Police Control Systems in Britain, 1775–1975: From Parish Constable to National Computer

Review Number: 1666
Publish date: Thursday, 2 October, 2014
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ISBN: 9780719084294
Date of Publication: 2014
Price: £65.00
Pages: 224pp.
Publisher: Manchester University Press
Publisher url: http://www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk/cgi-bin/indexer?product=9780719084294
Place of Publication: Manchester
Reviewer: Kevin Rigg

Dr Chris A Williams undertakes an ambitious project in attempting to analytically discuss aspects of the development of a public institution over a 200-year period, within a publication limited to 242 pages. Yet, in producing this book, he successfully negotiates the complex issue of defining crucial topics that formed the operational world of those who policed British society from the industrial revolution through to the space age. The publication develops three key themes: the development and evolution of mechanisms that directed the control of the operational police constable, what guided and regulated him; the introduction of various types of technology that assisted in controlling the duties he performed; and how these wider innovations correlated with philosophical theories of control. Whilst much has been written in relation to the development of policing society, particularly during the Victorian period, this work provides a fresh and new perspective on how the police were managed and evolved into modern day technocrats, utilising the latest technology, when dealing with the day-to-day problems created within society.

An impressive feature of the research carried out to produce the work is the scope of the data sources interrogated. Williams acknowledges that the main source of data was from the larger police forces, particularly the Metropolitan Police, and from the Home Office. However, references are made throughout the book to a wide range of primary and secondary sources, covering both geographic and thematic issues. These, together with the bibliography and indexing, provide a ready source of suggested reading for those wishing to follow up the questions presented in the work, or to pursue their own research interests. The book is therefore a source of reference as well as an analytical work in its own right; as such, it should be recognised as a book amongst the other ‘must reads’ for those engaged in the history of the criminal justice system, and the police.

Williams offers the portrayal of the parish constable as an operator who was able to express professional agency, in stark contrast to the ‘new policeman’ who was regulated to such an extent that every day of his life was subjected to control. He rightly suggests that at the outset of the 19th century nearly all police were in reality self-employed artisans; indicating they held a level of skill or craft in performing their duties. This poses the question of who had the more complex role, the strictly regulated ‘new police’ officer, or his predecessor the ‘parish constable’, who had the ability to pursue certain offenders in order to gain financial
reward. The parish constable when compared to the ‘new police’ could be free of immediate supervision, use initiative and enjoy a level of independence. The constable of the ‘new police’ performed duty while controlled by a specified timetable on a similar patrol route day-in-day-out, a duty that was repetitive, strongly regulated and to some extent predictable. His reward for complying with ‘working by the book’ Williams argues, was to receive promotion and recognition for adhering to the control system. If the constable used his initiative, veered away from regulations and ‘got it wrong’, he was liable to punishment; although he was rewarded if he ‘got it right’. Nonetheless, even though parish constables existed alongside the new police for several decades, they did not provide a uniform service across regions and were subject to limited supervision – they lacked the ability to be directed as one force, a single entity. The role they practiced in the early 19th century was swiftly becoming one where their impact on society overall was unseen, whilst the ‘new policeman’ was visible and provided a preventative presence; in time he became a part of urban street furniture. Significantly, the ‘new’ policemen could be mustered into groups to police large-scale public disorder

Williams uses a broad definition of the application of ‘technology’ by the police. For example, he includes methods of recording information such as entering data into registers, the use of police notebooks and the printed manuals and instructions that delimited the police. Indeed these administrative processes represent the introduction, on a large scale, of regulated methods of working that directed the everyday practices of the ‘new police’. In reality, this was a reflection of the industrial revolution’s manifestation of bureaucracy; the automata that standardized the repetitive nature of much of the role of the constable on the beat; and a means by which he was overseen. Williams neatly by-passes much of the police technology used throughout the 200 years he covers and concentrates on the arrival of the ‘new police’; real-time telecommunications; the introduction of radio; and the development of computer systems. There is therefore a lack of reference to a plethora of other specialised technology regulated and used by the police officer. Williams acknowledges that there are other publications covering the use and development of this equipment.

The development of innovative police technology generally occurred in tandem with new technology that became available to the wider public, just as changes in society also influenced developments in the police. The police reacted to social fluctuations and adapted their tactics in order to address them, sometimes with the introduction of technology, with varying degrees of success. Although Williams makes clear his book concentrates on being a work of analytical history rather than of historical sociology, I feel the two are inseparable.

Williams applies a similar broad-brush approach to the definition of control systems, as he did to technology. Control systems can be identified as procedures not simply of regulation but as management tools. They facilitate the movement of command to the constable as a resource, as well as the flow of information between the constable and the centre. As such, they are systems that need to manage the inputs and outputs of the dynamics of police incidents, from the reporting of them to their conclusion. Williams seems to attach less emphasis to control systems representing a two-way flow, where the constable can input information as well as receive and react to it. He tends to concentrate on the management perspective of controlling resources.

The incidents created within control systems needed to be documented, to permit auditing, inspection and the chronological recording of outcomes for evidential purposes. For example, the constable refers to his notebook to refresh his memory when giving evidence, whilst the inspector (including the Inspector of Constabulary) examines chronicles and reports of incidents, or any of the other recording processes administered by the police. There was much to record, as the police were responsible for a variety of examinations of wider social controls. For example, the police were required to inspect cattle; hawker’s licences; county bridges; all licenced premises and a host of other business functions to do with the general administration of a town or county.(1)

Williams highlights the perceived need to control the ‘new’ police by regulation. The policemen on foot patrol were, and are, directed by factors that are often outside of their influence, and therefore not easily
controlled or anticipated. The unexpected event that occurs within sight of the patrolling officer and the unanticipated crime or emergency brought to his attention are unforeseen incidents; unable to be predicted. How the constable deals with such occurrences once identified, can be controlled by regulations decreeing what the constable will do and what documentation should be created to record what happened. However, there was usually no immediate supervisory control over the ‘new’ constable; when on patrol he was generally unsupervised, and was able to use his ‘discretion’. The freedom the constable enjoyed when not under direct supervision, which was most of the time, created a chink in the armoury of control exerted by management. Supervisory officers were well aware of this flaw and sought to deal with it by means of the strict enforcement of discipline codes, which together with the regulations governing the expected duties of the police, and their conditions of service, were sufficient to guarantee a high turnover of staff and a perception of control. The ‘new policemen’ were imprisoned by their conditions of work; much of the freedom enjoyed by those in other occupations was removed from them.

The constable was, and continues to be, proactive in producing reports for summons, making arrests, dealing with property and the miscellany of problems posed by people. There is an absence of recognition by Williams that the patrolling constable was a significant contributor to the creation of inputs entered into the control system, the most important being the public. The introduction of telegraphic and telephonic communications in police boxes provided an additional means for the constable to request further police assistance, an ambulance or fire engine, or to provide the system with dynamic information such as descriptions of stolen goods or wanted people. They also offered an element of safety for the constable; indeed the police telephone box system provided a safe deposit for containing violent prisoners whilst awaiting transport (very early American boxes were made of metal and later boxes in Britain were made of concrete making them secure). Importantly, the box and pillar system were a means by which the constable and the public (who could access phones at boxes and pillars) could further contribute to the creating of inputs into the control system; although the public seemed reluctant to use them.

Williams recounts the development of a national police wireless communications system. This initially used telegraphy and later telephony, both were difficult and complicated projects. It can be argued that the expansion of radio systems were complicated by technology, not simply by the need for the evolution and development of appropriate radios but because various areas of the United Kingdom had differing electrical inputs; surprisingly not everyone had the same type of electrical power supply. The onset of the Second World War led to the police being controlled more akin to a single entity in a regional format; each region having a liaison officer who reported directly to the Home Office. This enabled effective operation and communication from the centre and perhaps served as an indication of how important a national police communications system was. It also served to show how efficiency could improve by amalgamating police forces. Most of the advancement in radio, particularly personal radios, occurred during the post-war years, when initially the finance and the materials required for progress were simply not available in the quantities needed. Interestingly, Williams provides clear recognition to the work of Sir Arthur Dixon, the senior civil servant who was instrumental in directing the police towards the introduction of a control room, wireless and radio communication systems, and general police modernisation.

The provision of wireless, and eventually personal radios, allowed constables to be closely monitored and controlled, but also enabled them to seek advice and information from the ‘control’ room. Also as an employee of the borough, county or Metropolis they would report on the maintenance of the town; street lights out, broken drains, insecure property, all of which required additional tasks to be undertaken in the control room. Equally, the constable had the freedom to seek supervisory advice in relation to law and procedure, for example, in asking what to do in a complicated dispute. This further illustrates the capability of constables to place more inputs into the control room, which was now a hub of relevant information provision; such as opening times for chemists, directions for particular places, details of key holders of premises, electoral registers, and wider general information such as lighting up times for vehicles. The control room was a place of supervision where a manager could direct operations. However, a constable working in the control room of a smaller force was occasionally required to make management and operational decisions, in the absence of a supervisor. The control room became the focal point of control.
systems and, dependent upon the perceived purpose of its function, took on various titles including, control room, information room, and communications room.

One area of prominence in relation to the management of inputs via a control system and a consequence of the use of telephones, which surprisingly receives little acknowledgement by Williams, is the introduction of the 999 telephone system. The use of the Whitehall 1212 number in London was superseded by the slow, but steady, national roll out of the 999 system from 1937.\(^2\) This system required a good deal of technical innovation to allow the telephone call to be directed straight to the police without deviation to an operator, or by not clogging up the system if there were numerous calls made at the same time. The impact that the 999 system had on control systems for the police included the requirement to assess the call to determine its appropriate response, an added increase in the demand for police mobility, and increased processes of filtering information, prioritisation and decision-making. The 999 system came about at a time when resources were limited and demand was growing.

Whilst post-war austerity meant there was a lack of resources to progress communications the consumer boom that followed led to a huge increase of telephone lines for public use, including their installation into private households. Such aspects of post-war social change became influential in increasing demands made of the police, the growth of consumerism, rising crime rates, increased road traffic with its associated offences and road accidents, changes to licencing hours, and the growing expectations of a more liberal society. All of these social factors increased the pressure on police resources. It can be argued that they represented a ‘moment of crisis’ defined by Williams as prompting the use of innovation, although he points out that following the passing of a ‘crisis’ many new innovations were abandoned (p. 123). The rise in demand for the police from the mid-1950s was a long-term issue and rather than diminish continued to increase. However, police tactics were adopted to counter these growing demands and unit beat policing, with a general emphasis on providing a mobile response controlled by radio communications, was one such ploy. It became clear that managing police resources in a complex world needed a mechanism to assist in controlling available resources and allocating them to the most suitable incident. The police needed a command and control system.

Williams, who identified the need for a command and control system, outlines the development of police computers from their initial use managing some finance and personnel functions, to their eventual ability to provide a huge dynamic database of information on vehicles and people; the Police National Computer (PNC). However, Williams concludes his research at a stage when, whilst the basic model of the PNC had been introduced, much work was still needed to produce the first robust fully functioning command and control system.

The PNC was a new form of police technology that in many respects can be compared to the registers and ledgers that formed part of the bureaucratic control systems that initially helped found the ‘new police’. It can be argued that the use of the PNC itself generates work. For example, a constable finds a car in a car park it is checked via the PNC and found to have been stolen, an incident is created, the owner is contacted (may be from another force area), when the car is recovered a statement is taken, and the car subsequently removed as stolen from the PNC. Each stage of the incident creates certain obligations on the recording of data. Entering and amending data specifically for the PNC required nationally uniform data to be collated and entered, for example, a national form (PNC 150) was completed for each stolen motor vehicle. Similarly, missing or wanted persons’ forms were required to produce standardised information for entry into the system, and when a stolen vehicle is recovered, or a missing person found, further data is generated to amend the entry. The PNC was a huge innovation. Prior to its introduction the police had to access and interrogate a vast amount of paper-based records at a local level in respect of licenced motor vehicles, and licenced drivers; the local offices responsible for administering these records were not housed in police stations. Should the police in Nottingham need to verify the owner of a vehicle registered in Norwich outside of normal office hours prior to the introduction of the PNC, the police at Norwich would have been requested to carry out a physical search of the records held locally. The time saved, and the ease of access to the records stored in the PNC, dramatically altered the perspective of space and place for the operational
police officer. As Williams comments, the system ‘dramatically reduced the distance between patrolling police officers and some key elements of the information structures on which they relied’ (p. 174).

I applaud this publication; it provides a well-rounded analysis of the main control systems introduced to the police over a 200-year period. However, the work has some notable absences. I feel a greater emphasis could have been placed on the inputs and outputs that the control systems managed and the benefits that they offered the constable; they gave more than methods of regulation and governance. The public accepted the police as an emergency service, perhaps more so after two world wars, and the 999-telephone system became synonymous with the police function. Research into the development and installation of that emergency control system would have added to the many other rich treasures contained within the work.

Nonetheless, this important book answers the questions of how and why police control systems were introduced, it allows an insight into the difficulties encountered when evaluating and developing new technology on a large scale, and it provides a clear chronological path of developing police technology as it emerged. In covering a considerable time-span, it comfortably concentrates on providing an analytical perspective of the most important aspects of police control systems in their various guises. It does not profess to offer an all-encompassing directory of police technology; rather, it provides an analytical insight into the evolution of key control and management systems. Further, the references to the main philosophical processes relating to control are constructive. I found referrals to the work of Max Weber and the defining of bureaucracy particularly relevant and interesting (p. 13). The philosophical application of the use of time by Frykman and Lofgren (p. 45), and how it relates to the industrial revolution and processes of industrialisation, was another of the many useful ways in which theory is used in relation to control systems.

There was previously a clear gap in the historiography of policing in relation to how they were controlled from the period of the ‘old police’ through to the introduction of the ‘new police’, and into the 20th century. This book goes a considerable distance in addressing this lacuna. Additionally, I propose that this work will become compulsory reading to those who wish to gain an understanding of the quiddity of policing, and the comprehension of how the centre came to dominate the way in which police systems were developed. Finally, I would suggest that the publishers should consider releasing the work in paperback format to afford a greater range of readership.

Notes


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