

**Introduction to the Special Issue:  
Media Criminology in the Television World**

**By**

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In the television world, crime and justice are central features. Although, inherently inaccurate, the experiences of police, lawyers, private investigators, criminals, and victims are explored in a variety of television shows. The programs are predominately dramas, but also include comedy, reality and science fiction. Some of the shows have inane premises, while others attempt “realistic” depictions of the justice system. Regardless of the type of characters, or stylistic presentation, there is little doubt that with the dawn of each new television season, several new programs that deal with crime and justice always commence. Even the casual television viewer is exposed to the frequent portrayals of crime and justice on television.

There is a long history of crime and justice programs on television. In the 1950s, several popular shows appeared, such as: *The Lone Ranger* (1949-57); *Perry Mason* (1957-66); *The Untouchables* (1959-63); *M-Squad* (1957-60); *Gunsmoke* (1955-75); *Dragnet* (1952-59); *The Life and Legend of Wyatt Earp* (1955-61); *Sergeant Preston of the Yukon* (1955-58); *Have Gun will travel* (1957-63); *Peter Gunn* (1958-61); *Bat Masterson* (1958-61); *Wanted: Dead or Alive* (1958-61); and *Hawaiian Eye* (1959-63) appeared. The focus on frontier justice was notable in this era, with the popularity of Westerns such as *The Lone Ranger*, *Have Gun Will Travel* and long running *Gunsmoke*. Detective based shows and shows that were originally radio programs also were popular during the 1950s. One of the most popular shows was *Perry Mason*, which focused on the exploits of a defense attorney played by Raymond Burr. The trademark of the series was Mason’s cross-examinations, in which his client was always cleared of the crime, while the true culprit was exposed (Brooks & Marsh, 2007).

During the 1960s, popular shows such as: *The Mod Squad* (1968-73); *Hawaii Five-O* (1968-80); *Ironside* (1967-75); *Dragnet* (1967-70); *Mannix* (1967-75); *The F.B.I.* (1965-74); *N.Y.P.D.* (1967-69); *Felony Squad* (1966-69); *The Fugitive* (1963-67); *The Defenders* (1961-65); *Adam 12* (1968-75); *Car 54, Where are you* (1961-63); and *The Andy Griffiths Show* (1960-68) appeared. *Dragnet* a highly popular radio program and television series of the 1940s and 1950s reappeared on television. The ultra straight-laced Sgt. Joe Friday, played by Jack Webb was the central character (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). The show used real life cases in their storylines; however, many viewers would remember the conservative, old-fashioned police officers, within the backdrop of the turbulent sixties, with storylines that focused on hippies, sex and drugs. Middle-class America was strangely fascinated with the show, while many liberals exposed the story as reinforcing mainstream America’s values and attitudes. Today, some view the show as a pseudo comedy because it might be considered “campy”. *Adam 12*, which was created by Webb, also used a similar formula. Interestingly, during the 1960s we see the

emergence of a police show that attempted to attract younger viewers, with a hipper, sexier type of police officer. *The Mod Squad* (the forerunner of *21 Jump Street*) focused on the exploits of three younger undercover officers who were former delinquents. They were the epitome of “cool” and also featured a Female and African American in primary roles, which at the time was quite unusual (Brooks & Marsh, 2007).

The 1970s is considered the zenith of crime and justice shows (Surette, 2007). A multitude of popular shows debuted, such as: *Charlie’s Angels* (1976-81); *Vega\$* (1978-1981); *Barney Miller* (1975-82); *Quincy M.E.* (1976-83); *Barnaby Jones* (1973-80); *Columbo* (1971-78); *The Rockford Files* (1974-80); *Hart to Hart* (1979-84); *CHiPs* (1977-83); *Cannon* (1971-76); *McCloud* (1970-77); *McMillan and Wife* (1971-77); *The Rookies* (1972-77); *The Streets of San Francisco* (1972-77); *Police Story* (1973-1978); *Kojak* (1973-78); *Police Woman* (1974-78); *Baretta* (1975-78); *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-79); and *S.W.A.T.* (1975-76). With the success of the *Mod Squad* in attracting younger viewers, several shows included younger police officers. Popular shows such as *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Rookies*, *Streets of San Francisco* (which featured a young Michael Douglas, as Steve Keller) and *CHiPs* appeared. In addition, several shows were based on the exploits of private detectives, such as *The Rockford Files*, *Hart to Hart*, *Vega\$*. While other shows primary appeal was the personality, style and trademark of the lead characters, such as *Columbo*, *Baretta*, *Kojak*, *Cannon* and *McCloud*. Interestingly Quincy, ME is considered the forerunner of the scientific based shows (such as *CSI*, *Crossing Jordan* etc.) that became prevalent in 2000s, *Quincy*, played by Jack Klugman, was a medical examiner that investigated murder cases and was able to catch the real killer through his medical expertise. We also see one of the first successful police shows with a female lead, *Policewoman* starring Angie Dickenson (Brooks & Marsh, 2007).

During the 1980s, several shows appeared such as: *Simon and Simon* (1981-88); *The Fall Guy* (1981-86); *Magnum P.I.* (1980-88); *Hill Street Blues* (1981-87); *Matt Houston* (1982-85); *Cagney and Lacey* (1982-88); *Remington Steele* (1982-87); *Knight Rider* (1982-86); *T.J. Hooker* (1982-85); *Hardcastle and McCormick* (1983-86); *Hunter* (1984-1991); *Miami Vice* (1984-89); *Murder She Wrote* (1984-1996); *Moonlighting* (1985-89); *Spencer For Hire* (1985-88); *Matlock* (1986-95); *The Equalizer* (1985-89); *L.A. Law* (1986-94); *Jake and the Fatman* (1987-1992); *Wiseguy* (1987-90); *21 Jump Street* (1987-91); *In the Heat of the Night* (1988-94); *America’s Most Wanted* (1988-); *Unsolved Mysteries* (1987-2002); and *COPS* (1989-). Once again, we see the domination of the private detective in television, with popular shows like *Magnum P.I.*, *Simon and Simon*, *Remington Steele* and *Spencer for Hire*. We also see the emergence of more female lead characters, with *Cagney and Lacey* and *Murder She Wrote*. Other shows, although short-lived had serious implications towards American notions of justice. *Hardcastle and McCormick* featured a retired judge (played by Brian Keith) enlisted a former car thief to reinvestigate criminals whose cases were dismissed on technicalities, while *The Equalizer*, featured a private detective who got involved in cases in which the police were not interested (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). Both shows instill the view that the justice system does not work and vigilantism might be a better alternative for victims of crime. It is interesting that these shows appeared during the Reagan era, in which Get Tough Policies and Crime Control were predominating. Finally, arguably the most significant development was the emergence of reality based crime and justice shows. Although, many previous shows were based on real life cases, they were dramatized. With the advent of *America’s Most Wanted*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, and *COPS*, American viewers

were provided with a much different style of crime and justice shows and this style of show remains popular today.

The 1990s brought several shows such as: *Law and Order* (1990-); *The Commish* (1991-1995); *NYPD Blue* (1993-2005); *Walker, Texas Ranger* (1993-2001); *New York Undercover* (1994-1998); *Due South* (1994-1999); *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (1993-2000); *Diagnosis, Murder* (1993-2001); *Nash Bridges* (1996-2001); *Profiler* (1996-2000); *The Practice* (1997-2004); *Martial Law* (1998-2000); *Third Watch* (1999-2005); and *Law and Order: SVU* (1999-). Although some of the shows followed the tried and true format that had been used for years (see *Texas Ranger*, *Due South*, *Martial Law*, *Nash Bridges*, *New York Undercover*, *Diagnosis Murder* etc.), several shows claimed to provide audience members with a more realistic portrayal of the criminal justice system, such as *Third Watch*, *The Practice*, *Homicide: Life on the Streets* and the long running *Law and Order*. Several of the storylines in *Law and Order* are actually adapted from current headlines, while the program is divided into two sections, the police investigation and the prosecution, which was quite unique compared to the majority of crime and justice shows that have aired on television (Eschholz, Mallard, & Flynn, 2004). Although, it was not the first television program to use this formula, the short-lived, yet critically acclaimed *Arrest and Trial* (1963-64) followed the exploits of the police officer (played by Ben Gazzara) during the arrest stage, and the trial stage featured Chuck Connors as a defense attorney (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). Nevertheless, the popularity of *Law and Order* has spawned two spin-offs, *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* and *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. In addition, we also see the beginnings of a wave of shows that employ forensic experts as the lead characters. Although a science fiction show, *Profiler* features actress Ally Walker as the forensic psychologist that solves crimes, while *Crossing Jordan* features Boston medical examiners that solve complex murder cases.

In the 2000s, highly watched shows include: *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* (2000-) *The District* (2000-2004); *Law and Order: Criminal Intent* (2001-); *Crossing Jordan* (2001-07); *24* (2001-); *CSI: Miami* (2002-); *Without a Trace* (2002-); *Cold Case* (2003-); *NCIS* (2003-); *CSI: NY* (2004-); *Numb3rs* (2005-); *Criminal Minds* (2005-); *Prison Break* (2005-); and *Bones* (2005-). Probably, the most important development in this era is the emergence of forensics and science to help catch television criminals. The highly popular *CSI*, has not only entranced viewers but also spawned two spin-offs, several books and video/computer games. Other shows followed the “science” format, such as *Numb3rs*, *Criminal Minds*, and *Bones*. However, we also see emergence of action adventure shows that feature law enforcement as main characters. The extremely fast paced, suspenseful and popular *24* stars Kiefer Sutherland as a counter terrorist agent based in Los Angeles. The show is unique as the hourly episodes are in “real time”. The storyline occurs within the hour and continues for the entire day, 24 episodes representing 24 hours (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). In addition, the show features extreme violence (which is unusual for a network based show) and also involves incidents of torture by law enforcement personnel. However, the torture and extreme tactics used by CTU agents are often justified by the danger that terrorists (nuclear, chemical, and biological attacks etc.) may enact on innocent American citizens. The show has been criticized for its portrayal of Arabs, yet is still a highly popular show among many Americans.

*Prison Break*, which achieved surprising success, features a lead character that commits a crime to intentionally enter prison to help his older brother (who was wrongfully convicted) escape from prison (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). With the exception of *The Fugitive*, the short-lived sitcom *Stir Crazy*, *Arrested Development* (the father is in prison), and the cable show *Oz*, there are virtually no television shows that feature prisoners as the lead characters. Although some of the themes that emerge in *Prison Break* are not unique and are often based in stereotypes that occur in Hollywood films, such as extreme violence, homosexuality, lifers that help school the younger prisoners, racial tensions, brutal guards, and lead characters that are innocent, noble and heroic (Surette, 2007; Bennett, 2006).

Crime and Justice themed shows are not only prominent in network television, but also appear with regularity in Cable networks. Cable networks enjoy considerable success with shows such as *The Sopranos* (1999-2007), *The Wire* (2002- ), *The Shield* (2002-), *Dog the Bounty Hunter* (2004- ), *Oz* (1997-2003), *Dallas SWAT* (2006- ), *The First 48* (2004- ), *Brotherhoods* (2006-) and *Dexter* (2006-). One characteristic of some cable network programming is the ability to “push the boundaries” of traditional television standards: foul language, nudity, explicit violence, drugs, and sex are features that characterize some of the shows. The extremely successful and acclaimed mafia drama *The Sopranos* gripped many viewers with intense violence, suspenseful storylines, captivating dialogue and strong, yet vulnerable characters. *The Sopranos* dealt with a myriad of issues, yet the foci was on the criminality of the lead character, Tony Soprano, aptly played by James Gandolfini. Millions of Americans rooted for Tony, despite the fact that he was a pseudo “bad guy” who was involved in illegal enterprise and murder. Of course, the murder victims were never “good guys”, they were always deserving of their fate. Although, the Sopranos often glamorized the life of mobsters, several of the storylines were based on real-life characters and incidents (Martin, 2007; Hughes, 2005). In addition, several episodes provide interesting and accurate accounts of organized crime activities. For example, stealing of luxury automobiles, Bust Outs, pump and dump schemes, gambling, and extortion are featured somewhat accurately in the show.

Both *The Shield* and *The Wire* feature the exploits of police officers, although the *Shield's* foci is on corrupt, yet heroic Los Angeles detectives, while *The Wire's* foci is concentrated on drug/murder investigations conducted by the Baltimore Police Department. Both shows are critically acclaimed; however, portray the police in very different manners. *The Shield's* lead character Vic Mackey, played by Michael Chiklis is a tough as nails, violent, racist, and corrupt police detective in an elite unit with the LAPD (Brooks & Marsh, 2007). Although corrupt, Mackey is portrayed as very effective and audience members identify him as heroic. Many storylines illustrate the paradox between being a “bad” and “good” cop. Ironically, Chiklis also played the easygoing, somewhat meek police Commissioner in *The Commish*, which is the polar opposite to the brutish, violent Vic Mackey character

*The Wire* has been acclaimed by many in law enforcement as portraying some realistic dimensions of police bureaucracy and politics. *The Wire* was created by a former Baltimore crime reporter, David Simon and was co-written by former Baltimore homicide detective, Ed Burns. Burns had faced bureaucratic hurdles when working on lengthy investigations of violent drug dealers in Baltimore and Simon claims that the drama was loosely based on this dimension (Alvarez, 2004). In the critically acclaimed first season, the show follows the exploits of

Detective Jimmie McNulty, as well as the drug trafficking empire of Avon Barksdale. The show is remarkably devoid of criminal stereotypes, as criminals, drug addicts and police are portrayed in sympathetic manners. The show is often equated with *Hill Streets Blues*, yet has more focus on the criminal aspect, as compared to the simplistic formula of “good versus evil” (Alvarez, 2004).

As this cursory examination illustrates, Crime and Justice Shows have played a major role in both network and cable television. However, there are only a few studies that systematically examine the portrayals within these shows, the social/political implications of these shows, and/or the impact on audiences. With the exception of the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, and *Crime, Media, Culture Online*, there are relatively few outlets for media criminologists to publish their work. A preliminary examination of major journals reveals that media criminology research studies appear very infrequently. The continued growth of media criminology is dependent on providing more outlets for media criminologists. There is a dearth of programs, both historically and contemporary that deal with crime and justice issues. We need more research that deals with not only the depictions, but the social/political repercussions of these shows and the impact that these shows have on audience perceptions of justice.

In this Special Issue of the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*, it is with pleasure that I introduce the following three articles. In the first article, Dawn Cecil provides a fascinating and much needed examination of female offending on four popular crime dramas, *CSI*; *Law & Order*; *Law & Order: CI*; and *Without a Trace*. Cecil finds that female offenders are generally portrayed as non-threatening and deserving of punishment. Female offenders are more likely to be white and are motivated by greed, revenge and love. In addition, Female offenders are linked to male accomplices or are motivated to violence by maternal instincts.

The second article provides an examination of the CSI effect. The CSI effect relates to the popularity of CSI and other programs that portray scientific and forensic evidence-gathering procedures to catch criminals; the “effect” is the rise in expectations of real-life crime victims and jury members. Prosecutors complain that they have to supply more forensic evidence because jurors expect the type of evidence that they see on television. The expression the “CSI effect” has been used predominately in media outlets, yet, at the time of this writing, there have not been academic studies that have examined this effect (Dowler, 2006). To help remedy this lack of research, Thomas Hughes and Megan Magers employed a survey to ask judges about their perceptions of the impact of shows like CSI in their courtrooms. Interestingly, the judges perceived these shows to have a negative (although limited) impact on the administration of courts.

The final article, written by Thomas Fleming scrutinizes the “trajectories” of high profile murder cases within Canadian news. These highly publicized murder cases create fear among the public, reinforce the need for increased police and police resources, demonstrate how victims are selected for news stories and replicate the good/evil dichotomy that is so often used in media forms. This article provides an excellent starting point for future research on ‘trajectories’ of murder. Studies in the United States are especially required, as murder is a media event, especially at the national level. Considering the high volume of murders in the United States, the

faces of murder victims on network news are relatively homogeneous and the stories are the eerily similar.

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