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CSI and moral authority: The police and science

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Abstract
Since it first aired in 2000, CSI has consistently been among the top-rated television programs in the United States. In this article, we analyze CSI’s debut season and also include observations about the program today as well as its two spin-offs: CSI:NY and CSI: Miami. We are interested in the cultural meanings conveyed in this very popular forensic crime drama, especially in terms of the moral authority of the police and of science. We consider how CSI uses the conventions of the crime genre to assert the police as a moral authority. We also demonstrate how CSI portrays a sense of forensic realism, and, in so doing, asserts the veracity of science. We conclude with a discussion of what these meanings suggest about the legitimacy of policing and of science.

Key words
moral authority; science; television crime genre

INTRODUCTION

On Friday, 6 October 2000, the pilot episode of CSI: Crime Scene Investigation (CSI) premiered on CBS. It debuted to 17.3 million television viewers and was ranked eighth on Nielsen’s weekly top 10 television programs (Armstrong, 10 October 2000). That debut signaled the beginning of a very long and successful run. Now beginning its seventh season, CSI remains among the top 10, and frequently is the Number 1 program on television (see Nielsen Ratings, 2005; Arthur, 2006). Its popularity has led to two successful spin-off series, CSI:Miami and CSI:NY.

CSI’s consistently high ratings are interesting and ironic. The series foregrounds science and yet many in its audience lack a science background. It is a successful police drama at a time when there are many challenges to the legitimacy of law enforcement. Indeed, some of these challenges actually come from science in the form of DNA evidence. The focus
of our research is to understand how CSI circulates images and proffers cultural meanings that assert the moral authority of the police and science.

Two important institutions – policing and science – stand somewhat discredited today. As a result of continuing revelations about wrongful convictions or the FBI’s failure to process evidence that might have prevented the attacks on September 11, 2001 the police have lost some of the moral authority that is necessary for their legitimacy in a democratic society. And the certainty that science traditionally has been promised as a solution to problems caused by ignorance or disease is lacking today. Science seems to be less certain, even contradictory, for example when knowledgeable scientific experts like the FDA and the National Academy of Sciences disagree about the medical benefits of marijuana (Harris, 2006). In other cases, science seems to be implicated in the problems that threaten us, for instance global warming. The police and science now add to life’s uncertainties and they seem to be at odds with each other. When we read about issues of science and justice, as often as not the story is about an innocent person who is exonerated by DNA evidence after years in prison or on death row. We suggest that in this situation where the moral authority of policing and science seems to be lacking, CSI offers surety and certainty, and that this, in part, is why the program is so successful. Our research focuses on how CSI combines the traditions of the crime genre with a new forensic realism to fuse the police and science with a convergent moral authority.

A skillful combination of old and new programming techniques contributes to CSI’s popularity, but also circulates a series of cultural images about crime. Because they stand at the intersection of crime, media and culture, these forensic programs are a worthy site for analysis. Accordingly, in this article we analyze the content and tactics of CSI’s first season along with new data from its 2006 season and from its two spin-offs, CSI:NY and CSI:Miami.

TELEVISION CRIME DRAMA

According to one well-known formulation, culture consists of the stories we tell ourselves about ourselves (Geertz, 1973). The stories provide an interpretative framework through which we are encouraged to understand various aspects of culture (McCullagh, 2002). This framework draws upon shared symbols and meanings, and uses these cultural elements even as it reinforces them. Such stories, then, both reflect and shape our culture. Today, these stories are told on television. Television circulates the cultural images through which we understand aspects of our social world ranging from our own identities to our concepts of right and wrong (Wilson, 2000; Wittebols, 2004; Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

Since television’s inception, one of its most prevalent genres has been the crime drama (Mawby, 2004). Crime dramas provide interpretative perspectives that shape our thought, in this case about crime (Jewkes, 2004). Crime dramas are morality plays which feature struggles between good and evil, between heroes who stand for moral authority and villains who challenge that authority (Rafter, 2006). The crime genre exhibits stable elements, for example a focus on crime, usually violent crime, and the quest for justice,
but it also reflects social change. Over the past 50 years television crime drama has shifted from story-lines in which private detectives or criminal defense lawyers protected their innocent clients, to programs in which police officers apprehend the guilty (Cavender, 2004). Today, the police are the heroes and lawyers are the villains who impede their quest for justice (Rapping, 2003).

To a significant degree, the frameworks of understanding that the crime genre circulates go unnoticed. There are several reasons for this. First, because the producers of television crime dramas seek to attract a large audience, they tend to offer programs that reflect the cultural beliefs and sentiments about crime shared by the audience (Rapping, 2003). Similarly, crime genre plots are comfortably situated within dominant socio-political ideologies (Cavender, 2004). Finally, crime dramas provide an understanding of crime and criminals that is consistent with the criminological theories that are in vogue (Rafter, 2006). The frameworks of understanding about crime are unnoticed then, because they reflect dominant, taken-for-granted assumptions, but they, in turn, perpetuate those assumptions and, in so doing, perpetuate cultural views about crime and criminals. The crime genre also circulates cultural images of gender. These images go largely unnoticed because they also conform to cultural assumptions (Roberts and Inderman, 2005). These cultural ideals about gender influence notions of heroism (Rafter, 2006). In the earlier crime dramas, the hero was a man, usually macho, and likely to be an iconoclastic loner. Thus, gendered identity, the nature of work, and the hero's moral authority were stitched nicely into the narratives of television crime dramas. But times change and so do the narratives. Today, women are featured more in crime dramas, and notions of the ideal cop focus less on macho displays of strength and more on technical competence, what Messerschmidt (1993) calls *techno-masculinity*. The hero is less likely to be a loner and more likely to work in the police organization. These genre changes reflect larger cultural changes such as changes in the nature of masculinity (Messerschmidt, 1993), what it means to be a hero (Cavender, 1999), or the fact that there are more women in the criminal justice workplace (Martin and Jurik, 2006).

Similarly, the crime genre circulates shifting representations of race. Years ago, the genre often was racist: black characters, for example, were colorful ‘extras’ or menacing figures, but, in either case, were portrayed as ‘the other’ and juxtaposed against the usually white protagonist. The situation has changed today, especially on television. When black characters appear, they are more likely to be depicted as members of a legitimate profession like police officers than as a criminal (Hunt, 2005). However, the nature of the representation remains problematic. In what Gray (2005) calls an assimilationist style of presentation, black characters typically are in a largely white world where race is not a concern.

The shift toward more dramas about the police organization entails other changes in the crime genre. The narratives in the contemporary dramas not only deal with crime and the efforts to capture the criminal, they also include more details about the police sub-culture and about the personal lives of the police (Wittebols, 2004). These personal lives may be portrayed as home life (McLaughlin, 2005); at other times, the members of the police organization are portrayed as a ‘police family’ (Joyrich, 1996: 48–9). These
narratives often have a melodramatic quality, complete with plots that are motivated by the characters' personal backstories (Mittell, 2004). Stories that utilize these plot devices, for example personal involvement or police family, make the characters seem like 'real people', which attracts an audience but also reinforces the cultural meanings that are conveyed through the characters (Wittebols, 2004; also see Jermyn, 2003).

Notwithstanding its melodramatic nature, contemporary crime drama is linked with crime news and reality television; indeed, crime fact and crime fiction blur on television in representing the spectacle of crime (Altheide, 2002; Jewkes, 2004). Crime news, reality programs like America's Most Wanted, and crime drama all emphasize violent crime (Cavender et al., 1999; Chadee and Ditton, 2005; Roberts and Inderman, 2005). Their presentations are couched in notions of good and evil, and these binary opposites act as emotional, moralistic hooks that draw an audience for news or drama (Jewkes, 2005; McLaughlin, 2005; Roberts and Inderman, 2005). Television's various depictions of crime weave together realism and melodrama. The result is a forensic style of journalism that dwells on the minutiae of the crime scene (Websdale and Alvarez, 1998) and the forensic realism of television crime dramas like CSI. These factual and fictional depictions of crime are compelling because they offer mutually validating cultural images of crime and the police.

In our analysis of CSI, we adopt the perspective of cultural criminology which sees the media portrayal of crime and the efforts to solve it as entertaining (Ferrell and Websdale, 1999), but which works through a symbolism that reflects a series of cultural meanings, in this case, about crime, policing, and science. We argue that CSI provides an interpretative framework for understanding the moral authority of the police and of science. After a brief synopsis of the program and a description of our methodology, we turn to our analysis.

**CSI SYNOPSIS**

Most episodes open with a shot of the Las Vegas strip, which identifies and locates the upcoming crime scenarios within a landscape that is familiar to the television audience. The camera then zooms in and travels across Las Vegas to what will be the opening scene of the episode. Then, opening credits roll over stock shots of the CSI cast in action: Gil Grissom, the head of the CSI unit, and investigators Catherine Willows, Sara Sidle, Warrick Brown, and Nick Stokes. There are similar establishing shots at the opening of CSI:NY and CSI:Miami.

During the program, the CSI team is depicted examining crime scenes, securing evidence, conducting lab experiments, interviewing witnesses and suspects, and, ultimately, using forensic science to solve crimes. In a week's episode the CSI team solves several cases, controls the threat to society that crime occasions, and brings closure to victims. This gives each episode an interesting flavor of crime, melodrama, and the seeming authenticity of science. This format is repeated in the two spin-off series.
METHODOLOGY

To understand more about the cultural meanings of the police and science as conveyed in CSI, we conducted a content analysis of its first season. We wanted to consider that season in close detail because CSI’s initial popularity ushered in an era of television forensic crime drama. Today, CSI, its reruns, and its two spin-offs air five nights a week in our television market. We updated the original data with observations of eight episodes from the 2006 season: three CSI episodes, three CSI:NY episodes, and two CSI:Miami episodes. They were the first eight episodes to air (between 22 February and 6 April 2006) after our decision to update the data from the first season.

CSI’s first season was available in a DVD compilation. We watched and coded the 23 episodes which originally aired between 6 October 2000 and 17 May 2001. Our referencing system begins with the number 100, the pilot episode, and continues consecutively through the episodes as they appear in the DVD compilation. Initially, we watched four episodes, and, based upon this preview, formulated a code sheet.

The code sheet was organized around three aspects of CSI: (1) crime statistics, for example types of offenses and demographic details about offenders and victims; (2) crime genre, for example elements typical of the genre such as the nature of plot development (such as personal involvement narratives); and (3) forensic science, that is, how CSI employs dialogue, narrative, or other programming features to present science. Our interest here is not the accuracy of presentation but rather in how CSI dramatically constructs a sense of science and interweaves police themes with representations of science in culturally significant ways.

With the eight current episodes, our observations are provided as qualitative, thematic comparisons with the first season rather than the quantitative coding that we initially employed. We were interested in how CSI (2006), CSI:NY and CSI:Miami were similar to, or differed from, the programs in that initial season. We taped the episodes, and our referencing system for them begins with number 200.

We present our analysis in three sections. The first section addresses how CSI relies on the conventions of television’s crime genre and presents the police as a moral authority. In the second section, we consider how CSI evokes a sense of science and how it rehabilitates science such that it stands as a moral authority. In the third section, we show how its combination of melodrama and realism converge with police themes to enhance the cultural meanings that CSI conveys.

ANALYSIS

The television crime genre

The team treats me like family. (Episode 202)

CSI’s focus on forensics makes it unique, but the success of the program and its spin-offs also reflects the long-term popularity of the crime genre. The programs exemplify both
the stability and the change that are common to the genre. These features are central to the cultural meanings that the program circulates, especially that of the police as a moral authority.

Among the genre’s more stable features is the emphasis on violent crime. Our coding reveals that 72 percent of the crimes depicted during *CSI*’s first season were violent crimes; 64 percent of the crimes involved murder. Although these are the type of crimes that would involve forensic investigations, the focus on murder is a crime genre staple. Murder was prominent in *CSI*’s current season and in the two spin-off series. Murder serves as an emotional hook in the crime genre: it entails the loss of a life, which in itself is important, and it symbolizes a threat to the social order (see Wilson, 2000).

*CSI* employs other emotional hooks as well. These include the pain of loss to a victim’s family. In Episode 111, Catherine cries because, as a mother, she shares the grief of another mother who must identify her dead son. This episode demonstrates a frequent pattern in the first season: emotional hooks are constructed around personal involvement narratives. Catherine has an emotional connection on cases that involve parents or victimized children. The spin-offs also employ this technique. *CSI:Miami*’s lead character, Horatio, befriends a boy whose dad murdered his mother; Horatio suffered a similar fate as a boy (Episode 205). These narrative devices circulate cultural meanings that are common to the crime genre, for example, crime as a threat to ourselves, to our families, and to fundamental moral values (Rapping, 2003). But, they also create characters with whom the audience can identify.

*CSI* also circulates images of gender. These images reflect cultural changes but they also perpetuate the notion of the investigators as ‘the good guys’ and of the police as a moral authority. During *CSI*’s first season, Gil Grissom is depicted as a father figure who heads the unit. He demonstrates a vast amount of forensic knowledge and offers sage advice to his younger subordinates. William Peterson who plays Gil was the series’ best known actor during that first season. This cemented his status as the lead character, and also reinforced the gendered images: he is a man and he is the boss (see Cavender, 1999). The spin-offs also have well-known male actors in lead roles: David Caruso (formerly of *NYPD: Blue*) in *CSI:Miami* and Gary Sinese in *CSI:NY*. These men display a techno-masculinity (see Messerschmidt, 1993) that both updates the portrayal of masculinity and reaffirms the notion of men as heroes (Rafter, 2006).

As women have increased their presence in the criminal justice workplace, they appear more frequently in crime dramas like *CSI*. *CSI*’s female characters have essentially the same duties and abilities as their male counterparts. This depiction persists across the episodes in our analysis. A female investigator adeptly uses a jack hammer to open a chimney where a body is hidden, demonstrates agility while working on a roof, and is shown to be competent in the lab (Episode 204). In a series that foregrounds competency in science, intelligence is as important as physical strength. Sometimes, however, these programs reaffirm extant stereotypes about women. A woman may supply the key element that solves a crime, but does so with ‘special women’s insights’. An investigator who had been a victim of domestic violence realizes that such abuse is important in a case, and she mobilizes a secret network of female victims to discover key facts (*CSI:Miami*, Episode 205). *CSI* and its spin-offs are not sexist, but in their presentations of who is in charge and in their portrayal...
of women investigators, they reinforce some notions of patriarchy, for example, men are the boss and women are stereotypically feminine (see Joyrich, 1996).

*CSI* is one of the ten most popular programs among African-American viewers (Hunt, 2005). During the initial season, one of the five investigators is an African-American man. Only occasionally, however, is race a relevant plot issue (see Episode 103). For the most part, *CSI* represents race in the assimilationist style (Gray, 2005), that is, Warrick, the African-American character, exists in a white world and racial issues are rare in the plots.

In the past, a tension between a protagonist and others, even other police agencies, was a standard plot device. It set the protagonist off from others and established his (usually a man's) moral authority. *CSI* employed this plot device during its first season. It served to establish the forensic investigators as unique, as different from other police (Episode 100). We saw less of this plot device in the current season or with the spin-offs. Perhaps the series writers felt that, after many successful seasons, such tensions were no longer needed to demonstrate the uniqueness of the forensic team. *CSI* makes this point when a reporter asks an investigator, formerly in forensics but now a detective, ‘Which side of the fence do you prefer’? She answers, ‘It's the same side’ (Episode 207). Forensic science blends with policing to promote the legitimacy of both spheres.

Tensions still occur but they are more like disagreements among friends or family members. In a *CSI: Miami* episode, two investigators argue about whether it was a mistake for a colleague to put up posters that call attention to a pedophile. Later, they argue about the appropriate sentence of a man who killed the pedophile. These disagreements reflect the ‘police family’ dimension of the programs. The characters are respectful of each other, and, at the episode's end, agree to continue the discussion over a beer after work. When the investigator who made the posters is offered a reassignment because her actions have possibly hurt her career, she declines with the statement that opened this section: ‘The team treats me like family’ (Episode 202).

The police family device may resonate with the audience because it normalizes the characters who are like our own families, but it also circulates an image of the police as a moral authority. Across these programs, the forensic units are portrayed as smooth-running organizations. The investigators work together as a team, and, as a result, they usually solve the case. Indeed, in only four episodes during *CSI*’s first season do the investigators fail to apprehend the criminal, and in two of these (Episodes 103 and 109) they have an idea about the criminals’ identity but not enough information for an arrest. *CSI* circulates a set of cultural meanings about the police: they are competent, they are a team, and they are a moral authority that stands against social disorder (see Wilson, 2000).

*CSI*’s villains also circulate cultural meanings. Occasionally criminals are sympathetic characters. In Episode 204, a father, bereft because the police never found his missing daughter, undertakes a form of vigilante justice against the man he suspects of murdering his daughter. Catherine sympathizes with the father’s grief. More often however, *CSI*’s villains are unsympathetic characters who lack moral values. First, they are usually murderers. In the current *CSI* season and in the spin-offs the criminals rarely show remorse for their crimes. Some even blame the victim. An abusive ex-husband who murders his wife berates her for having an empty gun and being unable to defend herself against him (*CSI: Miami*, Episode 205). In the eight current programs, many witnesses are unwilling to assist the
police. This may be a plot device that is designed to misdirect the audience’s suspicions, although the witnesses seem to be nasty characters who rely on a twisted sense of the law to avoid civic responsibility. Indeed, law is portrayed as being problematic in some episodes. In the vigilante justice case, Catherine apologizes to the bereaved father because the law failed him and he had to take matters into his own hands (Episode 204). And if the law is problematic, lawyers are worse. The detectives worry that an ‘aggressive attorney’ will file a civil suit against them (Episode 202) or file motions to exclude incriminating evidence they have uncovered (Episode 204). The cultural meanings are clear. CSI, like the crime genre generally, reinforces stereotypes about who is and who is not deserving of our moral sympathy (Rapping, 2003; Jewkes, 2004).

These genre elements, both traditional and contemporary, are standard features in CSI’s first season, its current season, and in its spin-offs. At the same time, science sells these programs. Therefore, it is essential that they construct a sense of science that appears to be accurate and decisive, thus convincing viewers of the show’s forensic realism.

CSI’s forensic science

King Solomon didn’t have a DNA lab. (Episode 201)

Genres are identified by, among other markers, iconographic signs and symbols which include settings, costumes, and props. CSI exhibits an iconography which is marked by the accoutrement of science. These accoutrement include markers such as ‘scientific’ dress and language, and importantly, narrative and cinematographic techniques that make a claim of scientific verisimilitude. These markers separate CSI from other television crime genre dramas but also circulate a series of cultural meanings which suggest that science solves problems. The accuracy of the scientific equipment and techniques is less important than the meanings about science that CSI conveys: the program essentially rehabilitates science by making it appear less equivocal, less contradictory. Science stands for truth on CSI, truth in a deeper philosophical sense, and in terms of the case at hand, that is, proving who is the criminal. But, because this is television, science must also be entertaining and accessible. The programs in our updated sample are consistent in their treatment of science.

Iconography and accoutrement CSI characters look the part of forensic investigators at the crime scene and in the crime lab. At a crime scene, they display the markers of the police such as identification badges, but they also wear clothing which visually marks their special status such as jackets and caps labeled ‘forensics’. Gloves and booties complete the crime scene ensemble. As befitting scientists, in the crime lab characters wear lab coats, smocks or lab aprons.

The characters use specialized equipment which validates their scientific status. Crime scene equipment ranges from adhesives and plasters to lift finger and footprints, to chemicals like luminol which, when illuminated with a special blue light, causes invisible blood traces to glow (Episodes 110 and 120). In a CSI:NY episode (203), they use a plastic tent which they inflate with a special gas to reveal fingerprints on a corpse. The crime
laboratory set is stocked with microscopes, beakers, and test tube trays which are designed to lend credibility to CSI’s forensic science.

As the characters use this specialized scientific equipment, they explain its purposes. This dialogue acts as a primer that helps to make science accessible for the audience. The use of scientific jargon also makes the characters seem to be knowledgeable forensic specialists. Their language covers a vast array of scientific specializations, including forensic medicine, ballistics, toxicology, and chemistry. During a fire investigation, Gil is conversant with such terms as ‘spalling’ and ‘alligatoring’; these refer to burn patterns which suggest that an accelerant was used to start a fire (Episode 111). The characters are knowledgeable in other ways as well. They are knowledgeable about crime and criminal careers (Episode 207), and possess non-science information which is relevant in their investigations such as how automobile windshields are made (CSI: Miami, Episode 205).

Forensic databases are frequently referenced on CSI. These include the Forensic Medical Journal, the Dental Society Database, and the Combined DNA Index System (CODIS). These databases often reveal key information. As the investigators painstakingly restructure a skeleton, they post images of the jaw on the Dental Society Database. A dentist compares his records with that image and identifies the victim (Episode 113). In a CSI: Miami episode (202), the investigators use a special camera to photograph under a man’s skin; it reveals an unformed bruise, which, in turn, reveals the design of the gun barrel that caused the bruise. They then use a gun ownership database to locate the gun’s owner. These databases not only help solve crimes, equally important, they convey the idea that science has the answers, and that they are even computerized. CSI and its spin-offs thereby circulate cultural meanings about the infallibility of science.

Verisimilitude The crime genre has long been characterized by a sense of realism. CSI maintains this tradition, but in a unique sense: it privileges the accuracy of physical evidence, and, by extension, of science. The verisimilitude of physical evidence surfaces through recurrent dialogue, dead-on experiments, and accompanying visualizations. The evidence solves the case and elevates the credibility of the forensic sciences.

In most episodes, someone declares the evidence to be the absolute truth. A definitive example occurs in the pilot (Episode 100) when Gil urges them to ‘concentrate on what cannot lie, the evidence’. He reinforces the point in another episode: ‘The evidence only knows one thing: the truth. It is what it is’ (Episode 105). The dialogue consistently asserts that physical evidence is superior to all other proof, and insinuates that it is completely accurate. Gil’s formulation of this position is that they ‘chase the lie ‘til it leads to the truth’ (Episode 111). Again, truth on CSI seems to refer to the notion that there are answers to the unknowns that confront the investigators. The King Solomon reference at the start of this section makes this point in a CSI episode. The investigators encounter a dilemma: two women claim to be a boy’s mother. When a detective references the Bible story wherein Solomon confronted such a problem, another responds, ‘King Solomon didn’t have a DNA lab’ (Episode 201). Science can supply the answers. The current programs maintain this notion. When the CSI: NY investigators are temporarily stymied, one mentions Max’s (Gary Sinese) mantra, ‘Dig deeper’ (Episode 200). The reference presumes that if one does this, the truth is there and will be unearthed.
The investigators dig deeper by conducting experiments or re-enactments of the crime. Experiments are routine in CSI episodes, and they serve to substantiate the notion that there are answers and that forensic science can and will reveal them. However, because most viewers lack a science background, CSI uses cinematographic effects to explain these scientific techniques, that is, to visually supplement the complicated forensic language, and to make them more entertaining. Visualizations include close-ups of microscopic evidence. As Catherine peers into a microscope, enlarged images of the physical evidence appear on the screen allowing the viewers to feel as if they, too, are looking through the microscope (Episode 112). These visualizations combine with the dialogue to convey a sense that the audience understands forensic science and can do this job and also can see the truth. Such techniques continue in the current programs. Moreover, as an investigator conducts an experiment that reveals some important fact, visuals confirm it with a flashback to that portion of the crime. Near the end of a program when the investigators have solved the crime, more complete flashbacks confirm their theory (e.g., CSI:NY, Episode 200). Science provides the police and the audience with an understanding of the crime and the criminal (Wilson, 2000).

Police and science

Everyone learns from science; it all depends on how you use the knowledge. (Episode 207)

The cultural images that CSI and its spin-offs circulate about the police and about science are bolstered by the long-term popularity of the crime genre and by the esteem of science. The police and science are mutually reinforcing. Moreover, CSI fits into other television programming trends that also enhance the cultural meanings that the programs disseminate.

Earlier, we noted that the boundaries between fact and fiction are blurring on television. This blurring is evident on CSI and its spin-off series. CSI is informed by many elements popularized by reality television. It uses the sights and sounds of seemingly real police at work to suggest its own realism in the manner of America’s Most Wanted. When the forensic investigators first appear at a crime scene, background effects includes squawking police radios and the flashing of police car blue lights; yellow police tape and milling extras in police uniform complete the effect: this is a crime scene. In one current CSI episode, the forensic detectives are even the subject of a fictional reality television program.

Reality television enhances its own realism by citing official crime data. CSI and its spin-offs work such data into the dialogue. For example, as he conducts an autopsy of a murdered sexual assault victim, a coroner states, ‘Women are four times as likely as men to be victims in sexual-related murders, and men are ten times as likely to be the murderer’ (CSI, Episode 207). Such factually based dialogue adds authenticity to the program’s forensic science claims by making it seem more news-like.

Although we did not code for these news-like aspects in our analysis of CSI’s first season, we did see them in the updated data, especially with the spin-off series. In our television market, CSI:NY and CSI:Miami precede the 10 p.m. local news, and teasers for the local news appear during commercial breaks in these programs. In one CSI:NY episode (200),
the teaser notes that the news will feature an interview with Gary Sinese, the program’s lead actor. In other episodes, the teasers mention crimes that will be the lead news story. Following a *CSI: Miami* program about the murder of a child molester, the news opened with a story about technology developed by the military that can trace sex offenders (Episode 202). Another news broadcast opened with a reporter in a helicopter hovering over a crime scene. Below, we could see yellow police tape and crime scene investigators at work just as in the preceding crime drama (*CSI:NY*, Episode 203).

The relationship among a crime drama like *CSI*, reality television, and the news is important because of its impact on the cultural meanings circulated by television. For cultural historian Raymond Williams (1974), the individual program is not as important as the flow of television programs over the course of an evening. The cultural images that television circulates in this flow are mutually reinforcing, unnoticed, and therefore more compelling. With *CSI*, there is an image of the police and science as absolute authorities. Williams’s observation is all the more relevant with crime dramas which, as we noted earlier, also square with widely-held views about crime, with dominant ideologies, and even with extant criminological theory.

*CSI* and its spin-offs, consistent with reality television and the news, depict the modern world as a mean and scary place. People already fear crime and the programs reinforce these fears. Crime is random, the characters tell us, and you never know when you will be victimized. As one investigator puts it, ‘Juries want explanations, nice and neat. They don’t want to know that we live in a random world’ (*CSI*, Episode 207). People are angry at criminals and the characters in the programs reflect those sentiments as they express their indignation at criminals (Rapping, 2003). *CSI* is consistent with current themes of individual responsibility for social problems, and also reinforces contemporary criminological theory, for example, routine activities theory: criminals are irresponsible people (Rafter, 2006). Crime is usually motivated by selfishness, as with the New Yorker who murdered a woman to get her apartment (*CSI:NY*, Episode 200). The crimes and the motivations for these criminals are without social context. The programs circulate a cultural meaning about crime: crime is normal and opportunistic (Jewkes, 2004). For example, in the episode about sexually related murders, when the coroner gives his statistical litany about men killing women, he adds, ‘That’s just the way it is’ (*CSI*, Episode 207). Nothing is said about how sexism or patriarchy might help us to understand why it is this way (see Websdale and Alvarez, 1998). Contextual comments that might address a criminal’s motivation are lampooned. Such a presentation privileges reliance on the police and science, and offers little hope for collective social change.

Plots may be complicated on these programs, but right and wrong usually are portrayed as straightforward matters. When asked if there is a danger that criminals might learn to avoid detection by watching forensic crime programs, Gil Grissom responds with the piece of dialogue that opened this section: ‘Everyone learns from science; it all depends on how you use the knowledge’ (*CSI*, Episode 207). *CSI* suggests that the police use science to set things right. The result is a powerful legitimation of the union of police and science.
CONCLUSION

Television circulates images which convey cultural meanings about many facets of social life, including crime. At the outset, we suggested that CSI is an interesting site for analyzing the intersection of crime, media and culture. Perhaps they are only crime dramas, but CSI and its progeny traffic in cultural meanings on matters as diverse as gender, race, family, work, and of course, crime and policing. As we have argued, chief among the meanings that these programs convey is the view that the police, aligned against crime and criminals, stand as a moral authority. In part, this view is accomplished through adherence to the traditions of the crime genre: violent crime, especially murder, represents a threat to the social order which the police, here the forensic detectives, contain by apprehending the criminal.

At the same time, CSI stakes out new territory in television crime drama. CSI, CSI:NY and CSI:Miami circulate cultural images which validate scientific evidence and science itself. CSI’s mantra – that physical evidence cannot lie, that evidence is a truth that science will reveal – suggests that the police have harnessed science. And more, they have rehabilitated science by reducing any contradictions it might exhibit in the real world, for example competing expert opinions in a court case. If we see justice as reaching the correct answer as the program suggests, the CSI team almost always produces justice. And, they never enter a courthouse. Indeed, lawyers, and, to a degree, even the law, are problematic. Cases are solved in the crime lab which renders a jury unnecessary: there is no better judge than science.

CSI circulates these cultural meanings through narratives that reflect and reproduce popular beliefs about crime. Crime is a random, routine event on these programs. Criminals typically are selfish, venal, remorseless people, so no causal explanation of criminality is needed. The idea that there is a social context in which crime occurs is not an issue or is depicted as a farcical one. The proper response to the criminal event may be predicated on the rationality of science, but it also takes for granted a strong measure of punitiveness, what Jewkes (2004: 180) calls ‘authoritarian populism’, which plays as indignation against the criminals by the investigators. Many episodes end with the investigators confronting the criminals and engaging in status degradation ceremonies (Garfinkel, 1956).

Ironically, however, the very success of CSI and its spin-offs raises new challenges, to them as television programs, and to the meanings they circulate. Some commentators claim that not all of CSI’s science is valid. One forensics expert calls some of it, for instance using a knife wound to make a mold of a knife, ‘blatant hokum’ (Roane, 2005). What is interesting is not so much the accuracy of the scientific procedures as the fact that CSI presents them in such a realistic fashion that fans (and experts) try to find fault with them. There is a further irony as well: CSI’s mantra about scientific evidence may have produced another dilemma, the so-called ‘CSI Effect’. Members of the television audience, convinced that they understand forensic science, maintain these beliefs as jurors. One prosecutor says that because of programs like CSI, jurors now have unreasonable expectations about scientific technology (Walsh, 2004). According to another attorney, CSI ‘projects the image that all cases are solvable by highly technical science, and if you offer less than
that, it is viewed as reasonable doubt’ (Roane, 2005: 50). It is difficult to make definite judgments about CSI’s accuracy or the CSI Effect. Some experts claim that the program is fairly accurate, but modified to be entertaining. Others note that the CSI Effect is, for now, mainly anecdotal (Tyler, 2006).

In any case, CSI has brought forensic science into the popular discourse. All of this is occurring in a country that is not known for a scientific culture. Our analysis of CSI’s first season and the updated observations from its 2006 season and from CSI:NY and CSI:Miami suggest that their careful blend of melodrama, which attracts an audience, combines with the form of realism that is characteristic of television which today blurs the boundaries between fact and fiction. In these programs, crimes are solved, the guilty get their come-uppance, and order is restored (at least until the next episode). Members of the audience believe that they understand forensic science and that they could be forensic detectives, so they side with them. Perhaps such a belief brings a sense of closure or certainty in an uncertain world. If the police sometimes fail at their tasks in the real world, CSI provides a new and legitimate way of catching the bad guys. At a time when so many problems are intractable, CSI’s stock-in-trade is dependable and untarnished: science united with the police. Comforting though that may be, it is a media construction of science; it is television.

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