Ethical Examination of Police Podcasts

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Toronto Police Services (TPS) and *24 Shades of Blue*

- 47 episodes since Feb. 16, 2021

- Video podcast on Toronto Police Services (TPS) YouTube channel; Audio podcast available online via Anchor, Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, Pocket Casts, Radio Public, and Spotify

- Interviews hosted by Andy O'Brien and Axel Villamil, co-founders of the Obie & Ax Inc. production company

Toronto · CBC Investigates

Toronto police spending $337K on a podcast to avoid perception they're making 'copaganda'

Podcast series '24 Shades of Blue' has limited reach, critics question why deal was sole-sourced

John Rieti, Shawn Jeffords · CBC News · Posted: Feb 14, 2023 4:00 AM EST | Last Updated: March 30

The police and their podcasters: Toronto police former deputy chief Shawna Coxon, left, brought forward the idea for a podcast for the service. Obie & Ax Inc., run by Andy O'Brien, second from left, and Axel Villamil, right, were given a sole-source contract to produce the show. Former chief James Ramer, third from left, extended the show despite its limited audience. (Toronto Police Service)

Copaganda

"In the same way that we're using cell phone cameras, storytelling, and social media to share the truth and keep ourselves safe, many police departments are also using these tools to depict themselves as kind, heroic, fun-loving community members whose niceness can outweigh the actions of a few "bad apples." This is called copaganda." (Palika Makam, Teen Vogue)

"Copaganda… is all the media made in an effort to show police as being uncomplicatedly friendly, heroic, and good. But these one-dimensional displays actually do harm by presenting cops as being solely friends and allies to the public at-large, rather than offering a truthful depiction of the deeply violent and racist nature of police work in America." (Erin Corbett, Refinery29)

Social Media Communication Ethics

1. Be prudent (not libelous, slanderous, defamatory)
2. Avoid deception
3. Initiatives that need secrecy should raise red flags
4. **Paid speech should be transparently identified as such**
5. Personal opinion should be clearly identified as distinct from organization's voice
6. Use rational analysis to examine messaging from all sides—how can it potentially be misconstrued?
7. Message should maintain your responsibility to do what is right
8. Is the messaging still ethical if roles are reversed and you are on the receiving end
9. **Maintain the dignity and respect of the involved publics**
10. Is the intention behind the communication morally right
11. **Emphasize clarity, including source and sponsorship**
12. **Emphasize transparency in how the message came about**
13. Verify sources and data—do not traffic in rumour and speculation
14. Consistency of message across time to build trust
15. Encourage the good

(Bowen 2014)

Public Perception

Chart 4
Perceptions of police among Canadians, by performance measure, provinces, 2019

percent

Good job | Average job | Poor job | Don't know

Performance measure
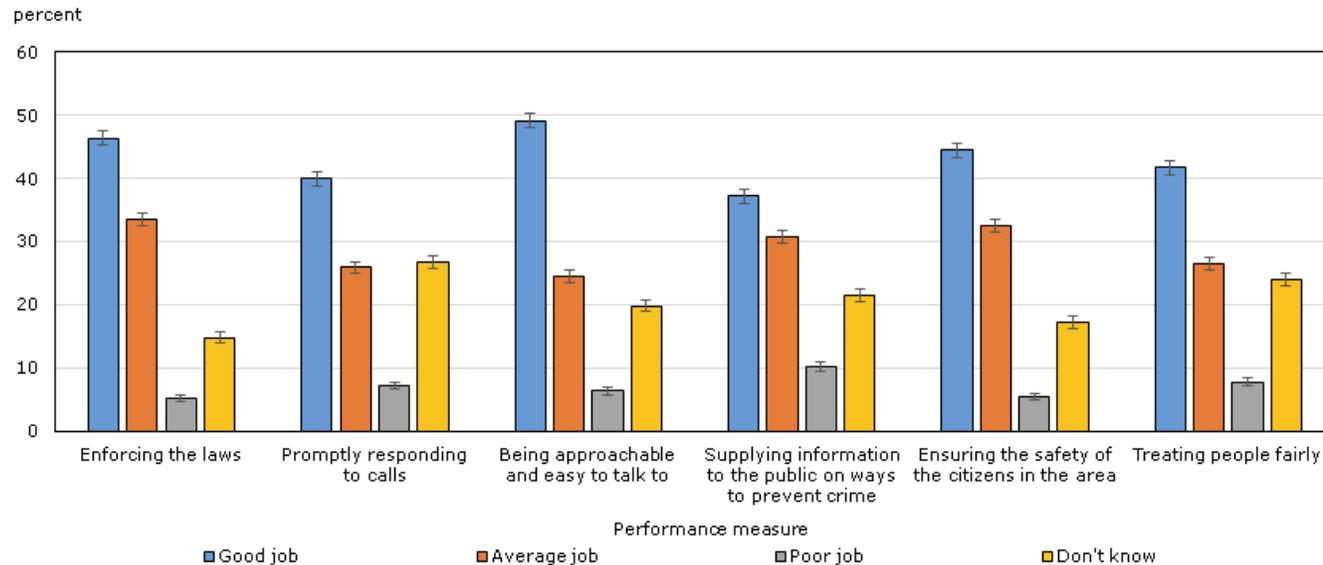
Note: Percent calculations include missing responses, but these data are not shown. Excludes data from Yukon, the Northwest Territories and Nunavut.
Source: Statistics Canada, General Social Survey.

"Public perceptions of the police in Canada's provinces" (Statistics Canada, 2019 data)
https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/85-002-x/2020001/article/00014-eng.htm

"Less than half of Canadians thought their local police were doing a good job of being approachable and easy to talk to (49%), enforcing the laws (46%), ensuring the safety of citizens (44%), treating people fairly (42%), promptly responding to calls (40%) and supplying information to the public on ways to prevent crime (37%). Less than one in five (18%) Canadians felt that the local police were doing a good job on all six of these measures."

"This arms-length approach is important as it is not the Service running its own podcast, but working with an independent, external partner to discuss key issues which are mutually important to their audience and to our community. Police agencies that have run their own media programs have been accused of 'copaganda' and engaging and sharing the content with a third part will assist in mitigating this risk." (Internal TPS memo, Coxon 2020a)

"The Service will work with Obie & Ax Inc. to determine and schedule guests, to provide feedback on desired theme(s) and topics and will need to push the pre-edited social media content out to social media users in the Service. We will also review the content as final editing is to be approved by the Service." (Internal TPS memo, Coxon 2020a)

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