss researchers’ initial difficulties with gatekeepers (Smith 2001) and how gatekeepers are understandably concerned about the image of the organisation or community that the ethnographer will portray, particularly if the ethnographer is returning to research a society, which he or she knows intimately. The expectation of expert critical surveillance may indeed create anxieties on the part of gatekeepers and of others in the organisation and, even if permission is given to conduct research, the gatekeeper may on occasion attempt to steer the research in directions he or she would prefer or even away from potentially sensitive areas.

Certainly in my initial phone conversation and subsequent first meeting with the story producer, I felt he was trying to “place” me. I was asked about confidentiality, where my research findings would be published, and was asked for reassurance that this was just an academic study for other academics and researchers and not a piece of investigative journalism. I

could understand the story producer's wariness. Firstly, this was a new undertaking for *The Bill*; although this was a programme much in the public eye, and most of the senior production staff had been regularly interviewed for magazines and newspapers, this was the first time an academic researcher had been allowed to observe working processes. Secondly, although I believed that my status as a former practitioner may have swayed the executive producer into allowing me access, I also felt that my former status might be a cause of concern.

I had asked to focus on one particular area of the show's working processes, story development, and an area of work that was comparatively new to the show – before 2001, the role of story producer had not existed, as stories had been generated mainly by the freelance scriptwriters, employed by the show to develop, research and write scripts, and not by the in-house production team. The shift in creative power away from the freelance writers in favour of the in-house production team had been a controversial move on the show; as will be discussed in Chapter Four, many in-house staff and production staff left the show at this point. Although I worked for the show both before and after it became a serial, I was very much associated with the “old” regime and for that reason, was probably viewed with some suspicion as to how I would report these new working processes. Moreover, because in-house staff also work on fixed term contracts, any academic findings that might in any way be critical of particular working processes might indeed be a cause for concern to media workers being observed and might make them feel that their jobs could be endangered.

It was hardly surprising then that, although access to the setting was given extremely promptly, actually negotiating access to the data and to the actors within that setting proved to be more problematic. There were also a number of delays in arranging the meetings at which I would be a participant observer. My first meeting was cancelled at the last minute; I was told, quite reasonably, that the ITV network had commissioned an extra block of eight episodes, involving a self-contained serial story to run over four weeks, and that as the story team were under pressure to come up with story material in a very short space of time, it was not the best time for a researcher to be on the premises. However, I then found it hard to actually get in touch with the story producer to rearrange meetings and, for several weeks, phone calls and emails were not returned and I started to worry about ever being able to carry out the research. Finally, in desperation, I phoned the executive producer's secretary. As he had given permission for the research to take place, I believed it would not be unreasonable for me to ask for some dates of future meetings. This ploy worked, though I found the process of slinking into a meeting to which I had not been officially invited by the story producer fairly uncomfortable to say the least. However, it proved to be a turning point; at the end of the meeting I made a point of going up to him, saying that I hoped my presence had not been too intrusive and that I was very grateful to him to be allowed to sit in on the meeting. Whether or not the story producer just decided I was a necessary evil to be tolerated at this point I will never know, but we ended up chatting in an amicable way about things completely unrelated to the research and, from then on, access to meetings did not prove to be a problem.

However, although my status as an “insider” was initially a problem in terms of gaining access to “the field”, in many respects, I believe that it was a huge advantage and that it enriched the research in many ways that might not have been possible, had I been an “outsider”. Rock (2001) discusses the process of choosing a research topic and argues that:

“... venturing into terrain that is too alien will be disconcerting because it offers no paths and little reassurance that one is looking around oneself with an intelligent and informed eye. The new and the strange which is not too new and strange may be the best compound, if only because ethnography demands a coming-together of the insider’s understanding with the outsider’s puzzlement, a state most often accomplished when the new is a little old and the untoward familiar, where one may learn from perspective through incongruity.” (Rock 2001, p. 33)

The social world of media workers, and in particular media producers, writers and editors, was far from alien to me. However, by the time I started my Ph.D. in 2006, I had been out of television for nearly three years. The turnover of personnel on shows is high; I had already done some preliminary research on the show for my M.Sc. dissertation and found that very few of the people I had worked with in the early part of this decade were still involved with *The Bill*. More than that, as a writer, I tended to have very little contact with the in-house production staff. In the 1990s, contact for writers with in-house production staff was limited to the occasional meeting with the script editor who had been allotted to your particular script, to act as a point of liaison between the writer and the other members of the production team. Generally I worked year in, year out in isolation at home and only met the other writers at social events such as the Christmas party. However, although working processes had changed considerably since that time and writers were now invited to more meetings at the studios, they still worked

very much in isolation and so were not privy to many of the organisational or early creative meetings that I wanted to observe. I hoped, therefore, that I would be able to bring an insider's understanding of this world, together with an outsider's puzzlement at observing the meetings and decision-making processes to which, as a writer, I would not have been privy. In Chapter Eight, I return to this topic in more detail and discuss how, despite being an "insider", my research findings in terms of the impact of commercial imperatives, working processes and the constraints of the format on representation of the police were often surprising and unexpected to me, even though I had worked in the industry as a practitioner for thirteen years.

5. The experience of being in "the field"

Van Maanen (1988, p. 2) talks of how the experience of doing fieldwork requires some of the instincts of an exile; "the fieldworker typically arrives at the place of study without much of an introduction and knowing few people, if any". My experience was less like someone going to a strange country than of someone going to a place they had once known very well but had returned to find it completely changed.

In many ways, my experience as a writer on *The Bill* in the 1990s had prepared me very well for the experience of fieldwork. As a writer, I was used to spending time with the police, shadowing their work, trying in a short period of time to "build up trust, confidence and friendship so that one hears and sees something of the inner life of a social group" (Rock 2001, pp. 31–2). But I was also acutely aware, even in those days, how my informants constantly sought to manage impressions of themselves, their work and their

settings (Goffman 1959). My visits were often arranged by the police advisers on *The Bill* and I got the impression that the officers selected to show me round their place of work and to let me shadow their work were often chosen for their ability to present the organisation in its best light and their ability to head off awkward questions. Moreover, I was often only at stations for one or two days – not long enough to build up real trust on the part of my informants. However, even researchers who have carried out intensive and long-term fieldwork on police work suggest police officers' creation and management of their "official" personae can create problems. For example, Punch (1979) reports how, at a party he attended some months after completing his fieldwork, one of his informants revealed to him, that he had been deliberately kept away from any evidence of police corruption.

As Ericson *et al.* (1989, p. 8) point out, this level of secrecy is not unique to the police, that indeed every "human being and organization requires a workable level of privacy" (Ericson *et al.* 1989, p. 8). However, having been an "insider" for so long, it was nevertheless disconcerting to find myself returning to *The Bill* studios to be treated as an "outsider". I first encountered this prior to the observation period, when the story producer suggested that I came to the studios to have lunch with the story production team. I had asked if I could interview members of the story team on an individual basis before observing story-lining meetings, but on the day I was told that, due to pressures of time, a group interview was most convenient for all concerned. Although the interview proved to be extremely helpful in terms of their talking me through the mechanics of the meetings I would subsequently observe, I

found that when I moved away from questioning the group about the process of story-lining on to more personal areas, such as asking them what was the best or worst things about their jobs, I was informed to a man that there were no bad things about the job and that all of them felt it was the best job they had ever had – clearly no-one was prepared in this group situation to divulge anything other than the most positive spin on working life on the show to me as a researcher. My fieldwork notes from that day record the hesitancy with which everyone spoke at this point, and “how all of the editors looked at the producer to set the tone – that no-one was prepared to break ranks in any way unless he indicated it was safe to do so, which he most definitely did not”. As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 177) point out, participants’ responses to ethnographers may also be an important source of information to the researcher. I had forgotten what an edgy, slightly paranoid world the world of television was; how everyone watched their back, even when they were on permanent contracts, how everyone was mindful of “saying the right thing” and toeing the “party line” and never criticising openly the current production management, and so my experience as an “outsider” researcher reminded me of these aspects of this social world once more.

Originally I intended only to interview key personnel involved in the story-lining process on *The Bill* but, as my research progressed, I realised that, in order to understand those working processes fully, I needed to set them in a broader social, cultural and economic context. Observation of current working processes and interviews with current staff would only give me part of that picture – in order to understand what was happening now, I needed to understand what had happened before. I then broadened the scope of my

research to interview staff from the show's twenty-six year (at the time of writing) history. In addition, although I had decided previously not to carry out a comparative study, I nevertheless thought it would be fruitful to interview key personnel from a number of British police dramas also spanning *The Bill's* history as an extra source of data on changes in the television industry.

6. Interviews

Timetable Of Research		
Method	Date	Participants
Interview	Feb – Jul 2007	22 interviews with current production staff (17 in-house personnel, 5 freelance writers)
Observation	Feb – Jul 2007	Observation of story / development process
Interview	Jul 2007 – Mar 2008	17 interviews with former production staff and writers
Interview	Jul 2007 – Jun 2008	9 interviews with personnel who had worked on other police shows, including <i>Life On Mars</i> , <i>Wycliffe</i> , <i>Prime Suspect</i> , <i>Trial and Retribution</i> , <i>Between The Lines</i> , <i>Blue Murder</i> , <i>The Cops</i> , <i>Without Motive</i> and <i>City Central</i>

Focus groups	Mar – May 2008	Two focus groups held with CID officers from the Greater Manchester Police / Metropolitan Police Service to watch an episode of <i>The Bill</i> and discuss representation of the police and policing in that episode
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Figure 2.1 Timetable of research

6.1 Selecting informants

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 103) point out, once the decision has been made to collect data via interviews, the next issue is: who should be interviewed?

The criteria by which I selected my first interviewees was very simple: I contacted nearly everyone on the show directly involved in the story-lining process. In retrospect, this would have been extremely difficult had I not already been an insider – although I was introduced to the group at meetings, the group conversely was rarely introduced to me and I got round that problem by scribbling a seating plan of the room and notes as to each person present, trying to work out their respective names and roles on the show. I then corroborated these notes with the researcher on the show, who was, at that point, the longest serving member of the team and someone who had known me well in my scriptwriting days. I followed up each meeting with emails and phone calls to the individuals who had attended, asking if they would be willing to meet me.

6.2 Interviews with creative personnel on *The Bill*: February – July 2007

I interviewed everyone directly concerned with the story-lining process, in terms of decision-making, from the head of continuing series through to the script editors and writers. (In Chapter Three, I discuss the various roles within the story production team in detail.)

In-depth interviews were carried out with seventeen in-house personnel and five current writers. In the case of the production staff, interviews were all carried out on-site at *The Bill's* studios in South Wimbledon, usually in the interviewees' offices. In the case of the network executive, the interview was carried out at her office in the ITN studios. Interviews with the freelance writers were carried out at my home in London or, in one case, as the freelance writer was based in the North, over the telephone.

Interviews were semi-structured in that I usually went in with a list of topics. I started every interview by asking each person about their trajectory into the television industry to set them at ease, and to describe their job and their particular input into the story-lining process. Other topics involved research into police work, where the story team and others derived ideas for story material, the importance of accuracy/authenticity, the specific input of police advisers, whether the Metropolitan Police Service ever contacted the show in order to give feedback or criticism on story-lines and the input of the network on story ideas. I also asked more general questions:

- Had respondents' attitudes to the police changed since working on police shows and, if so, in what ways?

- Did respondents think police shows such as *The Bill* had any effect on the viewing public and, if so, what did they think that might be?
- Did they think police shows made the work of the police harder or easier?
- Did they think police shows increased or decreased public support for the police?
- Were respondents ever conscious of the kinds of messages about the police and about crime they were sending out on the show to putative audiences?

However, as I grew more confident as an interviewer, I generally tried to make the conversation less directive, though on occasion, when I wanted to find out more about budgetary and financial aspects of running the show, including advertising and sponsorship, I went into the interview armed with fairly specific questions.

It soon became apparent, even to a novice researcher, that *who* was talking was just as important as *what* was being said (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). Gitlin (1994, p. 14) describes the world of television as one devoted to the “fine art of salesmanship”. In addition, most senior executives in television are used to being interviewed and to honing their responses accordingly. I thus found almost immediately that the senior executives were very guarded in their responses and were acutely aware not just of me as a researcher as “audience” but also of a wider audience who might read this work. One executive clearly had a definite agenda of his own. More than half the allotted time was spent discussing a book he had just read, until I very politely steered him back to the subject in hand. By contrast, the younger

members of the team who had less invested in their careers at that point, in terms of time and status, were considerably more open as were the freelance writers on the show, though both groups would frequently make it clear that certain things they had said could not be attributed to them in any way. In those cases, I would always observe strict anonymity in attributing my source material.

6.3 Interviews with former production staff on *The Bill*: July 2007 – March 2008

The next stage of my research was to interview former members of the production staff and former writers. I carried out the same process, interviewing personnel at every level of management/decision-making in terms of the story development process. I carried out seventeen interviews with past members of staff. These included three former executive producers, two former producers, four former script editors, three former police advisers and five former writers. (The roles of researcher, story consultant, story editor and story producer did not exist on the show prior to 2001.)

Interviews were semi-structured and, in terms of questions and topics raised in the interview, I followed a similar format to the previous group. These interviews were often longer as many of my informants were by now retired and were not trying to fit me into a frantic working day. Interviews lasted between one and three hours and took place at a variety of settings – the interviewee's current place of work, my home, bars, cafes, the British Library on two occasions and in meeting rooms at the London School of Economics.

I contacted this group of interviewees through a “snowballing” process, often asking current members of staff at *The Bill* if they still had contact numbers or email addresses for their predecessors in the job. I asked if they were still in contact with former members of staff or former writers and, if so, if they would mind letting me have addresses or numbers. Without fail, people gave up considerable amounts of time to meet me and, in three cases, travelled some distance specifically to answer my questions.

The group of former production staff were far more open in their responses, possibly because they no longer had to protect their positions (Ursell 2006). Additionally, this group included the individuals I knew best in that I had worked with most of them during the 1990s and this may have contributed to their candid responses.

Although I had set out with the aim, with this group of interviewees, of finding out about working processes on *The Bill* in previous decades, I was mindful throughout that, although these accounts were, on one level, a valuable source of information about the changes in working practices on the show and in the industry, inevitably I could not take this data totally at face value.

As Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out:

“in analysing members’ accounts of their own and others’ lives, therefore we need to be attentive to the ways in which the past is repeatedly constructed ... The ethnography of the past, or of memory, therefore, is not an imaginative reconstruction of past events by the analyst, but rather an ethnography of how actors create pasts for themselves and for others.” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 180)

My respondents’ identities, past and present, would shape their interpretation of events and the stories that they would tell me would inevitably be slanted and selected in line with their prevailing concerns and interests. I always

started these interviews by asking my respondents about their current situations out of courtesy and genuine interest. Some respondents had fared better than others since leaving the shows. Some had a very clear agenda, wishing to be interviewed by me to “set the record straight” about certain events in the show’s history and, again, I had to be mindful in interpreting their responses, to take into account how their present situation might have contributed to their construction of the past events they were recounting.

6.4 Interviews with personnel on other police shows: July 2007 – June 2008

I conducted a further nine interviews with personnel who had worked on police shows, other than *The Bill*, or had been involved in commissioning these shows for a broadcaster. These included two heads of drama at ITV and at the BBC, a head of new writing at the BBC, two writers, two police advisers, one script editor and an executive producer. In addition, because the working world of television is so fluid, I conducted a further eleven interviews with personnel either currently working on *The Bill*, or who had worked on *The Bill* in the past, about their experiences of working on other shows. These included an executive producer and head of development, three police advisers, six writers, two of whom also worked as script editors, and one script editor. The shows that this group of respondents had worked on included *Life on Mars*, *Wycliffe*, *Prime Suspect*, *Trial and Retribution*, *Between The Lines*, *Blue Murder*, *The Cops*, *Without Motive* and *City Central*.

I had imagined that contacting personnel on other shows might be difficult as some of them required “cold-calling”; although they might have heard of me or of my work in television, I had worked directly with very few of this group. However, I was surprised by the generosity of all my informants, who again gave up considerable amounts of time to talk to me. Interviews lasted from one hour to three and a half hours and were generally conducted at the informant’s office.

The slant of my questions was slightly different with this group. Firstly, I wanted to talk to media workers on shows which spanned the twenty-six year history of *The Bill* to find out about working practices on other police shows. Secondly, I wished to talk to executives, past and present, from both the BBC and ITV, about the process of decision-making in terms of commissioning new police drama, about the changes in the industry over the last twenty or so years and if this had an impact on what was being commissioned and made. This time I did not begin with a set list of questions – I had a generic list of topics I wished to cover but usually I let conversation range freely. The kinds of questions I asked this group were usually along these lines:

- Can you tell me about your job?
- Which police shows are you involved with?
- Can you describe your working relationship with each of these shows?
- Do you get involved in suggesting ideas for shows/story ideas for existing shows?
- If so, where do you get these ideas from?

- What do you think has been the biggest change in the television industry over the last twenty years?
- What impact, if any, do you think it has had on what is being commissioned/made, in terms of police shows?

By the time I carried out these interviews, I had already completed my observational work and interviews with personnel, past and present on *The Bill*, so I often found myself discussing emerging concepts from my analysis with members of this group who would frequently suggest further reading, other shows to watch and other media workers who might be able to talk to me.

6.5 Focus groups

I also ran two focus groups with officers from the Greater Manchester Police Service and the Metropolitan Police Service in April and May 2008, in which participants were asked to watch an episode of *The Bill*. My aim in conducting these focus groups was to explore police officers' perception of the effects of representations of policing on public expectations of the police; whether depictions of their work in police series had had any effect on their work or interaction with the public; and, lastly, how they might wish to see themselves portrayed in police drama.

Among the questions I asked in the focus groups were:

- How accurate/inaccurate/out-of-date do you think is the depiction of police work in the episode of *The Bill* you have just watched?

- Do you think it is important for shows such as *The Bill* to be authentic and, if so, can you explain why?
- Do you think police dramas give the public unrealistic expectations of what the police can/can't do? If so, can you give examples?
- What sort of impression about the police do you think that episode gave the public?
- If you were writing a police drama, what would you do differently? Is anything left out of police dramas that you would like to see included?

7. Analysis

Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 158) suggest that the analysis of data is never a distinct stage of the research and that, in many ways, it begins in the pre-fieldwork phase, taking shape in analytic notes and memoranda, ideas and hunches, which then feed into research design and data collection. The iterative process carries on once in the field, where ideas are used to make sense of data and data are used in turn to change and make sense of ideas and hunches. Rock (2001, p. 35) describes the process eloquently, likening it to trying to construct a jigsaw or mosaic, "whose overall design can only be seen dimly but whose configuration changes with each new piece found or offered".

The initial task in analysing qualitative data is to find concepts that help the researcher to make some sense of what is going on in the case or cases documented by the data. Becker (2007) suggests that one starting point for analysis is to focus on the activities actors are involved in and that "focusing on activities rather than people nudges you into an interest in change rather

than stability, in ideas of process rather than structure” (Becker 2007, p. 148).

This was a hugely helpful starting point for my analysis – I started by subdividing data into categories dealing with each stage of the processes I was observing, on how each stage of the production process was carried out and on who was involved in each stage. I then did the same with data relating to past working processes on the show so that I had an initial linear trajectory in terms of tracing the processes of changing working practices on the show.

However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) point out, analysis of people’s activities also needs to pay serious attention to the means and methods by which social actors perform social life. This may involve identification of routine activities such as typical patterns of work, typical problems and typical solutions, characteristic strategies and so on. The next stage of my analysis was to look for cases and instances of such types in the story development process, their characteristic trajectories and their typical outcomes. Equally, in analysing my data, I looked for unexpected outcomes and crises, which provided information on how informants reacted under these circumstances and helped to map the variety of actions that could be taken under such circumstances.

In his 1982 study, *Art Worlds*, Becker argues that any understanding of art rests on an understanding of the extended social system that creates and defines the work of art, which involves bringing all aspects of that social system into the analysis – bureaucratic structures, budgets, professional codes, audience abilities and characteristics. This was the next stage of

analysing my data in terms of concepts – sub-dividing the data under headings such as budgets, aesthetic constraints, audience characteristics, professional imperatives, etc., moving between, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007, p. 164) put it, the mundane and the more abstract.

I did this manually, opening individual folders under each heading, then going through my data painstakingly, inserting every reference I believed belonged to the relevant folder. At this stage, I considered the possibility of learning how to use a software programme to facilitate the process of analysis but as no software programme could adequately carry out the coding for me, I decided to carry on my task manually.

Indeed, when it came to the next stage of my analysis, the analysis of talk as opposed to the analysis of actions and organisational characteristics, I felt that I had done the right thing in eschewing software for this nuanced and intricate stage of the process. It is a central assumption of ethnography that, in order to understand what people are doing and why, one needs to understand how social actors interpret and evaluate the situations they face, past events and situations and their interactions with others. However, as Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue, the proper analysis of talk has to recognise that social actors do things with words:

“In their everyday talk, as also in their interview responses, people are performing social actions. They are, for instance, offering justifications or excuses for themselves or others; they are providing explanations for events and actions; they attribute motives to their own and others’ actions.” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 170)

In my analysis, I was constantly watchful not to take my data at face value, to be aware of my effect on my respondents, of the fact that they might be

speaking for a wider audience than myself, that they might have a certain agenda in giving me a particular version of events, or that, on occasion, a certain element of wish fulfilment might be involved – in short, I needed to remind myself to resist the temptation to assume that actions, statements or interview responses represent stable features of the person or indeed of the settings.

Finally, I engaged in constant triangulation of my data. The term triangulation refers to a process of comparing data relating to the same phenomenon but deriving from different phases of the fieldwork, or the accounts of different participants located in the setting, or using more than one datum to corroborate an observation. In research, if we rely upon a single piece of data, there is the danger that undetected error may render the analysis incorrect, whereas if diverse kinds of data lead to the same conclusion, we may be a little more confident in that conclusion. Sometimes I found, particularly when piecing together accounts of past working practices on the show, or examples of decision-making, that I would have some very varied accounts of those events. In those cases, I would cross-check and, on occasion, track down more respondents to hear their version of events and, if they still did not agree, I followed Gitlin's advice in his ethnographic study of American network television:

“When in doubt, I tried to triangulate among different accounts of the same meetings and decisions and when they still didn't agree, I tried to make sense of discrepancies, on the principle that discrepancies, evasions and blind spots are themselves clues.” (Gitlin 1994, p. 14)

Learning to treat discrepancies as clues rather than as a problem was finally one of the best pieces of advice in trying to piece together this shadowy

jigsaw puzzle and, in an industry devoted to the hard sell, I always had to be mindful of my respondents' own agenda in telling me the accounts that they had and to let this inform every stage of my analysis.

8. Ethics

While ethnographic research rarely involves the sorts of damaging consequences that may be involved in, say, medical experiments on patients, it can sometimes have important consequences, both for the people studied and for others. These may arise as a result of doing the research or through future publication of the findings. The fact that many of my interviewees would be readily identifiable was a concern from the start. The world of television is a particularly small community in this country and, by choosing to focus on one particular programme during a particular point in its history, I laid many of the informants open to be readily identified. But more than that, the working world of television is, as I have mentioned earlier in this chapter when discussing the initial problems in gaining access to the setting, a world characterised by insecurity. Contracts are short-term, jobs are rarely advertised and mainly secured through contacts in the business and, as a result of these two factors, self-presentation is crucial (Ursell 2006). Any findings that might be critical of the organisation being studied, might reflect in turn on the informant who provided such information and cause serious problems for them. Many of the people I was interviewing were friends as well as former colleagues so there is also a personal element of feelings of betrayal involved in such research. As Young (1991, p. 10) puts it, when discussing the moral and political implications of publishing research on the police "the insider finds it hard to bite the hand that feeds".

At the beginning of each interview, I asked each participant if they would like a copy of the transcript and explained that if I quoted them directly when coming to write up my research, I would send them a copy of the quote in context in the relevant chapter. Everyone refused copies of transcripts, but some said that, while they were not interested in seeing random pages from my thesis, they would be keen to see the completed draft. At the start of each interview, I also asked participants if they wanted complete anonymity; unsurprisingly, most of the current staff working on *The Bill* wanted anonymity, whereas most of the staff who had left and creative personnel from other police shows said they were happy to be identified. In a couple of cases, informants were quite insistent that, in their words, they wanted to “stand up and be counted!” In the end, I felt it fairest to all concerned to try, whenever possible, to protect everyone’s anonymity, albeit in a limited way. Informants are thus referred to as “a member of the production team” or, where relevant, as “a writer” – in the latter case, because so many writers were used by *The Bill* at every stage in its history, it would be very hard to attribute specific quotes to any one individual. In addition, in order to pursue a participatory approach to the research, and indeed to make use of what Rock (2001, p. 37) describes as the insider’s competence, I asked certain key figures if they would be happy to talk through findings at a later date, for again, as Rock argues, “it is their lives one is reporting and one may have got things ‘wrong’”. Not all subjects had the time to do this but, in the cases of those who did, their comments were invariably helpful and thoughtful and often gave me a second chance to ask questions I had not asked the first time in the field.

9. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the methods employed in my study and the methodological issues that related to my research. I have discussed my personal reasons for wishing to undertake this research and for choosing a “mixed methods” approach to this study, combining the exploratory nature of ethnography with interviews and focus groups. I have described my experience of gaining access to the field and the advantages and disadvantages of being an “insider” returning to a world in which I spent most of my adult working life. I have then discussed my experience of interviewing people I had known for many years and how, in an industry devoted to the “hard sell” and the “positive spin”, I needed to be constantly aware of not taking my data at face value and that participants’ responses to the ethnographer were another valuable source of information. I have concluded by discussing the ethical implications of my research and the difficulties of ensuring anonymity, when researching a world where all the participants are easily identifiable.

In the next chapter, I explore the organisational and structural conditions that prevailed on the show during the 1980s and 1990s. I discuss how changes in the television industry had an impact on those conditions, on the format of the show and on the creation and development of stories about the police.

Chapter Three: Inside the world of *The Bill*

1. Introduction

In this chapter, I provide a brief history of *The Bill*, before describing the roles of everyone involved in the storytelling process on the show. I explore the organisational and structural conditions that existed on the show during the 1980s and 1990s, which enabled creative staff on the show to enjoy considerable autonomy in their work. I then discuss how changes in the television industry led to radical changes in the programme's format to win back dwindling audiences and how these, in turn, also changed working processes in terms of the creation and development of stories. Finally, I discuss how these changes had a huge impact on the culture of those involved in that process.

2. History of *The Bill*

The Bill, originally devised by Geoff McQueen⁶, started as a one-off drama for ITV called *Woodentop*, which was broadcast on 16 August 1983. The show impressed ITV executives so much that a series of twelve episodes was commissioned, under McQueen's original title for the series, *The Bill* (Tibballs 2004, p. 11).

The first episode of *The Bill* was transmitted on 16 October 1984. While other police dramas at this time tended to focus on major crimes such as murder investigations, *The Bill*, by contrast, focused on what one of the early executive producers of the show described as the "small change of policing"

⁶ Geoff McQueen (1947-1994), best known for creating *The Bill*, but also creator of two other drama series, *Big Deal* and *Give Us A Break*, for the BBC.

in a personal interview for this thesis. The show was also unusual at the time because it always showed events from a police point of view (Leishman and Mason 2003; Tibballs 2004). Stories were told throughout this period in a “stand-alone” format, which meant that each episode contained one or two stories, which were resolved by the end of the episode. Although initially the show was aired in an hourly format, between 1988 and 1997 the show was shown in a twenty-five minute format.

In 1997, the show changed back to an hourly format. Although some stories were still told in the “stand-alone” format, for the first time, two long-running stories about police corruption and sexual harassment were told over several episodes. In 2001, the ITV network decided to fully serialise the show and to feature plots about the police characters’ private lives. In order to attract audiences, several controversial story-lines were broadcast during this period, including an arson attack by one of the uniformed officers, a male rape in which the victim was a CID officer and an incestuous relationship between two uniformed officers. However, in 2005, due to falling ratings⁷, a decision was made on the part of the makers to focus once more on crime-based stories. In March 2010, after ratings had fallen to an all-time low of three million on the show (*The Guardian* 26 March 2010), it was announced that ITV would not be commissioning any more episodes. The final episode of Britain’s longest-running police procedural drama was aired on 31 August 2010.

⁷ According to the then executive producer, while ratings had reached a high-point in 2002 of nine million, thereafter viewing figures fell steadily to a then low of five million in 2005, which prompted the decision by the ITV network to relaunch the show.

3. Inside the studio: The process of creating and developing stories

In his 1982 study, *Art Worlds*, Becker suggests that all artistic work, like any other human activity, involves the co-operation of others and it is through their co-operation that an art work comes into being:

“Whatever the artist, defined as the person who performs the core activity without which the work would not be art does not do must be done by someone else. The artist thus works in the center of a network of co-operating people, all of whose work is essential to the final outcome. Wherever he depends on others, a co-operative link exists.” (Becker 1982, pp. 24–5)

As Henderson (2007) argues in her study of British soap operas, the process of creating story-lines and developing scripts is hugely complex and collaborative. Indeed Davis and Scase (2000) suggest:

“It is often highly structured on the basis of time schedules and deadlines; programme projects have to be sequenced in order to co-ordinate a large inventory of talents and skills that are required to produce the final product.” (Davis and Scase 2000, p. 116)

A whole range of personnel with varying skills and talents would be implicated in the process – from the executive producer in charge of production, the production staff involved in the day-to-day running of the show, the creative staff including the writers, actors and directors, the technical staff involved in the filming of the show and the design team responsible for the visuals to the make-up artists and wardrobe assistants who made sure each actor had the right costume in his or her dressing room for that day’s filming. However, “while every role is important to the realization of an episode” (Intintoli 1984, p. 122), in this chapter I concentrate solely on the storytelling process, before discussing how events in the wider

television industry caused working practices on the show to change and how the roles of those involved in the creation of narratives also changed as a result.

3.1 Major decision makers on the show 1983 – 2001

In figure 3.1, I outline the chain of command on the show among those involved in the story development process.



Figure 3.1 Roles in the story development process

The most senior role, in terms of both story-lining and the day-to-day running of the show, was that of the executive producer. This job was both creative and managerial: he had overall responsibility for the show including budget, decisions about casting of actors, hiring and firing of senior production staff, ratings for the show and decisions about script content. However, the

executive producer essentially saw his role as creative rather than managerial and argued that his key responsibility was to ensure he was happy with every aspect of the scripts being produced on the show. In this respect, he took an extremely “hands-on” approach:

“I was my own script editor at the beginning. Having set it up, I selected all my producers who then selected their directors, who selected their principals, the principal actors, but referred everything back to me. And I supervised the script process from initial inception – the first paragraph idea from a writer to final draft.”

Answering directly to the executive producer were the three producers. Each producer was in charge of one unit – the Red, Blue or Green unit. Each unit comprised a team of production staff who were responsible for the day-to-day organisation required to then film one complete episode a week. As one of the producers explained:

“I was the Red producer, so I was responsible for all, for one episode a week which was budget, management, approving and appointing freelance staff of which there were quite a lot. So that’s the sort of organisational side.”

Like the executive producer, the producers also saw their role as both creative and managerial and also took a “hands-on” approach to all aspects of the decision-making process involving scripts.

Although the executive producer and the team of producers were very involved with the script development process, it was the series script editor and his or her team of script editors who worked directly with the writers commissioned to write for the show. As one script editor described his role:

“My job was to recruit writers to write episodes of *The Bill* and to create ideas with them, to help them do the story-lining, to help them write their scripts and to make sure their scripts fitted within the general template of that series.”

Although writers generated ideas for the show, Born (2005) argues that script-editing is key to the craft in writing for television:

“Drama’s editorial culture [in the BBC] centred on two paradoxical principles: that the source of original and inventive television drama is the single unfettered authorial voice; and the heart of the craft is script editing, which improves scripts through repeated scrutiny, often going to five drafts. Scriptwork was a collaborative process between writer, script editor, producer and sometimes director. Its aim was to optimise the telling of the ‘story’ and to endow it with maximum narrative and psychological coherence.” (Born 2005, p. 335)

As Born (2005) points out, despite the importance of the script editor’s role in television, not just in popular drama but right across every genre, there was little or no training for this role. As with most posts in television (Davis and Scase 2000), skills were acquired *in situ*, the main entry point for the bulk of aspiring script editors being a degree in English. But unusually on *The Bill*, many script editors on the show were themselves established writers – one script editor was a published poet who then went on to establish a successful career in academia while another went on to co-create *Between The Lines* and to create *Without Motive* (see section 4.2 in Chapter One).

Working in tandem with the script editors but also the rest of the production team were the police advisers. *The Bill* was unusual in its practice of employing two retired police officers, one ex-uniform and one ex-CID, as full-time police advisers who had offices on set. Since the early days of police drama series (Sydney-Smith 2002; Leishman and Mason 2003; Manning 2003), many of the creators of popular television police drama had employed such consultants, particularly those shows that placed great emphasis on procedural accuracy (Leishman and Mason 2003). However, in the words of

one former police adviser at *The Bill* and a number of other police shows, the difference between working on *The Bill* and on the other shows was vast:

“That role as a police adviser then was peculiar to *The Bill*. Because when I’ve worked on other things, the scripts are normally written, you get given a copy of it and it’s all, “Do you agree or not agree?” Well, yeah, a few tweaks here and there because by then it’s too late because they’re going to film it.”

As a former script editor at the time described it, the role of the in-house police adviser was completely different on *The Bill* in that they were involved in the process of advising on scripts, right from the conceptual stage and the submission of the first premise or idea for an episode by a writer. Their job was thus:

“... to ensure that the things felt procedurally accurate. I think in those days it was probably stricter than it is now. They would read the story-lines (story outlines) and the scripts and just point out things that were completely wrong, like the misapplication of a law, seeing an informant without the right procedure being carried out and those rules were always there to be observed. They could occasionally be broken but they were usually broken knowingly rather than by accident.”

The police advisers also had two other key functions. Firstly, they were a source of contacts within the Metropolitan Police Service for writers wishing to research new story ideas or simply shadow the work of uniformed officers in order to give verisimilitude to their fictional depictions of police work. Secondly, they would serve as a point of contact for officers or departments wishing to publicise certain initiatives or new strategies.

At the bottom of the decision-making hierarchy were the writers, who had very little influence over decisions such as casting, budget or the long-term direction of the show. However, unlike previous long running serial shows, such as *The Sweeney*, where scripts were developed from a format

(Paterson 1976) which was given to the writer, writers on *The Bill* were responsible for generating and developing story ideas for the show. One of the script editors from this period commented:

“And I think one of the things I used to like about *The Bill* was the complete focus on the writer. I think it’s absolute death for a show if you start writing by committee, writing by numbers, giving the story outline to the writer. So my first question to any writer, any new writer we interviewed for the show was what is the story that you want to tell? Rather than, this is the story that we want you to tell for us. And I think that resulted in a whole host of writers finding their authorial voice and becoming writers who have contributed I think quite significantly to television elsewhere outside *The Bill*.”

If a writer was commissioned to write for the show, he or she would then be asked to submit an idea in the form of a premise – a one page document setting out the rough story arc of the proposed episode. This would be submitted for consideration by the rest of the creative production team, headed by the executive producer at an in-house meeting at *The Bill* studios held each Wednesday.

If the premise was commissioned, the writer would be asked to develop a longer outline of the episode or a scene by scene breakdown of the main events in summary, known as a story-line. Writers would work from home, liaising over the telephone with their assigned script editor and assigned police adviser. This outline would then be submitted for consideration at the Wednesday meeting and, if successful, the writer would be commissioned to develop a script, again working in close collaboration with the assigned script editor and police adviser. Unlike the other members of the production team who were employees of Thames Television, the company that made *The Bill* in the 1980s and 1990s, writers were self-employed. They were

commissioned either on an episode by episode basis or, if a writer had proved his or her worth, would be given a “block contract” of six or eight episodes to be written over a period of a year or eighteen months. This was a standard practice on long running shows of this kind, both in the UK and in other countries, such as Australia (Tulloch and Moran 1986).

3.2 Changes in the story production team 2001 – 2010

When *The Bill* became a serial for the first time, there were a number of important changes to working practices and to the team. In order to ensure continuity of episodes, story ideas now had to be generated in-house instead of being commissioned solely from freelance writers. This change in working practices led to new personnel being appointed and in changes of role for the existing production team.

Head of Continuing Series and Serials



Executive producer



Series Producer



Producer



Story Producer



Story Editors → Researcher → Technical Advisers / Story Adviser



Script Editors



Writers

Figure 3.2 Chain of command in the story production team

In Figure 3.2 above, I indicate the changes in the hierarchy of the production team. The first significant addition to this team after 2001 was the involvement of ITV network executives in the development of stories. The key network executive at ITV who was involved with *The Bill* was the Head of

Continuing Series, whose brief was to oversee all the continuing drama series from *Coronation Street* to *The Bill*. More specifically, this executive was responsible for the running of the show for the network and would also attend story meetings. In addition to attending those meetings, he or she was also in daily contact with *The Bill*'s executive producer about long term plans for the show, whether this involved new ideas for scripts or casting, and fed back to the executive producer discussions that took place at the Network Centre about the future direction of the show. The Head of Continuing Series also read all the story outlines prior to transmission, as well as most of the scripts.

Directly answerable to the Head of Continuing Series were the executive producer and producers. Under the new regime, the executive producer still maintained overall responsibility for the show, in terms of casting, budget and decisions on contents of scripts, although all these elements were subject to a process of constant negotiation with the Network Centre, which was not the case in the 1980s and 1990s. As one script editor from the earlier period commented, "Our exec producer positively delighted in telling the network to bugger off – it was his show and he was running it his way!" Similarly the role of producer changed very little under the new regime.

The key new roles in the production team in the last ten years of the show were the story producer and the story team who, in order to develop continuity in the story outlines, now developed ideas in-house. This had previously been the job of the freelance writers. One of the team described the new working processes thus:

“The story team is where it starts. The structure we have is that we’ve got the story producer, the story editors and we kind of work together as a team with the series producer, the exec producer to come up with the long-term story ideas and that process starts with three monthly long-term meetings. So we get together with writers and the advisers and go away to a hotel for two days and think about the big stories we want to tell for the next year and a half. Then we work those into a monthly plan, and we’ll do eight episodes per month.”

Below the story production team were the script editors, whose job was still to act as a middleman between the rest of the team and the writers and to work with individual writers to create a script from the detailed story notes given to them by the story editors. The role of the police advisers remained the same, although they were now known as technical advisers. However, another new role was created for one of the former police advisers – that of story consultant. The remit of the story consultant was to advise the show’s story production team on possible story ideas. In addition, as she explained, her role was also to make contact with outside police sources and “find out what’s going on in the Met, what sorts of stories we should be covering on the show”.

The show also employed for the first time a full-time researcher who, each month, prepared a research pack for the writers, with background research on the story outlines they had been allotted to write. Usually, though not always, this material was not to do with police procedure (help with this was provided by the technical advisers) so, for example, if a crime story was to feature a guest character with an illness or disability, the researcher would include detailed information on that for the writers.

Finally, writers were still employed on a freelance basis as before but, under the new regime, their contribution was mainly to breathe life into the

formatted story-lines already mapped out for them by the in-house production team. As before, they worked mainly from home to develop the scripts, though as I will describe later in this chapter and in Chapter Six, to ensure continuity of the stories being told, writers were invited to meetings in the final stages of the story development process to discuss their story outlines with their colleagues working on the episodes before and directly after theirs in the schedule. In addition, a few tried and trusted writers were also invited to contribute ideas for the long-term running of the show at the three monthly long-term meetings.

3.3 In the studio: the working culture of *The Bill*

Given the sheer number of personnel involved in the production of scripts (Henderson 2007) and the sheer volume of output – in the 1990s, three hours of prime-time drama were being produced each week by the show's makers – the show could indeed be described as an “industrial product” (Henderson 2007, p. 31). Despite this, almost everyone interviewed from the first eighteen years of the show's history described the experience of working on the show as a fulfilling creative experience in which writers were afforded a considerable degree of autonomy and working relationships were characterised by trust, mutuality and common values. By contrast, those interviewed from the later period of the show's history (2001 – 2010) talked of changes in the working processes on the show and a move towards team writing that had resulted in writers' autonomy being severely curtailed (Burns and Stalker 2001) and where working relationships were characterised by insecurity (Sennett 1998) and by a “culture of fear” (Born 2005).

In his discussion of police culture, Reiner (2010) cites the *Oxford English Dictionary's* definition of culture as being the “whole way of life of a society: its beliefs and ideas, its institutions and systems, its laws and customs”. But as Reiner (2010) argues, the culture of any society is not monolithic, but constantly evolves, as:

“people respond in various meaningful ways to their predicament as constituted by the network of relations they find themselves in, which in turn are formed by different more macroscopic levels of structured action and institutions.” (Reiner 2010, p. 116)

In her study of the BBC, Born (2005) makes a similar point. She argues that the public service values of the BBC – the “commitment to truth telling, to telling stories about the human condition in pleasurable, challenging or innovative ways ... to uncovering the bases of injustice or inequality” (Born 2005, p. 372) – may begin life, as she puts it, “in the intention of programme-makers” but that programme-makers can only carry out their intentions if they are working within a particular set of structural and organisational conditions that are conducive to making programmes with such ethical and creative values. If these structural and organisational conditions change then, Born argues, such ethical and creative values may indeed become secondary to other considerations:

“Creative values do not exist in a vacuum ... the continuing evolution of these values and their well-being depend on organisational conditions. They can be blocked, their energies diverted into tangential demands – pitching, selling, accounting, auditing, marketing, politicking.” (Born 2005, p. 372)

In this section, I shall explore the structural and organisational conditions during the 1980s and early 1990s that enabled creative personnel on *The Bill* to operate within a culture that afforded them considerable autonomy in their

work and in which their work was highly valued. I shall then discuss how changes in the television industry in turn had an impact on those organisational and structural conditions and on the working culture of those involved in the story creation process on the show.

3.4 The world of the cultural bureaucracy

In his study of the BBC in the 1960s and 1970s, Burns (1977) described the Corporation as a cultural bureaucracy – an organisation marked, as Davis and Scase (2000) argue, by the following characteristics:

“Strong hierarchy, elaborate divisional structure, clear demarcation of roles and responsibilities are all present. Essentially the role of the organisation is to provide a financially secure base, creative freedom and a protected environment in which creative workers could operate.” (Davis and Scase 2000, p. 56)

However, as Davis and Scase (2000) observe, the model of the cultural bureaucracy could also be found in ITV companies such as Thames Television, makers of *The Bill* for the ITV network until the mid-1990s. This was due to a number of factors, according to Born (2005):

“Competition ... was limited and it took place between two vertically integrated, large and well funded organisations. Critically, while there was competition for audiences, the two sides of the duopoly did not compete for revenues; nor was there internal competition for revenue between the regional ITV companies. Indeed ... ITV was awash with advertising money; it paid higher salaries and funded programmes at higher levels than the BBC ... the result was rising creative standards and innovation across the range of genres, particularly in, but not limited to, popular programming.” (Born 2005, p. 39)

Although *The Bill* was being made for a commercial channel, the fact that ITV was, as Born (2005) puts it, “awash with advertising money” during the early years of the show’s existence meant there was no pressure at this point on the producers of the show to view themselves as “providing services to

paying customers or satisfying consumer demand” (Davis and Scase 2000).

Indeed as one executive recalled:

“There was no interference from the Network in terms of content. We were getting good ratings and so therefore people were not on our back. Because clearly we knew how to do it better than they did. And if they wanted to do it, they could bloody well do it.

Davis and Scase (2000) argue that one of the key characteristics of a “cultural bureaucracy” is a strong hierarchy and a clear demarcation of roles – in particular, a very clear demarcation between those involved in the creative side and those involved in managerial roles (Born 2005). Indeed, as one executive suggested, although ITV was a commercial broadcaster, this demarcation of roles had existed since the very early days of the channel’s existence:

“When I started out in commercial television, the programme companies who had won their contracts were financiers who had made their calculations about income from advertising and the cost of programme making. And they had set up their advertisement department and their engineering departments and then they had to make programmes. So back in those days, which was the late 50s, mid to late 50s, they looked for writers and directors and producers from the cinema but notably from the theatre and when programmes were made, the budgets were given to them and they were transmitted and the money came in. Occasionally the front offices, the businessmen who had won the franchises to make programmes weren’t pleased with us because ratings weren’t any good or for some other sound reason and then they would stop making that programme. But generally the programming department was kept at arms’ length and we were trusted to work within our budgets and make the shows we saw fit to make.”

It was thus a working culture characterised by the belief that those involved in management should not interfere with creative content or indeed attempt in any way to control the creative freedom and autonomy of those involved in those processes (Davis and Scase 2000). Certainly, this seemed to be the

prevalent attitude of senior executives on the show from this period, as one member of the production team recalled:

“I remember I took against one entire episode because I thought it was wrong, and I wrote the whole bloody thing off. And the then Head of Drama rang me up and said, ‘Is it true that you’ve, you’ve razed an entire episode?’ I said, ‘Yeah.’ He said, ‘Well, I think the managing director is very concerned.’ And I said, ‘Why should he be concerned? He’s not an executive producer.’ I was in my budget. You either hire somebody and you trust them or you don’t”.

Although creative autonomy was fiercely protected from any interference from the “suits”, as another executive termed them, within the creative production team itself, there was a distinct and very clear hierarchy with the executive producer having final veto on the show’s output (Elliott 1972; Hobson 1982; Intintoli 1984; Tulloch and Moran 1986; Devereux 1998; Henderson 2007). As one of the production team explained:

“The show was made in [the executive producer’s] image and he ran it in a very autocratic way and fair enough you know. I think the show was really run by the script editors and [the executive producer], that was the way that it was and the producers would guide the scripts through and make them ... which obviously is a very difficult process, but the creative side was all done in that way and you know, if he said he didn’t like it, his opinion is more important than anyone else and ... I think at *The Bill*, there was only one view that mattered whether the executive producer liked it or not, and we all worked to that rule.”

Members of the production team on *The Bill* in the 1980s and 1990s described the often explosive atmosphere at the Wednesday script meetings, described in the previous section. One script editor from those days described feeling nauseous with apprehension, waiting for the executive producer to discuss the story ideas or scripts he had put forward on behalf of the writers he was working with:

“You’d be sitting there waiting for them to get to your script or your premise. And if it was by a writer that [the executive producer] had taken against or it was a script which for some reason he didn’t like, you’d know that seven shades of shit were about to be knocked out of you in that meeting.”

However another editor took a somewhat more robust stance on the Wednesday meetings and recalled them as being rather more constructive and creative:

“You know, [the executive producer] was totally authoritarian and he was mischievous and he had his own agendas and you know, but in spite of all those things, one of the things that was really great about *The Bill* with [the executive producer] at the helm was that you could actually stand up in a script meeting and have a stand up fight with him but you could go back to your office without the fear of having just lost your job.”

Another member of the production team added that, despite it being a collaborative process, in his view, one final deciding voice was still needed with a clear overall vision of the show (Henderson 2007):

“Yes, he was an autocrat. Yes, at times he could be a bully. But at the end of the day when you are making television which is a hugely collaborative process, you need someone at the helm, you need someone up there with whom the buck stops.”

However, while many of those interviewed from the period 1983 to 1997 described the executive running the show as “an old bugger”, they also spoke of the trust and latitude he extended to his staff in allowing them to develop ideas and to take risks in the content of the show. Davis and Scase (2000) argue that this is also typical of the cultural bureaucracy model, that while there is a distinct hierarchy with clearly defined roles and a tendency to refer decisions upwards, one of the key skills of management in these organisations is to allow creative staff working for them a considerable degree of autonomy in carrying out their work (Davis and Scase 2000, p.

116). This was certainly the case for staff working on *The Bill* during the 1980s and 1990s. As one producer from this period recalled:

“I can remember one episode which I had to do because there was no other script to do. [The executive producer] didn’t hate it but I thought it didn’t work and I ended up by rewriting probably 90% of that script. But if he trusted the producer, then he would delegate completely and even if the episode was a disaster, he would sort of have an attitude, well, you tried, failed and was very tolerant.”

Similarly, writers on the show spoke of being given considerable latitude in their work:

“First of all you weren’t given the story, you gave them the story so you felt right from the start that the writer was very much the centre and was very valued. And secondly, you weren’t competing with anyone. If your script idea was good enough, it would be made.”

Although writers were employed on a freelance basis, as mentioned previously, those writers who had proven their worth would be retained by the programme on a block contract (Tulloch and Moran 1986). Although these block contracts generally required the writer to develop and write six or eight episodes, usually within a year, many writers remained longer on the show largely because it was one of the few long-running series that allowed writers to contribute and develop their own ideas rather than working to a format. Inevitably, as a result of this disposition, writers also built up long lasting working relationships and, in some cases, good friendships with their editors (Sennett 1998). One writer recalled:

“I think that relationship with your script editor was key. And I think when it worked, there would be that sense of total trust on both sides. You were encouraged to give your input. Your experience as a writer was valued if you said that you didn’t think something would work and if she could see that, you knew she would fight with the executive producer to make him see that. It was a very nurturing and very

fulfilling environment to be in, I think. But it was something that developed over time.”

Davis and Scase (2000) argue that trust is particularly important in creative industries such as broadcasting. The work itself often involves huge areas of uncertainty – an actor may suddenly become ill, get pregnant or decide to leave the show, a location may suddenly no longer be available for shooting or a story idea may bear too much resemblance to a real-life disaster or major crime incident and, as a consequence, have to be scrapped for reasons of taste and so on. For those reasons, Davis and Scase (2000) argue that it is important to appoint people that those in control can trust to perform well, on time and to target – and, perhaps even more importantly, share the same vision of what a show is aiming to produce (Born 2005). As one executive put it:

“If you employ the people you trust, your own views and your own sense of responsibility or moral obligation or whatever might perhaps come up against somebody else’s set of wishes, but if you’ve got the right people around you, you end up with everybody rowing in the same direction. I think generally, people wanted to work on the programme because they enjoyed working within the recognised constraints. And those constraints came largely from me but they were generally recognised as beneficial for all concerned. But it was a team with mutual respect. We may not always have agreed but if your team lacks that, then you’ve got nothing.”

In her study of the BBC, Born describes how “the corporation had been a way of life for many employees, in whom it inspired unusual devotion and who approached their work almost as a vocation” (Born 2005, p. 81). She argues that this was in part down to the fact that it was an institution that had long cherished “creative and intellectual vitality – the capacity for original and dissenting thought” (Born 2005, p. 69). Similarly, staff interviewed from this period (1983 – 1997) talked of “loyalty to the show” and “loyalty to the

executive producer” and that, despite the executive’s somewhat autocratic nature, it was nevertheless an environment that cherished the “maverick”.

However, as Davis and Scase (2000) argue, the need to appoint personnel who can be trusted to carry out their work under great pressure and to tight deadlines can also lead to media organisations being seen as operating “on the basis of closed or exclusive networks which outsiders have difficulty in penetrating” (Davis and Scase 2000, p. 117). Born (2005) in her study of the BBC also highlights that recruitment into television generally comes about through a very narrow pool of contacts indeed – as she puts it, “career consolidation and pathways to promotion continued to be captured by those from traditional elite and establishment backgrounds” (Born 2005, p. 197). Certainly, many of the production staff I interviewed for this study also came from just those backgrounds and were given their first break in television through personal contacts:

“It was through friends. One of my friends used to be in *The Bill* so I just phoned her up randomly out of the blue and she said, ‘Oh, I’ve been talking about you to the story producer’. So I came along to a meeting and sat in on that and then afterwards I just asked if there was anything I could be involved with and luckily the timing was right and they were kind of wanting to expand the story department so I was brought in that way.”

However, the same was not the case for the writers, many of whom came from rather less privileged backgrounds. A number of the writers had been ex-police officers, many had been teachers and one had started her writing career writing for music magazines during the punk era of the 1970s. Moreover, very few writers were recruited through personal contacts, but rather through submissions of their work via their literary agents or, on

occasion, writers were talent-spotted for the show by script editors who had seen their work at either the London or Edinburgh Fringe.

However, while writers tended to be recruited on a mainly meritocratic basis, Ursell (2006) argues that the practice of recruiting for television generally through “informal arrangements” can militate against certain groups, such as “unknown newcomers, those who are culturally or politically different and those whose domestic responsibilities and/or limits of physical stamina restrict their availability for long and anti-social hours of working”. Certainly, during my time as a writer during the 1990s, there were very few women on the writing team and very few writers from black or minority ethnic communities. Although there were a number of women involved at senior levels on the production team, as one police adviser from this period said:

“You see black people on the front desk – occasionally – and black people cleaning the building. But that’s it. And they give us stick in the police for not being a culturally diverse organisation.”

A female writer also commented on the lack of other women in the team:

“I think even though it was a very nurturing environment, I think it was very difficult then and now to be a female writer and be the one in charge of looking after a family. You remember what it was like, that they could ring you up at any time, say six in the evening and want huge changes by eight the following morning. And you couldn’t say, “Oh, I can’t, my son’s ill or I need to take him somewhere.” You just had to get on with it. And I think that way of life was too hard for a lot of women writers trying to be family women too.”

Interestingly, almost all the police advisers interviewed from this period also commented on the privileged backgrounds of many of the production staff.

As one former adviser put it:

“I just accepted they were a weird bunch. And they’re not in the real world. Sometimes you hear them talking and you’re thinking,

especially when you know what sort of money they're earning and you're thinking, get in the real world, please get in the real world. And some of their backgrounds. Some of the editors when they went out in the back of a police car and the blue light was going and they're all "Ooh, isn't this exciting?" And you'd wince for Christ's sake. But if you've never been there, it's that insight you never had, I suppose. They hadn't seen that side of things, that world before."

Another adviser took a rather more balanced view of his media colleagues, commenting that:

"I'd been a police officer all my life, left school at 16, went straight in. I didn't mix with people who'd been to Eton or wherever. And yeah, I suppose I did think they were going to be a bunch of luvvies. And a couple of them were. But most of them were very down-to-earth, very hard-working and very professional. And I think once we both got past our initial mistrust of each other, we came to respect each other a lot."

Certainly, as Reiner (2010) argues, the police have often seen themselves as denigrated and under attack in the news media:

"These perceptions are not unfounded. The media, even while reproducing perspectives fundamentally legitimating the police role, nonetheless criticise and question many particular police actions and individual officers." (Reiner 2010, p. 179)

However, in a number of studies of relationships between police sources and reporters (Chibnall 1977; Ericson *et al.* 1987; 1989; 1991; Mawby 2010), commentators have noted that, over time, reporters often develop an affinity for their sources. Chibnall (1977) cites an interviewee saying of his police contacts, "You get to know them, you understand how they think, how they are likely to act. You talk the same language." Similarly, Mawby's (2010) more recent study of police/news media relationships cites one of his interviewees thus: "The job of a reporter is all about relationships you build up with contacts. People become friends effectively through your job." (Mawby 2010, p. 1047)

In the same way, just as the police advisers by and large overcame their prejudices that media workers were “luvvies”, members of the production teams also described how they came to have a new respect for the police through working closely with the advisers and with serving officers within the Metropolitan Police Service (see Chapters Four and Five). As one writer put it:

“At one point I spent a lot of time with those armed response unit officers up at their training place. So I got to know them very well. And I like those male societies. Yes, of course I’m interested in them as a source of ideas but I’m also interested in that culture and I must say that a lot of the police officers I’ve met, I really like as men. And I’ve become very close friends with a number of them, one in particular who wrote a book about his time in the Armed Response Unit. So I started off asking him for stories and then I ended up helping him out with his writing.”

The police and the media worlds have a number of similarities (Mawby 2010). As described above, the world of the media is often portrayed by commentators as one which is mainly white, middle class and male-dominated (Ursell 2006). Similarly, Loftus (2009) argues that the world of the police has traditionally been:

“a white heterosexual male dominated occupation and this poses considerable challenges for those who do not correspond with this norm because of their gender, ethnicity or sexuality.” (Loftus 2009, p. 10)

Media circles are often portrayed as “‘partially closed’ rather than open to all” (Ursell 2006, p. 146) while, as Reiner (2010) comments, the world of policing has also been seen as one marked by internal solidarity and isolation (Westley 1970; Reiner 1978). Mawby (2010) argues that there are distinct similarities between the activities of police officers and the activities of crime reporters, observing that both roles involve seeking out information,

cultivation of sources and dealing with the darker side of life. Similarly, both scriptwriters and police advisers also talked of realising, over time, the many similarities between their jobs⁸. As one police adviser put it:

“And what I loved about being a cop was that I’d listen to things and think, “Blimey, that’d make a good story.” And why I wanted to be a detective was because if I met you and we had an incident, in my head, I’d go home and think, “Whatever happened to that Marianne?” So say there’s an incident, a window’s broken, “Did you break that window?” “Yes.” That’s of no consequence to me, why you broke the window is what I want to know because if I ask you why, I’m going to find out heaps more about you as a character as opposed to did you do it ... So yeah, I think the starting point for the world of writers and the world of some detectives, not all, is very much the same.”

But central to good working relationships between police advisers, police sources, writers and other production staff, as in all the other working relationships on the show, is mutual trust, respect and understanding of each other’s work over a period of months and even years (Chibnall 1977). As one writer put it:

“I think that the writers the advisers got on with and the writers they were prepared to help were those who they sensed had some kind of sympathy for the job that they were doing. And that was all it was really.”

In short, writers and other creative staff working on the show during the 1980s and 1990s were able to enjoy considerable latitude in their work because of the organisational conditions prevalent in Thames Television during this period. As Davis and Scase (2000) point out:

“The strategy of allowing creative workers to operate freely within a well-defined space in an enabling managerial culture is most likely to be successful when the organisation is growing, when its financial position is secure ... and when there is a strong demand for its products.” (Davis and Scase 2000, p. 73)

⁸ See Waddington (1999), who argues the importance of police “storytelling” as a way of giving purpose and meaning to inherently problematic occupational experiences.

I have suggested that in the world of the “duopoly” of the BBC and the ITV network, where there was competition for audiences but not for revenue, this was certainly the case for employees and freelance writers working for Thames Television. However, from the mid-1990s onwards, this state of affairs changed dramatically and in the next section I shall explore the reasons for these changes and their impact on working processes on the show and on the working culture of the programme.

3.5 *The world of the commercial bureaucracy*

A new era in broadcasting policy began under the Thatcher government. The most far-reaching piece of legislation was the 1990 Broadcasting Act. Before this Act, UK television was highly regulated by public bodies – the BBC and the Independent Broadcasting Authority. The 1990 Act brought major reform of ITV and of its regulator. The Independent Broadcasting Authority was replaced by a “lighter touch regulator” and, at the same time, there was an auction of franchises. Previously, each of the ITV regions had been run by a single operator, and licences were awarded on the basis of good programme ideas and sound financial control; after 1990, franchises were to be awarded to the highest bidder, albeit with a “quality threshold” in place. Until this point, Thames Television, which was the company making *The Bill* for the ITV network, also held the franchise for the London area during weekdays. Following the new Act, Thames Television lost its franchise and became an independent production company, continuing to make a number of shows, including *The Bill*, until it was taken over by Pearson Television in 1996, which subsequently became Fremantle Media in 2000.

It was not the loss of the franchise by Thames Television that was to signal huge changes for the makers of the show, but rather more far-reaching changes in the television industry as a whole. The 1990 Act was designed to accelerate change in the industry from a highly regulated and protected state of affairs to a more open one with more competition and less intervention. However, at the same time that the British television industry was being deregulated, there was a sudden growth in cable and satellite channels, as well as the beginnings of digital television broadcasting. The effect of these combined changes was, as Born (2005) puts it:

“... the unleashing of rampant competition and pressures to maintain ratings and cut costs across British broadcasting ... by the mid1990s, Britain’s erstwhile public service ambitions were subordinated to the vaunted ideal of market competition.” (Born 2005, p. 52)

Thus in the mid-1990s, for the first time in the British television industry, there were now many more commercially-oriented channels competing for audiences than primarily public service ones. This transformation had a crucial impact on the programmes being made, as a senior executive explained:

“In the old days, we used to think what programmes we wanted to make and whether we had the money to make them. But now it was the other way round, it was the cart leading the horse – the money men at the top were deciding which audiences they wanted to attract and what programmes would bring them in and it was our job to make those programmes to fit that niche. We used to be an ideas-led industry. Now we became a marketing-led one. And for many of us, it was the end of an era of intense creativity and passion about what we did for a living.”

In their study of the management of creative industries, Davis and Scase (2000) argue that, as a result of these changes in the television industry, the cultural bureaucracy model, which they argued characterised working

processes at the BBC and at ITV companies such as Thames, was replaced by a new model of organisational structure, which they describe as the commercial bureaucracy. This was part of a much larger process of the installation of performance culture in management managerially⁹. As Born (2005) comments of the changes in the BBC:

“... the now-global concern with implementing processes of accountability [was] part of a general shift in government away from central state controls to indirect controls exercised through a variety of regulatory and self-regulatory means. From the late eighties onwards, accountability had become a central plank of public reform ...” (Born 2005, p. 214)

They argue that the aim of such organisations is:

“... to exploit creativity for the purposes of making profit. There is an ongoing attempt by management to impose rules and regulations that govern the means whereby clearly defined goals are to be achieved. The outcome will be an emphasis on hierarchical reporting mechanisms according to which the performance of employees is monitored, measured and appraised.” (Davis and Scase 2000, p. 98)

One of the first changes that occurred on *The Bill* in the light of these changes in the industry was increased involvement from the ITV network. Previously, network involvement was minimal and the executive producer's response to any attempts to control content was, simply, “It was my show. So I told them to bugger off!” But at a time of sudden increased competition for audiences and for revenue from advertisers and sponsors, the use of market research increased (Hesmondhalgh 2005; Born 2005) and, with it, more involvement from ITV network executives in the content of the show to ensure that episodes would attract audiences and advertisers wishing to

⁹ Similarly, as Loftus (2009) comments, new public management or NPM has also had an impact on policing. New practices introduced by NPM include performance management and the concept of the public as “customers” (McLaughlin *et al.* 2001).

purchase air-time during the commercial breaks on the show (Henderson 2007). As one of the senior executives explained:

“At the beginning, I was given a sort of free hand in the halcyon period when *The Bill* was doing so well that there wasn’t a need to have regular meetings but once the BBC started to up the ante, then the meetings at Network Centre became more frequent and the pressure was then put on me to change the format of the show.”

As I discussed earlier, the complete serialisation of the show and an emphasis on stories about the personal lives of the characters were the changes in the format that network executives requested. Once this had taken place, the network executives also became increasingly involved themselves in contributing to the story development process, as one of the producers from the 2000s recalled:

“The model on which ITV was founded, just doesn’t apply as much anymore. We live in a very different age and the channel has to be kind of punching its weight all the time. So the network executive comes to our long-term conferences. And their involvement after that is a constant dialogue with us. Our network executive will watch the episodes and say, “I enjoyed this, we should do more of this” or “I don’t really like that. I don’t think we should do that again.” So we have to deliver what they want based on the conversations that we’ve had with them. And the big pressure is viewing figures so we have to respond when they say we need celebrity casting or we want more stories that will attract a specific demographic. So then we obviously will adapt our stories to try and target those audiences that way.”

In a world where market and demographics were all, the status and creative autonomy of the producer and, more critically, of the writer was severely eroded. Whereas the emphasis in the 1980s and 1990s was on encouraging the distinctive authorial voice of the writer, now the emphasis on the show was on teamwork, on creating ideas collaboratively. This resulted, in part, from a growing awareness of the role of team writing in some of the best American serials such as *The Sopranos*, which were finding their way onto

British television at the turn of the century. But for many of those who had worked on the show in the 1980s and 1990s, the idea of team writing “was seen as a commercial expedient, diluting integrity and originality” (Born 2005, p. 337). As one executive put it, “it was writing by numbers and where’s the fire and the passion in doing that?”

But more than that, the concept of teamwork was one with which many writers felt extremely uncomfortable, both on a personal and creative level. In their study, *The Management of Innovation*, Burns and Stalker (2001) explore the progress of a scheme inaugurated in the mid-1950s by the Scottish Council to facilitate the entry of established engineering firms in Scotland into the new field of electronically controlled machinery and equipment. They argue that this involved changes in management structure and operational practices – from “mechanistic” forms of management to an “organic” style of management structure. Burns and Stalker (2001) characterise “mechanistic” practices as being distinctly hierarchical with all major decisions being taken by the most senior manager at the apex of the hierarchy but with employees being afforded a degree of freedom in carrying out tasks. “Organic” practices were characterised by more fluidity and a greater emphasis on teamwork or, as they put it, “the adjustment and continual re-definition of individual tasks through interaction with others” (Burns and Stalker 2001, p. 121). However, they also observe that many employees used to the “mechanistic” styles of management and working practices found it hard to adjust:

“It is a necessary condition of [mechanistic] practices that the individual ‘works on his own’ ... He works at a job which is in a sense artificially distracted from the realities of the situation the concern is

dealing with, the accountant 'dealing with the costs side', the works manager 'pushing production' and so on ... The distinctive feature of the second organic system is that the individual's job ceases to be self-contained: the only way in which 'his' job can be done is by his participating continually with others in the solution of problems ... Such methods of working put much heavier demands on the individual." (Burns and Stalker 2001, pp. 124–5)

One of the writers who was regularly commissioned under the new regime, but had also worked regularly on the show in the 1990s, talked of the stress and anxiety she experienced in attending the long-term meetings held three or four times a year to work out plots for the regular characters. She said that she found the experience of working in a team alien to the way she preferred to create stories:

"There was the executive producer and the network executive and then there would be all the story team, the directors, producers. I can't remember how many writers now were invited. There would be a group of us, maybe eight or ten. I can't remember. And so it was really everybody and you went away for a weekend, to a very nice hotel. So it was very sociable. I found though I'm really not as effective in very, very large meetings just because it has, inevitably, that feeling of competition where you feel, oh, I should have come up with some brilliant idea and you sit there thinking, this is terrible, I need to say something at least and then the more you think that, the less you can think of something to say. Which isn't really what being a writer is about. I think I used to like the old way, just you and your editor hammering away at your script but now you had to be a team player as well."

Many of the writers interviewed from this period talked of the "superficiality" of the new working processes and described how they felt pressure during meetings at *The Bill* studios to come up with ideas instantaneously. As one writer put it:

"It just wasn't the way I worked. In the old days, I would think of an idea, I would ring up my police advisers or my own police contacts to see if they thought it was viable from a police procedural point of view and then I would go out, interview contacts and just slowly, slowly piece my idea together. But now we'd all be herded into these hotel

rooms, plied with endless sweets and cakes to keep our energy up. There'd be one person standing at the whiteboard and everyone else would be in a kind of competition to see who could come up with the most ideas. And hardly any of them ever got used as usually the executive producer ended up scrapping most of them and giving us story-lines he'd wanted to do all along. But it was just so alien to the way I worked, this quick fire saying the first thing that came into your head."

Several of the writers from the period 2001 to 2010 said that the new regime was ultimately dispiriting in terms of job satisfaction, that they believed that there was very little point in coming to the meetings, having done any preparation or researched any possible ideas for the show:

"Ostensibly we were all told that everyone had a voice on the show. But the reality was we were the hired hands. We came in at the end of the process when everyone else had hammered out a story-line of sorts with minimal research and we had to make sense of it and hope it was something that we could identify enough with or had enough interest in to make a coherent story."

Another writer was even more explicit:

"Basically there were too many people involved in the process with no-one claiming ownership. You had the story editors, who came up with stories but were inadequately thought through, inadequately researched. You then had the script editors who really had no power and the producers who read far too late into the process. So the script editors would be thinking, no, no, no, you've got to do what the story team say, and then the producer comes in and says that doesn't work, dump it. So you'd always end up actually coming back at sort of the fourth or fifth draft to what you'd written in your first draft and you told them you know, this will never work, do this. And it, you know, it was not trusting the writer. It was an absolutely appalling business really."

Whereas previously writers had responsibility for researching and developing those stories, now writers were brought in at the end of the story creation process to develop the story outlines that had already been devised in-house, often with very little prior research, as will be discussed in subsequent chapters. As Gitlin (1994) commented on team-writing practices, in his study

of working processes in commercial American television in the 1980s: “It is as if there were not only too many cooks planning the broth, but the landlord kept interfering as well” (Gitlin 1994, p. 85).

Just as the status of the writer was eroded under the new regime, so were the influence and sanctions of the police advisers, because the shift towards telling stories about personal lives of police officers now meant that the advisers’ input was not as central as before. Indeed, as one police adviser observed wryly, from having an office very close to the centre of power on the show – the executive producer – they were gradually shunted, under the new regime, further and further away from the new story production team and, by the time I interviewed them, occupied offices at the other end of the studios:

“I must say when I first went down *The Bill* in the early 1990s, our offices were right near the executive producer. And we had his secretary doing all our notes. We never did our notes in those days. And you went to meetings and it was always, “Can we do this? What do the police say?” He wanted a police show, as he would say, warts and all. We gave our opinions and if we thought it was really bad, we’d object. And we were listened to. But as time went on, we were gradually moved round the building. A new breed of editors came in who were good but had no idea of police procedure. We just weren’t important to them any more. Not in the way we used to be.”

But the new working processes of stories being devised by a team instead of by individual writers also led to what Sennett (1998) calls a situation of power without authority on the show during this period. He argues that in traditional work hierarchies, or the kinds of “mechanistic” operations that Burns and Stalker (2001) describe, there is always one boss or one authority figure who takes responsibility for the power he or she wields. Thus, under the old regime of working practices on *The Bill*, the executive producer wielded the

power in terms of making decisions on output and actively resisted any incursions by the network, or indeed anyone else, on his authority and responsibility for running the show. Under the new regime, while the executive producer still wielded ultimate authority, the fact that so many people were now involved in devising episodes led, in turn, to those in senior positions being able to shirk taking responsibility if a script simply did not work. This led to a situation, which Sennett (1998) describes as an absence of authority, which then “frees those in control to shift, adapt, reorganize without having to justify themselves or their acts” (Sennett 1998, p. 115).

Not only did this situation absolve those on the story team from taking responsibility for poorly thought out or poorly researched scripts, it also meant that blame could in turn be shifted – to the outsiders in the group, the freelance self-employed writers. As Sennett (1998) argues, to disagree or criticise or to provoke confrontation is to be seen to be a poor team player – “a good team player doesn’t whine” (Sennett 1998, p. 115). Similarly, one writer summed up the situation thus:

“At the end of the day you couldn’t communicate [with the story team]. You just had to agree with what they wanted or when it went wrong, you had to take the blame. But the one thing you could never ever say was that it was their fault.”

But there was also less work than in the 1990s for writers: the explosion of cable and satellite television and the subsequent struggle for terrestrial channels to retain already dwindling audiences (Born 2005) led to less original drama being commissioned, because drama budgets were slashed as a result of lower advertising revenues. This meant that more writers were now competing for a limited number of jobs on soaps and serials, rather than

attempting to sell original work to the networks. As one senior member of the team commented:

“Because less and less is being commissioned because the channels don’t want to take the risk so we’re finding on *The Bill* at the moment, that our writing pool is really well stocked, compared to what it was a year ago. This time last year, we would sometimes have a commissioning meeting without having all the writers booked up. We could book up four months easily now. We can pay them twice what they would earn on a development deal for an original piece of drama and it will take them three months.”

This also led to a culture of insecurity among the writers. In this increasingly competitive workplace, writers believed themselves to be disposable, however many years’ experience they had had on the show, and in constant competition with each other (Sennett 1998):

“You feel so helpless really and impotent and also, that you mustn’t make a fuss. Or else you know they just won’t use you again. You knew there would be another ten, twenty writers they could get in because there weren’t the jobs that there used to be ten years ago.”

But as Born (2005) points out, such conditions were becoming increasingly prevalent across the industry in the late 1990s and 2000s. As she also argues, it was a set of conditions that was detrimental to creativity and to the quality of output. These are themes to which I will return in Chapters Five and Six.

To sum up then, changes in the wider television industry led to huge changes in the format of *The Bill*, and necessitated changes in working practices. However, these changes not only severely eroded the status, influence and sanctions of the writers and police advisers, in particular, but had severely negative results in terms of working relationships on the show

by eroding the webs of loyalty, trust and commitment to the show spun between the creative workers involved in the story development process.

4. Conclusion

Born (2005) argues that, for creativity to flourish, it requires “the existence of trust and of collaboration between talented individuals, the freedom to take risks and make mistakes” (Born 2005, p. 211). In the 1980s and early 1990s, structural and organisational conditions on the show, within Thames Television, the company making *The Bill* for the ITV Network, and within the television industry as a whole, enabled writers and other creative personnel to enjoy considerable freedom in working relationships that were characterised by trust and where writers were encouraged to take risks and allowed to make mistakes. However, with the advent of cable and satellite television and increased competition for audiences and revenue, the economic climate of the television industry became increasingly less stable; that, in turn, had an impact on broadcasters and on the makers of shows such as *The Bill*, who, in order to retain audiences, had to change the format of the show and to instigate new working practices. Such practices involved greater input from the ITV network to the show’s content, episodes being devised in-house and not by the writers, which in turn eroded the writers’ influence and sanctions on the kind of stories being told. New working practices also led to a culture of increased competitiveness between writers for jobs on the show, increased insecurity and stress for those writers and an erosion of the trust in working relationships they had previously enjoyed. In short, as Reiner (2010) comments, paraphrasing Marx, “people create their

own cultures but not under conditions of their own choosing” (Reiner 2010, p. 116).

However, these changes in working practices were also to have a significant impact on the representation of the police and of policing on the show. In the next two chapters, I discuss in more detail how and why these changes had an effect – firstly, on how stories were selected and, secondly, on how stories were then developed for transmission.

Chapter Four: The origins of story ideas

1. Introduction

In Chapter One, I discuss my theoretical framework and the approach I will take to analysing my findings, including drawing on the work of Hall (1980), Johnson (1986) and Du Gay *et al.* (1997) and the concept of the “circuit of culture”. This concept argues that, while each moment in the circuit of production, circulation and consumption of cultural objects is distinct and has its own forms and conditions of existence, it is at the same time interconnected with the others.

Although my theoretical framework is influenced by this literature, my thesis focuses on production and, in this chapter, I discuss the first stage of the “moment” of production: the origins of story ideas and how, even at this stage, all the other “moments” of the circuit, such as consumption and regulation (Du Gay *et al.* 1997), also form part of this “moment” of

production.

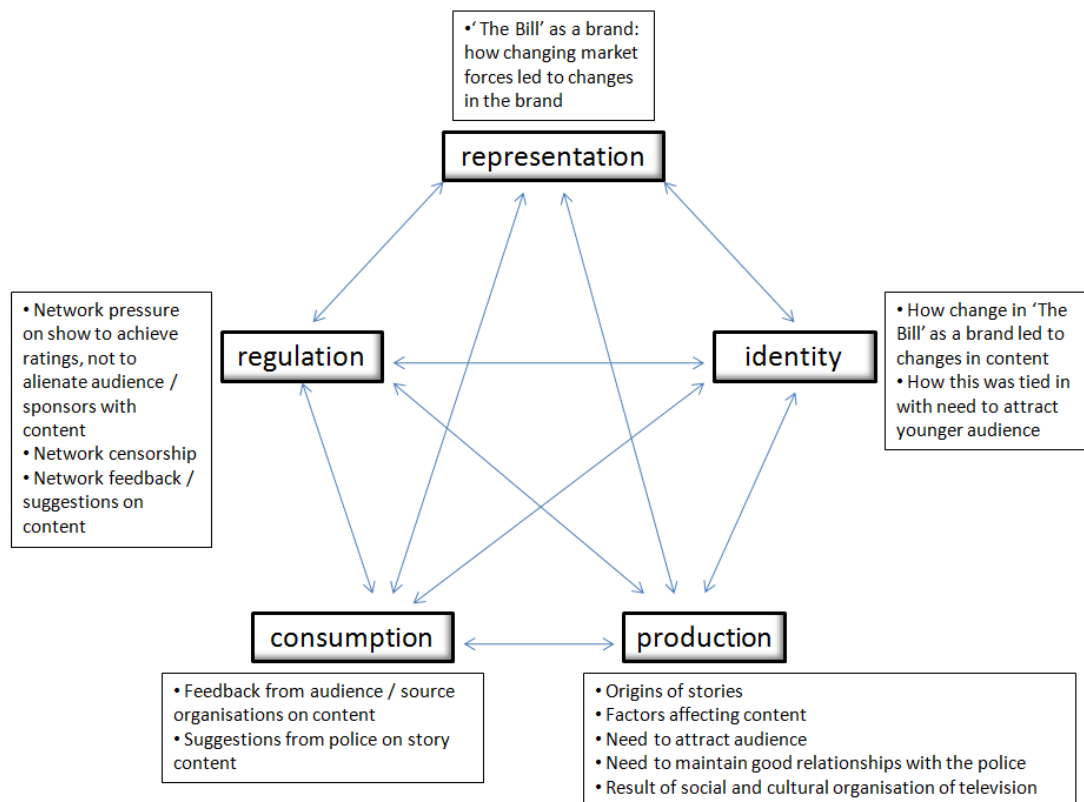


Figure 4.1 Theoretical framework for my thesis, based on Du Gay *et al.*'s (1997) interpretation of the "circuit of culture"

In an empirical study of the making of a television documentary, Elliott (1972) suggests that ideas for programmes are generated through three sets or chains of factors. He describes these sets of factors as being, firstly, the subject chain or specific ideas for particular items suitable for use in a programme; secondly, the presentation chain in which considerations such as the time-slot available to the programme, the budget available and customary methods of programme production also impinge on the selection of ideas for a show; and, lastly, the contact chain or range of contacts and institutional sources available to production staff working on the show. Although Ericson *et al.*'s (1987) study is of working practices among news

and broadcast journalists and not of a television programme, they describe a similar process in the development of story ideas. These are generated in much the same way, through ideas submitted by reporters or editors, through source origins, both on a reactive and proactive basis and from other media sources.

Although *The Bill* was a drama series and not a documentary, perhaps because of the emphasis placed on procedural accuracy during the first eighteen years of the show's existence in depictions of the police and of policing, there are also similarities between the ways in which writers on the show generated ideas and those described by Ericson *et al.* (1987) and Elliott (1972).

In the diagram below, the main three sources of story ideas on *The Bill* during the first eighteen years of its existence are highlighted. These included internal sources or writers' own police contacts; overtures made to and by source organisations (generally the Metropolitan Police Service); and other media sources. In the next section, I analyse how stories were originated on the show, before discussing how changes in the industry had an impact on working practices on the show. As a result, this affected the ways in which story ideas were originated and representation of the police on the show.

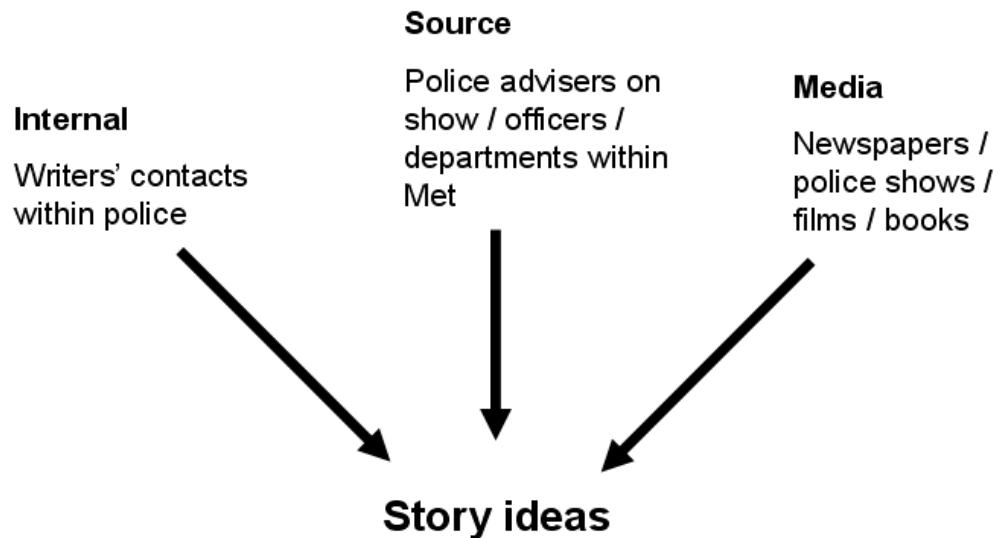


Figure 4.2 Origins of stories for the show

2. Finding Stories on *The Bill* 1983 – 2001

2.1 *Internal sources*

In contrast to other police dramas screened during the 1980s and 1990s, which tended to focus on major crimes such as murder investigations, representation of police work on *The Bill* focused on what one of the early executive producers of the show described as the “small change of policing”. Crimes and incidents featured during the first eighteen years of the show’s existence tended to be the kinds of incident that would be handled by a small police station in South London: a disturbance at a party (*‘The Night Watch’*), a thief returning stolen goods to his victim (*‘Revenge’*) or a woman giving birth in an alleyway (*‘Soft Talking’*). The “identity” of *The Bill* during the first eighteen years of its existence was a police show that, by contrast to shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* and their imagery of police work as a “hard-hitting, fast-paced, testosterone-fuelled ‘you’re nicked’

fantasy of urban detective work” (McLaughlin 2007, p. 105), instead emphasised the mundanity and “social service” aspect of policing (Cumming *et al.* 1965; Bittner 1967; Bayley 1994; Reiner 2000b).

Before a writer was even invited to submit potential story ideas, it was expected that he or she would already have some working knowledge of policing, through making contacts in his or her home town and spending time observing police work. Other writers prepared for their initial interviews with police officers by reading the *Police Review* as a way of understanding more about the world they would be attempting to describe. As one writer said:

“I think I must have been the only person in my village who took the *Police Review*. But I’d read it through because it gave me an overview of what was preoccupying police officers.”

Once accepted into the “pool” of regular contributors, writers were given a “police pack” which was assembled by the police advisers on the show. This included details about ranks of officers, the wording for cautions and other useful information, but writers were still expected to continue expanding their list of contacts. However, it was not just the writers who were expected to spend time shadowing the work of police officers – the script editors and even producers were expected to do this too. One of the script editors describes the process:

“When I was first involved with *The Bill* as a writer, the first thing that [the script editor] organised for me was a few days and nights out sitting in the back of an area car, actually doing some policing you know. And sitting in on the interview technique training sessions at Kilburn Police Station, sitting in on police interviews and actually understanding about interview technique.”

This was a directive that came from the executive producer and as the same script editor explained:

“And [the executive producer’s] concern was that writers should actually know something about the way the police actually do the job. And rigorously about the job and not about you know, the private lives of the people who do the job.”

All of the writers interviewed who worked on the show stressed the emphasis placed by script editors and producers alike on receiving story ideas that were directly based on first-hand observation of everyday police work. One writer describes one episode he wrote which was directly based on his experience of shadowing police officers:

“The very first time I went out with some police officers and they were dealing with a guy who had been discharged from a mental hospital. It was you know, it was right at the very beginning of um, care in the community. And this guy had been put in a flat, given a fridge, given a cooker, an electric fire and none of it worked. None of it was plugged in. And it was cold and he was stuck there and it was a Friday night and he said, ‘What do I do? Will you lock me up?’ And they said, ‘We can’t lock you up. If you misbehave, we’ll lock you up and then at least you’ll be safe till Monday morning.’ And that’s what they did in the end. And that was what he wanted them to do because he had nothing, he had nothing to eat, he had nowhere to go and he was quite happy.”

None of the writers I interviewed had had contact with the police prior to working on the show and they admitted that most of their previous knowledge and ideas about policing had come from other police shows – the show most frequently cited being *The Sweeney* (see Chapter One). Indeed, one or two writers admitted that their preconceptions about the police and the nature of police work had initially led them to be slightly worried about going out and shadowing police officers on patrol:

“I can’t remember what I was expecting. I was very nervous about going and nervous of what I would see or have to face. I was terribly

nervous of the high speed chases and I imagined there would be a lot of roughing up of suspects, a lot of aggressive behaviour, that sort of thing.”

As Newburn (2009) argues:

“... popular representations of policing invariably focus on crime, making police work appear to be utterly dominated either by very serious criminal activity or by a constant need to respond to incessant public calls for assistance.” (Newburn 2009, p. 602)

However, as many police researchers have pointed out, much routine policing is mundane (Punch and Naylor 1973; Skogan 1990; Shapland and Hobbs 1989) and, far from spending the bulk of their working hours on crime-related activities, the police are, in fact, the only “24 hour service agency available to respond to those in need” (Morgan and Newburn 1997, p. 79).

Indeed as Bayley (1994) puts it, in a description of routine police work:

“The police ‘sort out’ situations by listening patiently to endless stories about fancied slights, old grievances, new insults, mismatched expectations, indifference, infidelity, dishonesty and abuse. They hear all about the petty, mundane, tedious, hapless, sordid details of individual lives. None of this is earthshaking or worthy of a line in a newspaper – not the stuff that government policy can address, not even especially spicy; just the begrimed reality of the lives of people who have no-one else to take their problems to. Patient listening and gentle counseling are undoubtedly what patrol officers do most of their time.”

All the writers interviewed admitted that their preconceptions of police work had been destroyed after spending time with the police on patrol and that most of them had believed that the bulk of police work would be investigative, focusing on a crime that had already taken place, that enquiries would be geared to uncovering the “truth” about what had happened and then discovering and interpreting clues to find out “who did it” (Maguire 2003, p. 367).

By contrast, as one writer put it, his observation of police work had led him to realise that, in many respects, the police were both “social workers” (Punch 1979) and “dirty workers” (Ericson 1982):

“They were social workers in many ways. Basically they were sweeping up all the kind of dregs that no one else wanted to deal with. And I thought they were doing it admirably and sensitively, you know, I was so impressed by that.”

Others talked of how they had been surprised by the way in which police officers generally dealt with the public. Reiner (2000b) argues that one of the core functions of the police mandate is order maintenance. He suggests that:

“The craft of effective policing is to use the background possibility of legitimate coercion so skillfully that it never needs to be foregrounded ... The successful police officer draws on the authority of her office, as well as her personal and craft skills in handling people, rather than the one of coercive power – although sometimes this will not be possible.” (Reiner 2000b, p. 112)

One writer again admitted that her preconceptions about police encounters with the public had been based on watching shows such as *The Sweeney* when she was growing up and that she had expected to encounter much aggressive and, indeed, coercive force in her observation of policing on the streets. By contrast, she said:

“I hadn’t expected to see the police calming people down all the time. I thought there’d be much more throwing their weight around, much more macho preening. But this was taking everything down to a level where everyone’s calm and if an arrest needs to be made, then it’s going to happen in the best possible way with nobody getting hurt and um, with authority without having to scream and shout about it.”

Thus in the early days of the show, its identity as one which dealt with the small change of policing and represented the police more as dirty workers rather than crime fighters, in turn led to a need for the writers to base stories

on research and observation of police work. This was also the practice on early police series such as *Dixon of Dock Green* and *Z Cars* (Sydney-Smith 2002), particularly the latter where, as Sydney-Smith (2002) describes, writers were sent to observe the police for several weeks and then came back to London to write scripts based on what they had observed.

2.2 Source origins

In their study of newsroom journalists' working practices, Ericson *et al.* (1987), in considering the origins of story ideas, argue that the key intermediary between reporters and source organisations in a newsroom is the assignment editor, a senior journalist mainly responsible for assigning stories to reporters. They argue that the assignment editor is both reactive and proactive in his or her dealings with sources – maintaining relationships with well-placed sources in all organisations that the newsroom had dealings with (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 187), as well as receiving press releases, official reports, announcements of scheduled events and calls from sources who would recommended coverage of events or issues with which they were involved.

Although writers were encouraged to form their own police contacts, two groups of personnel on *The Bill* – the script editors and the police advisers, whose roles on the show were discussed at length in Chapter Three – also had access to the source organisation, the Metropolitan Police Service, and were able to provide writers with another source of research opportunities and germs of ideas for stories.

The script editors played a similar role to the assignment editors in a newsroom, receiving ideas from the writers and liaising between the writers and senior management – in this case, the producers and executive producers on the show. They also played a similar role in acting as a link between writers and the source organisation and, like assignment editors, were both proactive and reactive in their dealings with the Metropolitan Police Service – or, as one producer described it, “they effected a marriage between the writer and the police expert in that particular field”.

Approaches by the Metropolitan Police Service to script editors could be made in a variety of ways – either through a department or by an individual seeking to publicise a particular initiative. One former script editor gave an example of this:

“I think this guy who was a DI got in touch with one of the script editors about Operation Bumblebee (an anti-burglary initiative spearheaded by the Metropolitan Police in the mid-1990s). Anyway he was the face of Bumblebee and I guess he thought *The Bill* was a good place, well, we were supposed to be showing what was going on in the Met, so he got in touch, I think initially to see if he could get a few posters up round the set, maybe have a few officers making reference to Bumblebee. But Y obviously thought it was a good opportunity for us to run some stories about current initiatives so that’s how it all started. And Bumblebee really took off, they had all those roadshows everywhere and people turning up to recover their property so it was, we were a huge publicity tool then for the Met.”

The same script editor went on to describe how *The Bill* also became involved in publicising another initiative that was introduced by the Metropolitan Police Service – Operation Sapphire – to improve the investigation of sexual offences and victim care. The script editor suggested that the approach to incorporating current initiatives on the show was very much on the basis of an exchange of favours (Chibnall 1977):

“When we did Operation Sapphire it was very much a PR thing for the Met. We went to the launch and we took an actor so the Met could see it was supported by *The Bill*. And that way they support you. So we got three writers to work on stories and they accommodated the writers. So yeah, it was very much you scratch our back and we'll scratch yours.”

Empirical studies of police/news media relations (Chibnall 1977; Ericson *et al.* 1987; 1989; 1991; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Mawby 1999; 2002) frequently analyse the processes of reciprocity and exchange between the source organisation and journalists. The author of one of the earliest studies of police/news media relations, Chibnall (1977) discusses the “dependence of the crime reporter on the police as a source of routine information” (Chibnall 1977, p. 146) but suggests that it would be a mistake to regard the relationship between journalists and police officers as one of patronage. Instead, he suggests that the relationship is one that operates on a basis of equality and mutual obligation. As Chibnall (1977) argues:

“the crime reporter controls other, more powerful exchange resources. These derive from his position within an organisation offering the possibility of instant communication with the public ... Mass communication creates the opportunity for members of an organisation to promote their interests and disseminate their ideas on a mass scale ... The role of the crime reporter is as intermediary ... liaising between Scotland Yard and the press but it is also as copy writer – he is the man who makes public police activities. Thus, an important exchange resource for the crime reporter are his accounts ...” (Chibnall 1977, p. 154)

In the same way, the makers of *The Bill* had an important resource to offer the Metropolitan Police Service in exchange for assistance and story ideas. As a former executive producer suggested:

“What we can do for the Met in return for their assistance is give the public an understanding of what they're up to. But yeah, if there's a new campaign they want us to feature, well, we've got a lot of hours to fill ...”

Although most script editors suggested that the “favour” most frequently requested by individual officers or departments was publicity for a particular initiative, on a few occasions, the “favour” could also take another form, as one script editor explained.

“The executive producer wanted to commission six to eight programmes all set in the studio. One was set in an interview room and because the ethos of *The Bill* in those days was all about going out and exploring and understanding the world we were writing about, I got in touch with some police officers and I got this bloody fabulous guy, sort of a trainer. And he said, ‘Oh, come over to Kilburn and see what we do because we have these training programmes.’ And this training programme consisted of getting police officers to interview people, members of the public to try and practice their skills, hone their skills of interrogation. They’d give these people a set up you know, they’d give them a scenario, you’ve been shoplifting or you’ve got whatever in your house or you’re a drug addict and you need the money for this, that and the other and you’ve hidden the money here, here, here. This is what you do and this is the guy that’s going to talk to you about this and you’ve just been arrested, and then they’d go through a role play with you. And they said, ‘Look, you could help us out because we’ll need people to do this.’ I said, ‘This is fine. What we’ll do is, we’ll send you, I’ll send you every writer I can find to help with your role play scenarios. We’ll provide you with the stool pigeons and um, and you can provide us with contacts and help.’ And it went on for years. We got the ideas and the writers got first-hand experience of how interviews were conducted.”

Another source of research opportunities for the writers were the police advisers, who, like the script editors, were both proactive and reactive in their dealings with the Metropolitan Police Service. Their specific role on the show was discussed at some length in Chapter Three, and one of their primary functions was to ensure that scripts were as accurate as possible in terms of police procedure, given the constraints of mainstream popular television drama. Thus, for example, interview scenes were accompanied by reference to official interview procedure, the Custody Sergeant was regularly seen undertaking the same line of questioning from episode to episode, asking for

age, date of birth, address and surname from those brought into custody and there were also real-life police posters on the wall, featuring actual police initiatives (Leishman and Mason 2003, p. 65).

The other key aspect to the police adviser's job at this point in *The Bill's* history was their wide range of contacts:

“Basically everything to do with the police force, we were supposed to know about. Now if I'm perfectly honest, I'd been a uniformed officer for 25 years, so a lot of the goings on of the Fraud Squad, Murder Squads – it was alien. So my answer was always, I don't know but I know a man who does. So my job was to use contacts, people that I knew and that was one of the big things a police adviser does for a show – it supplies contacts.”

Finally, on occasion, the police advisers themselves could be valuable sources of story ideas as one writer elaborated:

“One of my best ideas came from one of the police advisers. He told me a story about where he'd been custody sergeant and an old man was brought in on a murder charge, on a zimmer frame. And what had happened was that he'd been in a suicide pact with his wife, managed to kill his wife with a knife and then being too weak to carry it out. And it was X saying what it was like to have to have this old boy in custody through the night, knowing it was out of his hands. He was merely the custody sergeant and in the morning, the guy was going to go down for murder. And I just wanted to get the sense of the, of the empty station. You know, it's quiet. The drunks aren't coming in. Everything's dead. People are asleep but the custody sergeant's got to stay awake and he knows that around the corner, in his cell, is this old boy. And I wanted to do honour to that memory.”

However, as one of the police advisers explained, there were two no-go areas in which they would not offer any advice or help. One was advice on scripts concerning major incidents of terrorism or attack on the Royal Family in the capital, and the other was on the procedures that came into play when a child was kidnapped:

“At the end of the day, our first loyalty is still to the Metropolitan Police. And there are certain procedures, certain aspects of what they do that yes, it’s confidential. The documentation, the plan, the master plan on what they’re going to do if certain things happen in London is confidential. If you want to write a story about that, then presume that X, Y and Z is going to happen and we will just say, “Yeah, okay.” That’s as far as we would go because we do sign the Official Secrets Act when we join and when we leave. So if you asked what are the security methods for the Royal Family, I know exactly what they are because a good friend of mine is a bodyguard but I’m not going to tell you. Yes, you will depict it in the script and we’ll say, “Yeah, that’s pretty good” but that’s as far as we’re going to go, we’re not going to say, “Well, actually they carry this and actually they carry that and they’ve done this training and blah, blah, blah”, because of the security issue. And the same if you wanted to write a story about a child being abducted. There’s no way we’d let you know what procedures would come into play because someone out there could be watching, and think, right, now I know exactly what they’d do and that means I need to do X, Y and Z. And we would never take those chances.”

In the “circuit of communication” model (Du Gay *et al.* 1997) (see Figure 4.1, on page 126) the last “moment” is regulation. In his study of the police/news media relationship, Chibnall (1977) suggests that one of the reasons for predominantly favourable representation of the police in the news media is the need for continuing police co-operation. By contrast, script editors and writers alike commented that the main feedback they received from their police contacts was the need for accuracy of the portrayal of police work. As one police adviser commented:

“When there’s been misrepresentation by the press or misunderstanding of things, for example, in rape investigations, it’s very important to actually break down the stereotype or misrepresentation by saying, “no, this is the way it’s done. Please can you make sure you do show that they are treated this way and that the day of the sort of brusque detective, the DS belittling the victims is long gone.” So that’s the other end of the scale, we’ll work very hard to make sure something is depicted correctly. And I think drama shows like *The Bill* are a good place to set the record straight.”

Interestingly, one script editor commented that quite often stories about police malpractice or minor cases of transgression would either come from the police advisers or police contacts in the early days of the show. One of the most famous episodes in the show's history in which a character, DI Burnside, flushes a suspect's head down the lavatory in order to elicit a confession was suggested by one of the police advisers.

In Chapter Five, I discuss in more detail how favourable representation of the police on the show at this time could be attributed to a number of complex and contingent factors. However, it is useful to note at this stage that regulation in terms of police feedback on story ideas or indeed story suggestions was minimal and that the overriding concern on the part of the police as an organisation was for procedure to be depicted accurately – and, moreover, that a show such as *The Bill* with its emphasis on accuracy of depiction of police work was seen as a suitable vehicle to increase public understanding of their work.

2.3 Media origins

Although the emphasis during the early years of the show was on telling stories about routine police work based on research and observation, as Troy Kennedy Martin, a scriptwriter on the early series of *Z Cars* and *The Sweeney* argues, the police series is never just about the police, but rather that “the police are used as a vehicle to get inside contemporary society” (Kennedy Martin 1978, p. 122). This idea that the police show could be used as a vehicle not just to discuss issues of policing but social issues as well was a sentiment echoed by many of the writers and producers on the show:

“*The Bill* is not just about the police, it’s where the police meet the public. It’s about the front-line. It’s about the interface between the institution and us. And the drama comes from the collision between the two. *The Bill* is about the public and the police colliding. It should by definition always be as modern as it possibly can be because the issues that we are discussing in this show are the issues that are in the writers’ heads which means that those are the ideas that are in the zeitgeist, those are the ideas that are current in society”.

Although many story ideas for the show during the 1980s and 1990s came from writers’ research, observation and simply talking to police officers about issues that concerned them or incidents in their professional lives that had touched them or left a mark on them, occasionally writers would draw inspirations for story ideas from media outlets, particularly when telling stories about the interface between the police and the public. As one of the executive producers explained:

“Yes, first and foremost, some of the best *Bill* episodes handled issues that in the Seventies, say, might have been seen as the sort of thing, social issues story, that you might have expected from a *Play for Today*. But what was key in our shows was how our cops reacted to those social issues.”

Another script editor described an episode about a young officer dealing with someone with mental health problems:

“There was another one which I did with a writer, which was called *Friends Like That* which started with the notion of how quickly a young and well trained police officer might recognise mental instability in a potential suspect and to realise that there was a distinction between criminal behaviour and mentally unstable behaviour. And that came from an article about how so many people in the 1990s who would have qualified for care within the community were just being left to fend for themselves and it was the police out there having to pick up the pieces.”

Thus, on occasion, stories were derived during this period in the show’s history from media outlets. However, these “issue-based” stories, as one of the executive producers described them, were in the minority and, more

usually during this period, stories derived directly from observation of policing and from the writers' first-hand understanding of the strains and stresses of police work.

2.4 Why working practices changed

In Chapter Three, I discuss how the expansion of the television industry and the arrival of multi-channel programming and, with it, greater choice for the viewer, led in turn to falling viewing figures on *The Bill*. If we turn once more to the model of the "circuit of communication" (Du Gay *et al.* 1997), the moment of "consumption" or falling ratings led in turn to network executives or the moment of "regulation" asking the makers of the show to change the format of the show or the moment of "identity". In 2001, the show became a bi-weekly serial.

Figure 4.3 Viewing figures

		Viewing figures (millions – source BARB)
Month	Dec 1985	12.0
	Dec 1986	13.2
	Dec 1987	15.2
	Dec 1988	12.8
	Dec 1989	13.8
	Dec 1990	10.8
	Dec 1991	15.1

	Dec 1992	15.6
	Dec 1993	17.5 (highest)
	Dec 1994	13.7
	Dec 1995	10.6
	1996 – 1998	Figures not available
Week ending	18 Oct 1998	10.32
	21 Oct 1999	9.15
	22 Oct 2000	8.84
	21 Oct 2001	6.50
	20 Oct 2002	8.16
	19 Oct 2003	7.76
	17 Oct 2004	7.34
	16 Oct 2005	6.54
	15 Oct 2006	5.61
	21 Oct 2007	5.43
	19 Oct 2008	6.18
	18 Oct 2009	3.78
	1 Aug 2010	2.85

However, in an increasingly competitive marketplace (Born 2005), pressure from the ITV network or “regulation” was now being put on the makers of the show, not only to garner high audience ratings but to attract a specific demographic – the 16–34 demographic. This social group was, as I shall discuss in Chapter Five, deemed to be the most desirable group of potential

viewers by advertisers and sponsors as they were thought to be the most malleable in terms of not having yet established loyalty to certain products and also were believed to have the highest disposable income, not yet being burdened with the responsibilities of families and mortgages.

The makers of the show were now asked to tell stories that would attract this potential audience. Apart from the change to the format, there were two other key changes to the “identity” of the show in order to make the show more attractive to this audience. Firstly, the show would deal for the first time with the personal lives of the characters and, secondly, instead of telling stories about the kinds of crime that might reasonably be dealt with by officers at a South London station, the show would now feature crimes that would normally be dealt with by specialist squads (see Chapter Five for a detailed account of why these changes were deemed to make the show attractive to a younger audience).

This change in the “identity” of the show had an impact on working processes or “production” and on the ways in which the makers of the show now generated story ideas. In the next section, I will detail those changes.

3. Finding stories on *The Bill* 2001 – 2010

3.1 Media origins

With the change of identity of the show from series to serial, new working practices had to be introduced. While the bulk of story-lines had been originated by the freelance scriptwriters between 1983 and 2001, in order to ensure continuity of the serial or continuing story elements, story ideas were now developed and formatted in-house by a new production team – the

“story-line” team, comprising three or four story editors, led by a story producer.

As discussed in Chapter Three, the main task of the story team was to supply the writers with an outline for each episode. These outlines would generally comprise three strands: a major and a minor crime story and a “soap” style (Hobson 1982) story involving the personal lives of the characters – for example, characters having affairs with each other, getting pregnant, having secret gay liaisons and so on. (See Chapter Five for the reasons behind the introduction of the “soap” element.) The story team would generally supply an outline of the major crime story in some detail for the writers to flesh out, as well as fairly comprehensive notes on the main story events in the serial element. In theory, the freelance writers were then supposed to supply the minor crime story. However, as will be discussed in the next section, the minor crime stories were usually supplied by the story team as well.

Under the old regime, episodes of *The Bill* could be screened at any time because they were self-contained narratives with no serial elements. This meant that, during the writing and research period, deadlines could be flexible as it was extremely rare for a script to carry any form of continuing story element and writers generally had a six to eight week period to research and write a first draft. However, once the show was repackaged as a serial, as one of the executive producers explained:

“Once an episode is commissioned, its transmission date ... well, not its transmission date, as that can be moved round a little with football or whatever, but its position in the cycle is locked. One way or another, those dates that we set for the drafts, the production meeting,

for the shoot, for the delivery will have to be met. Because each episode locks into what has gone before and what comes afterwards in story terms and there is no scope for flexibility. We have to get a script out to the relevant departments on the dates we have promised or else we do not have a show.”

This lack of flexibility in terms of scheduling in turn had an impact on the writing and research process because, without fail each month, eight “story-lines” or outlines of episodes had to be generated and given to the writers to develop by the story team, while the sheer volume of work required in order to generate this material continuously by a team of four people meant, in turn, that time for research and observation of police work was now severely curtailed.

As I remarked earlier in this chapter, there are many similarities between the ways in which writers and other creative staff generate story material for shows such as *The Bill* and the ways in which newsroom journalists generate material (Ericson *et al.* 1987; 1989; 1991). Ericson *et al.* (1987) argue that the process of news-making is the “act of structuring reality rather than recording it” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 19) and that the “reality” represented in the news is a “reality” constructed from an “infinite universe of possibilities” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 8). It is also a reality that, as Ericson *et al.* suggest, depends on a number of factors:

“The creation of news is not therefore a matter of the personal whim and fancy of the journalist. Rather, it is a matter of systemic relations among journalists and their sources. It is a product of the cultural and social organisation of news work, not of events in the world or the personal inclinations of journalists.” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 9)

In the same way, even in the very early stages of devising stories, the creation of story-lines was both a product of the systemic relations among

writers, creative personnel and their sources and contacts and a product of the cultural and social organisation of storytelling work on this particular show. However, whereas story material in the first eighteen years of the show's existence was generated by a pool of fifty to sixty scriptwriters, whose ages ranged from early thirties to early sixties, from diverse backgrounds and deriving their material from a number of sources but chiefly research and observation, in the last ten years of the show's history, the storytelling "aperture", to borrow Ericson *et al.*'s (1987, p. 9) phrase, narrowed considerably. Stories were now mainly generated by four people working almost entirely from an office based on set in the show's studio and deriving their material now almost solely from other media sources.

The on-set office was known affectionately by staff as the "story barn". In one corner of the story office was a large whiteboard, on which were pinned various articles, mainly from tabloid newspapers, which often would then form the basis for future story ideas. As the show's full-time researcher, whose role was described in Chapter Three, explained:

"Every week I send to the story team and it also might start going to all the editors as well. I accumulate a little, a paragraph on each of the new stories that have gone through that week which I think might be of interest to the department, might spark off an idea for a story. So yes, I usually issue those on a Friday or end of the week anyway. So that's, I do that and often the editors will have also seen it or they've seen something because they read a different newspaper or something. So yes, it's very much a joint effort there."

In addition to scouring tabloid newspapers for story ideas, the story team also said that they looked on the internet, based stories on experiences of family and friends (Ericson *et al.* 1987) and additionally found other media sources such as police shows shown in other countries or old films a

valuable source of ideas. In Chapter Six, I discuss the implications of this practice of taking ideas from other police shows from countries with different models of policing and transposing them into a British context.

Another key change on the show was the emphasis on stories about the personal lives of the characters as well as about everyday police work. As I shall discuss in Chapter Five, this change in the format had been instigated by the ITV network in an attempt to attract new audiences. Whereas in the early days of the show, writers were asked to come up with stories solely about police work, now the writers were asked to come up with story ideas that were about policing but also posed some kind of dilemma personally for the police characters. As one of the story editors remarked:

“Basically most of our stories are about officers facing a really tough moral dilemma within a case. So we will try and define how that officer comes through that dilemma and where they end up so it’s kind of the beginning, middle and end for the character’s journey and we’re looking to tap into the dilemmas that face police officers on a day to day basis and you know, issues of moral justice versus legal justice and issues of whether you’re a human first and a police officer second and trying to really explore that rich territory to find stories, um, with the aim of developing those characters and engaging the audience with those characters. And if the character journey is a personal journey, so this guy’s marriage has broken down or an affair’s been uncovered or whatever, and we’re defining that side of the story, we want to um, frame it in police terms, so actually, not looking for a resonance, thinking about, thinking about how does a copper cope on the day that his marriage has fallen apart, say, he’s been kicked out by his wife but he’s got to go out and deal with a rape victim and how does he remain strong and how does he remain professional, when inside emotionally he’s collapsing.”

During their interview, the story team talked enthusiastically of a storytelling workshop run by an American scriptwriter. One of the story editors described how, in this workshop, the team were taught how to define each character on a show by one defining emotion or characteristic.

“We’ve had um, a lady come and talk to us on two occasions now. She’s an American woman. She has worked on quite a few American series and she, I won’t explain this as well as the others, but she breaks down characters into traits. And I can show you the actual, her programme that she gives to people. It’s how she sees certain characters. She has seven or it is nine, nine characters, types of character and why they react and who they would react to and how, and they’re called love and will and conscience and truth and reason. And it’s how reason would react with love and how ambition would react to conscience and how they’d react to it, you know, this particular situation.”

In another corner of the “story barn”, there was a large sheet of photographs of each member of the cast in full uniform. Underneath each photo were details of their name, rank and their “defining characteristic” – one female police officer was defined as “love” while a male CID officer was described as “will”. The story editors described how they had found the workshop extremely useful in terms in terms of generating stories from scratch for the characters:

“So if we’re sitting there, thinking okay, we need to tell a story for this character or that one, we sit down and start thinking about the permutations – how would “will” react to or clash with “reason” and from there, you find yourself thinking of really good police stories – one officer wanting to break the rules for noble causes and being held back by bureaucracy.”

When I asked how much time the story team had spent shadowing the work of actual police officers, I was told that each of the team had spent one half day or one whole day in a patrol car, a visit arranged by the on-set police advisers. This was in marked contrast to the practices on the show between 1983 and 2001. However, as one story editor remarked:

“I think you get a pretty good sense of what it’s all about just from going out with the police for one day, and if we have any problems with a story, we’ve got our advisers on hand. We tell them what we want and then they tell us how to make it work.”

For the first time in the show's history, story ideas were also suggested by the network (Henderson 2007), thereby linking the moment of "production" with the moment of "regulation" (see Figure 4.1). During the first eighteen years of the show's history, network input into the show's content was almost non-existent as ratings were stable. However, as Hesmondhalgh (2005) suggests, generally the entertainment industries are characterised by high levels of risk and uncertainty because they cannot quite predict how products will resonate with audiences. Moreover, as media products have proliferated and as much of the product is increasingly generic and "formatted", those shows, like *The Bill*, which are not marked by the names of "star performers" within the industry, have a harder job to attract and retain audiences. In a world where networks are fighting for smaller and smaller shares of audiences, as Hesmondhalgh (2005) argues, those personnel who deal with issues of marketing, publicity and advertising, increasingly come to act as important "advisers" during the creation stage.

Ideas would be suggested by the network via the network executive in charge of continuing series and serials at ITV. These suggestions would either go to the executive producer or directly to the story team and these ideas would also come from other media sources. One such idea was described by the story team – a story about a transgressive officer – and in Chapter Six I analyse in further detail the development of this idea from initial concept through to shooting script. One of the story editors described how the network first mooted to the makers of the show the idea of a story about a cop who would "bend the rules":

“Also funnily enough, the network has come back to us and has talked to us about it, that what the show’s in danger of becoming at times is too PC¹⁰.”

At the time of the interview with the story team, the first series of *Life on Mars*, one of the biggest successes on television in recent years, had just been screened. The show was set in 1973, portraying a world in which officers bent the rules, with a general atmosphere of racism, sexism and homophobia. The success of *Life on Mars* may have been an influence on the network executive’s decision to give this directive to the team. As Intintoli (1984) argues, one key strategy on the part of broadcasters to ensure viewing figures is to rely upon what they perceive to be successful formulae, which “may mean repeating what they feel has led to success in the past and/or copying what they see as leading to the success of a competing program” (Intintoli 1984, p. 91).

Manning (2003) further develops this notion in the concept of the “media loop”. He describes how news programmes are “looped” and become the putative basis for other media reportage – they can, for example, be reported in other magazines or human interest-based publications. The loop is then joined as Manning (2003) comments:

“... when the stories about them and the stories about the stories are commented upon in the general interest monthlies. These feature stories on how celebrities reacted to the stories and the stories written about the stories written about them in other media.” (Manning 2003, p. 102)

In the final years of the show’s existence, a similar process seemed to be going on: when trying to find new stories to tell on the show, the newly

¹⁰ ‘PC’ is an abbreviation for ‘political correctness’, which the *Oxford English Dictionary* defines as “the careful avoidance of forms of expression or action that are perceived to exclude or insult groups of people who are socially disadvantaged or discriminated against”.

established story team and the network drew on ideas within the media itself, from other shows or from clippings from newspapers. The result was the setting up of media loops, developing stories that were no longer based on research and interaction with the police but rather drawing on other police shows and tabloid newspapers for inspiration. In Chapters Six and Eight, I shall discuss further the significance of this change in working practices and changes in originating story material and the implications these changes had in terms of the kinds of stories now being told about the police on *The Bill*.

3.2 Internal sources

Just as the exigencies of the schedule meant there was very little scope for the story team to spend lengthy periods observing police work, so too opportunities for writers to spend time on patrol or shadowing the work of specialist squads dwindled. As a result of this, most of the writers, both those who remained with the show after the changes in format and working procedures and those newly recruited, described how they frequently found story ideas from other media sources, including newspaper articles and other police shows. Indeed, one of the newer writers talked about how she was a little worried writing about a world of which she knew nothing. As she put it:

“Thing is, you write *Emmerdale* or *Coronation Street*¹¹, you know where you are. You can write two characters talking camp old nonsense in a shop or wherever. But with *The Bill*, I used to sit down and think, right, I’ve got my story but what do the police actually do when they’re not out there solving crimes? What do they do when they’re back in the offices? So every single script I wrote, I used to put in the stage direction “They are carrying a lot of files” and every single script that got filmed, that’s precisely what my characters were doing.”

¹¹ *Emmerdale* and *Coronation Street*, both long-running, popular British soap operas set in the North of England and shown on the ITV network.

In keeping with the new emphasis placed within the show on character-led stories rather than stories that reflected the day-to-day mundanity of police work, one new writer, who had previously worked on soap operas, said that his tried and tested method of coming up with story ideas was to write for a specific actor or actress whose work he admired:

“My favourite episode that I wrote and I also had a hand in the casting – it was sort of ludicrous, really. It was an East End villainess who was a contemporary of Gina Gold (character in *The Bill*). But Gina had gone good and this one had gone bad and she was played by this actress called Georgina Hale. She worked for Ken Russell loads. She was a gangster and she was planning ... she was the mastermind of a raid on a department store and she also ran a casino and it was a three part story. It was sort of a special as it was Christmas or something and she ended up going down in a hail of bullets. And sometimes – and this is so the wrong way to do things but the guest crime stories on *The Bill*, I would sometimes have an actress who I loved in the Seventies, who hadn't worked for twenty years so I'd try and think of a story for her ...”

Interestingly, the established writers who remained with the show admitted that their approach to finding stories had also changed, now that the show had become a serial and, with that change, a new emphasis on “soap-style” (Hobson 1982) stories. One of these writers, who also worked as a journalist, suggested that:

“Although everyone pretended the show hadn't changed, that it was still about petty crime in London and police work, if you actually submitted stories in the old way about small crimes, the police working on a low level, it got flung out and they'd replace it with, I don't know – stories about serial killers and people going mad – and I'm talking about the officers now, not the guest characters. So in the end, I just did what everyone else did, looked through my files, saw if there were any articles that I'd written for magazines that I could recycle and I took those in. But by and large, it was a pointless exercise as the story team nearly always threw it out and gave you a story to write anyway. I think you just had to be seen to be playing the game and bringing some sort of ideas to the meeting to pay lip-service. But the fact is we were just writing by numbers.”

Thus the shift in working practices meant a decline in influence of the writers on content while the limited opportunities for research also meant that they too tended to submit ideas based on other media sources rather than, as previously, on research and observation of police work.

3.3 Source origins

Although, in the 1980s and 1990s, the relationship between the makers of *The Bill* and the Metropolitan Police Service was characterised by reciprocity and exchange (Chibnall 1977), in the following decade, the relationship was more formal and less reciprocal.

Firstly, as a former executive producer argued, whereas in the past, the makers of the show had been allowed to use Metropolitan Police Service uniforms and film on Metropolitan Police Service locations in return for publicising new initiatives, for the first time in the show's history, the makers of *The Bill* now had to pay for these privileges. As he elaborated:

“There was a very funny issue that came up, where the police were charged by the government to raise as much revenue as possible. And one way to do that was to charge TV dramas. So you know *The Bill* uses Met uniforms and the badge, blah, blah, and all the rest of it. In the end, I think *The Bill* now pays six hundred pounds a week or something which is really low compared to everyone else, it's almost nothing.”

Secondly, the new emphasis on telling stories about the personal lives of the characters, on basing stories on other media sources and concentrating on more serious crimes rather than concentrating on depicting “the small change of policing”, also meant that the makers of *The Bill* were no longer quite so dependent on the Metropolitan Police Service for story material as they had been. As another executive producer explained:

“At the end of the day, if the Met refused to help us, we could cope. We could just do what most of the other police shows do and make it up. It’s not what we choose to do, it’s not what the brand of the show is all about. But I reckon we could do it.”

However, despite the changes in format, content and representation of the police on the show, which will be discussed in more depth in Chapter Five, successive executive producers of the show during the 2000s were insistent that the essential identity of the show remained the same, even though this was patently not the case:

“This is the only long running show that we have that is set in the South, it is the only police show that is from the police’s point of view. But actually it’s quite difficult to articulate the absolute essence of it. I think it absolutely is about the reality of policing in 2007. It’s not *Wire in The Blood*; it’s not about seeing the psychology of the criminal and the extremes to which people are driven. It’s not all about deconstructing psychology, it’s about the minutiae of a policeman’s life, albeit a rather dramatic version.”

For that reason, the executive producers and story producer on the show during this period insisted that, although they might not need the assistance of the Metropolitan Police Service in quite the same ways as before, they retained the belief that links with the Metropolitan Police Service and input from them as an organisation were still essential in order for the show to have some semblance of verisimilitude.

Previously, links between the show and the Metropolitan Police Service were forged by the script editors and police advisers on the show. This role was now taken over by the show’s full-time researcher and by the story adviser, a former police officer whose roles were described in Chapter Three. The researcher and story adviser worked in the same ways as the script editors and police advisors, actively building up a portfolio of contacts within the

Metropolitan Police Service. However, whereas previously script editors and police advisers would actively look for story material that reflected accurately the kinds of crimes that might feasibly be dealt with by a small London police station, the researcher's remit in particular was somewhat different. Because the show now told stories about serious crime, as a way of potentially attracting younger audiences, her remit was to discover different areas of police work that might be reflected in story-lines, but which might not necessarily be dealt with by a local London station:

"We do have to fudge it to a certain extent because we are basically just a London police station and whilst the Met is becoming more and more specialist, we have to ignore that because otherwise we couldn't cover the array of stories that we want to cover. So technically we wouldn't be covering murder because there are murder units and there are specialist sexual assault units and rape units, child protection unit, all those different ones which we embrace under our CID officers which wouldn't be strictly true, to a certain extent they would because they would work in conjunction with those units. But because we're a drama, we want to cover every sort of story. And after twenty odd years, we need to find new stories just to keep the show going."

As I observed previously, in the first eighteen years or so of the show's existence, overtures were regularly made to the makers of *The Bill* by individual officers or departments within the Metropolitan Police Service to feature certain initiatives on the programme as a way of publicising them to the general public. However, in the last ten years of the show's history, while the researcher and story advisor were both extremely proactive in establishing and maintaining contacts within the Metropolitan Police Service, it was comparatively rare for officers from the Metropolitan Police Service to contact the show directly. The researcher suggested that one reason for this might have been the show's proactivity: "the police probably don't feel the

need so much to come to us to reflect things because we're out there looking for it all the time". However, another police advisor, who had left the show at the time of interview, was more succinct and suggested that the controversial story-lines and lack of accuracy on the show might well have led the Metropolitan Police Service "to believe the show was no longer a suitable or indeed believable vehicle to publicise new campaigns".

4. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have analysed the origins of story ideas for scripts on *The Bill*. I have discussed how, even in the first stage of the "moment" of production – generating story material – all the other moments of the "circuit of communication" (Johnson 1986) – representation, identity, consumption and regulation – have an impact on this process.

I have examined how, in the early years of the show, writers derived story material from contacts they had made in the Metropolitan Police Service and other forces, conversations they had with officers, contacts they made through the show's police advisers, going out on patrol with officers, spending time shadowing police work in specialist units and from magazine articles or news reports. However, I also argue that in the last ten years of the show's existence, the "storytelling aperture" narrowed considerably.

Stories were not only being told by fewer people – a story team of four or five, as opposed to fifty or sixty – but were being based almost exclusively on media sources as opposed to research and observation of police work. This resulted in the creation of "media loops" – with the result being, as GF

Newman, writer of *Law and Order* and *Judge John Deed*, put it so succinctly in an interview in the late 1970s:

“The main problem is that the people who make the series, the people who write them, the people who direct them just don’t know the realities of police, villain and judiciary. They just don’t know policemen and criminals. They haven’t experienced policing a metropolis, they haven’t experienced crime, so they have nothing to relate to. All they can relate to in fact are things they’ve seen on television. If you accept that television is art – I mean it’s bread and butter arts I suppose – then art should imitate life. But all television is doing is imitating other art. I mean, they’re just imitating *Kojak* and things like that, American television police fiction.”

However, while it is true that the makers of the show between 1983 and 2011 undoubtedly made attempts to find out something of the “realities of police, villain and judiciary”, in contrast to many sociological accounts of policing, also based on ethnographic study, the representation of the police on the show during this period does indeed seem “too good to be true” (Mason 1992, p. 17). Within the police organisation, women have found it hard to gain legitimate acceptance, have often experienced various forms of sexual harassment and discrimination (Martin 1980; Heidensohn 1992; Brown 1998) and found it hard to climb the “greasy pole” of promotion (Halford 1993). Racism has also been identified as one of the most central and problematic features of police culture (Holdaway and Barron 1997; Martin 1994) and there is a long history of persistent police harassment and intolerance towards members of minority groups outside the organisation (Phillips and Bowling 2002). Other researchers have argued that the police have a uniquely cynical and pessimistic view of their social world (Manning 1977; Reiner 1978; Graef 1989), that they are insular, make a clear-cut distinction between “us” (the police) and “them” (the rest of the population) (Waddington

1999b) and that, on occasion, this solidarity can lead to officers protecting and covering up colleague infringements of practice (Punch 1985; 2009). Yet these studies and the accounts produced by the writers on the show during the period 1983 to 2001 are both apparently based on in-depth observation of police work.

But as Reiner (2010) observes, the media-constructed image of policing is not a mirror reflection of reality but rather a refraction. Media accounts, whether news or fiction, are also shaped by a host of other factors: the organisational imperatives of the media industries, the ideological frames of those involved in the construction of stories, the impact of working processes and the constraints of the format. In the next chapter, I explore how all these factors affected, in different ways at different times, representation of the police and of policing on *The Bill*.

Chapter Five: Influences on the story-line

1. Introduction

In *Telling About Society*, Becker (2007) argues that, in order to understand the creation of any work of art, any representation or report on society, whether photographic, fictional or even a mathematical model, it is necessary also to understand the organisation in which it was created or, as he puts it:

“Bureaucratic structures, budgets, professional codes and audience characteristics and abilities all impinge on telling about society. Workers decide to go about making representations by seeing what is possible, logical, feasible, and desirable, given the conditions in which they are making them and the people they are making them for.”
(Becker 2007, p. 16)

In this chapter, I examine the production process on *The Bill* more closely. I will discuss how various factors (see Figure 5:1), such as commercial imperatives and wider changes in the television industry, working processes and ideological beliefs of those working on the show and, lastly, artistic constraints in terms of format, characterisation and budgetary considerations, influenced the storytelling process and determined how stories were told about the police – and indeed, on occasion, determined why some stories were simply deemed not suitable for audiences.

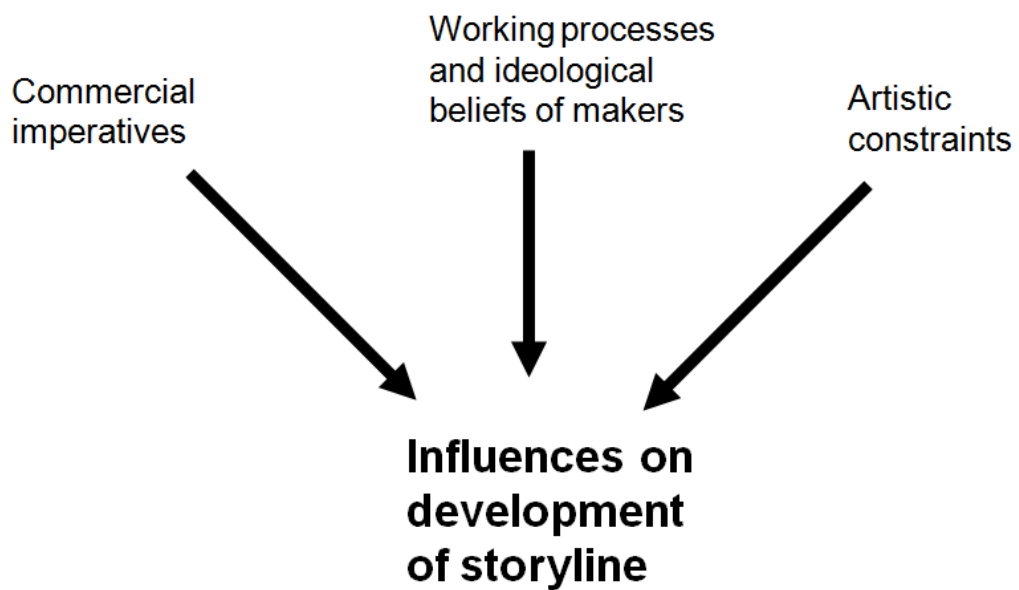


Figure 5.1 Sets of factors affecting the development of story-lines on *The Bill*

As I argue here, none of these factors can be discussed in isolation in terms of their impact on the storytelling process – each factor is contingent, complex and interacts with all the others – and at certain times in the show’s history, some factors or constraints may be more important than others. In order to analyse my findings, therefore, I draw as in Chapter Four on Du Gay *et al.*’s (1997) model of the “circuit of culture” (see Figure 5.2) as a way of demonstrating how the “moment” of production – and, in this chapter, the focus will be on the development rather than the selection of story ideas – interacts with and is affected by all the other “moments” in the circuit.

Above all, I shall argue that, just as Silverstone (1985, p. 164) suggests there is “a certain arbitrariness – a serendipity – at the heart of documentary practice”, the same arbitrariness and serendipity is at the heart of all television storytelling. I hope that what will become clear from this chapter is that what emerges on screen is sometimes very far from a writer or a story

editor's intention and is far closer to "a frail compromise" (Silverstone 1985, p. 165) rather than the realisation of a writer's original idea.

2. Commercial imperatives and how these affected the storytelling process

2.1 Phase 1 1983 – 1998

In her study of British soap operas, Henderson (2007) argues that there are two key considerations in creating and developing story-lines in television drama for commercial television – firstly that they attract large audiences and secondly that, as a result of attracting large audiences, they attract revenue in the shape of advertising and sponsorship for the broadcasting company screening the shows. In an early study of *The Bill*, Mason (1992) puts this succinctly:

"With *The Bill* occupying a prime-time slot on Thames Television, the advertising space between the two halves of the show is a vital source of revenue. It is therefore crucial that the series continues to receive high audience ratings. If Thames fail in this objective then they will also fail to attract the large companies that provide the funds needed by the franchise to operate." (Mason 1992, p. 17)

A show such as *The Bill* was, as one senior executive put it, a "banker" for the producing company and for the ITV Network screening it. It was a show that provided large, loyal audiences, a regular point of continuity in the schedule for viewers (Hobson 1982) and could potentially generate large audiences for shows later on in the schedule. Indeed Henderson (2007) argues that such shows actually "deliver audiences for advertisers" and, more than that, the need to attract advertisers often shapes producers' decisions as to whether to develop potentially controversial story-lines.

However, in the early days of the show, commercial imperatives were not as important a factor in shaping story-lines as they became during the last fifteen years of the show's existence. This was because the television industry was a far less competitive marketplace in the 1980s and 1990s. As I mentioned in Chapter One, *The Bill* began transmission in 1983 – a period in the British television industry which Davis and Scase (2000) describe as being “a ‘comfortable duopoly’ in which the BBC and the independent sector both settled for approximately half the audience share” (Davis and Scase 2000, p. 39). Until 1992, *The Bill* was made by Thames Television, a licensee of the British ITV network, covering London and parts of the surrounding counties on weekdays. However, during the 1980s and for most of the 1990s, input from Thames Television and from the ITV network was minimal in terms of pressure to achieve ratings. The show regularly commanded audiences of between 16 and 17 million in the early 1990s and as a senior member of the production team explained:

“If you get good ratings, people tend not to be on your back because quite clearly, you know how to do it better than they do. And if they want to do it, they can bloody well do it. That was my attitude and so I simply wasn't prepared to have anybody interfere.”

This lack of overt commercial pressure to retain existing audiences and to attract new audiences in turn meant that the makers of the show were not constrained in terms of storytelling to place audience entertainment above “communication” (Elliott 1972). Instead the makers of the show, in keeping with the cultural bureaucracy model of organisation in which they functioned (see Chapter Three), saw their mission above all in making the show to inform the public about the world of policing and the pressure police officers

faced in carrying out their jobs. The emphasis on the show at that time was to depict the “small change of policing” and, to that end, stories mainly emphasised the social service aspect of police work.

As one senior member of the production team said, one aim of the show was to enable viewers:

“... to understand police procedures and, therefore, understand their rights and it’s important that the police know that people understand this. So I think it’s also important that people have an understanding quite what a difficult job it is. And what a dangerous job it is. So I think overall, *The Bill* has been an immense force for good in giving audiences a window on that world.”

However, interestingly, while the makers of the show all spoke of their desire to “inform” and “not give audiences what they want but to give them what they never knew they wanted”, as a script editor described it, research on audiences for the show at that point was almost non-existent and indeed was actively resisted by the executive producer:

“Focus groups? Why would I have wanted the views of some bloody halfwits. Bigger that. It was my show. I was the focus group.”

In a study of story conferences on the American drama series, *Lou Grant*, Espinosa (1982) suggests that what producers and writers believed would engage them in the scripts was also presumed to appear the same way to their intended audience (Gripsrud 1995). In the same vein, the executive producer of the show seemed to believe that if he enjoyed what he was making then, similarly, so would his audiences, and thus no audience research was necessary. Similarly, Elliott (1972) argues that the most significant feedback on any television programme comes from colleagues within the TV producing community (Intintoli 1984; Henderson 2007) and

from members of their own social network, a sentiment echoed by many of the production team on *The Bill*. One script editor argued that the only way to measure the success of a show or an individual episode was to ask:

“Well, did a lot of people watch it? Did they come back and watch it again? Do people you know, from home, family, who aren’t usually in the TV industry – did they like it? Did they talk about it? And do you yourself sit and watch it and think, yeah, that’s good. You have to be like a viewer. You know when you’ve done a good one. And sometimes that is and sometimes that isn’t reciprocated by viewing figures.”

However, on one occasion, both the makers of the show and the ITV Network who had suggested a radical change to the show’s format were forced to take notice of audience preferences. In 1991, Thames Television lost its franchise as a broadcaster to Carlton Television. From this point onwards, Thames Television became an independent production company, making television programmes such as *The Bill* for the ITV network and other UK and international broadcasters. While the day-to-day running of the show was not affected for several years by Thames’ loss of the franchise, as ratings remained constant throughout the early 1990s (Harbord and Wright 1995), there was an immediate impact on the show, as one of the producers of the time explained:

“When Thames lost the franchise, it opened up the possibility of a third episode. It was Greg Dyke¹² who at that time was controller of programmes at London Weekend and he had always wanted a third weekly episode of *The Bill* on a Friday night which Thames had resisted because Thames wanted the programme only to generate the advertisers when they were the broadcaster, the programme maker. So when Thames lost the franchise, immediately Greg Dyke said, how about a third episode? And that was dreamt up rapidly and it went to three half hours a week and stayed at three half hours while I was

¹² Greg Dyke, British media executive who held Chief Executive positions at London Weekend Television, Pearson Television and Channel 5 during the 1990s and was Director-General of the BBC between 2000 and 2004.

there on my first tour of duty and we brought in a third producer to handle that third episode a week.”

During the early and mid-1980s, there were urban riots in a number of Britain’s inner city areas, in which insensitive policing was perceived to have had a pivotal effect, particularly on the most disenfranchised social groups (Scarman 1981; Holdaway 1989; Phillips and Bowling 2002; Bowling and Foster 2002). These disturbances not only had a great impact on public perceptions of the police but, as Bowling and Foster (2002, p. 990) point out, on police sensibilities as well. The need to develop closer contacts and reduce the gulf between the police and the communities they were serving and, in particular, to develop closer contacts with the most disenfranchised and disadvantaged social groups in those communities became a policing priority.

At the same time, the makers of *The Bill* were trying to generate new material to fill the third episode. The then producer explained that it was suggested to them by contacts within the Metropolitan Police Service that the area of community policing might appear to offer new areas of storytelling as well as highlighting this important new initiative within the police as an organisation. As one of the aims of the show, as stated previously, was to publicise new initiatives in the Metropolitan Police Service, the makers of the show were only too happy to do so. New actors were hired to play community liaison officers and many writers, including myself, were sent to shadow the work of real community police officers in London.

However, when these scripts were televised, they regularly received the lowest ratings ever recorded for the show. As one of the producers explained:

“It wasn’t a great success in fact, and the audience research showed actually that they wanted to see coppers go about proper policing. I say proper in inverted commas whereas, actually worthy though the sort of community area of policing was, it didn’t appeal to the viewers. Actually what they wanted to see was the boys, you know, our heroes running after scrotes¹³ down the pavements of Sun Hill. And that’s what they thought real crime was rather than sort of domestic violence or community aspect of policing, etc. So although we’d created special sets on site and new characters, actually within about six months half the sets became largely unused. And some of the characters disappeared because nobody could find stories for these characters to service. So we gave up on telling stories about community policing.”

So just as officers themselves in the 1990s resisted the new community police initiatives, seeing the social service aspects of their work as not being “real policing” (Foster 2003)¹⁴, so it would seem that stories that were solely about community policing and which lacked the usual features of our “heroes running after scrotes down the pavements of Sun Hill” were a bridge too far for audiences at this stage (Sparks 1992; Loader and Mulcahy 2003). This is a point that will be developed further in subsequent chapters. In terms of the “circuit of communication” model (Du Gay *et al.* 1997) and the process of storytelling, this was a clear example of how a myriad of complex and interlocking factors could affect story-lines on the show. In this case, a demand from the network or “regulation” to feature a third episode had an impact on “production” in terms of featuring stories about a new area of policing not previously explored on the show which in turn affected “representation” of the police on the show. But poor audience ratings (the

¹³ “Scrote”: a contemptible person (from the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

¹⁴ See Fielding (1995) for a slightly different account.

moment of “consumption”) had an effect on production and the moment of representation in that the makers of the show had- to abandon stories being told about community initiatives – which in turn had an effect on the “identity” of the show in terms of defining what stories would or would not attract audiences.

However, as I describe in previous chapters, there was a sea-change in television in the mid-1990s. The advent of multi-channel programming created more choice for the viewer, and tried and tested stalwarts of the schedule such as *The Bill* began to fight for smaller and smaller shares of the market. As both the BBC and commercial television, as a consequence of these changes, started to perform less well in numerical terms, both the BBC and the ITV network became at the same time much more market oriented.

One of the first problems facing the show was more aggressive scheduling on the part of the BBC, which led to a decline in audience figures. As one member of the production team explained:

“*The Bill* in those days was very vulnerable to anything on the opposition which caught the audience’s fancy because each episode was self-contained. So the audience’s attitude was well, if I miss an episode of *The Bill*, well, I miss an episode of *The Bill*. It’s not crikey, I’d miss what happened next. And at the same time there was a lot of pressure from Network Centre on us to get the ratings up and get the audiences back.”

Until that point in the show’s history, *The Bill* was screened in stand-alone episodes, which meant that stories were resolved at the end of each episode. This had the advantage that episodes could be shown at any point in the schedule, allowing writers as much or as little time as they needed to develop their ideas and carry out research. However, the shows that

garnered the highest ratings on both BBC and ITV in the early and mid-1990s were soap operas, such as *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale* and *EastEnders*. It was thought that audiences would identify with the recognisable characters and situations, be drawn in by the hooks at the end of each episode and tune in to find out what happened next. For the first time in *The Bill*'s history, executives at the ITV Network started to put pressure on Pearson Television, who had bought Thames Television in 1996, to change the format of the show. The previous executive producer had steadfastly resisted any interference from the Network or from the parent producing company in terms of input into the content of the show. However, with his retirement, the Network decided to appoint a new producer who might be more amenable to carrying out the changes the Network required.

One of the first changes the Network asked for on the show was the development of stories over a longer period. One of the first stories developed in this vein was about about a "bent" copper, DS Beech. Before this, any transgressions by the regular cast of Sun Hill were of a minor kind. As Mason (1992) puts it, writing about the depiction of the main characters on the show in the 1990s:

"The police in *The Bill* are almost heroic, too good to be true ... This is primarily achieved by confining any illegality to a single character or to extenuating circumstances causing another to lose his control. PC Loxton serves as a good example of both: in [one episode] he is seen leaving a betting shop, gambling in his breaks and flouting police car regulations ... In a later episode, he drives too fast when chasing a getaway car and collides with a civilian car. Both incidents are seen as isolated either in terms of Loxton, the bad apple in the barrel, or in terms of a one-off incident." (Mason 1992, pp. 16–7)

Reiner (2000b) argues that favourable representation of the police in the news media depends in part on the need to meet deadlines and subsequent dependence on sources for information as well as the need to maintain good relationships with sources. The makers of *The Bill* also acknowledged the need to maintain good relationships with their sources. As the then executive producer explained:

“At the beginning there was a certain nervousness by New Scotland Yard about the idea of *The Bill*. It wasn't the BBC with whom I think naturally they would have been more relaxed. This is a commercial company whom they had heard was making this programme about the life and times of their own business. And this made them curious about us and an Assistant Commissioner came along to see me. This was right at the very beginning and we talked about the programme, what our intentions were and I showed him a couple of scripts. And there was this slight tension and I, they then started to get involved with us. They started to supply us with information and with furniture, with uniforms, advice and they became, they and we became quite integrated. And I subsequently heard that this Assistant Commissioner had said to the Commissioner, if we don't help them get it right, we can scarcely blame them if they get it wrong.”

Many of the production team acknowledged that help from the Metropolitan Police Service inevitably had a price (Chibnall 1977), as one producer put it:

“I think the Met accepted that we were bound to be showing malpractice on occasions whether it was serious corruption or just malpractice but they hoped that we wouldn't do it too often. It was our executive producer who was concerned about not showing too many bad apples in the barrel, not our police advisers or contacts.”

Another former script editor recalled that, whenever writers submitted stories that were less than favourable to the police, such stories were vetoed by the executive producer, not the police adviser (Sydney-Smith 2002, pp. 143–5). He talked of one story where a policeman tried to get another off a drink driving charge, and how the then police adviser “actually told me what you could do to throw people off the scent”. He added that in his opinion:

“... the executive producer was probably more concerned about showing the police as heroes. The police advisers, of course, had experience of the real police and knew a lot of the time that they weren’t.”

One of the producers on the show at the time was fairly firm that the reasons for the positive representation of the police on the show at this time lay very strongly in the executive producer’s own personal ideology:

“Because I think of the generation he came from, he actually thought that it was right and proper that we should look up to, to the police um, and respect the job that they did.”

However, while the executive producer acknowledged that he believed it was part of the show’s remit and “contract with the audience” to show the police in a trustworthy light, he also pointed out that the very structure of the show (Drummond 1976) also prevented the show from portraying the regular police characters in a negative light. As he explained:

“There’s a much simpler reason. It was because if we had had those elements in Sun Hill, they wouldn’t, they wouldn’t have cropped up suddenly. They would have been there. And so it creates problems for continuity if you, if you have somebody that is known about as, regarded as a fairly dodgy constable or sergeant or whatever, then this would be part of the background knowledge and awareness and you couldn’t suddenly have it coming up. Whereas if it happens in another police station, then that’s different ... We never decided until fairly late in the day on our programme transmission schedule so we might decide for all sorts of reasons to change the transmission schedule from a draft and if we’d had those considerations around our necks as well as all the other problems of continuity, then that would have been an unnecessary, a deeply unnecessary constraint. And since we set these one-off situations in other places, it didn’t become a problem. That’s the reason.”

Mason (1992) argues that positive representation of the police on the show during this period in its history was largely down to commercial imperatives:

“For the series to remain popular [and attract advertising] it must maintain a standard format ... and this necessitates avoiding too

much boat-rocking ... the portrayal of the police is, for the most part, complimentary – avoiding matters of wrongful arrest, police brutality and racism.”

However, while commercial imperatives may have played a part in the portrayal of the police in a favourable light, it is clear that other factors also played a part, not least the ideology of those involved in selecting and developing the story, the need to maintain good relationships with the Metropolitan Police Service and, indeed, the actual format and structure of the show, demonstrating again that any representation of the police on any show at any particular point in time is the result of a complex and interlocking set of factors.

However, while commercial imperatives arguably played a secondary part in the reasons for favourable portrayal of the police on the show in its early days, these same commercial imperatives were later to play a major part in opening the floodgates for a number of stories that would now depict regular characters on the show in a more critical and indeed highly debatable light. Interestingly, during this time of favourable portrayal, as Reiner (2010) notes, the 1980s and 1990s were marked by a number of cases of police abuses leading to miscarriages of justice, notably the Guildford Four, Birmingham Six and the Tottenham Three¹⁵. The end of the 1990s was marked by the case of Stephen Lawrence which, as Reiner (2010) comments, “united the

¹⁵ The “Guildford Four” were three men and a woman who were sentenced in 1974 to life imprisonment for the Guildford and Woolwich pub bombings. However, evidence gathered by the Avon and Somerset Constabulary showed, in the words of the Lord Chief Justice, Judge Lane, that some of the Surrey officers investigating the bombings ‘must have lied’ at the trial of the Four. The “Birmingham Six” had been convicted in 1975 for the Birmingham pub bombings and were released in 1991. The “Tottenham Three” had been convicted of the murder of a police officer, PC Blakelock, during riots on the Broadwater Farm estate in North London in 1986. However, their appeal against their conviction was upheld on the basis of forensic evidence that the accused’s statements had not been recorded contemporaneously (as PACE requires). These investigations had supposedly taken place under PACE procedures (Reiner 2010, pp84–5).

issues of police ineffectiveness, racism and corruption” and “epitomised the brittle character of the representation and public standing of the police in the 1990s” (Reiner 2010, p. 185). By contrast, just as presentation of police issues on the show were about to become “more unstable, complex and contradictory” (Reiner 2010, p. 185), the recommendations of the 1999 Macpherson Report, following the Stephen Lawrence inquiry “rendered it the most comprehensive reform programme ever undertaken in British policing history” (Loftus 2009, p. 32). While it is not within the scope of this thesis to offer an assessment of the reforms in policing brought about as a result, except to note that change is slow and uneven (Loftus 2009), it is worth noting that in a report on the impact of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry on the police service, Foster *et al.* (2005) found that eighty one *per cent* of police respondents agreed that they believed themselves to be under greater scrutiny and accountability for their actions (Grieve 2009, p. 122). In short, while the police were attempting to “clean up their act”, presentation of the police on *The Bill* became progressively “dirtier”.

2.2 Phase 2 1998 – 2005

With the retirement of the previous executive producer and the change of the show’s format from one-off episodes to a mixture of self-contained episodes and longer serialised stories that would unfold over several episodes, writers on the show were, for the first time, able to tell stories about the police that would not necessarily show them in a good light. However, there was another more commercial reason why the makers of the show were now encouraged to tell stories that were far more critical of the police than previously – as one senior member of the production team from that period

put it “there was a belief among the network executives that such ‘edgy stories’ that didn’t show the police in a whiter than white light might help to attract a younger audience”.

With the expansion of the television industry, the arrival of multi-channel programming and greater choice for the viewer, pressure was now not only being put on the makers of the show to garner high audience ratings but, for the first time, to attract a specific demographic – the 16–34 year old demographic – and to tell stories that would supposedly attract them to watch the show. One member of the team explained why this had come about:

“Before the expansion of the industry, BBC and ITV were all things to all people. You didn’t worry about which audience you were attracting, as long as you got the figures, the advertisers were happy. But then all of a sudden, we went from four, five channels to over two hundred. And so in order to justify charging advertisers peak-time rates, when all of a sudden, we were no longer getting sixteen million viewers but nine million, eight million, we had to show we were getting the right viewers in their eyes – the ones with spending power. And the viewers all the advertisers suddenly wanted from the mid-1990s onwards were the 16–34 year olds.”

As another member of the production team went on to explain:

“Basically everyone wants the 16 to 34 age group because advertisers think they are the most malleable. They haven’t decided already if they like Flash Bleach so the reasoning is if you build up loyalty to your programme then some of the loyalty will then transfer to the products they see advertised in the breaks. And also advertisers want them because they’ve got the most disposable income. So if you stick in car adverts, adverts for expensive lifestyle products, they’re the age-group most likely to buy them. That’s how the reasoning goes.”

However, as one senior member of the team explained, in terms of attracting a younger audience:

“I think there were in-built weaknesses within *The Bill*'s remit at that point. The Network was pressurising us to attract a younger audience. But I think a police series, which is generally speaking, favourable to the police is not necessarily going to elicit sympathy from a younger audience anyway. They're more used to being chucked out, told off or arrested outside the pub on a Saturday night for whatever it may be. So it was hard for us at that point to get a younger audience unless we radically changed our format and our content. Which is what happened.”

As Bradford (2011) points out in his study of trajectories and trends in public contact and confidence in the police, it is well documented in Home Office Reports (Allen *et al.* 2006) that younger people, on average, tend to have less favourable opinions of the police. Adding to this argument, Reiner (2010) points out that the last fifty years have undoubtedly been marked by tense and conflict-ridden relations between the police and the young, the unemployed and those from ethnic minorities (Hall *et al.* 1978; Gilroy 1987; Skogan 1994; Bucke 1997; Fitzgerald *et al.* 2002). Reiner (1995) also suggests that the last five decades have been marked by a general decline in deference towards authority figures in society, such as teachers, doctors and police officers¹⁶.

However, Clarke (1986), Reiner (1994) and Rafter (2006) argue that any development in the police drama is as much down to changes in the forms of storytelling as it is to do with changing societal attitudes to law and order. As one script editor put it:

“Shows change because the world of television is changing. You've got to look at what other shows people are watching. There's hundreds and hundreds of cop shows – not hundreds, but there's a lot. With hospital drama, you've got *Holby*, *Casualty*, *ER* and *Doctors*

¹⁶ However, Loader and Mulcahy (2003) take an opposing view and suggest that such changes in society, including the decline of deference, have triggered “growing or at least sustained identification with the police, particularly among those who turn to it as a symbol of stability ... in an increasingly disorienting and threatening world”.

to a certain extent. Police shows, you've got *Waking The Dead*, *Prime Suspect*, *Trial and Retribution*, *The Bill*, *CSI*, *NYPD Blue* – loads. So if your show doesn't change in line with the new shows that are coming forward and making splashes and registering with the audiences, you're going to get left behind."

As discussed in Chapter One, during the 1990s, a number of television shows, including *Between The Lines* (1992) and *The Cops* (1998) emerged that portrayed a complex and critical view of the police and policing in Britain. In particular, *The Cops* (1997) focused on the same territory as *The Bill* – police officers on the beat dealing with the "small change of policing" – but, unlike *The Bill*, it was a show that set out, according to its executive producer, Tony Garnett¹⁷, to "deliberately subvert the defining characteristics of the British police television series" (McLaughlin 2007, p. 107). The opening scene of the show depicted a young blonde woman in a nightclub, snorting a line of coke, and then panicking about being late for work and as she enters a crowded locker room and pulls on her uniform, the audience are aware for the first time that the young clubber is a police officer. However, as McLaughlin (2007) argues, as the series unfolds, officers are routinely depicted as being flawed, cynical, sexually predatory and brutal, "dealing with life at the sharpest end of policing, fighting a losing battle to maintain any semblance of law and order in a poverty-ridden criminogenic residual sink-estate" (McLaughlin 2007, p. 106). Compared to *The Cops*¹⁸, *The Bill*'s story-lines where crimes were always resolved and officers only ever

¹⁷ Tony Garnett is a television producer and screenwriter, well-known for his involvement with politically radical drama. Some of his most well-known work includes *Up The Junction* (1965), which dealt with the subject of backstreet abortion, *Cathy Come Home* (1967), which dealt with homelessness, and *Law and Order* (1979), which examined the British judicial system. Other work includes *Between The Lines* (1992), discussed elsewhere in this thesis.

¹⁸ However, while *The Cops* was a critical success, winning BAFTA (British Academy of Film Television Awards) for Best Drama series in 1999 and 2000, it was not a success with audiences and was axed after three series.

committed the most minor of transgressions seemed old-fashioned and out-of-touch.

Two long-running stories were featured on the show in the 1990s – one about a corrupt officer and another about sexual harassment. These were a success in terms of audience ratings, although the executive producer I spoke to was unable to let me have those viewing figures. Following this success, a new executive producer was appointed to turn the show into a serial and to feature, for the first time, stories about the personal lives of the characters. Previously, this was one of the unspoken rules about writing stories for *The Bill*, that as one script editor put it “we never went home with our characters” and this was also a move that the then executive producer resisted as he believed that:

“... we would be concentrating on the personal lives of the characters at the expense of telling stories about the reality of policing – or as much of the reality of policing we could show, given the constraints of our medium.”

However, the network executives chose to differ with this view. The second key change was to feature more serious crimes on the show. Previously, the show had deliberately adopted a policy of only featuring the kinds of crimes that might reasonably be dealt with by a small South London police station (see Chapter Four). Now, for the first time, the show would deal with serious crime, such as drug and people smuggling, which in reality would be the domain of specialist squads. However, as one executive explained, the change was crucial if the show was to attract younger audiences:

“For a long time, *The Bill* didn’t deal with murder, because murder was something a local nick wouldn’t deal with; they bring in MIT, which used to be the Murder Investigation Team. We slightly altered that just

because you have to keep abreast of your audience and their expectations, and young people, particularly, and older people as well, are used to seeing police shows that deal with those big things.”

At the turn of the decade, a number of American shows such as *CSI* and *The Shield* were shown for the first time on British television. In particular, *CSI* dealt with crimes of an often violent and sexual nature, but solved such crimes not through impressive powers of detection but through forensic science (Brunsdon 2000). By comparison with such shows, as the Network executive argued, “the previous emphasis on petty crime on *The Bill* seemed old-fashioned and behind the times”.

A third key change was that the new executive producer intended to tell what he described as “more contemporary stories about the police”. However, while previous executive producers and other staff (see Chapters Three and Four) spent much time cultivating good relations with the Metropolitan Police Service in return for assistance, the new executive producer admitted that, due to the exigencies of turning the show into a serial during his first year, he “had very little time to talk to the police”. Indeed, his main concern in taking over the show was to think up stories that would attract younger audiences. His way of doing this was not to:

“... tell stories about the police but to tell stories that would get the ratings. Later on I had the luxury of going out there and finding out what was going on in the Met but to start off with, I just needed to turn the show round.”

In his first year, one of the two main stories he ran was about a gay officer who falls in love with another officer – a story which, he admitted, was deliberately a ploy to get the ratings:

“Of course, we did provocative things, I mean, the gay kiss was really deliberate, you know. Yeah, I mean, it was to say, hang on, the fusty old dusty old *Bill*, it's changed, and it worked a treat. I deliberately put it in August, slow news month, so it'd get loads of coverage.”

The other story he ran in his first year was about a police officer with a serious drug problem and was, as the executive producer suggested, another attempt to “bring the fusty old *Bill* kicking and screaming into the new century”. He said the idea for the story had come about when he joined the show and saw a story-line which had been written under the previous regime, “where one PC smokes a spliff and his colleagues were reacting “Oh my god, he's got a spliff”. It's not 1952 but it certainly felt like it was.”

As he explained, under the old format of the show, such a story would not have been possible:

“How could you tell a story like that in one episode? You would have to have a story where an officer smokes a spliff and then he gets his knuckles rapped and that's the end of it. But because we could tell this story over a couple of years, we could explore the complexity of the situation. We were going to follow the character all the way through getting addicted, trying to do his job, slipping back, getting found out and then going through rehab.”

However, as the executive producer explained, it was a story that initially soured relations between the show and the Metropolitan Police Service:

“At the beginning when I joined the show, and they wrote to us and said they were very unhappy about the show, I was quite happy at that point to say, “Well fine, bugger off then”. But if I had fallen out with them at that point, it would've been very bad for both sides and ultimately I think we pay them respect as much as possible. And the end result is Sir John Stevens and Sir Ian Blair coming down and sitting in my office, the pair of them, and saying what a brilliant thing that story was.”

According to the executive producer, viewing figures, which had been on average six million viewers per show in 2001 when he took over the running

of the show, rose to nine million by the end of 2002. However, by 2005, according to network executives, viewing figures had declined to five million. As viewing figures declined, stories on the show became increasingly focused on making headlines rather than on the business of policing, culminating in an incest story-line featuring two of the main characters, Sergeant June Ackland and PC Gabriel Kent, which led Nancy Banks-Smith to comment somewhat acidly in 2005:

“It has to be said – and I hope that the Met will take this criticism in the spirit in which it is offered – that PC Gabriel Kent worked at Sun Hill for three years without anyone noticing he was a serial murderer, rapist, vigilante, and not to put too fine a point on it, a slaving psychopath of the finest water.” (*The Guardian*, 7 October 2005)

Although the executive producer admitted that: “If you go to a police station, I’m sure they’ll say about *The Bill*, ‘Oh, it’s all shagging, it’s all about lesbians and gays, blah blah ...’”, he also maintained that the show was just as much about the business of policing as ever:

“Okay, so we had all those mad stories about Gabriel shagging his mum, blah, blah, blah. But that was just six *per cent* of the whole thing but that was the bit the media picked up on. We were still doing as many crime stories as ever – we were featuring community policing, victim centered policies, ASBOs¹⁹ ... So we were doing our research and getting out there and finding out what we should be featuring.”

However, as I shall argue, the development of the new serialised format also necessitated new working practices and led to story-lines being developed initially mainly by the largely office-based executive producer himself and later by a team of story editors. This was a practice that effectively militated against stories being based on research and observation of policing

¹⁹ ASBOs, or Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, are civil orders made against someone who has been seen to have engaged in anti-social behaviour. They were introduced in 1998 to correct incidents that would not normally have warranted criminal prosecution.

practices and in turn led to stories being, as one police adviser observed wryly, “the result of one man’s (the then executive producer) overheated imagination”.

2.3 Phase 3 2005 – 2010

By 2005, with bad reviews of the show in abundance, audience figures hitting an all-time low of five million, according to one member of the production team, there was a final attempt to change the format of the show. A new executive producer was appointed and this time his brief was to go back to the show’s roots and concentrate on what one network executive described as the “minutiae of police work”. However, the Network were still worried that, because *The Bill* had been part of the schedule for so long, a complete return to the former days of telling stories about petty crime might lose the younger audiences the show had been fighting to attract. As one executive put it:

“So that’s something else we’ve been talking about quite a lot which is how do you take an old brand – and I don’t mean old in terms of years but I mean emotionally an old brand and make it young and trendy and exciting. But it’s very difficult. It’s like Clarks’ shoes or something, isn’t it? Yes, they do a job but do people aspire to wearing Clarks’ shoes? They might aspire to Manolo Blahniks so how do you make Clarks’ into something it hasn’t been for a long time. It’s an uphill struggle.”

The other problem facing members of the production team in their attempt to win back audiences was that, since the turn of the new decade, audiences’ viewing habits had changed. As one senior member of the production team explained:

“Everyone wants that younger audience and that’s the viewer that’s escaping everyone because of how many distractions there are – Play

Station, multi-channels or whatever else is available. It's not like one TV set in the whole house where all the family sits round it any more. Everyone's got their choices."

Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, input from the ITV Network was minimal and very little pressure was put on the members of the show to tell stories in a particular way to attract audiences, during the last ten years of the show, the network had constant input into the show's content (Hesmondhalgh 2005). Similarly, whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, the makers of the show were able to dismiss audience research as being something that did not concern them, the climate of the television industry had completely changed since then. As the story team explained:

"You're given the results of focus groups on which characters are registering, who's popular, you're shown the publicity to see which of our characters are featuring on front pages of magazines. From a purely business point of view, the hour between eight and nine is worth a lot of money and ITV expects a twenty six *per cent* share. So if we're getting less than twenty six *per cent*, we're not delivering what they want, so then we need to think of what changes we can make to make it twenty seven, twenty eight."

Thus, in the last ten years of the show's history and particularly in the last five years, commercial imperatives were indeed the key factor in determining which stories should be told and how they should be developed. This meant in turn that, although the makers of the show were told to return to the show's roots and to concentrate on stories dealing with everyday policing, in order to retain a younger audience, this was actually very much a cosmetic exercise in which the Network were involved at every stage. Firstly, instead of a return to telling stories about low-level crime, the makers of the show were instead told by the Network to make the show "even more glossy and

aspirational to attract a younger aspirational audience". As a senior member of the production team told me:

"And shows that look a little bit shit, people are less tolerant than they used to be because they're much more active in terms of the choices they make. So we have a fantastic pair of episodes coming up which are almost finished which have a car chase with a helicopter viewing ... we've got a car going over Tower Bridge and screeching round the city and ultimately disappearing under the Barbican where they run out and dump it and it is going to be a real treat for our audience."

Secondly, as under the previous executive producer's regime, in order to ensure continuity, story-lines continued to be generated in-house, largely from other media sources. Although members of the production team were adamant that stories were thoroughly researched, one senior member of the production team admitted in discussing a future story-line dealing with a corrupt police sergeant who decides to take the law into his own hands (Klockars 1980; Reiner 2007b):

"And sometimes, for example, if you're doing a corruption story, it is based on the desire of the police officer to get a result. They are passionate about getting a result. And if the system doesn't let them get a result, then some of our characters would occasionally step outside of the system to deliver justice. And um, whether or not that's true in real life, I don't know."

In 2010, after viewing figures for the show reached an all time low of three million (*The Guardian*, 27 March 2010), the decision was taken to axe the show – the official reason according to Peter Fincham, Head of Programmes at the ITV Network, was that "times change and so do the tastes of our audience" (*The Guardian*, 27 March 2010). However a former writer argued that:

"The problem was that it had lost its way. The unique thing about *The Bill* in the old days was that even though all the characters were

squeaky clean, it was at least based on research and about people having some knowledge of that world. And it had lost that completely.”

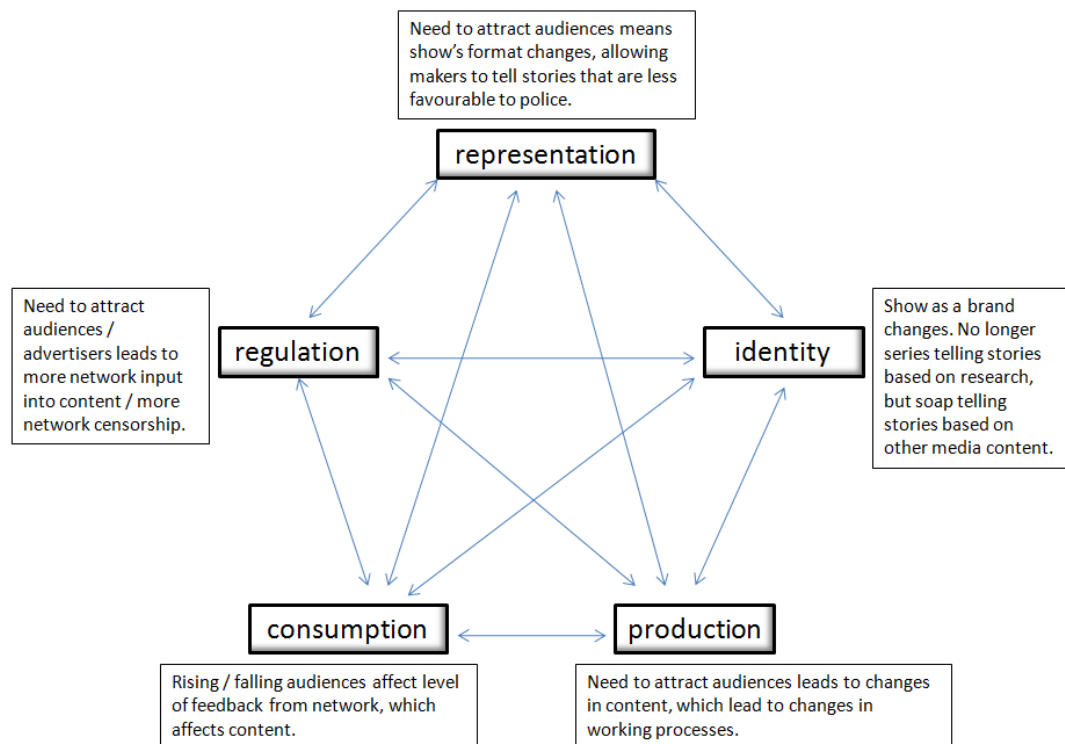


Figure 5.2 The development of story-lines on *The Bill* based on Du Gay *et al.*'s (1997) interpretation of the “circuit of culture”

Returning to the “circuit of communication” (Du Gay *et al.* 1997), in the last ten years of the show’s history, failing audience figures (consumption) led to increased pressure from the Network (regulation) to change the identity of the show into a soap opera. This in turn meant that new working processes had to be adopted (production) in order to ensure continuity of story-lines but, because there was no longer time for research and, at the same time, there was increased pressure on the makers of the show to achieve high viewing figures, ever more controversial and inauthentic stories were told about the police (representation). However, interestingly, in the last five years of the show’s existence, although the Network (regulation) was keen

for the show to return to telling less controversial stories and stories that were once more grounded in research and observation of police work (representation and identity), because working processes (production) remained the same and stories continued to be generated instead from other media sources, no real change could be effected in terms of storytelling and representation of the police on the show.

However, in order to understand the production process fully, it is also necessary to understand the complex and equally interconnected factors at play within the modality of the “moment” of production itself and how these factors contributed to particular representations of the police and of policing on the show, as I describe in the next section.

3. Working processes on *The Bill*

3.1 Phase 1 1983 – 2001

In her study of early police series, Sydney-Smith (2002) discusses production processes on series such as *Dixon Of Dock Green*, *Z Cars* and *Softly Softly*. Although the episodes of *Dixon of Dock Green* and *Z Cars* were written by a group of writers, each episode was created and researched by individual authors and she describes how scriptwriters on the first series of *Z Cars* actually spent time with the police in Lancashire, where the series was set, in order to find ideas for scripts and gain an understanding of the world about which they were writing (Sydney-Smith 2002, p. 160). However, Sydney-Smith (2002) argues that, as these shows became more and more successful with the public and more and more episodes were commissioned each year, in order to deal with the exigencies of production, shows such as

Softly Softly started to be developed from a format devised by in-house executives, which were then given to scriptwriters to expand into scripts.

Later shows, such as *The Sweeney*, followed similar working processes – story-lines for episodes being developed by in-house production staff, who then gave them to the freelance scriptwriters to develop into a script (Paterson 1976). However, during the first eighteen years of its existence, the story development process on *The Bill* was far more akin to the working processes on the early series of *Dixon of Dock Green* (see Chapter Four). Writers were asked to submit a one page premise or outline of the story they wished to tell to a weekly production meeting, headed by the show's executive producer. If the premise was accepted for development, the writer was then expected to go away and research the story idea thoroughly by spending time with the police, observing and shadowing their work. As episodes were self-contained, they could be screened and scheduled at any time and that in turn meant that, unlike other shows which had a serial element and had to be screened once commissioned at a set date, writers for *The Bill* were given at least four to six weeks to research and write first drafts.

It was not only the writers who were expected to have a good working knowledge of the world about which they were writing. Their script editors and even producers were also expected by the executive producer to spend time with the police.

In addition, all members of the production team relied heavily on the expert knowledge of the police advisers, who were employed full-time by the show

and who had an office on the set in South Wimbledon. This was an unusual practice, as discussed further at 3.1 in Chapter Three. The police advisers were involved in every stage of the story development process from the submission of an initial idea through to the final reading script. If, at any stage, a story was deemed implausible or inaccurate from a procedural point of view, the writer would be either asked to rewrite the story or, in some cases, the story would be rejected outright. As one script editor put it:

“I think we all relied very heavily on the police advisers. Not just because we needed them to tell us how to get it right but we needed them to tell us what we didn’t know about their world.”

3.2 Phase 2 2001 – 2010

When the show became a serial, working practices changed dramatically. The first change was that stories were no longer generated by the writers but by an in-house story team who would give the writers a story-line to develop. Thus, as commercial pressures became more intense, *The Bill* moved away from episodes written by a sole author, as had *Z Cars* and *Softly Softly* in the 1960s, to a much more collaborative and industrialised way of working. The second change, as I described in Chapter Four, was the new method of generating stories in-house from other media sources – other television shows, films or newspaper articles. The final change was that, because stories were now told in sequence, once commissioned, the shooting and screening date were immovable – and as another result of these changes, writers were given on average seven to ten days to complete a first draft which meant that, as one interviewee said, “there simply was no time to go

out and research – you had a week to get a script to them by whatever means you could ...”.

While in the 1980s and 1990s, writers were expected to carry out their own research, the show now employed a full-time researcher. As one of the story editors explained:

“She researches medical, legal stuff and anything the writers need and she can arrange visits to A and E’s and often comes back with story ideas as well and provides a research document which often includes articles about a similar crime.”

The show also employed a full-time story consultant who was a retired police officer, and it was her job, she said, “to find out what’s going on in the Met and the kinds of stories we should be telling”.

However, this shift in working practices now meant that many new writers joining the show for the first time felt very uncertain of their abilities to write for the show:

“I just never lost that fear of writing about police work because at the end of the day it wasn’t a world I understood. I tried to get an insight into it by, you know, watching other shows, trying to pick up the language, the way they talked to each other, the hierarchies but at the end of the day, I never felt I was doing a good job there.”

As the same writer explained:

“The thing was, I just didn’t know what the police did. I didn’t know what they did in terms of investigations. I didn’t know what they did in terms of paperwork even. So how I got round that was whenever I had to write a scene in the station, I’d try and set it in a corridor so there would be movement, it’d be dynamic, two people talking on the move.”

Another writer described how she wrote an episode about a siege, knowing as she put it “there would be no way I could have written something like that authentically”. She explained her methods:

“I just rang up one of the police advisers and asked if she would come to my house for two days and talk me through what would happen in such a situation from a police procedure point of view. So I plotted it before she came and then when she arrived, I told her what I wanted to happen in each scene, asked her how real police officers would say it and whether it was at all plausible from a police procedure point of view. She sat with me for two days solid, side by side at my computer and I would say to her, ‘This is what I want to happen’ and she would say because she’s quite strong and she would say, ‘It just wouldn’t happen, they just wouldn’t do that’. And I would say to her ‘but it has to because that’s the story the executive producer wants me to write so tell me what real officers would say’. So yeah, I just asked her to come to the house and paid her separately for it.”

Under the previous regime, writers were expected to spend significant amounts of time shadowing police officers. Under the new regime, writers were allowed one whole day or a half-day shadowing the work of the police:

“When I did it, I did half a day and say, maybe a bit more with two coppers and I just went out in the car. I did about half an hour in - what’s that place where they answer the radio calls? CAD. I spent half an hour in CAD and then I spent the rest of the time in the car with these coppers. We went to a burglary and then a man had dropped dead in a post office. I really enjoyed it and it was great, going sixty miles an hour with the siren on, that was good fun. But it just didn’t really help me get much insight into what they did. Except drive round very fast.”

During observations on the show, I was told that a story was currently being scripted about a crime scene examiner (CSE) and, in that instance, the police advisers had offered to put the writer in contact with a CSE and the chance to visit a unit. However, when I asked one of the police advisers if there was still the option for writers to go out and visit specialist departments or units, he said that:

“We can try to get them in with a unit but we would turn around and say, “Why do you want to go there? A unit is normally an office based thing, right, and they work with computers. It’s only the uniformed officers that are doing the confrontational stuff so it’d be no good sending them out with CID.”

Just as the role of the writer had changed on the show, so too had the role of the police adviser. As one former adviser observed dryly, under the old regime, there was an emphasis on representing police procedures as accurately as possible, given the constraints of mainstream drama. The role of the police adviser was, accordingly, to advise on this and should a story be deemed to be inaccurate from a procedural point of view, the writer would be asked either to re-draft the script or to submit a new idea. Under the new regime, the adviser noted:

“They wanted ‘yes’ men. We were there to tell them that their stories worked, even if we thought they were a complete load of old toss. They weren’t concerned about getting it right, they were concerned about getting audiences.”

One former adviser observed that, under the new regime, there was now a need to be “sanguine”, that the role of the police adviser was to advise and that if the creative personnel chose not to take that advice “there was no point getting upset about it”. The adviser talked about how he had run a presentation on correct interview techniques on *The Bill* for creative personnel and how, at the end of it, the creative personnel said that they would still be writing scripts in the way that they had always done, as the “correct way seemed far less dramatic”. The same adviser said that his original contract had stated there would be time for the advisers to visit police stations, to take ex-colleagues out to cultivate contacts and to keep up-to-date with current policing issues. However, the new working practices had meant more meetings, which police advisers had to attend each week. In addition, because writers were perhaps more dependent on the police advisers for their research than they might have been in the 1990s, when

they would have had additional contacts of their own, advisers spent more and more time on the phone and were increasingly less able to keep up-to-date. This posed yet another problem in terms of accuracy of procedure being depicted on the show in that as an adviser from another show pointed out:

“You can only comment on how things were done at the level at which you were serving when you retired. I retire in 3 years time and I’m aware even now that I’m out of date with uniformed police stuff so if anyone comes to me about uniform issues in a script, I’ve got three different lads in the field that I phone up and I say, “Chris, can I run this past you?” But if you’re going to be an adviser, you have to keep yourself ahead of the game.”

Thus, not only did writers on the show have less time for research, but so did police advisers, due to the new working processes, which also contributed to story-lines becoming less accurate in terms of police procedure.

To summarise, the changed working practices on the show resulted in a shift in creative power away from the writer and a shift in favour of the in-house production team and network executives in determining the stories that would be created and shown. This also had an impact on the role, influence and sanctions of the police advisers, while the changed working practices also meant less time for research.

4. Artistic considerations

4.1 Phase 1 1983 – 2001

One of the restrictions on *The Bill* in terms of storytelling, as on every other television show, was budgetary. Drummond (1976) discusses the effect of budgetary constraints on *The Sweeney*’s “quest for verisimilitude” and how

the limited shooting schedule on the show, the need to shoot on location no more than an hour's drive from the studios in Hammersmith where *The Sweeney* was made and the expense of night-time shooting, all limited the kinds of stories that could be told about the police in the show. In the same way, writers had to take into account these restrictions when submitting potential story ideas for *The Bill*. Stories involving extensive, or indeed any, night-time shooting were not generally likely to be accepted, due to the expense of shooting outside daylight hours. Writers were also encouraged to submit scripts that were largely set in the purpose-built police station or hospital in the South Wimbledon studios. If any outside locations were crucial to the story, writers were again exhorted to limit these to a bare minimum – no more than three or four locations per script – as, again in terms of budgetary constraints, any outside shooting needed to take place in the space of one day, with each episode being filmed over a period of one week. As one script editor put it:

“It was a balancing act for the writers having to take all these considerations into account and make sure their scripts were procedurally accurate. And some writers did get restive and they were the ones who generally did not stay.”

In terms of the scripts themselves, the actual format of the show did impose certain restrictions in terms of storytelling – each episode had to have a beginning, middle and end, every scene in the story had to be told from a police officer's point of view and there had to be a “cliffhanger” or an incident which would occur in the half-hour format between eight minutes and thirteen minutes, which would precede the commercial break and be dramatic enough to keep audiences viewing during the final segment. However, while

writers enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in creating stories, the format of the show placed severe limitations on the kinds of stories writers could tell about the police. Although the fact that episodes were not serialised meant they could be shown at any time, it also meant, as one script editor explained:

“Because scripts weren’t scheduled months in advance, the production team would quite often run into logistical problems. You’d write a script for one character but then you’d find that she might be down to be in another script they were shooting that week so you’d have to rewrite at the last moment. Or more usually the script department would just change the names, so if you’d written a script for PC Quinnan, they’d give it to PC Loxton. So I think what happened was that we told strong stories about the work of policing but we never got under our characters’ skin – they were all a bit bland and interchangeable.”

In terms of representation of the police on the show, the fact that characters were so interchangeable meant that although writers were able to tell stories about the business of policing, the format militated against their being able to tell stories, for example, about issues such as gender, race and sexual politics (Pines 1995; Eaton 1995; Cavender and Jurik 2004; 2007). As Leishman and Mason (2003) point out, the show had always featured black and Asian actors and indeed, in 1994, featured television’s first ever black female detective inspector, but as one writer explained, the format made it impossible to explore issues that might have faced a real-life counterpart:

“I look back and we really did miss a trick there. We had a new young black female detective inspector and we just didn’t tell stories about any problems she might have faced with racism or sexism. Okay, we were allowed to hint at the fact that some of the blokes might have got a bit sarky having a woman as their boss, but that was all we could do, really, because we had to tell stories that were mainly about her solving crimes, not about her being a black woman police officer. Because at the end of the day that story might have to go to another actor, simply because they were the only ones available for filming so

we just couldn't make our stories that specifically tailored for one character."

However, in terms of depiction of offenders on the show, it was extremely rare for writers to be allowed to tell stories that depicted black or Asian offenders. Dominick (1973) argues that, in an attempt to avoid charges of racial or ethnic stereotyping, television producers often avoid depicting offenders from ethnic minorities. Reiner (2007a) points out that, in crime fiction generally, "offenders are primarily higher-status, white, middle-aged males" (Reiner 2007a, p. 314), unlike their counterparts in "official" statistics who are predominantly young, from the most marginal socio-economic groups and disproportionately black.²⁰

Certainly, as one producer argued, echoing Dominick's (1973) point, there was a fear on the show that:

"One had to think long and hard before having a black drug dealer, say. One is always open to accusations of stereotyping and you have to be careful because obviously you do have a considerable influence over people's perceptions and attitudes."

But as another executive producer pointed out, there was also a simpler reason for the fact that offenders featured on the show were mainly white, middle-aged males (Mason 1992):

"Look at the writing team. They're white, middle-aged, middle-class males. So they write about what they feel comfortable with. Things that have happened to them, to people they know, things within the sphere of their experience."

²⁰ However, as I discuss in Chapter One, Reiner (2007b) suggests that the pattern of offending represented in "official" statistics may reflect the fact that police activity tends to bear most heavily upon "a relatively restricted group at the base of the social hierarchy" (Reiner 2010, p. 177).

Just as Hammersley and Atkinson suggest that “ethnographers [construct] the social world through their interpretations of it, thereby producing incommensurable accounts that reflect differences in their background cultures” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p. 11), so too do screenwriters write accounts that are influenced by their background cultures, their education, experiences, their particular “take” on the social world about which they write. As one writer put it:

“I sat on the train this morning with these three young black boys and I listened for 20 minutes while they were planning how they were going to get away with not having the right tickets. And when the guard, this decent, decent young bloke you know, came up to deal with them, they just gave him such a hard time and I wanted to say, look, kick the fuckers off, I’m sorry. But I listened to them and I listened to what they were doing and I think I could, I think I could write them, I could get the speech patterns but I’m not sure I could get inside their heads. And maybe I shouldn’t even try. Maybe there’s something kind of distasteful about some you know, old white guy trying to write about a world he doesn’t understand.”

Thus, the other key reason the demographic profile of offenders on the show was the opposite to that portrayed by recorded crime statistics (Reiner 2002) was simply that many writers on the show felt uncomfortable writing about worlds and characters with which they were not intimately acquainted.

4.2 Phase 2 2001 – 2010

When *The Bill* became a serial, a number of changes in the format also contributed to changes in representation of the police, crime and criminals on the show. Firstly, as discussed earlier in the chapter, the move towards telling stories over a period of months rather than in a single episode meant that certain subjects such as corruption, racism and sexual harassment could now be tackled on the show (McLaughlin 2007). However, as also discussed

earlier, such stories were often sensationalised in order to attract younger audiences. These stories included one male rape where the victim was one of the detective constables, an attempt by one of the male uniformed officers to blow up the police station with a petrol bomb, the suicide of the station's Chief Superintendent after raping his wife and the murder of a young female uniformed officer by a serial killer.

In terms of the format, because story-lines were now generated in-house to ensure continuity, writers had very little autonomy in terms of creating or developing stories. However, interestingly, the one area where writers were allowed and indeed actively encouraged during this period to exercise some creativity was, as one script editor explained, in developing the guest characters or offenders. As one member of the production team explained:

"I think we like to ask our writers to think a little bit outside the envelope with the characters so say, we'll be doing a burglary – obvious one – and then they'll say, "let's make it a bit different, maybe it's a little bit amusing, let's make it an old man who's doing the burglaries" The demographics would say that probably little old men wouldn't do burglaries but that wouldn't be a question we would consider."

Another story editor added to this:

"It's boring if you have ... I don't know, some kind of drug addict, unemployed, as the villain. I'm more interested in telling a story about the guy who is middle-management who lost everything and that's often the way to think of something that's not obvious. It wouldn't be maybe the picture painted by the demographics but that wouldn't be our concern."

Intintoli (1984) argues that one of the main challenges of storytelling for soap operas or long running series is to find "new ways of telling the story with enough variation and novelty to keep the audience". Thus, in order to attract

audiences, writers were now actively encouraged to think laterally and to deliberately create unusual criminal characters – and to create characters who would not fit patterns of offending or the demographic profile of offenders as depicted by recorded crime statistics (Reiner 2007a, p. 309).

However, at the same time, there was a conscious decision on the part of the executive producer during the early years of the decade to feature even more black and Asian officers on the show and also, for the first time, to feature more black and Asian offenders. Although at the time of these changes, the executive producer acknowledged that, in the wake of the Stephen Lawrence inquiry (Macpherson 1999; Foster *et al.* 2005), the Metropolitan Police Service “might very well want to see more diversity of representation on the show”, he admitted his reasons were purely commercial. Firstly, he argued that in order to attract a young and ethnically diverse audience, he needed to reflect that diversity in the cast of the show (Intintoli 1984):

“From an ITV commercial point of view, a huge proportion of the population is non-white. If you want to get as many viewers as possible, you need to reflect, y’know, the demographic of your potential audience.”

However, he also claimed that, as a viewer in the 1990s, he too had noticed the dearth of black and Asian offenders on the show and the tendency to make offenders and victims on the show older and middle-class (Mason 1992; Surette 1998; Reiner 2003; 2007a):

“The problem for me with the show in the old days was that so many of the offenders and victims were older and white and middle class. And as a human being, you have to say is it my job, twice a week, all year to send old ladies to bed scared? No. And if you look at the statistics, they’re not – the biggest victims of crime are young men and

the biggest number of offenders. And something else, I'd never really thought about till recently but when I started, I thought how black people have never been allowed to do anything bad on *The Bill*."

His solution was somewhat pragmatic – that in order to fend off accusations of being racist by running stories depicting black and other ethnic minority offenders, he would counter this by creating morally upstanding black police characters in senior management positions on the show:

"I kept thinking, okay, if I start introducing lots and lots of black villains, we're gonna be accused of being racist. Then it came to me if we had fantastic black role models on the show, black actors playing really heroic characters, black officers in senior roles, then it would balance everything out. Black heroes and black villains."

Thus, a complex and interconnecting set of factors contributed this time to more rather than fewer black and Asian offenders and police officers being depicted on the show. Whereas in the 1980s and 1990s, producers were anxious not to alienate audiences by stigmatising certain groups, in the 2000s, producers were anxious that the dearth of black and Asian offenders and officers might conversely lose audiences through not reflecting the demographic the show was now seeking to attract – a younger and more ethnically diverse group of viewers.

5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the process of developing story-lines on *The Bill* and, in particular, discussed how various contingent, complex and interlocking factors – namely commercial imperatives, working processes and ideological beliefs of those involved in the creative process and artistic constraints – all played a part in determining how and what kind of stories about the police could be told on the show. I argue that, as a result of these

pressures and constraints, representation of the police at various points went against the prevailing tide. For example, in the 1980s and 1990s, when the police on the show were largely depicted as heroic and “too good to be true” (Mason 1992, p. 17), it was against a backdrop of revelations about police abuses and miscarriages of justice. In the late 1990s and 2000s, when representations of the police were more critical and complex, the police service was undergoing huge reform (Macpherson 1999) and as a result, officers believed themselves to be more accountable than ever for their actions (Foster *et al.* 2005). I also suggest that the process of storytelling on any television show is very far from being a linear process but rather, as Ericson *et al.* (1987) describe the business of news-making, a process that needs to allow for “fluidity and situational contingencies” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 24). As Becker (2007) puts it simply: “makers seldom, if ever, have complete control of their work situation or its results” (Becker 2007, p. 90).

However, while any work of art, any representation or report on society is the result of organisational activities, it is also necessary to remember that, as Becker (2007) puts it, “at every moment ... everything in the work results from choices makers of the work have made or might have made differently” (Becker 2007, p. 72). In Chapter Six, I look at this process of decision-making in more detail as I discuss, based on ethnographic observation, the process of developing an idea from the initial germ to the final shooting script and explore how certain decisions taken along the way also contribute to the narrowing of what Ericson *et al.* (1987) describe as the storytelling “aperture” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 25).

Chapter Six: Creating the story

1. Introduction

Between February and June 2007, I observed the story creation process on *The Bill*, following the development of one major story-line or narrative from the initial idea to final script. The story-line was about a new character on the show, Sergeant Stone, a transgressive officer who had joined the station and used vigilante techniques on occasion to bring offenders to justice. In the story-line I observed being developed, he also enlists junior and impressionable officers to help him in his task. In this chapter, I describe how this story-line was created.

In Chapter Five, I argue that three key sets of factors play a part in shaping the content of programmes – commercial imperatives, working processes and ideological values of the makers of the programme and, lastly, the constraints of the medium and format (see Figure 6.1). I also argue that, at various points in the show's history, some factors were more important than others in determining representation of the police and policing.

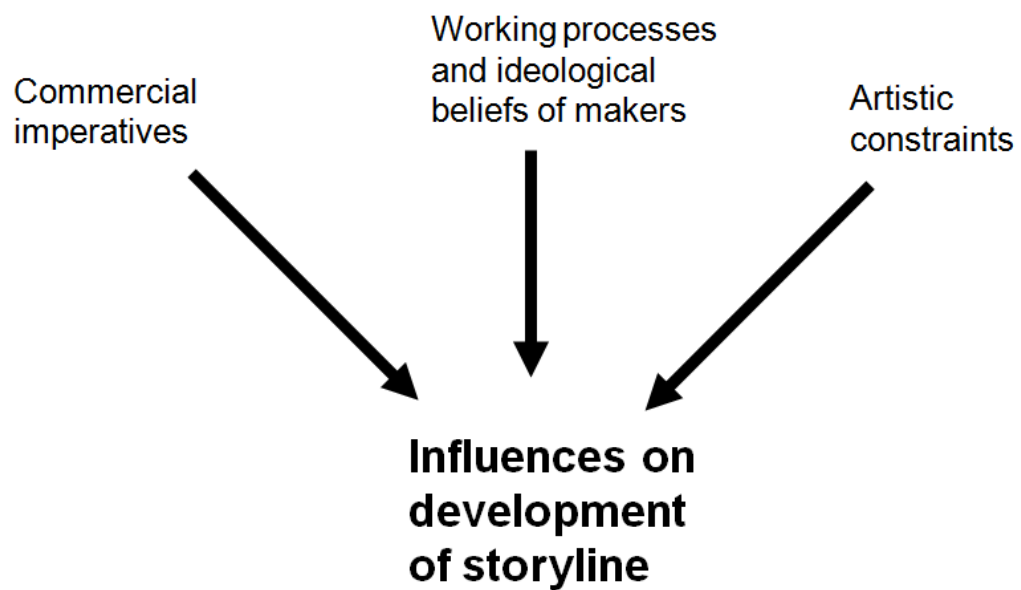


Figure 6.1 Influences on the development of the story-line

In this chapter, I look more closely at how such factors influenced the decision-making process on a daily basis in the creation of story-lines. I chart the development of the story-line described above through a series of meetings and discuss how and why, at various stages in the process, different sets of factors led the makers of the show to make changes to that story-line.

I begin my discussion with an overview of the key stages in the story development process.

2. Overview of the story creation process

As I discuss in Chapters Three, Four and Five, between 1983 and 2001, ideas were mainly generated and developed by the freelance writers. However, in the last ten years of the show's history, ideas were instead developed by an in-house story production team. This was the process I

observed in 2007. There were four distinct stages in the story creation process, as illustrated in Figure 6.2 below.

Long-term meeting	generating ideas for the show (held every 3 months)
Brainstorming	fleshing out the story outlines (continuous daily process)
Planning	discussion of content of the outlines (one meeting once a month)
Commissioning	writers assigned individual story outlines to develop into scripts (one or two meetings depending on how many writers are commissioned once a month)

Figure 6.2 Process of creating story-lines

The first stage in the story-lining process was the long-term meeting. This would take place at a hotel, usually outside London, during one weekend every three months. All the in-house staff involved with the story-lining process would attend this: the executive producer, the producers, the story producer and story editors, script editors, technical advisers and story adviser, the researcher and up to eight writers – usually those who had been involved with the show for a long period of time. The ITV network executive responsible for series and serials would also take part in this meeting. On the first day, there would be a general discussion of the stories proposed for the regular characters by the story team. These would be a mix of “soap” stories, touching on issues such as affairs, relationships, pregnancies and so on

(Hobson 1982), and policing stories – for example, stories about the regular police characters using undue force on suspects and the consequences of their actions. I give an example below of one of the “soap” stories in the notes I was given from the long-term meeting in which the story-line for Sergeant Stone was also developed.

WEIRD SCIENCE

Reg develops a crush on Lorna. He loves that she is slightly geeky and sciencey and finds any excuse to go and talk through evidence with her. At first she enjoys his company – it’s not often she finds someone who’s so into what she does – but when he asks her out to dinner, she has to draw the line. He won’t be deterred, however, and continues to try and find events in which she might be interested in the hope she’ll accompany him. She is straight with him and tells him that nothing is ever going to happen between them, but Reg forever lives in hope that she’ll change her mind.

Having discussed the broad sweep of these stories, the rest of the weekend would then be devoted to discussing how such stories could be broken down into stages and incorporated into episodes over a series of months – for example, in month one, two police officers investigate a criminal but are forced to drop the case through lack of evidence; in month two, the officers come across the same criminal and one of the police characters uses undue force and a complaint is made against him by the offender; and so on.

At the end of the long-term story conference, the story team – the four story editors and the story producer – would collate all the ideas from the meeting and then develop these into a document, giving details of the stories in a month by month plan for the following year.

Next, the story team would develop these stories into eight separate story-lines for each month of the year. Every day the story producer and one or

more of the story editors would shut themselves away for two or three hours in the “story barn” or story development office, fleshing out the outlines that had been decided upon in the long term story conference. At the end of each month the story team would provide the executive producer with detailed outlines of eight episodes, several months in advance of transmission, who would then give feedback.

The next stage of the process was the monthly planning meeting. This was held in-house in a meeting room at the studios and would be attended by the story team, the script editors, one or more of the producers, the researcher and the technical advisers. The writers would not be present at this meeting. This meeting was a chance for the production team to discuss the episodes and to spot any potential problems, from a budgetary, administrative or purely text-based perspective. Such problems might include an actor suddenly leaving, which might necessitate considerable rewriting of story-lines to accommodate this, or the sudden unavailability of a key location for filming. At the end of the meeting, the story team would incorporate these suggestions into a revised document – the commissioning document. Each document would give a detailed breakdown of the main points of the two key crime or investigation stories for each episode and of the main point of the serial or character stories for the police officers involved in each episode and suggestions from the story team as to how these serial elements might be woven into the main crime stories. After feedback from the executive producer, these would be sent out to the writers chosen by the story team to develop these outlines into scripts.

The penultimate stage in the process was the four commissioning meetings, held approximately six weeks after the monthly planning meeting. Two writers at a time would be called to each of these meetings. The point of this meeting was for the writers, having been given a character-driven “soap” style story by the story team, to submit an idea for a crime based story which could then be woven in with the “soap” story. One of the story editors explained how this worked:

“So for example, if one of our police officers is in a marriage is breaking down or an affair’s been uncovered or whatever, we want to then give a police story or a crime story that will complement this. So we’d be asking the writers to think, “How does a copper cope on a day when he’s been kicked out by his wife but he has to remain professional?” What sort of crime might really test him that day?”

The commissioning meeting would also be an opportunity for the writers to discuss with the production team their thoughts on the story-lines they had been allotted, for example any changes they proposed to the plot or any scenes in the narrative they did not believe to be plausible. After this meeting, writers would return home to work on their story-lines or outlines and develop them into scripts, communicating with the story team by telephone rather than face to face.

3. Creating the story-line

I observed the story creation process on eight episodes over a four month period. However, to discuss how each of these episodes evolved over that period would be beyond the scope of this thesis. Instead, I propose to follow the development of one story-line about a character, Sergeant Stone, who was about to be introduced on the show. Sergeant Stone was intended to be a character who used vigilante methods to dispense his own version of

justice. I chose this story partly because of its obviously controversial content but also because, out of all the stories I observed, the creation of this story illustrated most clearly how, at different points in the development process, certain and sometimes unexpected sets of factors can take precedence over others in shaping content.

4. The origins of the idea

In Chapter Four, I discussed how changing working processes on *The Bill* meant that during the last years of the show's history, stories were originated by the in-house story production team and, on occasion, by the ITV network, rather than by the freelance writers, as had been the practice previously.

Unlike the first eighteen years of the show's existence where executive producers actively resisted creative input from the network, during the last ten years, the network increasingly advised the executive producer and story team on all aspects of the "creation" process (Hesmondhalgh 2005).

The idea to develop a story about a vigilante police officer, who feels failed by the criminal justice system and who decides to take the law into his own hands, came from the network executive. One of the story team described the initial directive:

"So what they're [the network] saying is that all our cops are largely very noble and there are a certain number of people who would like the cops to be a little more rough, a little more old-school or a little bit more 'clip 'em round the ear' or whatever – and is there a way of telling those stories through our characters but just have cops that sometimes bend the rules, that sometimes will play it a bit fast and loose. Or cops that are very draconian in the way that they view the world."

The portrayal of the vigilante officer is not a new one in television police drama. In Chapter One, I discuss how both Clarke (1986) and Reiner (1994) argue that the emergence of the vigilante cop in television police drama had its roots in two sources. Firstly, the characterisation of the cop as vigilante had been pioneered in the *Dirty Harry* trilogy of films, featuring Clint Eastwood as the eponymous cop forced to achieve results by breaking all the rules of due process (Klockars 1980; Rafter 2006). This paved the way for similar narratives to be explored in television drama, in American shows such as *Kojak* and in British dramas such as *The Sweeney*. Additionally, Reiner (1994) argues that the themes of *The Sweeney* resonated with the advent of law and order as a major political issue, championed by both the Conservatives and the police themselves in the build-up to the Conservative election victory in 1979. As Reiner (1994) puts it:

“The law and order campaigns of the late 1970s feature the same conception of crime as the vigilante cop shows on TV. Crime is the product of evil, not of social problems, and must be cracked down upon by the state, with the police as its thin blue line of defence.”
(Reiner 1994, p. 25)

However, while the emergence of the character of the vigilante officer in British television drama may have been in part due to changes in the genre and changes in the wider political climate and media culture, the vigilante officer remained a staple of police drama throughout the next three decades. Indeed, Sparks (1992) argues that the debate as to whether officers are ever justified in bending the rules is a key theme of police drama and that “crime stories return continually to the conditions under which the hero is or is not entitled to use force or to resort to extra-legal methods” (Sparks 1992, p.

133). But as Beckett and Sasson (2000) point out, the vigilante cop is also an intensely dramatic character and as they argue:

“The maverick who answers to his (and sometimes her) own conscience, works accordingly to his or her own rules, and triumphs where rule-bound organisations have failed ... makes for great television.” (Beckett and Sasson 2000, p. 107)

At a time when the idea of “a more draconian cop” was being mooted by the ITV network for development on the show, *Life on Mars*, one of the biggest successes in the television industry in recent years, had just been aired for the first time. *Life on Mars* took the familiar vigilante cop and gave it a new twist: the story hinged round a young present-day DCI, Sam Tyler, who is transported back to 1973 after a car accident and finds that his unit is now being run by DCI Gene Hunt. Unencumbered by any need to pay attention to the demands of the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984), not yet passed in the fictional world of *Life on Mars*, Gene Hunt is free to run his patch, as the creators of the show put it in a personal interview, as “the Sheriff of Dodge City” – accountable to no-one as long as he gets results.

Intintoli (1984) argues that “the ultimate consideration in creating and selecting stories is that they garner and keep a sufficiently large ... audience” (Intintoli 1984, p. 84). However, as Elliott (1979) also points out:

“there is no way of knowing which creative item will appeal to the audience and which, if selected for production and distribution, will be the greatest economic success.” (Elliott 1979, p. 160)

One way of reducing this uncertainty in the world of television drama, according to Intintoli (1984), is for the makers either to repeat story-lines that have proved successful with audiences in the past, but with new variations,

or to copy ideas from a popular programme in the same genre. Many reviewers from this period suggest the character of Gene Hunt was key to the success of *Life on Mars* and, in a *Radio Times* interview, one of the creators of the show argued that Hunt's success with the British public was partly due to the fact that:

“... secretly I think a lot of people wish we could still operate in that way. He has a sense of morality but he just sees himself as a tough bloke who has to do a crap job.” (*Radio Times*, 7–13 January 2006)

Although none of the story team would admit that the suggestion from the network to develop story-lines on *The Bill* about officers being “more draconian and breaking the rules” was directly influenced by the success of *Life on Mars*, given the timing of the directive from the network to the story team in late 2006, it would seem a reasonable conjecture that it may have been an influence on the network executive's suggestion.

5. Stage one: Brainstorming

5.1 Preparation

I joined the story production team in February 2007 for the first brainstorming meeting to develop ideas that had been mooted at the long-term story conference to which I had been unable to secure an invitation. The meeting was held at the studios, in the story production office, known to everyone working on the show as the “story barn”. Prior to the meeting, I was sent a document detailing the initial thoughts the story production team had about the ideas discussed at the long-term story conference. One of the main stories they had developed was about a vigilante officer, Sergeant Stone, who was about to join the show. Below, I reproduce the story production

team's initial thoughts about this story, which I was given in document form before attending the meeting.

Dan turns to Stone. November 2007

Dan (a PC and regular character) and Stone (the vigilante officer) investigate a criminal who is an utter low life – i.e. a loan shark or drug dealer who preys on the vulnerable. Perhaps Dan has a link to the victims – an old couple who used to know him as a kid. When the victims are found – Dan is incensed and wants justice

They manage to track the criminal down but he runs away. Dan gives chase and eventually catches him and confronts him about the vile things he has done. The man shows no remorse and gloats about what he has done and Dan snaps and lays into him but pulls back before he does real harm. Stone comes over as Dan is making the arrest. The criminal starts to claim police brutality. Dan momentarily flounders and says the guy resisted arrest.

However, the criminal is insistent Dan was violent. Back at the station, Dan expects Stone to back him up but Stone says he will have to inform the DPS and that Dan has been bloody stupid and has acted illegally and will get what's coming to him.

Dan is shocked at Stone's attitude and can't believe Stone has got him so wrong. Before the DPS come in, however, Stone gets Dan alone in a briefing room. He pushes Dan hard and tries to get him to crack regarding his story about resisting arrest. Dan doesn't crack and becomes more sure in his denials. But just when he does seem about to crack, Stone just smiles at Dan and tells him to stick to his story. It's clear that Stone has been testing Dan and that Dan has passed Stone's test.

The DPS try everything to trip Dan up but he sticks to his story and thanks to Stone's prior stiff cross examination, he does a good job. The DPS decide that Dan is telling the truth but there is no evidence with which to hold the criminal so they have to let him go. Dan is livid. Stone talks to Dan and explains that he rode Dan hard to prepare him for the DPS. He says that by beating the guy up, Dan laid himself open to trouble but there are other ways and means of getting justice and if Dan is prepared to trust Stone, they will get their man.

5.2 The brainstorming meeting

Although the story idea suggested by the network was to explore a police officer who bends the rules to get justice, the story producer and story editors explained that, in order to set up this story, they were going to concentrate initially on one of the constables, Dan. They intended to tell a story in which Dan becomes so incensed by a suspect, he goes too far and beats him up and that it is only through the auspices of the vigilante Sergeant Stone that he retains his job. Dan is so grateful to Sergeant Stone that he becomes an easy target for Sergeant Stone to groom and become part of his gang of vigilantes. As the team elaborated, this was partly due to the fact that the actor playing Dan had decided not to renew his contract so they needed to find what they termed a big “exit” story for him and wanted to kill two birds with one stone by tying his “exit” story in with the big story of the spring season in 2008 – Sergeant Stone’s attempts to achieve justice through less than ethical methods:

“Basically we’ve got a situation where the actor who’s playing Dan is leaving. So we’re saying, well, give us another four months and we’ll give you a really big exit story. And it’s a story we planned before in brushstrokes so it’s about just seeing if that still holds up now. And whether it contradicts anything we’ve planned before. That’s the job of today.”

The team explained to me in a brief conversation over coffee the broad outlines of the story they had so far for Dan:

“We want to take Dan, who is the kind of meathead cop, you know, he’s a young guy, likes the adrenalin, he likes the chase, kind of loves the physical side of policing but he’s a good guy. But what we’re looking for is an incident that enrages him. A real act of injustice and we want to get him to a point where he’s gonna, out of frustration, beat someone up in the heat of the moment, at the end of a chase, blah, blah, blah. Once he’s beaten someone, Stone is going to come in and witness that scene. And this is going to end up back at the police station with a Department of Professional Standards enquiry.

But before Dan's interview, Stone is going to come in and quiz Dan hard on everything. And he's going to look like he doesn't believe Dan. But because of Stone, Dan really has to fight back and get his story straight and just at the end we see one moment where we realise and so does Dan that Stone has done this on purpose to prepare Dan for the interview. This will be one episode. Then what we want next is to see how Stone takes Dan under his wing and says right, if you want to get justice on a suspect and the law evades you, you need to make sure you don't get caught. So what we need now is to see Dan and Stone dispensing justice to the crim who's got away. And that's what we need to work out today – what are the stages in that story and how precisely do they dispense this justice?"

The team had a rough end point for Dan's story. They explained that they envisaged that Dan and Stone attempted to dispense their own brand of rough justice on the "crim who's got away" but that Dan used undue force and, as a result, was dismissed from the Metropolitan Police Service.

"Anyway, they get to a situation where Stone and Dan go into a room, beat the crim up. Stone wants this guy beaten up as much as anyone else. But Dan doesn't listen. And Dan goes further. Dan keeps hitting him, keeps punching him, kills the bloke or maims the bloke or puts the guy in whatever. And at that point, Stone leaves him to it. And Dan will be arrested for it, thrown off the force and will be feeling the injustice of it. And he'll say to Stone 'I was just doing what you taught me to do' and Stone's saying 'You went too far and you got caught. And I can't save you this time.'"

The first task of the story team was to come up with a motivation for Dan to justify his actions in being so violent with this criminal. One of the story editors suggested that perhaps Dan had received a beating from this particular offender and that this provides him with a personal motive for the attack. To illustrate his point, he draws on a story idea from *Six Feet Under*, an American drama series about a family of undertakers:

"In *Six Feet Under*, there's an episode where David is filling up in a petrol station, he's the gay undertaker, right, and some young guy asks for a lift. And he's quite cute and quite pretty and David's charmed by him and then suddenly this guy flips and knocks David out. And then for an hour, he's on this terrifying journey with this guy

basically who is holding him captive, making him drive places and rob people. And it ends with this guy, beating David up in the street, dragging him into an alleyway, covering him in petrol and threatening to light him. And David's like crying and sobbing for his life and the guy just sort of laughs at him and says "You're pathetic, you faggot" or whatever. And he just, and he walks off and leaves him laughing. And I think we could use that with Dan, that idea of being brought, ridiculed, emasculated, all his stuff stolen, his warrant card so everything he feels about himself, the uniform, the job, the respect he had is stripped away."

Right from the start, it was apparent that working processes on the show played a huge part in how stories were chosen – and, to my surprise, how stories were developed. In one corner of the "story barn" was a whiteboard with clippings from newspapers, mainly tabloid. I was informed that the story team and the show's researcher went through newspapers every morning searching for ideas, which might be used as the basis for future story-lines.

As I discussed in earlier chapters, this was a major departure from previous working practices on the show, where the writers, who at that point were the main originators of story ideas, were encouraged at all times to contribute ideas based on research, observation and interviews with police officers. However, I had not realised until I sat in on this first meeting that not only did the story team use media sources as the basis of stories but also constantly drew on other drama series and films throughout this meeting as a way of developing this particular plotline. Henderson (2007) argues that this is a common practice in developing story ideas for soap operas and suggests that production teams often borrow "elements from highly successful cinema releases" (Henderson 2007, p. 66)²¹ in developing their own plots for these shows. However, I was surprised to see this practice on *The Bill*, as I had

²¹ As an ex-soap opera writer on *Brookside*, I was also aware of this way of working.

been told several times prior to my period of observation that all stories were grounded in research. I was also told that the police advisers were key to the story development process. The police advisers were absent from this meeting and at no point during my observation did the story editors or story producer consult them. By contrast, when I had worked as a writer on the show in the 1990s, once an initial idea had been accepted, writers were then urged to talk through that idea with a police adviser to identify any potential problems of inaccuracy or lack of plausibility before developing the idea into a story-line.

One of the story editors said he was not happy with this suggestion that Dan had received a beating from the offender. The story editor suggested that perhaps Dan's motive for using undue force should be more personal and that perhaps the suspect has attacked one of the other officers or even raped them. He goes on to explain why he thinks this story will instantly win audience sympathy:

"What if we play it so that this guy beats Beth (a WPC on the show). Or nearly rapes her. Little Beth, seventeen years old, it should be the most terrifying situation of her life with that monster she was only trying to help. You'd get the whole audience behind you. They'd understand that if Dan really loses it and really kicks the shit out of this bloke. You'd definitely get eight million viewers for that, Dan avenging Beth. I can just see it. Maybe they all pile in and then Stone tells them that's enough but Dan doesn't stop, and he's there, killing this guy so Stone has to call for back-up and then the whole of Sun Hill CID come in with Dan just pounding this dead body."

In her study of British soap operas, Henderson (2007) argues that drama writers "constantly theorise about audiences" and that "perceptions of audience play a central role in ... developing scripts" (Henderson 2007, p. 65). Similarly, in a study of the reception of the American soap opera,

Dynasty, in his native country, Norway, Gripsrud (1995) suggests that images of a perceived audience play a huge part in the development of a series episode. However, he also adds that:

“At the same time, the considerations of how people in front of the screens would react blended in the discussions seamlessly with the intuitions and feelings of the writers and producers themselves. What ‘felt right’ and ‘worked’ for them was presumed to appear the same way to the audience.” (Gripsrud 1995, p. 59)

The story producer told me that the team was given constant updates of audience viewing figures for the show, but this was the only contact or feedback they had in terms of actually knowing audience preferences. One story editor commented:

“we take on board what we’re told by the network and then we have to put it to one side and just get on with telling the stories, otherwise you’d be too hung up on audience preferences”.

Nevertheless, throughout every stage of the story creation process, the image of the “perceived audience” and the need to attract high ratings was invoked as a reason for either telling a story in a particular way or for changing a narrative. At the same time, this did not seem to be based on any in-depth knowledge of audience taste (apart from ratings) but rather an assumption that what “felt right” to the story team, would therefore “feel right” to their audience (Gripsrud 1995).

However, the story producer argued that they would lose audience sympathy if Dan actually killed a suspect. The story editor suggested a compromise – and similarly, it seemed that commercial imperatives, in terms of attracting audiences, were a key consideration:

“Maybe he doesn’t kill the guy but gives him brain damage. I think we need some comeuppance though, because the guy won’t go down if Dan’s beaten him up so if we make it so that Dan has caused this inadvertently, then we’ll still get our eight million.”

Having decided that Dan needed a personal motive of some description for using undue force on a suspect, the discussion then turned to how Stone, over a longer period, would actually bring about his version of tough justice. The story producer was concerned that, if Stone were also violent with suspects over a long period of time, audiences would lose sympathy for his character. He suggested that Stone’s methods should be less violent and rather about getting other people to do his dirty work for him – again, commercial imperatives informing the decision-making process.

One of the story editors suggested that, in order to dramatise this idea, they could “borrow” an idea from another police drama – in this case, American police drama, *The Shield*, which focuses on the activities of a group of Los Angeles officers known as the Strike Team, who operate using a variety of illegal and unethical methods to bring offenders to justice.

“What we’re doing here is telling a story out of *The Shield*. Yes, they’re doing bad things but oh, God, I can see this noble cause behind what they’re doing. There’s a morality, there’s a code to this – basically this is a story that you, sometimes the law lets you down and you have to reinterpret the law for just ends.”

The story editor outlined the story development he had in mind, which effectively enabled Stone – and Dan – to deliver the criminal in question to another gang of criminals who had some grievance against him.

“I think what’s key here is that Stone doesn’t need to get his hands dirty. And we can’t let him get his hands too dirty – not if he’s going to be in the show for a while. Dan can get violent but then Dan is seen to get his come-uppance so what we need to make sure is that the

audience still root for Stone. So what about this, maybe Stone puts this guy in a situation where he needs the law but Stone lets him get on with it. Bit like that incident in *The Shield* where Mackey²² puts the two gang leaders into the back of a truck and goes, you sort it out. Natural selection, natural justice, you know, you don't want the police? We won't be there. We'll move away. So you almost put that guy in a situation whereby um, he needs the police and the police won't be there for him because he's basically rejected the police. So it's kind of poetic justice."

The story editor explained how this could be dramatised, again drawing on *The Shield* to develop this idea:

"Maybe this guy is a loan shark who's beaten all these little people, is actually in debt to a couple of heavy Eastern European proper ex-Russian mafia loan sharks. And Stone, and what you do is Stone tips them off about where this guy's gonna be and all that happens is, they take this guy, and you can see this guy terrified. They bundle him in the back of a car, the car drives off and Stone goes "You live by the sword, you die by the sword." Or something else we could use from *The Shield* where Mackey and his lot need to frame someone and there's been a series of armed robberies. So basically Mackey and his team copy the MO of the series of armed robberies, heist the property truck from their precinct so it looks like the original gang did it and then they plant it on their guy. So maybe Stone could do the same. But I think the main thing is that he keeps his hands clean but still gets results."

This was the first time in the process the story editors drew on other police shows for inspiration although, in an interview prior to this meeting, they spoke at length of watching American and German police shows for ideas they could use themselves in *The Bill*:

"We watched a German show, you know, and the question was: is it ever justified for a police officer to use violence in the interview room to get a result. And that was the broad question. And they played it out in a certain way over a certain story with a guy that had kidnapped a girl. And you think, well, actually, you could just take that question and ask it of one of our characters. Give it a different scenario and you've got, you know, an entirely new story and a new area to explore. But

²² Detective Vic Mackey, portrayed by Michael Chiklis, the main protagonist of the American police drama, *The Shield*. Mackey was a corrupt detective in the Los Angeles Police Department, who routinely beat suspects and committed murders.

you've been inspired by another show. I think that's, you know, the way we work."

However, the team seemed unaware that different cultures have different models of policing (R.I. Mawby 1999) and, for that reason, for example, a story about a German officer using violence on a suspect in an interview room might not transpose plausibly to a post-PACE British context. I asked them how much time they had spent working with the police and observing police work, and was told that they had all spent a day on observation and that, as one story editor observed:

"I don't think it's very hard writing for police characters. I think if you write for the show long enough you get a sense of how characters talk and also it's in the public consciousness, isn't it, that kind of police-speak."

Similarly they seemed unaware that levels of corruption and indeed the nature of deviant practices among police officers vary from country to country and over time. It is not within the scope of this thesis to enter into a discussion of the reasons for this, but it is relevant to note that in his study of police corruption in the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and the United States, Punch (2009) argues that corruption in the United Kingdom, compared to the US, has tended to be "more sporadic, less highly organised and confined to small 'crew-style' groups or special units such as the West Midlands Serious Crime Squad" (Punch 2009, p. 157). By contrast, Punch (2009) argues that corruption occurs at all levels in US policing and is "near endemic, resilient and shifting in its forms" (Punch 2009, p. 88). Thus, in this case, the story team were taking an idea from a police show about a group of deeply corrupt officers from a country in which, according to police researchers, corruption is endemic and transposing it to a British context and

a culture in which corruption is much less widespread, to tell a story about beat officers, who would have the least opportunity to carry out such practices (Punch 2009). At the same time, the makers of the show were still suggesting in interviews to the press that “the other cop shows are slightly heightened or serial killer shows, ours is a show about real policing” (*Digital Spy*, 22 August 2010).

However, the story producer was more than happy with this suggestion to incorporate elements from *The Shield* into this story-line and, before the meeting ended, the main story-line points developed that morning were summarised on the whiteboard.

It was clear, even at that early stage in the process, that while working processes and artistic considerations all played a part in shaping the development of the narrative, the main consideration at every stage of the decision-making was commercial – would this plot development attract or alienate a potential audience? It was also clear that, although all the executives assured me during interviews that all story-lines were based, as in the 1980s and 1990s, on research and observation of police work, none of the stories I observed being created seemed to be grounded in any research or input from police advisers or other police sources at this crucial stage. Instead, the story team drew inspiration for plot ideas from other media sources (Brunsdon 2000; Manning 2003) and, critically in this meeting, from other films and series also featuring vigilante officers. Later in this chapter, I will discuss in more detail the ramifications of such practices.

6. Stage two: The planning meeting

6.1 Developments prior to the planning meeting

I was sent the planning document prior to the planning meeting. This was an episode-by-episode breakdown of the stories developed by the story team for transmission in the spring of the following year. I noted immediately that there had been a number of significant changes to the stories I had observed in the initial brainstorming meeting. I reproduce some extracts from these documents to illustrate the key changes.

The first such change was that Dan, the officer about to leave the show, had been replaced by Ben, another police constable. The initial outline of the opening stages of this story remained roughly the same – namely that Ben became incensed by a suspect, used excessive force in arresting him, causing the suspect injury, and that it was only thanks to Stone's expert coaching that he managed to get through his interview with the DPS. However, the personal motivation for Ben's attack had been developed considerably – instead of the suspect having attacked another constable, in the planning document, the suspect had been abusing his son for many years. This was now the motive for Ben's attack.

Extracts from Planning Document for Episode 572 June 2007

Ben answers a call of a domestic disturbance. When Ben arrives, a man is slumped on the floor in a pool of blood unconscious – lying near him is a bloodied kitchen knife.

Mickey and Terry (CID officers) arrive at the scene. As they dig into Brian's life, they are able to identify a number of possible suspects. Brian has form and connections to a number of criminal worlds.

These leads take the investigation down a number of avenues until they realise that the answers that they are looking for could lie in a

different direction. Brian's son, Liam, was a witness to the attack but refuses to speak.

As forensic details from the scene of the attack come through, some new questions are raised. The depth of the wounds and the angle of the cuts suggest that this might not have been an aggressive struggle between two grown men. When confronted with these details, Liam confesses that he stabbed his dad but his account is full of holes. Terry and Mickey believe Ben is the best person to get further information out of Liam while they pay a visit to Brian in hospital. Ben manages to get Liam to open up and finds out that both he and his mother have been abused for years and that in fact Liam's mother, Helen, stabbed Brian.

Helen confesses all but because she was not being attacked at the time – she snapped during the middle of a domestic row, she has to be charged and it will be up to the Crown Prosecution Service whether they proceed or not. But the fact is Helen could go down and Brian could walk away, scot-free. Everyone is struck by the injustice of the case and Ben feels he has let Liam down.

The change of character was occasioned by necessity (Henderson 2007). In her study of British soap operas, Henderson (2007) discusses one of the most famous story-lines on the soap opera, Brookside. This was the murder of Trevor Jordache by his wife, Mandy, and daughter, Beth, whom Trevor had sexually abused. The actress playing the part of Beth was given the sack and story-lines featuring her had to be rewritten at short notice to accommodate this. Similarly, Dan had to be written out of the series before this episode could be screened. However, the story team argued that they had made a virtue out of this and instead decided to tell a long-running story with the new character, Ben, initially becoming part of Stone's "gang" and then becoming increasingly disenchanted with his methods.

Intintoli (1984) argues that creators of soap opera story-lines generally avoid controversial subjects, for fear of alienating potential audiences, a point echoed in an Irish study by Devereux (1998). However, Henderson (2007)

takes a different stance and suggests soap operas often feature stories on issues such as child abuse and incest as a way of boosting ratings.

However, as Henderson (2007) also points out, on occasion, some story-lines can be deemed too controversial and potentially divisive for audiences, as in the case of the famous Jordache child abuse story-line on *Brookside*.

The story revolved round the Jordache family – Mandy Jordache and her two daughters, Beth and Rachel, had moved to Brookside Close to get away from their abusive father, Trevor. Trevor followed the family to their new home and pleaded with Mandy to be taken back. At this point, Channel Four (the broadcasters of *Brookside*) asked the makers of the show for a significant change in the story – that Trevor had only raped his daughter on one occasion. According to Henderson (2007), Channel Four executives were worried that if Trevor had repeatedly raped his daughter, audiences would lose sympathy when Mandy took her husband back. Instead, Channel Four executives reasoned “if raping Beth had been one incident in isolation, then Mandy (and audiences) could assume it was ... ‘one weak moment’” (Henderson 2007, pp. 72–3).

Similarly, it could be conjectured that the decision to tell a story-line in which one of the members of Sergeant Stone’s vigilante “gang” had a change of heart was probably also prompted by audience considerations and that a narrative in which all the officers involved solidly endorsed these tactics might alienate audiences.

The next episode, 573, dealt with the incident where Ben used excessive force on Brian, after being called to an incident at Brian and Liam’s home and finding Liam injured. Brian admitted that he was responsible, causing

Ben to lose his temper and cause Brian injury. The rest of the episode dealt with Stone coaching Ben for his interview with the DPS, but there was another significant change from the story idea discussed in the brainstorming meeting. In that meeting, the suspect – now Brian – got away as a result of Ben's heavy-handed tactics. In the new document, CID uncovered further offences that Brian had committed and arrested him. The story team explained prior to the meeting that they believed the story would be stronger and rather more unexpected for audiences if Brian were actually sent down, leaving Ben in Stone's debt. This enabled them to set up another episode in which Stone called upon other junior colleagues to administer his version of tough justice. Extracts from the planning meeting document relating to this later episode are below.

Episode 575 Planning Meeting June 2007

Sally, one of the younger constables is called to an emergency – the victim is Mandy, a student she came into contact with a few weeks ago. Mandy is an escort who is working to fund her studies at university and has been beaten and raped.

Stone initially assumes that the assault is connected to Mandy's work but Mandy says the incident took place while she was out with friends. Because of Sally's involvement with the case, Stone allows her to follow up some leads. CCTV footage from a number of clubs helps Sally and her colleagues, Will and Ben to get a visual of the attacker – and a name, Ronnie. He is a heavy drug user and has a reputation for being violent with prostitutes.

Stone, however, points out that their evidence is almost all circumstantial and their witnesses drunken partygoers. However, Sally, Will and Ben find the case hard to drop and when Ronnie puts a foot out of line, they pounce and Ronnie is arrested with a sizeable amount of cocaine on him.

However, Sam, a DI, realises Ronnie is connected to someone else who has form for drug offences that CID have been trying to nail for a

while. She strikes a deal with Ronnie in which the charges are overlooked in exchange for information about Ronnie's contact.

It is too much for Sally who turns to Stone. By now Stone can see what a monster Ronnie is, so agrees to deliver justice. Giving each of them an opportunity to back out, Stone tells them that if they want this man to be punished, they need to think outside the box and they have to be united. Ben is the only one who is uncertain but agrees to this.

Stone then drives them to Ronnie's place where they wait. Then out of nowhere a van arrives and three men with crowbars force their way into Ronnie's house. Will, Sally and Ben panic but Stone stops them from intervening. Only when the emergency call comes through on the PR does Stone allow the constables to go inside to arrest the men who have attacked Ronnie. Back at Sun Hill, Sam recognises the thugs as associates of Ronnie's contact and believes that this is a revenge attack. Meanwhile, knowing that this will have affected the junior officers, Stone reassures them that Ronnie got what was coming to him and that they got justice for Mandy.

As can be seen, several elements from the first meeting were retained. In the brainstorming meeting, the idea that the suspect should rape one of the constables was mooted. This idea was retained although the victim was now a young student working as an escort. The reasons for this were not discussed with me. Secondly, in the brainstorming session, there was much discussion of Stone and his colleagues believing themselves to have been "failed by the criminal justice system" but this point was left vague in the meeting. In the new document, Stone and his colleagues were given a specific reason – CID had struck a deal for information – and Ronnie was allowed to walk free. This gave Stone and his colleagues the motivation to exact their revenge but, as discussed in the brainstorming meeting, they did not carry out their revenge personally. Instead, Stone delivered Ronnie behind the scenes to a group of thugs who wished to attack him for his betrayal of their colleague – drawing directly from the story-line in *The Shield* discussed in that earlier meeting.

6.2 The planning meeting

As described in Chapter Two, I was not invited to the planning meeting and had to be creative in order to inveigle myself into the studios. I was therefore unable to tape this meeting or the following meeting but made copious notes during the meeting of the conversation (I have rusty shorthand) and immediately afterwards.

This was the largest meeting I attended. It was held in the studios in one of the large meeting rooms immediately opposite to the “story barn”. The meeting was attended by one of the producers, the story consultant, the two police advisers, the story editors and story producer and the script editors. As before, the writers were not involved in this stage of the process. Prior to this meeting, all those mentioned above received a copy of the planning document to give them an overview of the stories developed thus far by the story team and to act as a starting point for their feedback.

Throughout this thesis, I have drawn on the similarities between the production of news and the production of television drama. As Sparks points out, “there is a demand for narrative in Press reporting of crime which to a significant extent parallels that in fictional modes: the most ‘satisfactory’ news story is also a literal story” (Sparks 1992, p. 24). In particular, I draw parallels below between the role of the assignment editor in news and the role of the story producer on *The Bill*.

In their study of newsroom practices, Ericson *et al.* (1987) argue that the assignment editor is “a supervisor and controller as well as a consultant and

advisor” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 210). In this meeting, the story producer’s role as “supervisor and controller” was very much in evidence.

The story producer started the meeting by asking for everyone’s thoughts on the planning document. The first point of dissent came from the show’s researcher and from one of the police or technical advisers. Both of them were unhappy with the ending of the story-line for Episode 572 in which Liam went home with his father after his mother was taken into custody. The show’s researcher argued that if Liam did not want to go home with his father, he would be immediately taken into care.

When observing newsroom practices, Ericson *et al.* (1987) found that most assignments were made and accepted without tension and that most disagreements which the researchers observed were settled amicably, but they nevertheless suggest:

“As with any organizational setting in which someone sits in judgment over others, there was ongoing disagreement, tension and conflict between assignment editors and reporters.” (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 211)

This was also the case in the meetings I observed. This was also the first time that any issue of “accuracy” had arisen.

In Chapter Five, I discussed how, during the 1980s and 1990s, huge emphasis was placed by the show’s makers on telling stories that were as accurate as possible, particularly in the depiction of police procedure (Mason 1992; Leishman and Mason 2003). If at any point a story was deemed to be inaccurate by the police advisers, the writer would be told either to drop the story or to rework the story considerably. In this meeting, it was clear that the

emphasis had changed and that, at this stage in the proceedings, the story team were not open to suggestions and were happy to sacrifice “accuracy” for the sake of the dramatic story they had created. The story team made it very clear to the researcher and to the technical adviser that they did not want to change this ending and that, in their view, the dramatic point of the story was that Liam should go home with his father and that Ben should feel he had failed Liam – that he had solved the mystery of the attack on Brian but had broken up Liam’s family. The police adviser suggested a compromise – that Liam did not voice any doubts about going home with his father. The story producer was happy with this and accepted the change.

The biggest conflict in the meeting arose over the representation of the police in Episode 572 and in Episode 575, where Stone employed vigilante tactics for the first time. In news production Ericson *et al.* (1987) suggest that the main clashes between assignment editors and reporters usually occur on ideological grounds, and this appeared also to be the case in the planning meeting. However, the objection was raised not by the police advisers but by the script editors. The script editors voiced two objections. Firstly, they argued that the depiction of Ben losing his temper with a suspect seemed unprofessional to them. They argued that this would be a situation officers would face every day and would know how to control their personal feelings. Secondly, the script editors also echoed the concern raised by the story producer in the brainstorming meeting that Sergeant Stone’s vigilante tactics might alienate audiences. However, while the concern raised in the brainstorming meeting seemed to be prompted by commercial imperatives, in the planning meeting, the concern expressed by the editors appeared

mainly ideological. One script editor disagreed strongly with the story team's assertion that the audience would see Stone as a hero avenging a young girl who has been raped. Instead the script editor argued that, in his opinion, this was a story about serious police corruption.

There are two points worthy of note here. Firstly, it seemed as though there was an unspoken division of labour between the police advisers and researcher on the one hand and the script editors or "creatives" on the other. While the researcher and police advisers' roles seemed to be to go through the story-line, concentrating on specific plot details and commenting on their accuracy or otherwise, broader discussion of representation of the police and the possible effect of that representation on audiences (a combination of ideological beliefs and commercial imperatives at play) appeared to be the responsibility of the script editors. There was no point in the planning meeting where police advisers raised any concern about a narrative concerning a vigilante officer and the possible effects of such a representation on audiences. They did not comment on this story-line in personal interviews either, although one police adviser tellingly made the point that:

"We are here, as we would say to everyone to advise. I will give you (the makers of the show) my advice. If you don't wish to take that advice, that's entirely up to you. You are paying me, you are producing the product, if you're saying you can't do what I'm advising you to do because it won't enhance the product, we go into what my colleague and I call, "We'll just fudge it then." And my colleague and I say, "Yeah, that's okay, it's up to you." We understand and we don't get upset."

It would seem that the police advisers considered their role to be solely to offer advice on points of procedure, accuracy of story-lines and so on and

not on overall plots; they also seemed aware that such advice would be ignored on occasion, if it meant abandoning what the makers considered to be a commercially attractive story. In other words, accuracy was now optional, rather than essential to story development.

The script editor's concern about Ben's use of force on a suspect was waived by the story team and the plot remained the same. However, one of the show's producers also expressed concern about the depiction of Sergeant Stone's vigilante tactics. His reasons appeared to be driven by a mix of commercial imperatives and ideological issues. He agreed with the script editor that the story, as it stood, was one about police corruption and expressed a worry that the narrative was too controversial and that it might alienate audiences. He suggested a compromise, that instead of Stone grooming the officers, he would prefer the officers put pressure on Stone to help them bring Ronnie, the rapist, to justice by fair means or foul. He also argued that the officers needed to be visibly shaken by what they had done and acknowledge that their actions were morally wrong. The story producer and editors were clearly less than happy with this but the producer was adamant that this change needed to be made in the story-line.

Although it was stressed repeatedly that the process of story development was "democratic" and that everyone involved "had a voice", it was clear, as Henderson (2007) notes in her study of British soap operas, that:

"there is a distinct hierarchy in the production process ... and there are ... clearly limits to the 'democracy' of the team process."
(Henderson 2007, p. 49)

While the first concern of the script editors over Ben's undue use of force in Episode 573 was overridden, the fact that the producer – the most senior member of staff at the meeting – shared their concern over the portrayal of the vigilante Sergeant meant that a change in the narrative had to be taken on board.

Although in the brainstorming meeting, issues of commercial imperatives and working practices played a considerable part in shaping the development of the plot, in this meeting, for the first and, as it turned out, only time in the process I witnessed, ideas of “accuracy” in terms of depiction of police procedure and ideological concerns about the representation of the police also played a part in the discussion. However, such concerns were also bound up at every stage with the primary concern of the makers – would this be a narrative that would alienate or captivate audiences? In this meeting, accuracy and ideological beliefs appeared to be secondary to this.

7. Stage three: The commissioning meeting

The commissioning meeting was held in the studios, approximately four weeks after the planning meeting. This was a much smaller meeting that involved the line producer, the producer for the episodes under discussion, the story producer, the script editor for these episodes and, for the first time in the story creation process, the two writers commissioned to develop scripts from the planning documents they had been given. I wanted to go to all the commissioning meetings but was only allowed to observe one meeting covering Episodes 574 and 575. Episode 574 did not cover any of the story-lines I had observed being developed so I focus here on Episode 575. This

episode did cover the crucial story in which Stone and the other officers attempt to seek retribution for a young girl's rape so I was able to observe how this story developed before and after the writers were involved. No new documentation was presented at this meeting, as the writers were sent the planning documents summarised in the previous section prior to the commissioning meeting.

The point of the commissioning meeting was explained by one of the story team:

"That's where we bring the writers in, um, two episodes at a time, and we spend the morning with the writer, fleshing out those ideas we've developed. In addition to the serial elements of the story, we also have two investigations per episode. Sometimes we give the writer very clear guidelines as to what we want or sometimes we just tell them that we want a story involving a crime of this nature, depending on the stories we want to tell that month. So those commissioning meetings, we're asking the writer just to bring their ideas as well, bring the crime stories they want to tell to the table and really start taking ownership of the episode and the producers and script editors will be in that meeting as well."

The commissioning meeting began with the story producer giving an overview of the episode. Interestingly, whereas in previous meetings the story team had described Sergeant Stone as a hero dispensing rough justice where the criminal justice system had failed him, the story team now described the story as one of "noble cause corruption" – apparently bowing to the producer's suggestion in the planning meeting. Similarly, taking on the producer's suggestion from the previous meeting, the story producer stressed that the police characters, particularly the younger officers, should express remorse for their actions and that, in the long-term, the character of Ben would stand up to Stone and leave the "vigilante gang".

The writer, however, expressed some puzzlement over the story and said that he could not quite understand what would prompt Stone and the other officers to act as “judge and jury” as he put it. The story producer suggested that the writer thought of Stone as similar to Clint Eastwood’s character in the *Dirty Harry* film – in other words, a hard-bitten vigilante officer. The story producer argued that this might help the writer understand Stone’s motivation and that Stone was only driven to such desperate measures because the law had failed him. Again, working processes were clearly determining the way in which this story developed – and just as the story team had used other media sources rather than research or observation of policing as a way of advancing the plot, in turn, the story producer also urged the writer to use the same methods (Henderson 2007).

The discussion then turned to practical considerations – the first time that constraints of the format had entered the discussion. The episode was to be set late at night, when shooting is more expensive, and the writer and producer discussed at some length precisely how many scenes in the script could be shot on location and how many scenes needed to be shot at the purpose-built police station and hospital sets inside *The Bill*’s studios.

Although ostensibly this was a meeting in which the writer was encouraged “to take ownership of the script” and to suggest crime stories, it seemed clear that the story team had strong ideas about the direction this story should take and were not in the main open to negotiation. In Chapter Three, I discuss how the changed working processes on the show in its last ten years resulted in considerable reduction in autonomy for the writer. As one writer recalled:

“You didn’t do research, there was no point. And yes, you were supposed to come to those commissioning meetings with ideas but half the time they were rejected on the spot. It was just a formality, humouring us that we still had a voice.”

This seemed to be the case in the commissioning meeting that I observed.

The story producer asked the writer if he had had any thoughts about the character of Ronnie, the rapist. The writer suggested that Ronnie might be a dealer who has been flooding an estate with poor quality drugs and that when, in an apparently unconnected incident to the rape, another girl dies in a nightclub, the police would be led to Ronnie through witnesses. However, the story producer was dismissive and said that they already had an idea for Ronnie and that the police will track him down via other criminal associates to whom he will be in serious debt. The writer also suggested that perhaps Mandy, the young escort, might be involved with a police officer and that, in the past, he had come across police officers who had relationships with escorts. This was the first time in the process anyone had mentioned any direct contact with an officer that might be used in a story – but the story producer did not seem interested and ended the meeting.

The main purpose of the commissioning meeting seemed to be largely practical, to inform the writer of any cast changes that might affect their episode and to discuss locations, rather than a chance for writers to become actively involved in the creative process. What little autonomy did appear to still exist for the writer was the chance to imaginatively construe the barebones of the story-line they had been given (Ericson *et al.* 1987, p. 310).

8. Stage four: The final scripts

The scripts were transmitted in February 2008, by which time my period of observation on the show had come to an end. I was therefore not privy to any further discussions that took place about the development of these scripts but was instead sent copies of the scripts (after many requests). Significantly, very few changes had occurred in plot development in the stories I observed. The only major change since the commissioning meeting was in Episode 575, where the young escort who was raped is now a student, but I was unable to find out the reason for this change. This would seem to indicate, as did the meetings, that once story-lines were developed by the team, there was possibly little scope for negotiation.

9. Conclusion

A number of issues arise from this discussion.

In Chapter One, I reviewed the existing literature on the production of television drama. Of the two ethnographic studies of the creation of stories for soap operas, an Irish study by Devereux (1998) argued that the constraints of the format and the ideological values of the makers played the biggest part in determining content, while Henderson's (2007) British study suggested that commercial imperatives were behind every stage of the story-lining process. In my thesis, and indeed in this chapter, I argue that a third set of factors – working processes – also plays an important part in shaping the content of narratives in television drama.

As Henderson (2007) notes, it is a common practice to construct soap opera narratives using ideas from other media sources, such as films or indeed other television shows. However, when this practice was introduced on *The*

Bill, it had serious ramifications in terms of the depiction of the police and policing.

Certainly, it was the case that, although stories were based on research and observation of police work in the first eighteen years of the show, the depiction of the police was somewhat idealised and, due both to the constraints of the format and, as discussed in Chapter Five, the ideological beliefs of the makers of the show, issues such as racism, sexism and corruption were rarely, if ever, featured. Nevertheless, it could also be argued that the show made a serious attempt to portray the “small change of policing” and the various roles of the police, including the social service aspect of their work (Punch 1979).

However, it would seem that in the last ten years of the show’s existence, the aim to portray “the small change of policing” was subsumed by commercial imperatives – the need to tell stories that would attract audiences and, in particular, as discussed in previous chapters, a younger demographic. But the new working practices of deriving story ideas from media sources also led, in turn, to an increasingly distorted depiction of policing on the show.

Whereas previously stories were originated by a pool of at least sixty writers, in the last ten years of the show, they were generated by four or five story editors and research was minimal. As a script editor from another show observed:

“The world of people working in television is significantly different from the world of most people and that gets increased in drama, I think. You spend a lot of time talking with people who are fairly similar to you, fairly similar backgrounds, fairly similar outlook on life. Because

you all do the same job. And that narrows down the sorts of stories that you tell. And that narrows down the way you tell them, I think.”

Similarly, a police adviser from another show argued that input from the police into any police show, particularly those laying a claim to “authenticity”, was essential. However, she argued that this was not merely so that writers and producers could make sure any procedure portrayed was accurate but because, in her view, without that input, media workers would simply be reproducing their own ideas of what they thought police work was about, mainly derived in turn from their own cultural frames and those of other police shows. As she explained:

“You’re getting your people at *The Bill* coming up with their story-lines within their frame of reference or getting them out of the papers because that’s all they’ve got to go on. But I’m a serving officer. I can say I’ve dealt with 200 armed robbers and I’ve never heard them say something like that, But I have worked in a job where 80 odd year old women get stabbed to death in their own homes, get their hearts ripped out of their chests and then the murderer drinks the blood from their hearts. That’s the world I live in. (laughs) Things like motivation too. Like someone stabbing someone. They don’t need to do it for a reason. And the way people die. You see them get shot and they hit the floor or you see them get stabbed and before they hit the floor, they’re dead. It doesn’t happen unless you get four bullets through the heart. But people always go to their own frame of reference and if that frame of reference has been in a very small area of school and training, then you get stories that reflect that.”

Thus, what was happening on *The Bill* in the last ten years of its history was a recycling of ideas, particularly from police shows set in other countries, with different models of policing. These ideas were selected by a tiny group of media workers with little or no working knowledge of police work, apparently unaware that their practice of taking stories and themes from shows about deviant armed detectives in Los Angeles and transporting wholesale to a British context of beat officers in a South London station might not lend itself

to an accurate depiction of what one executive described as “the reality of British policing in the twenty-first century”. In short, representation of the police on the show in the last ten years was not merely a refracted image of the realities of policing (Reiner 2010) but an image of policing viewed through an increasingly distorted lens and created by workers who seemed unaware of the levels of distortion of those images.

In the following chapter, drawing on findings from focus groups with officers from the Metropolitan and Greater Manchester Police Services, I discuss officers’ responses to a story-line about the vigilante officer, Sergeant Stone, and their perceptions of how the police had been represented on the show.

Chapter Seven: The ‘old Bill’ on *The Bill*

1. Introduction

In Chapter One, I discussed how most production studies are framed in a “tripartite” structure or an integrated theoretical framework, examining the complex relationships between media production, media texts and audience reception. I also discussed at length my reasons for focusing solely on the process of story-telling in relation to police drama inside the production company responsible for making *The Bill* for the UK’s main commercial station.

However, I thought it fruitful to end my discussion by examining, albeit in an extremely limited way, the perceptions of officers from two focus groups, of how fictional representations of police work may shape public understanding and knowledge of policing. I decided to do this work with police groups rather than members of the general public for the following reasons. Firstly, this is above all a criminological study, contributing to the existing body of literature on “police fiction”, a specialist sub-field of police studies and only secondly, a case study of television drama production. The starting point of this work was to explore how and why television representations of the police changed over time on *The Bill*, often against the tide of what was going on in the world of everyday policing (See Chapters Four and Five) and to explore the implications of such representations for public understandings of policing. For that reason, and given that no literature to date exists in this country on police officers’ perceptions of how they are represented in fictional media and how they believe such perceptions might have an impact on public

understandings of policing, I decided to carry out focus groups with police officers from the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) and from the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). Certainly, I could have chosen to carry out focus groups with members of the general public to explore possible links or disconnections between the intentions of the programme makers and the ways in which texts were received and interpreted by various social groups but this would then have turned my thesis into a more conventional “tripartite” production study and moved the focus of my research from a criminological study to a more general and traditional television production case study.

I look firstly at these officers’ perceptions of mass media images of policing and how these affect police work and the public’s treatment of the police. Secondly, I examine whether police officers from these focus groups perceive mass media images of policing to have an impact on public expectations of the police; and thirdly, I explore how police officers from the focus groups might wish the police to be represented in crime fiction in ways which, in their opinion, might increase public understanding and support.

2. The research

In this chapter, I draw on the results of two focus groups from the Greater Manchester Police (GMP) and the Metropolitan Police Service (MPS) in April and May 2008, in which participants were asked to watch an episode of *The Bill*. There were six GMP officers (two male, four female) and two civilian indexers in the first focus group; their rank ranged from DC to DI and their length of service ranged from 14 years to 28 years. Eleven officers (nine male, two female) participated in the MPS focus group; rank ranged from DC

to DI and length of service ranged from 9 years to just under 30 years. In *The Bill*, the work of both detectives and uniformed officers is depicted and, for that reason, I would have liked to have conducted focus groups with uniformed officers from the GMP and from the MPS. However, it was not possible to arrange this. I was able to conduct one further focus group with six uniformed officers from the MPS but despite a number of attempts, was completely unable to arrange a fourth focus group with uniformed officers from the GMP. For that reason, I decided just to use my findings from the two focus groups with CID officers from the MPS and GMP.

Although focus groups are commonly used in media studies (Philo 1990; Henderson 2007), this methodology, while generating rich material, is limited as sample sizes are small and discussions are generally no more than one hour in length (Devereux 2003). The focus groups I ran lasted two and a half hours, one hour of which involved viewing the selected episode of *The Bill*. Inevitably, the structure of a group affects what is said as well as who speaks (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007). For example, in both focus groups, conversation was led mainly by one individual. In the Metropolitan Police Service focus group, the conversation was led by a male DC with over 25 years' service and in the Greater Manchester Police focus group, the discussion was led by a female DI with 28 years' service, who was also a scriptwriter and police adviser for a number of police shows – and, as a result, there were significant divergences in perspectives as well as some noticeable convergences in opinion between the two focus groups.

Although the opinions expressed by these officers may or may not reflect the views of other officers in other forces, or even of other officers in the same

force, this report nevertheless gives an insight into some officers' perceptions of how a specific fictional representation of the police may affect public expectations of policing and how they would wish to present themselves and their organisation in the media. I provide below a synopsis of the episode I showed to my two focus groups.

The Bill: "Corrupted" Transmission date 13th March 2008, ITV 1

Sergeant Stone and PC Sally Armstrong are called to a fight in a nightclub. Once there, Sally is pushed to the ground. One of the men involved in the fight goes back to help her. It transpires that he is an undercover officer from another station – DC Andrew Tipping – investigating drug dealing in the club. Tipping knows he will be arrested and asks Sally to take a stash of cocaine, which he has on him, which he has just taken from a dealer. Sally agrees but regrets it. Meanwhile, the other person involved in the fight, David Bartlett, has been rushed to hospital. He has DC Jo Masters' card in his wallet. DC Masters is called to the hospital. Bartlett's daughter died at the club two years earlier after taking cocaine and her death was recorded as accidental. Bartlett has been doing his own investigation and believes that the undercover officer, Tipping, is involved in corruption. Meanwhile Stone tries to pull strings for Sally to make sure no-one discovers she has covered up for Tipping.²³

3. Do police officers perceive that mass media images of policing have an impact on police work and interaction with the public?

The proliferation and expansion of mass media communications – radio, television, the newspaper industry and the internet – has been one of the most significant social transformations of the last sixty years; a transformation which Loader and Mulcahy argue (2003, p. 16) has had far-reaching consequences for the police and for the manner in which the public

²³ I was not able to show the episode I observed being created in Chapter Six, as the DVDs were not sent in time. However, this did not pose a problem as this episode was part of the same group of episodes featuring the transgressive officer, Sergeant Stone, and also featured themes of corruption.

view them. One of the effects of this expansion of the mass media has been the social diffusion of images of the police. Crime is probably the single most common genre in both fictional and nonfictional television and film (Ericson *et al.* 1987; 1989; 1991; Katz 1987; Reiner 1992; Sparks 1992; Schlesinger and Tumber 1994; Perlmutter 2000). Yet at the same time, and as several commentators have noted (Skogan 1990; Reiner 2000b; Manning 2003; Loader and Mulcahy 2003), in large, complex and class-divided societies, the practical experience of many socio-economic groups with the police is limited to encountering them in their traffic-control function. For many people, the mass media are the main source of their perceptions and knowledge of the other roles of the police.

Loader and Mulcahy (2003, p. 17) suggest that one of the consequences of what they describe as the “routine visualisation of policing on British television” is that police dramas have enabled people to feel they know about the world of policing, and to fit their own encounters into this “cultural imaginary”. As Perlmutter (2000) puts it:

“Vicariously, all of us have viewed via the TV set or movie screen, cops chasing crooks through city streets, chain-drinking coffee during a stakeout, deciphering clues at a crime scene ... The scenes, dialogue and poses of police work are clichéd.” (Perlmutter 2000, p. xi)

As Newburn (1999) points out, the work of the real police officer often consists of dispersed operations out of sight from supervisors and from the general public. There has been some research on the perception of media images by the public, but only limited research on the perception of images

by the police themselves (Doyle 1998; Perlmutter 2000) and no work in a British context.

In the MPS focus group, officers initially said that, in their experience, public opinion was mainly shaped by direct interaction rather than police dramas, even though data in the *Policing for London* survey suggest otherwise (Fitzgerald *et al.* 2002). As one MPS officer suggested:

“If anybody has any experience with the police force, if you come away with a good experience, you’re happy.”

Another MPS officer argued that:

“You can’t completely absolve programmes from having an influence, but I’d like to think that it’s in the minority.”

However it is also worth noting, as Bradford (2011) points out, drawing on data from eleven sweeps of the BCS (British Crime Survey) from 1984 to 2005/06, that:

“those who have had recent contact with the police, particularly unsatisfactory contact, have, on average, lower levels of trust and confidence.” (Bradford 2011, p. 183)

Later some officers from this group backtracked considerably in their opinions as to the influence of police drama on public perceptions of policing. The majority of the GMP group took a very different view. However, as I mention at the start of this chapter, the group was led by a female DI who dominated most of the discussion and was herself a script adviser for Granada Television. This may have coloured her perceptions somewhat and possibly had an impact on the responses of the rest of this group. By contrast to the MPS group, this officer reflected that:

“I think (police dramas) create the expectations of society, people’s expectations of the criminal justice system, should they become witnesses etc. The vast majority of people have very little contact, if any, with the police and they get their perception of it from the television. And when they do come into that situation, they react with that perception they’ve developed. If you see on a police show, that it’s okay to say, I’m not going to talk to a police officer or to swear at them, then that’s what they’ll do. Television creates the perception for a lot of people because they have no real perception of dealing with the police.”

The GMP focus group suggested that mass media images of police also engendered expectations in the public about how the police might treat them.

For example, one GMP officer said:

“I think the thing for me is that it is so far from realistic, going up and talking to people or interviewing people. Everybody is aggressive with you or anti, everybody, as you said, carries on doing what they were doing. I mean, half the officers there, they never cautioned them or gave them the opportunity to have a solicitor present. It’s just completely procedurally inaccurate.”

The high level of aggression shown by both the public and the police (both male and female officers) in their interaction on *The Bill* was a key theme in the GMP focus group. They contrasted it with their own experiences and, as one officer commented, the need to get people onside and to trust them:

“When we deal with members of the public, we go in there to defuse a situation, not to escalate it. But that episode made us all look like we barge in, don’t take any notice of people’s work, what they might be doing and that every encounter is some kind of screaming match. And I think those sorts of shows make people think, make them hesitate about being willing to co-operate with us.

As Loftus (2009) points out, one of the legacies of the Macpherson Report (1999) was increasing pressure on the police organisation to understand themselves as “providers of a fair and equitable policing service” (Loftus 2009, p. x). She argues that underpinning this is the idea that “members of the public should be treated as though they are users of and stakeholders in

a public service – and central to this has been the redefinition of the public as police ‘customers’” (Loftus 2009, p. 61).

Nevertheless, while officers from the GMP were keen to emphasise that such depictions of police/public encounters were completely inaccurate, there may have been another element informing their responses. As mentioned previously, the Greater Manchester Police focus group was predominantly female. In her ethnographic study of two police forces, one urban, one rural, Loftus (2009) observed that, despite initiatives to redefine the police role, many officers in both forces seemed to believe that:

“the principle of treating members of the public as though they were customers was profoundly inconsistent with the police conception of what real policing was all about.” (Loftus 2009, p. 92)

She also makes the point that it would be inaccurate to portray all officers as subscribing to the crime fighter image of policing and that indeed operational policing encompasses a wide variety of functions, from peace keeping to order maintenance (Banton 1964; Reiner 1978). However, she suggests that in the main, it was female officers who adopted a more service-oriented approach to their work, a point made also by Martin (1980) and by Braithwaite and Brewer (1998):

“The tactical choices of male officers more often placed them at risk of physical confrontation ... Females were generally more supportive of citizens, preferring tactics which emphasized mutual power in the interaction.” (Braithwaite and Brewer 1998, p. 286)

Thus the perspectives of the GMP focus group may reflect a gendered reaction to interaction with the public, as well as the increasing emphasis by

public and politicians alike on the police adopting more sensitive and responsive approaches to communities (Foster 2003).

However, officers from both focus groups expressed concern over what they perceived to be the growing gulf between procedural accuracy and the kinds of police procedure shown in popular television drama. Instances cited were the fact that witnesses were often interviewed in a public place, officers walked into hospital wards without asking the permission of medical staff to interview injured suspects, handcuffs were not used when arrests were made and suspects were not informed of their rights to have solicitors present at interviews. This would seem to mirror their concern to emphasise that police powers are used in accordance with the safeguards set up by the Police and Criminal Evidence Act (1984), although a number of subsequent studies have debated the impact PACE has had on police attitudes and practice (Maguire 1988; Bottomley *et al.* 1991; McConville *et al.* 1991; Leng 1995).²⁴ Additionally, it is worth noting that, in a Home Office report on the impact of the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, Foster *et al.* (2005) suggested that officers were now alerted “to the possibility that their behaviour might be perceived and crucially, successfully defined in a way that was at odds with their own intention and perception” (Foster *et al.* 2005, p. 29). This ‘culture of anxiety’ (Loftus 2009, p. 146) in terms of police interactions with the public and of public perceptions of the organisation may also have influenced respondents’ answers and their emphasis that police procedure was always carried out in

²⁴ However, while implementation of PACE may be uneven, studies have also noted many changes in the working culture of policing (Loftus 2009). Morgan (1995) argues that the Act has dramatically reduced the risk of mistreatment and oppressive interviewing, while Brown (1997) suggests that, as a result of PACE, there is a greater professionalism in the areas of stop and search, entry, and arrest and detention.

accordance with PACE. Equally, it may have made these respondents even more reluctant to acknowledge any possibility of transgression within the organisation.

I asked the focus groups if they had ever found the public unwilling to engage with them because of something they had seen in a police drama such as *The Bill*. There were marked differences in response from MPS and GMP officers. The MPS focus group officers said that they had not experienced problems with members of the public as a result of anything they might have seen on television, but one GMP officer cited a specific example:

“The public go off what they’ve seen on the television and then they think, ‘Oh, I’m going to be a witness, I’m going to get petrol bombs through my front window, I’m going to get run off the road, I’m going to get threatened and I’m going to get assaulted.’ Now I know all the shootings we’ve worked on off Moss Side and I’ve never known one witness to get injured or actually ... but it’s the perception it creates. And then when we come to investigate a job, people all say, ‘Oh no, I’d rather not get involved.’ And we say, “Why, what’s been happening, what experience have you had that you’d rather not get involved?’ and they say, ‘Oh no, I’ve seen it on *The Bill*, I’ll be threatened, you’ll give them my name and address, I’ll have to go to court and stand up in front of others.’”

The same officer also commented that another common practice in television dramas – one featured in the episode I showed them – of pinning photographs of murder victims up on a whiteboard in the CID office was inaccurate and that, in her opinion, it inhibited victims’ families from giving photos to the police on occasion:

“Officer: You always see pictures of the victim stuck on the white board. You would never have that. That would be an abuse of your staff. It’d be bad enough to sit police officers looking at disembowelled bodies twenty-four hours a day, who are used to these sights, let

alone your civilian staff. It'd be emotional and sensory abuse. They just don't do it and it's disrespectful to the victim as well.

Marianne: It's so interesting, because you take all this for granted if you work in television, because these are the conventions of police drama.

Officer: Exactly, they're the conventions about how things should look and there has to be a white board ... But no, we don't have pictures of victims with their legs splayed and their knickers ripped, that's not the way it works."

The same officer made the point that, not only were such scenarios inaccurate, part of the problem was also that a lot of police procedure on police shows was also out of date.

"I don't know where they're getting their advisers from these days, or what advice they're getting ... but what seems to me, what's happened here, that the procedures were right when *The Bill* started ... but that's not the case here. It's like the show is stuck in the 1980s. If that. And I think that's the problem that they haven't done up-to-date research and it shows."

As I outlined in Chapters Four and Five, in the 1980s and 1990s, stories on *The Bill* were based on research and observation of police work. In the last ten years of the show, stories were generally based on other media sources with very little observational research being carried out in comparison to the previous decades. According to the focus group participant cited above, such out of date depictions hampered investigations:

"We need to be showing what you can do for witnesses who come forward. What we can do to protect them as much as we can. They're decades out of date and it really affects witnesses. But they don't believe that things have changed because they watch *The Bill* and that's not how it happens on *The Bill*. So I just can't see how people can say these shows don't affect public opinion."

However, conversely, both focus groups raised the point that, on occasion, television drama can be too realistic, especially in terms of depiction of forensic procedures. As one MPS focus group participant observed:

“The only thing I really object to on these sorts of things is when they do say how we deal with issues of forensic importance that are important to us and not commonly known outside of our fraternity. I mean, why on earth do you put all the cards on the table? We don’t have that many cards left in our deck at all. So why do we tell the whole world how to do this, how to avoid that. If you’re gonna show that sort of thing, could you at least send them down the wrong path.”

In the 1970s, respondents to Arcuri’s (1977) survey on how police officers in the United States viewed fictional depictions of their work were highly critical of the way in which police dramas portrayed the resources available to police for their investigations:

“They, the public, feel that all experts are at our fingertips ... as well as all up-to-date crime labs. In most cases, that’s crap.” (Arcuri 1977, p. 243)

Brunsdon (2000) argues that, since the late 1990s, there has been a shift in the police drama genre, with the focus moving away from the police as solvers of riddles to pathologists and criminal psychologists, and that a loss of faith in the police’s ability to solve crime has been replaced by the public’s desire to trust in the power of DNA to get results. In the last decade, programme makers have increasingly depicted the use of new forensic methods to catch criminals, rather than this being the sole preserve of pathologists. This is a move some officers said posed threats to their work. An MPS officer gave an example of this, citing how an episode of a police drama may have influenced offenders in a recent rape case and given them clues as to how to cover their DNA:

“Sorry, but you look at that girl in Tottenham, cause and effect. Caustic soda after multiple rape. Why did they do that? Because they’ve seen it gets through the DNA. It’s as simple as that. They’ve seen it on telly. You just sit there with your six pack and your spliff and it’s there in front of you. ‘Ooh, I do that, I won’t get caught next time. I’ll tell my mates.’ And it’s such an education for them. It’s just given away for free.”

In conclusion, there were considerable divergences in opinion between the two focus groups. Officers from the Metropolitan Police Service focus group felt public opinion of policing was much more likely to be shaped by direct interaction with the police than by the mass media, whereas officers from the Greater Manchester Police took an opposing view.

However, officers from both groups raised concerns about the increasingly inaccurate and out of date portrayals of aspects of police procedure. Officers from the Greater Manchester Police focus group felt that such inaccurate representations, notably the depiction of handling of witnesses, might have a negative impact on investigative police work. But officers from both focus groups felt that, on occasion, representations of policing could be too authentic, particularly where forensic “trade secrets” were being given away.

4. How do police officers perceive representations of policing might affect public perceptions and expectations of policing?

In his study of police attitudes towards media images of policing, Perlmutter (2000) draws on a study by Radelet and Carter (1994) to argue that citizens form expectations about the police from a variety of sources, including the mass media, and that if the police meet a member of the public’s expectations, that person is more likely to have a favourable image of the police. However, Perlmutter (2000) argues that problems arise when those

expectations are based upon unrealistic criteria, and that one of the main sources of unrealistic criteria by which the public judge the police is the mass media and, in particular, television drama.

A number of commentators (Arcuri 1977; Perlmutter 2000; Reiner 2003) have observed that, from the police's point of view, positive portrayals of policing can create almost as many problems as negative depictions, in terms of creating unrealistic public expectations about the police's speed and ingenuity of detection. This issue was raised in both focus groups, who noted inaccurate timescales, the compression of events and rapid resolution. Transitional, but necessary, events such as filing forms and completing paperwork are culled to make the narrative more interesting but, as an MPS officer pointed out, this can have a negative effect on members of the public:

"I think that's the thing that gets me, totally unrealistic timescales. The problem is, people do, whenever you speak to them, they say, oh, is it like *The Bill*? People have got this perception that our job is like that, and the fact that when we turn round and say it's gonna take a month to get this or it's gonna take weeks to get this, they think we're having 'em over, because they actually think we can get it straight away. And that's the problem, it's just totally unrealistic."

Perlmutter (2000) argues that officers conduct their work in what he calls "the fog of war"²⁵. Officers have to make rapid decisions based on scant data about the people they encounter or are about to encounter; knowing, in addition, that what they do will be judged by others. However, as Perlmutter (2000) goes on to argue, television police officers never operate in that "fog of war" and information inevitably comes thick and fast. Both focus groups commented on the unrealistic speed at which the characters received

²⁵ "The fog of war" was a phrase coined by the German military theorist, Carl Von Clausewitz (1780 – 1831), to note how unexpected developments in the field of battle called for rapid decision-making without a great deal of information on the part of military commanders.

information, getting phone records within twenty-four hours, and how such depictions failed to show the difficulties officers face each day in decision-making with limited information.

Initially, the MPS focus group participants doubted that television drama had any impact on public expectations and perceptions of policing. However, when I asked the MPS group if they thought specific details of the story-line might affect the public's perceptions of the police as an organisation, one MPS officer commented:

“... they see that and they think, right, we're all, you know, all corrupt, ain't we?”

The episode they watched was called *Corruption* and was about a young female police officer, Sally Armstrong's attempt to cover for a corrupt officer. Both focus groups believed the story-line depicted in this episode was inaccurate and showed a lack of research. One MPS officer commented that if an officer had been asked during the course of a raid in a nightclub to take a wrap of cocaine from another officer, the initial reaction might be to think it was an integrity test. However, the fact that the sergeant then attempted to cover up the young officer's mistake seemed to create the biggest controversy in the MPS group:

“I thought the problem with it at the beginning was, the skipper (Sergeant) when she actually confessed, he had a go at her, and was saying, you know, outrageous, blah, blah, and then, he then goes on her side and then starts trying to cover it all up and there was a comment at the end, we all gotta look after our own and each other, and you're thinking well, you know, people do actually believe this is exactly true and this is what happens, and this makes 'em out to be corrupt, really ...”

The key line of the episode, which triggered the most controversy in the discussion, was at the end where the young officer thanks the sergeant for covering up her mistake. The sergeant replies that, as police officers, “we have to look after our own”. A participant from the GMP focus group made the following comment:

“But the general public do all think the police all stick together, don’t they? You are one big gang, one big family and you have to look after each other and that’s taken to the extreme. We know that’s wrong.”

Another officer from the Greater Manchester Police commented that:

“It’s quite horrific to think about that episode and about public perception that we sweep things under the carpet like that.”

Although participants from both focus groups were at great pains to argue that the police had never been more accountable at any time in their history, and that any idea that the police “looked after their own” was simply erroneous, many commentators have emphasised the internal solidarity of police officers (Westley 1970; Cain 1973; Reiner 1978; Graef 1989; Skolnick and Fyfe 1993; Crank 1998; Waddington 1999a; Foster 2003). Reiner (2010) argues that this solidarity is engendered in part by the social isolation of police work: working shifts, difficulty switching off from the tension of the job and encountering as a matter of routine, hostility or fear from members of the general public (Loftus 2009). This isolation and sense of danger then in turn generate strong feelings of solidarity with colleagues (Skolnick 1966; Holdaway 1983; Loftus 2009). But while solidarity may, on one level, as Loftus (2009) argues, be beneficial for the police as an organisation because it produces high levels of team work and support for colleagues in potentially dangerous situations, the other side of the coin is that “an in-group

perspective can encourage the protection of colleague infringements of procedure” (Loftus 2009, p. 120). Thus, while internal solidarity and looking out for colleagues in beleaguered situations might be part of police culture, it would seem from the response of officers in both focus groups that the potentially negative aspects of this were something that officers would not wish to be made public on screen.

However, Foster *et al.* (2005) also make the point that, outside London, police officers felt that the findings of the Lawrence inquiry were indicative of the incompetence of the Metropolitan Police Service, rather than reflecting practices in the police service more broadly. Certainly officers in the MPS focus group were particularly sensitive to their depiction in the media:

“Our organisation now is so conscious of the media and the perception of us by the public, I can’t believe we actually endorse that programme (*The Bill*). I just think that’s absolutely incredible now, that is, that’s done us no favours at all, that programme.”

Officers from both focus groups acknowledged, as one MPS focus group participant put it, that corruption had “gone on in the past” but argued that this could no longer happen as police officers were under more scrutiny and more accountable for their actions than ever before (Foster *et al.* 2005):

“The rules can’t be bent sometimes even if we wanted to, and we don’t need to stick together because there’s nothing to stick together about.”

Newburn (1999) argues that a factor which enables “the bending of rules” to take place is that much police work is of low visibility in terms of being observed either by line management or by members of the public. Reiner (2010) argues that while implementation of PACE may have been patchy, a

number of changes – recording requirements, lay station visitors, enhanced access to solicitors, the introduction of CCTV in some stations – have opened up this low visibility of routine police work (Reiner 2010, p. 218) and have made officers more accountable for their actions. In addition, Punch (2009) notes that since the 1990s, the police have, as an organisation, adopted much more assertive tactics in dealing with police corruption. As he comments:

“In the 1990s, the Met, with other forces and with ACPO (Association of Chief Police Officers) had altered internal investigatory units from being complaint-based, reactive and not well resourced to becoming elite units with top-rate investigators using intelligence to chart networks of corrupt officers before moving into action.” (Punch 2009, p. 210)

However, Punch also makes the point that “like other workers, cops will continually, creatively and for a multiplicity of purposes bend and break the rules according to covert codes” (Punch 2009, p. 226). Indeed, he argues that this is a “persistent occupational reality” (Punch 2009, p. 226) and that “most if not nearly all front-line and street-level professionals – as well as many senior executives of leading corporations and once prestigious banks – employ some variation of this argument: ‘the rules don’t apply in this particular world’” (Punch 2009, p. 226). Thus, the suggestion by both focus groups that corruption is a thing of the past is not entirely plausible. It may now be harder for officers to “bend the rules” than in previous times but that is not to say that such practices are now eradicated (Punch 2009; Loftus 2009).

In conclusion, police officers from both groups felt on occasion that inaccurate depictions of police work might set up unrealistic expectations in

the public as to the police's speed and efficacy in solving crime. Officers from both focus groups also expressed concern over two aspects of representation of the organisation in the episode they viewed – aspects of procedure not complying with the stipulations laid out in the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984 and, secondly, portrayals of certain aspects of police sub-culture, in this case, police solidarity. In both cases, officers emphasised their increased accountability and transparency over the last decade and their belief that “corruption may have taken place in the past, but not now”. However, as Punch (2009) observes, “it is an illusion that [corruption] can be eradicated and we should anticipate that it will continually resurface” (Punch 2009, p. 234).

5. How might police officers wish to see themselves portrayed in television drama?

Focus group participants were asked how they would wish the police to be represented in television drama. The GMP group identified three important aspects of their work – black humour, the impact of some cases on police officers and what was called “the reality of police work”. They believed all three aspects would increase public understanding and support in ways that more attention to accuracy and detail would not. I consider each of the three aspects below.

Focus group participants believed that television police drama often left out the black humour²⁶ inherent in much of their work (Waddington 1999a;

²⁶ Black or “gallows” humour as a coping mechanism is not confined to the police, however, and can be found in other particularly fraught occupations (see Becker *et al.* 1961).

Perlmutter 2000), and that such humour was an important tool in increasing public support:

“Something like *Life on Mars* worked as it made people laugh. If you make people laugh, they automatically tend to side with you and warm to you.”

Buscombe (1976) argues that humour has always been an intrinsic part of police dramas, and argues that much of the appeal of *The Sweeney* “derives from the repartee between Regan and his colleagues, Regan and his superiors, Regan and the crooks” (Buscombe 1976, p.67). Similarly Garland and Bilby suggest that “laughing and joking about the job, the villains and each other” (Garland and Bilby 2011, p.119) was a key part of the success of more recent police dramas such as *The Cops* and *Life on Mars*. In *The Cops*, one officer jokes about the paperwork he has been saved by buying a young male prostitute breakfast rather than taking him to the police station while in *Life on Mars*, DCI Gene Hunt tells a suspect that he would sooner believe the snot in his handkerchief than listen to the lies he believes the suspect is spinning to him.

However, while the officers in the GMP focus group cited both *The Cops* and *Life on Mars* as examples of shows that in their opinion got “the humour about right”, they argued that by contrast, the humour in *The Bill* was too “sanitized”. Instead as one officer argued, the humour was simply not black enough and that what was omitted from most police dramas was the ways in which banter helped officers as a coping mechanism to deal with the horrors they often saw on a daily basis:

“I’ll give you an example. The team are all sitting there and the team all know they’re going to watch a video of the murder scene. And you

see people sitting there, laughing, joking, on ours, we've got this fella eating his second bacon butty and one of the girls says, "Bloody hell, you're gonna watch a murder scene." And he says, "If I didn't eat every time, I saw something gory, I'd be anorexic because that's all I do." Murders are abhorrent to most people but if that's all you work on and you let it stop you eating, that's all you all do. So he's sitting there, eating a bacon butty watching a murder scene. But he's doing that so he can keep going during the day. It's showing the reality of a briefing. We don't have people coming in and sitting down all stony faced and serious, they're laughing, they're joking, they're drinking coffee, they're taking the mickey out of each other and it's not disrespectful to the victim. It's their work and what they do. You have to banter and have a joke or else you'd go mad with what we see, and yeah, it does get pretty black sometimes. But I don't think the British public realise sometimes what people are capable of and what we see on a daily basis and that we crack jokes to get through the day. And I think it'd just increase support if we had a bit more of that in those shows."

GMP focus group participants also said that police dramas rarely portrayed accurately the effects of some cases on police officers. One Greater Manchester Police officer argued that too often the creators of television drama appeared to have very clichéd ideas of what stress did to police officers:

"But the way they show it at the moment in police drama is every man goes home, drinks too much and beats his wife and every policewoman feels guilty about neglecting her kids and putting her job first."

Garland and Bilby (2011) echo this, arguing that "an element which has longevity in policing dramas since the 1960s is the emotionally damaged character of some of the officers" (Garland and Bilby 2011, p.118). In the 1990s drama, *The Vice*, the lead character, Pat Chappel, is a divorced middle-aged alcoholic who frequently sleeps in his clothes; in another 1990s police drama, *Between The Lines*, the main protagonist, Tony Clark, regularly cheats on his wife with a string of other women before subsequently being played at his own game by a powerful older woman. In the same vein,

Leishman and Mason argue that female officers in television drama are often seen to lead similarly dysfunctional lives and that, in their words:

“...’equal’ opportunities appear to exist mainly in the sense that the loneliness of the microwavable meal for one, the emptiness of the emotionless casual sexual encounter, the discomfort of living with a noisy conscience and the inability of alcohol to dull the pain are now more regularly depicted by almost inevitable costs to be experienced by both female and male police characters.” (Leishman and Mason 2003, p.97)

However, as one officer argued succinctly:

“It’s a job. We don’t all hit the bottle or go home and beat our wives because of what we’ve seen. It’s a job and you just switch off. Same as doctors and nurses. But what I think we don’t see on television is that yes, some really painful cases can affect us. Anything to do with young kids, murders, rapes – that really, really gets to us. And again they don’t show that on television. How we’re so aware of the effect of our actions on the victim’s family and how we know when we knock on that door to tell them we’ve found their son, their daughter, we’re going to change their life forever. But also the effect it has on us too.”

The same officer suggested that if the public were to see the effect on police officers of dealing with sudden deaths, cot deaths or dealing with victims, that public support might be increased. She described the impact on a colleague who found the body of a missing child:

“He had searched it [the area where the child was found] and said he remembered seeing the bag but he didn’t look in it, he thought it was rubbish and it absolutely destroyed him, absolutely destroyed him. She was already dead, he could never have saved her but the fact as he was saying, that her little body was left lying there two weeks – and you could see where rats had gone into the bag and things like that. Just haunted that man.”

By contrast, researchers suggest that, from very early on in their careers, officers of both sexes (Martin 1979) learn that the expression of emotion is problematic. As Jackall (2007) suggests, “the whole construction of the police world depends on officers maintaining the appearance of a rugged

emotional distance, especially from the most emotion-laden and draining aspects of their work” (Jackall 2007, p. 236). Similarly, Silvestri (2003) argues that the male dominated police environment is one in which “expressing emotions signifies weakness and is devalued, whereas emotional detachment signifies strength and is valued” (Silvestri 2003, p. 131). However, this officer seemed to believe very strongly that public support might be strengthened if there was greater public understanding of aspects of their work that she had never seen depicted in story-lines – in particular, officers’ work with murder victims’ families:

“We’ll always return the clothing if they want them. And we’ll explain that some of it is damaged, some of it has been cut off at the hospital and obviously it’s got bloodstains on it and we’ll ask if they want it cleaned. And the amount of people who will say, “No, I don’t want it cleaned” and some people can’t understand that we’d go and give someone’s bloodstained shirt back – they can’t understand why you would want the blood on it. But they do, it’s not a biohazard to them, it’s part of their loved one.”

The idea of the “reality” or “humanity” of police work being rarely shown in television drama was the last aspect of police work which officers from the Greater Manchester Police argued was missing from television drama – more specifically the “service” aspects of their work such as the care taken in dealing with members of the public and families of victims.

As Foster (2003, p. 200) points out, despite the “image of fast cars and catching criminals”, policing is frequently a more mundane and routine activity than it is often portrayed in the media, popular fiction and by police officers themselves”. Banton’s (1964) early study found the police role was primarily ‘peace-keeping’ not law enforcement and that many aspects of their work were in fact very mundane – “waiting, boredom and paperwork”

(Banton 1964, p. 85) being a large part of it, and as Foster (2003) notes, over forty years later, the working practices of the police remain largely the same. Many observational studies support this and suggest that rather than speeding to the scenes of crime at high speed, the police, in fact, spend much of their time as “the only 24 hour service agency available to respond to those in need” (Morgan and Newburn 1997, p. 79), defusing disturbances, negotiating disputes and tending to a wide variety of accidents and emergencies (Punch and Naylor 1973; Skogan 1990; Bowling and Foster 2002; Loftus 2009). However, as Foster (2003) and Loftus (2009) argue, the obsession with excitement and the emphasis in police working culture on crime-fighting being ‘real’ police work, means that incidents that fail to fit this template are dismissed by some officers as “bullshit” (Van Maanen 1978). Foster (2003, p. 201) suggests that a consequence of officers’ attachment to the concept of “real policing” may lead to some of the social service tasks they are often asked to perform being perceived as a waste of time and effort and that these perceptions may extend to the treatment of victims, whose needs may be seen as detracting from their “real work” of catching offenders. As part of his study of American police officers’ perceptions of media images of their work, Perlmutter (2000) took numerous pictures of officers at work. He comments that he offered the officers a chance to look at these photos and that:

“Overwhelmingly their preferences, the pictures that they stopped to comment on and ask for copies of, were action pictures: cops with guns raised, cops running, struggles with suspects, moments of anger on the street. Pictures displaying the procedural aspects of police work were flipped past without comment. (Perlmutter 2000, p. 13)

Echoing the comments of Banton (1964), Perlmutter (2000) also discovered that when out on patrol with officers, he was frequently told that this was “pretty dull stuff” or sarcastically, after a night of very few calls, that he had just witnessed “another action-packed adventure” (Perlmutter 2000, p. 7). As Perlmutter (2000) comments, “to be a cop, to wear the dark uniform, the badge and the gun, is to compete with a counterpart on the screen” (Perlmutter 2000, p. 22) and that counterpart, according to Perlmutter and the officers he observed, stresses the crime-fighting elements of policing or “cop as saviour and enforcer of justice” (Perlmutter 2000, p. 30).

By contrast, the GMP focus group suggested that public understanding of the police role, and respect for the police as an organisation, might be increased by depicting the service-based elements of the police role in police dramas. One of the officers in the focus group who also worked as a police adviser for television shows described how, when dealing with road traffic fatalities, every aspect of their interaction was carefully thought about, right down to the type of bag in which property would be returned:

“I think Yorkshire were the first ones who said we’ve got to get a property bag that we can take property back. And someone said, “Okay, we’ll just get some bags.’ But a lot of people, they’ve lost a husband or they’ve lost a son in a motorcycle crash, they can’t open it. They put it away in cupboard and they might decide two years later they can’t stay in that house any more. So they go to move and then they find this bin bag and they don’t even know what it is, they rip it open and bang, they’re right back on the floor again. So you have to have something that is recognisable – how do you do it? Can’t be black because that’s rubbish bags. Let’s have them green? No, green’s for garden rubbish. The thought that goes into the bags ...”

As the same officer argued, such elements of care and thought on the part of the police for victims’ families is rarely, if ever, shown in police dramas – yet

in her opinion, such depictions could only increase support for the police and what she described as the “reality” of police work.

“Maybe if they (television drama makers) did show that, what we do when someone’s killed, then maybe the public would be more sympathetic towards the police. But instead they just show us trying to solve the crime, trying to get the man and that’s what they think policing is about, about catching criminals when that’s just one small part of it, even for us in our job.”

A number of caveats need to be added to this. Waddington (1999a) argues that the glorification of action and excitement in police sub-cultures is linked with a cult of masculinity, while earlier studies (Heidensohn 1992) argue that, in terms of beliefs and values, female officers also appear to value the same aspects of policing as their male counterparts. Bryant *et al.* (1985), for example, argue that when women officers complained about sex discrimination, it usually referred to their being prevented from doing “real police work”. However, the GMP focus group seemed to take a quite different stance in wishing television companies provided a more “accurate” portrayal of police work, as one officer put it, in terms of showing the service-oriented aspects of the job.

As Loftus (2009) points out, there have been many developments in the British policing landscape, many of which could be expected to transform police culture or cultures. There has been, according to Loftus, a notable increase in the number of minority ethnic, female, gay and lesbian officers. Added to that, as Loftus (2009) argues, in the wake of the Macpherson Report (1999), a pivotal development in policing has been “the emergence of respect for diversity and recognition of cultural and gendered identities in policing discourse and practice” (Loftus 2009, p. x).

With that in mind, it could be argued that changes in the field in terms of a more diverse society and in terms of greater political sensitivity around policing may have led to changes in police cultures and that this is reflected in the GMP focus group's emphasis on wishing to see the service elements of their role reflected in television drama. But while Loftus argues that "the police organisation is an environment where alternative cultures are emerging to challenge old ones" (Loftus 2009, p. 81), Loftus also makes the point that, in her view, it is important not to overstate the extent to which these cultures have displaced the dominant white, male heterosexual culture in the police organisation and that, despite changes in the police climate, "a recalcitrant perspective has emerged from white, heterosexual officers towards the new realities" (Loftus 2009, p. 63). Thus it is important to note that the only suggestion from the predominantly male MPS group was the inclusion of more black humour and banter and it is also important to note once more that the GMP group was led by a DI who was also a police adviser for a number of police shows. As a result, she may have taken a much more reflexive approach in making suggestions as to depictions of policing in television drama.

To sum up, participants said that there were three aspects of police work that rarely featured in representations of policing in crime fiction. These were the black humour officers employ to help them with the stresses of the job; the effects of some cases on officers; and a depiction of the more service-based aspects of their job rather than the media emphasis on crime control. Some officers suggested that the inclusion of these elements might give the public

a more realistic picture of police work and, thereby, increase public understanding and decrease unrealistic expectations.

6. Conclusion

Although the focus group data is inevitably limited and confined to the perceptions of a small number of officers from two specialist teams within two different forces, it does demonstrate those officers' perceptions as to the effects of mass media representations on the public and offer some insight into the ways in which those officers wished to have their organisation portrayed in the media.

A number of themes emerged from the focus groups. Initially MPS officers expressed scepticism about the impact of mass media representations on public perceptions of policing, while GMP officers suggested that, on occasion, such images had affected investigative work and had an impact on the public's expectations of the police. However, both groups expressed concern over the gulf between the types of procedure shown on *The Bill* and correct police procedure and about the story-line depicting a sergeant attempting to cover up for another junior officer and how such representations might affect public understanding of policing.

However, in terms of how the police themselves might wish to be represented in television drama, a number of key themes emerged. Firstly, officers argued that television police drama frequently omitted the kinds of black humour and banter employed to cope with the stresses of the job and that any humour shown was often "sanitized" and too "nicey-nice". Secondly, officers from the GMP group argued that too often television police drams

depicted a clichéd view of the effect of stress on officers, depicting both male and female officers as often dysfunctional and unable to form stable relationships outside work. Instead, focus group participants argued that they would prefer to see depictions of the effects of certain cases on officers, particularly those involving children, even though much research suggests that showing emotion is often problematic for both male and female officers and can be seen as a sign of weakness. Finally, again although much research suggests that it is the action-packed, machismo-laden, crime-fighting aspect of the job so often captured in police dramas that is particularly valued by male and female officers alike, officers from the GMP group argued for more depiction of the service-oriented aspects of the police role in television drama as a way of increasing public understanding of the police role and decreasing unrealistic public expectations.

Interestingly, although this was not mentioned in either focus group, between 1983 and 2001, the aim of *The Bill* was to tell stories about the “small change of policing” and to focus on the service-oriented aspects of the police role. In Chapter Eight, one of the issues I will discuss is whether the move away from telling such stories led in part to the decline in popularity of *The Bill* and whether a return to showing the service based role of the police on the show might have halted its demise.

Chapter Eight: The function and importance of the television police show in shaping public understanding

1. Introduction

In this thesis, I have endeavoured to produce an account of the process of storytelling during the twenty-six year history of the television police drama, *The Bill*. Although previous commentators (Clarke 1986; Reiner 1994; Rafter 2006; McLaughlin 2007) have suggested that changes in the storytelling process in television drama are, in part, due to shifts in public attitude, changes in the political climate and changes in the genre, I suggest that in the case of *The Bill*, a complex and interlocking set of factors including commercial imperatives, working processes, the fluctuating economic climate of the television industry and the constraints of the format also played a part in determining how and why representation of the police changed over the show's twenty-six year history. I also suggest that, at times, depiction of the police on *The Bill* was at odds with what was actually happening in everyday policing, indicating that these structural factors may indeed be more important at any one time in determining storytelling in television police drama than changes in the genre or wider political climate

However, as Elliott (1972) points out, one of the aims of case study research is to move from the particular to the general. In this chapter, I start by discussing the effect of being an "insider" on my research and its impact on my findings. I then summarise the key points of the thesis, before moving on

to discuss three key issues. Firstly I discuss the lifecycle of the police show and whether or not the demise of the show had been hastened by its move away from stories about the “small change of policing” towards “grittier” and more sensationalized narratives. Secondly I discuss the function of the police drama. Although Sparks (1992) puts a forceful case that part of the pleasure viewers derive from watching these dramas derives from their “dramatic moral structure of outrage and reassurance” (Sparks 1992, p. 4), I argue that it is important to differentiate between different sub-genres of the police show. I suggest that in the case of the police procedural, or what Reiner (2010) terms the “community police show” where the emphasis is on the non-crime fighting aspects of the police role, this sub-genre has another important function – to inform as well as entertain. Lastly I address the issue of media power. Throughout my thesis, echoing the words of Silverstone (1985) that there is “a certain arbitrariness – a serendipity – at the heart of documentary practice” (Silverstone 1985:164), I have made the case that the same arbitrariness lies at the heart of television drama. In this last section I explore the implications of the haphazard nature of television drama production and the fact that the makers have only limited control over content, given that such representations are so important in shaping public understanding of the police role and function in society (Reiner 2010).

2. Being an insider: fielding familiarity

In Chapter Two, I briefly discussed briefly the advantages of being an insider in terms of gaining access. Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) argue however that outsiders and insiders can be exposed to “different kinds of methodological dangers” (Hammersley and Atkinson 2007, p.87). They

suggest that while outsiders may either fail to understand the orientations of participants or misunderstand the behaviour being observed, the insider may be prone to bias in analysis through what they describe as “over-rapport”. “Inside” researchers may also run the risk of being identified with particular groups or individuals so that their social mobility in the field may be hampered.

As I described in Chapter Two, the processes and meetings that I observed were meetings and processes to which I would not normally have been privy as a writer, so I was able to view these with what Rock describes as the “outsider’s puzzlement” (Rock 2001, p.33). But I also believe that had I not been an insider, viewing these proceedings with an “insider’s understanding” (Rock 2001, p.33), I might have assumed that the way in which stories were being developed on the show at the time of observation was the way in which stories had always been created. As a result, my research analysis might very well have just concentrated on story processes at a particular point in time and how these affected representation of the police and policing during this period – and, I would argue, would possibly be the poorer for it. However, as someone who had worked as a writer on the show during different periods of its history, I was aware that what I was observing was a very different process to the process of script development on the show in the 1980s and 1990s and it was that awareness of change – of trying to discover what forces had led to the changes in working processes and, as a consequence, the changes in the stories being told about the police on *The Bill* – that was to underpin the whole of this study.

Another possible danger of being an 'insider' is, according to Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), the risk of over-identifying with certain groups in the field and, as a result, personally identifying with their perspectives. At times, in analyzing my data, I did wonder if my bias leaned too heavily in favour of the "good old days" when writers were accorded more creative autonomy on the show, and whether I was too critical of the new regime and of the stories being told. However, other ethnographies such as Born's (2005) ethnography of the BBC also took a similar stance and argued that, as a result of the massive changes in the industry and the arrival of cable and satellite television in the 1990s, the climate changed from one in which "wayward and contrary 'creative' people" (Born 2005, p. 69) were valued and given considerable autonomy in their work to one in which producers and writers were "disempowered, their creative latitude curtailed" (Born 2005, p. 307).

Whereas Born's (2005) study concentrates on how these changes affected key decision-makers at the BBC – controllers of various genres, heads of departments, commissioning editors and so on – my study explores how those changes affected those actually involved in making a programme day-to-day, how those changes had an impact on working processes and the culture of those involved in the creation of scripts and, key to this study, representation of the police and policing. In the next section I briefly review those findings before moving on to discuss the wider issues raised by my research.

2.1 Representation of the police on The Bill 1983 – 2001: "the small change of policing"

In contrast to other police dramas screened during the 1980s and 1990s, which tended to focus on major crimes such as murder investigations, representation of police work on *The Bill* focused on what one of the early executive producers of the show described as the “small change of policing”. Crimes and incidents featured during the first eighteen years of the show’s existence tended to be the kinds of incident that would be handled by a small police station in South London. The “identity” of *The Bill* during the first eighteen years of its existence was a police show that, by contrast to shows such as *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* and their imagery of police work as a “hard-hitting, fast-paced, testosterone-fuelled ‘you’re nicked’ fantasy of urban detective work” (McLaughlin 2007, p. 105), instead emphasised the mundanity and “social service” aspect of policing (Cumming *et al.* 1965; Bittner 1967; Bayley 1994; Reiner 2000b).

Before a writer was even invited to submit potential story ideas, it was expected that he or she would already have some working knowledge of policing, through making contacts in his or her home town and spending time observing police work. Once accepted into the “pool” of regular contributors, writers were expected to continue spending time observing police work. This was made possible by the police advisers, retired officers employed full-time by the show and whose other task was to advise on story-lines, in terms of ensuring scripts were as accurate as possible in depicting police procedure. All of the writers interviewed who worked on the show stressed the emphasis placed by script editors and producers alike on receiving story ideas that were based directly on first-hand observation of everyday police work.

However, although story ideas were based on research and observation, much seemed to be omitted from the representation of the police on the show during its early years. By contrast with many of the sociological accounts of policing (see section 4 of Chapter Four), issues of racism and sexism were not touched upon, even though, as Leishman and Mason (2003) argue:

“the existence and persistence of widespread discrimination and sexual harassment within and by the police service has been attested to by countless academic studies, journalistic exposes and official reports” (Leishman and Mason 2003, p.94)

During the 1990s, the sexual discrimination claim brought by former Assistant Chief Constable Alison Halford, who was at the time Britain’s highest ranking female officer, highlighted the problems of female police officers seeking promotion through the ranks, while the Macpherson Report (1999) indicted the police service as being “institutionally racist”. The 1980s and 1990s were also marked, as I discuss in Chapter Four, by a number of cases of police abuses leading to miscarriages of justice, notably the Guildford Four, Birmingham Six and the Tottenham Three. Yet during this period on the show, the police were invariably depicted as “whiter than white” and any illegality confined to a single character and invariably of a minor nature (Mason 1992).

In his work on production processes on the Irish soap opera, *Glenroe*, Devereux (1998) argues that two factors are key in shaping content – the ideologies of the makers and the constraints of the format. In terms of news production, Chibnall (1977) argues that one reason for positive representation of the police is the need for reporters to maintain good

relationships with sources. Interestingly, although the makers of the show during the 1980s and 1990s were also aware of the need to maintain good relationships with their police contacts (see Chapter Five), both script editors and writers from this period state that the main feedback they got from police contacts and the police advisers was the need for accuracy in the portrayal of police work. Another former script editor recalled that, whenever writers submitted stories that were less than favourable to the police, such stories were vetoed by the executive producer, not the police advisers (Sydney-Smith 2002, pp. 143–5).

In Chapter Five, I discuss how one of the show's former producers was adamant that a key reason for favourable representation of the police on the show at this time lay in the executive producer's own personal ideology and that "he thought it was right and proper we should look up to the police and respect the job they did."

However, while the executive producer acknowledged that he believed it was part of the show's remit and "contract with the audience" to show the police in a trustworthy light, he also pointed out that the very structure of the show (Drummond 1976) prevented *The Bill* from portraying the regular police characters in a negative light. As discussed in Chapter Five, he explained:

"It was because if we had had those elements in Sun Hill, they wouldn't, they wouldn't have cropped up suddenly. They would have been there. And so it creates problems for continuity if you, if you have somebody that is known about as, regarded as a fairly dodgy constable or sergeant or whatever, then this would be part of the background knowledge and awareness and you couldn't suddenly have it coming up. Whereas if it happens in another police station, then that's different ... We never decided until fairly late in the day on our programme transmission schedule so we might decide for all sorts of reasons to change the transmission schedule from a draft and if

we'd had those considerations around our necks as well as all the other problems of continuity, then that would have been an unnecessary, a deeply unnecessary constraint."

Similarly the format of the show also prevented writers from tackling issues such as racism and sexism. While writers enjoyed a considerable degree of autonomy in creating stories, the format of the show placed severe limitations on the kinds of stories they could tell about the police. As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, between 1983 and 2001, episodes were not serialized and could be shown at any time. It also meant that, because scripts were not scheduled months in advance, it was almost impossible to predict whether or not a particular character would be available for shooting and writers were therefore encouraged to write stories that could easily be given to another of the regular characters at the last minute. However, in terms of representation of the police on the show, the fact that characters were interchangeable meant that, although writers were able to tell stories about the business of policing, the format militated against their being able to discuss issues such as gender, race and sexual politics. In Chapter Five, I discuss how in 1994 *The Bill* introduced television's first ever black female detective inspector but, as one writer explained, the format made it impossible to explore issues that might have faced a real-life counterpart:

"We had to tell stories that were mainly about her solving crimes and not about her being a black woman police officer. Because at the end of the day that story might have to go to another actor, simply because they were the only ones available for filming so we couldn't make our stories that specifically tailored for one character."

However, as I also discuss in Chapter Five, it was extremely rare for writers to be allowed to tell stories about black or Asian offenders. This was in part

due to a concern on the part of the makers to avoid charges of racial or ethnic stereotyping, but also in part, as one producer argued, due to the fact that the writing team were mainly composed themselves of white, middle-class, middle-aged men (Mason 1992). As one writer put it:

“Maybe there’s something distasteful about some old white guy trying to write about a world he doesn’t understand”.

As discussed in Chapters Four and Five, during the 1980s and early 1990s, the television industry was relatively stable and both BBC and ITV were well financed. As a result, the makers of the show had very little pressure on them, if any, from the ITV Network in terms of attracting audiences or specific audience demographics and were afforded considerable autonomy in terms of determining the content of the show. However, while commercial imperatives generally played a secondary part in determining content of the show and representation of the police during this period, during the final phase of the show’s existence these same imperatives were to inform every stage of the decision-making process in terms of story-telling on the show. In the next section, I summarise how commercial imperatives and, in particular, the demands of the ITV Network that the makers of the show should tell stories that would appeal to a younger audience, had an influence on story content and in the depiction of the police and policing on *The Bill*.

2.2 Representation of the police on The Bill 2001 – 2010: “a cast of murderers, psychopaths, child molesters and arsonists, all of them in police uniform”²⁷

²⁷ From a review of the show in *The Guardian* (25 June 2005).

In her study of British soap operas, Henderson (2007) argues that the single most important factor in determining content of stories is commercial – whether or not a story idea will appeal to audiences. While in the 1980s and 1990s commercial imperatives were secondary to other factors in helping to shape story content, from the mid-1990s and the advent of multi-channel programming, these imperatives came to the fore in deciding what stories should be told about the police on *The Bill* and what form these stories should take.

As I discussed at length in Chapters Four and Five, pressure for the first time was placed upon the makers of the show not only to garner high audience ratings but also to attract a specific demographic – the 16-34 age group or the age-group most attractive to advertisers and sponsors by virtue of their supposed malleability in terms of product preferences. (See Chapter Five for a fuller discussion of this).

In order to attract this demographic, the makers made a number of key changes to the format. Firstly, the show became a serial with an emphasis for the first time on telling stories about the police characters' personal lives. The shows that had attracted the highest ratings on both BBC and ITV in the early and mid 1990s with this audience were soap operas, both British shows such as *Coronation Street*, *Emmerdale* and *EastEnders* and also imported shows, particularly Australian soap operas such as *Neighbours*, which had a large student following in the 1980s and 1990s (Henderson 2007).

The second key change was to feature more serious crimes on the show. Previously the show had had a deliberate policy of only featuring the kinds of

crimes that might reasonably be dealt with by a small South London police station. Now, however, the show would deal with serious crime such as drug and people smuggling, which in reality would be the domain of specialist squads. The decision was partly influenced by the influx of American shows such as *CSI* and *The Shield*, being shown for the first time on British television, dealing with crimes of often a violent and sexual nature. By comparison with such shows, as discussed in Chapter Five, “the previous emphasis on petty crime on *The Bill* seemed to be old-fashioned and behind the times”.

The third key change was in the nature of stories being told about the police. In Chapter Five, I describe how the new executive producer, brought in to steer the show through the changeover into a serial, had wanted to tell what he described as more contemporary stories about the police. However, unlike previous executive producers who spent much time with the Metropolitan Police cultivating good relations in return for assistance with story concepts, locations for shooting episodes and loan of equipment, the new executive producer admitted that he had very little time to talk to the police. His main concern was to “tell stories that would get the ratings” and, in his first year, his two main stories were about a gay officer who falls in love with another officer engaged to be married and about an officer with a serious drug problem.

It was certainly the case that, under the old format of the show, a story exploring the complexities of an officer with a serious drug problem, “getting addicted, trying to do his job, getting found out”, as the then executive producer described it, would not have been possible, as any such story

would have had to be resolved neatly by the end of the episode. It was also certainly the case that the new format afforded opportunities for the writers to explore issues such as racism, sexism and corruption in ways they had hitherto been unable to do. However, two factors militated against any in-depth treatment of these issues. Firstly, in an increasingly unstable media landscape, where, after an initial boost in ratings to nine million by the end of 2002, ratings steadily declined (BARB 2002-2005), storylines became increasingly sensationalised. One storyline involved a male rape where the victim was one of the detective constables, another featured an attempt by one of the uniformed officers to blow up the police station with a petrol bomb, yet another featured the suicide of the Chief Superintendent after raping his wife. Secondly, as a result of changes to working practices, necessitated by the change in format, storylines were increasingly less based on research and observation. Whereas previously stories were generated and developed by the freelance writers, now that the show was a serial, in order to ensure continuity of the story-lines, stories were developed in-house by a story production team. However, because stories were now told in sequence, once commissioned, the shooting and screening date were immovable. There was very little time for research on the part of the story production team, responsible for creating the story outlines, or on the part of the writers, who had the task of developing those outlines into scripts. The lack of time for research also meant that stories were no longer based on research and observation but instead on other media sources. In turn, this meant the role and importance of the police adviser on the show had changed. Whereas, under the old regime, there was an emphasis on representing police

procedures as accurately as possible on the show, under the new regime, one adviser noted, “they [the story team] weren’t concerned about getting it right, they were concerned about getting audiences”. As another police adviser noted dryly:

“In the past we used to say if something had happened in the UK to a police force, we could feature it – now it was whether or not it had happened somewhere in the world. They (the story team) didn’t seem to realise that different forces have very different ways of dealing with crime.”

Thus, although the makers of *The Bill* were still claiming the show reflected “the reality of policing in the 21st century” and that stories were actually “grittier” than in the 1980s and 1990s, the narratives were actually increasingly less grounded in any kind of observation or knowledge of contemporary policing issues. Stories were not only being told by fewer people – a story team of four or five, as opposed to fifty or sixty – but, as described at length in Chapter Six, were being based almost exclusively on media sources. Thus, at a time when the police service was undergoing significant reform in the wake of the Macpherson Report (1999), depiction of the police on *The Bill*, despite changes in “real-life” policing, was becoming ever more controversial and sensational. Interestingly, one of the recommendations of the Macpherson Report (1999) was the recruitment of more minority ethnic officers and, in the early 2000s, it was notable that even more black and Asian officers were being featured on the show (Lines 1995), including for the first time a black Chief Superintendent. However, the reason for this was once again informed by purely commercial motives, rather than any mirroring of reforms within the police service as a whole. Instead, the then executive producer argued that in order to attract a young and ethnically

diverse audience, he needed to reflect that diversity in the cast of the show (Intintoli 1984):

“From an ITV commercial point of view, a huge proportion of the population is non-white. If you want to get as many viewers as possible, you need to reflect, y’know, the demographic of your potential audience.”

However, he also claimed that, as a viewer in the 1990s, he too had noticed the dearth of black and Asian offenders on the show and the tendency to make offenders and victims on the show older and middle-class (Mason 1992; Surette 1998; Reiner 2003; 2007a). In order to fend off accusations of stigmatizing certain ethnic groups, he decided to counter this by creating morally upstanding black police characters in senior management positions on the show. In other words, commercial imperatives rather than a desire to reflect changes in the police service were informing decision-making in terms of the story development process.

In summary, although there have been numerous studies of the content of crime films and television police dramas, this is one of the few studies to examine how factors such as commercial imperatives, organizational factors, ideological values of the makers and constraints of the format affect content of a show – and how different sets of factors at different times in the show’s history had an impact on the ways in which police roles and police work were represented. In the next section, I discuss the broader issues arising from my findings. I start by discussing the lifecycle of police dramas. In particular, I explore whether the demise of the show was simply, as Peter Fincham, the then Head of Programmes at the ITV Network, put it, that “times change and

so do the tastes of our audience” (*The Guardian*, 27 March 2010) or whether other factors were at play in contributing to falling viewing figures.

3. The lifecycle of the police drama

Lacey (2000) argues that “the TV cop programme is one of the most interesting genres broadcast on television” as it “is a genre that is constantly being reinvented as new variations are tried in an attempt to replace tiring cornerstones of the schedules” (Lacey 2000, p.224). In the early days of television, Reiner (1994) suggests that each new reinvention of the police drama was heralded as yet another “departure in realism” (Reiner 1994, p.21) and that the very early police procedurals which preceded *Dixon of Dock Green*, emphasized that their stories came straight from police sources. Reiner (1994) recounts how episodes of the early American police series, *Dragnet*, always emphasized that the stories audiences were about to see were based on true events and that “only the names have been changed to protect the innocent” while the 1950s cinema series, *Scotland Yard*, opened “with presenter Edgar Lustgarten – ‘the world’s foremost authority on crime and criminals’ – reaching for a file inside a record room at the Yard and beginning to read from it” (Reiner 1994, p.21-22). But as Reiner (1994) goes on to argue, each new series was seen as a step nearer verisimilitude. *Dixon of Dock Green* was a new departure in focusing on the comparatively humdrum routine of the uniformed constables and divisional CID of a local police station while *Z Cars* was perceived, in turn, as a shocking new exercise in “debunking the police image” and “puncturing the goody-goody portrayal of Dixon” (Reiner 1994, p.22).

The early police dramas were also based very much on case material and observation of police work. Sydney-Smith (2002) notes how, in the early days of *Dixon of Dock Green*, one of the show's writers, Ted Willis, advertised in the *Police Gazette* for serving officers to contact him with story ideas for the show in return for payment while writers for *Z Cars* spent time with the Lancashire police and wrote scripts based on their observations. However, the practice of basing scripts on case material and observation slowly petered out as more and more episodes of *Z Cars* were commissioned each series – writers no longer had the luxury of spending weeks or months at a time observing police work. In the case of *Softly, Softly*, the spin-off series to *Z Cars*, stories were no longer created “from the raw material of the police themselves – but from the writer's own imagination” (Sydney-Smith 2002, p.190).

By the time *The Sweeney*, a show featuring the activities of the Flying Squad, was screened in the 1970s, as mentioned earlier in the chapter, it was standard practice on shows for stories to be developed in-house by a creative production team and the finished format or story-line given to the freelance writers to develop further (Paterson 1976). But, as Sparks (1992) suggests, the move away from basing story material on casework and observation was also mirrored by the fact that “the realist imperative was itself attenuated” (Sparks 1992, p.26) in terms of depiction of the police.

Firstly, there was, in terms of fictional output of police work in television in the 1970s, a decline of interest in the work of the uniformed branch of the police and an increasing interest in firstly the work of the CID and from there a

concentration on the more specialized services such as the Flying Squad and Special Branch (Sparks 1992). Clarke (1986) comments:

“It should be remembered that the concept of ‘serious crime’ had assumed particular connotations by the early 1970s: it referred to crimes involving large amounts of money and large amounts of violence and usually both. *The Sweeney* legitimated the transition to violence as part of the routine of police work by locating the fiction within the framework of that section of the police force most likely to deal with violence in the course of its work. The Flying Squad was an ideal vehicle for this fictional representation both in terms of the internal logistics of the genre and the concerns of the law and order debate outside of the series” (Clarke 1986, p.221)

In Chapter One, I discussed how both Reiner (1994) and Clarke (1986) suggested that the change of the police image in *The Sweeney* was due in part to a change in the crime film genre, and the characterisation of the cop as vigilante in films such as the *Dirty Harry* trilogy and *The French Connection*, and in part connected to the advent of law and order as a major political theme in the 1970s. In terms of the actual storytelling however, Sparks (1992) argues that the change in genre not only resulted in harsher, more combative heroes in police drama but also a corresponding move away from the “realistic” element which had hitherto characterized the police show:

“the increasing distance of the sphere of dramatic action from public experience affords greater dramatic licence, more schematic narratives, more action and less contamination by the equivocations of the real” (Sparks 1992, p. 27)

The irony, according to Sparks (1992), was that a demand for a new “definition of the aesthetic plausibility in the representation of policing” resulted in “the ever greater removal of the sphere of action from everyday experience and concerns [of policing]” (Sparks 1992, p.27).

By the 1980s, the wheel had turned full circle and the launch of *The Bill* in 1984 with its emphasis on “the smaller everyday concerns which affect people and their property” (Sydney-Smith 2002, p.83) was seen as a return to realism after the excesses of the hard-hitting series of the 1970s. *The Bill* also heralded a return in working methods to the police series and story-documentaries of the 1950s and 1960s with writers and indeed members of the production team, as described in Chapters Four and Five, being required to immerse themselves in the minutiae of police work and to base stories on observations of policing.

However, as described earlier in this chapter, despite an insistence that stories needed to be based on research and observation, the constraints of the format meant that much was left out of the picture on the show – for example, issues of racism, sexism and corruption. Such issues were taken up by other seminal series of the 1990s such as *Prime Suspect*, which dealt with sexism and racism, and *Between The Lines*, which examined corruption, both individual and institutional within the force, the latter series being co-created by a former writer and script editor from *The Bill*. Indeed one of the co-creators in a personal interview said that *Between The Lines* had come about because of the constraints on storytelling on *The Bill*:

“Basically the stories we wanted to write, we couldn’t tell on *The Bill*, we wanted to test the characters, put them in situations we couldn’t put them in on that show so we came up with our own series, to draw on all the material we had but couldn’t use, about the police investigating the police.”

However, in October 1998, the biggest challenge to *The Bill*’s claim of being the “only show to really illustrate the reality and mundanity of everyday

policing” as one script editor put it, came from a new BBC 2 drama, *The Cops*. Like *The Bill*, it was filmed in a quasi-documentary style (Leishman and Mason 2003); like *The Bill*, writers were encouraged to spend time with serving officers and to base their stories on the events and incidents they witnessed out on the beat; but unlike *The Bill*, there were no “heroes”, crimes were very often unresolved, and rather than offering viewers “reassurance that their ordinary everyday concerns were being met” (Sydney-Smith 2002, p.83) stories instead dealt with “the depressing realities of urban contemporary policing” (McLaughlin 2007, p.107). Officers, by contrast with the “whiter than white” (Mason 1992) characters of *The Bill*, were depicted as “flawed, individualistic, sexually predatory, and frequently brutal...pursu[ing]personal vendettas...[and doling] out their own brand of street justice” (McLaughlin 2007, p.107-108).

Although McLaughlin (2007) argues that “*The Cops* gave permission to *The Bill*, in turn, to court further controversy and scandal for ratings purposes” (McLaughlin 2007, p.109), as I have argued throughout this thesis, the advent of multi-channel programming and the consequent economic instability of the television industry was far more instrumental in bringing about drastic change to the show’s format and working processes. Certainly, as I discuss in Chapter Five, both executives at the ITV Network and the makers of the show were aware of the challenge posed by series such as *The Cops* and the influx of the highly sophisticated, complex US dramas such as *The Shield*, *The Wire* and *CSI*. Next to these shows, *The Bill* appeared as hopelessly out of touch with the “reality” of policing as had *Dixon of Dock Green* in the face of *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals*. As

Cosgrove (1996) notes, the police officer in television drama was moving “from being a lawman to a flawed, impulsive and para-criminal character who is profoundly damaged by society as well as guarding it” (Cosgrove 1996, p.12).

Although the response of *The Bill*'s makers to changes in the television landscape and the impact of these new police dramas was to change the show's format, that would allow them to explore issues such as corruption, racism, sexism and homophobia, changes in working practices and the need to court a younger demographic resulted in stories becoming more controversial and less grounded in the minutiae of everyday policing – although the show still billed itself as a police procedural dealing with the “business of policing in the 21st century”, as one executive put it. In short, history repeated itself – just as in the 1970s, *Dixon of Dock Green* with its emphasis on the mundanity of police work appeared tired and out of touch compared with the hard-hitting, grittier action series such as *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals*, so too *The Bill* appeared an anachronism alongside shows such as *The Cops* and *CSI*.

As I outlined in Chapter Five, despite yet another re-launch in 2005, audience figures continued to fall to three million in 2010 from regular ratings of 14-18 million in the mid to early 1990s when the show's popularity was at its peak (BARB). I was unable to get any comment from the production team on the reasons for the show's demise in 2010, other than the comments quoted earlier from the then Head of Programmes, suggesting that changes in audience taste was the main factor. However, it is interesting to note that the show's viewing figures were at their highest in the 1990s, when the

show's stories were still based on research and observation and that officers from both of the focus groups I ran as part of my research (see Chapter Seven) spoke most fondly of the show during this period when, as one MPS officer suggested, "it was more authentic". Certainly the advent of multi-channel programming creating greater choice for the viewer, the advent of the internet and, with it, the arrival of the home computer as yet another alternative leisure activity to television watching must have contributed in part to falling viewing figures. However, it may be worth conjecturing in these last pages if there were other reasons why the depiction of the "small change of policing" had proved far more popular than the more controversial stories of the 2000s, even though in the last ten years of the show's history the makers had been more conscious than ever in attempting to create stories to appeal to a certain demographic.

In the next section I discuss the function of the police show, particularly the sub-genre that Reiner (2010) describes as the "community police procedural", a category in which he includes *The Bill*. I ask whether the function of this genre is to inform as well as to entertain and whether, by ceasing to perform the former function, *The Bill* failed to attract or indeed retain audiences – and whether this might have been another reason for its demise.

4. The function of the police procedural

In his study of television crime drama, Sparks (1992) argues that part of the appeal of such shows is that they address themselves to "potentially important passions and sentiments" of which he suggests that "fear and

anxiety may be among the most potent” (Sparks 1992, p.4). He suggests that, although the development of television seemingly coincided with a period of what he terms “sporadically acute anxiety about crime and policing” (Sparks 1992, p.16), such anxieties are not new (Pearson 1983), are “not evenly distributed throughout the social formation” and “neither is the unevenness of their distribution entirely explicable by the distribution of criminal events themselves” (Sparks 1992, p.16).

Instead, Sparks argues that crime fiction has its roots in earlier moral and heroic tales and, like these tales, “encodes some features of society’s response to sources of danger and anxiety”. He suggests that to draw a direct link between contemporary narratives and myth, as some commentators have, would be to disregard what he terms “modulations within genres over time” or alternatively “changes in focus in response to momentary concentrations of social anxiety” (Sparks 1992, p.32). However, he argues that most heroic and moral tales have a similar structure – “reconvening or establishing order and equilibrium in circumstances where disorder seems to threaten” (Sparks 1992, p.32). He suggests that common to these tales is a pattern of danger and pursuit, framed at either end by a return to familiar and safer circumstances.

Sparks also suggests that the demonstration of heroic agency is central to these stories – “a matter of integrity, capability and decision and of the overcoming of tests and adversities” (Sparks 1992, p.146). He argues that crucial to these stories is the fact that heroes always make sure justice is done and that opponents or nemeses are disposed of at the end of the story by either death or capture – there is always a clear cut resolution. He also

makes the point that such plots do not compel belief – that heroism and triumphalism are what marks such narratives as fictive and part of the pleasure for audiences or readers of such tales is the recognition of such conventionalities, that the good, for the most part, end happily and the bad, for the most part, end unhappily.

Sparks (1992) argues that cop shows draw on these traditions, tending to fit a fairly recognizable format, while redeploying the elements of such stories in different ways. He suggests that there are distinct versions of heroism and different roles for the hero, depending on the story being told:

“The crucial dimensions here may be summarized as including heroes’ designated positions within or against institutional hierarchies, their relations to secular or moral law, their physical, intellectual and technological prowess, their class and gender positions ... The establishment of the hero as heroic demands that we the audience be shown what would provide an honourable course of action under such initial conditions” (Sparks 1992, p.132)

But more than that, Sparks also argues that cop dramas like heroic tales before them:

“affirm rather than contradict the passions and sentiments involved in punitive justice. Cop shows do not presume that we believe the world to be divided neatly into heroes and villains: but they do presuppose that at some level we would like it to be so” (Sparks 1992, p.147)

But while Sparks (1992) suggests that audiences enjoy crime fictions as a means of displacing a widespread range of anxieties, which may be manifestly or obscurely related to crime and punishment, I would argue that in terms of the police procedural, there is another key function – educating and informing the public about the nature and role of policing in contemporary society.

As discussed in Chapter One, Reiner (2010) argues that one of the key functions of fictional representations of the police is helping to secure public legitimacy and respect for the organization. McLaughlin suggests that:

“the ‘fictional fuzz’ can become a key reference point in public conversations about the ‘real’ police and tutor the popular imagination about the type of policing to come.” (McLaughlin 2007, p.105)

However, as Reiner (2010) argues, there are many sub-genres within the police drama and in his typology of these dramas, he identifies twelve key variants, including the “community police procedural”, in which he situates *The Bill*. According to Reiner, the key elements of this sub-genre are:

“... an emphasis on the harmonious relations within the police force, and between it and the wider society ... the emphasis is on the non-crime related tasks of the police, and even, when crime-fighting, the human rather than the organisational or technological resources are stressed. Like the procedural policeman (but unlike the vigilantes of police deviants), the community police not only stick to the rules but are more effective as a result.” (Reiner 2010, p.199).

There are a number of points in this description that I wish to return to but, for the moment, I want to discuss one of the key elements of this sub-genre that has been left out – the educative function of the police procedural.

In Chapter Three, I discussed how many of those working on the show during the 1980s and 1990s had trained or worked at the BBC during the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s. As Born (2005) suggests in her ethnographic study of the BBC, Lord Reith’s (the first director-general of the BBC) conception of broadcasting as a social, cultural, educative and moral force was highly influential on many generations of creative personnel who worked for the organization. Born elaborates further:

“Broadcasting would enable people to become interested in ideas and areas of life to which they had no prior access. It would offer not only information but argument and discussion.” (Born 2005, p.28)

Certainly the early television story-documentaries on the police made by the BBC had a strong educative element. As Sydney-Smith (2002) comments, *Pilgrim Street*, a six part series dealing with the small events and petty crimes dealt with by a local police station, was “made with an eye to educating the public about the more mundane aspects of policing” (Sydney-Smith 2002, p.80). Sydney-Smith (2002) cites an article written by Jan Read, the creator of the series, for the *Radio Times*, in which he reminds the audience that “murder is the rarest of crimes”. Unlike other crime dramas dealing with more spectacular crimes, *Pilgrim Street*’s intention was to portray the reality of everyday police work, of what occurs when “a fire breaks out, an old lady is taken ill in the street, a child runs away from home ... in the houses, the pubs, the amusement arcades, where police-work begins” (*Radio Times*, 30 May 1952).

As Sydney-Smith (2002) observes, the *Viewer Research Report* for the second episode of the series considered it “admirably effective for both instruction and entertainment” and cites the response of one viewer, whose wife, “an ex-policewoman of six years’ standing”, found the series “completely true to life and just as things happen” (Sydney-Smith 2002, p.84).

The emphasis on petty crime, on the small events and incidents dealt with by the officers of a local London police station was obviously the terrain covered by *The Bill* in the first eighteen years of its existence. But what was also

shared by the makers of *The Bill* was the intention to tell stories that entertained and informed. As one executive noted:

“We are story tellers – we have no real ambition beyond that. We exist to entertain, but we are able to incorporate all kinds of other elements. Occasionally we tell a story about a bent copper, but we are not denigrating the Metropolitan Police as a whole. In any case we are not PR agents for the Met, but we do behave responsibly in portraying them and there is a strong educative element to our work.” (*The Guardian*, 10 October 1994)

However, as recounted in Chapter Five, the educative element in the storytelling on the show was not always to audiences’ taste. An attempt to run a series of episodes dealing with the then comparatively new community policing initiatives resulted in the show’s lowest audience ratings at that point. As one executive commented (cited also in Chapter Five):

“Although audience research showed [that audiences] wanted to see coppers go about proper policing. I say proper in inverted commas, whereas worthy though the area of community policing was, it didn’t appeal to the viewers. Actually what they wanted to see was the boys, you know, our heroes running after scrotes down the pavements of Sun Hill. And that’s what they thought real crime was rather than sort of domestic violence or community policing.”

Clearly, as the executive commented, the show was at its most popular when it balanced depiction of the social service aspect of the police role with depiction of the police as crime-fighters – the educative function with the element of entertainment.

Finally, returning to Reiner’s (2010) definition of the “community police procedural”, he emphasizes the harmonious relations between community and police and the fact that officers do not break the rules in this sub-genre and “are all the more effective” (Reiner 2010, p.199). The fact that stories told on the show during the last years of its history regularly dealt with

officers either breaking the rules or turning vigilante and dispensing their own brand of rough justice as described in Chapter Six might have been a contributory factor to audiences deserting the show in the late 2000s. Not only had the educative aspect of the community police procedural become increasingly redundant, but what Sparks (1992) describes as one of the more pleasurable reasons for watching such shows – the element of reassurance in a world of “messy inconclusiveness of the process of criminal justice and its obdurate failure to conform either morally or aesthetically satisfying patterns” (Sparks 1992, p.24) – had also been abandoned. Instead of a world in which the good ended “happily”, viewers were now being shown a world of messy inconclusiveness in which the “bad” and morally corrupt were more often than not, ending “happily” as well.

This is, of course, conjecture and the abandonment of the educative function, the lack of resolution in stories and the muddying of key elements of the “community police procedural” may not have been instrumental in hastening the show’s demise. Nevertheless it is worth considering in these last few pages whether, if the show had continued to place an emphasis on stories that were actually based on research, to remove the soap element completely and to turn the new serial format to its advantage and commission writers to develop long-running stories dealing with serious issues confronting the Metropolitan Police, it might still be a part of the schedule today.

5. The haphazard nature of television production and the ramifications for audiences

In Chapter One, I reviewed the existing literature on media production. I summarized the key theoretical perspectives (Devereux 2003) – the political economy approach, which explores the extent to which media productions and media professionals are constrained by economic and political forces; the critical theory or neo-Marxist approach, which explores the extent to which media professionals knowingly or unknowingly reproduce dominant ideology in support of dominant social groups; and the liberal pluralist perspective, which recognizes the complexity of media organizations and explores the agency and creativity of media professionals.

However, as I have stressed throughout my thesis, this is not a production study of *The Bill* as such, but rather an attempt, in a criminological context, to understand the effect of factors such as commercial imperatives, working methods and so on, on the representation of the police and policing, although my work is informed by both a political economy and a liberal pluralist approach.

One of the key findings of my work, echoing the work of Elliott (1972) and Silverstone (1985), is the haphazard nature of television production. In particular, my work highlights how in the later days of *The Bill*'s existence, due to a complex set of factors, output often lacked integration and planning, so that despite its claim to be representing the reality of policing in the 21st century, stories were increasingly taken from other media sources, particularly American police shows. This practice, as discussed in Chapters Four and Five, set up a succession of “media loops” (Manning 2003) so that what was being relayed back to audiences was a rehashing of ideas and

images current in media culture about the police and policing – or as GF

Newman, creator of *Law and Order* put it:

“I think the main problem is that the people who make the series, the people who write them, the people who direct them just don’t know the realities of police, villain and judiciary. They just don’t know policemen and criminals. They haven’t experienced policing a metropolis, they haven’t experienced crime, so they have nothing to relate to. All they can relate to are things they’ve seen on television. If you accept that that television is art – I mean it’s bread and butter art, I suppose – then art should imitate life. But all television is doing is imitating other art, I mean they’re just imitating *Kojak* and things like that, American television police fiction” (Newman, cited in Kennedy Martin 1978, p.129)

Although in the last ten years of its history, as McLaughlin (2007) points out, media campaigns and advertisements for *The Bill* stressed its “no holds barred realism” with captions such as “Real crime, real close” (McLaughlin 2007, p.110), it was ironically during this period that the show’s links with the Metropolitan Police became increasingly disconnected and distant. As recounted in Chapter Five, production staff working on the show could talk in the same breath of how the show was becoming “grittier” and increasingly “realistic” yet when describing the story about a vigilante officer (the development of which is described in Chapter Six) one member of staff admitted that they did not know whether or not such a set-up could actually take place in this country.

Leading on from this, if we take the view that media representations of policing, particularly fictional representations, are pure entertainment, there is no cause for concern. However, if we return to some of the data cited in Chapter One, that in a *Policing for London* (PFL) survey, 29 per cent of respondents mentioned “media fiction” as their main source of information

about the police and policing (Fitzgerald *et al* 2002), such representations cannot be dismissed as having no effect in terms of helping to shape citizens' views of the police and of the police role (Allen *et al* 2006; McLaughlin 2007; Reiner 2010). Indeed as Elliott (1972) concludes in his study of documentary production processes:

“... those working in the media are not able to exercise direct control over its output to engage in direct manipulation. This does not mean, however, that nothing is said, that no effect is produced, that no manipulation takes place” (Elliott 1972, p.165).

He goes on to comment even more harshly that:

“the dominant means of communications is tending more and more to be controlled by people who have nothing to say, or if they have, cannot use the media to say it. It does suggest however, that the mass media illustrate the contradictions rather than the conspiracies of capitalist society” (Elliott 1972, p.166).

In the years when stories on *The Bill* were based on research and observation, much was left out of the picture. Nevertheless, it is important to note what was being achieved by the show in terms of depicting the service-orientated aspects of the police role during these years. As many ethnographers on both sides of the Atlantic have noted, much of routine police work is mundane and far less police time is spent in crime-related activity than in providing a 24-hour social service (Morgan and Newburn 1997:79), calming disturbances, negotiating disputes and responding to a variety of accidents and emergencies (Bowling and Foster 2003).

This was the contribution of *The Bill* to public understanding and knowledge of police work in its early years; playing down the crime-related aspects of police work and instead concentrating on the “small change of policing”.

Much was certainly left out of the picture but far more was retained in terms of depicting the “reality” and mundanity of police work during those early years than in the last ten years of the show, when accuracy and a desire to inform and educate the public was abandoned in an increasingly desperate chase for viewing figures.

Interestingly this was a view shared unanimously by the respondents from the police focus groups asked to watch an episode of *The Bill* (see Chapter Seven). Officers from the focus groups argued, that in terms of shaping public understanding, *The Bill*, in its earlier incarnation, despite its flaws and emphasis on always showing the police as “whiter than white” heroes (Mason 1992), nevertheless performed a valuable service to the public in educating them about the day-to-day reality of police work. As one officer commented:

“I don’t think television reflects society. I think television creates the expectations of society, people’s expectation of the criminal justice system ... People question so many things these days, they question the councils, they question the MPs, they question everything. But somehow because it’s in a drama, it seeps into their minds. If you asked them on a conscious level, they’d say, “No, I don’t believe everything I see, it’s a drama.” But it seeps into their behaviour; it seeps into their frame of reference. The vast majority of people have very little contact if any with the police. And when they do come into that situation, they react with the perception they’ve developed. And that’s why *The Bill* was so good in the old days. Because it didn’t show us in endless car chases, breaking down doors and manhandling villains. It showed us doing all the dirty, thankless tasks that no-one else wants to do, dealing with all the people society would rather push out of sight. Not crime-fighting, just trying to keep the peace and doing the best we can each day.”

Similarly, an editor from the early days of the show recounted how one of his proudest moments was:

“... walking into an ordinary working men’s pub and hearing these blokes talk about the episode I’d worked on which had been on the night before and whether or not the police are ever justified in breaking the law to get results or whether they should always play by the rules, come what may. And that’s what I felt it was all about, making drama that made people think, reflect, question what’s going on in our society, what we expect of our police. And I think that’s what we’ve lost in our bid for ratings, to grab this demographic or that demographic. We no longer have that sense of wanting to inform, to trigger debate. And I think we underestimate our audiences. And I think this is what your study should be about. To make those in charge of commissioning programmes, those responsible for making them think again. About the messages they’re conveying with those stories and the effect they are having.”

At the time of writing (summer 2012) there are no police procedurals currently in the television schedules, although there has recently been an announcement (Digital Spy, 24 May 2012) that a new drama, *True Crime*, developed by former members of *The Bill* production team, will feature officers tackling crimes based on real events and, like the early days of *The Bill*, the new show will be filmed in a documentary-style. Whether or not the show will also return to basing stories on research and observation remains to be seen, but there is certainly currently no show in the schedules that concentrates on the “small change of policing” in the 21st century.

In summary then, although much has been written about the content of representations of crime, policing and the criminal justice system, my research is one of the few studies to explore the causes and factors affecting these representations. While I hope this study will pave the way for further research bridging the gap between cultural studies and criminology, I also end this thesis with another hope – that it might help makers of television police series to realise that, even in a time of acute economic instability in the television industry, their representations of policing are not always mere

entertainment, that they do have an impact on the sensibilities of the public – and that even in a commercially driven world, there is still room for well-researched thoughtful drama that triggers debate rather than closes it down.

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