

"I fought the Law and the Law won": The clash between police and criminals on prime-time television

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The mass media are one of our most important sources of information about the criminal justice system. Television, in particular, is a resource from which people may come to understand what is acceptable, necessary and just. This article presents a content analysis of recent prime-time New Zealand television which draws out implications this may have for social control. The author advances two arguments. First, as a form of narrative cloaked in myth, programmes which deal with crime perform a stabilizing role by making the conventional aspects of the law enforcement system seem obvious. Secondly, they foster social cohesion by ritually enacting shared understandings of permissible behaviour and reinforcing the inevitability of punishment for deviant behaviour.

I INTRODUCTION

Every night television audiences around New Zealand experience crime from the vicarious safety of their living rooms. Programmes with law and order themes are a staple of our viewing diet, so much so that it is sometimes predicted that "television would shrivel up and die without cops, detectives, crimes, judges, prisons, guns, and trials."¹ This observation has significance on a number of levels. Most importantly of all, perhaps, it suggests that television provides its viewers with a distinctive and powerful version of the many available "realities" of crime.² In itself this would be unremarkable, but for the fact that public opinion studies in the United States, for example, have shown that for up to 95% of people the mass media constitute their main source of information about crime and the justice system.³ This level of informational reliance underwrites the importance of examining just how television depicts crime-related subjects.

These cultural representations also have significance on a second level. In as much as they provide a ubiquitous resource from which individuals may fashion their own (or accept society's) understandings of what is acceptable, necessary, and just, media images of deviancy and law enforcement have an innate political component. Communications

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1 L M Friedman "Law, Lawyers, and Popular Culture" (1989) 98 Yale LJ 1579, 1588.

2 Refer to A N Doob "The Many Realities of Crime", in A N Doob and E L Greenspan (eds) *Perspectives in Criminal Law* (Aurora, Canada Law Book Co, 1985) 61-80.

3 See D A Graber *Crime News and the Public* (New York, Longman, 1980).

scholars have long noted that the dramatic fare of television, "with its portrayal of crime, courtrooms, and conflict-ridden urban life, may well be a principal contributor to basic political orientations."⁴ If for no other reason than the market requires networks to appeal to the largest possible audience, the televised "reality" of crime will usually favour the so-called mainstream in terms of the images, values, and ideology it projects.

The point to be made here is that law and order shows do not exist in a vacuum. Inevitably these programmes are culturally embedded: emerging in response to, and subsequently reinforcing or refining, a set of pre-existing beliefs and conventions that already exist in society. To use more technical terms, television might be said to employ a semiotic system which communicates various culturally-agreed meanings to its viewers, reifying those conceptions as it does so in a circular and mutually-supporting way.⁵ To the extent that television dramas may *cause* certain *effects* in society, then, it is crucial to remember that such programmes are themselves an outworking of elements within society.

A combination of these ideas suggests that television be viewed as a form of consensus narrative, one serving as a cultural medium in which society's core beliefs and values undergo continuous rehearsal, testing, and revision.⁶ The content analysis presented in this paper seeks to identify some of the stories about crime and law enforcement that this narrative is telling its audience. Analysis concentrates on a particularly important story-telling genre: the prime-time drama. The assumption is that the stories contained in these texts function not just as escapist entertainment or overt socialization, but may also work more generally towards social control.

II PREVIOUS RESEARCH

The prominence of crime and policing in prime-time storylines has been largely ignored by media researchers.⁷ The two earliest studies in this area found that, as well

4 G Gerbner et al "Political Correlates of Television Viewing" (1984) 48 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 283, 284.

5 See generally, J Fiske and J Hartley *Reading Television* (London, Methuen, 1978). This idea of television as a "circular" system is not uncritically accepted in the literature, but in the synthetic sense that it is used in this paper, the weight placed upon it does not seem unreasonable to bear. It is used here simply to gain some purchase on the notion that extant conceptions of crime and law enforcement in the community feed into the media images that are constructed to depict these subjects, which are then available to feed into how people continue to view them (or see them differently), and so on.

6 A useful reference here is D Thorburn "Television as an Aesthetic Medium" (1987) 4 *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 161.

7 See J Garafalo "Crime and the Mass Media: A Selective Review of Research" (1981) 18 *Journal of Research in Crime and Delinquency* 319. The exception to this dearth of research is daytime soap operas: see, most notably, J C Sutherland and S J Siniawsky "The Treatment and Resolution of Moral Violations on Soap Operas" (1982) 32 *Journal of Communication* 67; and R Estep and P T Macdonald "Crime in the

as being portrayed in a heavily stereotyped manner, around 20% of the characters shown on television were criminals, with a somewhat higher share of law enforcement officers.⁸ Later work confirmed this general level of over-representation, and noted that when measured on a theoretical index of power - which related the proportion of dominant acts to submissive ones - judges, attorneys, and police officials appear as the most powerful of all television occupations.⁹ The major conclusion of recent analyses has been that entertainment programmes consistently misrepresent the nature and level of crime in the community, especially as regards the use of violence.¹⁰ These findings were reiterated by Lichter and Lichter in the most comprehensive study to date, adding that while almost all television crime is punished, policemen are often upstaged as the heroes by private detectives or enterprising citizens.¹¹

Despite the paucity of empirical research, a small amount of secondary literature has emerged which maps some of the lessons provided by this genre. In a sophisticated article, Schattenberg suggests that television drama represents the forcible affirmation of social solidarity and aversion towards crime, the popularity of which may be traced to its enactment of the primal theme of vengeance.¹² Alley argues that audiences learn contempt for civil liberties and the canons of due process from the routine violations of citizens' rights in many crime-based dramas.¹³ Macaulay contends that these shows teach viewers not to question the status quo given that it is bad people, rather than the structure of society itself, who are seen to cause the problem of crime.¹⁴ This conservative posture is also addressed by Sparks.¹⁵ Locating television fiction as a dramatization of other political discourses on crime, he argues that these programmes propose an imagery of social order, designate the sources of threat to society, and identify the legitimate social responses to that threat.

Afternoon: Murder and Robbery on Soap Operas" (1985) 29 *Journal of Broadcasting and Electronic Media* 323.

8 S Head "Content Analysis of Television Drama Programs" (1954) 9 *Quarterly of Film, Radio and Television* 175; D Smythe "Reality as Presented by TV" (1954) 18 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 143.

9 M De Fleur "Occupational roles as portrayed on television" (1964) 28 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 57.

10 For example, J R Dominick "Crime and Law Enforcement on Prime-Time Television" (1973) 37 *Public Opinion Quarterly* 241; J Pandiani "Crime Time TV: If All We Knew Is What We Saw" (1978) *Contemporary Crises* 2; and L G Barrile "Television and Attitudes About Crime" (PhD dissertation, Boston, Boston College Dept of Sociology, 1980).

11 L S and S R Lichter *Prime Time Crime* (Washington DC, The Media Institute, 1983).

12 G Schattenberg "Social Control Functions of Mass Media Depictions of Crime" (1981) 51:1 *Sociological Inquiry* 71.

13 R S Alley "Television Drama", in H Newcomb (ed) *Television: The Critical View* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1982) 77-102.

14 S Macaulay "Images of Law in Everyday Life: The Lessons of School, Entertainment, and Spectator Sports" (1987) 21:2 *Law & Society Review* 185.

15 R Sparks "Dramatic power: television, images of crime and law enforcement", in C Sumner (ed) *Censure, Politics and Criminal Justice* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1980) 123-41.

Taking its cue from these earlier research efforts, the present paper explores control implications of the nightly television portrayals of crime and law enforcement. Before proceeding, however, a number of caveats are in order. The paper does not go so far as to contend that people always gullibly believe in the accuracy of media images, nor is it assumed that they always generalize from television to life.¹⁶ It would also be folly to assert that television representations have the unidirectional effect of translating into specific attitudes or behaviours; that is to say, there is not necessarily any congruence between what comes out of the picture tube and whether people comply with the law or act in a prosocial way. Even if there were, the presence of intervening variables would make measuring the exact relationship between the two extremely problematic.¹⁷ This reservation applies equally to suggestions that media images play a significant role in exacerbating actual levels of crime, either by immersing their audience in a stream of violent images or, more directly, through the copycat phenomenon.¹⁸

Grand claims about television dramas must therefore give way to comments of a more general and speculative nature. With this limitation in mind, the paper begins from what should be an uncontroversial position: that the complex of images thrown up by popular culture impacts upon our thinking about the police in particular, and law enforcement and criminality in general.¹⁹ The purpose of this work is to identify the residue of meaning which these texts might mediate to their viewers,²⁰ and to examine some of the consequences it may have for social control.

16 In particular, it has been demonstrated elsewhere that viewers are capable of making sophisticated judgements about television portrayals of police and criminals. See D L Rarick at al "Adolescent perceptions of police: Actual vs as depicted in TV drama" (1973) 50 *Journalism Quarterly* 438.

17 As Eco points out, "the medium [of television] transmits those ideologies which the addressee receives according to codes originating in his social situation, in his previous education, and in the psychological tendencies of the moment". U Eco "Towards a Semiological Guerrilla Warfare", in *Travels in Hyperreality*, trns W Weaver (London, Pan Books, 1987) 141. Indeed, studies of audience perceptions show a great divergence of interpretation is possible. The complexity of audience responses is something of a truism.

18 See, for instance, R V Clarke and G McGrath "Newspaper Reports of Bank Robberies and the Copycat Phenomenon" (1992) 25 *ANZ Journal of Criminology* 83.

19 See generally, J A Inciardi and J L Dee "From the Keystone Cops to *Miami Vice*: Images of Policing in American Popular Culture" (1987) 21:2 *Journal of Popular Culture* 84; and S D Stark "Perry Mason Meets Sonny Crockett: The History of Lawyers and Police as Television Heroes" (1987) 42 *U of Miami LR* 229.

20 Although it may sound like a cop-out (no pun intended!), it is not the writer's intention to get mired in a postmodern debate over how television texts "mean". It is enough for present purposes to know that the issue is a problematic one, and that the transmission of any messages from prime-time dramas to TV viewers should therefore not be overstated.

III THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In approaching these related questions several points of entry are available.²¹ With regard to the stories told about crime and policing, a convenient starting point is the realization that the messages conveyed by television need not be the stuff of socialization *per se*. Rather, it has long been argued that the mass media work to maintain consensus within a culture by the mere fact of positively reaffirming the group's norms.²² In other words, audiences might not learn new values from the media so much as they simply become accustomed to the ritualism of a standardized repetition of familiar stereotypes and motifs.²³ Less an exercise in telling new stories, then, television dramas may be better thought to offer a re-telling of existing stories.

This argument is given a modern reworking by Gerbner and Gross, who contend that the cultivation of socially constructed "realities" is precisely the task of mainstream ritual and mythology. As agencies of symbolic socialization and control, they argue, common rites and mythologies explain the world in a self-consistent and reassuring way, one which "makes people perceive as real and normal and right that which fits the established social order."²⁴ Put another way, myth has the task of making contingency appear eternal.²⁵

Applying this insight to television, the production of dramatic narratives cloaked in myth can be seen as a vehicle for making orthodoxy transparent, thus confirming the natural and obvious quality of existing structures and frames of reference. Viewed through this lens, it seems plausible to expect that the crime stories of television drama

21 Although it may offend the purists, the approach taken in this section of the paper is unashamedly eclectic. It amounts to something of a *bricolage*, and for that it may appear to lack a central theoretical guiding thread. Rather, various sources from across a diverse range of disciplines and ideological traditions have been drawn upon. One result is that concepts such as "social control" are not located theoretically with respect to social structures or broad social processes. Another consequence is that the discussion incorporates ideas from different theorists working on different levels of analysis (eg functionalist, class, and discourse analyses) without pursuing the political inconsistencies which may arise because of this strategy. Notwithstanding these effects, the pragmatic concern has been to build a coherent argument by taking from each theorist that which seems to fit the research problem, and discarding that which does not, without being overly worried about the sanctity of boundaries between different analytical traditions.

22 See, for example, L Wirth "Consensus and Mass Communication" (1948) 13 *American Sociological Review* 1; and P F Lazarfield and R K Merton "Mass Communication, Popular Taste and Organized Social Action", in L Bryson (ed) *The Communication of Ideas* (New York, Harper, 1948) 95-118.

23 This suggestion is made by W Breed "Mass communication and sociocultural integration" (1958) 37 *Social Forces* 109.

24 G Gerbner and L Gross "Living with Television: The Violence Profile" (1976) 26 *Journal of Communication* 173.

25 R Barthes *Mythologies*, trns A Lavers (London, Paladin, 1973) 115.

will contain an ideological sub-text which reminds its audience that the institutions of the justice system are both necessary and legitimate.

The dominance of this socially-conservative myth is likely to derive from its engagement of the basic dichotomy between evil criminals and good police officers; a dualism which pits the fear of chaos against the security of order. This predicted use of the good/evil dichotomy introduces the notion of censure. Simply stated, censuring distinguishes between phenomena by invoking binary oppositions - good/bad, legal/illegal, etc. - which mark out the permissible from the prohibited within a culture. More than an act of labelling, censures are thus a moral and political exercise of power.²⁶ Drawing on censures that already operate within the parent culture, television dramas can be expected to employ this discursive practice to not only make the world that it depicts a recognizable one, but to help impose order on it when it is threatened by the disruptive forces of crime. In short, these programmes should contain familiar expressions of what "society" considers blameworthy. Furthermore, the censure of deviancy they embody is likely to be strengthened by showing a type of offending which prevents any sympathy for, or identification with, the obviously "bad" criminal; viz crimes of violence directed against innocent people.

A different approach to the social control implications of crime-based dramas is recommended by what many scholars have identified as the didactic function of punishment.²⁷ This approach targets the way justice is meted out to the deviant on television. It is appropriate to begin with Durkheim's theory that punishment of crime is less a physical deterrent than it is a symbolic act given over to the re-affirmation of moral sentiments shared by a society, one designed to act primarily on the *potentially* guilty.²⁸ Grappling with how to apply this theory to modern society, Erickson posits that the constant fascination of the mass media with crime and deviancy may serve to communicate information about moral boundaries in the same way that public punishments once did.²⁹ Through their representation of public morality, so the argument runs, televised dramas which tie crime and punishment thereby reactivate the collective code.

This idea complements the understanding developed by Foucault.³⁰ Emphasizing punishment's historical role as a ritualized exercise of power, he encourages us to regard the punishment of crime as both a complex social function and a political tactic. According to Foucault, the disappearance of punishment as a public spectacle in the mid-nineteenth century caused its exemplary mechanics to change: "its effectiveness is

26 The following introduction can be enthusiastically recommended: C Sumner "Rethinking deviance: towards a sociology of censure", in C Sumner (ed) *Censure, Politics and Criminal Justice* (Milton Keynes, Open University Press, 1990) 15-40.

27 See D Garland *Punishment and Modern Society* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1990).

28 E Durkheim *The Division of Labor in Society* (New York, Free Press, 1964).

29 K Erickson *Wayward Puritans* (New York, Wiley, 1966).

30 M Foucault *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, trns A Sheridan (New York, Pantheon, 1977).

[now] seen as resulting from its inevitability, not from its visible intensity; it is the certainty of being punished and not the horrifying spectacle of public punishment that must discourage crime."³¹ Because actual law enforcement has lost much of its ceremonial force, the treatment of crime on television is now arguably the most graphic means of telling people about the inevitability of punishment for transgressing society's normative boundaries.

To briefly summarise, audiences may not learn new values from law and order dramas so much as they become accustomed to the ritualized repetition of motifs, censures and stereotypes which are already familiar to them, and which to some degree animate their everyday social interaction. The theories canvassed above suggest two ways in which this may work towards social control. As a form of narrative cloaked in myth, programmes which deal with criminality and law enforcement might first perform a stabilizing role by providing a decorative display of what-goes-without-saying. Secondly, they may work to foster social cohesion by enacting shared understandings of permissible behaviour, and reinforcing the inevitability of punishment for criminal behaviour.

IV RESEARCH DESIGN

A number of hypotheses emerge from the preceding theoretical discussion: (1) that police and criminals featured in prime-time dramas will be stereotyped along a good/bad dichotomy; (2) that the censure of deviancy will be strengthened by the type of crimes that are shown being typically serious, person-directed, and motivated by individual tendencies; (3) that to render the conventional obvious, a leading theme in these programmes will be "laws and police are necessary"; (4) that their narrative content will regularly demarcate the bounds of acceptable behaviour; and (5) that to reinforce the inevitability of punishment for deviancy, the "crime does not pay" message will be the predominant theme and plot resolution in these shows.

The research design used to test these hypotheses was content analysis. In quantifying programme attributes, the analysis largely replicated those methods used by Dominick.³² Where it differed from the techniques used in previous studies was its commitment to the interpretation of television texts *as texts*, and thus to a less anaemic process of data collection. Doubts have for some time been expressed about the utility of quantitative content analysis for research such as this, given its dependence on a serially organized design which stresses rigid protocols at the expense of descriptive depth.³³ Strong arguments have been made that narrative as well as enumerative data should be collected when studying cultural documents, of which television programmes are an important example. The qualitative approach to research which this calls for, sometimes termed ethnographic content analysis, envisages a reflexive process in which there is a constant interaction between concept development, sampling, data

31 Above n 30, 9.

32 Above n 10.

33 See M Counihan "Reading Television: Notes on the Problem of Media Content" (1975) 11:2 ANZ Journal of Sociology 31.

collection/coding/analysis, and interpretation.³⁴ For the purposes of this study, television dramas were assumed to draw on certain conventions, known implicitly by viewers, which regulate their cultural signification.³⁵ In accepting this premise, it was necessary to supplement a quantitative analysis of crime-based programmes with an inquiry as to their discursive and semiotic quality.

The sample population used for analysis targeted all regularly scheduled television programmes transmitted on the three major New Zealand channels (Television One, Channel 2, and TV3) during the peak-viewing time of 7.30pm to 11.00pm. Only those items presented in an overtly dramatic way were scrutinized.³⁶ This included standard situational dramas, plays adapted for television, and reality-based programmes of the "docu-drama" variety. News items and movies were excluded from analysis. Although sampling one full week of network programming has been shown to yield substantially the same results as a larger, randomly selected data set,³⁷ a two week period from 17-30 October 1993 was used so as to improve the chances of deriving a valid sample.

On the basis of pre-testing in the month prior to the sample period, a series of categories were developed for coding purposes. Three units of analysis were employed: the programme as a whole; each criminal act; and each character who appeared as either a perpetrator, victim, or fighter of crime.³⁸ Using these three units of analysis, data was gathered in five areas. First, coders were asked to identify each crime featured in a programme, who or what it was directed against, its relative degree of seriousness, and whether a motive was given or suggested for its commission. The next three variables amassed demographic information on the criminals, their victims, and the law

34 D L Altheide "Ethnographic Content Analysis" (1987) 10:1 *Qualitative Sociology* 65.

35 Kaminsky expresses it this way: "There is only so much attention that the home audience will give to narrative information. Television shows, whether consciously or unconsciously, are created in recognition of that. The shows are written in a kind of shorthand which requires, to a great extent, that the audience understand the cultural context in which the information is given". S M Kaminsky (with J H Mahan) *American Television Genres* (Chicago, Nelson-Hall, 1985) 33.

36 Programmes from the following series were coded: *LA Law*, *America's Most Wanted*, *Spender*, *The Bill*, *Crimewatch*, *The Ruth Rendell Mysteries*, *Michael Winner's True Crimes*, *Agatha Christie's Poirot*, *COPS*, *Prime Suspect 2*, *Sex*, *Roseanne*, *Coronation Street*, *Reasonable Doubts*, *Wolf*, *MacGyver*, *Casualty*, and *Murder in Eden*. Since the conclusion of the study, many of these series have been replaced by similar fare, for instance the Australian production *Law of the Land*, and the British dramas *Between the Lines* and *The Chief*.

37 Refer to M F Eleey "Variations in Generalizability Resulting from Sampling Characteristics of Content Analysis Data: A Case Study". Unpublished manuscript (Annenberg School of Communications, University of Pennsylvania, 1969).

38 The working definition of "programme" has already been outlined. The item "criminal act" included any episode in which criminal activity was shown, the definitions of which were standardized against an established classificatory system. To avoid trivial images contaminating the findings, the item "characters" recognized only those persons who appeared on screen for at least 10 seconds and spoke more than 2 words.

enforcement agents featured in each show. As well as these characteristics, data was collected on what the final result of the offending was for the criminal(s), whether law enforcement agents successfully apprehended their quarry or prevented a crime, and if violent or illegal means were used to do so. The consistency of law enforcers and criminals with the "good" or "bad" stereotype was also measured against a firm set of criteria. The fifth area of data collection identified the messages about crime and punishment that programmes conveyed. The salient references for the 11 themes coded here were derived from pre-testing a number of programmes from an analogous population. This was done in consultation with two colleagues in order to minimize the chance of arriving at an invalid coding schedule from the observational biases of a solitary researcher.

Three graduate students acted as coders. Working independently, each observer reviewed all of the cases from videotapes of the sampled programming. Cases were coded in a randomly assigned order. Themes were coded simply on the basis of presence or absence, and coders were instructed that no themes need necessarily be chosen. To diminish the risk of measurement error, they were earlier involved in a three-hour training session at which the operational definitions of variables and themes were discussed. A list of detailed decision rules was also provided to assist the coders in their task. Final inter-coder reliability tests revealed a 97% level of consistency. The few instances of disagreement were resolved by the author acting as a final arbiter.

V FINDINGS

The 42 programmes that were coded yielded a total of 57 criminal acts.³⁹ The overwhelming majority of the offending (92% of cases) occurred on shows which were self-conscious examples of the law and order genre. The targets of crime were typically people (80.7%) as opposed to public or private property, with victims being split more or less evenly along gender lines (males = 23; females = 26). Victims were, however, considerably more likely to be young and white (73.5% combined). The crimes themselves were usually serious ones in which violence was the preferred *modus operandi* (82.4%). In direct contrast to actual New Zealand crime statistics, in the world of television drama the most frequent crime was murder (n = 19), followed next by robbery/fraud (n = 10) and assault (n = 6). Table 1 expresses the degree to which other forms of delinquency were a common plot device of nightly entertainment television during the sample period.

39 When measured across all programmes aired in prime-time during the sample period, this level of criminality translates to a proportion of around 70% of the television shows involving some kind of criminal act.

TABLE 1
TYPE AND FREQUENCY OF CRIMES PORTRAYED DURING THE SAMPLE PERIOD

<i>Crime</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage of Total N</i>
Murder	19	33
Robbery/Fraud	10	18
Assault	6	11
Shooting/Aggravated Assault	5	9
Alcohol and Drug Offences	5	9
Rape	4	7
Child Sexual Abuse	4	7
Domestic Abuse	3	5
Vandalism	1	2

Offenders were depicted in a straightforward, one-dimensional way. Demographically, they were typically young males (87.7%) whose racial identification was white (66.7%). This group displayed a high level of consistency with the "bad" stereotype (86%), with only 8 of the criminals not being presented as malicious, violent, or destructive. This trend extended to the simplistic aetiology of crime which was offered. As a rule, deviancy was seen to stem from character defects rather than the economic system or social structure in which a person lived. Over 80% of the offenders featured in the sample were motivated by either the utilitarian drive of simple greed, the violent passion of sex or revenge, or generally anti-social or "criminal" tendencies. Crime was only seen to result from structural inequalities, poverty, or a sense of desperation in a combined total of 8 cases (see Table 2).

When taken together with the already-cited dominance of serious crimes against people, these findings about the causes given or implied for offending lend weight to the suggestion in the second hypothesis. A cross-tabulation of the degree of seriousness, target, and attributed motive of all 57 criminal acts analysed, confirm that the type of crime likely to be displayed in prime-time dramas is indeed serious, person-directed, and motivated by individual characteristics (chi square = 11.5; df = 1; p = .0006). This profile of typical offending could be expected to intensify the censure which already operates against criminals who are stereotyped as "bad".

TABLE 2
REASONS GIVEN OR IMPLIED FOR THE COMMISSION OF CRIME

<i>Motive</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage of Total N</i>
Greed	15	26
Anti-social tendencies	11	19
Sexual motive	10	18
"Criminal" character	7	12
Revenge/Retribution	5	9
Sense of Desperation	4	7
Poverty/Structural Inequalities	4	7
Boredom	1	2

For their part, law enforcement officers were also presented in a relatively standardized way. Of the 131 officers featured only 13 were non-white, with a 5:1 ratio of male to female officers. A total of 83% of those identified as law enforcers were police officers, the remainder being evenly divided between lawyers, judges, and private detectives/citizens. Mirroring the stereotype consistency of criminal characters, police officers displayed a 97.9% level of conformity with the protective virtues of fairness, helpfulness, and a generally peaceable nature. Only one rogue individual breached the stereotype of the "good" policeman. When read alongside the high level of stereotype consistency exhibited by criminals, the dichotomy between "good" police and "bad" criminals was found with an overwhelming degree of regularity (92% of all cases). This result bears out the expected relationship of the first hypothesis.

In a result which their real-life counterparts would be proud of, police officers in the television sample were seen to achieve a combined 88.1% success-rate in either solving or preventing crime. More generally, transgression of society's norms was met with some form of punishment in the vast majority of storylines. In fact, only 5 of the 57 offences were shown to go unpunished. Also as hypothesized, the sure consequences of offending translated into a prominent role for the "crime does not pay" theme (61% of cases). The dominance of this theme and the use of punishment as a plot resolution tended to underscore the certainty of being punished for criminal behaviour.

The second leading motif in the programmes analyzed was "laws and police are necessary" (25% of cases). This result was anticipated by the third hypothesis, and is consistent with the wider aim of making the conventional aspects of the law enforcement system appear obvious and legitimate. Table 3 sets out the frequency with which other themes were present in the sample. The next most prominent motifs were "the city is a dangerous place", "male criminals attack female victims", and "criminals can strike anyone, anywhere, anytime". Each of these appeared in 21 percent of the programmes coded.

TABLE 3
PREVALENCE OF THEMES CONVEYED BY DRAMAS DEALING WITH CRIME

<i>Theme</i>	<i>Frequency</i>	<i>Percentage of Total N</i>
Crime does not pay	35	61
Laws and police are necessary institutions	14	25
The city is a dangerous place	12	21
Male criminals violently attack female victims	12	21
Criminals can strike anyone, anywhere, anytime	12	21
Police work is difficult, brutalizing, stressful etc.	9	16
Crime is a product of a "criminal character"	9	16
Law enforcement is the search for truth	9	16
Sometimes rules must be broken to get justice	5	9
People should not take the law into their own hands	5	9
Brutal treatment of criminals is justified	4	7

The programmes coded also contained a rich vein of narrative and semiotic content. The censure of deviancy was particularly apparent. It was evident, for instance, in the self-congratulation by a police officer in *Wolf* that "we took a real bad guy off the streets". There were also many cases in which the boundaries of acceptable behaviour were re(p)layed. Thus an attorney in *LA Law* decried "[t]here is something very wrong when a sixteen year old child chooses to settle his differences by murdering a classmate on the playground", and a policeman in *COPS* chastised an abusive father that "you are not within your rights [to discipline your child] when you openly take your hand and strike him to the point of making his eye swell up". While each of these examples has very different connotations, and say something profoundly different about the type of behaviour which is acceptable in society, they both provide general support for the expected relationship of hypothesis four.

A number of familiar motifs were also rehearsed in narrative form. For example, in an episode of *Spender* the audience was told of how "the city is comin' apart at the seams", while a young urban mother in *MacGyver* lamented the "gang-banger hell" in which she lived. Other themes rendered concrete included a policeman's injunction to a violent man in *The Bill*: "Don't take the law into your own hands, or you'll answer to me"; and a warning issued in *COPS* to a prisoner: "Don't try it again. Cos' what'll happen? You'll get caught. It don't pay. I don't care how much money these people pay you to do this [sell drugs], it's just not going to work. You're going to get caught". Interestingly, the most common metaphors in these dramatic offerings were those of battle (eg. "the war against crime", "the forces of law and order") and money (eg "crime does not pay", "the cost of crime to the community").

A final comment should be made about the typical plot development exhibited by the sample. In almost all of the programmes, the following pattern was observed: (1) an initial scene of calm, which was (2) shattered by crime, occasioning (3) the pursuit and arrest of the criminals, and (4) the restoration of calm. Although this basic formula

was observed in the development of most items coded, there were often individual differences in accent and weighting.

VI DISCUSSION

These findings suggest a number of stories about crime and law enforcement which prime-time dramas⁴⁰ might be mediating to their viewers. Above all, perhaps, the clash between police and criminals on television enacts the Manichean conflict between good and evil. Within the logic of censure, this is a conflict between the centre (police) and the margin (criminal). As the heavily stereotyped results of the content analysis imply, individual actors are likely to become metonymic referents for either the stabilizing forces of the core, or the disruptive elements of the periphery.

Having made this point, however, yet another interpretation is available. In the ritual condensation of this basic social conflict, violence is often the most enduring form of communication between the two opposing realms. This rhetoric of violence is conceivably learnt by those who watch law and order shows each night, and may thus be accepted as a necessary or commonplace feature of the law enforcement process. In these programmes violence is, as von Clausewitz might have said, merely the continuation of policing by other means. The viewer of crime-based dramas is therefore presented with an image of the police as a paramilitary force.

There is of course something of a factual basis for this caricature. Lasswell observed long ago that under certain demands police action becomes military action,⁴¹ and Bittner has demonstrated how the conception of police as a quasi-military institution with a "war-like mission" plays an important part in the structuring of modern police work.⁴² Yet representing the police in this way on television could also promote the idea that fighting crime is their chief function, as opposed to more prosaic activities aimed at preserving public order. A connection may also be made here to the organizing metaphor of war that was seen to resonate throughout these programmes.

Through their vivid identification of "bad" criminals losing the literal and metaphorical battle against "good" police officers, television dramas may also unite the community in its *general* criticism of those marked out as deviant. To borrow again from Foucault, crime-based television in this way offers a disciplinary and normalizing discourse which communicates the bounds of the acceptable by censoring the deviancy

40 It would be interesting to break this sample down in order to locate the internationally-sourced programmes within the immediate social milieu of New Zealand. For instance, what is the significance of UK and US crime shows in the New Zealand cultural context, particularly when gauged against localised notions of "good policing", this country's economic and welfare policies, and the (historical) politics of "law and order"? Again, though, answers to these sorts of questions must be reserved for a subsequent study.

41 H D Lasswell *World Politics and Personal Insecurity* (Glencoe IL, Free Press, 1950).

42 E Bittner *The Functions of the Police in Modern Society* (New York, Jason Aronson, 1975) 52.

of the prohibited. On this level, the depiction of law enforcement activities on prime-time television fulfils the Durkheimian strategy of uniting the community in its censure of the criminal, while simultaneously strengthening the social bond that holds the group together. Moreover, the censure embedded within these programmes defines the limits of social order by stigmatizing certain acts and actors as tainted according to its underlying moral and political economy.⁴³ One need not search long for an agenda behind this type of censoring - that being that criminality should not be rewarded. A life of crime is certainly not an attractive proposition on prime-time television: it is usually violent, sometimes desperate, and ultimately unsuccessful. The message is there for all to see: crime does not pay.

Interestingly, this pattern echoes those features observed by Knight in his study of written crime fiction.⁴⁴ Arguing that these texts provide a ritualized form of reassurance to social anxieties about crime, Knight perceived that within the logic of the stories plot itself is a way of ordering this resolution of fear. "Its outcome distributes triumph and defeat, praise and blame, to the characters in a way that accords with the audience's belief in the dominant cultural values."⁴⁵ The results of the present content analysis suggest that television crime fiction may serve a similar end. The dramas analyzed were remarkable for their level of internal consistency, leading the viewer to feel psychologically reassured that the guilty are (almost) always punished. In the absence of public displays of punitive justice, it is this inevitability of punishment that Foucault argues must now deter crime.⁴⁶

Despite this certainty of outcome, little attention is given to the latter stages of the criminal justice system. As one scholar has pithily remarked, "if crime shows are about law and order, they are light on the law, heavy on the order."⁴⁷ Prime-time dramas normally focus instead on the investigative process, the pursuit, and the eventual arrest of criminals. Here one is not innocent until proven guilty; guilt is established by the mere fact of apprehension. Within the simple moral economy of the cop show, exacting punishment is given priority over the niceties of due process. As one police officer observed after the assault of a criminal in *Reasonable Doubts*: "He got what was coming to him. That's all that matters". In comments such as these, the viewer sees the will to punish writ large as police violence is justified by the need to protect the public - Bill of Rights or no Bill of Rights.

43 Much more could obviously be said here about the process of "criminalisation", notably: what does or does not get defined as crime (and why)? who does or does not get defined as criminal (and why)? and what links are there between this process and its structural underpinning vis-à-vis social and political power in society? Given that they fall outside the immediate scope of this paper, the answers to these questions (and others) must however be left for a later study.

44 S Knight *Form and Ideology in Crime Fiction* (Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 1980).

45 Above n 43, 4.

46 Above n 30.

47 S D Stark, above n 19.

The focus on the early stages in the criminal justice system has another, related effect: that of drawing attention away from the mechanisms for subsequently dealing with offenders, notably imprisonment and rehabilitation. Indeed, there is a lingering suspicion that these means of controlling deviancy are merely a flawed attempt at denying the recidivist streak in all criminals (precisely because, in the final analysis, they *are* criminals). To take one example, of an attempted rapist's release from prison for sexual assault only weeks earlier, an officer in *The Bill* made the sarcastic remark: "Another one successfully rehabilitated".

Excluding the final aspects of the law enforcement process in this manner does not detract from television's ability to foster social control. Far from it, the media decision to ignore certain aspects of "reality" may in fact serve to enhance the stability of the underlying system.⁴⁸ And as previous researchers have observed, through the emphasis on the inevitable capture and swift punishment of criminals, media images can partially satisfy the social demands for retribution, if only towards symbolic rather than real enemies of public safety.⁴⁹

At another level, this method of depicting crime works to hide the deeper, structural causes of offending under the emblem of individual pathology. The results of the content analysis indicate that the four leading motives given or suggested for offending on prime-time television are greed, anti-social tendencies, sexual gratification, and a basically "criminal" disposition. Significantly, it is suggested, this type of personalization is consistent with the methods of legal rhetoric, where "meaning is always to be attached to individual acts and legal explanation is correspondingly biographical and moral rather than sociological and contextualizing."⁵⁰ When this same rhetorical device is employed for dramatic effect in law and order shows, the attribution of blame for criminality becomes a simple matter for viewers. The many "realities" of crime are here subsumed into a denial of what some would say are its ultimate causes: systemic inequalities, encircling poverty, and a sense of social alienation.

The reductive explanations of deviance offered by these programmes have a clear political dimension. To the extent that the fear of crime makes people feel dependent on the state for protection, that tendency is likely to be magnified by television dramas that represent criminals as a socio-psychological type that only trained professionals can predict and control. Put another way, the motives imputed for crime are best countered by the punishment of offenders, and not the deep-level change that would be needed to address structural or systemic causes of offending. By visualizing deviancy in this way, television dramas are thus subtly engaged in justifying a particular approach to the control of crime.

Their implicit message may also be located within the wider context of television rendering the conventional obvious. As a form of narrative cloaked in myth, these programmes can be seen to confirm the natural and legitimate quality of existing

48 See W Breed, above n 23.

49 G Schattenberg, above n 12.

50 P Goodrich *Reading the Law* (Oxford, Blackwell, 1986) 204.

institutions in the justice system.⁵¹ Hence the regular showing of the "laws and police are necessary" theme. This, too, would appear to favour social stability and a particular orientation towards the control of crime.

On the basis of these foregoing general features, it may well be possible to construct a formula to which the prime-time cop show is likely to conform. Sparks has already given a brief gloss on this project, demonstrating that crime is seen to upset an implied equilibrium in these shows which the police officer/hero brings about a return to.⁵² While the findings of the above content analysis give some support to this view, a full account of such a formula - and the commercial and cultural imperatives which inform it - must be left for consideration in a later study.

VII CONCLUSION

In the world of entertainment television the commission of a crime is an opportunity for a morality play of society's norms and dominant ideology. Dramatic stories about crime and policing are effective cultural devices for demarcating the boundaries of permissible and proscribed behaviour. As Ericson and his colleagues point out, "[t]hese stories are an important source of contemporary myths - narratives that at once describe and justify - that help us to make sense of, and express sensibilities about, social order."⁵³ In doing so, they also contribute to public conversations about justice, legitimacy, and authority.

Significantly, however, the need for the core apparatuses of the criminal justice system are not contested in these stories. Prime-time dramas seem to tell their viewers that the institutional arms of the legal process are both necessary and legitimate. The dominance of this socially-conservative myth derives primarily from its engagement of the fear of chaos against the security of order. As well as underwriting the value of state-sponsored punishment to ensure the public's safety, the forces of the establishment - police, lawyers, and judges - are shown on television to produce the truth about crime. This version of "reality" offers the viewer a politics of explanation which extends far beyond the narrow confines of the TV-screen itself.

Admittedly, television provides a complex and conflictual system of representations which is capable of generating a divergent range of contradictory effects.⁵⁴ Nothing

51 We must be careful not to over-emphasise this legitimising function, however. As Reiner correctly observes, "It coexists not only with media criticism of specific police actions and individuals, but even of the whole direction of police policy, at times building up to a consensus for reform. Moreover, the media image of the reality or ideal of policing is not monolithic, either in any one period or between different times". R Reiner *The Politics of the Police* (Brighton, Wheatsheaf, 1985) 163.

52 Above n 15.

53 R V Ericson et al *Representing Order: Crime, Law, and Justice in the News Media* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 1990) 342.

54 G Murdock "Disorderly Images: Television's Presentation of Crime and Policing", in C Sumner (ed) *Crime, Justice and the Mass Media* (Cambridge, Institute of Criminology, 1982) 104-21.

presented in this paper challenges that assessment. To the extent that television is a culturally (re)iterative medium, however, audiences watching law and order shows become accustomed to the ritualized repetition of familiar censures, motifs, and stereotypes. Most saliently of all, through their black-and-white portrayal of the clash between police and criminals, prime-time dramas encourage their viewers to adopt a particular way of understanding the boundary between good and evil, permissible and prohibited, normal and pathological. In this way, the punishment of criminals on television may help to shape a specific *mentalité* which contributes to the formation of symbols and attitudes necessary for the maintenance of social order. As such, the regularities of form and content displayed by these texts not only tell stories about the way the world is (and should be), but they may perhaps work more generally towards social control.

If these assessments are accepted, one must clearly begin to conceive of media representations as *active* generators of social relations and practices, and not merely as *passive* reflections of existing cultural patterns. It has been argued in this paper that television images of crime may positively construct cultural meanings as well as just reaffirming them. By leading audiences to experience the emotional drama of crime and its resolution in punishment, it has been suggested that prime-time television also helps to structure our perceptions and praxes of blaming deviants. And by providing a language of condemnation it might ultimately translate into conduct, as well as feeding back into support for established institutions of the state.

Conclusions such as these should not surprise us, nor especially dismay us, but they should give us pause to consider. The ascerbic television critic Horace Newcomb once said that most of us look at TV without ever really seeing it.⁵⁵ As the content analysis presented here has tried to suggest, that may be precisely the point.

55 H Newcomb *TV: The Most Popular Art* (Garden City NY, Anchor Press, 1974), 1-24.