6
Creating the Story

1. Introduction

Between February and June 2007, I observed the story creation process on The Bill, following the development of one major storyline or narrative from the initial idea to final script. The storyline was about a new character on the show, Sergeant Stone, a transgressive officer who had joined the station and used vigilante techniques on occasion to bring offenders to justice. In the storyline that I observed being developed, he also enlists junior and impressionable officers to help him in his task. In this chapter, I describe how this storyline was created.

In Chapter 5, I argued that three key sets of factors play a part in shaping the content of programmes – commercial imperatives, working processes and ideological values of the makers of the programme, and, lastly, the constraints of the medium and format (see Figure 6.1). I also argue that at various points in the show’s history, some factors were more important than others in determining representation of the police and policing.

In this chapter, I look more closely at how such factors influenced the decision-making process on a daily basis in the creation of storylines. I chart the development of the storyline described above through a series of meetings and discuss how and why, at various stages in the process, different sets of factors led the makers of the show to make changes to that storyline.

I begin my discussion with an overview of the key stages in the story development process.

2. Overview of the story creation process

As I discussed in Chapters 3, 4 and 5, between 1983 and 2001, ideas were mainly generated and developed by the freelance writers. However, in
the last ten years of the show’s history, ideas were instead developed by an in-house story production team. This was the process that I observed in 2007. There were four distinct stages in the story creation process, as illustrated in Figure 6.2 below.

The first stage in the storylining process was the long-term meeting. This would take place at a hotel, usually outside London, during one weekend every three months. All the in-house staff involved with the storylining process would attend this: the executive producer, the producers, the story producer and story editors, script editors, technical advisers and the story consultant, the researcher and up to eight writers – usually those who had been involved with the show for a long period of time. The ITV Network executive responsible for series and serials would also take part in this meeting. On the first day, there would be a general discussion of the stories proposed for the regular characters by the story team. These would be a mix of ‘soap’ stories, touching on issues such as affairs, relationships, pregnancies and so on (Hobson 1982), and policing stories – for example, stories about the regular police characters using undue force on suspects and the consequences of their actions. I give an example below of one of the ‘soap’ stories in the notes.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Long-term meeting</th>
<th>Generating ideas for the show (held every three months)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Brainstorming</td>
<td>Fleshing out the story outlines (continuous daily process)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning</td>
<td>Discussion of content of the outlines (one meeting once a month)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commissioning</td>
<td>Writers assigned individual story outlines to develop into scripts (one or two meetings depending on how many writers are commissioned once a month)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 6.2 The process of creating storylines