

Case study 3

The Bondi Xmas bash

Over the Christmas–New Year holiday period, it has become ‘traditional’ for large crowds of young people to gather on Sydney’s famous Bondi beach. They usually roam up and down the promenade, and eventually many end up ‘under the weather’. In 1995 this crowd scene became ugly when a mob tried to overturn a bus. The police intervened and it turned into a ‘riot’. During the early hours of the morning of Boxing Day, the revellers/rioters threw beer bottles at the outnumbered police. No arrests were made. The police said this was because they feared things would escalate. As usual on slow news nights, television stations had sent crews to Bondi to ‘cover’ the party, and when it became a ‘riot’ the cameras were on the spot to record the action. The police requested, and were given, copies of the television tapes in order to identify offenders who hadn’t been arrested on the night. Over the next few days a debate ensued over whether the media should cooperate with the police in such situations. The then Communications Minister, Michael Lee, said the media had a duty to help bring offenders to justice (Wright 1995b). At the time, federal secretary of the MEAA, Chris Warren, said that if people involved in such incidents knew that the tape would be given to police, news crews could be attacked. Senior news producer at Channel Seven at the time, Strath Gordon, said it was common for news organisations to give the police tape and still photographs. He added that the police might make life difficult for news crews who did not cooperate. Chief of staff in the Channel Nine newsroom, David Allender, said the media plays a public service role when it cooperates with police (all quoted in Bearup 1995). The head of the Australian Press Council at the time, Professor David Flint (1996), wrote later that the media should not gather evidence for the police that would put it at risk of attack. Professor Flint went on to say that, over time, if the media continued to give material to the police, its independence and objectivity would be jeopardised. Professor Flint (1996, p. 9) wrote that ‘this case should not encourage the media to change the general principle of keeping authority at arm’s length’. Professor Flint’s comments provoked an angry letter from Dr Peter Robinson of Bondi Junction. Dr Robinson (1996, p. 10) suggested that if

the media had refused to hand over tapes, it could be construed as 'aiding and abetting criminal activity' or 'might be construed as obstructing the course of justice'. Dr Robinson cites the media's 'very significant role in the maintenance of civil society' as a principle to be upheld in this case.

Issues and questions raised by case study 3

- 1 Should the media cooperate with police by providing images to help in their investigations?
- 2 Should there be any limits to that cooperation?
- 3 Do you agree with the Minister's view that the media has a duty to help bring offenders to justice?
- 4 What's the difference between this and showing identikit drawings of suspects, or video from closed-circuit cameras of robberies at service stations, for instance?
- 5 What's your reaction to the MEAA position that cooperation with the police might put the media in danger of attack?
- 6 Do you agree with Professor Flint, who thinks that by cooperating journalistic independence and objectivity could be jeopardised?
- 7 And what of Dr Robinson's assertion that not to cooperate could be construed as obstructing the course of justice?
- 8 Do you think police would 'penalise' news crews who did not cooperate?
- 9 Can you get too close to a source and become its puppet?
- 10 In what other ways does the media cooperate with authority in general, and the police in particular?
- 11 What problems do you see associated with that cooperation?

Bibliography:

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- Robinson, Peter. 1996. 'Media Obligated to Help Police.' *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 January, 10.

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