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Television News Magazine Crime Stories: A Functionalist Perspective

Maria Elizabeth Grabe

□—*More than a century ago, Emile Durkheim argued that the rituals of processing and punishing crime are functional in constructing a society's morality, teaching its members to abide by certain rules, and promoting cohesion among members by making it public when individuals have violated shared moral values. This content analysis investigates network and syndicated news magazine crime stories for their potential to promote these three social functions. Programs were exhaustively sampled over a six month period (October 1, 1994 to March 31, 1995). Three coders content analyzed 272 hours of television programs. Results indicate patterns in the data set to support the Durkheimian notion that social systems ritualize crime events with functional implications for the maintenance of social order.*

THE injustice and human suffering which result from crime have been well-documented and lamented. Yet, the widespread occurrence of crime persists. Emile Durkheim (1933, 1938, 1951), Kai Erikson (1966), Michel Foucault (1979), and George Herbert Mead (1918) provide a controversial explanation of the persistence and prevalence of crime over the centuries. Unlike the popular belief that crime is a menace that must be obliterated, these scholars argue that crime is an inherent part of a healthy society. Rituals whereby crime is processed and punished function on a number of levels to sustain social structure. Whether there is consensus as to the desirability of the system that is maintained, of course, does not affect the functionality of these rituals in aiding that system's stability.¹

The existence of crime provides society's members with the opportunity to publicly draw and recognize the line between good and evil. Furthermore, crime rituals promote social cohesion. When the criminal is presented as violating the collective sentiments of a society, its members unify in their condemnation of the criminal. Crime, and the punishment thereof, can also be viewed as a form of social control, where potential criminals are scared into submission to society's rules and regulations.

Beyond the mass media's ritualization of the three Durkheimian functions of crime—to construct morality, promote cohesion, and impose social control—this study is concerned with the mass media's functional presentations of demographic relationships between criminals and victims. According to Gerbner et. al (1979), demographic profiles of violent criminals and the portrayed repercussions of their

Maria Elizabeth Grabe is an Assistant Professor in the School of Journalism, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN 47405-6201.

actions often demonstrate power relations to society's members by communicating "who gets away with what against whom" (p. 181). Although Gerbner takes a functionalist view on this construction of a social order, he fundamentally opposes the notion that crime, and the mass mediation thereof, is a "healthy" part of social systems. Instead he views the narratives of crime stories (fictional or non-fictional) as cultivating an oppressing "scary view" of the world which musters support for police power and ultimately aids in maintaining the status quo.

The Study of Narrative Content

The above functional views of crime assume the mass dissemination of rituals and myths surrounding the occurrence of criminal acts by which the immorality of deviant behavior is made known. In other words, crime becomes functional when it is constructed into a narrative and made public. Before the existence of mass media, societies relied on public rituals like torture and executions to demonstrate the notion of justice (Cromer, 1978; Erikson, 1966; Foucault, 1979; Garfinkel, 1956; Rusche and Kirchheimer, 1939; Schattenburg, 1981). In fact, Erikson (1966) links the disappearance of public execution with the development of the newspaper. It is therefore not unreasonable to suspect that contemporary mass media provide the platform for public rituals and communication of myths about crime.

Yet, the study of media content as part of the pursuit to understand social life is often criticized. There are two closely related issues to be addressed here. The first is methodological. The argument goes that the study of artifacts is a descriptive endeavor which

does not produce the high level of insight into human behavior that can be obtained through experiments, surveys, and ethnographies. The artifact is thus assumed to be a secondary product of behavior. But Thomas (1994) questions how "direct" experiments, surveys, and ethnographies capture the process and outcome of peoples' mediated experiences. She reminds us that many societal values and customs depend on artifacts, especially those with narrative dimensions, to exist and be delivered transgenerationally to assure cultural continuity. It is in this sense that the study of artifacts provides insight into the patterned perpetuation of social systems.

The second issue here concerns research paradigms. Carey (1975) distinguishes between the transmission approach and a ritualistic approach to scholarly investigations of mass communication. The ritual view of communication departs from the transmission view in that it "does not see the highest manifestation of communication in the transmission of intelligent information but in the construction and maintenance of an ordered, meaningful cultural world which can serve as a control and container for human action" (Carey, 1975, p. 6). He therefore defines communication as "a symbolic process whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired and transformed" (Carey, 1975, p. 10; see also White, 1981).

Supporting Carey's (1975) general ritualistic view of communication is a body of scholarship on narrative and ritual. Barthes (1972), Levin (1959), and Levi-Strauss (1955) describe rituals and stories as symbolic structures that provide meaning to a society's practices and beliefs and contain practical rules and boundaries for the guidance of

human behavior.² As De Certeau (1988) points out, narratives are instrumental in structuring the conditions of social life.

By studying narratives we acknowledge the possibility that all social processes (including mass communication) cannot be explained or studied in terms of a linear causal model. After all, we can't administer stories to subjects in a laboratory and measure how they affect their views of the world. Nor can we use the laboratory or surveys to determine how a specific social order is perpetuated. The notion that human behavior and cultural reproduction are established through a subtle, continuous, and patterned diffusion of information should be seen as a legitimate avenue of communication inquiry. The purpose of this study is therefore to investigate patterns in the content of crime reporting for their contribution to a diffused societal "common consciousness" (Durkheim, 1933, p. 79) or in Foucault's (1979, p. 297) phrase the "carceral net" that underlies morality, power relations, and order.

Fiction, News, Reality

The bulk of research on televised mediation of crime has focused on fictional portrayals of crime during prime time drama series, daytime soap operas, and music videos. Studies of non-fictional crime stories, such as those appearing on local and network television news, are rare. The few studies that have examined crime-related news have focused mostly on newspapers, not television. As Klapper (1960, p. 139) remarks about non-fictional portrayals of crime and violence, "Real violence is not statistically observed [i.e., through empirical research] and its vehicles, far from being castigated,

are typically commended as educational."³

Although researchers and the television audience may think of fiction and nonfiction as two different mediated worlds, Gerbner (1980) argues that both news and entertainment stories are social constructions. With news stories, portions of human life are selected and put in narrative form to reaffirm the framework of society's learned knowledge. No part of either news or fiction stories is accidental, and according to Gerbner (1980), the function of all stories is ultimately to perpetuate the existing social order. Whether non-fictional and fictional television views of the world differ dramatically from each other is certainly an interesting question. The assumption that these television worlds have different implications for their audiences or that they have different responsibilities and functions is not made here. Research on crime portrayals across all television genres is crucial for a comprehensive assessment of the television world's stories about social life.

The results of this study will, to some extent, be compared with FBI crime statistics. Many authors have pointed out that FBI reports are not the authoritative source on crime (Pandiani, 1978; Whitney, et al., 1989; Wright, 1985; and Signorielli, 1987). Nonetheless, for the purposes of this study, FBI reports provide a convenient comparison point between portions of mediated (television news magazine crime coverage) and non-mediated (FBI crime reports) worlds.

Crime News as Myth and Ritual

Ericson (1991) observes that the mass media and the justice system constitute two institutions jointly responsible for

much of what we learn about the social order. Together they turn events in the physical world into narratives "... of what ought to be, fusing facts with normative commitments, values, and myths" (Ericson, 1991, p. 223). Many scholars have described journalism as a process of mythmaking. Following Carey's (1975) ritual view of communication, news is not information but drama—it does not describe the world, but portrays an arena of dramatic forces and action. Along the same lines Condit (1987), Glasser and Ettema (1989), Ettema and Glasser (1988), Gans (1979), and Knight and Dean (1982) argue that through ritualistic mythmaking, journalism reinscribes and updates society's consensual views on morality by publicly defining what is right and wrong, innocence and guilt. Gans (1979, p. 293) goes so far as to claim that the news media helps to "punish those who deviate from these values."

In order to investigate the pragmatic potential of news to perpetuate the moral order, promote social cohesion, impose social control, and define power relations, it is necessary to uncover the specific functional myths that underlie crime stories. Durkheim (1933, pp. 65–110; 1951, pp. 335–392) argues that the ritualization of crime is a powerful means to draw publicly the line between good and evil, thereby constructing morality. Thus if crime news stories play a part in constructing morality, we could expect them to clearly assign the roles of good and evil to police and criminals and prominently frame crime in terms of the struggle between good and evil. This leads to the first hypothesis:

H1: News stories will frame crime in terms of a struggle between good and

evil and primarily assign police and criminals to these roles.

Durkheim (1933, p. 73–74) and Ericson and Haggerty (1997, p. 448) theorize that criminal violations of public sentiments provoke a shared outrage aimed at the criminal (and not the societal causes of crime) among society's members which indirectly promotes social cohesion and integration. Fictional television crimes are commonly portrayed as resulting from individual causes such as material greed and psychological instability (Barrile, 1980, 1986; Haney & Manzolati, 1981). By ignoring possible structural causes for crime, such as poverty or racism, the criminal is portrayed as society's enemy who deserves shared hate and banishment. If crime news stories play a part in promoting social cohesion we could expect them to promote outrage against criminals by presenting them as irrational villains who are responsible for violating society's moral values. This leads to the second hypothesis:

H2: News stories will present criminals as villains who are personally responsible for violating society's moral values.

Durkheim (1933, pp. 65–110; 1951, pp. 335–392) and Ericson and Haggerty (1997, p. 53, 54 and 360, 361) argue that the processing and punishment of crime provides an opportunity to discourage those who contemplate criminal behavior and intimidate them into submission to society's rules and laws. Dominick (1973) and Estep and Macdonald (1985) reveal that in television fiction, almost without exception, crime doesn't pay. If crime news stories play a part in promoting social control, they will prominently present the idea that crime is not profitable. This leads to the third hypothesis:

H3: News stories will prominently feature the crime does not pay myth.

According to Gerbner et. al (1979) demographic profiles of criminals and their victims have the narrative potential of communicating society's power structure to its members. Research on fictional narratives reveal the marginalization of women and African Americans. Emphasis on African Americans as society's criminals⁴ promotes suspicion and distrust of this race group and when women are routinely featured in fictional crime stories as victims of crime⁵ this gender group's vulnerable social position is reaffirmed. If crime news stories contribute to the perpetuation of hierarchical power relationships we can expect these stories to present women as the victims of crime and African Americans as the criminal villains. This leads to the fourth hypothesis:

H4: News stories will present women as the victims of crime and African Americans as criminals.

Method

This study focuses on news magazine programs because they feature self-contained narrative segments and allow for relatively lengthy and elaborate storytelling compared to the short and fragmented format of stories on local and national newscasts. In recent times scholars have argued that the distinction between the so-called tabloid and traditional approaches to news reporting is disappearing (Bird, 1992; Knight, 1989; Knight & Dean, 1982). For the purpose of this study both tabloid and traditional news magazine programs were included in the investigation. The specific tabloid programs are: "Inside Edition," "A Current Affair," "American Journal," and "Hard Copy." The specific traditional programs are:

"Dateline NBC," "Prime Time Live," "Turning Point," "48 Hours," "Eye to Eye with Connie Chung," "60 Minutes," "Day One," and "20/20."

Instead of a composite month of television programming, the news magazine programs examined in this study were exhaustively sampled over a six month period (October 1, 1994 to March 31, 1995). An additional week of these television broadcasts (April 1-7, 1995) was used in coder training sessions. Half a year of television news magazine programs provided 713 programs and 2,783 individual story segments which amounted to 272 hours of material for the analysis. It is important to use an uninterrupted time period for this study because major crime stories tend to evolve over several weeks and a randomly sampled composite month of television content would only provide fragments of this evolving storytelling process. Although this study is not directly concerned with how crime stories evolve over time, there was concern about creating a sample which could only provide fragmented episodes in a complex, interrelated, and evolving social process. The six month period was long enough for prominent crime stories to develop (e.g., the O. J. Simpson case, Susan Smith's murder of her two infant sons, the Ferguson train massacre trial in New York City, and two skinhead brothers killing their parents and brother).⁶ Such highly publicized crime cases, together with lower profile stories, represent the typical course of crime reporting.

Coding Instrument

Coding was based on what was portrayed, reported, suggested, or implied in the content of the news programs. Two different sampling units were used.

Sampling Unit One: The News Magazine Program

The prevalence of crime was assessed through items pertaining to the number of program segments and crime segments in each news magazine program, as well as the duration of crime segments. Items concerning the positioning of the crime segment within the story line-up provided insight into the prominence of crime in news magazine programs.

Sampling Unit Two: The Crime Segment

The second sampling unit concerned individual crime segments within news magazine programs. A crime story is defined as a program segment which features one or more acts of breaking the law as central to the narrative. Only a subset of all segments, based on this criterion, was coded. Segments identified as "crime stories" by virtue of their focus on crime were analyzed using the portrayed, mentioned, or inferred criminal, victim, and criminal act as three separate recording units. A crime story may have multiple crimes, criminals, and victims, and in such instances, coders coded each criminal, victim, and crime separately. The criminal was identified as the person, group, or organization suggested, suspected, accused, charged, or found guilty of a crime. Three important aspects were considered when coding a criminal. First, the criminal had to be central to the crime narrative. In other words, the criminal had to make a considerable and critical contribution to the construction of the crime narrative. Second, "suspect," "accused," "perpetrator," or "sentenced criminal" were all coded. Once someone was identified as a criminal suspect (lawfully guilty or

not) and presented as such in the story, he/she was included in this investigation. Third, this study also included group and corporate criminality. In such instances each of the identified members of the corporation or group responsible for the crime were separately coded as criminals.

The victim was identified as the person or group which suffered due to criminal actions. Four important aspects were considered when coding a victim. First, as with the criminal, the victim had to be central to the crime narrative. Stories may provide criminals without victims. In such instances only the presented criminal was coded. Second, in cases of group victimization each central victim appearing, inferred, or described was coded separately. Third, when animals were presented as the victims of a crime, the "other" option was coded on all items except those related to the severity of the victimization. Finally, in order for someone to be coded as a victim, he/she had to be a direct or primary victim of the criminal act. When acquaintances or family members of the primary victim were portrayed as secondary victims (e.g., they lost the murdered family member) they were not coded as victims.

The crime is the act committed by the criminal, which establishes a relationship with a victim (except of course in the case of a victimless crime). As with the criminal and victim, each criminal act central to the crime narrative was coded. Presentations of the criminal act was scrutinized for its nature,⁷ motivation,⁸ and the aftermath. The outcome of the crime was examined on a number of different levels. The prevalence of the "crime doesn't pay" myth, the struggle between good and evil, and the portrayed roles of the

criminal, victim, and law enforcement system in the struggle between good and evil were recorded. The coding instrument also assessed the physical and psychological harm done to the victim as a result of the crime.⁹

Criminals and victims were coded for demographic information including gender,¹⁰ race,¹¹ age,¹² class,¹³ occupational status,¹⁴ criminal history of the suspect,¹⁵ and the alleged criminal's guilt or innocence. Two separate items pertained to the presentation of the criminal's guilt and innocence. Both categories had "yes" and "no" options. In other words, the coding instrument allowed for the possibility that in one story both innocence and guilt could have been implied.

The operational definitions of crime, criminal, and victim used in this study are not attempts to describe the "essence" of these constructs. These definitions were merely useful within the parameters of this study, which involves more inclusive treatment of crime portrayals than what is stipulated in criminal justice definitions of crime.

Administration

A week before the coder training started, three coders were provided with the code book. They were asked to read it closely and to identify problems they encountered in the content of the code book. During a practice coding session the coding instrument was applied to program material. A few additional options within variables were added to improve exhaustiveness. The additional week of magazine program content was used as a final pre-test of the coding instrument. Using the Krippendorff (1980) Canonical Matrix Formula, an acceptable level of coder agreement (83%) was established

at the end of the training period. The same formula was used in a post hoc assessment of coder reliability. Ten percent of the six month sample (three weeks) was randomly selected and coded by all three coders. There was 93 percent overall agreement between the three coders.

Results and Discussion

This study's data collection method involved purposeful non-probability sampling. Inferential statistics are therefore not appropriate for data analysis. Simple frequency counts and percentages are used to make comparisons and derive conclusions about patterns in the data set.

Prevalence and Prominence of Crime

The results indicate not only that crime is a staple ingredient of news magazine content, but also that crime narratives are prominently featured within the news magazine program's story line-up. The prevalence of crime can be discerned in terms of two major indicators: Frequency of crime segments within programs and the program time devoted to crime. Approximately 83% of the programs under investigation featured crime stories and 38% of all segments were coded as crime stories (i.e., featured crime as central to their story plots). More than one third, or 38%, of the total duration of the programs under investigation (excluding advertisements, program logos, and anchor dialogue not related to segments) was devoted to crime stories. This left only 62% of news magazine time to feature other major news topics like politics, economics, health, education, and human interest.

Although substantial, one cannot conclude that this emphasis on crime is disproportionate because there is no standard expectation of how much television news content should be devoted to crime. Interestingly though, if one takes the FBI crime reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994) as a standard measure of crime, the U.S. crime rate is at its lowest level in 20 years. In 1992, 25.2 violent crimes occurred per 1,000 people and crime affected 23% of households in America.

It is noteworthy that this study's findings about the prevalence of crime in news magazine programs are remarkably similar to previous (relatively outdated) findings on its prevalence in other media content. For example, Graber (1980) found that more than one third of both NBC local (Chicago area) television newscasts and the "Chicago Tribune" was devoted to crime. Likewise, the crime theme has been found in 40% of all prime time fiction and Saturday morning television programming (Gerbner, 1972). Crime dramas have been found to take up 33% of prime time television programming (Dominick, 1973).

The prominence of crime stories within programs deserves examination. In television news, stories are typically organized in a descending order of importance; the lead story enjoys more prominence than the final segment. Yet, the most controversial and therefore the most promoted stories are often "saved" for the end of a newscast in an attempt to entice viewers to watch the entire program. But, there is reason to argue that the lead story exemplifies the most substantial and socially significant information.¹⁶

The results of this study indicate that when crime was featured, it was with considerable prominence. To be pre-

cise, 73% of programs that featured crime presented the crime story in the lead position. Furthermore, of all programs that featured crime segments, 14.9% presented crime stories as the second story, 7.9% featured crime as the third story, 3.9% featured crime as the fourth story, and 0.3% featured crime as the fifth story. This finding is consistent with Graber's (1980) study of local television newscasts in which she found that 40.8% of crime stories were featured in the local (Chicago area) NBC television news headlines.

The prevalence of crime in television fiction, and to a lesser degree in newspapers, has been documented. This study offers indications that the crime theme is also prevalent and prominent in the nonfiction television news magazine genre. In functionalist terms, for crime to serve social functions, it has to be a prevalent and prominent issue on the social agenda. The fact that crime comprises a considerable portion of news magazine content (despite FBI crime reports that the crime rate is on a noticeable decline) is consistent with Erikson's (1966) argument that in contemporary social life the mass media are now the major platform from where crime is ritualized and disseminated. A few centuries ago public executions provided the setting for these public rituals.

Establishing a Moral Order

The majority of society's members believe in the efficiency, accuracy, and fairness of the criminal justice system. With few exceptions, law enforcement officers are viewed as the protectors of society's members, and the mass media generally reaffirm this notion by portraying the officers of the system as effective and fair in their efforts to guard common morality. In the programs un-

der investigation, law enforcement officers were cast as the good force (78% of cases) fighting against evil criminals in the classic battle between these two forces, confirming Hypothesis 1. The victim was in most cases (91.3%) the helpless good person whom the criminal preyed upon. The criminal took the prominent role as the evil force in 93.5% of cases. By unambiguously assigning police officers to the role of the good force fighting evil, criminals to the role of the evil force, and victims to the role of the helpless prey of evil, clear lines between acceptable and unacceptable behavior are drawn—thereby contributing to constructing society's moral values.

Promoting Social Cohesion

Support for Hypothesis 2 was found on two levels. First, the patterned presentation of criminals as guilty before the criminal justice system has taken its course prematurely vilifies suspects. Most crime reports preceded the criminal's day in court. Most often (in 86.5% of cases) the suspect was arrested, yet in most cases (69.7 percent) the outcome of the criminal justice process after the arrest remained unknown. In only 17.9% of cases the arrested criminal was shown to have been found guilty and in only 14.4% of cases was the criminal sentenced. This did not discourage presentations of the criminal as guilty. More than 95% of the portrayed criminals were presented as guilty (see Table 1). Similar character assassinations of alleged criminals are common in television fiction (Cromer, 1978). Garfinkel (1956) refers to these portrayals as mass mediated degradation ceremonies which publicly deliver a curse upon the criminal and call for all of society to witness the ritual destruction of the deviant character. Ulti-

mately these degradation ceremonies serve to promote social solidarity because the members of a society unify in their outrage against the criminal's violation of their common values. The criminal fulfills the important function of representing the evil force in society's never-ending battle against evil. Therefore, it is noteworthy that news magazine programs were quick to turn suspects into guilty and evil criminals.

Second, the criminal was presented as having sole responsibility for violating society's moral values. From Table 1 it is clear that of all the motivations for crime, psychological instability was featured most often. Most important though is that portrayals of individual causes for crime (such as psychological instability—91%, revenge—55.2%, protection of social status—26%, greed—17%, drug abuse—13%, and avenging justice—3%) overshadowed structural causes of crime such as poverty (1%). Barrile (1986) reports similar emphases on individual causes for crime in television fiction and labels it the "personalized" crime perspective. By virtually ignoring possible structural causes for crime (such as poverty or racism) criminals are portrayed as society's irrational enemies who deserve little sympathy because they presumably act as a result of their own will. In the Durkheimian (1933, p. 73–74) view, these supposedly self-interested acts that violate the common morality of society's members provoke a shared outrage against the criminal (and not societal institutions), promote social cohesion and integration, and ultimately camouflage the need to change the status quo.

It is noteworthy that 97.7% of all crimes were fully explained in terms of the above motivations (i.e., as a result of greed, material desperation, protec-

tion of social status, psychological instability, revenge, alcohol or drug abuse, and avenging justice). The FBI's uniform crime reports provide limited insights into the causes of crime. Yet, there are indications that individual causes of crime play a remarkably small

TABLE 1
PROMOTING SOCIAL COHESION

Variable	Frequency	%
Criminal Arrested		
Yes	1119	86.5
No	166	12.8
Unknown/Other	8	0.7
Criminal Found Guilty?		
Yes	231	17.9
No	162	12.5
Unknown/Other	900	69.7
Criminal Sentenced?		
Yes	186	14.4
No	97	7.5
Unknown/Other	1010	78.1
Implied That the Criminal is Guilty?		
Yes	1238	95.7
No	37	2.9
Unknown/Other	18	1.4
Implied That the Criminal is Innocent?		
Yes	92	7.1
No	1196	92.5
Unknown/Other	5	0.4
Motivation		
Greed	223	17.2
Material Desperation	13	1.0
Protection of Social Status	336	26.0
Psychological Instability	1177	91.0
Romantic/Domestic		
Revenge	714	55.2
Alcohol/Drug Abuse	168	13.0
Avenging Justice	17	1.3
Other motivation	30	2.3

Note. The "unknown" option includes cases in which no suggestion or information related to the categorical issue at hand was provided. The "other" item is an attempt to exhaust options within categories. It comprises cases which could not be fitted into either of the options within categories. The motivations of crime were not coded as mutually exclusive categories. This allowed coders to indicate if more than one of the above motivations were presented as the reason for a criminal act.

role in motivating criminal behavior. Only 6.91% of murders are motivated by greed and 4.93% of murders are committed because of revenge (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994). Nevertheless, the television news magazine world functionally emphasizes individual causes for crime, thereby promoting a view of criminals as self-interested violators of social values.

Imposing Social Control

As Table 2 shows, the vast majority of news magazine crimes (88.6%) were violent. Yet, the FBI's uniform crime reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994) indicate a vastly different ratio between violent and non-violent crime: Only 13.4% of crimes are violent. Yet murder was the most prevalent (71.1%) outcome of the criminal act in the news magazine programs. By contrast, FBI (1994) crime statistics indicate that murder constitutes just 0.16% of all crimes and 1.23% of all violent crimes committed in the United States. Only 10.7% of victims in news magazine programs escaped without any physical injuries (see Table 2). Psychological injury as a result of the crime appeared prominently (93%) in the news stories under investigation.

This disproportionate emphasis on violence and injury reflects what Gerbner (1988) describes as the process of cultivating fear in television viewers. As we become socialized and observe patterned portrayals of violence in the symbolic world of primetime, we make our own calculations about the risk of becoming a victim of crime (Gerbner, 1988). If the members of a society are repeatedly instructed that violence and psychological injury are common outcomes of crime, their understanding of the seriousness of this act is greatly inflated. The drama and

narrative potential of crime stories as powerful lessons about social control, morality, social cohesion and power relations are therefore enhanced.

Social control was further promoted in the content of the programs under investigation by making it clear that crime doesn't pay. This study assessed the prevalence of this crime lesson in two ways. First, the inevitability of a criminal's arrest (86.5% of cases, see Table 1) implies that virtually all criminals are brought into the cold light of justice. The tendency to portray law enforcement efforts as swift, effective,

TABLE 2
IMPOSING SOCIAL CONTROL

Variable	Frequency	%
Crime Type		
Violent	1145	88.6
Weapon Used	871	67.4
Sex	142	11.0
Property	129	10.0
Financial	53	4.1
Physical Harm		
Killed	1102	71.1
Serious Injury	119	7.7
Light Injury	96	6.2
Unharmd	167	10.7
Unknown/Other	66	4.3
Psychological Injury		
Yes	386	93.0
No	29	7.0
Unknown/Other	0	0.0
Suggested That Crime Doesn't Pay?		
Yes	952	73.6
No	86	6.7
Unknown	255	19.7
Suggested That Crime Pays?		
Yes	224	17.3
No	678	52.4
Unknown	391	30.3
Punishment Other Than the Criminal Justice System		
Yes	419	32.4
No	828	64.0
Unknown	46	3.6

and fair is common in television fiction. Knutson (1974, p. 29) argues that in television detective series, police officers are presented as dedicated protectors of morality. Haney and Manzolati (1981) did not find a single instance where the "wrong man" was in custody at the end of television fiction shows. This tendency to portray the police as infallible creates an illusion of certainty and trust in law enforcement (Haney & Manzolati, 1981).

Second, the outcome of 73.6% of all crime stories was coded as presenting the "crime doesn't pay" myth. Even when criminals escaped the long arm of the criminal justice system (32.4% of cases), they faced alternative forms of punishment (i.e., personal tragedy or victimization by another criminal), thereby reaffirming that crime doesn't pay (see Table 2).

Narratives about police efficiency and the unprofitability of crime prominently featured in news magazine crime stories, supporting Hypothesis 3. Public displays of arrests can be interpreted as fear-provoking warnings against criminal pursuits of self-interest. As Durkheim (1933, p. 86), Mead (1918, p. 587), and Foucault (1979, pp. 32-69) argued, they are a way of instilling the paralyzing fear of retribution in the minds of those who contemplate evil.

Reaffirming Power Relations

Hypothesis four was also supported. Criminals in news magazine programs are mostly male (85%), African American (53.3%), adult (68.1%), upper-class (50%), and legitimately employed (66.7%). Considering the race and age of criminals, the FBI's demographic profile for criminals differs noticeably from what was found in the content of the programs under investigation. In

fact, according to uniform crime reports (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994) state prison inmates are most often Caucasian (49.1%) and young adults (45.7%). However, similar to the content of news magazine programs, FBI reports indicate that most criminals are employed (67.3%) and male (94.5%).

The focus on African Americans as the group most likely to commit criminal behavior may contribute to the marginalization of this race group. Indeed, portrayals of employed, upper class, male, African Americans as the criminals (despite their favorably portrayed socio-economic position), echo the stereotypical view of this race as the untamed and primitive savage. Entman (1992) calls these news presentations of African Americans, as a demanding and criminal race, modern racism. It is important to note that African American criminals were also portrayed as the most prominent victimizers of both Caucasians (58%) and people from their own race (67.7%, see Table 3). These portrayals have the potential to reaffirm Caucasian distrust of African Americans. Indeed, it hardly promotes the social integration of this race.

TABLE 3
CROSSTABULATION OF CRIMINAL'S
AND VICTIM'S RACE AND GENDER

Victim	Criminal		
	Caucasian	African American	Latino
Race			
Caucasian	39.2	58.0	2.8
African American	29.7	67.6	2.7
Latino	40.0	10.0	50.0
Gender	Male	Female	
Male	75.2	24.8	
Female	94.9	5.1	

Note. Data presented in percentage.

The demographic profile of the victim differs from that of the criminal in all variables but social class (i.e., Caucasian, 87.9%; female, 53%; young adult, 39.5%; upper-class, 40.6%; and legitimately employed, 36.8%). Unlike what is reported in the news magazine programs under investigation, the FBI crime reports indicate that young black males are most likely to become crime victims (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 1994).

Caucasian, young adult, upper-class, females who are legitimately employed could be viewed as the group most frequently competing with males in the workplace. It is therefore noteworthy that women were presented as most likely to be victims of crime. One can certainly argue that this portrayal serves the existing social order by communicating to aspiring females that they are the group in society most likely to become victims of crime.

Crosstabulations of gender and labor status reveal that working women (58.7%) were more likely than working men (29.40%) to be victimized in the workplace. Furthermore, the group of working women that was portrayed as victims was also more likely to be victimized in the workplace (58.7%) than at home (31.4%). There is reason to argue that these portrayals send the discouraging message to women that the workplace is a dangerous environment.

As Table 3 shows, male criminals were more likely to victimize females (94.9% of female victimizations) than people of their own sex (75.2% of male victimizations). Weapons like knives and guns, as well as the male body itself, were used in the process of victimization. Male criminals (72%) were more likely than female criminals (32.7%) to use weapons during the

crime and men (11.9%) were responsible for more sex crimes than women (3.9%). These prominent portrayals of men using weapons and sex against their female victims is an intimidating reaffirmation of male dominance.

The race variable also produced noteworthy results pertaining to sex crimes, the use of weapons other than the body, and ultimately the communication of power relations. Caucasians (20.6%) and males (11.9%) were most likely to commit sex crimes while African Americans were most likely to be the victims (25.4%) of these crimes. Thus when white males were presented as violent criminals they most often used the physical force of sex to establish their superiority over other races. The body and its sexual imposition on women and African Americans was portrayed as the Caucasian male's means of dominance. On the other hand, human-made weapons provided African American criminals with the means to achieve dominance over their victims. As a group, African American criminals, were most likely to use guns, knives, and other weapons (83.1%) against their victims. These portrayals of the African American as armed and dangerous deepen this group's marginalization and perhaps even perpetuate justification for police brutality against African American offenders.

The relationship between the criminal's gender and the portrayed motivations for the crime offer insight into how society publicly distinguishes between demographic groups. Crosstabulations of the criminal's gender and motivation for crime reveal that female criminals were presented as more irrational than male criminals. In fact, female criminals were more likely than male criminals to be portrayed as com-

mitting crimes because of greed (29.4% vs. 15.6%) and drug or alcohol abuse (86.7% vs. 13.3%). By contrast, the male criminal was motivated by more "rational" needs (i.e., protection of his social status—27.9% vs. 1.8% of females). These portrayals emphasize the view of women as unstable, substance abusing, and pathologically greedy beings. This image of women as greedy is further encouraged by the fact that more female (19%) than male (8.8%) criminals were portrayed as committing property crimes. When a society succeeds in constructing demographic distinctions like these, the inclusion and exclusion of distinct groups in different aspects of social life becomes inevitable.

Conclusion

Although many efforts have been made to study crime in television fiction and newspapers, crime portrayals in television news have, thus far, been neglected. This study's findings contribute to comprehensive knowledge about the mass media's portrayals of crime. The theoretical significance of this study lies in the functionalist perspective of the role that crime occupies within society. Popular condemnations of humankind's long-standing fascination with crime overlook the instructional value of mass mediated crime stories. Indeed, this study found support for the notion that the rituals whereby crime is made public serve social functions. In the Durkheimian tradition, the results of this study suggest that crime stories provide a potential means for negotiating society's morality by drawing clear lines between good and evil. Moreover, by frequently and prominently offering the criminal for public scrutiny and by promoting outrage against the criminal's violation

of the public's common morality, social solidarity and integration may be promoted.

Through the unambiguous communication of the idea that crime doesn't pay, there is tremendous potential for mass mediated social control. In line with cultivation analysts' reasoning, this study also suggests that the construction of crime narratives involves the casting of demographic groups at different levels of the social order, thereby reinscribing hierarchical power relations and re-establishing stereotypes.

African Americans were presented as criminals who cannot be trusted while women were marginalized as helpless victims, particularly those who dare to leave their homes to pursue careers. These messages are strikingly conservative in times when institutionalized support of women and minorities are supposedly correcting inequalities between race and gender groups. In fact, this study's results support the notion that television mass disseminates messages to nurture the survival of the existing social order. □

Notes

¹This study treats television and its portrayal of crime as rituals functional to maintaining social order. The goal is therefore not to argue from a moral stance what is just, fair or objectionable, but merely what is functional to maintaining the social system's order.

²See Himmelstein (1984), Hyman (1955), and Raglan (1955) for a discussion of the interrelationship between myth and ritual.

³In a rare attempt at examining the effects of fiction and nonfiction, Atkins (1983) conducted an experimental study exposing two groups of subjects alternatively to realistic and fictitious television violence in a laboratory setting. He found that realistic news representations of violence had greater impact on aggressiveness than fictional portrayals of violence. The results were, according to Atkins (1983), surprising. This research project is an example of how fiction and non-fiction are perceived as having different effects, functions, and responsibilities.

⁴See Entman (1992), Gomes & Williams (1990), Graber (1984, 1979), Graber (1980), Halloran (1978), Haney & Manzolati (1981), Kerner (1969), and Sheley & Ashkins (1981).

⁵Barrile (1986), Cassata & Skill (1983), Estep & Macdonald (1985), Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, Morgan, & Jackson-Beeck (1979), and Sutherland & Siniawsky (1982).

⁶The six month period under investigation started before the beginning of the O.J. Simpson trial and ended before the end of the trial.

⁷Five categories (Was the crime violent?; Were weapons used?; Was it a sex crime?; Was it a property crime?; and Was it a financial crime?) investigated the nature of the crime. Yes, No, and Unknown were the options within these categories. Gerbner's definition of violence with the exception of self-inflicted violence or natural disaster were used: "An overt expression of physical force with or without a weapon, against others, compelling action against one's will on pain of being hurt or killed or actually killing or hurting."

⁸The motivation for the crime was measured using seven categories (Greed, Desperation for material sustenance, Protect social status, Psychological instability, Revenge, Drug or alcohol abuse, and Avenge justice) with Yes, No, and Unknown options.

⁹The options within the category assessing physical harm as an outcome of victimization included: Killed (Death as a result of injuries inflicted by the criminal); Serious injury (Hospitalization unavoidable as a result of injuries inflicted by the criminal); Light injury (Minor medical attention necessary as a result of injuries inflicted by the criminal); Unharmful (Medical attention not necessary); Unknown or undetermined (Physical harm as a result of injuries inflicted by the criminal cannot be determined); and Other with open ended specification. The category assessing psychological harm included Yes, No, and Unknown options.

¹⁰Options within this category include: Male; Female; Unknown or undetermined; and Other with open ended specification.

¹¹The options within this category were: White (Non-Hispanic. People having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, North Africa or the Middle East); Black (Non-Hispanic. People having origins in any black racial group of Africa); Latino (People of Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central or South American or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race); Asian or Pacific Island (People having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, South East Asia, the Indian Subcontinent, or Pacific Islands); Unknown or undetermined; and Other with open-ended specification.

¹²The options within this category were: Youth (Appears to be under twenty years old); Young adult (Appears to be in the 21–30 year-old age range); Adult (Appears to be in the 31 to 60 year-old age range); Mature adult (Appears to be in the 60+ year-old age range); Unknown or undetermined (Age cannot be determined); and Other with open ended specification.

¹³The options within this category were: Upper (A member of the “old rich,” or the “nouveau riche” successful elite. Members of this class are either financially independent, i.e. have sufficient financial means so that s/he does not need to work, or from the gold-collar occupational level, i.e. an executive or proprietor of large concern or a major professional e.g. celebrities and professional athletes); Middle (Of average comforts and living standards. Not extraordinarily rich. Members of this class are from the white-collar occupational level and typically employed as professionals, i.e. academe, science, law, etc., business managers in middle-management-non-gold collar executives, technicians, i.e. computer programmers, laboratory technicians, or minor professionals, i.e. nurses, school teachers, or salespeople, farmers of medium production, small proprietors); Working (“Just getting along,” or “barely making ends meet.” Members of this class are from the blue-collar occupational level, including semi skilled or unskilled workers, i.e. manual laborers, artisans, and kindred workers); At poverty level (Destitute); Unknown or undetermined (Social class cannot be determined); Other with open-ended specification.

¹⁴Options within this category include: Legitimately employed (Includes part-time employment but not illegal means of income such as prostitution, drug dealing or Mafia-related operations. All income is derived from legitimate occupations); Illegitimately employed (Includes illegal means of income such as prostitution, drug dealing or Mafia-related operations. Income may be derived from a combination of legitimate and illegitimate occupations); Unemployed (No employment. Includes the homeless, welfare recipients or unemployment compensation recipients); Home-maker (Unemployed in the traditional sense but financially supported by a spouse or family member); Unknown or undetermined (If occupational status cannot be determined); and Other with open-ended specification.

¹⁵Two categories (career criminal and occasional criminal) with Yes, No, and Unknown options were used.

¹⁶It must be noted that in the case of “48 Hours” and “Turning Point” programs are typically divided into separate segments, but focus on one central issue. If crime was the focus of these programs, it was coded as located in the lead position. This was the case in eight “48 Hours” and five “Turning Point” programs.

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