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THE WICKED STEPMOTHER?: THE EDNA MUMBULO CASE OF 1930*

by

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the role of gender and the stereotype of the "wicked stepmother" in the 1930 murder case of Edna Mumbulo in Erie, Pennsylvania. In April 1930, Edna Mumbulo was charged with the murder of her stepdaughter Hilda. It was alleged that Edna deliberately set fire to the eleven-year old girl with the hopes of obtaining the girl's $6,000 estate and receiving the sole affections of the girl's father. Edna Mumbulo's case was the most sensational murder case in Erie to that date. It is asserted in this article that the facts of the case were seen through the distorted lens of the "wicked stepmother" stereotype. As a result, Edna was convicted of the crime. Eight years later, the presiding judge of the case, with the conviction that there was reasonable doubt, helped secure her release. Using newspaper accounts, court records, family histories, and census data, the author recreates the alleged fire, hunt, trial, and public speculation.

INTRODUCTION

On March 24, 1990, Edna Deshunk Mumbulo died of old age. At age 99, she had not been the oldest resident at the Erie County Geriatric Center, but she may have been the most famous — if they had only remembered. In the following days, Edna’s body was taken from St. Vincent’s Medical Center in Erie, Pennsylvania, where she had died, to St. Joseph’s Cemetery in Perry, New York. There, in the small local cemetery grounds, in a plot freshly dug, despite the frozen ground, Edna was buried.1

Edna Deshunk Mumbulo was a mystery to those people who surrounded her; to those who came in and out of her life just before her dying days in 1990. She was, likewise, a mystery to the people who she encountered in 1930. Edna Deshunk Mumbulo was not simply a little old lady, frail and sweet. Edna was the Torch Killer of 1930.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Female murderers, like Edna Mumbulo, blended into the American public with great ease. They were not big, hulking monsters like many of their male counterparts, nor were they old, hooked nose witches rubbing their hands with maniacal glee. On the surface, they looked average, non-threatening. Edna Mumbulo was just one such murderer. But, it was that commonness that perplexed the Erie public. Murder was alarming and incomprehensible. The murder of a child, however, was frightening and shocking. It was gruesome. The thought of a gruesome, grisly crime being committed by an ordinary woman elevated the Mumbulo Torch Killings to a new height.2
The literature on female murderers is rich. Likewise, the number of different theories about female killers abounds. One theory, as expressed by Elicka Peterson in her article “Murder as Self-Help: Women and Intimate Partner Homicide,” suggests that low status in society and low social control led to decreased access to social control. In turn, the inability to control one’s life and the inability to tap into resources to assist in the control of life crises prompted some women to resort to lethal violence as a means of restoring a semblance of control to their lives. In effect, Peterson argues that homicide was a last-ditch effort to take back their lives. Elizabeth M. Suval and Robert C. Brisson might add to this self-help theory that included in that loss of social control is an absence of economic control. In their work, “Neither Beauty Nor Beast: Female Criminal Homicide Offenders,” they argue that socio-economic deprivation was a contributing factor in women’s homicides. This theory is countered, however, by the work of Eric Dowdy and N. Prabha Unnithan. Their study of Texas female killers suggests that there is little evidence to support the conclusion, at least in Texas, that economic distress motivated the homicide of children.

Much of the literature being produced today focuses on the personal background and characteristics of those women convicted of homicide. In “Convicted Women Who Have Killed Children: A Self-Psychology Perspective” by Susan Crimmins, Sandra Langley, and Henry H. Brownstein, the authors describe 42 New York State cases where mothers killed their own children. Overwhelmingly, they argue, women who kill their children have a background pattern of repeated damage to self. Mothers who kill, they suggest, were consistently subjected to physical and sexual victimization, suicide attempts, and substance abuse. They suffered low self-esteem, relied heavily upon an abusive and dysfunctional spouse, and experienced a sense of self-worthlessness.

Jane Totman’s conclusions were strikingly similar. In her 1978 work, The Murderess: A Psychological Study of Criminal Homicide, she argued that female murderers came from destructive relationships. They may have been mothers, but they came to that role reluctantly. Being a mother was simply an unwanted fate and was perceived as a burden on their personal life and a dramatic and tragic shift from how they envisioned themselves. The frustration with this new burden of responsibility drove some women to no longer see their children as family members in need of care and nurturing, but as obstacles to their personal happiness and irritants. But, these women, because of the nature of their abusive and destructive relationships, could not confide in their partner. They had no one with whom to share their feelings. As a result, Totman suggests, they removed the unwanted child by killing that child. Edna Mumbulo, Erie’s Torch Killer of 1930, fit this description.

But Edna might equally fit the image of the struggling stepmother, which carries with it the myth of wickedness and cruelty. The literature on the stereotyping of stepmothers is equally abundant as that of female killers. Negative connotations about stepmothers have been in existence as early as the 15th century. Those myths remain in existence today. The story of Cinderella locked in a tower on the eve of the Great Ball, Snow White’s poisoning, and Hansel and Gretel’s abandonment in the woods all came at the hands of the “wicked stepmother.” The stepmothers in those fairy tales are depicted as the raw incarnation of “evil” and all that is “wicked.” They are portrayed as individuals “devoid of all human goodness.” These myths are quickly assimilated into the slate of cultural standards. Stephen Claxton-Oldfield and Bonnie
Butler, in their work “Portrayal of Stepparents in Movie Plot Summaries,” have amply demonstrated the pervasiveness of the negative stereotypes associated with stepmothers in popular contemporary media forms. Yet, contrary to popular myth, most stepmothers are not “wicked” or “evil.” In fact, as Marianne Dainton has noted in her work, “Myths and Misconceptions of the Stepmother Identity,” despite “fairy tales’ depiction of stepmothers as evil hags, real stepparents look just like real mothers.” In the end, the prevalent myth about stepmothers continues to assert that the non-biological mother cannot nurture and care for a child as well as the biological mother. Thus, Edna Mumbulo’s role as “stepmother” may have influenced the public’s perception of her love for her daughter and, as a consequence, her innocence or guilt.

Others have suggested that the stereotype and creation of the “wicked stepmother” myth have gone much further than just labeling women, and have played a central role in the deterioration of those stepfamilies. Gerda Schulman’s landmark work in 1972, “Myths that Intrude on the Adaptation of the Stepfamily,” argued that negative “step” images created additional problems for stepfamilies. Mark Fine’s work, “Perceptions of Stepparents: Variations in Stereotypes as a Function of Current Family Structure,” has further demonstrated the power of negative stereotypes and the expectations of those stereotypes to adversely affect already strained relations between stepchildren and stepparents. Simply put, women internalized the messages and stereotypes about stepmothers long before they entered a relationship that required them to assume the role of stepmother. And, these women’s fear of being linked to that negative image has fostered unnatural relationships and great expectations of “instant love.” The dynamics of a stepfamily have been only further complicated, as many have noted, by the prevalence of the “evil stepmother” stereotype. Thus, the problem of natural jealousies and the ill-feelings of having been separated from the natural mother are further exacerbated by this “stepmother” syndrome. So, while the Erie public may have unjustly convicted Edna Mumbulo because of her stepmother status, the strains within the family may have been heightened, in part, because of that same stereotype. Those strains, jealousies, and deflated expectations may have compelled Edna to commit the horrific act.

Janet Strayer’s article, “Trapped in the Mirror: Psychosocial Reflections on the Mid-Life and the Queen in Snow White,” sums up the problems associated with stepmothers well. “Folktales,” Strayer writes, “are privileged in reducing complex issues to essentials, such as ‘good’ and the ‘bad’.” While those essentials, in some cases, may serve the public in a positive way, the stepmother stereotype has been harmful. The Erie public, having consumed a lifetime of fairy tales and myths, organized the known facts of the Mumbulo case into the “wicked stepmother” framework. In doing so, they condemned a woman to prison.

BACKGROUND: EDNA MUMBULO

Edna was born December 1, 1890, in North Baltimore, Ohio, to George Shunk and Mary Agnes Arbogast. George had been a glassblower for a small company run by Philip Arbogast, Mary’s father. Several branches of the Arbogast family were well-known in southwest Pennsylvania and West Virginia for their glass-making skills. George and Mary met through that industry. Their fourth child was Edna. When Edna was a small child, the family moved from their home south of Toledo to Pittsburgh’s Homewood District. There, as Catholics, they joined the Holy Rosary Catholic Church where Mary played the organ for Sunday Masses and
her eight daughters served as members of the church choir. Around 1906, however, Edna strayed from her faith and fell in love with a local boy named Harold Van Sickle. By her sixteenth birthday, Edna was the mother of twins. Unable to care for the twins, the children were sent off to live with her older sister. Nonetheless, Harold and Edna were married. After only ten months of marriage, however, Harold died. With his death, Edna “had to go to work.” She held various jobs between 1907 and 1909, including working as a bundle wrapper for Kaufman’s Department Store in Pittsburgh and as a freelance dressmaker in the city.17 In 1910, with nearly the entire family in tow, George, Mary, and Edna moved to the small town of Coudersport in northern Pennsylvania.18

By the mid-1920s, Edna had relocated from Coudersport to New Berlin, New York. New Berlin is around 50 miles north of Binghamton in the heart of central New York State. There, she found work in the silk mill. One of Edna’s co-workers at the silk mill was Ralph Mumbulo. Very quickly, over the course of 1926-1927, the two formed a friendship. Despite her new job and new friends, Edna was plagued by family problems. Her elderly father, who was closing in on 90 years old, was without home and assistance. “Pap,” as he was called by his children, bounced around from child to child. With his mind rapidly failing, he was increasingly a burden on those family members who cared for him. By 1927, it was Edna’s turn to care for her father. “Pap” lived with her in New Berlin for one year before returning to another of Edna’s siblings in Arkansas. It was during her father’s stay that she and Ralph solidified their relationship.

Their relationship was an “illicit alliance.” Ralph was married. In August, 1927, Ralph was brazen enough to introduce Edna to his eight-year old daughter, Hilda. Hilda’s mother, Edith Chapen Mumbulo, died suddenly in late 1928. In the wake of her death, Hilda received an estate valued at over $6000, the bulk of which she would receive when she turned twenty-one. By the time the estate papers were formally recorded and the family apprised of the nature of the settlement, the country found itself amid an economic tailspin. The silk mills temporarily closed and both Edna and Ralph were released from their jobs. For several months, the threesome (Ralph Mumbulo, daughter Hilda Mumbulo, and Edna Shunk) “tin-canned” their way across the United States. Ralph took day jobs while Edna continued to find work as a dressmaker. Finally, on November 8, 1929 (just a little over a week after the Stock Market Crash), the threesome found their way to Erie, Pennsylvania.

In Erie, the three set up house in a second-floor apartment at the corner of 6th and Lighthouse on Erie’s East Side. Ralph found work at the Standard Stoker Company in Erie as a welder while Edna designed and made dresses out of their apartment. She also earned extra money (and the trust of her neighbors) by babysitting their children. Together they yielded less than twenty-five dollars per week. The cost of food and rent ate up much of those earnings. Despite the low income, the Mumbulos (as all three were now called) could afford to buy a new Ford automobile. Bought on credit, the purchase of the new Ford will later be viewed with suspicion. Hilda was enrolled in Wayne School and quickly developed friends from among her classmates. Over the course of the next four months, Edna and Hilda endeared themselves to their neighbors.19

Edna, however, was growing disillusioned over her relationship with Ralph. She had not been able to care for her twin boys twenty years earlier and now, as she approached her fortieth
birthday, she was saddled with the care of an eleven year old girl who was not biologically her own. Ralph worked hard at the forge and she spent her days in the apartment alone or with Hilda. The conditions in the apartment were clean, but crowded. It was, by design, a one-bedroom apartment, but because of Edna’s desire for privacy, the sitting room adjacent to the kitchen was converted into a bedroom for Hilda. The family, as a result, was forced to spend their time in the apartment either in their own bedrooms or together in the 8 by 14-foot kitchen. The existing tensions between the three were exacerbated by the crowded living conditions. Moreover, Ralph freely spent their limited money on Hilda. He frequently sent her to the movies and bought her new clothes. Edna, as a result, grew jealous of Hilda. On at least one occasion, Edna threatened to leave Ralph because she believed he thought more of his daughter than he did of her. The tensions between Ralph and Edna were further compounded by their growing economic problems. The bills were adding up — food, rent, the car — and they all needed to be paid. “Pap,” back in Arkansas, needed money. And Hilda wanted more. The problems seemed insurmountable. In the back of both of their minds, however, there was a chance — a $6000 chance.

THE FIRE

On the morning of March 21, 1930, Edna seized her chance. The second floor of the Pittsburgher Apartments was just coming alive with activity around 5 a.m. when Hilda awoke crying. She sniffed and snuffled and returned to a half-sleep. By six o’clock Edna had risen and begun preparing breakfast for Ralph. Bacon, toast, and coffee were quickly devoured. He ate in big exaggerated bites as he rushed to finish dressing for work. By 6:40 a.m., he was off to Standard Stoker. Edna and Hilda were alone. Had she planned what she was going to do next? Had she thought out all of the implications of her acts? Or was it impulse? From her bedroom, she brought a jug of gasoline that she had purchased the day before. What then ensued remains a mystery. By 7 a.m., the apartment building was engulfed in smoke. Little eleven-year old Hilda was in flames. She was, as a physician later reported, “literally cooked alive.” When Nina Hickson, the apartment manager, arrived “there was considerable smoke” pouring from the apartment. The apartment building was in jeopardy. The flimsy composition walls that separated the families were potential fuel to the growing flames. Hickson quickly exited to procure a pail of water. In the meantime, a Mumbulo neighbor, Frank Fisher rushed to what he believed was an empty apartment. As he stood in the doorway, Mrs. Hickson returned with two pails of water. One pail was emptied onto the larger fire and as she was about to dump the second onto the smaller fire underneath a chair, she spied little Hilda standing in the kitchen corner, her underclothes in flames. She doused the young girl and ran back for more water. As she exited the apartment, she nearly collided with another neighbor, John Blossey. Blossey found Hilda now sitting on a kitchen chair, her nightgown burned entirely off. Hilda was motionless.

“Why are you sitting there?” Blossey asked.

“I can’t see to get out,” she replied.

The fire and smoke had blinded the girl. And, as one might suspect, she was traumatized. She was not only traumatized by the fire and its devastating impact upon her, but also devastated by the fact that Edna, who was practically her stepmother, had apparently committed the [End
devastating act. Blossey, afraid to touch the girl’s scorched body in fear of inflicting greater pain, led her into the hall. She whispered to Blossey, in her faint child’s voice, “don’t let me die.” Then, little Hilda collapsed onto the floor. By 7:14 a.m., the firemen from Station Number 5 arrived onto the scene, quickly followed by a medic. The remaining embers of the fire were extinguished. But, the firemen found unquestionable traces of gasoline poured all over Hilda’s bedroom. Dr. Nathan Shuser, the medic, found Hilda on a neighbor’s cot. She was unconscious and was “badly burned about the face and body…. It was apparent to Shuser that her condition was critical so she was promptly loaded into the ambulance and taken to Hamot Medical Center.

Throughout it all, Edna screamed and cried.

“Save my baby! Save my apartment!” she cried.

Sadie Donovan, a neighbor, cornered the woman.

“Are my furs safe?” Edna asked. Donovan was shocked. “Are my furs safe?”

Donovan asked Edna how the fire had started, unaware that the answer stood before her. Edna avoided the questions and tried to push past Donovan for the stairwell. Donovan prevented her descent.

“How did the fire start?” Donovan asked again.

“Mind your own business,” Edna replied, “or I’ll sock ya’ in the jaw.” She then shoved Donovan and ran to the street below. There, the tenants of the building gathered beside her. Among them were neighbors Eliza Summerville and Ethel Luther who, once the fires were extinguished, led Edna to Mrs. Hickson’s apartment where they knelt in prayer. Sadie Donovan remained on the street, anticipating the arrival of Edna’s husband, Ralph.

He arrived around 7:30 a.m.

“Where are they?” he asked. Sadie pointed. He found Edna in Mrs. Hickson’s apartment and Hilda in the process of being loaded onto her stretcher. He backed down the stairs slowly as the firemen and Dr. Shuser carried her to the street. As the emergency workers did their business of loading and securing Hilda into the ambulance, Ralph disappeared. Sadie Donovan, her suspicion fully aroused, followed Ralph into the apartment building. She stood in the doorway of the smoke-filled apartment and watched Ralph as he “hurriedly searched for certain papers…. When he realized that he was being observed, he grew indignant.

“Mind your own business, woman!” he barked. Donovan withdrew, a thousand thoughts rattling in her brain. Ralph scurried about the apartment, quickly rummaging through drawers until he at last found the papers he had been seeking. He then rushed past Donovan in the stairwell and to the ambulance on 6th Street. With the papers tucked into the bib of his coveralls, Ralph jumped aboard the ambulance and, with Hilda, raced to Hamot Medical Center.
The crowds quickly dispersed. A neighbor took Edna from the Lighthouse Apartments and the scene of the crime to one of Edna’s relative’s home in Wesleyville, Pennsylvania. She would return only once more to the site of the fire and then it was only to pack her bags.

By late morning, on the day of the fire, Hilda was dead. Blossey, the neighbor to whom she had spoken the words — “don’t let me die,” had failed to help her. The firemen and Dr. Shuser had been unable to save her. She had been burned to a crisp. Her once soft skin was burned pink. Her face was taut with the evaporation of skin moisture. She died of burn trauma at Hamot Medical Center around eleven o’clock in the morning. Between her arrival at the hospital shortly before eight o’clock and her death at eleven, Ralph Mumbulo was not at the bedside of his dying daughter. His last words to her – as he left her that morning – were, “I’ll see you in heaven, Hilda.” Instead, he visited the offices of the Erie Insurance Company where he inquired as to the status of his life insurance policy on Hilda. Ralph never returned to the hospital. He was not present when Hilda died. In fact, at the moment she died, Ralph was still in the offices of the Erie Insurance Company.

The police reports at the time of the initial investigation reported that Hilda had risen from her bed to light the gas stove when suddenly she was engulfed in flames. Yet, there was no evidence of scorch marks or smoke damage in the kitchen where she was alleged to have started the fire. It was, as the Erie Daily Times later reported, “singularly free from smoke.” Instead, the fire damage was restricted to Hilda’s bedroom. On the right wall of her bedroom, the wall closest to the apartment corridor, a “ghastly smudge” was found on the apartment’s “dismal” yellow walls and ceiling. Yet, Assistant Fire Chief Lawrence Scully reported that their efforts to determine the “exact cause were futile.” Coroner Dan Hanley investigated the fire site and viewed the body of Hilda Mumbulo and then promptly signed an “investigation completion card.” The fire was out and the excitement over, or so the Mumbulos thought.

Edna and Ralph reportedly could not stay in the apartment the next day. “The memories of their child’s death” were unbearable. Instead, they remained in the home of their Wesleyville relatives. On March 24, Reverend Carl Blackmore presided over the funeral service of Hilda Belle Mumbulo at the Hanley-Schaller Chapel on the corner of 13th and Peach Street. The next day, Ralph and Edna packed up their belongings and vacated their apartment. The two drove east to New Berlin to bury Hilda and start anew. As Hilda was buried and friends and family of Ralph gathered around their grieving son, Edna stood emotionless, stoic in the face of the tragedy. Hilda’s burial was supposed to be the end of the story. It was supposed to be the closure to a tense and horrific experience. It was not.

**THE HUNT AND TRIAL**

Back in Erie, the investigation reopened. John Blossey had his suspicions. At his General Electric workplace, he confided to his boss that he thought the fire was deliberately set. He was not alone. The Mumbulo’s neighbor, Lester Hatch, went so far as to meet with Coroner Hanley to discuss the nature of the fire and relate to him the behavior of Ralph and Edna during the fire. How was it that the fire was entirely confined to the bedroom if the fire started in the kitchen? Hanley consulted with the local police reports and met with Assistant Chief Scully. The firemen were admittedly suspicious, but the case had been closed so they did not speak up.
Hanley read the police reports and interviews with Edna. In her testimony to the police, she claimed a different story than what she had originally told neighbors and Dr. Shuser. In her report to the police, she claimed that the fire started when she was cleaning a dress in gasoline. The day before the fire, she said, she babysat a neighbor’s child and the child accidentally soiled her dress. She bought gas that day to clean it, but did not get around to actually cleaning the dress until the day of the fire. She had, she argued, taken a can of gasoline out of her bedroom and filled a washpan in the kitchen. She then rubbed the soiled dress in the gasoline and, according to her, it immediately exploded in flames. In a panic, she tried to throw the pan of flaming gas out the kitchen window, but a clothesline full of freshly laundered linens hung outside her window. Fearing that she might set the linens on fire, she went through the doorway separating the kitchen and Hilda’s room, and threw the flaming pan toward the window there. The window, however, was closed. Hilda, she said, caught on fire as the pan of flames dropped onto her. It was an accident, Edna claimed to the police – a horrible accident. On March 31, dissatisfied with Edna’s explanation and the pattern of the fire evidence, Coroner Hanley advocated for a reopening of the case. Investigators returned to the site of the fire and took more detailed notes, mapped out the apartment, and took photographs. Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst contacted the apartment manager, Nina Hickson, and arranged for the city to rent the damaged apartment in order to secure the investigation site. If there was foul play in the fire, Herbst believed, he could not afford to have the crime scene repaired. The burn damage needed to be preserved.

The day after the case was reopened, local Erie authorities began searching for Ralph and Edna. Detective LeRoy Search and Assistant City Detective Harry Russell were employed to lead the investigation. By April 2, 1930, the citizens of Erie were fascinated with the speculation about the couple’s whereabouts. The Erie Daily Times headline read: “Continue Hunt for Parents.” They knew they were not staying in their old apartment or with their relatives in Erie, but the local officials in New Berlin could not find them. Detective Russell went to New Berlin to see for himself. He hoped that he might ascertain clues about their location by visiting with family members there and visiting the site where Hilda was interred. He returned the following day to consult with Assistant District Attorney Herbst and Assistant District Attorney Mortimer Graham. Meanwhile, New York State Troopers scoured the Oneonta Mountains near New Berlin in hopes of locating the two. After nearly a week of hunting for the elusive couple, Herbst was convinced that their flight was evidence of guilt and that enough evidence, albeit circumstantial, had surfaced to merit his swearing out of an arrest warrant. Appearing before Alderman Eugene Alberstadt, Herbst leveled the charge of murder against Ralph Mumbulo and his common-law wife Edna Deshunk.

By the time authorities caught up with Ralph and Edna, however, they were no longer involved in a simple common-law marriage; they were legally married within the state of Pennsylvania. On April 3, 1930, as Detective Russell searched New Berlin, Ralph and Edna were driving south from the area back into the state of Pennsylvania. They crossed the border and in the small town of Montrose, they were married. Their marriage protected them. For Edna, the wedding not only legitimized their life together over the last two years, but sealed the “lips of her husband.” Pennsylvania law prevented an individual from being forced to present damaging testimony against a spouse. Edna had silenced the only individual who may have truly known the intention of the fire. After their wedding, the two drove back north into New York
and to their hometown of New Berlin. By the time they arrived, Russell had already returned to Erie to meet with his superiors about a course of action. Rather than stay with family, who they likely suspected knew about the case by now, Ralph and Edna checked into a local hotel.30

In the meantime, Russell was dispatched back to New Berlin and began inquiring at other locations in the area. On the morning of April 5, he visited the local hotel where Edna and Ralph were staying. The hotel manager escorted him to the couple’s room only to find that they had fled (and did so, of course, without paying their bill). Russell knew he was close. The hunt intensified.

After days of hunting for the couple, Detective Russell and Assistant District Attorney Mortimer Graham located Ralph and Edna. The couple was questioned, but let go, as the warrant had not reached the two officers and they had no legal authority to hold them. Nonetheless, the government officials kept a close eye on the two. When the warrant arrived two days later, on Saturday April 5, the Mumbulos were promptly arrested in the town of Edmeston where they had been staying with family. Edna, a bride of only three days, was hysterical when the charges were read. She collapsed several times as she was escorted from the house to the police car. Ralph, when confronted by Chenango County Sheriff Rexford Ormsby, denied his identity.31

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he said.

“What are you trying to do, hang a murder on me?”

Once she had calmed down, Edna, likewise, tried to elude the authorities’ questioning. “What is happening?! What is happening?!” she cried.

The two were immediately taken to the Chenango County Jail in Norwich, New York. There, Chenango County District Attorney Frank Barnes confronted Edna. She denied all charges to Barnes, but admitted that she had bought gas the day before the fire in order to clean a dress. Barnes calmly took her statement and then, over the phone, translated it to Erie County Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst. Herbst began to assemble his case against the couple by drawing up extradition papers, assigning his associates a variety of smaller tasks, and making the preparations for his trip to Norwich.

While the Mumbulos were arrested on Saturday, April 5, Herbst did not arrive in the town until Wednesday, April 9. In the meantime, the couple had contacted local attorneys Percy Thomas and Ward Truesdale. They were not formally retained until Wednesday. When they were retained and all relevant authorities had been apprised of the situation, Thomas and Truesdale petitioned for the release of Edna and Ralph. They argued that the accused were not a real threat to society and that they had family in the area with whom they could stay at no expense to the court. Chenango County District Attorney Barnes countered that they were, in fact, threats and that they had proven their unreliability and untrustworthiness in their weeklong flight from the law and their inability to pay the local hotel charge. Municipal Judge Nelson P. Bonney refused the petition for release and so Edna and Ralph remained behind bars.
Over the course of those first days in jail, between her arrest on April 5 and the first hearings on April 10, Edna’s mood fluctuated. At times she sat in her cell motionless, stoic-faced, and somber. Then, she broke into fits of tears and stormed the perimeter of her cell. Bordering on collapse, she begged and yelled for a dose of the opiates which had been administered to her since her arrest on Saturday. The jail physician had, in fact, given Edna a sedative each night to help her sleep. The dose was strong enough that after only one minute she was fast asleep. Chenango County officials intimated that Edna’s hysteria was the result of her lack of drugs. In effect, the jail physician suggested that she was a drug addict and that she was “craving opiates.” Later, however, Dr. George Manly retracted those remarks, but said that something was “preying on Mrs. Mumbulo’s mind.”

On April 9, in a separate room in the county courthouse, Sheriff Ormsby, Chenango County District Attorney Frank Barnes, and Erie County Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst questioned Edna. Observers later reported that the questioning was, in fact, a “severe grilling.” When first asked what had happened on the day of the fire, Edna broke into tears. As she sobbed, she began to tell her version of the story.

“After Ralph went to work, I brought the jug of gasoline from my bedroom into the kitchen and poured about half of it into a pan. While I was rubbing it, there was a sudden flash and flames rushed toward the kitchen window,” she sobbed.

“Why didn’t you throw the pan of burning gasoline out the kitchen window in your apartment, instead of running through Hilda’s bedroom with it?” Herbst asked.

“A string of wash blocked my path,” she explained, “so I turned into the bedroom toward the window.”


“I couldn’t, I couldn’t,” she cried.

The interrogation team took notes.

“Why is Ralph being questioned? He wasn’t even there?”

“Tell me, Mrs. Mumbulo, why didn’t you save Hilda?” Herbst asked.

“Don’t ask me that! Don’t ask me that!” she screamed.

“I loved her as my own and if I had another chance, I’d give my life for her.”

“But why didn’t you help her?” Herbst pressed.
“I don’t know… I ran out of the room and it seemed to me Hilda ran in the other direction,” she replied. “Why are you doing this?” she asked.

Herbst and the others simply looked at her. By then the four were joined by Dr. Manly. Looking to the physician, Edna asked, “Can I please have some more medicine?”

Herbst responded, “You’ll get all you want when you tell what we want to know.”

Edna’s hands shook. She turned her head downward.

“I did everything for her,” she said. “Denied myself that she might have good clothes. Provided money for her entertainment and now you say I killed her.”

She continued to shake, her hands stroking each other in nervousness and stress. Dr. Manly and Assistant District Attorney Herbst watched her hands. There were no signs of burns. No evidence of a sudden flash that must have come close to her hands, which had not only been near the burning pan, but in the gas within the pan. There was no evidence of any burn or scarring.

The interrogation team spent hours asking the same questions and fleshing out greater details about Edna’s relationship with Ralph. Over and over, they rehashed the questions. What took minutes to occur, the sudden instant of the flash and the fire, was played time and time again over the course of the day. All parties involved were exhausted.

While the interrogation team worked on understanding the incident, the assistant district attorneys in both Erie and Chenango Counties began the process for extradition. Official papers were sent to Governor John Fisher in Harrisburg and Governor Franklin Delano Roosevelt in Albany. Fisher received the extradition papers on April 9, signed them the following day, and had them immediately sent back to Erie. The attorneys in Erie then sent them to Albany. It was not until April 14 that Roosevelt signed the papers. In doing so, the prosecution was given a green light to transport Edna and Ralph back to Erie. In the meantime, however, the city of Norwich, the Chenango County seat, filled with reporters. The Chenango Hotel in Norwich, one reporter noted, was the site of “vigorous gossip” about the case. The Mumbulo Case had captured their full attention. Rumors circulated about the intent of the murder and the details as to how the fire started.

On April 10, the day upon which Fisher signed Pennsylvania’s extradition request, Edna and Ralph’s defense attorneys filed for a habeas corpus hearing. The Writ of Habeas Corpus process was typically a long affair. Observers expected that this stage alone might take up to three weeks. Assistant District Attorney Herbst, naturally, opposed the writ. He wanted the couple in an Erie courthouse as soon as possible. On April 11, the hearing proceeded with New York Supreme Court Justice Abraham Kellogg presiding. After three days of arguments, filings, and objections, Judge Kellogg rejected the defense’s writ. The defense team quickly prepared an appeal to the writ denial. The submission of the appeal to the Appellate Division of the New York State Supreme Court automatically blocked the extradition process. So, while both Governors had signed the papers for extradition, the court system prevented the execution of that
extradition. The appellate hearing was set for May 13 in Albany. It appeared that Edna and Ralph would have to remain in the Chenango County Jail one more month. Herbst was frustrated at the delays and the costs they were incurring upon the city of Erie. The situation for Ralph and Edna did not look good. To compound their problems, the Buffalo Finance Company repossessed the Mumbulo’s new Ford automobile. The company argued that they had violated the terms of their contract by taking it out of the state.39

On April 25, 1930, Edna and Ralph gave up the fight. They withdrew their appeal to the New York State Supreme Court and agreed to extradition. They agreed to voluntarily return to Pennsylvania. On April 28, Detective Harry Russell and Erie Policewoman Elizabeth Jeffs escorted Ralph and Edna from Norwich to Erie. The four boarded the train in Norwich in the morning. A layover in Binghamton, New York, kept them in the state until a little after 3 p.m. As they rode toward Erie, Detective Russell quizzed Ralph. After three hours of persistent questioning, Russell finally gave up. He was unable to secure an admission from the man. In another train car, Officer Jeffs sat shackled with Edna. Edna watched the passing countryside. Around 10:30 p.m., the train arrived, over the Nickel Plate Railroad, at the Erie train station. As the couple stepped off the train, photographers scrambled to get their shots. Flashbulbs lit the dark boarding area.

“Do you still say that you’re innocent?” one photographer yelled.

Ralph and Edna both nodded and replied, “yes.”

Russell and Jeffs escorted the couple through the station and past a throng of eager onlookers. One estimate suggests that there were over one hundred Erie residents crammed into the Nickel Plate Depot to see the infamous couple. Flash after camera flash made the two killers and their escorts squint as they proceeded past.

Over the course of the week, the Erie Daily Times chronicled the story of the fire and the tale of Edna and Ralph. “The stepmother’s story is meager and full of discrepancies,” one editorialist noted. Certainly these types of headlines must have played into the imagination of the Erie public. Edna was already, whether consciously or unconsciously, being linked to the “evil stepmother” stereotype.

Yet another daily columnist, Jay James, doubted the prosecutor’s abilities. James went so far as to say that bets were “five-to-one” that they would not get a conviction against Edna. The community appeared divided. Some were so appalled at the idea that a woman could deliberately kill a child that they automatically dismissed the case. Others, including Jay James who had reservations about the prosecution’s ability to secure a conviction, couched their opinions in the language of the “evil stepmother.” Where Edna had consistently been referred to as the “mother” prior to her return to Erie, she was thereafter consistently referred to as the “stepmother.” Erie residents, like people elsewhere throughout the western world, had undoubtedly heard the old folktales of the “evil stepmother.” Did the Erie public judge Edna guilty because she was not the biological mother? Did some deem her innocent because they could not comprehend the thought that a woman could commit such a ghastly crime? In either event, Edna’s case was already being decided in the court of public opinion.41 It can hardly be
denied that that public opinion held gendered views of crime — women do not commit crimes, but those that do commit the most horrific crimes are stepmothers are the most evil of all women. Edna was both a woman accused of a horrific crime and she was a stepmother. It was, however, the court’s responsibility to assure that those private opinions did not obscure the facts of the case.

Efforts seemed underway to secure a fair trial. Emanuel Urich, a former boarder of the Mumbulos, was held in Chicago. His knowledge of the couple and their relationship with the dead child might shed important light onto the case. Detective Harry Russell urged Ralph to speak. “Don’t you know that you’re getting yourself in deeper by keeping quiet?” he asked. Russell’s question seems to indicate his belief that Mumbulo was innocent, but for the sake of love he was protecting Edna. Russell repeated the question. Ralph’s only response was that Edna loved the child as if it were her own.

On April 30, 1930, before Alderman E. Alberstadt, Ralph and Edna were arraigned. The following day, Edna and Ralph’s attorneys, Truesdell and Thomas, visited the eastside apartments where the fire had occurred. The Pittsburgher Apartments were open and still occupied. The Mumbulo apartment, however, was closed upon orders of Assistant District Attorney Herbst. The attorneys were frustrated and so returned to their makeshift offices to make the necessary arrangements to get into the apartment. As they did, they viewed the photographs of the apartment taken by K. F. Schauble.

The Grand Jury Hearing was held on the first day in May. Attorney Truesdell asked that Edna and Ralph be tried together. The Erie County Prosecutor saw through the ploy. He later stated to the press that he believed the marriage exemption from testifying was null because the crime was committed before the marriage had been recorded. Nine witnesses were brought to the Grand Jury Hearing. Graham questioned and Truesdell cross-examined. In a surprise move, the prosecution did not seek the charge of First Degree Murder, but rather opted for Murder in the Second Degree. The prosecution, whether by true, heartfelt conviction or pure, legal strategy to insure Edna’s incarceration, argued that while she may have had “malice aforethought,” she had not intended to take Hilda’s life. The charge leveled at Edna was that she had deliberately sought to inflict bodily harm. The defense seemed stunned by the charges. All reports circulating suggested that the prosecution would shoot for the First Degree Murder charge. The defense would have to shift strategies. Alderman Alberstadt held Ralph and Edna without bail and set Edna’s trial for Monday, May 19.

Thomas and Truesdell, after their first defeat in the Grand Jury Hearing, handed over the reigns of Edna’s defense to local attorney, William Carney. Carney called upon both local and national experts to bolster his argument. A. H. Hamilton was brought in from Ossining, New York. Hamilton had been involved in over 268 murder trials and, the defense suggested, could prove that the friction of Edna’s washing could ignite the dress. Critics scoffed at the professional witness and questioned not only the veracity of such an argument, but asked how the fire then got into Hilda’s bed.

The sensational case surely meant a sensational trial. The Erie public followed the story daily. There were so many requests about entrance into the trial that the Court decided to issue
admission cards to control the story-hungry crowd. By the middle of May, it was announced that Judge William E. Hirt was scheduled to preside over the case. Hirt was approaching his tenth year as an Erie County Judge. Born in 1881 in Erie, he was quite familiar with the city. He graduated from Princeton in 1904 and joined the law firm of Fish and Rilling in 1908. In 1921, Pennsylvania Governor Sproul appointed Hirt as Erie County judge to fill the vacancy left by Judge Whittlesey. Hirt was “scrupulous about maintaining a non-prejudicial posture.”

On May 19, 1930, the Torch Killer Trial began. The publicity of the event and the sensational way that Hilda had died brought hundreds of onlookers to the Erie County Courthouse. Only those with tickets were admitted; the rest remained on the courthouse steps waiting for news as the day proceeded. Around 10 o’clock that morning, the jury selection began. One by one, the two sides debated the qualifications and merits of each potential juror. Only fifteen of the eighty-four possible jurors were brought forward. The defense and state’s questioning took longer than expected, but met less resistance as well. Before the end of the day, all of the jurors were selected.

Edna was brought before the bar. Her head lowered, she was reminded of the charges against her and asked what she would plead.

“Not guilty,” she said. The judge nodded and she returned to her seat. Ralph sat next to her, but their eyes did not meet.

Before recessing at 4 p.m., Judge Hirt recommended that both parties consider evening sessions so as to expedite the trial. Both the defense and the state agreed to consider it. The first day ended with no surprises.

On the second day of the trial, Assistant District Attorney Graham outlined the State’s case against Edna Mumbulo. He made the argument that Edna had planned the act in advance. The murder of Hilda Mumbulo was pre-meditated, he said. She had bought gasoline the day before. In addition, he added, she had moved her valuable fur out of Hilda’s room to protect it from the fire she would set the next day. Graham painted Edna as a vicious woman. She was poor and jealous of Hilda. The only thing that stood in her way from achieving both the full affection of Ralph and the material goods she wanted was little Hilda. And so, Graham said, Edna killed Hilda. In clear and systematic fashion, Graham detailed the possible plan. He noted Hilda’s estate, hammered back at the premeditation, and then shared with the jury the attempted cover-up by marrying in Pennsylvania. Graham’s opening remarks laid it all open. He gave a painful description of Hilda’s death. Graham had successfully married the facts of the Mumbulo Case to the stereotype of the “wicked stepmother.” The jury did not flinch, but absorbed it all.

The defense tried to counter. "Where was the evidence?" they asked. They did not, however, stroke a chord with those listening. Assistant District Attorney Otto Herbst then introduced a motion to take the jury to the scene of the crime. Defense attorney William Carney did not object so long as the State could prove that the crime scene had not been tampered with. All parties agreed. The State seemed to have the upper hand.
The next day, the State brought forward a series of witnesses. Among them was the Erie City Assistant Fire Chief Lawrence Scully. He gave details about the fire and his department's response to the fire. Graham asked him how the fire started. Scully, perhaps misunderstanding the question, said that the fire had involved gasoline. He was unsure how the gasoline had ignited, however. In cross-examination, Scully told of their discovery of the jug of gasoline. It was half-filled, Scully said. When asked what that meant, Scully responded, “Murderers are not concerned with conserving the implement or medium through which the crime was committed.” He also said that Edna had told him that the gasoline ignited while washing a dress.  

This was a blow to the prosecution. In effect, Scully believed the half-filled jug might indicate Edna’s innocence. Graham and Herbst tried to counter the testimony. "But if it was made to look like an accident, might that not be the case?" they asked. 

Time and time again the defense blew little holes into the State’s case against Edna. Who really led Hilda out of the apartment? Was it John Blossey or Sadie Donovan? Both those State witnesses testified to saving Hilda. That morning’s conflicting testimony was damaging. 

In the afternoon things began to turn around. Dr. Lininger, the attending physician for Edna after the fire, testified that he had found no evidence of burns on Edna’s hands or any other part of her body. His testimony immediately raised the question, “How could she have carried a pan of flaming gasoline without burning something on her?” He also testified that Edna was very nervous. The defense cross-examined and forced the doctor into admitting that he simply could not see any burns on Edna. Moreover, he stated that it was “perfectly natural for a woman in the condition he found the defendant to make conflicting statements as to what happened at the time of the fire.” The failure, from the defense’s perspective, was not Edna’s, but Dr. Lininger’s. 

Other witnesses were brought forward. G. E. Gardner, the Justice of the Peace in Montrose, identified both Edna and Ralph as the couple who secured his services for their marriage. Firemen L. J. Stanton, Leo Nagle, R. J. McCall, and Assistant Fire Chief Lawrence Scully shared their versions of the fire. Coroner Dan Hanley admitted that the first investigation of the fire ended without suspicion. 

Nothing seemed to be going right for the prosecution. Then, without notice, a young woman entered the courtroom. She was crying hysterically as she approached the defense table. The young woman was Margaret Tanner, Edna’s daughter. The two had not seen each other in over two years. The mother and daughter embraced and cried. Judge Hirt temporarily adjourned the court. The story took an improbable twist. Had the defense manufactured the return of Edna’s daughter simply to present Edna as a loving and loved mother? Or was it purely coincidental? In either event, the image was clear. Maybe Edna was not a cold-hearted murderer. But, the presence of her weeping daughter convinced few of her innocence. It only served to remind them that she loved her own children, but perhaps not her stepchild. 

Attorney Carney, working on behalf of Edna Mumbulo, then went onto the offensive. He argued that Chenango County Sheriff Barnes questioned the couple without offering them attorney services or informing them of their rights. In doing so, he suggested, his client had been
denied her constitutional rights and that any and all admissions made during that time were improperly acquired and thus inadmissible. By the day’s end, the trial was up for grabs. “It is difficult,” the defense stated in their Memorandum of Brief, “to imagine a case where a conviction of a murderer is sought on such flimsy evidence.” The Erie Daily Times reported that the State’s argument was an abysmal failure. “Those witnesses, reputed by the State to be their most important, floundered several times as defense counsel drew statements from them greatly to the benefit of Mrs. Mumbulo.” Had Edna slipped away from the law again? Or, was she being tried for a crime she had not committed? Was she being tried because she was a woman? Was she being tried because she was a stepmother? In any event, the conviction which seemed so certain to the State days earlier, was in jeopardy.

On May 21, the third day of the trial, both the prosecution and defense brought forward experts they believed could win the case. The prosecution secured the services of R. E. Lee, head of the chemistry department at Allegheny College and the author of chemistry textbooks.

Assistant District Attorney Graham asked Lee to share with the court his qualifications. He then asked in what ways fires could be ignited. Lee told the court that there were four ways to ignite a fire: by a photo-chemical method, an electrical spark, an open flame, and by thermal effect. Graham knew that the defense’s argument was that the fire had started by friction or thermal effect.

“Dr. Lee,” Graham asked, “assuming a person is cleaning or rubbing clothes in an open dishpan, such as this exhibit, and in gasoline, would you say it possible by the thermal effect of the friction — only by the thermal effect of the friction — to set fire to the gasoline without burning the hands?”

“No, Sir,” Lee replied.

Graham had been successful in eliciting testimony from the expert that supported the prosecution’s argument. Graham also needed to demonstrate that Edna had not only deliberately ignited the fire, but that she carried it and willingly threw it upon Hilda.

Lee’s testimony, therefore, continued. Lee testified that according to tests done on the dishpan in question, it was estimated that the pan reached temperatures of 700 to 800 degrees Fahrenheit and that Edna’s hands would have begun burning as soon as the pan’s temperature reached 400 degrees Fahrenheit. The image painted for the court was clear: Edna Mumbulo had doused little Hilda with gasoline and then, and only then, was the gasoline ignited.

The defense saw otherwise. Truesdell rose to question Professor Lee. Under cross-examination, Lee admitted that the defense claim was not entirely impossible, but “highly improbable.” The defense then offered up the testimony of A. H. Hamilton, a chemist. Hamilton testified that a burning pan could be carried and that Edna’s apron had scorch marks to prove it. The defense, in effect, argued that the pan had ignited, Edna carried the pan with her apron, and then unwittingly threw the pan at a closed window. The defense never tried to explain how the flaming gasoline splashed back over six feet to catch young Hilda on fire.
On May 22, the trial resumed. In what the *Erie Daily Times* would later describe as a “merciless barrage,” Assistant District Attorney Herbst questioned Edna Mumbulo. None of her answers seemed to satisfy the government attorney.

“And you left Hilda, the beautiful child, in that blazing inferno and didn’t do a thing to save her?” he asked.

Edna remained silent. Then softly she began to explain. The district attorney’s bitterness subsided as Edna’s hushed voice captivated the courtroom audience. Edna remained on the stand for two hours as she repeated her story over and over again. She told of their times together. She told the court how she treated Hilda as if she were her own. She told of the dishpan, the sudden flames, and the subsequent fire. Her eyes watered, but no tears fell. A long pause punctuated the testimony. Then, both parties rested. The trial was over and deliberations began.

On Friday, in a small room on the third floor of the Erie County Courthouse, the jury deliberated the fate of Edna Mumbulo, the accused Torchkiller of 1930. On the jury’s first ballot, nine voted for a conviction of Second Degree Murder, two voted for the death sentence, and only one held out for an acquittal. In the company of Deputy Sheriff Irma McDonald, Edna paced the halls in anticipation of the verdict. Ralph remained in the courtroom, falling in and out of sleep. His interest in his wife appeared to be waning. Was he convinced of her guilt? Or was he part of the plan? Did he still love her? The deliberations took most of the day and by the end of that Friday, the jurors were already exhausted. The deliberations continued into the night. On the second ballot, eleven voted for Second Degree Murder and the lone juror remained steadfast in support of the acquittal decision. Finally, on the third ballot, the lone juror was broken. All twelve jurors voted in favor of the prosecution. Edna Mumbulo was found guilty of Second Degree Murder. At 3:30 a.m., early Saturday morning, the tipstaff was notified that a verdict had been reached. Judge Hirt was summoned from home and just forty minutes later the verdict was read: "Guilty."

Edna’s face was ashen. She seemed older. She looked blankly at the jury and then the judge. Her sister, Grace Johnson from Wesleyville, fainted. Other sobs filled the courtroom. Ralph and Edna did not look at one another. Walter Smoot, the Chief Deputy Sheriff, approached Edna’s table and stood by her side. She rose. Smoot escorted her into the “cold, gray dawn of the morning” and through the courtyard and into the jail. When she reached her cell, she fell suddenly onto her cot and began weeping. All subsequent efforts and pleas for a re-trial were denied.

Because Pennsylvania State Western penitentiary did not accept women and the Allegheny County Workhouse was for those inmates serving a sentence longer than one year, Erie County authorities began to search for proper prison accommodations for Edna. Eastern Penitentiary in Philadelphia usually took women, but the request for Edna’s incarceration there was denied. In July, Edna was sentenced to 10 to 20 years in prison, but the State still had no place to send her. Finally, in late September, 1930, Erie officials contacted and received approval for Edna to be incarcerated at the Muncy Institute for Women in Muncy, Pennsylvania.
There, it was reported, she would be assigned to the lace-making department to make full use of
dressmaking skills. She bided her time. In late April, 1932, the memory of Edna’s case was
revived in the Erie Daily Times when a reminiscence article was published about Erie’s most
notorious female criminal. By that date, she had only served 21-months of her minimum 120-
month sentence. There was, however, increasing speculation that her sentence might be reduced
to seven or eight years.

The speculation was correct. On December 24, 1938, Edna Mumbulo, the “Erie
Murderess,” was freed from prison. In all, she served eight years and three months behind bars
in Muncy. Pennsylvania Governor George H. Earle commuted her minimum sentence to exactly
eight years and three months to allow her immediate release. The Erie County District
Attorney’s office made no objection and, in doing so, Edna was set free. Edna’s supporters had
argued that over those eight years she demonstrated “model behavior.” In addition, they had
secured the assistance of the very judge who presided over her conviction. Judge William E.
Hirt recommended that she be granted a pardon. He suggested that he had some doubts about
her guilt. By January 1, 1939, Edna was again a free woman.54

CONCLUSION

Upon release, she and Ralph (for whom all charges had been dropped) moved to the
Rochester, New York, area to start over. Over the course of the next two decades, the childless
couple bounced around between New York State, Florida, and North Carolina. On occasion,
they visited family members in New Berlin and Rochester, but never stayed too long.55 In 1965,
Ralph died. By the late 1980s, Edna was back in Erie. She found housing in the Erie County
Geriatric Center and was assigned a GECAC counselor. She died in 1990 at the age of 99.

The Mumbulo Case of 1930 presents interesting problems to a criminal historian. How
and why did she commit the crime? Does her scenario of the events that transpired hold any
weight? Yet, how could the jury convict her, knowing that what evidence existed was purely
circumstantial? Why did Judge Hirt assert her possible innocence only after the trial had
concluded? And, lastly, how does a woman rebuild her life after such a devastating tragedy and
her conviction for the murder that came from that tragedy?

The truth may never be known about Edna Mumbulo. She remains as mysterious as the
day she hit the local headlines in 1930. It may be difficult to deny, however, that her gender and
her status as a stepmother affected both the public perception and court decisions of her case.
The idea of a mother killing a child, to many, seemed beyond comprehension. Mothers are
supposed to be caring, loving, and nurturing. Stepmothers, according to the myth, are not. Over
the entire course of the Spring and Summer of 1930, the facts of the Mumbulo case were twisted
and contorted to portray Edna as a cold-hearted stepmother who viciously killed Hilda Mumbulo.
She had abandoned her first children, had an “illicit alliance” with Ralph Mumbulo, craved his
attention, and wanted lavish gifts. Or so the newspapers said. The reality is, however, that those
allegations about her personal life and character remain unsubstantiated. Whether she committed
the act or not, she was convicted because she was the living embodiment of the “wicked
stepmother.” She was, in the eyes of the Erie public, no fantasy. And thus, no fairy tale ending.
ENDNOTES


1 Social Security Death Index; Erie Daily Times, 26 March 1990, p.3B.

2 In a study of Detroit female homicide offenders, nearly 44% of all victims of women killers were their own children. See A. Goetting, “When Females Kill One Another,” Criminal Justice and Behavior 15: 179-189.


11 Dainton, 95.

12 Erving Goffman, in Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1963), notes that stigmatization is the product of the connection (conscious or unconscious) between a “particular attribute” and the myths and stereotypes about that attribute. In effect, Mumbulo was stigmatized as a “bad” person because she was a “stepmother.”


15 Strayer, 157.

16 Correspondence with Barbara Ferrar-May, Bill O’Neil, and Kristi Kennison, all of whom are Arbogast Family members, January 2001. Edna consistently gave her name, both at the time of her arrest and in later years to her GECAC counselors, as “Deshunk.” Her social security forms and family records, however, note the real spelling as “Shunk.”


18 Correspondence with Kenneth Hodges, Arbogast descendant, February 2001.


21 *Erie Daily Times*, 25 April 1932, Insert Section, p.4; 2 May 1930, p.3; 4 April 1930, p.6; 9 April 1930, pp.8, 29; and 23 May 1930, p.17.

22 Blossey’s testimony found in *Erie Daily Times*, 8 April 1930, p.2 and 21 May 1930, p.2.

23 *Erie Daily Times*, 2 May 1930, p.3.

24 Ibid.

25 *Erie Daily Times*, 4 April 1930, p.6; 8 April 1930, p.1; and 10 April 1930, p.2.


27 The Hanley-Schaller Funeral Chapel was run by the family of Erie Coroner Dan Hanley. There is no evidence of any improprieties with regard to the Mumbulo’s use of that funeral home. *Erie Daily Times*, 4 April 1930, p.6 and 24 March 1930, p.13.


29 *Erie Daily Times*, 31 March 1930, p.13; 1 April 1930, p.15; 2 April 1930, p.15; 3 April 1930, p.17; 4 April 1930, p.1; and 5 April 1930, p.1.

30 *Erie Daily Times*, 7 April 1930, p.1; 1 August 1930, p.12; and 5 April 1930, p.1.

31 *Erie Daily Times*, 4 April 1930-11 April 1930.

32 Ibid.


34 *Erie Daily Times*, 9 April 1930, p.1; 10 April 1930, p.2; 23 May 1930, p.17.

35 *Erie Daily Times*, 10 April 1930, p.2.
40 There are a significant number of works on the stereotype of the “wicked stepmother” as noted in the introduction. It should be noted that these stereotypes are not associated with stepfathers.


42 *Erie Daily Times*, 10 April 1930, p.2.

43 *Erie Daily Times*, 29 April 1930, p.15; 1 May 1930,p.17.

44 “Erie County Quarter Sessions Docket, February Term 1930 to November Term 1930,” Book 27, (Erie County Historical Society, Erie, Pennsylvania). See also *Erie Daily Times*, 30 April 1930,p.17; 1 May 1930, p.1; and 2 May 1930,p.3.

45 *Erie Daily Times*, 2 May 1930,pp.1, 3, 19.


49 *Erie Daily Times*, 20 May 1930, pp.1,23.


51 *Erie Daily Times*, 21 May 1930, p.2.

52 Defense Memorandum of Brief, Commonwealth of Pennsylvania vs. Mrs. Edna Mumbulo, Court of Oyer and Terminer of Erie, Pennsylvania, p.3.


55 Correspondence with David Mumbulo of Owego, N.Y., great-nephew of Ralph Mumbulo, Fall 2000.

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Correspondence with John William Hirt and Patrick Scully, descendants of participants in Mumbulo Trial, 2001.


“Erie County Quarter Sessions Docket, February Term 1930 to November Term 1930,” Book 27 (Erie: Erie County Historical Society Archives).

*Erie Daily Times*, March 1930-January 1939.
SERIAL KILLER COMMUNIQUÉS: HELPFUL OR HURTFUL *

by

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ABSTRACT

For centuries serial killers have plagued society. These social deviants cunningly meander through communities murdering the most vulnerable: women, children, the homeless, and the elderly. Often, the serial killers avoid capture because they are highly mobile, tend to leave little evidence, and keep their thoughts and deeds to themselves. Occasionally, serial killers communicate with police or the mass media. It may be a poem or a random telephone call. This analysis focuses on selected serial killer cases in which the killer or someone professing to be the killer communicated with police or the news media during the killings. The examination seeks to ascertain whether communiqués help or hurt investigations into serial killers.

INTRODUCTION

History is fraught with criminal cases in which the perpetrators caught themselves, not only by carelessly leaving clues at the crime scene, but by opening their mouth. Too often, criminals have spoken of their crime to relatives or friends, sometimes to seek advice on avoiding police or prosecution and other times to just “brag.” Whatever the motive, it is common knowledge in police and criminal justice circles that solid investigative work to identify a suspect frequently is bolstered by the perpetrator’s own incriminating words. There is one type of killer, though, who seems to contradict this phenomenon: A serial killer. Law enforcement and social scientists who study serial killers point out that serial killers tend to speak to no one about their crimes prior to being caught, if they are ever caught (Cross, 1981; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). They tend not to confide in relatives, spouses, friends, or strangers. Their propensity for psychological isolation is one of the reasons why law enforcement agencies have trouble conducting successful serial killer investigations. Other reasons include: Jurisdictional jealousy; linkage blindness; and the complexity of serial cases (Egger, 1985; Hickey, 1997). When law enforcement has had success solving serial cases, they have done so with such tools as forensic examination of trace evidence, multi-agency investigations, and psychological profiling (Brooks, Devine, Green, Hart, & Moore, 1987; Keppel, 1989; Hickey, 1997).

While serial killers appear to have an innate ability to refrain from discussing their crimes before a case is solved, there have been sporadic cases in which serial killers communicated anonymously with police or news organizations during the murders. This analysis focuses on selected serial killer cases in which the killer, or someone professing to be the killer, communicated with police or news organizations. It aims to ascertain the communiqués’ investigative value, whether the communiqués helped or hurt the investigations. If the communiqués were helpful, how? If they hurt the investigation, how? For this analysis a communiqué was defined as any anonymous message intentionally left at a crime scene by the killer or intentionally sent by the killer to law enforcement or news organizations prior to a case...
being solved. Communiqués could come in any form: A poem, a letter, or a telephone call. A communiqué was deemed to be of investigative value or helpful if it advanced the investigation, particularly if it provided: Clues that helped investigators better understand the serial case; evidence to directly identify the killer; or information that helped to obtain a conviction. A communiqué was deemed of low investigative value or hurtful if it failed to advance the investigation or it disrupted or misdirected investigation.

This analysis is not intended to be an exhaustive review of all cases in which serial killers communicated with investigators or journalists. It would be virtually impossible to identify all such cases in police, prosecutor, or court files nationwide. The serial cases examined here are: “The Lipstick Killer” of Chicago; “Zodiac Killer” of San Francisco; “BTK” of Wichita; “Weepy-Voice Killer” of Minnesota; “Happy Face Killer” of Oregon; and “Zodiac Killer” of New York. Each case fits the criteria to be classified a serial killer case: A series of murders committed over weeks, months, or years in which there is a cooling-off period between killings. The cases were identified through an extensive search of newspaper databases, periodical indexes, academic journals, books, and internet sites. The basic facts of the cases were culled from local and national journalism articles, academic studies, and books. Most of the articles or books quoted the communiqués and offered interviews with various participants of the cases, including criminal investigators intimately familiar with the communiqués. For the analysis of the “BTK” case, the author obtained copies of several written communiqués, unedited and unmediated. To better understand the significance of the “Happy Face Killer” communiqués, the author corresponded with the serial killer who sent them to police and the news media. The “Case History,” “Communiqués,” and “Investigative Value” of each case studied follows.

"THE LIPSTICK KILLER" OF CHICAGO

**Case History:** On Jan. 7, 1946, Suzanne Degnan was kidnapped from her home and strangled. The 6-year-old was dismembered and parts of her body were put in sewers near her home. Her death turned out to be strikingly similar to the murder of two Chicago women in separate attacks: Frances Brown, 33, and Josephine Ross, 43. Both were mutilated after being assaulted in their homes. On June 26, 1946, William Heirens was arrested for the three murders (Morrow, 1946). At the time, Heirnes was a 17-year-old sophomore at the University of Chicago. Surgeons’ tools were found in his university room. Eventually, Heirnes was convicted of all three murders and was sentenced to three consecutive life terms.

**Communiqués:** Heirnes is credited with the notorious lipstick communiqué: “For heaven’s sake, catch me before I kill more; I cannot control myself” (Kennedy, Hoffman, & Haines, 1947). That message was scrawled on the wall in the home of victim Brown. Heirnes also sent Degnan’s family a ransom letter. The letter threatened: “Get $20000 Redy And Wmt Forward…Do Not Notify FBI or Police…Bills in 5’s & 10’s…Burn This For Her Safety” (Morrow, 1946).

**Investigative Value:** The lipstick communiqué possessed little investigative value. While the message pointed toward a killer out of control and begging to be caught, it failed to advance the case toward a resolution or lead to the identification of the killer.
The ransom note originally misled police into thinking they were dealing with a kidnapping, rather than a slaying that should be compared to unsolved killings. Sexual perversion, not money, motivated Heirnes in his assaults in residences. For several years the youth had successfully burglarized homes and stolen women's undergarments. He liked to put on the undergarments and experience sexual excitement (Kennedy, Hoffman, & Haines, 1947). The ransom note eventually was of value in linking Heirnes to the serial case.

Heirnes was arrested on June 26, 1946, breaking into an apartment. The victim was in the kitchen and her 10-month-old daughter was in the bedroom. A neighbor saw Heirnes sneak into the home and called police. As Heirnes fled, a janitor walking through the area tried to stop him, but Heirnes brushed him away with a gun. When a police officer arrived, Heirnes fired a handgun twice at the police officer, but he missed. The officer fired back and there was a struggle. Heirnes was finally subdued when a passerby smashed flower pots on Heirnes' head. A routine fingerprint check revealed a match to prints on the Degnan ransom note (Morrow, 1946). His prints also tied him to an assault of another woman. The FBI confirmed Heirens' prints were on the ransom letter (Scott, 1946).

"ZODIAC KILLER" OF SAN FRANCISCO

**Case History:** San Francisco residents were in the midst of the Christmas holiday season in 1968 when David Faraday and Betty Lou Jensen were slain just north of the city in Vallejo. As the young couple talked in a remote lovers’ lane, a stocky man pulled out a .22-caliber handgun and shot Faraday behind the ear at close range. Jensen ran out of the car and the killer illustrated that he was an excellent marksman. He shot the woman five times in a tight pattern in the upper-right portion of her back (Graysmith, 1986). Seven months later, the killer struck again in Vallejo, killing a young woman and seriously wounding her date with a .9-millimeter handgun. Police dubbed the assailant the “Vallejo Killer.” The killer next assaulted a couple in September, 1969. In that attack he used a gun to get control of the couple. He then tied them up and stabbed them repeatedly. The woman, Cecelia Ann Shepard, died while her companion survived. In the assault the suspect donned a hood over his head and shoulders. There were slits for his eyes and mouth. The killer was renamed the “Cipher Slayer” after he sent a letter to a San Francisco newspaper with a cipher message composed of arcane symbols. Eventually, he began signing his letters the “Zodiac Killer.” Officially, the Zodiac Killer is known to have murdered six people, but some investigators believe he killed many more. The slayings attributed to the killer have not been solved.

**Communiqués:** The Zodiac’s dialog with investigators and the media involved telephone calls and many untraceable letters that teased police and the public with cipher messages. At least twice the killer telephoned police to report the slayings. In one of those phone calls he stated: “I want to report a murder…no, a double murder. They are two miles north of park headquarters. They were in a white Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. I’m the one that did it” (Graysmith, 1986). In his phone calls and letters he often revealed facts about the murders that only the killer would know. To further prove he committed a slaying, the Zodiac included in his letter a piece of blood-stained clothing taken from the victim. Sometimes, the killer displayed a morbid sense of humor. In one letter he sent a greeting card with a drawing of a dripping wet fountain pen hanging by a string. The card carried the caption: “Sorry I haven’t written, but I just washed my
pen…PS could you print this new cipher on your front page? I get awfully lonely when I am
ignored. So lonely I could do my Thing!!!!!!!” (Graysmith, 1986). The Zodiac sent most of his
communiqués to the San Francisco Examiner, the San Francisco Chronicle, and the Vallejo
Times-Herald. Once, he went four years without communicating with the news media or police.
After the lull, he wrote in April, 1978: “Dear Editor, This is the Zodiac speaking I am back with
you.” The short missive taunted police: “SFPD – 0” (Graysmith, 1986).

**Investigative Value:** Often, there is a delay in starting a comprehensive investigation
specifically to apprehend a serial killer since the slayings are committed in different police
jurisdictions and investigators are reluctant to link cases without indisputable evidence there is a
connection. The Zodiac’s phone calls and letters expedited the linking of seemingly unrelated
murders and the formation of a special investigation into the case. During one phone call, the
killer stated: “I want to report a double murder. If you will go one mile east of Columbus
Parkway to the public park, you will find kids in a brown car. ..I also killed those kids last year.
Good-bye” (Graysmith, 1986). At the scene of one slaying, the killer wrote on a vehicle door:
“Vallejo 12-20-68, 7-4-69, Sept. 27-69-6:30 by knife” (Graysmith, 1986). The dates
corresponded to Zodiac slayings. The killer’s distinct communiqués served another valuable
role: To weed out letters by “kooks” or false confessors. Eventually, the FBI gathered the
estimated 20 letters sent by the Zodiac and asked a psycholinguistics expert to develop a
psychological profile. While the communiqués helped investigators link the various San
Francisco-area murders and the profile provided a variety of psychological traits the killer might
possess, they failed to help identify the killer. In the end, the communiqués proved mostly
frustrating and of little investigative value since the letters publicly taunted police and repeatedly
pointed out the inability of police to solve the case. Federal and local investigators were
particularly embarrassed when they could not decipher a coded message sent by the killer to the
news media. When the media printed the coded message, a husband and wife broke the code.
Part of the code said: “I like killing people because it is so much fun…” (Graysmith, 1986).

"BTK" **OF WICHITA**

**Case History:** On the afternoon of Jan. 15, 1974, residents of the quiet town of Wichita,
Kansas, began hearing media reports of the brutal murder of a local family. Killed were Joseph
and Julie Otero and two of their children. All four had been strangled. The 8-year-old son was
discovered with a hood over his head. The 11-year-old daughter was nude and hanging from a
rope tied to a pipe in the basement. None of the victims were sexually assaulted, but police
found semen all over the house and on some of the victims. Three months later on April 4, 1974,
a woman named Kathryn Bright was found stabbed to death in her home. Police were unaware a
sexually-motivated serial killer was operating in the city or that the Otero and Bright murders
were related until the killer sent a communiqué in October, 1974 (BTK, 1974; Johanning, 1974;
Thimmesch, 1986). The writer claimed responsibility for both incidents in a letter. For three
years the killer was silent, killing no one and communicating with no one. In 1977 the killer
surfaced again to strangle Shirley Vian and Nancy Fox in separate slayings in their homes. All
the murders had occurred within a 3 ½ mile radius. The active search for "BTK" ended in the
early 1980s. In 1984 police reopened the case with a small task force to use new technology to
try to crack the case. The task force operated for several years before closing the case for a
second time. The case remains unsolved.
Communiqués: In this case the killer’s communiqués included letters, poems, and a telephone call. His first communiqué in October, 1974, consisted of a lengthy, single-spaced typed letter. It was found in a mechanical engineering textbook at the Wichita Public Library. At the top of the letter were the words: “OTERO CASE.” The killer detailed how he killed each member of the Otero family and in what position he left them in the house. He ended the Otero letter with: “Since sex criminals do not change their M.O. or by nature cannot do so, I will not change mine. The code words for me will be…bind them, torture them, kill them, B.T.K…” (BTK, 1974). He ended his second letter with: “P.S. How about some name for me, its time: 7 down and many more to go. I like the following. How about you? ‘THE B.T.K. STRANGLER', 'WICHITA STRANGLER', 'POETIC STRANGLER’” (BTK, 1978). The second communiqué came in the form of a short poem about victim Vian. The poem, sent to the newspaper The Wichita Eagle-Beacon, was patterned after a “Curley Locks” nursery rhyme. The third communiqué was a telephone call on Dec. 9, 1977. That day the killer used a public phone booth to report the Nancy Fox slaying. When police arrived at the phone booth, the phone was dangling from the receiver. Later that month the killer sent a poem about Fox. The poem was accompanied with a letter claiming responsibility for a total of seven murders. The poem “Oh Death to Nancy” was patterned after a poem called “Oh Death” that was published in a textbook used in a Wichita State University American Folklore class. The letter detailed how Vian and Fox were brutally murdered. The letter to the media was traced to Wichita State University library copiers. On February 10, 1978, the killer sent another letter, this time to KAKE TV Channel 10 in Wichita (BTK, 1978). Attached to the letter was a drawing of the Fox murder scene, so detailed it could have virtually matched a lab photo of the crime scene. The letter said, in part: “I find the newspaper not writing about the poem on Vian unamusing. A little paragraph would have enough. I know it not the news media fault. The Police Chief he keep things quiet…” (BTK, 1978). The killer’s final communiqué was found in the Wichita home of a 63-year-old woman. The April 8, 1979, note simply informed the woman he left her house after getting tired of waiting for her in the closet.

Investigative Value: On the surface BTK’s many communiqués appeared extremely helpful to the investigation. They revealed the killer would kill again and provided leads that normally proved fruitful in a routine murder investigation. Unfortunately, in the end, the communiqués were of little value and misdirected the investigation, leading investigators to devote precious hours and money to dead ends.

The Otero letter had been left in an engineering book at the Wichita Public Library. Police obtained a list of people who checked out the textbook, but hit a dead end. Detectives took the Fox letter to Xerox headquarters in Syracuse, New York. Technicians there determined that the letter was a fifth-generation copy of the original, making it hard to trace to a specific typewriter. The letter appeared to have been copied at the Wichita State University Library. Police obtained lists of people who lived in the area between 1974 and 1979, but could not develop any leads. The Vian poem was patterned after a nursery rhyme that had appeared in a puzzle magazine called "Games." Police obtained a list of subscribers to the magazine but, again, to no avail.
After one slaying, police received a phone call from the killer. Police provided a copy of the taped call to broadcast stations. About 110 callers contacted a special police phone number, but the calls did not provide the identity of the killer.

The communiqués also hampered the investigation because many of them were sent to the news media, which added pressure for police to solve the case. In the communiqués the killer painted police as inept since they could not catch him.

"WEEPY-VOICE KILLER" OF MINNESOTA

**Case History:** New Year’s Eve, 1980, ushered in a series of brutal beatings and murders that terrified Minneapolis residents for two years. The attacks began with Karen Potack. On New Year’s Eve Potack was beaten savagely on the head with a tire iron after leaving a New Year’s Eve party. She survived. The second victim, Kimberly Compton, 18, was not so lucky. On June 3, 1981, she was stabbed 61 times with an ice pick south of St. Paul. Next came Kathleen Greening, 33, who was drowned in her bathtub in her home on July 21, 1982. The fourth victim, Barbara Simons, 40, was stabbed more than 100 times in Minneapolis. The final victim, Denise Williams, 21, was stabbed several times with a screwdriver after she accepted a ride. She survived. Eventually, Paul Michael Stephani, who grew up in Austin, Minnesota, where his stepfather worked as a meatpacker, was arrested and convicted for murdering Simons. It was not until 1997 that he contacted police while in prison and confessed to the attack on Potack and murdering Compton and Greening (Brown, 1997).

**Communiqués:** The communiqués in this case began with the assault on Potack. The man telephoned police at 3 a.m. to report the attack. In an emotional voice he asked police to hurry to some railroad tracks, then said: “There is a girl hurt there” (Brown, 1981). After stabbing Compton on June 3, 1981, the killer contacted police pleading: “God damn, will you find me? I just stabbed somebody with an ice pick. I can’t stop myself. I keep killing somebody” (Brown, 1981). Two days later the killer called police to say he was sorry for stabbing Compton and would turn himself in. He didn’t. Instead, on June 6 he called to say newspaper accounts of some of the murders were inaccurate. His fourth communiqués came June 11. In a whimpering, barely coherent voice he cried: “I’m sorry for what I did to Compton” (Brown, 1981). There were no communiqués after Greening’s death, but the “Weepy-Voice Killer” contacted police on the murder of Simons: “Please don’t talk. Listen. I’m sorry I killed that girl. I stabbed her 40 times. Kimberly Compton was the first one over in St. Paul” (Brown, 1981).

**Investigative Value:** The serial killer contacted police so often investigators felt there was an excellent opportunity someone would recognize his voice on the communiqués. On several occasions media broadcast stations aired recordings of the phone calls from the Weepy-Voice Killer. Police received over 150 calls from the public, but the recordings were so short and distorted with emotion that they failed to provide the identity of the murderer. Several times his phone calls were traced by emergency operators, once to a bar near a bus station depot and once to a downtown phone booth. When police arrived, he was gone.

How did police link Stephani to some of the Weepy-Voice Killer murders? The chain of events began on August 21, 1982, when a 21-year-old woman named Denise Williams
picked up by Stephani, who stabbed her several times with a screwdriver. During the attack, Williams clobbered Stephani on the head with a soft drink bottle. When he returned home to his apartment, he noticed he was bleeding badly and sought medical help. This action linked him to the Williams attack. Routine investigative work connected Stephani to the murder of Simons. In the end, Stephani was convicted of killing Simons and assaulting Williams. During Stephani’s trial in the Simons murder case, Stephani’s ex-wife, sister, and a woman who lived with him testified that they believed the hysterical caller revealing the attacks was Stephani. Those observations, alone, were not enough to identify Stephani as the Weepy-Voice Killer since the hysterical crying distorted the voice. Stephani’s confession in prison almost 20 years after the first slaying allowed police to officially link the slayings and telephonic communiqués. In brief, the communiqués were of no investigative value during the investigation.

"HAPPY FACE KILLER" OF OREGON

**Case History:** This case surfaced in January, 1990, when a woman named Taunja Bennett was murdered in the Portland, Oregon area. The slaying seemed an isolated, single murder since there had been no other similar slayings in the area. In fact, Bennett was part of a serial case, but the killer’s propensity was to find his victims in a number of cities while working as a long-haul truck driver. Early in the Bennett case police focused their investigation on a couple after the woman claimed her male friend killed Bennett and then implicated herself. Although that investigation was full of unanswered questions and dubious evidence, the couple was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. They were not the “killer.”

**Communiqués:** The first sign something was amiss in the case came in April, 1990, when a message was scrawled on a wall in Umatilla, Oregon. The message read: “Killed Tanya Bennett in Portland. Two people got the blame so I can kill again (Cut buttons off jeans – proof)” (Painter, 1995a). A second message was found scrawled on a restroom wall at the Greyhound Bus Depot in Livingston, Montana. It said: “I killed Tanya Bennett Jan. 21, 1990 in Portland, Oregon. I beat her to death, raped her and loved it. Yes, I’m sick, but I enjoy myself too. People took the blame and I’m free” (Painter, 1995a). Even though one of the missives contained information unknown at the time to the public, police in the Portland area paid little attention to the note since the author was unknown. The mystery deepened on March 29, 1994, when a letter postmarked in Portland arrived at the Washington County Courthouse. The anonymous writer claimed the couple was innocent. At the time, the female suspect was on trial. A short time later, a six-page, letter handwritten on blue paper arrived at The Oregonian. The writer complained that the letter sent to the courthouse was never in the newspaper. He then claimed responsibility for the Bennett slaying. Not only that, he took responsibility for several other slayings around the country. The writer wrote: “All 5 of 5 I would like to tell my story! I am a good person at times. I always wanted to be liked. I have been married and divorced with children…” (Stanford, 1994a). The writer, who claimed to be a long-haul truck driver, then provided details of the Bennett murder that had not been released by police. The writer signed the letter with a “Happy Face” at the top of the first page. A columnist for The Oregonian felt the “Happy Face” letter was genuine and in May, 1994, wrote a five-part series analyzing the letter and pointing out the details of the murder that only the killer probably knew. Police remained dubious. One police captain told reporters: “All police agencies in the country get letters from people. A lot of them have mental problems. You can read through the letters and
see they have no credibility” (Stanford, 1994b). Prosecutors stated that it would not shock them “to find out that somebody talked to somebody who talked to somebody” (Stanford, 1994b).

One serial killer expert sided with The Oregonian in thinking the letter came from the killer. That expert was Robert Ressler, formerly of the FBI. He stated: “To be a hoax, a person would have had to learn a great deal about the case” (Stanford, 1994b).

**Investigative Value:** It was not until 1995 that investigators took the communiqués seriously (Painter, 1995b; Jesperson, 1999). The pieces began coming together on March 11, 1995, when the body of Julie Ann Winningham of Camas, Washington, was found. On March 22, 1995, investigators interviewed her boyfriend about Winningham’s death. He was a Canadian long-haul trucker named Keith Hunter Jesperson. The following day, while on the road in Arizona, Jesperson telephoned an investigator and confessed over the phone to killing his girlfriend. That same day, Jesperson wrote a letter to his brother in which he said that in the past five years he had killed several women. The Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office finally decided to take a new look at the Bennett murder case after Jesperson was returned to Oregon and he wrote the media that he was the author of the “Happy Face” letter sent to The Oregonian a year before. Handwriting experts concluded the same person wrote the restroom missives, the “Happy Face” letter, and the letter to Jesperson’s brother. Fingerprints on a letter also tied Jesperson to the crimes. Although the communiqués did not help in the identification of the killer, they were of investigative value in positively tying Jesperson to several killings. Jesperson is serving three life sentences in Oregon for three murders in Oregon and Washington. Other jurisdictions would like to put him on trial.

"ZODIAC KILLER" OF NEW YORK

**Case History:** Twice during the 1990’s New York City was terrorized by a man who dubbed himself the "Zodiac Killer" and promised to methodically murder a person for each of the 12 signs of the Zodiac. The Killer’s first spree began in 1990 with Mario Orozco. At 2 a.m. March 8, 1990, the 49-year-old disabled man was shot in the back. On March 29 about 3 a.m., 33-year-old factory worker Jermaine Montenesdro was shot in the back six blocks from where Orozco died. The third victim became Joseph Proce, 78. He, too, was shot in the back as he walked with the aid of a cane. The assailant’s fourth victim turned out to be Larry Parham, a 30-year-old homeless man shot in the chest while he slept on a bench in a park. Suddenly, the killings stopped. Between 1992 and October, 1993, two persons were killed and two others wounded in assaults. Police were not aware those attacks were related to the Zodiac Killer until the Killer sent a communiqué claiming responsibility for the recent string of attacks (Kleinfield, 1996).

The murders and communiqués came to a halt on June 18, 1996, when police arrested a Brooklyn loner obsessed with guns and religion. The man was named Heriberto Seda. A day after his arrest he confessed to being the Zodiac Killer. He could not have been the San Francisco Zodiac Killer, though, since he was an infant at the time. On June 24, 1998, Seda was found guilty of three killings and wounding one person.

**Communiqués:** Seda turned out to be a prolific writer of communiqués. His first letter of November 18, 1989, to the 75th Precinct stationhouse in Brooklyn warned police of his intentions. He planned to kill someone for each of the Zodiac signs. Police took the threat seriously, but they were jaded by the frequent odd crimes and letters sent to that particular precinct. It wasn’t until the third victim had been killed that the first communiqué was linked to
After shooting Proce, Seda left a handwritten note containing astrological symbols in a paper bag near the murder scene. On June 6, 1990, Seda sent letters to the CBS News program *60 Minutes* and to *The New York Post*. The letter named the three first victims and provided details probably known only to the Killer. The letter included the threats: “No more games pigs. The 12 signs will die when the belts in heaven are seen” (Kleinfield, 1996). An examination of the letter revealed that the handwriting matched that on the note left at the Proce shooting scene. A folded note with astrological signs was under a rock on the bench where Parham was sleeping when he was shot. The fifth communiqué to *The New York Post* threw investigators for a loop. The writer claimed to be the New York Zodiac Killer and the San Francisco Zodiac Killer. Up to this point the Zodiac Killer was only thought to be responsible for the attacks in 1990. The August 4, 1994, communiqué to *The New York Post* made investigators realize the Zodiac Killer had returned and was responsible for a string of attacks in 1992 and 1993. He wrote: “Hi, I’m back” (Kleinfield, 1996). Some people thought the letter was a hoax and the string of attacks in 1990 and those in 1992 and 1993 were unrelated. Detective Joseph R. Borrelli informed the media that the letter was not a hoax because it contained "intimate knowledge" of assaults. For six years the Zodiac Killer taunted police on their inability to catch him.

**Investigative Value:** Despite the many communiqués, the letters did not directly lead police to Seda and identify him as the Zodiac Killer. No one came forward and said they recognized the writing in the letters or the symbols in the letters as belonging to Seda. The communiqués did, however, contribute to solving the Zodiac case. Seda virtually jumped onto the lap of the police department, and his communiqués proved critical in police obtaining a confession. The happenstance capture came on June 18, 1996, when police responded to a disturbance and shooting at a home in Brooklyn. Seda lived at the home with his mother and his 17-year-old half-sister. So devoutly “religious” was Seda that he objected to his sister associating with drug dealers. Seda had, in fact, warned drug dealers about their evil ways and the fate that would befall them in hell. In this particular dispute Seda went berserk and shot his sister in the back. When police arrived, a gun battle ensued. After Seda’s arrest, a detective recognized similarities between his signed confession to the shooting of his half-sister and some of the notes signed by the Zodiac Killer (Toy, 1998). The most incriminating symbol was what became the Zodiac Killer’s signature, a circle with an overlapping cross and three 7’s that surrounded the cross. Prosecutors likened the symbol – scrawled on letters sent to the media in the early 1990’s – to the crosshairs of a rifle sight. Initially, Seda denied being the Zodiac Killer. His confession came only after he was confronted with physical evidence from the communiqués: The crosshairs symbol; Seda’s fingerprints fit those left at the 1990 attack in the park and on the 1994 letter mailed to *The New York Post*; and Seda’s DNA matched DNA in saliva found on an envelope used to send a communiqué.

**CONCLUSION**

It is evident from examining some of the most notorious serial killer cases involving communiqués that the communiqués failed to lead directly to identifying a perpetrator. Although these killers injected themselves into cases, sometimes repeatedly for years, with poems, letters, and telephone calls to investigators or the news media, the communiqués did not lead to enough investigative evidence or clues to put an immediate end to a series of slayings. The communiqués, however, played a pivotal investigative role in helping police convict the
perpetrators in serial cases. Once the serial killer had been identified, the communiqués provided strong physical evidence – fingerprints, DNA, and handwriting samples – for conviction. The communiqués also assisted investigators in linking the suspect to specific cases and ascertaining which cases were part of the serial case. Judging from this evidence, the communiqués in the unsolved cases should solidly link a suspect to a string of murders and ensure a conviction if an arrest is made eventually.

Communiqués appear so rich in evidence – clues that can eventually help link a specific individual to a series of murders – that law enforcement officials should make communiqués more of a priority in serial cases and make it a point to reveal their content soon after the communiqués are received. That would allow the public to assist more in the investigation. Citizens who may suspect an individual or be familiar with the perpetrator’s handwriting are apt to make a connection when the case is fresh in their minds during the slayings. Currently, police practice and culture is to keep communiqués secret. This comes from a long history of trying to keep secret something only the killer would know for use in polygraphs. That tended to be the pattern in the cases evaluated for this study. Although police allowed release of some information in communiqués and the broadcast of some telephonic calls, for the most part police advocated hoarding the content of the communiqués. Sometimes the content of communiqués was not revealed to the public for years after the slayings.

There are other reasons why investigators should seriously think about changing their investigative approach in serial cases involving communiqués. Traditionally, investigators conduct investigations out of the public eye. Evidence and witness statements usually reveal the relationship between the victim and suspect, which assists police in identifying the suspect. That approach has worked well in traditional murder investigations, but it appears to falter in serial cases since often the victims are picked randomly by a person unknown in the victim’s circle of relatives or friends or coworkers. Since communiqués possess clues that can link the crimes to a specific individual, investigators should release their content with the hope that someone close to the killer will recognize the clues. Although in the cases studied the communiqués did not directly lead to the perpetrator, revealing details of communiqués to the public offers rich potential for a quicker resolution of the case. There have been criminal cases in which investigators identified the suspect by publicly revealing handwriting samples.

In 1992 an Ohio mother and her two teenaged daughters were raped, murdered, and dumped into the bay in Tampa Bay, Florida. One of the few clues was a brochure on which the suspected killer had written directions to a boat dock. After a county commissioner suggested the handwriting sample be made public, it was plastered on five billboards within two miles of the motel where the victims were staying. Someone recognized the handwriting as belonging to 45-year-old Oba Chandler, a suspected serial rapist. Chandler was convicted in the triple murder.

The Unabomber case was another investigation that argues for investigators to reveal communiqués. For over 18 years the FBI hunted for the Unabomber, the individual who sent letter or package bombs to professors and people involved with technology (Stolberg & Gladstone, 1996). The FBI had stored 22 million pieces of information in computer databases in their attempt to identify the killer. The Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, 53, eventually was
identified and apprehended in 1996 as a direct result of his writings, but only because his manifesto was published by major newspapers. For years, the FBI hoarded Kaczynski’s communiqués. Kaczynski fits the broad definition of a serial killer – an individual who kills repeatedly with a cooling-off period between murders – but law enforcement and social scientists primarily view him as a revolutionary who sought to get his philosophy circulated to the masses. They do not generally consider him a serial killer as the term is mostly used today in association with sexually-motivated murders.

Investigators often argue that encouraging the media to publish communiqués might simply spawn copycat writers. That appeared to be what happened in the “Jack the Ripper” case of 1888 in England. Investigators agree that some of the communiqués to police were sent by the Ripper, but handwriting experts identified several hoax letters, which made the investigation more difficult (Rumbelow, 1987). That same scenario was replayed in the “Yorkshire Ripper” investigation of the 1970’s in England. Someone claiming to be the Yorkshire Ripper contacted police, who then dedicated resources to trying to identify the voice. Among other things, officers visited “working-man’s clubs” to play the Yorkshire Ripper tape (Cross, 1981; Burn, 1985). When Peter Sutcliffe was arrested for killing 13 women, his voice did not match the phone communiqué recordings. Serial killer cases are fraught with so few clues, though, that investigators should favor revealing the communiqués and find a way to deal with the task of sifting through false confessions and “kooks.” In fact, the authenticated communiqués themselves are a useful tool for handwriting experts and psycholinguistics expert to assist investigators in weeding out imposters.

Since investigators usually have no viable suspects in serial killer cases, it would behoove investigators to use their only obvious link to the identity of the killer: His or her communiqués. Investigators should seek to exploit this type of killers’ weakness, a propensity to communicate. Investigators in the BTK case made a cursory attempt to communicate with the murderer. After the killer sent the Otero letter, police asked a columnist for The Eagle-Beacon to write a column in an attempt to get BTK to begin a dialog. The killer did not respond. In 1978, again at the request of police, KAKE-TV tried to contact BTK by appealing to his subconscious mind in a news report. Using a technique called subliminal communication, employees at the station spliced its news broadcast and inserted a few frames of film with the message: “Contact the chief” (Stephens, 1979). Police and the news media made a more concentrated attempt to communicate with the Zodiac Killer of San Francisco. Early in the killings a police chief doubted a letter sent to the San Francisco Examiner came from the killer and publicly asked the killer to provide more details. The killer did in a three-page letter. The killer wrote: “Dear Editor… This is the Zodiac speaking. In answer to your asking for more details about the good times I have had in Vallejo, I shall be very happy to supply even more material” (Graysmith, 1986). Off and on, the Zodiac Killer of San Francisco responded to statements made by police and occasionally wrote to an attorney and newspaper columnist. Once, the Sunday San Francisco Examiner wrote across the top of the front page: “We ask that you give yourself up to The Examiner… Call the City Editor of The Examiner, any time, day or night. The telephone number is (415) 781-2424. Call Collect” (Graysmith, 1986). The Zodiac Killer never wrote to The Examiner again. Although efforts to communicate with the killer in the BTK and Zodiac Killer case of San Francisco failed to lead to the killers’ apprehension, this avenue should not be de-emphasized since it is a direct link to the killer. Law enforcement agencies on the local and
federal level should study this area to develop the best strategy to entice the killers to keep communicating. The more these killers communicate, the more chances investigators may have to identify him-her or get fingerprints or other evidence that can lead to solving a case or obtaining a conviction once there is an arrest. Fingerprints belonging to the killer were found in several of the communiqués discussed in this analysis. They appeared to be careless in writing and handling their communiqués. The Zodiac Killer of San Francisco seemed to be the only killer to systematically attempt to conceal his fingerprints. In one of his letters, he revealed he coated his fingertips with airplane cement. The longer the conversation continues, the greater the chances that the killer will make a mistake and provide a vital clue.

Law enforcement should encourage experts in psychology and psychiatry to conduct research geared toward helping investigators better understand the killers’ mindset and behavior when sending communiqués. Is there anything police can say that would convince these type of killers to turn themselves in or provide a clue that would reveal their identity? The study of these killers revealed evidence – a pattern of commonalties – that the killers appear psychologically weak and vulnerable when communicating. They seem to want to be caught. That was the opinion of experts at a California medical facility, who stated in the San Francisco Zodiac Killer case: “And the taunting notes and phone calls may be a plea to be found out, exposed, perhaps cornered, in which event a grandiose paranoid quite likely might take his own life, as a grand gesture, to punish the world for its neglect of him in life” (Graysmith, 1986). An attorney who received letters from the San Francisco Zodiac Killer told reporters: “I believe he wants to stop killing. I have carefully studied his letter… and feel it was written at a time when he calmly and rationally was considering the future… That is why he is crying out for help” (Graysmith, 1986). In his letter to the attorney, the Zodiac Killer wrote: “The one thing I ask of you is this, please help me. I cannot reach out for help because of this thing in me won’t let me. I am finding it extremely difficult to hold it in check… I am afraid I will loose control again… Please help me I am drowning” (Graysmith, 1986). Similar pleas are found in communiqués of the other serial killers included in this study. Wrote BTK: “It hard to control myself. You probably call me ‘psychotic with sexual perversion hang-up’. When this monster enter my brain I will never know. But, it here to stay… Maybe you can stop him. I can’t” (BTK, 1974). The Weepy-Voice Killer begged to be caught, but he could not turn himself in. In one of his phone calls, he cried: “I couldn’t help it. I don’t know why I had to stab her. I’m so upset about it. I keep getting drunk everyday and I can’t believe I killed her… I keep getting drunk everyday and I can’t believe I killed her… I can’t think of being locked up (Brown, 1981). The same was true with the Happy Face Killer. He told reporters he wrote to The Oregonian “because I wanted to be stopped.” The Lipstick Killer wrote: “For heaven’s sake, catch me before I kill more; I cannot control myself” (Kennedy, 1947). After his arrest authorities learned that the Lipstick Killer tried to keep himself from going out to kill by taking off all his clothes. That failed to quell his urges and he got dressed and went looking for victims. When doctors asked the Lipstick Killer what he meant when he wrote, “Catch me before I kill more,” his response was: “That was George and I could not help what I was doing, and he was myself” (Kennedy, 1947). After his arrest he wrote to his mother and father, telling them he wanted to commit suicide to get rid of “George.”

If the serial killers in this study were on an emotional roller coaster when communicating with police or the news media, they would seem to be vulnerable to having their identify discovered. Yet because investigators tend to keep the communiqués secret, this vulnerability
may pass without detection. A systematic, investigative approach that better utilizes communiqués in serial killer investigations would better serve the public and law enforcement.

ENDNOTE

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SPINNING THE WEB OF HATE:
WEB-BASED HATE PROPAGATION BY EXTREMIST ORGANIZATIONS*

by

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ABSTRACT

Professed and suspected members of hate organizations have been involved in a number of highly publicized violent episodes in recent years. It has been suggested that there are connections between web sites operated by extremist organizations and select episodes of violence (including the Littleton, Colorado, school shooting and Benjamin Smith’s 1999 Independence weekend Midwest shooting spree). The proliferation of the internet in the lives of the American public raises new possibilities for this medium’s use by groups and individuals preaching hate and intolerance. This exploratory study examines the web sites operated by a sample of recognized extremist organizations to better understand how the internet is used to transmit ideologies and facilitate communication. Issues explored include the types of resources extremist sites made available to general users, categories of information provided to users, methods of communicating within the group, and mechanisms used to appeal to specific audiences.

INTRODUCTION

In early 1995, the internet was becoming prevalent in millions of American homes. The “worldwide web” offered the public a means to communicate, find information, meet new people, conduct business, and seek entertainment. As the internet was beginning to become a staple in the lives of the average American, Donald Black, a Florida computer consultant, launched Stormfront (www.stormfront.org), generally regarded as the first extremist hate site on the World Wide Web (Anti-Defamation League, 1996; Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998). In the subsequent years, Black has made Stormfront one of the most prominent extremist sites on the internet. Users may access an extensive library of essays and speeches by some of the most prominent actors in ideologically extreme right-wing and racial separatist groups, post messages on various discussion boards, subscribe to electronic mailing lists, and use chat rooms to communicate with others in “real time.”

Although Donald Black was a pioneer in his use of the internet, American extremist organizations have been using computers and computer networks since the early 1980s (Marks, 1996). Under the guidance of Louis Beam, a prominent leader of the radical right, the racist movement in America began to advance “from the age of the Xerox to the computer age” (Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998: 160). In the pre-internet years of the mid- and late-1980’s, several extremist groups made use of computer “bulletin board” systems to facilitate communication among members (Coates, 1995), although it is unclear to what extent such systems were actually utilized by followers.1 Extremist groups found these systems especially appealing because they

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were efficient, cost effective, and lacked any substantial police and/or governmental oversight (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997).

_Stormfront_ represents the pinnacle application of the internet as a means to preach hate and extremist ideologies to the general public. Donald Black has defined the genre of using web-based mediums to propagate separatist messages. As the internet has transformed how families communicate, how businesses operate, how consumers shop, and how students learn, it has also offered new modes of recruitment, retention and communication to groups with extreme views on a variety of issues. Leaders of ideologically extreme organizations were quick to perceive that the internet may be a useful tool to enhance and expand their operations. In a 1998 appearance on ABC’s _Nightline_, Black explained that his internet site had allowed him to “recruit people” who he “otherwise wouldn’t have reached” (Anti-Defamation League, 1999: 5). This paper considers how ideologically extreme “hate groups”² use the internet as a tool to spread their message and facilitate communication among members.

**Hate in America**

The United States, like many other nations, has a rich history of hate-related behavior motivated by race, ethnicity, gender, age, and sexual orientation (George & Wilcox, 1996); such views have often been an integral part of our cultural and political identity. Although many of the first European settlers were fleeing religious persecution, these colonists were guilty of making organized efforts to suppress the expansion of other religious beliefs. In some colonies legislation imposed fines on persons found practicing faiths deemed to be unacceptable. Prior to the Civil War, conspiracy theorists suggested that Catholic immigration was an attempt by the Pope to infiltrate and take over America (Ridgeway, 1995). In the wake of abolition, “Jim Crow” laws formalized popular sentiments by creating barriers to equal opportunities for freed slaves. Throughout the late 19ᵗʰ and early 20ᵗʰ centuries, immigration laws denied entry to immigrants leaving many nations. Even in the modern day, despite their many advances, women still lag behind men in terms of social status and job opportunities.

At the dawn of the new millennium, America is progressing in improving tolerance and enhancing appreciation for multiculturalism and diversity. Despite such gains, “although the melting pot is apparently at full boil, assimilation into one national identity is still incomplete” (Bushart, Craig, & Barnes, 1998: x). Advances have been made, yet our society is still struggling to balance national identity and the autonomy of various racial/ethnic, gender, religious, and behavioral groups. Some individuals and organizations believe that efforts to foster tolerance and diversity take place at the expense of certain cultural identities; they are quick to point out perceived contradictions and double standards in policies and programs aimed at integrating and assimilating American society. These persons often adhere to belief systems which conventional society might label controversial, extreme, delusional, or conspiratorial.

The majority of American society has (arguably) advanced beyond the tendency to adhere to overtly hateful and restrictive beliefs. There are, however, some segments which still maintain unconventional belief systems based upon race, ethnicity, gender, and religion. The presence of groups organized primarily for the purpose of furthering extremist ideologies is not a new phenomenon in Western cultures. For centuries, societies have engaged in internal and
external wars, crusades, revolutions and movements. Long before the internet, campaigns were being waged by anti-Masonic, anti-Semitic, anti-Catholic, anti-black, anti-white, anti-labor and anti-communist organizations (to name only a few targets). The targets have remained largely stable, but the “warriors” and their modes of operation are undergoing a transformation. The internet has not changed the fact that our nation contains extremist organizations; what may be changing is the way in which such groups function.

Mirroring conventional social and political organizations found in American society, groups that espouse a hateful or extremist ideology have tended to be male-dominated (Anti-Defamation League, 1996; Blee, 1991; Coates, 1995; Schmaltz, 1999). Women who joined such organizations were viewed as “apolitical in their own right, attached to the racist movement only through the political affiliations of their husbands, boyfriends, or fathers” (Blee, 1996:680). It has only been in recent decades that women have taken a more active role, not only as full members, but also as leaders, in these organizations. As American society becomes more diverse, so, it would seem, have the leaders and followers of organized racist organizations. It is possible that groups of “angry white males” are being replaced by more heterogeneous, ideologically complex, technologically advanced, market savvy men and women from diverse social, political, geographical, and educational backgrounds.

**Hate on the Internet**

Traditionally, the impact of extremist groups has been limited by the resources (or lack thereof) they have to spread their message to a wide audience. Groups have used radio (AM or shortwave) or television broadcasts (public access channels) to present their ideological beliefs (Marks, 1996), or used print mediums to educate, inform, enrage and entice (Barkun, 1997; Coates, 1995). These modes of communication are only capable of reaching a limited audience. Radio and television broadcasts are only available to those in a limited range who possess the proper equipment. Printed materials can only be used by a finite number of people over a given period of time.

The internet allows groups greater convenience in spreading their message to the general public and in offering information to members (Bennett, 1995; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997). Groups may “link” their web sites, enabling users to access resources offered by a variety of individuals and organizations, regardless of geographic restrictions (Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998). Electronic mailing lists automatically send text, audio, or video files to subscribing e-mail addresses, quickly and efficiently reaching users anywhere in the world. Published information that has been achieved on a web site can be accessed at a user’s leisure. New followers may use such archives to quickly learn about a group’s beliefs, values, and tactics. A member of the general public who “surfs” through a web site can hear group leaders proclaim their ideology 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

The difference between these traditional and conventional formats of communication is what Negroponte (1995) refers to as “the difference between atoms and bits” (p. 11). Traditionally, our communicative capacity was limited by our ability to transmit “atoms” of information – for example, using printed media to espouse an ideology or agenda. A given amount of money allowed the production of a limited number of copies (atoms) which could
only be read by a finite number of users at any one time. The internet allows for the transmission of the same information via “bits” – for a set fee a web page can be accessed simultaneously by geometrically greater numbers of users. The end result is that a group is able to disseminate information to a (potentially) larger audience using bits instead of atoms. The internet ameliorates the resource-based and geographic limitations that had restricted the capacity of groups to reach others.

The internet also offers advantages that mesh with the ideologies of many racialist extremist organizations. Inherent in the belief systems of many right-wing extremist groups is a distrust of the government and popular media outlets; members tend to feel alienated from popular culture and disenfranchised from the government and legitimate socio-economic opportunities (Aho, 1990; Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997; Freilich, Pichardo-Almanzar, & Rivera, 1999; Kaplan, 1997; Neiwert, 1999). As with members of youth gangs (Shelden, Tracy, & Brown, 2001), members of extremist organizations may turn to these groups as a source of social support. Unlike gangs, which traditionally offer support through face-to-face interactions, the internet allows extremist groups to offer social support, regardless of geographic proximity (Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998). Members can also share information that is outside of the control of either the government or conventional media (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997), making this mode of communication more secure and appealing in the eyes of group adherents.

An additional advantage of internet technologies is the capacity for groups to manage their image to appear more acceptable to persons in the social and political mainstream (Kaplan & Weinberg, 1998). Ideologies may be disguised or diluted to create a web site that is more palatable to an unknowing user. A student searching for information about Martin Luther King Jr. might unknowingly access a site intended to defame his character and reputation. The internet serves as a “bridging mechanism” (Barkun, 1997), offering a segue between racialist ideologies (in the case of race-based extremist groups) and more conventional conservative beliefs. Many people initially find extremist ideologies to be incompatible with their own belief systems (Aho, 1990), making them reluctant to immediately embrace the beliefs and tactics of a group. If, however, a person is “hooked” into a group through more mainstream concerns (e.g., taxes, social spending programs, educational systems, etc.), that person may slowly come to embrace other dimensions of the group’s ideology (Barkun, 1997; Neiwert, 1999). Over time, a person accessing a group’s website to learn about a relatively innocuous issue may be hooked into the group and may adopt more extreme beliefs about more controversial issues (Aho, 1990).

**Method**

Perhaps the greatest challenge to successful internet-based research is determining an appropriate population from which to draw a representative sample. By its very nature the internet is amorphous. Its size, dimensions, and composition are dynamic – constantly changing as sites appear, disappear, move and change. While “search engines” catalog the contents of a portion of the internet, it is generally accepted that they omit far more than they include. Thus, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to determine the true size of any population of web sites at any one point in time. In the absence of a known population, it is not possible to develop a representative sampling scheme for use in social science research. Consequently, research using web sites as the unit of analysis must often rely on less accurate purposive sampling techniques.
A content analysis of a purposive sample of web sites cataloged online with HateWatch (www.hatewatch.org) was used to generate the data for this study. HateWatch is a “web based not for profit that monitors the growing and evolving threat of hate groups on the Internet.” The criteria used for defining an organization as a “hate group” by members of the general public, the media, and the academy tend to be vague and inconsistent. HateWatch uses the following definition to determine which materials it will catalogue on its internet site:

an organization or individual that advocates violence against or unreasonable hostility toward those persons or organizations identified by their race, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, gender or disability. Also including organizations or individuals that disseminate historically inaccurate information with regards to these persons or organizations for the purpose of vilification.

In the absence of a more consistent standard, this definition offers an acceptable starting point for delineating and studying extremist organizations on the internet.

A sampling scheme based upon a catalog developed by a “watchdog” group (a group formed to protect a class of persons from discrimination and bias) does raise certain methodological concerns. All watchdog groups have an established agenda and vested interests which they seek to protect. Watchdogs may use vague and inconsistent criteria in determining which groups and individuals they will oppose. In addition to protecting a certain class of citizens, watchdogs also seek to preserve their existence, to garner media attention, and to obtain financial support for their cause (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997; Kaplan, 1997). Watchdogs may focus more attention on some groups than on others (Dobratz & Shanks-Meile, 1997); the Anti-Defamation League, by its very nature, is more concerned with groups believed to threaten Jewish citizens, showing far less concern for groups threatening Asian-American citizens. Most watchdogs are ideologically opposed to those whom they monitor (Freilich, Pichardo-Almanzar, & Rivera, 1999), thus they may seek to silence their opponents, rather than offering a balanced perspective on an issue (Aho, 1990; Kaplan, 1997).

From a scientific perspective, all of these issues may bias the information which watchdogs develop and color how that information is presented. Using data from watchdog groups for sampling or analysis purposes has potential shortcomings; it is important to understand the watchdog group, its motives and its beliefs in order to weigh these concerns. Unlike many other watchdog groups, HateWatch does not raise many of these methodological concerns. As indicated above, HateWatch has clear and explicit guidelines for defining which types of web sites will be included in its catalog. As a watchdog, HateWatch is not affiliated with any groups organized to protect a select class of citizens. HateWatch is a nonprofit entity which seeks to share information about threatening sources of hate in general. Although its operators may still have agendas and aspirations, the methodological issues that attend the use of watchdog groups for sampling purposes are not points of concern in this study.
The web sites cataloged by HateWatch reflect the dynamic and fluid nature of the internet. The author printed the entire list of links contained in the HateWatch directory on one day. Although HateWatch periodically updates its directory and requests that users notify them of “dead links,” as the sites were accessed and analyzed during the subsequent month, approximately one in six were no longer active. As others have noted, web sites of all types are constantly transformed and modified; it is impossible to identify the exact number of groups or individuals operating web sites that espouse a hateful ideology (McDonald, 1999). It should be noted, however, that the sites found on HateWatch include the most prominent organizations preaching hate in contemporary America.

After removing sites with multiple listings, sites which were clearly subsections of other sites, and cataloged sites which were no longer operational, 132 internet sites were included in the study sample. Given the amorphous nature of the internet, this purposive sample, while limited in terms of generalizability, offers perhaps the best representation of the phenomenon in question. Each site was examined to determine the basic elements it contained, particularly in terms of the types of resources made available, categories of information provided to the user, methods of communicating within the group, and mechanisms used to appeal to specific audiences. The “depth” of web sites is widely variable; some offer a limited amount of information, while others are quite expansive. Pragmatically, the author could not review all of the information included on each site in the study sample. Consequently, this content analysis may actually underestimate the prevalence of some features within this sample of hateful extremist web sites.

The internet and its emerging impact upon global culture influence both this study’s topical focus and methodological approach. Although the internet is fundamentally transforming how Americans work, live, and play, it is unclear how this technology will affect social science research. The issues addressed in this section illuminate a partial list of concerns and limitations that behavioral scientists will have to confront in the near future. The internet offers exciting new methods by which people may learn and interact, but there are few clear rules to define how these processes are best studied.

RESULTS

The study sample consisted of 132 web sites that espoused an extremist and (arguably) hateful ideology. Less than one-tenth (9.1%) of the sample sites provided any form of warning statement on their main page to alert users of the volatile and potentially offensive nature of the site’s contents. Upon accessing the main page for an extremist site, the user would typically find a brief introductory statement detailing the most basic beliefs held by the group. In most cases, the sites would then allow the user to access a variety of additional information, possibly including: More extensive statements of belief; “libraries” of textual, audio, and/or video material; discussion boards and chat rooms; information on contacting the group and, in some cases, local chapters; information on becoming a member; membership application materials; information about subscribing to the organizations publication(s); catalogues of products for sale; internal search engines; and a guest book.
Each study site was examined to determine its contents in three categories: Resources available to the site users; information provided to site users; and techniques used to facilitate communication between group members and site users. Resource available to the site users refers to textual, audio, and video files that users could access to learn more about the organization as well as the origin and nature of its ideological beliefs. The study sites provided users with a myriad of information about memberships, subscriptions, meetings, and activities. The study sites also employed a variety of techniques to facilitate communication between the group and the public, the group and their members, and among group members.

Available Resources

Table One presents the more common resources that the study sites made available to their users. Just over one-fifth (21.2%) of the web sites offered the user access to an archive of the group’s primary publication (i.e., magazine, newsletter, etc.). It should be noted that not every hate organization has such a periodic publication; however, it would appear that when such publications exist, it was common for sites to make them available to users. The most commonly observed resources feature (found on 87.9% of the sites) was some form of text library. Such libraries ranged from a few short essays to expansive collections of essays, articles, and on-line books (e.g., complete copies of Hitler’s Mein Kampf and Henry Ford’s The International Jew). While most sites tended to be modest, certain sites offered large collections of writings by prominent extremist leaders (e.g., Louis Beam, William Pierce, Richard Butler, Matthew Hale), as well as works prepared by members of their own group.

Libraries of graphics, sections of the site specifically dedicated to cartoons, photos, or other graphic images (files which could be used to create ideological appropriate letterhead or operating system “wallpaper”), were found on over one-forth (28.0%) of the sites in the study sample. In coding this category, the author was looking for more than just the inclusion of photos or graphics on the web site. “Library” was defined as a section of the site which was dedicated solely to making such images available to users. As computer technologies and communication networks improve, and as the internet continues to develop, it is becoming easier for sites to offer users audio or video files. Approximately one-quarter (21.2%) of the study sites allowed users to download audio files of speeches made by group leaders and members. Video files were less common (observed on 10.6% of the sites). With continual improvements being made in data transmission technologies, it might be expected that transmitting video files will eventually be a more pragmatic option for web site designers.

Information Provided

Table Two presents the types of information provided to site users. The most common information provided to site users was links to other sites, available on nearly three-quarters (72.7%) of the sites. The number of links provided by the sites ranged from a half-dozen to several hundred. The links allowed the site administrator to direct users to other sources of information, e-commerce establishments, and the web sites of groups with similar ideologies. Information on products for sale was the second most common item in this category. Over one-third (36.4%) of the study sites offered information on how users could purchase an assortment of products from the site’s proprietor(s). Common items being sold by these groups were books,
leaflets, pamphlets, audio/video cassettes, stickers, hats, and t-shirts. A few sites allowed the user to place an on-line order, while most offered a catalog and information on ordering by mail, telephone, or fax machine.

It is unclear how many of the study sites were organizations with formal members and official periodical publications. A small number of the sites provided users with information on subscribing to the organization’s periodical publications (22.0%) or on how to become a member (15.9%). Approximately one in seven sites (12.9%) provided contact information for local chapters, although it is unclear how many of the study sites were actually formal organizations with local chapters. All three of these items may underestimate the prevalence of these items on the sites of groups which actually had publications, offered membership, or were organized into local chapters.

Sites occasionally offered users access to important news items (sometimes with selective interpretations) and current events. Despite frequently being labeled as “news” or “current events,” these features were not necessarily up-to-date; it was common for items found in these sections to be outdated by several months. Analogously, calendars announcing “upcoming” events (such as meetings and rallies) were frequently outdated by six to 12 months. For user convenience, one in six (15.9%) sites provided a search engine that would allow one to query the entire site to obtain specific information.

**Modes of Communication**

The most common modes used to facilitate communication between users and group members are presented in Table Three. The most common mediums for allowing communication were chat rooms and discussion boards. Chat rooms allow users to engage in a live dialog with one or more other users by sending and receiving text messages. Discussion boards enable users to post messages and review the writings of others; postings are arranged by subject so that users can quickly determine whether a message is of interest. Despite being observed on nearly one-fifth (18.2%) of the study sites, it is not clear to what extent these were actually employed by users and members to communicate with one another. Regardless of the number of sites which hosted active chat rooms and discussion boards, a small number of popular sites may provide a sufficiently expansive forum to enable a user to locate and communicate with other like-minded individuals.

Many (17.4%) of the sites provided a “guest book” where users could make entries to voice their opinions and attitudes. While a guest book may not be a mode of communication in a traditional sense, they allowed site users to voice their support or opposition to the site administrator and other users. In addition, 11.4% of the study sites had a section of their web page where they displayed “hate mail” and negative guest book entries. These were often used by groups to reinforce their beliefs and to demonstrate that they were not the “real haters.” In a sense, by posting the messages in a special section of their internet site, the groups were viewing them as a badge of honor. A small number of the study sites also (proudly?) proclaimed that they were listed by HateWatch.
Electronic mailing lists were also a common tool for communication. Because individuals and groups may operate such mailing lists at no cost and with little effort, they are a quick, efficient, and easy way for like-minded individuals to share their ideas and beliefs. The existence of such a list does not guarantee that actual messages are sent to subscribing members. Some lists are generally inactive, while others are quite prolific. These prolific mailing lists may compensate for the lack of productivity among their inactive peers. The World Church of the Creator (WCOTC) and the National Alliance (NA) send out text copies of their weekly addresses via their e-mailing lists. WCOTC also routinely sends out press releases, membership updates, and news articles it views to be salient to its members and their cause.

The use of other modes of communication was relatively rare. In the years before the internet became a prevalent component of American culture, some groups and individuals operated computer bulletin board systems (BBS’s) that the public could access. Equipped with a computer and a modem, a user could “dial in” to a host computer to access and post information. Although BBS’s are outdated, phone numbers for such systems were still found on a small number of sites. A few groups (such as WCOTC) also made use of recorded messages; users may call a telephone number to hear a weekly update from Matthew Hale, the group’s leader. One in twenty study sites provided information about radio or TV broadcasts produced by their organization. Typically, these broadcasts would have very limited audiences. Radio programs were broadcast on short band or AM frequencies, while TV programs were aired on local public access cable channels.

Targeting Women

The role of women in hate-based extremist organizations is undergoing a transformation, as they become increasingly active members and supporters. When the issue was addressed, the study sites commonly portrayed men and women as having equally important (although frequently different) roles in their struggle. The Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, for example, stated that: “We welcome the ideas, input, and suggestions of women. And we welcome your involvement! Let’s work together - men and women - to Take Back America!” A small percent of the study sample had sections of their sites that were dedicated to “women’s issues” (2.3%) and a few sites were exclusively aimed at a female audience. Although many of these groups may still see women as serving a secondary (support) function, it was common for sites to present this role as noble and critical in their perceived struggle.

Blee (1996) points out that the factors that motivate participation in hate groups tend to be gender specific. While male activists reflect the belief that society is degenerating at a rapid rate, females often focus on protecting their children. Indeed, this notion would seem to be supported by contrasting the contents of web pages devoted to a female audience. Issues addressed on such pages often revolve around pregnancy, home schooling, and child rearing. Although groups may not always recognize women as equal partners in their ideological struggle, women are frequently portrayed as vital supporters of these racialist causes (Blee, 1991; Coates, 1995). To facilitate this supporting role, sites focus on how women may raise children in a manner consistent with the ideologies of these groups. For example, one such site proclaims that: “We are the mothers of the movement. The future of the Aryan race depends on our ability to bear and raise healthy, strong children.”
Targeting Youth

Social movement organizations have long recognized the importance of appealing to youth in order to perpetuate their existence. In the 1920s, during the height of its existence, the Ku Klux Klan had a children’s auxiliary designed to instill the group’s values in youth during their formative years (Blee, 1991). George Lincoln Rockwell, recognizing that the American Nazi Party needed to ensure its future existence by seeking to attract young, energetic members, spoke at colleges across the country. His campus presentations were well attended and, if they did not foster a strong base of support, they appeared to neutralize much of the opposition to his group’s ideology (Schmaltz, 1999). Following in Rockwell’s footsteps, modern hate-based extremist groups endeavor to attract young members through the internet. Among the sites in the study sample, 4.5% contained subsections that targeted children and young adults. These sites often had colorful images, hate-filled games, and messages aimed at a preteen audience.

Web sites operated by various white supremacist organizations allow users to sample and purchase “white power music.” The violent, hateful, and profane lyrics found in such music are set to a heavy metal tune; the music may be a powerful inroad for extremist groups in their quest to attract younger members. Like other forms of music and performance which are outside of the mainstream (e.g., raves), part of the appeal of white power music may be attending live performances and interacting with other fans. The nature of white power music and live performances may appeal to some youth who would not ordinarily be open to a blatantly hateful ideology. Once a youth begins to listen to the music and interact with other fans, however, he or she may slowly be desensitized to racist images and messages, and may be more accepting of the beliefs of extremist organizations. By building a subculture around certain symbols (ways of dressing, phrases, images, etc.) and transmitting these symbols through a medium which appeals to youth (live and recorded heavy metal music performances), some youth may find the beliefs and tactics of extremist groups to be more palatable. In this way, music may serve as a “bridging mechanism” (Barkun, 1997) between youth and extremist organizations and their ideologies.

The sale of white power music is a source of potential profits for sponsoring organizations. The desire to reach a younger audience and raise additional revenues was an impetus behind the National Alliance’s decision to purchase Resistance Records in the winter of 1999-2000. Resistance Records boasts a modest collection of titles and a brisk business (Segal, 2000). It specializes in selling white power music via the internet. While older members of racist movements may not personally enjoy this type of music, they recognize it as a valuable tool in replenishing their membership roles and producing additional revenues. In the words of William Pierce, founder of the National Alliance, author of the infamous The Turner Diaries, and veteran of the racist movement: “I don’t care for the music myself... But if it helps move people in the right direction, I’m for it” (Segal, 2000: C01).

DISCUSSION

Reviewing the web site contents of extremist organizations allows for several key observations to be made about these groups and the role of the internet in their operations. First, extremist organizations use the internet to provide a wide range of information to both their
followers and the general public. Unlike past technologies, which limited the audience a group could reach, internet technologies allow extremists to provide large portions of the American public with access to information about their beliefs, values, and actions.\textsuperscript{9} Although providing such information is no guarantee that groups will experience growths in membership or support, the internet allows them to do so with greater ease and (most likely) at a lower cost. Organizations have the potential to share their message with a wider audience and to operate more effectively as a group.

Second, groups may also have strong financial incentives for establishing a web site, although the internet does not necessarily lead to actual economic gains. More than one-third of the study sites offered products for sale. The sale of these products may have been tied to the group’s informational mission; there is a clear information-sharing function linked with selling booklets, books, video tapes, and audio cassettes designed to educate the user. Even other commonly sold products, such as t-shirts and hats, have the potential to inform the public by advertising the existence of the group. It is not clear to what extent groups profited from the sale of these products. It is possible that groups may funnel proceeds back into their operating budget, as it does not appear that most group leaders are profiting from their advocacy (Neiwert, 1999). As previously noted, the sale of products (e.g., white power music) may serve the dual function of spreading a group’s message and generating much needed revenue to support continuing operations.

Third, in addition to providing organizations with the opportunity to share information with the public, this research highlights the importance of web sites as tools for communication among group members. One in four (28.0\%) of the study sites offered users the opportunity to subscribe to an electronic mailing list and/or participate in an on-line discussion or chat. Such mechanisms are important methods by which groups may facilitate communication between committed members and followers. Discussion boards and chat rooms are of particular relevance, as they allow the committed to engage in two-way dialogue with other adherents. While these tools were only present on a minority (18.2\%) of the study sites, they were still prevalent among the study sample. In the past, it was not possible for large numbers of members to engage in an on-going dialogue unless they met face-to-face. The internet allows committed group members to routinely interact with one another to discuss strategies and tactics, to learn more about the group’s belief system, and to offer each other general social support. This study had no way of tracking how groups might supplement web-based communication with electronic mail to facilitate group interactions.

An important issue which cannot be resolved via these research findings is the degree to which the internet increases the membership of extremist organizations. Although the internet most likely increases the efficiency of these groups (e.g., faster and more reliable modes of internal communication), it is unclear if the internet is truly a more effective means of recruiting new followers. Kaplan and Weinberg (1998) address this issue, citing anecdotal evidence that suggests that extremist groups using technology (specifically, electronic mail messages sent out en masse) to carry out recruitment achieve little success. They argue that the internet does little to actually increase the size of extremist groups, although it may be a powerful tool to increase the allegiance of those who are already committed to radical ideologies.
Furthermore, while the internet has the potential to increase a group’s efficiency and efficacy, it may also become a burden. Followers of extremist ideologies may spend too much time creating and maintaining web sites. Followers responsible for web sites may find themselves devoting considerable time to responding to electronic criticisms (via e-mail, guest books, or discussion boards). Critics may also “hack” into a group’s site, requiring leaders to devote time and energy to repairing cyber-vandalism. All of these activities may occur at the expense of other actions that support a group’s objectives. Viewed in this way, web sites may be both assets and liabilities for extremist groups and their members.

**CONCLUSION**

This research illustrates the various ways in which extremist organizations may use the internet as a tool to operate, communicate, spread their beliefs, and attract new members. Sites included in the study sample were widely varied in terms of their depth (i.e., number of sub-pages) and breadth (i.e., number of features). All of the sites, however, reflect the potential of the internet to transform the traditional ways in which hate has been expressed in America. Combining these new avenues for recruitment with technological changes in communication mediums may dramatically alter the future face and function of hate and extremism around the world. The extent to which this is actually occurring is not readily evident.

Since Donald Black first launched *Stormfront* in the early days of the internet, groups and individuals wishing to espouse an extremist ideology have been quick to pursue this new avenue of operation. The internet offers users the opportunity to involve themselves in debating and advancing hate-based extremist ideologies with a high degree of anonymity and with considerable convenience. Groups that are actively advancing their agenda may share ideas and resources at any hour of the day, from anywhere in the world, at very little expense. The internet sites included in this study’s sample clearly understood and capitalized upon the potential benefits of using the web to further their causes. This is reflected in an electronic message announcing a change in the features offered on the World Church of the Creator’s web site. Matthew Hale, the group’s leader, proclaimed that: “Once again, Creators are leading the way in expanding Racial Loyalist communication throughout the world.”

---

10
TABLE ONE
RESOURCES MADE AVAILABLE TO SITE USERS†

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of resource</th>
<th>n of sites</th>
<th>% of sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Archive of primary</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>publication</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>87.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Text library</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>28.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library of graphics</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>21.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Audio library (speeches)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video library</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† On average, each site offered users 1.69 of these resources.
TABLE TWO
INFORMATION PROVIDED TO SITE USERS†

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of resource</th>
<th>n of sites</th>
<th>% of sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Calendar of upcoming events</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>11.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search engine</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Membership information</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Products for sale</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>36.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contact information for local chapters</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on subscribing to primary publication</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>22.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>News/current events</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to other sites</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>72.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†On average, each site offered users 2.23 of these information sources.
TABLE THREE
TECHNIQUES SITES USED TO FACILITATE COMMUNICATION AMONG USERS†

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of resource</th>
<th>n of sites</th>
<th>% of sites</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subscription information for online mailing list</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chat room/discussion board</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>18.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone number for BBS</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telephone number for recorded message</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information on radio/TV broadcast</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guest book</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>17.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal ads</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.8</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

† On average, each site used 0.61 of these techniques to communicate.
ENDNOTES

* Direct correspondence to Professor Joseph A. Schafer, Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Center for the Study of Crime, Delinquency & Corrections, Mailcode 4504, Carbondale, IL 62901-4504 (Email: jschafer@siu.edu). An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 2000 annual meetings of the Academy of Criminal Justice Sciences in New Orleans, Louisiana. The author would like to thank Elizabeth Bonello and Todd Bricker for their assistance, as well as the two anonymous reviewers for their helpful input. Professor Schafer's current areas of research include police behavior, police organizations, fear of crime, public perceptions of the police, community policing and extremist ideologies. Dr. Schafer is the author of Community Policing: The Challenges of Successful Organizational Change (2001, LFB Scholarly Publishing) and recent research articles appearing in the Journal of Criminal Justice, Justice System Journal, and Police Quarterly.

1. Hamm (1993) found that the overwhelming majority of the skinheads in his purposive study sample had never accessed such systems, relying instead on telephone “hotlines” and printed literature as sources of information.

2. Labeling these organizations as “hate groups,” while conventionally acceptable, is not necessarily ideologically accurate. The content of the web sites examined in this study reveals that many of the groups they represent would deny any hatred. They attempt to portray their opponents (be they black or white, Christian or Jew) as “the real haters,” while presenting themselves as indifferent toward the welfare of others. They will deny hatred or animosity toward their targets; they simply do not care about the well-being of their opponents. While many sites make efforts to cloak themselves in this more benign neutrality, reading between the lines often reveals hateful, vitriolic, and truculent attitudes. Because of its emotional connotation, the author is reluctant to use the label “hate group,” preferring, instead, to use the label “extremist organizations.” The label of “hate group” would, however, seem to be an apt characterization of many of the groups considered in this study (based upon their web sites).

3. At first appearance, Martin Luther King, Jr. - A Historical Examination [http://www.martinlutherking.org] seems innocuous. A closer examination of its content reveals that it is a site aimed at vilifying and maligning King’s life and accomplishments. The site was designed by Candidus Productions (which markets its services to those holding racist ideologies) and the webmaster has an e-mail address through Donald Black’s Stormfront.


5. Ibid.

6. In the course of conducting this research, the author subscribed to online mailing lists whenever this option was available. Of the 15-20 lists which were identified, only four have ever produced mailings.

7. Quoted from the Knights of the Ku Klux Klan, [http://www.kukluxklan.org/women.htm] (Accessed 12/04/000]. This site also notes that David Duke, its former director, was the first Klan leader to allow women to become general members.


10. From WCOTC’s Creativity mailing list; 03/12/00.
REFERENCES


**APPENDIX A**

**LIST OF INCLUDED INTERNET SITES**

*Note: These sites were accessed in the winter of 2000. Due to the fluid nature of the internet, some sites may be using a different URL or may no longer be available.*

1. 12 Tribes of Israel (www.hodc.com)
2. 14 Word Press (www.14words.com)
3. AAARGH (French Holocaust Denial Site) (www.abbc.com/aaargh/engl/engl.html)
4. Adelaide Institute (www.adelaideinstitute.org)
5. AIDS Cures Fags (members.yoderanium.com/aidscuresfags/)
6. Air Photo Evidence (www.air-photo.com)
8. Altar of Unholy Blasphemy (www.anus.com/altar)
9. America’s Invisible Empire (KKK) (www.airnet.net/niterider)
10. America’s Promise Ministries (www.amprom.org)
11. American Civil Rights Review (webusers.anet-stl.com/~civil/index.html)
12. American Front (www.americanfront.com)
13. American Knights of the KKK (www.americanknights.com)
14. American Nationalist Union (www.anu.org)
16. Arthur Butz (pubweb.acns.nwu.edu/~abutz/)
17. Aryan Nation (www.christian-aryannations.com)
18. Bayou Knights of the KKK (www.bayouknights.org)
20. Blacks and Jews Newsletter (www.blacksandjews.com)
22. Bob Enyart Live (www.enyart.com/)
24. Broadsword (www.hail.to/bnsm/1024broadsword.htm)
25. Canadian Freedom Site (www.freedomsite.org)
27. Carlos Whitlock Porter (www.cwporter.co.uk)
28. Children of Yahweh (www.childrenofyahweh.com)
29. Christian Bible Study (www.christianbiblestudy.org)
31. Committee for Open Debate on the Holocaust (www.codoh.com)
Hate in America / 87

33. Crosstar (www.nationalist.org)
34. David Duke Online (www.duke.org)
35. Euro-American Student Union (esu.simplenet.com/)
36. European Foundation for Free Historical Research (www.vho.org/index.html)
37. Final Conflict (dspace.dial.pipex.com/finalconflict)
38. First Amendment Exercise Machine (www.faem.com)
39. Focal Point Publications (www.fpp.co.uk)
40. German Historical Documents (abbc.com/berlin)
41. GOAL -- God’s Order Affirmed in Love (www.melvig.org)
42. God Hates Fags (www.godhatesfags.com)
43. Gospel Broadcasting Association (www.neosoft.com/~preacher)
44. Hammerskins Nation (www.hammerskins.com)
45. Hebron Institute for Political and Religious Studies (www.hebron.com)
46. Heritage Lost Ministries (www.heritagelost.org)
47. Historical Review Press (www.etv.com/HRP/)
49. I Love White Folks (www.ilovewhitefolks.com)
50. Iahueh’s Kingdom (www.iahushua.com)
51. Imperial Klans of America (http://www.kkkk.net/)
52. Institute for Historical Review (www.ihr.org)
53. Invisible Empire, National Knights of the KKK (www.neters.com/web/wwf2.shtml)
54. Jerry’s Aryan Battle Page (pw1.netcom.com/~jna/index.html)
55. Jew Watch (www.jewwatch.com)
56. Jewish Defense League (www.jdl.org)
57. Jubilee Newspaper (www.jubileenewspaper.com)
58. Kahane (www.kahane.org)
59. Kingdom Identity Ministries (www.kingidentity.com)
60. KKK.com (www.kkk.com/)
61. Knights of the KKK (www.kkk.com/knights/)
62. Knights of the KKK (www.kukluxklaan.org)
63. Lord’s Work Inc. (www.freespeech.org/thelordswork/)
64. Malmo Skinheads (malmoeskins.tsx.org/)
65. Mission to Israel (www.missiontoisrael.com)
66. Nation of Europe (www.demon.co.uk/natofeur/index.html)
67. Nation of Islam (www.ni.org)
68. National Action (www.adelaide.net.au/~national/)
69. National Alliance (www.natvan.com)
70. National Association for the Advanced of White People (www.naawp.com)
71. National Journal (abbc.com/nj/engl.htm)
73. National Socialist German Workers Party – American Order (www.nidlink.com/~nsdap)
74. National Socialist German Workers Party – Australia (www.ns.aus.tm/propaganda/index2.html)
75. National Socialist Hitler Youth Legion (www.front14.org/ruediger)
76. National Socialist Movement (www.nsm88.com)
77. Nations of Gods and Earth (www.nge.org)
78. New Order (www.theneworder.org)
79. Niggerwatch (members.yoderanium.com/niggerwatch/)
80. North Georgia White Knights (members.surfsouth.com/~ngkw/index.html)
82. Northwest Knights of the KKK (www.concentric.net/~nwk/intro.htm)
83. Official Harold Covington Website (www.harold-covington.org)
84. Oil Boys (www.execcc.com/~odinthor/)
85. Open-Bible Ministries (www.1335.com)
86. Oregon Knights of the KKK (home.cdsnet.net/~wotan/aaframe.htm)
87. Ostara (www.ostara.org)
88. Our Legacy of Truth (www4.stormfront.org/posterity)
89. Ourhero Library (www.ourhero.com)
90. Patriot (www.patriot.dk/)
91. Peoples Resistance Movement (hollywar.org/)
92. Politics and Terrorism (www.flinet.com/~politics)
93. Posse Comitatus (www.posse-comitatus.org)
94. Preterist Archive (www.poteristarchive.com)
95. Resistance Records (www.resistance.com)
96. Revisionism.com (www.revisionism.com)
97. Right of Israel Online (home.arkansasusa.com/dlackey)
98. Scriptures for America (www.christianidentity.org)
99. Seig Heil 88 (www.concentric.net/~seigheil)
100. Sigdrifa Publications (www.sigardrifa.com/index1.html)
101. Skinhead Pride (www.sinheadpride.com)
102. South Mississippi Knights of the KKK (http://www.kukluxklan.net/south_mississippi_knights.htm)
103. Southern Cross Militant Knights (www.homestead.com/militant/)
104. Stormfront (www.stormfront.org)
105. STRAIGHT -- Society to Remove All Immoral Godless Homosexual Trash (www.melvig.org/mel/melvig.htm)
106. Student Revisionists’ Resource Site (www.wsu.edu:8080/~lpauling/index1.html)
107. Sword of Christ (www0.delphi.com/jcsword)
108. Tangled Web (www.codoh.com/zionweb/zionweb.html)
110. The Order (www.14words.com/theorder)
111. The Spotlight (www.spotlight.org)
112. The Third Position (dspace.dial.pipex.com/third-position/index.html)
113. Thule Publications (www.thulepublications.com)
114. Truth at Last (www.stormfront.org/truth_at_last/)
115. United Confederate Knights (www0.delphi.com/uckkkk)
116. United Strike (unitedstrike.com/)
117. United White Klans (expage.com/page/unitedwhiteklans)
118. Voice of White America (members.aol.com/tsaukki/whiteamr.htm)
119. Wake Up or Die (www.wakeupordie.com)
120. WCOTC (http://209.143.158.42)
121. Weisman Publications (www.seek-info.com)
122. Western Imperative Network (www.usaor.net/users/ipm)
123. White Aryan Resistance (www.resist.com)
124. White Camelia Knights of KKK (www.wckkkk.com)
125. White Nationalist News Agency (nna.stormfront.org/)
126. White Power Online Magazine (www.whitepower88.de)
127. Whites Only (www.whitesonly.net)
128. Willis A. Carto (www.willisarto.com)
129. Women.WPWW.Com (women.wpww.com/)
130. World Wide Blasphemy (freedom.gmsociety.org/~god/)
131. Yagdrasil’s Library (www.dcc.net/ygg)
132. Zundelsite (www.lebensraum.org)
MASCULINITY AND JUSTICE: GENERATIONAL CHANGES IN JOHN GRISHAM'S THE CHAMBER

by

Sara Martín
Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona, Spain

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the evolution of masculinity in the Southern states of America across three generations. These three generations are represented in John Grisham’s popular novel The Chamber (1994) by Sam Cayhall, his son Eddie Hall, and his grandson Adam. The Chamber denounces, as is habitual in Grisham’s work, the corruption of the legal and political system in the United States, exposing in this case the cruelty of the death penalty and the wrong political uses white politicians make of it. However, the other main focus of the book is the relationship between Sam, an ex-Klan terrorist sentenced to die for killing two Jewish children in 1967, and his grandson, a lawyer trying to save him from the gas chamber in 1990. This relationship hinges on the suicide of Eddie, who concealed from Adam the existence of Sam and his crimes.

An analysis of the representation of the three generations in The Chamber leads to the conclusion that the main difference between Sam’s patriarchal generation and Adam’s autonomous one is their capability to pass judgement on the previous generation and to opt for change. Sam cannot question the ways of his father, but his son does, which leads him to die. Since neither hatred nor death are a valid solution, Adam is forced, first, to reconstruct his past and, next, choose a moral option that is meant to be representative of the men of his generation. This is marked, above all, by a multiplication of the possibilities in which men can choose to live. Adam chooses working for the reform of the law – for implementing justice – rather than for fatherhood or commitment to a woman. This also shows that changes in masculinity need not be regulated exclusively by inter-gender relationships.

INTRODUCTION

Changes in masculinity are, as is well known, brought about by the intersection of the personal and the political. I consider here this issue through a reading of The Chamber (1994), a popular novel by Southern American writer John Grisham. Popular fiction often fulfills the function of dramatizing in an intuitive, succinct way complex processes that only sociologists fully understand, if at all. This, incidentally, explains its popularity.

Grisham plays today a role quite similar to that of Charles Dickens in the 19th century. Both are hugely popular writers sending out a moral message based on a certainly sentimental treatment of their main characters, adapted to suit the tastes of their respective audiences. They call the readers’ attention towards their disclosure of the legal and economic corruption of their
society, which they read as, basically, moral corruption. More limited in scope than Dickens, Grisham – a former lawyer – obsessively describes, above all, the corruption in the legal system upheld by white American men and the limited chances of resistance against it.

In *The Chamber* this resistance is instrumental in the personal and political changes undergone by two white men, a grandfather sentenced to die and his grandson, a lawyer torn between anger and pity for him. Their relationship also offers an interesting case to argue that generational changes in masculinity can be shaped by choice based on experience and judgment rather than by simple imitation or inevitable conditioning.

*The Chamber* is, above all, an exposure of the cruelty and the moral ambiguity of the death penalty. Grisham’s choice of protagonist is, however, problematic enough. Disregarding more obvious options backed by the reality of death row statistics, Grisham focuses on the ordeal of a Mississippi seventy-year-old white man – former Klansman Sam Cayhall – sentenced to die for causing the death of two little Jewish boys in a Klan bombing in 1967. Grisham denounces the opportunism that leads the ambitious Governor of Mississippi to let Sam be executed for purely political gains that have nothing to do with justice. Sam fights a losing judicial battle in which he is unexpectedly helped by a lost grandson he had never met, the rookie lawyer Adam Hall.

Hegemonic masculinity changes most visibly when new legislation establishes different thresholds of tolerance for male personal and political behavior in relationship both to women and to other men. “The state,” in R. W. Connell’s words “both institutionalizes hegemonic masculinity and expends great energy in controlling it” (1987: 128). It could be argued that this is precisely Sam’s case. Formerly an example of the hegemonic masculinity sanctioned by his rural Southern community, including its law representatives, Sam is sentenced to die for his crimes as much as for the obsolescence of his bigoted political and personal views. His grandson represents, in contrast, an adequate, desirable moral masculinity replacing in the early 1990s the patriarchal hegemony of the grandfather.

It is unclear, though, whether Adam is to be accepted as the representative of a new interracial, inter-gender humanism or as the new hegemonic white man. Susan Jeffords has argued in relation to Alan Parker’s film *Mississippi Burning* (1988), which uses the same historical background as *The Chamber*, that narratives in which the racism of intolerant white men is denounced by liberal white men allow nonetheless white men to align “themselves with a system of law and justice that would ensure both the institution of justice and white men’s continued control of it” (1994: 140). *The Chamber* can indeed be read from this perspective, though Adam’s final choice of employment with a black lawyer working in death penalty litigation suggests his aim is collaboration with other men rather than their subordination.

*The Chamber* narrates simultaneously Sam and Adam’s fight against the gas chamber and their troubled reconstruction of a past they never shared. Beyond state or Klan political terrorism, the factor that most interests Grisham (and Adam) are the unfortunate consequences of Sam’s crimes on the lives of his family, that is, the personal cost implied in political choices. Shattered by the shame he feels when Sam is sentenced to die, Adam’s father chooses suicide.
This desertion, for which Adam blames both Eddie and Sam, leaves him literally stranded in a no man's land. *The Chamber* can be read, thus, as a contemporary morality play in which tragedy arises from the many mis-encounters between fathers and sons across three generations of American men.

Grisham traces an extreme model of transition from the intolerant, patriarchal man of the first half of the 20th century to the moral, tolerant man of the 1990s. His rise and success claims the sacrifice of former models represented by the grandfather who is forced to die by the state and the father who chooses to die rather than risk the danger of repeating the values of the previous generation. On Adam’s shoulders falls the responsibility not only to redress the wrongs of grandfather and father but also those of the state as he also tries to strike a personal balance. A heavy burden, which conditions the choices, he and many men in his generation make and the changes they face.

**THE INEVITABILITY OF WHITE PATRIARCHY: SAM'S GENERATION**

"A wide range of American cultural productions since the mid-1970s," David Savran writes, "have insistently reenacted the contradictory spectacle of white men proclaiming themselves victims while simultaneously menacing – or blowing away – somebody else" (1998: 207). Sam is one of those white men. Within the atrocious legal discourse that Grisham exposes – ineffective as a deterrent of crime, unnecessarily cruel – Sam's punishment is indeed undeserved. Sam is also the victim of the Klan’s harsh codes of masculine loyalty by which he is prevented from naming his accomplice Rollie Wedge, a young sadistic Klucker who actually causes the children's deaths.

Grisham plays, however, very cleverly with his own ambiguous moral position before the death penalty and the issue of Sam’s victimization. He partly exonerates Sam by blaming the sinister Wedge for the crime and although he allows Sam’s daughter, Lee, to claim retribution for the victims through her father’s death, he also allows Sam to express a politically incorrect view of his position. Sam actually considers his conviction an intolerable triumph of the minorities in his country. Formerly a respectable white man, at least to his own eyes and those of his native community, Sam derides the law for having placed him in the position reserved in America to marginalized black criminals who are, according to him, privileged by the system. Sam’s racism is actually increased rather than decreased by his punishment.

*The Chamber* explores simultaneously the corruption of the white man's judicial system and the corruption of white – specifically Southern – masculinity from which Sam's violence arises. Cayhall has killed because in his worldview the respectability of masculinity is measured by the amount of violence a man causes – violence which is read as justice even when children are involved. Likewise, he must die because the state also interprets the violence it inflicts on Sam’s body as justice. Grisham's novel hints that for the moral man to emerge from the patriarchal man, the sins of the latter must be forgiven but not forgotten. It also suggests that he must be sacrificed no matter how unfairly, for even more unfair is the sacrifice of his victims. Grisham preaches a very different message, though, as regards state laws: The men who enforce them for personal gain are neither forgotten nor forgiven for their selfishness. The relationship
between Adam and Sam is thus marked both by their common frustrated efforts at resisting the (immoral) law and by Adam’s educating his initially adamant, unrepentant grandfather into the ethical values that must lead Sam first to feel regret and remorse and, next, to ask for his victims’ forgiveness.

Their trans-generational alliance is only sealed when Sam asks Adam forgiveness for Eddie’s suicide and repudiates the Klan demonstrators marching outside the jail. His final moral pardon by Adam is granted when Sam writes a series of letters of apology to his victims’ relatives because “I have a conscience, not much of one, but it’s there, and the closer I get to death the guiltier I feel about the things I’ve done” (p. 391). Sam has actually felt remorse for years but only Adam – both family and counsel – provides the sympathetic audience he needs. This redemption through accepting guilt is, it must be noted, not the effect of Sam’s punishment by the law or a sudden Christian feeling of regret but the effect of Sam’s assumption of the secular, moral beliefs of his grandson. Moral regeneration rather than the death penalty is what turns the problematic memory of the intolerant patriarchal white man into a suitable example for the younger generations. In exchange, Adam provides Sam with an equivalent feeling of masculine regeneration: “I’ll die a proud man, son,” he tells Adam “because of you” (p. 477).

The story of the family can be described as the history of the troubled transition from the Civil War to the civil rights fight and the rise of the contemporary civil society to which Adam firmly belongs. Adam’s personal quest involves solving twin queries: Why Sam became a Klan terrorist and why his father Eddie didn’t. Lee reveals that the Cayhall men were loyal members of the Klan for four generations. The patrilineal Klan filiations extends back to a rich ancestor, a slave-owner and Civil War veteran in Colonel Nathan Bedford Forrest’s ranks. Sam’s father initiated his four sons into Klan activities, including the lynching of a black man in 1936 in which Sam participated, aged only 15. Sam seems to be a clear case of unquestioned imitation of the father’s violent behavior. His father’s racial hatred resounds in the son’s early crimes – the lynching of another black man, his killing of a black employee in 1950 – and in the brutal revenge against the white men that killed the father. Sam’s violence is sanctioned by the laxity of the law and the other men in his community and this gives him a feeling of invulnerability. After a decade of ordinary family life, the Klan recruits Sam again to take part in the bombing spree triggered by the unrest following the murder in 1964 of three civil rights workers in Mississippi. Real state offices, churches, synagogues, and the office of civil rights defender Marvin Kramer in which the children died are Sam’s targets. Mistried twice by hung all-white juries in trials manipulated by Klan lawyers, Sam walks back home as a free man in 1968.

The pace of historical change forces Sam out of his entrenched white, male haven into jail in 1981. As Grisham writes:

Much had changed in Mississippi since the first two trials. Blacks had registered to vote in record numbers, and these new voters had elected black officials. All-white juries were rare. The state had two black trial judges, two black sheriffs, and black lawyers could be spotted with their white brethren roaming the courthouse hallways. Officially, segregation was over. And many white Mississippians were beginning to look back and wonder what all the fuss was about (p. 20).
In a sense, Sam’s downfall is caused by the younger generation’s integration of the personal and the political. Sam’s prosecutor, David McAllister (born 1952), saw in situ the effects of Sam’s bomb at age 15. Elected District Attorney in 1979, he soon embarks on a personal crusade against Sam, whose conviction he secures when Sam’s former Klan boss betrays him. McAllister is elected Mississippi Governor in 1989, thanks to a Reaganite campaign offering “more jails, longer sentences and an unwavering affinity for death penalty” (p. 50) to his racially mixed electorate, 84% of whom support the death penalty. Sam correctly sees himself as “a political prisoner, sent here by an egomaniac who used me for his own political purposes” (p. 82). McAllister’s hounding of Sam is an example of the replacement of private or family patriarchy by public or social patriarchy described by Jeff Hearn. “Though patriarchies certainly still exist,” Hearn observes, “they cannot be said to do so in any simple or direct way – the power of the individual father is no longer necessary for the continuation of ‘patriarchy’” (Hearn 1992: 6). The state’s violence, allegedly a form of equalitarian justice, is exposed as yet another form of intolerant and intolerable behavior – more legal but certainly not more moral than Sam’s; not less patriarchal, either.

To Adam’s taunting as to whether his hatred of all non-whites is part of his genetic make-up, Sam responds that the way he behaved “was a way of life. It was all I knew” (p. 206). The conclusion that Adam reaches is similar. Looking at the photograph of Sam’s first lynching, Adam is comforted by the thought that 15-year-old Sam cannot be made responsible for that death:

He was just a boy, born and reared in a household where hatred of blacks and others was simply a way of life. How much of it could be blamed on him? Look at those around him, his father, family, friends and neighbors, all probably honest, poor, hardworking people caught for the moment at the end of a cruel ceremony that was commonplace in their society. Sam didn’t have a chance. This was the only world he knew (p. 400).

Adam’s sympathy is the most questionable aspect of The Chamber. This sympathy is necessary for him to make sense of his shattered family life. But, in view of his father’s rejection of Sam and his own tolerance, the inevitability of white patriarchy – for this is what the Klan defended – is a lie; maybe, hopefully, just consolatory nonsense and not a firm belief.

Choice is actually available even to men like Sam. Both Grisham and Adam neglect the insights that a secondary character – Sam’s brother Donnie, born in 1929 – offers into Sam’s behavior. If it was necessary for Sam to behave as he did, his brothers must have been subjected to the same conditioning. Yet gentle Donnie, the only Cayhall that has stood by Sam, is living proof that no man is fully conditioned by his childhood environment. “Eventually,” as Robert Bly writes “a man needs throw off all indoctrination and begin to discover for himself what the father is and what masculinity is” (1992: 25). Initially a Klan member like Sam, Donnie chooses to leave it after his tour of duty in the Korea war, an experience that opens his eyes to other realities beyond Mississippi and his family. For reasons that are not specified, he even leaves Mississippi for North Carolina, as if geographical distance could help free him from his
brothers’ influence. Sam’s lack of roots in his native, poisoned soil appears to be, thus, one of the reasons for his inability to choose change.

In the end, Sam discovers a well of self-pity he had never tapped before, secure as he was in his male emotional shell. In the clearest example of sentimentalism in the novel, grandfather and grandson address the most essential issue:

"I'm sorry you found me like this," he said, wiping his eyes.
"Don't apologize."
"But I have to. I'm sorry I'm not a better grandfather. Look at me," he said, glancing down his legs. "A wretched old man in a red monkey suit. A convicted murderer about to be gassed like an animal. And look at you. A fine young man with a beautiful education and a bright future. Where in the world did I go wrong? What happened to me? I've spent my life hating people, and look at what I have to show for it. You, you don't hate anybody. And look where you're headed. We have the same blood. Why am I here?" (p. 409)

The implicit answer is that Sam was wrongly taught that hatred is an integral part of hegemonic white masculinity. Rather than change his views or his behavior, the opportunistic manipulation of the law and his personal inability to consider making moral choices for change helped entrench him in his position, especially throughout the 1980s. He’s there because he was taught by his father to put his loyalty to the men of the Klan above the loyalty to his own family: The political over the personal, the masculine patriarch over the family man. As Lee argues, Sam would be safe if he had “been home with his family rather than riding around at night with his idiot buddies” (p. 61). Pride in his condition as a white man prevents him from considering the real sources of his hatred of others, hence, of his downfall. Adam helps him redirect his emotions by offering his own achievements as a legitimate motivation for feeling pride as a (white) man, but by then it is too late.

CIVIL RIGHTS AND UNCIVIL MEN: EDDIE’S GENERATION

In The Chamber, the generation of men born in the World War II period is dramatically split as regards the defense of civil rights and the effectiveness of justice. Two sacrificial sons and a terrorist, all of them Southerners, represent this generation. Eddie (1943-1981) chooses death by his own hand out of shame at Sam’s crimes; Marvin Kramer (1939-1971) follows the same path out of frustration at Southern justice’s unwillingness to condemn Sam. Rollie Wedge (born 1945) chooses terrorism. Eddie questions segregation on a personal basis without becoming involved in the civil rights fight. Inaction signifies in Eddie’s case his impotence to resist the hegemonic white masculinity around him rather than conformity. Kramer and Wedge are placed at opposite ends of personal and political commitment: The former is a family man who pays for his political activity with the death of his sons; the latter is a loner for whom violence is legitimate political activity. Not all the white men in Sam’s generation follow the same rules: Donnie doesn’t, nor does Kramer’s father, a Jewish businessman who refuses to involve himself in politics at all. For Eddie’s generation inaction is not really a valid option, which is why he ultimately dies. The definition of proper masculinity is beginning to involve by
the time of his suicide allegiance to the values of justice and equality implied by the civil rights movement, and that causes masculinity to split in multiple, incompatible directions.

Eddie and Marvin Kramer are the sons sacrificed to Sam’s fierce white supremacist beliefs. Both are said to be "different," though Wedge is clearly also different. Both choose death when their expectations of a fair life for all are shattered. Both are, also, the victims of Sam’s (and Rollie’s) violence. Like many patriarchal men confronted by sons who reject them, Sam is confused about his son’s sensitivity and tells Adam that Eddie "was a tender child […] He got it from his mother. He wasn’t a sissy. In fact, he was just as tough as other little boys" (p. 208). Eddie’s mother had little to do with Eddie’s heightened sensitivity. He is actually shocked into a radical rejection of his father’s model of masculinity by Sam’s cold-blooded killing of a black employee in 1950. Joe Lincoln, the father of Eddie’s best friend, was murdered following a quarrel between Eddie and Quince – both 7 – about a misplaced toy. Lee witnessed the scene in horrified silence, something Sam ignores and on which she blames her alcoholism. Despite apologizing to Quince for his father’s barbaric act, Eddie could never get over it.

Sam, however, is not aware of how important the incident was in the lives of Eddie and Lee. He attributes Eddie’s "difference" to other factors. His friendship with Quince – a strange gap in Sam’s racism – led Eddie to question segregation at an early age. “He really suffered for it,” Sam tells Adam “and that made him different. As he got older, he grew even more sympathetic toward the Africans” (p. 208). Sam never questioned his own father’s decision to initiate him in the Klan, but he behaved in quite a different way towards his son. Eddie was told about his father’s Klan filiation as a teenager and his grim revelation only reaffirmed him in his rejection of Sam: “He expected me to change, and I expected him to see the light like all the other white kids his age. It never happened. We drifted apart when he was in high school, then it seems like the civil rights crap started, and there was no hope after that” (p. 209).

Instead of participating in the civil rights movement – Sam explains local whites knew better than that – Eddie leaves home at 18, in 1961, to join the Army. Three years later he brings his wife, Evelyn, and their newly born son, Adam (then still Alan), back home. The young family leaves Mississippi for good in 1967, following Sam’s bombing. “Eddie,” Lee explains “was terrified that if he stayed […] something would happen to him, some mysterious genetic flaw would surface and he’d become another Sam” (p. 247). Eddie chooses to symbolically cut his ties with Sam by rejecting his surname, clipping it to Hall; Alan is renamed Adam. Sam, a free man until 1981, never bothers to track his estranged son and his family. His son’s rejection hurts his patriarchal pride and this prevents him from seeking any kind of reconciliation.

For Adam, the reconciliation with the dead father passes through forcing Sam to acknowledge his guilt in the death of his son. In view of Sam’s predicament, hatred is not an option for Adam; only compassion can heal the emotional wound left by Eddie's violent death. Understanding Sam helps Adam understand Eddie and his profound shame before the deviant hyper-masculinity of the father, which needs expression in "macho" acts of racial attack. The father's hatred of African-Americans and Jews is not tolerated by the son and prevents any
possible intimacy between them. But self-pitying, self-centered Eddie also lacks the resources to build any intimacy with his own son.

David Savran writes that "like their fathers, many young rebels of the 1960s endeavored not only to change the world but if necessary to sacrifice themselves (in certain ways, at least) to effect this change" (1998: 125). Eddie cannot be said to be a rebel in the way other 1960s public men were rebels, but his sacrifice clearly stems from a rebellion against the father. In a very sad sense, his sacrifice does effect a change in Adam’s life, which is partly positive and partly negative. Adam finally grants that Eddie was "a good man, a good father who just had this dark, strange side that flared up occasionally" (p. 212). Adam recalls family life as a state of perpetual divorce between his parents. The mother, Evelyn, gave a certain economic and emotional stability to a fragile family built as a shelter for the depressive father. Eddie was, unlike his own father, an unsteady breadwinner; like him, an uninvolved father. His view of his own son does not take into account how his death can harm him. He even plans his suicide so that Adam will find the body. Eddie’s suicide note expects Adam to keep his head, clean the mess, and protect the women – his mother and sister – from the ghastly sight of Eddie’s dead body. Only 16 years-old at the time, Adam collapses, indeed, and is only partly rescued from what could be a thorough, emotional death by Aunt Lee’s disclosure right after the father’s funeral of the existence of a grandfather.

Marvin Kramer loses in the bombing both his children – only two years older than Adam – and his legs. This is a brutal form of castration, for the killing erases the younger Kramer men, still little children, as Rollie wishes. Kramer’s biography is not much happier than Eddie’s and is also beset by a fundamental disagreement with the father. Kramer is a fourth generation Mississippi Jew belonging to a family of businessmen. His father pays for his son’s Northern education – college at Brandeis, law school at Columbia – but is negatively surprised to realize Marvin has found in the North his real call: The civil rights fight. “Marvin,” Grisham writes at the very beginning of The Chamber “was different” (p. 1). Despite the opposition of his whole family, Kramer devotes most of his office’s resources to registering black voters, filing lawsuits defending civil rights, and funding Freedom Riders. An early arrest is followed by early death threats, culminating in the bombing. It is the sight of a helpless Marvin Kramer rolling on the ground outside the court where Sam has been pronounced a free man that moves Adam to feel the shame of his grandfather’s action. He offers the elder Kramer an apology, asking him to forgive Sam, but the old man can only find relief for the loss of the other men in his family in Sam’s death.

In a sense, Rollie Wedge is the son Sam never had. In 1990 Wedge runs a Nazi training camp in the US. But between 1967, when he flees the US, and the 1980s when he returns, Wedge is involved with terrorist groups in Northern Ireland, Libya, Munich, Belfast, and Lebanon. Wedge, the son of a Louisiana Klansman, becomes a terrorist in 1966 – aged 21 – after dodging the Vietnam draft, traveling to Canada, and returning secretly to the US. His fierceness and lack of moral scruples are enough to terrify Sam into silence for years, a silence he only partly breaks to tell Adam he can’t name Wedge for fear of risking the lives of Adam himself and Lee. Whereas Eddie and Marvin have the capacity to judge the ways of their fathers, and choose accordingly to change, Wedge can be said to continue the supremacist,
masculine politics of his father without questioning them. He actually increases their destructive potential by contributing to the Klan a criminal, bloodthirsty terrorist know-how that surpasses the habitual cruelty of the Klan. His notion of masculinity is that of the unrepentant patriarchal warrior. When he threatens Sam in prison, his orders are clear enough: “You just take it like a man, Sam. Die with dignity” (p. 322). Wedge is infinitely more dangerous than Sam because his criminal activity feeds on hatred that has few visible, public outlets. Sam’s Klan was tolerated by wider sections of the Southern states, but Wedge’s Nazi group – for the Klan in the 1990s is nothing but one among many supremacist groups – marks the limits of absolute intolerance in contemporary society. He, and not Sam, is the threat politicians like McAllister should fight.

THE AUTONOMOUS MAN: ADAM’S GENERATION

Adam's activity and self-confidence make up for his father's passivity and self-victimization, yet his obsession with his grandfather signifies his own obsession for his rootlessness. As he tells Lee, "I have no past because my father conveniently erased it. I want to know about it, Lee. I want to know how bad it really is" (p. 57). Fascinated by American history, Adam can no longer tolerate the gaps in his own history. His brave facing of his monstrous gramps is meant to work as an adult rite of passage for young Adam, coming after the first rite involving his father’s suicide. “The boys in our culture,” Robert Bly writes, “have a continuing need for initiation into male spirit, but old men in general don't offer it” (1992: 13). In Bly's rhetoric, the grandfather is a clear case of the warrior gone to the dark side. It is Adam’s merit that he turns his negative example as a positive warning against hatred. Uncomfortably placed for years at a crossroads between his rage at Eddie's shortcomings as a father and as a man, his need to force Sam to acknowledge his guilt, and the quest for his own elusive root, Adam grows to be an apparently balanced, autonomous man.

The road towards Adam’s autonomous adult self begins with Eddie’s suicide. Apart from the awful shock, the suicide brings suddenly his so-far unknown family in focus. Told repeatedly he had no living family left, Adam regards himself an oddity. Aunt Lee’s revelations about Sam are received "not in shock or anger, but with enormous fascination. […] Perhaps he wasn’t so abnormal after all" (p. 53). This fascination is partly rooted in a morbid, teenage inclination to learn more about the sordid story of the grandfather. The father’s insurance money allows him to attend college at Pepperdine between 1982 and 1986, where he conceives the mad plan of saving his grandfather. He graduates from the University of Michigan Law School in 1989 and chooses to work for Kravitz and Bane, a Jewish, Chicago firm which has been handling Sam’s defense since 1983 as a pro-bono case. Sam dismissed them then, unable to tolerate for any longer the paradox of being defended by Jewish lawyers. As Adam tells the head of the pro-bono section, significantly named Goodman:

Nothing is understandable, Mr. Goodman. I do not understand how or why I’m standing here in this office at this moment. I always wanted to be a pilot, but I went to law school because I felt a vague calling to help society. Someone needed me, and I suppose I felt that someone was my demented grandfather. I had four job offers, and I picked this firm because it had the guts to represent him for free (p. 30).
Adam uses for his own personal ends the workaholic environment and resources of his firm. This is not easy, as he must face the resistance of the old patriarchal guard, represented by Daniel Rosen, who wishes to dismiss him on the grounds of his connection with Sam. His victory, the permission to carry out the case, in which Goodman helps him, signifies the demise of Rosen’s fierce work ethics, identified with Jewishness rather than Protestantism.

Under contemporary capitalism, “work becomes an end in itself […] very much in the way that morality is separated from the rest of our lives. There is always more to be done. We can never really settle, never relax. Self-denial is involved in the very definition of our masculinity” (Seidler 1991: 77). In the early stages of his odyssey, Adam hesitates between this paradoxically selfish workaholic self-denial, which should ensure his early retirement at 40, and devoting his energies to a job morally more rewarding. He finally eschews money in favor of employment with Hez Kerry, an African-American, Yale-educated lawyer who runs the Southern Capital Defense Group, an anti-death penalty quasi-governmental agency. Kerry dares Adam to take the job, arguing “it takes strong moral convictions to fight the system like this” (p. 441). And Adam agrees.

Since Grisham is not given to much psychological introspection, Adam remains a cipher. A few details, though, suggest his masculinity is not defined by his relationship with women. Aged 26 in 1990, when he meets Sam, Adam has no steady girlfriend, neither expectations of having one, or a family. His bachelor lifestyle includes a liking for strip shows, which he prefers watching “sitting in the rear, of course, where no one could see him” (p. 315) and hanging out in “trendy bars looking for lonely, beautiful women” (p. 315). But he shares the company of no woman, excepting Aunt Lee, with whom his rapport is very good. His mother Evelyn – remarried to a wealthy man – is distant; as for her he is, in Adam’s own words, “a painful link to my father and his pathetic family” (p. 56). His relationship with his pretty sister Carmen – a psychology doctoral student at Berkeley – is correct but not especially close, even though, unlike his mother, she supports his quest.

This emotional detachment causes Adam no apparent problem. A really unsettling aspect of his behavior is his repeated, compulsive watching of a video about his grandfather’s crimes that he has himself edited out of news clips assembled throughout his years of research on Sam. Seeing him watch this horror movie – “The Adventures of a Klan Bomber” – again and again sends a chill down the reader's spine. Lee, the only other person who sees the tape, breaks momentarily Adam’s shell, but it is hard to say where his autonomy begins and his isolation ends. Understandably, Adam may have not recovered at all from Eddie’s suicide. He tells Sam he was angry with Eddie both for having killed himself and for having lied to Adam about their family. Adam asks his dead father’s body questions that are left unanswered and motivate his search for the “truth” about the past and his family. He tells Sam he wants to know to “make some sense of it” (p. 95); he thoroughly disagrees when Sam tells him he’s lucky not to have a past.
In a sense, Adam is a miracle of stability. Adam and Carmen are living proof that the horrors of the patriarchal legacy can be overcome. Comparatively, Carmen is better adjusted: She has a steady relationship with a live-in boyfriend, is interested but not obsessed by family. Yet nothing actually explains how and why Adam has grown to be such a well-adjusted, moral young man – if he is at all. Becoming an adult without proper guidance either from men or women, Adam appears to be a miraculous product of a changed environment: He cannot help being compassionate, in the same way his grandfather couldn't help being full of hatred. Only his loneliness betrays a certain unbalance in his mental makeup.

Other factors such as education, the geographical distance from the South, the role of the hard-working mother, and, no doubt, changing morality and legislation must be instrumental in Adam’s stability. Choice rather than change is a key word in this generational transition articulated by changing notions of masculinity. “The hegemonic masculinity of a historical era,” Steve Cohan writes “does not define a proper male sex role for all men to follow so much as it articulates various social relations of power as an issue of gender normality” (1997: 35). Adam’s acceptable level of normality – for normality is always relative, not absolute – conforms to early 1990s patterns supporting the search for autonomy from hegemonic masculinity. In 1987 Connell spoke of the present as “not a culmination but a point of choice” (p. 279). In 1993, Kathleen Gerson concluded that psychoanalytical theories of conditioning – from Freud to Chodorow – do not give an accurate picture of change and choice. “[…] Men,” she wrote, “actively use and make sense of early experiences rather than simply being molded by them” (Gerson 1993: 42). Unexpected circumstances and unanticipated experiences carry an enormous weight in the making of contemporary men. This is not the only prerogative of Adam’s generation, for men like Donnie and Marvin also made choices that separated them from their fathers’ views of masculinity. What is new today is the coexistence of diverse models of masculinity based on active choice. Men, in short, are not changing in one single direction but opting for different models, more or less sanctioned by society.

One of these models is that of the autonomous man, that is to say, the man who does not see his life primarily in terms of commitment to a family, either as breadwinner or involved parent. Gerson refers to the growing numbers of men choosing to remain childless and single as part of a "male revolt;" she fixes the number of these men and the divorced men who have rejected parental duties at around 30% (1993: 11). She is concerned that American culture makes it impossible for men to adjust to a less selfish model, for “American culture idealizes both the good provider and the loner who remains free of obligations to work and family. It is impossible for any one man to live up to these contradictory ideals” (Gerson, 1993: 264). Men like Adam actually hint at another possibility, which may be equally popular among women: The focus on political commitment as personal commitment. Adam’s choices follow the trend announced by David Morgan when he writes “the desire for change on the part of men is more likely to take on an ethical dimension rather than an existential or experimental dimension” (1992: 140). Adam wishes to devote his life to a moral cause of high personal and political significance for him. To his eyes, this is enough to regard himself as a man in full – hopefully also a full human being.
Women like Kathleen Gerson and Lynn Segal are possibly guilty of narrowing down the possibilities of change for men to their interpersonal relations with women. Segal wrote in 1990 “it is quite simply not in men’s interest to change too much, unless women force them to” (p. 41). Gerson is certainly critical, though in a rather subdued way, of men who reject parenthood altogether. Grisham’s novel seemingly argues that change and choice in men’s lives needn’t be conditioned by women’s pressure or men’s selfishness. In Adam’s case, an aunt rather than a love interest plays an important role in his evolution, but this role is limited to her providing him with important information that can help him make his choices, rather than pointing out the road he must take. “Men and gender,” Hearn notes, “are produced in the conflicts and struggles of history and politics” (1992: 13). The Chamber dramatizes one of those conflicts, stressing the role of ethics and morality in the construction of contemporary masculinity beyond the confrontations between men and women.

The fact that no woman plays a major role in Adam’s life might suggest that, as Arthur Brittan observes, “what has changed is not male power as such, but its form, its presentation, its packaging” (1989: 2). This leads us back full circle to Jeffords’ denunciation of films like Mississippi Burning as endorsements of white men’s power. As happens in the case of feminism, the issue that cannot be solved is whether white men like Adam can embrace a genuinely fair stance and surrender a share of their power. Adam’s final choice of employment suggests he’s ready to contribute his power to a fair cause – the elimination of the death penalty – rather than simply to the continuation of white man’s power. Adam, a moral man if there is one, has been made by his family, his society, its laws, and, what is more important, his personal capacity to pass judgment on all of them and make his own, autonomous moral choices. The white man changes positively when he becomes, like Adam, capable of understanding the mistakes made by other men. This requires the ability to seek reconciliation even with those men who were wrong, while still pointing at their guilt and bearing the burden of shame their actions cause. This ability comes only from facing the evils of patriarchy with compassionate open eyes, for which women’s presence is helpful but not strictly necessary.

According to John Grisham, white masculinity is regenerated only through bravely facing the worst aspects of the white man's legacy as Adam does when he meets Sam: By giving the phrase "taking it like a man" a positive meaning. The next step is for Adam to overcome the need to punish himself for other men's misdeeds, as Eddie does. The path for the future is not necessarily committed fatherhood, though that may come, but devoting one’s life to redressing injustice, as Adam literally chooses to do. This might be pure wishful thinking coming from popular fiction with few affinities to reality, but even supposing this were the case, the moral message challenges white men to use their sense of justice to end the injustice sanctioned by the law. Men are not supposed to take justice in their bloodied hands, as Sam did, or to misuse the law, as McAllister does. Men are expected to help change the law for the common good of all. Grisham’s appeal to white men’s sense of justice may be sentimental and populist – but it can also be effective.
ENDNOTES

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1 This film narrates the FBI investigation that unmasked the Klansmen behind the murder of three civil right workers – one black, two whites – that took place in Mississippi in 1964.

2 I am quoting from the Double Day edition (New York, 1994) of The Chamber.

3 For a history of the Klan, see Wade (1987). Forrest was not the founder but the organizer of the Klan as a regional structure in the period 1866-1869. The Cayhalls appear to have been steady supporters of the Klan even in its less active periods.

4 The autonomous man is not the so-called New Man, a wishful-thinking figure bandied about by journalists and popular essayists in the 1990s. The New Man is a strange combination of autonomy and commitment – he is both the perfect bachelor and the perfect father – that seems not to exist in real life.

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The late 1990s saw a slate of books by criminologists focusing on the intersections of popular culture and criminal justice, including Popular Culture, Crime and Justice, a volume edited by Bailey and Hale, Making Trouble: Cultural Constructions of Crime, Deviance and Control, edited by Ferrell and Websdale, Shots in the Mirror: Crime Films and Society by Nicole Rafter, and many others. Each of these relied on content analyses of various crime topics as their main methodology. In contrast, Perlmutter utilizes visual ethnography to address how real police are influenced by media images of their role. Perlmutter spent three and a half years as a participant-observer with the St. Louis Park, Minnesota Police Department, a relatively small force in a relatively crime-free area. He explains why content analyses are inadequate: “Simply reviewing the content of TV cop shows and then producing a checklist of divergences is not in itself a satisfactory approach to the issues. Real cops do not refrain from attempting to mediate reality themselves. When they go on call, they take into account public expectations” (p. xii). It seems, then, that Perlmutter’s intention was to go beyond simple description and to explain the implications of the media deluge for both viewers and police. He did this well.

The book is intended to be used by students, practitioners, and scholars in both criminology and communications. It is built on the premise that, while the average US citizen sees countless hours of mediated police: “We have almost no contact with real live police officers, and, if it occurs, it is usually brief and in some moment of inconvenience and irritation or after a trauma” (p. 28). Thus, we should all be able to learn from the text, as we all “learn” from the media.

Chapter One, “Viewing and Picturing Cops,” describes a theme Perlmutter repeatedly turns to; that police feel that the public, based on their understanding of mediated policing, expect something to always be happening. Perlmutter says: “To some extent, the officer in public is always ‘on’” (p. 10). The officers he worked with were especially concerned that the public would think that they were boring and that they do nothing, “No matter that doing ‘nothing’ was actually something important indeed” (p. 16). This chapter, in essence, offers the reader a glimpse into how the police officers that Perlmutter works with view their “opponents,” the mediated police. In fact, Perlmutter says, they have a “love-hate relationship with their televisial and cinematic counterparts” (p. 13).
Chapter Two, “All the Street’s a Stage,” looks at police behavior through the lens of dramaturgical analysis. The main point stressed is that police officers know they are under constant public scrutiny, not just to perform, but to perform in the ways that mediated police do.

Chapters Three and Four provide overviews of prior literature regarding mediated police. The most useful part of the book comes from an eleven-page section in Chapter Three, where Perlmutter synthesizes his findings with those of other researchers to create a description of mediated cops, streets cops, and the effects of the difference in the way that role is conceived. For instance, Perlmutter describes the level of action for mediated cops as “never a dull moment,” while for streets cops it is “tedium and adrenaline” (p. 41). The effect is that “discordance between the stereotype and the reality creates some embarrassment for street cops when perceived by observers” (p. 42). Regarding the issue of heroes and villains, the media present clearly defined good and evil characters, while the street is characterized by “the good, the bad and the gray” (p. 44). One effect of this is that “everyone in real life seems to conceive of themselves as aggrieved victims” (p. 44).

Chapter Five is devoted to an analysis of the “Front Stage and Back Stage” of policing. The front stage refers to what the public actually sees. This section reinforces the mantra that image is everything, especially to police. Perlmutter relays the story of how he once fell asleep in the police car and was chastised by officers who told him: “It’s pretty embarrassing when people see a cop falling asleep in the cruiser” (p. 67). As Perlmutter notes later “a cop can afford to look mean, brutal, or callous, but not ridiculous” (p. 68).

The back stage involves the “hidden transcripts” of policing – the feelings, attitudes, and assumptions about fellow officers and the job itself, as well as moral judgments about the public and superior officers. In regards to complaints about the job, Perlmutter states: “Complaining is not deviance – literally everybody does it – but it is a strategy of empowerment that may, in the end, serve both the employee and the organization” (p. 75). Those most subject to police ridicule, however, are those dubbed “the asshole” and the families they perceive as inept. “The asshole” describes those who fail to recognize that the police are in charge of their encounters. That parents are clueless is also a commonly held police stereotype. Further, the general public is both criticized and applauded for not knowing their rights. While officers make fun of people who do not know when to call the police and who fail to recognize that criminals lie, they also feel that “if people really knew the law cold, the whole system would grind to a halt” (p. 80). Especially problematic for police are teenagers, and their back stage discussions highlight their contempt for this group, as well as the lack of respect they have noticed in return.

Chapter Six, ”The (Real) Mean World,” describes how cops see themselves as separate from the rest of society, based on their perception that their work is unique. They then begin to develop an “us versus them” mentality, which is reinforced by such symbols as the wearing of uniforms. As Perlmutter notes: “The basic point is that cops believe that when they show up, people look at them and see a cop, not a human being but someone in a uniform” (p. 102). Perlmutter goes on to compare this with the definition of minority status, arguing that cops perceive their own minority status. Perlmutter proceeds to detail how the police feel that they lack the respect of the public: “Contempt of cop is a serious violation of the unwritten laws of
the street” (p. 107). The section ends with an excellent description of the “lies” told by statistics about crime and policing. Cops, like no one else, can understand the weaknesses in official numbers – based on changes in policing agenda that result in over-policing of particular areas, as well as the fact that so little crime enters the official reports based on their own handling of various situations.

Perlmutter ends the book with Chapter Seven, titled “Real Cops and Mediated Cops: Can They Get Along?” Here he explains that the way media affect police, and by logical extension, all of us, is not simplistic. At times police seem to both denounce and support the stereotypes presented in the media, as if they were equal parts wrong and ideal. The final note is an important one, in that Perlmutter asks how much we really want to know about the reality of policing.

This text provides a useful glimpse into what police regularly do on the job, how they perceive their work, the police subculture, crime statistics, and the effect of media portrayals of police. There are several things that are bothersome, however. One is that, at times, Perlmutter seems to become repetitive. For instance, the notion that police feel they are expected to always be in action is an important one, but need not be mentioned in all of the chapters. It is sometimes as if he did not bother to organize the material under the chapter heading he provided, rather just spewing ideas randomly. Another point of criticism is the excessively jargonistic nature of some of the text. While Perlmutter claims to be trying to tell the story in the words of the police officers – a key strength of ethnography – readers often get mired in the language of academe. Additionally, some of the conclusions that he draws do not seem to be based on his observations. For example, as noted above, Perlmutter concludes that complaining in the “back stage” has normative functions, such as empowering the officers, yet readers are apt to question what event or exchange occurred that drove him to this assessment.

The book would be quite helpful to students of policing, as Perlmutter and others make a good case for the importance of including studies of popular culture in the classroom. The jargon may make it difficult for students in introductory courses, however. The utility of the book for practitioners is probably minimal, at best. The most valuable parts are those that allow people who have little knowledge of the actualities of policing a chance to see what it is like, which would clearly not be helpful to those already in the profession. Criminologists interested in the ways that media effect crime, criminality, and the criminal justice system will generally find Policing the Media an interesting departure from the traditional content analysis. It can provide a rich way of engaging students in critically assessing their own “reading” of media, as well as their own assumptions about police and policing.

ENDNOTE

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ABSTRACT

Popular culture and criminal justice intersect vividly in the police dramas Serpico and L.A. Confidential. These films examine, if not mirror, the realities of police culture in the US. This culture is defined by a machismo that has sometimes led to widespread police abuse. This abuse is most clearly seen in the recent Los Angeles Police Department’s Rampart Scandal. In Serpico, L.A. Confidential, and the Rampart Scandal, the themes are identical; there is a corrupt police department and one person in the department, the whistle-blower, who initiates change. This paper will discuss the dynamics of whistle-blowing by examining the characters Frank Serpico in Serpico and Officer Exley in L.A. Confidential. It will use Raphael Perez of the Rampart Scandal as a reference for discussion.

INTRODUCTION

The recent Los Angeles Police Department’s (LAPD) Rampart Scandal and the films Serpico and L.A. Confidential are strikingly similar. Rarely has the intersection of criminal justice and popular culture been so magnified. The LAPD’s Rampart Scandal has unfolded like a sordid Hollywood drama, while in Serpico and L.A. Confidential Hollywood deals with the reality of police corruption, and more specifically, whistle-blowing.

A whistle-blower is often faced with a plethora of ethical dilemmas; the most fundamental dilemma is whether to do the "right thing" or not. These films poignantly capture the multiple organizational variables that inhibit one from doing the right thing within police departments. This paper examines the whistleblowers of each of these police stories.

THE RAMPART SCANDAL

The main character in the Rampart Scandal is Raphael Perez, an LAPD officer for 10 years. He is the whistle-blower who exposed the division’s abuses. In 1999, Perez pled guilty to taking cocaine from an evidence locker. He bargained for a reduced sentence in return for agreeing to tell all to the LAPD and district attorney about the “bad deeds” with which he and other fellow officers had been involved beginning in 1995. After his testimony, it was found that innocent people had been charged with crimes they
had not committed and were sentenced to prison terms. Since then, at least thirty LAPD officers, including four sergeants, have been relieved of duty, suspended, fired, or have quit in connection with the department’s probe. Furthermore, at least sixty-seven convictions have been overturned. Some seventy officers are under investigation for committing crimes, for misconduct, or for covering up such activities (McDermott, 2000).

WHISTLE-BLOWERS

Hollywood’s police dramas have acted as presages about the Rampart Scandal. More specifically, the films Serpico and L.A. Confidential have detailed the widespread corruption that exists in some of our nation’s police departments. A careful examination of these films shows that the corruption of the LAPD in the 1950s, depicted in L.A. Confidential, and the corruption of the New York Police Department in the 1970s, depicted in Serpico, looks the same. In many police scandals there is someone who unveils the corruption. This person, the whistle-blower, will guide the following discussion.

Gordon and Milakovich (1998) state that when an employee makes any disclosure of legal violations, mismanagement, gross waste of funds, abuse of authority, or dangers to public health or safety, whether the disclosure is made within or outside the formal chain of command, the act is known as whistle-blowing (p. 495). President Lincoln’s administration originally enacted the False Claim Act. This law was created to stem military fraud during the Civil War. The original law allowed a whistle-blower to collect a percentage of any settlement that the government collected on a case they exposed.1

Notwithstanding the period of the Civil War, whistle-blowing is a relatively new phenomenon. According to Glazer and Glazer (1989):

Whistle-blowers are a historically new group. No doubt there were earlier workers who exposed practices that would harm the public, as there were thousands of workers who went on strike to improve their own wages and circumstances. But only in the period since the 1960s has there been a continual stream of employees who do not act primarily out of self-interest but concentrate on exposing that which could endanger or defraud the public.

SERPICO AND L.A. CONFIDENTIAL

Serpico and L.A. Confidential offer an interesting backdrop to discuss this phenomenon. Both films tell candid tales of the life of a police officer in a major city. Although these movies were made approximately 25 years apart, the contextual background is similar. The socio-political highlight of each film is that they are tales about two whistle-blowers, Serpico and Officer Exley, and their motivations for doing the right thing. Serpico, played by Al Pacino, is a conscientious police officer who is consistently pressured by his organizational culture to participate in various illicit activities. In L.A. Confidential Guy Pearce plays a police officer named Exley who is in
a similar situation. Unlike Serpico, Exley is driven by selfish ambitions. Nevertheless, both characters learn the stark consequences of whistle-blowing.

The movie *Serpico* is based on a true story about a New York police officer, Frank Serpico, who initiates a courageous crusade to expose the systematic corruption in the New York Police Department. Al Pacino plays Frank Serpico in Sidney Lumet’s film (1973). Lumet captures, in a documentary style, the organizational culture that exists inside many police departments. It shows the New York Police Department culture as colored with machismo, racism, and corruption.

In this film, we see Serpico as an average guy just trying to do his job. He routinely makes decisions that are guided by his conscience not his immediate environment. Serpico is a good cop trapped in a bad situation. Indeed, the ostensible mission of the department, “To Protect and Serve,” lured Serpico to the police department. While Serpico treats the formal mission of the organization with acute seriousness, others abide by the more encompassing informal culture. The formal mission and the informal culture of the police department are at the foundation of Serpico’s perpetual frustration. Chester Barnard wrote in the *Functions of the Executive* that the influence of an organization’s informal culture could not be trivialized. In many cases, the informal culture of an organization is the most significant influence on an employee’s behavior (Barnard, 1938).

Intrinsic controls were used to socialize Serpico. Intrinsic controls are mechanisms put into place as an alternative to formal rules and regulations. The premise here is if an organization succeeds in inculcating conformity to its rules, there will be no need for formal intervention. Intrinsic controls produce conformity without monitoring. Loyalty to an organization is a significant element of intrinsic control. Serpico was easily socialized into the broad context of the police department. Indeed, he was loyal to the ostensible goals of the organization. However, it was the informal culture’s intrinsic controls that he steadfastly resisted (Gortner, Mahler, & Nicholson, 1987).

One of the intriguing qualities of Serpico is that he never compromises his values. His conscientiousness causes him to be ostracized and cast as a deviant. Everyday he faces the torment of not being a team player. In the face of overwhelming pressure to conform, why does Serpico not give in to the weight of the informal culture? According to Glazer and Glazer (1989):

Serpico was able to move ahead because he was already disenchanted and estranged. Unlike other police, he had never "shopped" or taken any small bribes, which could have demoralized him. He never experienced the erosion of his personal values. He never became "bent." Equally important, he remained psychologically and socially distant from his peers. His loyalty remained to his early sense of what a police officer could be and to the formal regulations of his department (p. 55).
Although Serpico is a good person, he is not a pious sanctified do-gooder. He possesses some of the same machismo as the other officers. He is rugged, tough, and temperamental. Serpico, unlike his fellow officers, is bound to his ethics and public morality. Serpico has a genuine concern for the greater good of the public.

According to Denhardt and Grubbs (1999), ethics involves a process by which we clarify right and wrong and act on what we take to be right (p. 452). Morality involves personal practices and activities considered right or wrong and the values those practices reflect (Denhardt & Grubbs, 1999: 453). Public morality goes beyond concern for self, family, and immediate social groups. Serpico’s actions are ethical because he does not step outside of the formal standard operating procedures that have been constructed for his duties. His legal obligation is a source of ethical obligation. As a public servant, he is sworn to uphold and defend the Constitution. Serpico takes this pledge seriously. He shows a compassionate obligation to the law, the nation, and to democracy.

In a way, Serpico desires to be a change agent. He wants to change the organizational culture of his police department. Throughout the film it appears that Serpico is fighting a losing battle; indeed, the institutional structure and organizational culture appear to be too immutable to change, too arrogant to listen, and too impersonal to care. F. William Howton states:

The big organization dehumanizes the individual by turning him into a functionary. In doing so it makes everything possible by creating a new kind of man, one who is morally unbounded in his role as functionary… His ethic of the good soldier: take the order, do the job, do it the best way you know how, because that is your honor, your virtue, your pride-in-work (cited in Stillman, 1995: 460).

In the end, Serpico becomes disappointed and disillusioned after being seemingly set up and shot during a drug raid. He retires on a disability pension and leaves the country.

L.A. Confidential is a police mystery set in Los Angeles in the 1950s. This film noir is based on a book written by James Ellroy. It too is about police corruption. Officer Exley, in L.A. Confidential, complicates our understanding of whistle-blowers. For instance, he pushes away bribes, he’s intolerant of police brutality, and he acts within the formal rules of the organization. His values do not appear to be the same as the others' in the department. Paradoxically, he is the most straitlaced, and at the same time, the most untrustworthy member of the department. He has no allies in the department and he is comfortable with this.

Like Serpico, Exley is estranged and socially distant from his co-workers. Unlike Serpico, he appears to be playing his own game, not for the greatest good for the greatest number, but for himself. One vivid example in the film captures the essence of Exley’s character. The “Bloody Christmas Riots” took place inside of the LAPD jailhouse. Several LAPD officers initiated violence on inmates. Exley, the substitute watch commander this night, fiercely protested this police brutality. During the riots, he was taken away and locked in a cell by two fellow officers. The media reported on the melee.
and an investigation ensued. Exley was the only officer who had no problem “ratting” on his co-workers. During the trial, Exley named names and was immediately promoted.

It is difficult to delineate Exley’s moral fortitude because his inclination for justice is obfuscated by his self-interest. It is clear from the very beginning of the film that Exley is career-minded and self-interested. Herein lies the slippery distinction between morals and ethics. While Exley may not be a morally righteous person, he proves to be ethical. With the one exception of giving into his lustful desires for a call girl, played by Kim Bassinger, Exley consistently distinguishes right from wrong and acts on what is right. However, his morality is dubious because he is motivated by self-interest. This makes him seem less noble than Serpico but perhaps more real.

Towards the conclusion of the film, Exley states that he joined the force with the admirable intention of protecting and serving the people but personal ambitions got in the way. He is referring to his unremitting quest for power and prestige. At this point in the film, Exley reveals to us his shortcomings as a public servant. He reveals to us that although he may have been acting within the boundaries of standard operating procedures, his motives were twisted.

This scene is also the first time we see Exley pause for a moment of introspection. Before this point, Exley seems to execute his tasks without reflection or dissonance. Serpico, on the other hand, goes through intense periods of consternation. He toils over his disconnect with the culture of the department. What makes Serpico the quintessential American hero? Is it his ethics and morals? His love for the law, his seriousness about protecting and serving the public, his unwavering commitment to do the right thing, and his acts of bravery and selflessness are what distance him from us. In a society that adamantly pressures us to conform, where selfishness is conventional, we look up to people like Serpico as heroes because they possess qualities that we espouse in theory but cannot measure up to in practice.

REALITY MEETS HOLLYWOOD

The LAPD’s Rampart Scandal is the real life version of Serpico and L.A. Confidential. In the Rampart Scandal, Raphael Perez and others were driven to corruption by money, racism, and power. In each of the films and this scandal, there is a police culture that is marked by an “us vs. them” mentality. Moral and ethical leadership is weak and minorities are victimized. The focal point of the Rampart Scandal was the LAPD’s anti gang unit known as CRASH (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums).

During the mid-1980s, the Rampart area of Los Angeles experienced a significant increase in violent crimes involving gangs, drugs, and weapons. Consequently, the department created CRASH. Its main purpose was to make the area safer. Police officers were given wide discretion in meeting this objective and they were effective. Gang-related crime in the area fell from 1,171 in 1992 to 464 in 1999, a reduction that
exceeded the citywide decline in violent crime over the same period (Rampart Independent Review Panel, 2000: 1).

These victories, however, came with consequences. By giving police officers the latitude to fight crime by any means necessary, the LAPD created a greater problem, police corruption. Raphael Perez has become the symbol of police corruption run amuck in the LAPD.

Officer Perez possesses only a few things in common with Serpico and Exley. He was a police officer and he exposed police abuses. The similarities stop here. Although Exley possesses a selfishness, his behavior consistently falls within the letter of the law. Perez, however, admitted to hundreds of instances of perjury, fabrication of evidence, and false arrests. He admitted to stealing drugs from police evidence lockers and reselling them on the street. He admitted stealing drugs, guns, and cash from gang members.

Perez appears to be a genuine rogue cop. He possesses no noble or altruistic sense of purpose. There is little that sets him apart from the criminals he pursued. He pled guilty to police abuse and agreed to tell all to the LAPD and district attorney in exchange for a lesser sentence. Unlike Serpico and Exley, Perez’s motives are simple to deconstruct. He was always motivated by the selfishness, a need for money and power, but he is neither ethical nor moral. His behavior makes Serpico and Exley even more intriguing characters.

**CONCLUSION**

What should we have learned from the films *Serpico* and *L.A. Confidential*? Perhaps these films should have taught us that one person can make a difference (however small) and that police abuse and corruption is still a part of American society. They also teach us that whistle-blowing is motivated by a variety of interests. In *Serpico* and *L.A. Confidential*, Hollywood gave us a superb opportunity to examine an important sector of our society. Indeed, it is this intersection of popular culture and reality that is the most intriguing.

**REFERENCES**


ENDNOTE

* Direct correspondence to Professor Renford Reese, California State Polytechnic University at Pomona, Department of Political Science. Professor Reese is the Founder/Director of the Colorful Flags Human Relations Program at California State Polytechnic University, Pomona. He has written several articles and produced a short film on ethnic relations in the US. He has also written extensively on “Leadership in the Los Angeles Police Department.” He has also conducted cultural sensitivity training with various police departments in Southern California.

1 See www.encyclopedia.com/articles/13815.html