As the title suggests, *Excuse me, but we’re actually the POLICE and we’re above the law!*, Stefan Holgersson’s latest report is a well-documented, whilst rather hodgepodge, disclosure of the Swedish Police authority’s flagrant and pervasive violations of the laws regarding public access to government documents. Stefan Holgersson is damned angry! In the report he vents his frustrations with the police who have time and again withheld public documents and/or stonewalled his petitions to access public documents. Obviously, these actions on the part of the police have undermined his and other police scholars’ research, in the same way that withholding public documents undermines the work of critical journalists. What is at stake is transparency—the backbone of democracy and the rule of law. Let us take a look at Transparency International’s definition of transparency.

Transparency is about shedding light on rules, plans, processes and actions. Transparency ensures that public officials, civil servants, managers, board members and businesspeople act visibly and understandably, and report on their activities. And it means that the general public can hold them to account. It is the surest way of guarding against corruption, and helps increase trust in the people and institutions on which our futures depend (https://www.transparency.org/what-is-corruption#what-is-transparency, accessed 2019.01.08).

Holgersson’s report begins by disclosing the lengths to which human relations officers withheld the contents of public documents that laid the basis for the recruitment of management positions in the recently reorganised Police Authority. Holgersson claims and substantiates that the Police Authority’s Human Relations Department ignored important principles regarding the disclosure of public documents, provided misleading information and disregarded the requirement for objectivity and impartiality, and otherwise was prepared to violate laws and regulations, including destroying public documents (!) during an on-going appeal process to obtain these documents. They did go to great lengths to stone-wall Holgersson by blacking out the recruitment process. And one can wonder why the test
results of upper management police was declared classified information and that their
disclosure could jeopardise national security if the most competent applicants had indeed
been appointed.

In general, Holgersson describes the phenomenon that there is a widespread attitude
within the police that the Police Authority does not have to comply with laws and regula-
tions. Pretty harsh words, but as Holgersson points out, the Police Authority is a law
enforcement authority whose job is to investigate events where there are suspicions that
persons are guilty of crime. Hence, according to Holgersson, strange signals are therefore
sent when staff within the Police Authority do not themselves comply with laws and regu-
lations. In addition, he emphasises, that the Police Authority is an authority whose activi-
ties include using coercive measures and exercising physical violence against citizens.
Holgersson argues that it is therefore particularly important that within such an authority
it is considered important to comply with laws and regulations.

The report concludes with a chapter dealing with the Police Authority’s communication
strategy. In 2015, the Police Authority’s then chief police officer formulated a directive that
the “police’s external communication should aim to strengthen the police’s brand” (p. 54).
A major framework agreement was signed in 2015 with a PR agency (Prime), which caused
considerable criticism. The fact that state authorities buy in PR services has been a contro-
versial phenomenon. Unlike private security companies, the police are not selling their ser-
vices. Holgersson argues that the Police Authority’s communication strategy is to white-
wash incongruities in their activities and inappropriate behaviour on the part of police
officers. Furthermore, he contends that police officers have in a number of contexts reacted
to the police authorities’ whitewashing, but the criticism usually stops internally for fear of
reprisals.

According to Holgersson, research studies that indicate that the police in their endeav-
our to strengthen and/or defend the ‘brand’ do not provide objective descriptions, but
instead embellish the image of their activities, have in various ways been confirmed by
operational staff, middle managers and in some cases managers who have or have had high
positions within the police. In general, however, he maintains that research studies that
have produced this type of conclusion have been officially questioned by some senior man-
gers and by persons responsible for the police’s communication activities with claims that
the studies had been conducted by poor researchers. He points out that it is easy to assume
that such claims are made to protect the brand.

Holgersson points out that only the largest media companies in Sweden have more
employees than the police’s communications department. In percentage terms, the police
communication department commits small resources in relation to the Police Authority’s
total budget, but different activities compete for allocated resources. How can it be, ques-
tions Holgersson,

that the Police Authority believes that it can afford to have 190 employees in the police communication
department when, at the same time, with reference to lack of resources, for example staffing certain
large geographical areas with only one police patrol, cannot afford to have some full-time dialogue
police in some regions or not divide two people in the police to work to scan the network for hate crime
(p. 73)?
The communication strategy within the police not only ties up resources that could have been used for other tasks, but also has several other negative consequences. One such consequence, he contends, is that the police's activities are not developed in the way that is desirable by focusing on creating an attractive surface instead of the content of its activities. The Police Authority, Holgersson argues, is largely focused on defending and strengthening its brand rather than trying to improve its performance.

Holgersson’s report, like his work in general, is an initiated disclosure of deep-seated problems within the Swedish Police. What is worrisome is that his critical research will not likely find any resonance within the police organisation. He cites a study that compared 18 professional occupations in different branches, which showed that the police force had the lowest value regarding how important it is that the employees think that their work is based on research. On a scale from 100 to –100, for example, university teachers had a value over 90 and priests had value 30. The police force gained –20 (minus 20) and had a clearly lower value than the priests. The police force also received the lowest value (–30) compared to the other professions regarding the importance of being updated on new research (Brante, Johnsson, Olofsson & Svensson, 2015). Critical police researchers, with good intentions, are facing an uphill road for recognition within the Swedish Police.

REFERENCE