

# A need for closer working relationships with the media

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In the previous edition of *Platypus Magazine*, Federal Agent Jeff Penrose examined Australian links to the Japanese doomsday sect, Aum Shinrikyo. In this edition, National Media Liaison Officer, Tracey Dickerson examines the role and importance of media in major operations of this type.



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**I**magine a remote sheep station in the heart of Western Australia 600km from the nearest city, four Japanese television crews with a limited command of English and a team of investigators searching 190,000 hectares for one of the most lethal nerve gasses ever invented. The Australian Federal Police encountered just such a situation during a major investigation in early 1995.

Australian police receive comprehensive anti-terrorism training through regular exercises conducted under the authority of the Standing Advisory Committee on Commonwealth/State Co-operation for Protection Against Violence (SAC-PAV) (see *Platypus Magazine* No. 47).

Media handling is now a critical component of SAC-PAV exercises. This reflects a general need for police to be more open with the media. It is now appreciated that the public want to know what is going on – they can no longer be brushed aside by the comment: “This is police business”. The power of the media



*Aum Shinrikyo sect leader Shoko Asahara*

and the need for an organisation to respond to matters which the media have brought to public attention are now considered a significant part of major operations.

On March 20, 1995, Japan and indeed the rest of the world was rocked by a major terrorist attack by a religious sect known as Aum Shinrikyo on the Tokyo subway system. The attack killed 12 people and injured or maimed another 5500. Almost immediately, the AFP was inundated by media requests from Australia and Japan for information about the sect's visits to Australia in 1993.

They were interested in the reasons for the visits by a number of sect members which included sect leader Shoko Asahara. The sect had contravened civil aviation laws by transporting hazardous chemicals into Australia. It was also known that the sect members had purchased Banjawarn Station, a remote Western Australian sheep property.

In this particular instance, Australian media interest was fuelled by pressure from their Japanese counterparts. In Japan, the Tokyo subway gassing attracted immense publicity akin to the O.J. Simpson trial and the Oklahoma bombing in the US. The demand for information during this time was intense and both local and international media hounded the AFP media office.

Regular briefings were provided to the media through the AFP media office and the investigators on the ground at Banjawarn Station. Our information flow was hampered for a number of reasons. The remoteness of the location meant that mobile phone reception was non-existent, and our only contact with investigators was by cellular satellite phone. To add to communication difficulties, members of the media obtained the

number of the homestead's private telephone which the owners refused to answer. Finally, problems arose because certain media tried to either drive or fly into the property without seeking permission first.

Through liaison by AFP media branch personnel, Western Australian Police (WAPOL) media staff and investigators on the ground, access to Banjawarn Station was later provided to both national and international media. About nine aircraft were allowed to land on the property and television cameras captured vision of the homestead and other areas of interest. This arrangement provided the media with the vision required for their stories while causing minimal disruption to investigators due to the controlled way journalists were permitted onto the property.

The media blitz in relation to this operation peaked early in May 1995 when the West Australian newspaper ran a front page story revealing that sarin gas had been tested on Banjawarn Station – a fact that had been speculated on, but not confirmed, at that time. The co-operative environment which existed throughout this operation with both AFP and WAPOL media liaison officers and local journalists created a climate of trust whereby information was released as soon as it was possible to do so. Following the publication of the story, regular media briefings were held to update media on the status of the investigation.

The relationship between police and the media has often been a contentious one. It is time to recognise however, that each of us has a job to do and the outcomes will be more beneficial for both sides if co-operation exists. A closer and more open working relationship between police and the media is a positive solution to coping with greater public demands for information.

The type of work that police organisations are concerned with seems to generate more negative than positive media attention. The AFP is involved in many investigations which are covert in nature and for that reason, it is difficult to positively profile conclusions to successful investigations. The Aum Shinrikyo Sect investigation was problematic from an information flow perspective due to the sensitivity of the investigation.

The role of AFP media liaison personnel frequently involves a lot of 'mopping up' after negative media reporting flowing from a particular operation or investigation. This type of back foot liaison can be demanding and very debilitating for an organisation. However, by fostering professional relationships with media representatives and therefore the public, the image of policing can be improved. The deliberate withholding of

information will only serve to foster an environment of mistrust in the individual which will in turn reflect adversely on the reputation of policing as a whole.

Generally, the rapport which developed with the Australian media during the Aum Shinrikyo Sect operation, was excellent. An honest and open relationship developed over this period which allowed the beneficial exchange of information by both parties.

The media should never be taken for granted. They are anxious to get the big stories before their counterparts in a very time restricted, cut-throat environment. Whenever something of major significance happens overseas, the media will try to ferret out any possible connections to this country, to give the story local appeal. The resources available to major media organisations are virtually unlimited and every avenue will be explored if it means breaking the big story first. The Aum Shinrikyo Sect story was one which turned out to be well worth chasing. As the investigation into the cult's activities deepened, so did the wealth of story lines for the media. *Time* magazine did several feature articles on the Aum Shinrikyo Sect and although journalist Anthony Spaeths following quote sounds quite unbelievable, in this instance fact was far more sensational than any fiction:

Apocalyptic prophets are figures of fun because they're always wrong. Armageddon fails to arrive when they say it will. In Shoko Asahara's case, however, the prophet apparently made plans to ensure that his predictions would come true. They almost did.

As the Aum Shinrikyo Sect example illustrates, it is of the utmost importance for co-operation to exist between the media and the police. Both have a job to do. Neither is the enemy.

It is imperative that investigators develop a relationship with media liaison officers. Never make the mistake that they are the media. They should be used as policy advisers and kept fully briefed on everything that is happening, not just what you want the media to know. (Munday 1991, p.11).

Throughout the Banjawarn Station investigation, case officers provided AFP media liaison with accurate up-to-date briefings on every aspect of their investigation which assisted both the investigators in their role and the media.

When a major incident occurs, AFP media liaison personnel should be used to provide regular up-dates to journalists. This establishes two-way communication, satisfies the media's need to inform the public and enables investigators to get on with the job at hand. A designated media liaison person should be identified as early as possible in the event of a major incident occurring. Clashes and confrontations with journalists by busy investigators will be detrimental to the operation



*The remoteness of Banjawarn Station initially made media liaison difficult.*

and will become the focus of the journalist's report.

The occupation of policing is constantly striving for professional status and is moving away from conservative traditions of the past. Jane Munday (1995, p.256) describes the necessity for improved media relations:

Improving media relations does not happen overnight. It means a change of philosophy and attitude from the top – and the heart. It means accepting criticism, as long as it is fair, accurate and balanced. It means an openness to the media and public which can be at odds with human nature and police culture.

Presenting the facts honestly to the media will ultimately create a more cohesive and trusting relationship, which will alleviate, or at the least, greatly reduce instances of police being viewed by the public as secretive or having lost control of the situation.

The media, of course, need in turn, to understand the role and functions of the police to appreciate the pressures encountered by investigators. Operational police should utilise media liaison personnel to explain reasons for delays in the release of information.

The AFP's vision is to fight crime and win. It is therefore imperative for the police profession to work as a team with the media to win the game and to beat those who are the real offenders within the global world of crime. □

#### References

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