"I've been talking to some idiot on the phone"

Representation and Constructs, within a police control room.

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As traditional methods of contact diminish, the first point of contact and often the public’s first experience of the police occur when callers speak with a police call handler. Call handlers are the interface between the public and the institution; they are required to use their expertise to elicit what has occurred, where, what offences have or may have been committed and the level of threat, harm and risk present. This information is represented within the written discourse domain of the incident log and is passed to a dispatch operator for the allocation of police via the radio. Incidents are a construct or recontextualization (Linell 1998); created by the call handler, of events represented to them by the caller. Dispatch operators allocate police via the radio, with their understanding of the events provided by the call handlers’ incident log. The police officers’ knowledge of events is based on this final representation. To be considered competent call handlers typically complete a six week training course consisting of basic law, police policies and procedure and Incident recording. No training is provided in either verbal or written communication skills. Completed police call handling research has focused on either institutional discourse, (Zimmerman 1992, Hester and Francis 2001) or discord and communication problems, (Imbens-Bailey and McCabe 2000). Whilst research describing the experience of call handling has drawn on the work of Hochschild (1979,1983) and his theory of emotional labour, Tracy and Tracy (1998). These studies fail to situate call handlers against a backdrop of complex influences such as shift work, status, power structures and the management of change in an institution that finds itself in flux as it endeavours to respond to increasing demand with diminishing resources. I demonstrate how ethnographic methods reveal a complex control room society, where what is represented as real is often not, what is constructed can miss the real threat and, and that the outcomes can have dire consequences.