

OPINION:

Policing's fourth age? Mobile working and on-the-street management



OPEN

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The culture of policing has undoubtedly evolved over the last decades, but what does the latest stage mean? Serving officer Martin Gallagher argues that the 'fourth age' of policing could see mobile working undermine the capacity of senior officers to lead on the frontline.

I clearly remember my first trip in a Panda car as a probationer with my shift Inspector. My Sergeant and tutor had briefed me: keep your hat on in the car, and don't speak unless spoken to.

I thought they were winding me up; however, I kept my hat on and my mouth shut. I was very glad I did.

Sure enough the Inspector took his seat, didn't remove his hat and didn't say a word. To say the next half hour was odd as we drove around the housing scheme we policed would be a major understatement.

On receiving a call over the radio to attend a domestic I didn't even know if I was to answer the radio, but took it I had to acknowledge attendance from a sideward glance and nod of the head.

Up to that point I had discussed who would do what at a job in terms of lead and such with my tutor. But on this occasion not a word was uttered, and when we got to the house I just decided to crack on, which seemed to pay off.

After we had dealt with the incident we went back to the station. I partnered up with my regular tutor, and had probably about five or six more 'encounters' with the Inspector during the remainder of my probation. I must have passed his silent tests, as he put me into a plain clothes unit soon thereafter.

Evolution

Now, other than giving old sweats a smile and shocking youngsters reading this tale, its point is to illustrate how much policing culture has changed over the last three decades.

My experience occurred in 1994, but my Inspector had joined in 1968, and brought that policing culture he experienced coming through the service with him. Mobile working is here, and impacting across the world on policing, and I strongly believe that if we don't make policy-led interventions into its adoption we will see policing culture **evolve** rather than change by design, particularly as we face the challenges Covid-19 brings. This might not be a bad thing, but don't you think we should be considering if we are happy with uncontrolled evolution – will we learn from the past?

First Age

Policing we can recognise as such today started off in Glasgow (not London, sorry Met colleagues!) in 1800. At that time officers were equipped with a large cane and a top hat. Of note, for a time they also monitored environmental conditions, assisting in preventing disease under a Police Board with environmental oversight. History has a habit of going full circle.

For me this is policing's first age. Communication occurred through face-to-face interaction with colleagues, command and control being as basic as deploying officers to an area and to a degree hoping for them to use their best judgement.

Although policing professionalised during this time (and the top hats were eventually packed away) communication methods evolved slowly through the rattle to the whistle. You needed a big set of lungs then to be summoning assistance!

Policing at that time was also about big men. We look back today and view this as sexist. I'm not saying attitudes to women at that time weren't often abhorrent but I'd ask you to apply a degree of common sense in judging the recruitment policies that existed.

Officers were largely on their own, relying on their own initiative in a society that was in many ways far more violent than today. In a society that didn't properly value women or their contribution is it so surprising that in a job where officers had to be able to largely look after themselves that big, strong men were seen as necessary? I'm not saying it was right, but what I am saying that in its day it was a fairly practical approach.

Second Age

So, what changed? Policing's second age arrived in the widespread adoption of the telephone. The first police box went into use in Glasgow in 1891. The age of 'beat' policing with control room interaction was upon us. Officers could provide updates to control rooms from their box, and receive instructions.

During this age radio also came into its own, starting with experiments in the 1920's using Morse code but eventually evolving to see cars first being fitted with two-way radios in 1950's. Speedy attendance at incidents was possible, with control rooms receiving calls from the public and dispatching officers.

Third Age

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The third age, to me, was one that arrived through cultural creep. I write this as I believe I saw its emergence.

I searched my first prisoner in a police box and the cop I was with did the person check over the phone in the box. When I started out I was issued a universal 'box key' and told to retain it "although we don't really use them any more".

What I found was that most foot beat boxes in Edinburgh (and I imagine this was the case across the UK) had gradually ceased to be of use over the preceding decade.

The reason? For me, without doubt the introduction of personal radios for communication. Why go to the box to make a call when you can speak with the control room via the radio attached to your tunic?

Officers from the main city Police Stations were still deployed on foot beats; however, the boxes had been made redundant.

Over my service I have seen many reorganisations, and the number of officers deployed on foot in such a manner diminishes with each one.

I have had the privilege of being able to get around the UK a lot during my service and haven't seen much difference to this in most cities. There has generally been a move to largely vehicle-centred policing, for practical reasons in terms of attendance times at incidents, and the need to return to police stations to perform many tasks (and have a break).

Strategic grip

As far as I can discern, there was no strategic 'grip' of this change in UK policing, it happened incrementally over time. While it rolled through, the service also found its officers, and in particular its supervisory officers, tied ever more to a desk dealing with the needs of our increasing suite of ICT systems. There weren't many Inspectors getting out in cars with probationers, hatted or not.

So, although the cops were arguably freer through the use of radio, their supervisors were not. During my service I have witnessed a gradual retreat of front-line leadership. I undertook a 'Campaign Against Violence' day where I was out on foot with a probationer in the centre of Glasgow a few years ago. They were nearing the end of their probation, had never been out with a Sergeant operationally, and to my horror when we attended an incident I had to actually explain to them the concept of 'discretion'... they weren't a bad probationer as far as I could tell, they just hadn't been schooled in the art of policing.

Mobile working

The advent of Mobile Working sees our front line officers equipped with increasing amounts of information and access to systems on the street. The concept of telephone calls from a blue box is somewhat alien, and as I have found when speaking with young cops fairly hard to explain.

The impact of this technology in a cop's hand will remain to be seen, but as researchers from Leeds Business School caution, the drop off in radio traffic and isolation resulting from the lack of need to return to the Station can have negative consequences. The 'team' is quite

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simply less cohesive when the radio and Station banter drop away. The control room staff not only aren't now not in the same station as they have moved some time ago to a remote location, the advent of mobile means they are a voice heard less and less, as command and control moves online. The qualitative impact of such changes remains to be seen.

On-the-street management

Perhaps more importantly though is the impact on Sergeants and Inspectors. As systems that keep them in the office become more and more available in their hand, how does the service give them a gentle push out the door, and back into the role of front-line leader rather than, to a degree, remote manager? Now, I'm not claiming we have no supervisors providing front line leadership but what I am saying is that the nature of ICT system development has tied even the most proactive Sergeant to their desk for periods of time.

This is not as simple as telling them just to get on with it. Many Sergeants (and a lot of Inspectors) have no in-job experience of the kind of on-the-street management that existed until the 90s. After we get through this current crisis, careful thought is needed to re-engage a culture of front line leadership and reflect on practice that has emerged during our COVID-19 response, while also looking to mitigate the potential negative impacts of mobile working I have mentioned above.

Dr. Natalie Benton and CI Richard Atherton of the NPCC are to be applauded for their efforts in trying to draw together the UK forces in respect of mobile working technology and policies, and where possible the service should support such a drive. If culture is left to its own devices it may well develop in ways we really don't want. The phone or tablet is an enabler, we should be thinking about what its use means rather than the tech itself. It is people, not things, that are important. This will be particularly to the fore as we respond to our current unprecedented challenges and demands.

There are few left in the service now who will have had similar experiences to mine with my Inspector, and my brush with a culture that was without doubt inherited from six decades ago. Hopefully our front-line supervisors can be encouraged to get back out and about, and maybe even speak to their probationers. It would even be nice if they did it with their hats on, although even I won't insist they are worn in the car.