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Criminal Facts: Distorting Reality in Crime Dramas

As Gail prepares to take her dog for a walk on this late December evening, she checks the clock to make sure she is not leaving at the same time as prior walks this week. Next, she makes sure she has her cell phone and heads out, locking the door behind her. Even though Gail is walking within eyesight of her house, she knows from watching several crime shows that it is not safe to leave the door unlocked. She walks down the driveway, making sure the dog heads to the right since they walked to the left last night. Watching crime shows has also taught her that she does not want to exhibit any routine behavior that would make her more susceptible to being a victim. She pulls out her cell phone and calls what she has dubbed her “safety companions,” friends and family members that will “walk” with her. If something happens, her safety companion can phone the police with her location. Tonight, she calls her sister, Lori, who never watches crime dramas and thinks Gail is paranoid. “Stop watching those crime shows,” she tells Gail. “Nothing is going to happen!” Gail just rolls her eyes; clearly Lori does not understand just how violent the world can be.

Gail routinely watches shows such as *CSI*, *Law & Order*, *Cold Case*, *Criminal Minds* and *NCIS* in the evening during prime time hours. Prime time television is the block of scheduled programming with the most viewers and the time period when television networks and local stations reap much of their advertising revenue; in the United States, this time period occurs from 8-10 p.m. in the Eastern and Pacific Time zones and from 7-10 p.m. in the Central and Mountain

Time zones. The Nielsen rating system is used to calculate the total audience rating during these prime viewing hours. According to these ratings, for the time period November 5, 2007 through December 9, 2007, eight crime drama shows regularly appear in the top 20 shows: *CSI*, *CSI: Miami*, *CSI: NY*, *NCIS*, *Criminal Minds*, *Cold Case*, *Law & Order SVU*, and *Without a Trace* (List). Three of these shows, *CSI*, *CSI: Miami* and *Without a Trace* also ranked among the top 10 shows for the entire year of 2006. Interestingly, the rest of the top 10 included four reality shows, one game show, one football game and *Desperate Housewives* (Nielsen). Clearly, when it comes to scripted television programs, crime dramas are a popular viewer choice.

Historically, prime time television has devoted at least one-third of its time to crime and the fascination does not appear to be diminishing (Silver). With three versions of *Law & Order* and three *CSIs*, as well as a slew of new series, crime shows are one of the fastest growing types of prime time programming. Every week millions of viewers, including Gail, tune in to watch the detectives solve the latest case. There is some suggestion that crime as presented by entertainment television, however, differs dramatically from crime as described in official statistics and research reports. A study of the programs *CSI: NY*, *CSI: Miami*, *Law & Order SVU*, and *Criminal Minds* aired in November, 2007 provide data to investigate this phenomenon. This research indicates that although viewers are captivated by the forensic science used to solve crimes and the psychology of criminal behavior, their viewing habits contribute to a distorted **view** of crime and the justice system.

For the majority of viewers, their exposure to crime, violence, and the criminal justice system is obtained largely through the media rather than through personal experience or formal education. As such, cultural theorist George Gerbner's observations that, "People who watch a lot of television are likely to be more influenced by the ways in which the world is framed by

Comment [DF1]: EXCELLENT INTRO AND CLEAR THESIS

television programs than are individuals who watch less, especially regarding topics of which the viewer has little first-hand experience,” (Chandler, para. 4) are very applicable. If viewers have little knowledge of the actual statistics, they are likely to adapt their frame of reference from media; in this case, from crime drama shows.

Comment [DF2]: Excellent point

On the program *Criminal Minds*, the investigative team is comprised of four males and three females; the team on *Law & Order SVU* has four males and two females; on *CSI: NY* there are five males and two females and on *CSI: Miami* there are four males and three females. Of the 27 law enforcement officers on these shows, then, 10 are females and 17 are males; as such, the female characters on these shows represent 37 percent of the investigate teams. In reality, though, the statistics show that only 11.6 percent of law enforcement officers in 2004 were female and 88.4 percent were male (Crime). Even so, this distortion of reality may not be harmful. Instead, this message of counterculture may actually serve as encouragement to women who are considering pursuing a career in law enforcement.

In addition to this distortion, the crime dramas also misrepresent the race of law enforcement officers. Considering the same four television programs and the same 27 characters, five are African-American, two are Latinos, and the remaining 20 are Caucasian. As such, 26 percent of the characters are minorities compared to statistics that show only 18.8 percent of minorities account for all law enforcement personnel. As with the women, the programs over-represent the number of minorities in law enforcement as compared to the actual statistics. Even though both gender and race on these shows does not reflect reality for the field of law enforcement, television networks are under pressure to increase both female and minority presence in prime time television. Indeed, according to one study, “80 percent of all prime time characters are white, 13 percent are black, and all other minority groups account for 3 percent or

less” (Braxton, para. 12). Clearly, this is not an accurate reflection of the current U.S. population. Once again, the distortion apparent in these crime shows is probably not harmful; instead, it likely serves as a model of behavior that encourages minorities to pursue careers in law enforcement. Television is often an enforcer of the status quo, but in these instances it can also be a promoter of **change**.

Comment [DF3]: GOOD PRIMARY & SECONDARY RESEARCH

Not only do these crime drama shows misrepresent the gender and race of law enforcement officials, but they also distort the gender and race of the victims and offenders. In November 2007, the crime drama *Criminal Minds* aired four programs. On the November 7 episode, titled “Identity,” three young, white females were kidnapped, tortured and murdered by gunshot; the offender was a white male. On the November 14 episode, titled “Lucky,” two young, white females were kidnapped, one was killed; her throat was cut and her fingers were cut off. Once again, the offender was a white male. On the November 21 episode, titled “Penelope,” the white female victim is one of the investigators; she is shot at close range by a white male. On the November 28 episode, titled “Birthright,” four young white females are kidnapped, raped and tortured, two of them are killed and, once again, the offender is a white male. Thus, 100 percent of the victims were white females and all but one was kidnapped and in each case, the offender was a white male.

In reality, though, the Bureau of Justice reports that both male and female homicide offenders are more likely to target male victims than female victims. In fact, when the offender is male, the victim is also male 65.3 percent of the time and female only 22.7 percent of the time (Homicide). The Bureau of Justice also reports that 50.9 percent of homicide victims are white and 46.9 percent are black; in addition, 45.8 percent of the offenders are white and 52.2 percent are black. These percentages contrast sharply to those represented on *Criminal Minds* where

females were victims 100 percent of the time and the offenders were white males 100 percent of the time. Yet, the Bureau also reports that 86 percent of white victims are killed by whites, so their representation of intraracial homicide is somewhat accurate. Also, in all of these cases but one, the victims and offenders were strangers. In reality, however, female victims are more likely than male victims to be killed by an intimate or family member (Homicide).

Comment [DF4]: Excellent

These distortions contribute to the fear and apprehension of viewers, especially females, since they are more frequently shown as victims. Like Gail, these viewers tend to be overly cautious and assume that it is not a matter of if a crime will happen to them, but when. According to Gerbner, this sense of insecurity and vulnerability is a dire consequence of watching violence on television. He states, "Our surveys tell us that the more television people watch, the more they are likely to be afraid to go out on the street in their own community, especially at night. They are afraid of strangers and meeting other people. A hallmark of civilization, which is kindness to strangers, has been lost" (Gerbner, para. 7). In truth, homicide is at its lowest rates since the 1960s, and most murders involve arguments and handguns, not the exotic methods detailed on the show (Homicide). All media messages are constructed and, while different people may experience the same media message differently, all types of media have embedded values and points of view and are organized to gain profit or power.

Obviously, crime as presented by entertainment television differs dramatically from crime as described in official statistics and research reports. Comparisons reveal that the media tend to depict violent crimes, which occur least in American society, while neglecting the crimes that occur most, property crimes. On all four researched programs, the investigations centered on violent crimes, such as kidnapping or rape, which resulted in death. Of course, it is important to keep in mind that producers of crime dramas have profit, as well as entertainment, as their

primary purpose. As such, in order to appeal to the entertainment senses of its consumers, crime drama content is likely to focus on unusual or exaggerated images and events. It is not surprising then, that crime drama presentations will be more sensational and hence different from the images of crime presented through government statistics and research reports. Thus, it is somewhat expected that analyses of popular crime dramas such as *CSI*, *Law & Order* and *Criminal Minds* reveal some distortion in presenting crime.

Distorted presentations may also contribute to inaccurate or false beliefs about the justice system. The cultivation theory suggests that watching television may influence viewers' ideas of what everyday life is like or, in this case, what the legal system is like. In fact, a phenomenon dubbed the "CSI Effect" is widely debated among those working in the justice system. This so-called "CSI Effect" has been defined in three different ways. The best-known definition states that *CSI* creates unreasonable expectations on the part of jurors, making it more difficult for prosecutors to obtain convictions (Podlas 433). According to this theory, the quality of real evidence, usually more flawed than its television incarnation, fails to meet jurors' standards. As a result, they are allegedly freeing more defendants. Undoubtedly, viewers have developed unreasonable expectations of actual forensic practitioners.

To be sure, on all of the November programs of both *CSI: NY* and *CSI: Miami*, forensic evidence, not eyewitness accounts, led to the apprehension of every offender. On the *CSIs* and on *Law & Order*, the results from toxicology and DNA testing were received almost instantaneously. In reality, however, one forensics expert stated, "there were roughly 200,000 - 300,000 backlogged DNA samples in U.S. labs" (Rincon, para. 8). Indeed, DNA evidence is expected more and more by jurors, whether it is relevant or not in a given case (Rincon). In addition to DNA evidence, other evidence that is easily produced on these crime dramas is also

Comment [DF5]: Very interesting –I wasn't aware of this; provocative!

difficult to construct. For example, on the *CSI: NY* episode that aired November 28, a 3D computer depiction of the crime scene and bullet trajectory was easily constructed and manipulated to determine the direction of the gunfire. Once again, this is contrary to reality, where such a model would take a specialist several days to construct. Thus, even though the technologies lauded on these programs are found in real crime labs, they often require much more time in real life than on television.

Furthermore, on several episodes of all the programs, virtually all imaginable electronically stored information, from building blueprints to old newspapers, is readily accessible from the investigators' computers. In fact, only 34 percent of sheriff's offices used computers for interagency information sharing (Homicide), which indicates even fewer would have access to the various records easily found by investigators on these television programs.

As the *CSI* audiences come to expect efficient, productive, and scientific excellence from the bureaucratic institutions that control the justice systems, television producers perpetuate the myths that state-of-the-art forensic science technology can, and will solve the most complex, violent, disturbing and dramatic crimes. By constructing episodes around these social anxieties and resolving these issues within the one-hour program, everyday acts get exaggerated as the style becomes just as important as the substance of the show. Because everything is resolved in one-hour segments, television producers must engage their audience through these anxieties by using both dominant and popular ideals.

The second part of the "CSI Effect definition", which runs contrary to the first, refers to the way that *CSI* raises the stature of scientific evidence to virtual infallibility, thus making scientific evidence impenetrable (Podlas 433). Writing in the January 2005 issue of *U.S. Catholic*, ethics professor Patrick McCormick argues that *CSI* promotes a "forensic

fundamentalism” where interpretation and analysis is largely absent and evidence is never incomplete or ambiguous. McCormick sees this as a dangerous disconnect in a world where death sentences are commuted on the basis of faulty evidence and millions of crimes go unreported and unsolved. He suggests that part of the show's appeal lies in a desire for a straightforward moral universe “where the difference between guilt and innocence and right and wrong is a matter of black and white, a question of a negative or positive lab result” (McCormick).”

Perhaps, though, McCormick's argument is the true essence of the “CSI Effect” and its greatest strength. *CSI's* unwavering faith in science goes some way toward quieting the climate of fear that media often promotes. In a historical context, after 9/11, Americans were seeking safety in their communities and in their homes and continue to do. With these fictional victories over brutal crimes, Americans are reassured; science tracks down the criminal every time. On these shows, science is often the answer to both the 'how' and 'why' of murder. Each week suspects are faced with the incontrovertible proof of their misdeeds, which typically leads them to reveal their motivations. The crime is solved on all levels and viewers feel secure in the knowledge that bad things happen for a reason. It is satisfying and reassuring to know that evil has a logical root **cause**.

Comment [DF6]: Excellent points

The final definition of the “CSI Effect” focuses on *CSI's* increasing viewers' interest in forensics and science (Podlas 433). The popularity of these crime dramas has drastically increased the number of people interested in academic training and careers in the forensics field. In fact, universities have seen an increase in students enrolling in forensic science; “Between 1999 and 2002, the number of graduate students studying forensic science jumped from 113 to 190 at George Washington University in Washington” (Rincon, para. 13). This trend does not

just reflect an initial surge, but continues to proliferate. At West Virginia University, forensic professor Max Huock observes, “My university course started with four graduates in 1999; we’re now the largest major on campus with 400 students” (Rincon, para. 19). Even though these crime dramas and *CSI* in particular have triggered an increase in the interest of forensic science as a major for college students, they do not always have a realistic view of the field. The television programs portray the forensic scientist job fast-paced and constantly on the verge of solving a major crime. In reality, the forensic officers rarely participate in interrogations and the lab work is often monotonous and it can take days, sometimes months, to dissect the evidence that will lead them to solve crimes.

Comment [DF7]: Another interesting point

In conclusion, crime dramas obviously distort viewers’ perceptions of reality. This distortion in itself, though, cannot be characterized as totally positive or totally negative. On the one hand, these crime dramas overstate the number of females and minorities in law enforcement. Yet, as television often does, this distortion may serve as an agent of social change. That is, the depiction, no matter how inaccurate, has the potential to encourage females and minorities to pursue a career in a field that is historically dominated by white males. On the other hand, these crime dramas overstate the number of female victims and misrepresent the victim/offender relationship. As a result, viewers, especially females, believe the world is a more dangerous place than statistics demonstrate.

In addition, these crime dramas distort viewers’ and significantly jurors’ expectations regarding forensic science. On these shows the investigators have access to state-of-the-art crime labs where they can quickly analyze evidence. The reality is that few departments have this unlimited access and most crime labs have a backlog of evidence to process. On the positive side, the prevalence of crime shows has created an unprecedented interest in the forensic science

field. Once again, though, distortions prevail; the job of a forensic scientist is over-glamorized and does not reflect the repetitive nature and slow process of real-life lab work.

Television clearly stands as the most popular and most widely used communication medium and there is little debate that television exerts a powerful influence as a source of information about contemporary culture in today's society. This, of course, extends to information about crime as well as other social and cultural aspects. If viewers' exposure to crime occurs mostly through mediated communication such as television, in the form of images and messages, it becomes a primary force in shaping viewers understanding of crime and the justice system. As a result, myths projected by these crime dramas may become ingrained in the knowledge base of viewers such that if they rely heavily on these dramas for information about crime and the justice system, without the influence of other sources, they are likely to acquire erroneous beliefs about both.

Comment [DF8]: Excellent concluding paragraphs and observations

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