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Communications and the police – law flexes new electronic muscle

Society is faced with generally rising crime rates and accelerating trends towards more violence in the streets. Illegal offensive weapons are proliferating, while the professional criminal population grows more mobile and more sophisticated.

Some of the most important and interesting measures that law-enforcement agencies are taking to combat these trends are in the field of communications. Digital and analogue radio systems, telephones and computers are being used for information handling, retrieval and two-way communications. The partnership of computers and police radio systems alone is producing a revolution in efficiency on both the national and local scale.

Radio has long been as basic to the efficiency and effectiveness of modern police work as the patrol car. But radio and the patrol car are no longer tied together.

Solid state electronics have made possible the introduction of lightweight, rugged two-way radios now worn by urban policemen – as important to their safety as their firearms.

Patrolmen equipped with these radios are in constant communication with headquarters and other field units, whether riding in a cruiser, pounding a lonely beat in the dead of night or inside a building answering a potentially deadly domestic call. They no longer have to rely on bystanders to phone for help if confronted with a violent suspect, nor worry as much about handling other dangerous situations away from their car.

If the car has a permanently-installed radio, it may be used as a repeater to automatically retransmit to headquarters the comparatively weak signal from the radio worn by a patrolman while outside the car.

Many mobile systems now offer a feature that allows a small teleprinter to register a message while the officer is away from the patrol vehicle answering a call.

At dispatch centres, precious seconds are being shaved off police response times by separating urgent from routine

calls. A special, widely-publicized police emergency phone number bypasses switchboard operators to put the citizen in direct touch with a police officer who may actually be the radio dispatcher.

And instant replay is no longer something confined to hockey and football games. The police have it too, to enable cool heads to recheck the details of panicky calls from those in trouble – citizens on the phone or police officers in the field.

* * * *

Computer now assigns channels

The system in use today features complete flexibility in allocation of 12 channels by computer.

Patrol units carry a radio and mini-computer package worth about as much as the vehicle itself. Each car is automatically identified to the computer by its own numeric signature every time it makes a transmission. Patrolling constables may be entirely unaware of which radio channel they are actually using – the computer switches the radio from one frequency to another according to traffic and other demands.

Each cruiser has a special control head with eight push-buttons for sending routine messages to dispatchers. A computer records the information and displays it on one of 15 screens at the force's communications centre. By glancing at the screen, dispatchers can see the service status of all cruisers.

Pre-packaged service messages such as "Accepting call", "At scene", "Out of car" and "Clear of assignment; ready for next call" are sent at the push of a button. Such messages are transmitted to headquarters in less than one-fifth of a second.

When Toronto policemen want to talk, they push another button. The computer, by illuminating a light on the cruiser's control pad, tells them when they have a voice channel. In an emergency, the touch of another button assures immediate voice-channel assignment.

Eighty per cent of all Metro police