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**Police Information Release Management in the Australian Context**

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## **Police Information Release Management in the Australian Context**

### **Abstract**

This paper presents the findings from an empirical study of police information release management (PIRM) in the Australian context. The study investigated the role of information release in policing and explored effective PIRM. It employed semi-structured, in-depth and face-to-face interviews which involved two 'players' in information communication: the police and the media. The findings showed that it is necessary to improve the current PIRM system in Australia. A communication gap between the police and the media was identified by both parties, and a good relationship between them was regarded as the key to effective PIRM. This study revealed that it is urgent to establish an effective information release mechanism in order to reduce communication barriers. It is suggested that appraising the role of PIRM should be contextualized within the developing police role and the changing police culture. There is also the need to improve the awareness of international communication and cooperation in PIRM. This study contributes to a better understanding of PIRM in the contemporary Australian context. The results indicate that effective PIRM will lead to a win-win outcome, which not only benefits the police and the media but also the public.

### **Context and Rationale**

This paper presents a qualitative study that explored police information release management (PIRM) in the Australian context. This is a unique study in that it offered perspectives of two 'players' in information communication: the police and the media.

Police information is one of the public's most sought-after news items. The public pay a great deal of attention to mass media information about crime and the justice system (Graber, 1980). Public interest and news value ensure that 'crime stories' are perceived to be the primary function of police information series. This trend has been observed in a number of publications (see Leishman & Mason, 2003; McGregor, 1993; Reiner, 1997; Stephens, 1988). This phenomenon therefore leads to question whether police information reported by the media is only entertainment. This study investigated the role of PIRM, particularly its effectiveness in evaluation all facets of police information.

The police and media relationship is vital to information communication between them and it has been acknowledged as symbiotic (see Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Jiggins, 2004; Miller, 1978; Tunstall, 1970). It is critical because most members of society have little direct contact with the criminal justice system, but they learn about police information mainly from the mass media (Graber, 1980; Jiggins, 2004). However, few studies have specifically explored how the police manage the release of information within the context of the important relationship with the media. This study is therefore intended to fill the gap in this regard.

To date, and to the knowledge of the researchers, this study is the first which explores PIRM in the contemporary Australian context. In an age of increasingly sophisticated and complex crime, the police role and culture have changed and developed (Jiggins, 2004; Keelty, 2004b; Murray, 2000). Rohl (1997) observed that the range and complexity of police functions has increased considerably. The role of police is complex and has been evolving over the last century and a half. Policing is continually assuming new functions and responding to the changing needs of government and the community (Jiggins, 2004). However, there is a surprising lack of appraisal and exploration of effective PIRM in modern policing.

Some attention has been paid on police information communication. Some researchers view it as a kind of propaganda. Ellul (1965, pp.84-85) argues that information and propaganda have become virtually indistinguishable. Another view regards police information release as the major part of police-public relations policy (see Boyle, 1999; Chappell & Wilson, 1969; Davis, 2003; Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989). Hughes (2004) and Williams (2002) declare that the police have little success in managing the media environment although police can control information. Although some related research has been conducted, there are no contemporary studies which examine the views from both the media and police perspectives. This study was informed by this gap in the literature and sought to address the issues identified.

This study is intended to answer two research questions: **a)** What is the role of Police Information Release Management? **b)** How can effective Police Information Release Management be achieved? The study is intended to appraise the role of PIRM and explore effective management of police information release in order to facilitate communication between the police and the public.

### **Research Approach**

This qualitative study employed semi-structured, in-depth and face-to-face interviews as its research method to explore participants' perspectives of PIRM. The interviews involved both Australian police officers and journalists.

### ***Sample***

A purposive sampling method was employed in this study because characteristics which participants possess were deemed important for the research (Sproull, 1995, p.119). This research sample was opted for a purposive sampling with knowledgeable participants in the area of PIRM, which means their perspectives on the research topics are authoritative.

This study involved eight participants, who were all rich-experienced police officers or journalists. The researchers chose six of them as formal interviewees while two participants were chosen as pilot interviewees. Although this was a small sample, it was selected purposively to maximize coverage of possible variations. Three police

interviewees not only came from Australian Federal Police (AFP) headquarter in charge of national operation but also from Australian Capital Territory policing in charge of local area. Choosing objectives in this way enabled the interviewer to get perceptions about the strategic big-picture as well as operational practices. Three media interviewees were selected intentionally from different but influential media agencies, including Australian newspaper, radio and TV.

### ***Interview Procedure***

Before formal interviews, two pilot interviews had been conducted. Through pilot interviews, the researchers modified the interview questions to make sure they were clear and manageable. Interview instruments and procedure were also practiced through the pilot study.

A face-to-face, semi-structured interview process was used. Six participants were interviewed individually for appropriately 40-65 minutes from March to April 2005 in Canberra. The average time for each interview was about 50 minutes. The researchers used a standard interview schedule at every interview in order to ensure that each interview was conducted in the same manner. All of the pre-determined open questions were asked and a similar wording was used for all interviews.

### ***Data Analysis***

Each interview was digitally recorded, transcribed verbatim and analysed by the researchers following the principles of qualitative communication analysis (Lindlof, 1995). The 102 pages of transcripts were coded based on emergent themes and categories. The data analysis process involved a number of reading of transcripts and progressive refining of emerging categories of conceptions. The data were pooled and the researchers adopted an iterative approach with coding tools to efficient access to the content of data-texts, because coding is integral to the task of interpreting communication phenomena (Lindlof, 1995, p.219).

Initially, the data from the police and the media were analysed separately with the same attention on the understanding of PIRM. After several readings of interview transcripts and analyses of responses, preliminary categories were formed. Integrating categories was conducted both in terms of delimitating preliminary categories and synthesizing the police and the media data, and was refined until the emergence of all perspectives indicated by the respondents.

### **Findings and Interpretations**

Findings showed participants' views on PIRM and some suggestions for the police to improve current PIRM. The findings revealed interviewees' general understandings of PIRM and the necessity of PIRM. In addition, the findings explored the necessity of PIRM and the current AFP information release system.

### **General Understanding of PIRM**

The findings revealed the general understandings of PIRM from both the police and the media. Table 1 shows the four aspects of both groups' perspectives on PIRM.

Table 1 General Understanding of PIRM

<b>Major aspects</b>	<b>Police Views</b>	<b>Media Views</b>
Views on PIRM	Fundamental: 'it's fundamental to policing. Policing works only on the authority of the public. So we have to explain to the public what we are doing' (AP1 <sup>1</sup> ); Critical: 'it is critical for any government agency to survive or work in the modern world'(AP2); Very important: 'its significance is quite profound and it can be very beneficial to us in many ways' (AP3).	Police control information: 'a process of deciding what information police give to the journalist and what information police keep, and the decision needs to be made by police for their own operational reasons' (AJ1); A two-way street: 'the police have to understand where the journalists are coming from and the journalists have to understand where the police are coming from' (AJ2).
Situations for police information communication	A daily job which needs to be done at 'a broad range' (AP1) and 'all the time' (AP2). 'absolutely it is 24 hours a day; 7 days a week; 365 days a year. You never stop. It is 24 hours/7 days because policing is 24 hours/7days' (AP3).	Crime stories: 'we would like expect to get information if there has been a very large case' (AJ2); The information closely related with the public daily lives: 'traffic closures, public transport, big event are important because they affect people lives' (AJ1); Negative police news: 'it is important to have both sides of the story put to air rather than one' (AJ3).
Mostly used channel for police information communication	Media (AP1,AP2,AP3); Internet (AP1,AP2); Community activities (AP1, AP3).	Scanners (AJ1,AJ2,AJ3); Police media unit (AJ1,AJ2,AJ3); Contact particular police (AJ1,AJ2).
Views on the relationship between police and media	Symbiotic relationship: 'absolutely very important'(AP1); 'highs and lows'(AP2); 'a kind of love-hate'(AP3)	Very important: 'feed off each other'(AJ3); and eventually benefit the public (AJ2).

Findings of this study provided insights into current PIRM. The police participants reached the consensus that PIRM is important for the whole policing work; while the media had two major views on PIRM, as shown in Table 1, police control information

<sup>1</sup> In this study, code numbers are used in order to preserve the anonymity and confidentiality of the respondents. A stands for Australia; P stands for police participant; J stands for journalist participant. For example, AP1 means the first Australian police interviewee; AJ2 means the second Australian journalist interviewee.

and a two-way street. The findings presented the perspectives from both the police and the media.

On the one hand, both groups had some similar views on PIRM in terms of the importance of a good relationship between them, and the win-win outcome from effective PIRM. The media relationship was regarded as 'symbiotic relationship' by participants, which confirms many researchers' view on this point (e.g. Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1989; Jiggins, 2004; Miller, 1978; Tunstall, 1970). It was a consensus that a good media relationship can facilitate policing in many ways. In addition, all the participants thought that a good relationship between media and police can facilitate mass communication. AJ1 agreed that 'a good relationship benefits the police and makes their job easier and it makes the journalist's job easier, and ultimately the public wins because they find out more information and it's good for the public'. AJ2 held the similar opinion: 'the public benefits from a good relationship (between media and police)'. Consequently, a win-win outcome emerged from a good police and media relationship.

On the other hand, differences were observed in the understanding of the scope and areas of police information because of the different missions. According to the police's point of view, PIRM is broad range work and related to every situation of policing, which differs from the view that most aspects of police information series are crime stories (e.g. Leishman & Mason, 2003; McGregor, 1993; Reiner, 1997; Stephens, 1998). While the media would like to focus on crime stories, information closely related with the public daily lives and police stories, especially negative news. However, both sides reached the consensus that the police should manage information release in a transparent way with timely, accurate and objective police information. Effective PIRM aims to achieve a positive communication with the public to facilitate policing and better serve the community.

According to participants' experience, media is the most commonly used channel in the police information communication. The media powerful influence has been claimed that the media is one of the primary vehicles for conveying information about police activity to the public (Leishman & Mason, 2003; Reiner, 1997).

### ***The Necessity of PIRM***

All police interviewees considered PIRM as essential for the whole policing work. Firstly, the nature of policing decides PIRM is fundamental to policing. AP1 illustrated the fundamental role of PIRM as follows:

Policing works only on the authority of the public. So any authority we have comes to us from the public to maintain that authority and to maintain integrity of the authority. We have to explain to the public what we are doing...we must be transparent as we possibly can with the public and provide all of the details that we possibly can.

Secondly, promoting police image makes PIRM important. It can be understood that all of the police interviewees considered police image with PIR contribution as extremely important. Police release information to establish the brand, image and credibility. The PIRM contributes not only to positive police image but also to national image. 'So it (PIRM) runs from community, to national level even to the international perspective with the commissioner or others engaging with foreign police forces or foreign governments in discussions about what the AFP are doing' (AP1). This view was echoed by AP2: '...it (PIR) will make the country look good—not only for police image, but also the whole country'.

Thirdly, PIRM was regarded as the most direct way to communicate with the public. Police release information to tell the public what they are doing. AP2 and AP3 agreed that in the age of rampant terrorism, PIRM has never been so important for building confidence in the community and reduce public panic. This finding shares affinity with Jiggin's (2004) study where he examined media reports' impact on community confidence in the police to control crime.

Moreover, PIRM is essential to policing work. As organizational entities, the police need to compete with other bureaucracies for public funding. AP1 believed that it is necessary for the parliamentarians to believe the levels of public support for the AFP through the media. AP3 shared the similar view: 'So it adds a number of dimensions to it, not just straight from the public, but increasingly what the politicians see. They are the one who decides if you need the equipment if they would buy it'. This point is congruent with Jiggins's (2004) view that the media could generate positive publicity about successful operations and policies for policing.

That PIRM is essential to policing also lies in the following ways. 'Seeking the public support on a particular crime type is becoming prevalent' (AP1). In addition, 'how the information putting out to the community can generate information coming back and this can be very valuable for investigators' (AP3). Further, PIR contributes to improving police performance: '...if you want your people to do something, they should know, not only why they have to do it also why you want it done. So you transfer that knowledge to them through information, controlled information release, and they would perform better' (AP2). This view may have broadly aligned with the findings in Beck's (1996) study where he examined the most efficient demonstration for an organization to support its officers was being more supportive of them in the public especially through the media.

Furthermore, police release information to meet the need of developing police role in the society. He argued that police increasingly respond not only to traditional police issues like crime but also other responsibilities:

A recent example was the tsunami in the India Ocean. The public came to us, as a first port of call for information on what happened in the tsunami, which is traditionally a

foreign affair function but because we were so intricately involved in relief operations, we also ended up having a responsibility with that.

This finding is congruent with Murray's (2000) argument that policing has moved from an insular culture to a more open and consultative one.

### ***The Current Police Information Release System***

The findings showed the current information release procedure in AFP as follows: when the media call police to ask questions about a particular event or investigation, the police media officers first take down those questions. And then media officers go to the operational area, and with their assistance prepare a response to those questions. These responses to those questions will then be initially cleared with the functional manager, the person who is responsible for that line of what the police do. The next clear goes to the chief of staff or to deputy commissioner. The chief of staff will clear matters of policy; and the deputy commissioner will clear things on matters of operations. In the end, the media officers go back to the media with responses.

In the current information release system, the AFP encourages every sworn police to face the media with some preconditions. This finding indicates the development of PIRM. It differs from the initial Australian police information release policy forty years ago (Chappell & Wilson, 1969, p.131), which had strict restriction against average police officers talking to the media. Meanwhile, this finding confirms the changing police culture—from insular and defensive culture to open and consultative culture (Murray, 2000).

The findings provided insights into the AFP current police information release system from the police and the media. Table 2 depicts the strength and weakness of the current system; the police and media's views on key elements of information release system, and participants' suggestions for police to manage information release in a more effective manner.

As can be seen in Table 2, both police officers and journalists provided their opinions on the current information system, which became the genesis for the recommendations to improve the current PIRM.

Police participants concluded the strengths of the current information system include: accurate and authoritative information, efficient employment of civilian officers in information release area, and the multi-tiered training system. The journalists believed that the police media unit is convenient for them to get police information. The hierarchical release procedure was regarded as the main weakness by both police and media.



Table 2 Views on Current Police Information Release System

Aspects	Police views	Media views
Strength	<p>‘Accurate, reliable and authoritative’ information (AP1); ‘it is exhibiting, an open window into the community what police are doing’ (AP3);</p> <p>The unsworn (civilian) employment: ‘they have a good understanding of what we do’ (AP2);</p> <p>‘multi-tiered training system’ (AP1).</p>	<p>Directly contact the specific police media department: through the unit they get ‘consistent information’ (AJ1);</p> <p>‘quickly find the information’ (AJ2); ‘save time’ (AJ3).</p>
Weakness	<p>Hierarchical system: ‘responding to media is too heavily controlled and too slow, and that cannot meet the media’s need’ (AP1);</p> <p>‘It relies very much on an individual’ (AP3);</p> <p>A formal information feedback system has not established (AP1, AP2, AP3).</p>	<p>Hierarchical system: ‘there seems to be red tape in the system or bureaucracy’ (AJ2);</p> <p>Inadequate information: ‘the information hasn’t been forthcoming when we felt it should have been’ (AJ1).</p>
Key elements	<p>Media relationship (AP1,AP2,AP3);</p> <p>Communication skills (AP1,AP2,AP3);</p> <p>Timely response (AP1,AP2,AP3);</p> <p>Consistent and accurate information</p> <p>High quality staff (AP1, AP2, AP3).</p>	<p>The same and consistent information given to all journalists (AJ1);</p> <p>Timely release of information to the media (AJ2, AJ3);</p> <p>Accuracy (AJ1, AJ2, AJ3).</p>
Suggestion	<p>A ‘good management system’ is urgent (AP2);</p> <p>Promoting awareness of the importance of PIRM by training and ‘get the senior executives’ attention focused on it and to make resources available to do what needs to be done’ (AP1);</p> <p>Enhancing the accuracy of information; utilizing high technology and improving communication skills (AP1, AP2, AP3).</p>	<p>Maintaining a good relationship (AJ1,AJ2,AJ3): ‘striking and maintaining a good relationship’ (AJ2);</p> <p>Given both positive and negative police information (AJ1,AJ3);</p> <p>Trust is the key (AJ1,AJ3);</p> <p>The appropriate explanation from police for why information can or can not be released (AJ1, AJ2, AJ3).</p>

Police interviewees considered the media relationship as the key to effective PIRM, and some communication skills were also regarded important, such as timely response to the media, releasing consistent and accurate information to the media. In addition, high quality staff was emphasized by police. Meanwhile, journalists claimed that getting the same and consistent information is important; the timely and accurate information were requested as well.

The police officers gave the following suggestions for better information release: a good management system; promoting awareness of the importance of PIRM by training; enhancing the accuracy of information; utilizing high technology and improving communication skills. Journalists suggested both police and media should maintain a good relationship; police should give both positive and negative information, and appropriately explain reasons when releasing limited information.

## Discussion and Recommendations

Based on the research findings, two models have been developed to address the two research questions. One is for appraising the role of PIRM in policing, and the other is for achieving effective PIRM.

### *Appraisal of PIRM role*

In this study, the researchers proposed a model for appraisal of PIRM role (see Figure 1) to respond the first research question: what is the role of PIRM.

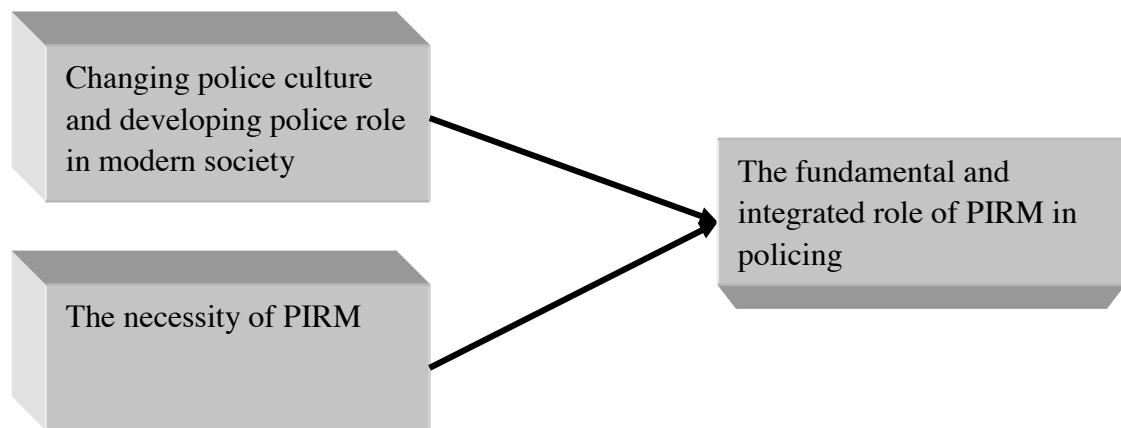


Figure 1 A Model for Appraisal of PIRM Role

As shown in Figure 1, appraising the role of PIRM is based on two major aspects: one is the appropriate understanding of the changing police culture and developing police role in the modern society; the other is the enhanced awareness of the necessity of PIRM.

Firstly, the changing police culture and developing police role put PIRM in a fundamental position in whole policing. Policing has undergone major changes moving from a craft or trade to a profession; from authoritarian approaches to problem-solving approaches to dealing with crime; from a quasi-military management style to a democratic management style; from an emphasis on physical attributes to an emphasis on intellect; and from an insular culture to a more open and consultative one (Murray, 2000). These changes witness the developing role of police from ‘fairly reactive in nature to proactive—(and that) boost police capability not only to fight crime but to prevent it’ (Keelty, 2004b). These changes and development highlight the importance of PIRM and lead to a fundamental reappraisal about the role of PIRM. This view was strongly echoed by AP1, who as the manager of communication and marketing of AFP predicted the trends of police and the role of PIRM as follows:

PIRM is a much more sophisticated and mature view of policing. And I would hope that in ten years time, we would no longer have police in the force who believe the job is just to investigate; (or believe) that they didn't have greater responsibilities to the public other than that.

Secondly, the necessity of PIRM leads to its integrated function in policing. As acknowledged by the police interviewees, PIRM is a daily job, which covers a broad range of policing: promoting not only police but also national image; communicating with the public in a direct and transparent way; supporting operational policing and contributing to the policing work.

However, despite the advantages police have as information gatekeepers, their attempts to manage the media environment have met with little success (Hughes, 2004; Williams, 2002). This view can be regarded as a challenge for PIRM and also confirms the necessity of PIRM and then leads to critical thinking about the role of PIRM. It is essential to explore how PIRM can better connect with policing as a whole and contribute to the overall function of policing. The media participants' confession of commonly used scanners to get police information also highlights the importance of PIRM. In other words, the police will be in a passive position if they do not release information appropriately with positive communication to the public, because the media could still get information without communicating with the police directly.

This model provides a critical thinking approach to understand PIRM, which may be more significant than describing the role of PIRM itself. It is argued that the developing policing historical context and cultural elements should be considered. This study suggests that the appropriate appraisal of PIRM role can help to achieve effective PIRM.

### *Towards Effective PIRM*

Based on research findings which explored the police officers' and journalists' views and needs, this study proposed the other model (see Figure 2) to address the second research question: how can effective PIRM be achieved. It is argued that effective PIRM needs to be seen in a comprehensive context. As shown in Figure 2, the appropriate appraisal of PIRM role is the basis; both external and internal factors contribute to effective PIRM. The former includes a good media relationship and enhanced international communication and cooperation; the latter comprises of an efficient police information release mechanism, which includes some key elements: a professional information release system, high quality staff, improving training and a wide application of technology. This model contributes to a comprehensive understanding of effective PIRM and puts policing in the context of communication with the public. Both external and internal factors are discussed in turn.

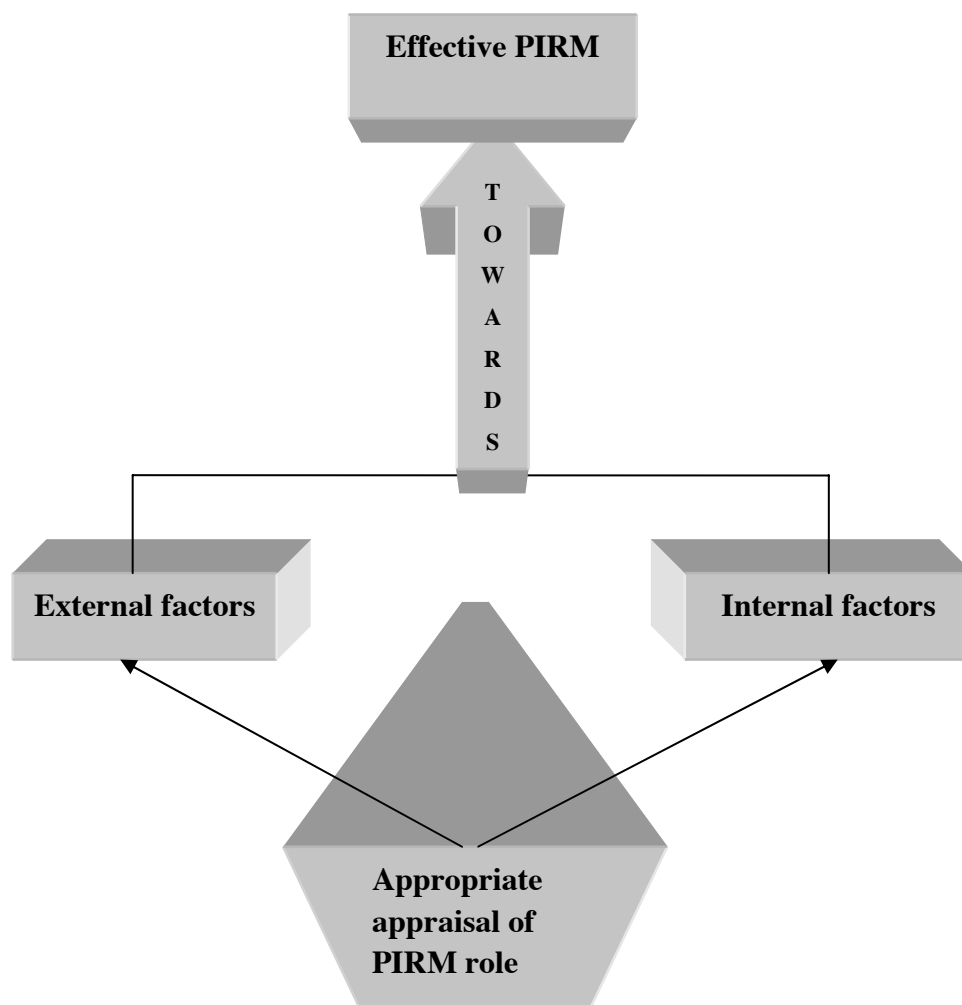


Figure 2 A Model for Achieving Effective PIRM

*Police and Media Relationship*

The consensus arising from the previous literature and the findings is that the relationship between the police and the media is essential for effective PIRM, which not only benefits the police and the media but also the public. However, the findings indicated that there is still a communication gap between them. For instance, journalists complained that the police did not release comprehensive information but mostly positive news; the police thought the media could not understand certain information was limited due to policing operational reasons. Consequently, a good relationship between the police and the media was strongly desired by both parties and became the key of effective PIRM. The question arises as to how such a good relationship might be achieved.

The findings showed that the relationship between the police and the media mostly depends on personal interface. The findings also suggested that further efforts need to be made in addition to what have been given in previous study. For instance, the

police should promote the awareness of keeping a good relationship in a professional way and maintain the positive communication between the police and the media; and the police should try to give reasonable explanation to the media when releasing limited police information. Furthermore, the police should organize or even create some communication activities with the media, which was recommended by the media participants.

### *International Communication and Cooperation*

With the increasing transnational crime, international policing cooperation becomes necessary and inevitable. This point is emphasized by Keelty (2003) as follows:

The most important trend has been the growing importance of collaboration in policing. In today's borderless society, cooperation is occurring on an international front, as well as between all levels of government, and community within the nation. Without cooperation and collaboration, the road for all of us becomes very hard indeed.

Under this circumstance, there is a surprising lack of emphasis on international communication and cooperation in PIRM. The necessity and challenges for the police to release information in the international circumstance have been realized by all participants. Based on findings from the police and the media participants' perspectives, this study argues that it is significant to enhance the awareness of international communication and cooperation for PIRM. Moreover, the international communication and cooperation in PIRM will be an important trend for the police all over the world to share information, which will put the police in a positive position against crime.

### *Efficient Police Information Release Mechanism*

Some communication barriers identified by interviewees suggest that it is essential to establish an effective information release mechanism, which can be regarded as the internal factors of effective PIRM. The following major elements compose an efficient police information release mechanism.

*Efficient Information Release System:* Chermak (1994) observes that the primary police source used by television and newspaper reporters to clarify the newsworthiness of an event was a departmental spokesperson or public relation officer. This public information specialist released news to media organizations and answered questions about ongoing investigations, acting as an image control agent for the department. Today, a specific information release unit has been deployed in policing although its name may vary from country to country. Whatever it is called, police information unit is regarded as a buffer between law enforcement officers and reporters, receiving input from the highest-ranking officials in law enforcement agencies and making spontaneous decisions about what information should be

released to reporters in the field (see Ericson, Baranek, & Chan, 1989; Francis & Gerald 1992; Gerald, 1984).

As acknowledged by the media interviewees, the accessibility to the police information unit is the main strength for PIRM. The media participants extolled the advantages of having a media information officer in police and they adamantly believed that the information unit is important in the relationship of the public and the police. However, the findings also showed that the current police information release system is red-tape, which has become the main barrier to effective communication between the police and the media. Both parties in information communication desired to improve the current information release system especially in terms of hierarchy. This finding is congruent with Chappell and Wilson's arguments (1969, p.129), 'In some instances police *red-tape* served to promote bad press-police relations'. Keelty (2004a), the commissioner of AFP, agrees that the challenge is to continue to improve the systems and processes to record, catalogue and disseminate the information in a timely manner.

The findings suggested that the information communication policy should be emphasized. Regular or irregular communication activities with the media should be on the agenda; different kinds of campaigns should continue to be applied to PIRM although some campaigns have already been initialled in the AFP. This study suggests that a feedback program is important for the police to get to know the effect of releasing information and adapt policy to facilitate PIRM.

*High Quality Staff:* The desire for high quality staff working for PIRM was expressed by all police interviewees. This view can be underpinned by Brock's argument (1962, p.123), '...to the public every policeman is the police force'. Especially during the procedure of police releasing information to the public, every individual police officer's performance stands for the whole police force. According to the police interviewees' point of view, high quality staff means police media officers in possession of rich-experience and a skilful capacity to monitor the media, and to respond to the media very quickly and authoritatively.

Another finding emerged from this study is the employment of civilians. Police participants emphasized the necessity and the efficiency of unsworn (civilian) employees in the PIRM system, which aligns with the argument alleged by Chappell and Wilson (1969). Nowadays, employing civilians in police force has been widely applied in AFP. For instance, in 2004, there were 1335 unsworn members out of 4800 AFP workforce (AFP, 2004). Bryett's (1991) study shows that the vast majority of civilians are employed in communication centres and administrative positions, which confirms the rationality of employing unsworn experts in PIRM.

*Improving Training:* The need for improving training emerged from this study, which can be seen from the recommendations given by police participants for improving

current PIRM. Promoting awareness and consciousness of the importance of PIRM tops all training needs, which is echoed by the need of appropriately appraising the role of PIRM. The needs of training also lie in seeking for enhancing the accuracy of information released to the public and communication skills for police information release staff. Ensuring the accuracy of released information was emphasized by both police and media. The training needs for police media officers in terms of communication skills were requested as a timely response to the media; reasonable explanation to media for limited police information; the skilful communication capacity not only with the media but also with policing operational areas. These training needs were identified by both the police and the media. Although AFP has operated a 'multi-tiered training system' in information release management, the above training needs were recommended by all participants as urgent needs to achieve effective PIRM.

*Wide Application of Technology:* It is not surprising that technology plays an important role in PIRM in modern society since the rapid development of technology has already influenced every profession. As for this context, the importance of technology in PIRM embodied police using internet, fax and telephone primarily to release information. The consensus arising from all participants is the importance of technology in PIRM, which highlights the necessity of keeping up with the developing high-technology and its application into PIRM. Keelty's (2004a) view underpins the importance of technology, and he claimed that the investment in information technology can ensure police to find the correct balance between vertical and lateral information flows. It can be seen that wide application of high-technology in information release mechanism is inevitable and helpful for effective PIRM.

### **Limitations and Directions for Further Research**

This study is limited to the perspectives of a small sample of police and journalists in Canberra. Generalization of their views about PIRM in other states of Australia or other countries requires caution. It would be significant to cover a greater number of participants in different states or countries. Limitations also lie in the fact that this study has provided strategic approaches for effective PIRM, rather than operational techniques. For instance, the study has examined some major elements of an efficient mechanism which includes high quality staff, training and other key elements, but it has not provided details about staff employment or operational training.

This study focuses on the perspectives of participants on PIRM. Hence a purposive sample was used, while the researcher collected data from the respondents. Further research is encouraged for researchers to participate in the procedure of PIRM, either as an information deliverer or receiver, to gain more insights into PIRM. This study was also limited to the Australian context instead of its original design of a comparative study between Australia and China. It would be significant to compare the perceptions and operational systems between different countries, through which to

review and explore the influencing factors to PIRM within different social and cultural backgrounds.

### **Contributions to Theory and Practice**

Acknowledging the limitations, this study contributes to theory and practice in the following aspects. This qualitative study makes its contribution to applied communication research through providing insights into police information communication with the public. The study contributes to a better understanding of PIRM in the contemporary Australian context. This study proposes a model for appraising the role of PIRM, which is contextualized within the developing police role and the changing police culture.

Furthermore, this study is unique in that a model for effective PIRM was proposed, which explored both internal and external factors. The findings show that the appropriate appraisal of PIRM role is fundamental to achieve effective PIRM. It suggests that effective PIRM will lead to a win-win outcome, which not only benefits the police and the media but also the public. The two models developed in this study can also shed light on PIRM in other countries in terms of strategic appraisal and management of police information for better communication between the police and the public.

### **Conclusion**

This study investigated the role of PIRM and effective PIRM in the Australian contemporary context from the perspectives of both the police and the media. The findings indicated that it is necessary to improve the current PIRM system in Australia. The findings also revealed a communication gap between the police and the media. This study suggests that a good media relationship is the key to effective PIRM. In addition, it underlines the urgency of an effective information release mechanism in order to reduce communication barriers.

This study suggests that it is significant to contextualize PIRM within the developing police role and the changing police culture. This study appraised the fundamental and integrated role of PIRM in modern policing. It also examined both the external and internal key elements of effective PIRM. This study recommends two strategic models to achieve effective police information release management from a pragmatic point of view. It highlights the importance of police information release management and a win-win outcome for the police, media and the public.



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## **Appendix: Interview Questions**

### **Interview Questions for Police Officers**

1. As an officer of AFP, how do you understand ‘police information release management’?
2. What is the significance of effective police information release?
3. According to your experience in AFP, how many channels do police use to release information? And what are they? Please list three of the most commonly used channels.
4. In which kind of situation do police need to release information? Why police think they should respond to these situations and release related information in an official way?
5. Do you have any impression on Chinese or Beijing police information release management? Are you interested in Chinese police information in your daily work? Why (not)?
6. From your point of view, what elements are the key to police information release management? Which one or two do you think is/are the most important for police to release information effectively? Please explain the reasons.
7. What’s your perception of the relationship between police and media? Do you think the relationship between police and media will facilitate policing and in what ways if you think so?
8. Could you please introduce the Information Release Management System in AFP? According to your personal experience, what’s the strength of this system for police to facilitate the communication between police and the public? And what’s the weakness or any aspects in this system can be improved?
9. In which situation does AFP need to face international media?

## **Interview Questions for Journalists**

1. As a journalist, how do you understand ‘police information release management’?
2. From the perception of media, what is the significance of effective police information release?
3. According to your personal experience, through what kind of channels can journalists get police information? Please list three of the most commonly used channels.
4. In which kind of situation do journalists expect to get police information? Why are you interested in police information? When media report some negative police information, will you predict the public response to that and people’s attitude to police? Will you consider the influence on police image?
5. Do you have any impression on Chinese or Beijing police information release management? Are you interested in Chinese police information in your daily work? Why (not)?
6. From the perception of media, what elements are the key to police information release management? Which one or two do you think is/are the most important for media to access to police information effectively? Please explain the reasons.
7. What’s your perception of the relationship between media and police? Do you think the relationship between police and media will contribute to mass communication and in what ways if you think so?
8. Could you please introduce the operational system in which journalists communicate with police? According to your personal experience, what’s the strength of this system for cooperation and communication between media and police? And what’s the weakness or any aspects in this system can be improved?