Copaganda:

The Correlation Between Cop Shows And Real-life Law Enforcement

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Introduction

There is an abundance of series centering around law enforcement on television. From the critically acclaimed classic *The Wire* to four-and-counting variations of navy crimes on *NCIS*. Anyone who has watched television in the last half a century is very likely to have come across several cop shows. While these shows are very common, they are absolutely not inconsequential.

On average, only 21% of Americans will have interactions with the police (Harrell, 2020), while at the same time, half of the broadcast network drama's on American television are about the police (Epstein, 2020). Thus, the police as seen on the television are the main source of information on the police for a majority of Americans. The information put out there by these cop shows is predominantly positive. The police in cop shows are the main character, the people the audience is supposed to root for, and be invested in. The portrayal of the police on television is commonly referred to as 'copaganda'. Jackson Maher defines copaganda as, "the conventional portrayal of police in media, how they represent the worldview of creators, and what message is handed off to society," (Skip Intro, 2020).

To strictly demarcate what counts as a 'cop show' and what does not, is nearly impossible. This paper looks at television series that predominantly, but not necessarily exclusively follows the work of law enforcement officers. The shows studied are prototypical of the genre.

This paper aims to analyze and examine American cop shows as a collective. Firstly, by discussing the origins of the cop show, starting with *Dragnet* in the 1950s. *Dragnet* (Webb, 1951-1959) set the stage for cop shows, building what became the conventions of the cop show genre. Then, said conventions will be examined. Nearly every cop show follows the same format, and contains the same themes. Both of which tend to oversimplify the workings of law enforcement. Lastly, the impact of cop shows on society is studied.

History of Cop Shows

Fictional Police in the 20th Century

Police have been on our screens for decades now. However, how the police were portrayed back then versus now is quite different. In the times of the silent movies in the beginning of the 20th century, the police were often portrayed as incompetent and were a source of comedy. Charlie Chaplin, a famous movie star from the silent movies era, often poked fun at the police in his works. In *The Adventurer* (1917), starring Chaplin, there is a scene with two policemen searching for an escaped criminal between the rocks of a mountain. The criminal is seen crawling under one policeman's legs. However, the policeman completely misses him as he looks up at that moment, which is played for laughs.

This trivialization of the police force was not unique to Chaplin's work. Another famous example is the 'Keystone Cops,' often spelled as the 'Keystone Kops'. Their name, a reference to Keystone Studios, where they were first created. Produced by Mark Sennett between 1912 and 1917, the Keystone Kops were a group of fictional law enforcement officers that were laughably incompetent. The Keystone Kops were usually shown falling from various things, ranging from cars to cliffs or sleeping on the job. The phrase 'Keystone Kops' is still used as a synonym for incompetency to this day. While criticizing Homeland Security's response to Hurricane Katrina in 2006, Democratic senator Liebermann said they "ran around like Keystone Kops, uncertain about what they were supposed to do or uncertain how to do it" (BBC, 2006).

The police during this time did not like the way cops were portrayed on the big screen. The International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) openly condemned the comical portrayal of the police in a resolution in 1910, believing it undermined their authority. The president of the IACP said that "in moving pictures the police are sometimes made to appear ridiculous, and in view of the large number of young people, children, who attend these moving picture shows, it gives them an improper idea of the policeman," (Reiner, 2008).

The Cooperation of The LAPD and Hollywood

Around the 1920s, the relationship between Hollywood and the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) changed. Hollywood now needed the help of the police force, to keep the reputation of its stars squeaky clean. This new cooperation became mutually beneficial, especially with the arrest of famous silent movie star Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle in the early 1920s. He was accused of the rape and manslaughter of the actress Virginia Rappe. Arbuckles trial in the case became highly publicized, and considered to be one of the first 'celebrity scandals'. The New Yorker described it as "a media bonanza" (Schulman, 2021). After two trials with hung juries, Arbuckle was fully acquitted after the third trial. However, the scandal still followed him; he was banned from the screen in Hollywood. LAPD Historian Joe Domanick said that Hollywood needed the Los Angeles Police Department on their good side to ensure discretion when it came to "carousing wild men like Errol Flynn and homosexual stars [who] were constantly being picked up by the LAPD but never booked." (Thomas, 2018). This cooperation builds the fundamentals that current cop shows are still standing on.

The First Cop Show: Dragnet

In 1951 *Dragnet* showed up on the screen. Originally starting out as a radio show, a few years later it was adapted for television considering its immense popularity (Rosenberg, 2016). This show is considered to be the first cop show in the genre as we know it today. *Dragnet* follows a gritty LAPD detective named Joe Friday, portrayed by Jack Webb, who also created the show. Webb wanted to create a police show that portayed police work as accurately as possible. The show emphasized the importance of following standard operating procedures and techniques. *Dragnet* opened every episode with the line, "The story you are about to see is true. The names have been changed to protect the innocent" to drive home the supposed realism of the show. This is similar to *Law & Order* (1990-), starting their episodes with the famous "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups. The police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who

prosecute the offenders. These are their stories." *Dragnet* helped to establish the formula for cop shows that we are familiar with today, including the focus on solving crimes and the portrayal of police officers as heroic figures.

Jack Webb as Joe Friday on *Dragnet* (1951-1959)

Dragnet's cooperation with the LAPD

To achieve the realism of *Dragnet*, Jack Webb enlisted the help of real-life police officers. At the time of *Dragnet's* production, the LAPD's chief was a man named William H. Parker, who would turn the LAPD into one of America's most powerful police forces (Domanick, 1995). One of the ways he managed to succeed in that was through the Hollywood glamorization of police. Joe Domanick writes that Parker, "had always hated the Hollywood image of the police. In the teens and 1920s, that image was of the Keystone Kops, of buffoons. By the '30s, they were worse than buffoons. They'd become corrupt, brutal oafs, while gangsters in movies like "Little Caesar," "Scarface" and "Public Enemy" were portrayed as romantic anti-heroes."

In a way, Jack Webb and William H. Parker needed each other. Webb needed the stories from LAPD detectives to base his show on. He needed technical advice to make the show appear realistic. Parker needed the media to make his LAPD seem powerful, honest, and competent. Parker agreed to cooperate, under one condition. The LAPD needed control of the script. They had the right to veto any part of the show that showed the department in a bad light, and if they had any recommendations, Webb would decidedly work that into the episode (Domanick, 1995). Rosenberg at The Washington Post shares this example, "If the department

objected to something, such as the depiction of a woman dying from an illegal abortion, the entire episode might be scrapped," to illustrate the influence the LAPD had over the television show.

In addition to the information provided by the LAPD, Webb also received financial help from the department (Rosenberg, 2016). The department recognized the potential of the series to improve public perceptions of law enforcement and provided Webb with unprecedented access to its resources. For example, the show used actual police cars, equipment, and locations for filming, and LAPD officers frequently appeared as extras on the show. The LAPD's collaboration with *Dragnet* helped to establish the series as a definitive representation of police work, and it played a significant role in shaping the public's perception of law enforcement.

From the first moment of creation, *Dragnet* was intended to give a real, authentic view of the LAPD, with the negativity and brutality skillfully ignored. The realism of the show was convincing enough, it became the only view people, especially locals had of the LAPD. "*Dragnet* helped conceal the LAPD's police brutality problem for all but the last year of Parker's 16-year tenure," (Shine, 2018). Coming from the era of the Keystone Kops, real cops were glad to see themselves represented positively on the screen, and audiences were quick to change their views from buffoon cops to heroic cops like Joe Friday. In a Time Magazine article from 1954, the author writes that "the U.S. completely forgets that it is a nation of incipient cop haters when its eyes are glued on Webb's show," (Jack, Be Nimble!, 1954). Joe Friday became the poster child of the LAPD, and Jack Webb, his creator, was essentially seen as an honorary cop, himself. For one year, he was on a civilian panel interviewing potential new police officers. "Such publicity persuaded viewers that there was little difference between Webb's LAPD and the agency," (Shine, 2018).

Naked City: Dragnet's Counterpart

But *Dragnet* was not the only cop show on television at this time. Where the West Coast had *Dragnet*, the East Coast had the popular *Naked City* (Silliphant, 1958-1963) . In the mid-20th century there was a distinction between how television portrayed the Los Angeles Police Department and the New York Police Department. Joe Domanick describes the difference as, "While the NYPD and its officers would be portrayed on TV as grimy, disheveled burnouts, Webb's Joe Friday would be a clean, neat,

unassailably honest, coolly polite, militaristically efficient, by-the-book professional - a persona that would become the LAPD's signature all over America'' (Domanick, 1995). Where LAPD in the West would show the criminals as nothing but a plotpoint, a bad guy to lock up, *Naked City* would start their episodes showing the life of the soon-to-be criminal. It would show what led this person to commit a crime. In the very first episode, the soon-to-be criminal is described by a voiceover as, "Arturo Guiterez is not a bad boy, he is a poor boy, a hungry boy, possibly even an inpatient boy. But mostly he is a divided boy, like this morning's breakfast, one quarter milk, divided seven ways." The take on the police on *Naked City* is much more liberal, compared to the depiction of the LAPD. But in many cases, the criminals are still seen as inherently evil, a one-dimensional bad guy. Another parallel between the western *Dragnet* and eastern *Naked City*, is the emphasis on trying to convince the audience that these are true stories. Similarly to *Dragnet* introducing their episodes stating word-for-word that the story is true, *Naked City*'s ending monologue goes as follows, "There are eight million stories in the naked city. This has been one of them". The first episode of the show also opens with assuring the audience that the episode was not photographed in some studio. Quite the contrary, the actors played out their roles in the streets, in the apartment houses, in the skyscrapers of New York itself. These are the buildings in their naked stones, the people without makeup".

Dragnet's influence on subsequent police procedural series cannot be overstated. The show's commitment to realism and accuracy set a standard for future crime dramas, and its influence can be seen in contemporary shows such as *Law & Order*, *NCIS,* and *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. *Dragnet's* emphasis on following established procedures and protocols in police work has also influenced the way in which fictional law enforcement agencies operate today, as is seen in modern television shows where the cops spend their nights finishing paperwork or go to the hassle of receiving a warrant.

These shows often portrayed the police as heroic and just, and helped to create a more favorable public perception of law enforcement. However, as society has become more critical of police practices, police shows have come under scrutiny for perpetuating harmful stereotypes and promoting a narrow view of law enforcement.

Real police in the 20th century: Vollmer's Influence on the Berkely Police Department

The police in the United States have changed immensely since the 1900s, as has the public opinion on the police. The police, as it is known now, can be traced back to 1909, California, when August Vollmer became the chief of the police department in the Californian city, Berkeley. Vollmer was a veteran of the Spanish-American War in the Philippines in 1898. Vollmer's influence on the American police force transformed it into a military-like organization. This fashioning after the Army was on purpose, "For years, ever since Spanish-American War days, I've studied military tactics and used them to good effect in rounding up crooks. After all, we're conducting a war, a war against the enemies of society." Who were those enemies? Mobsters, bootleggers, socialist agitators, strikers, union organizers, immigrants, and Black people", Vollmer said. Vollmer and his colleagues in domestic policing incorporated tactics and weapons that were previously used against Native Americans and colonized peoples in Cuba, Puerto Rico, and the Philippines into their approach. This connection has been demonstrated by sociologist Julian Go. Vollmer's training model was widely adopted by police departments all throughout the country, many of which were led and staffed by veterans of U.S. conquest and occupation. This new way of policing is referred to as the Progressive Era. During this time, the police grew to be much harsher, and bigger, as well (Lepore, 2020).

Real police in the 20th century: the Cops On Television

The emergence of *Dragnet* and other cop shows coincided with real-life police appearing on television more frequently. This was often in a bad light. " The bad guys shocked America's conscience on the nightly news: Arkansas state troopers barring Black students from entering Little Rock Central High School, in 1957; Birmingham police clubbing and arresting some seven hundred Black children protesting segregation, in 1963; and Alabama state troopers beating voting-rights marchers at Selma, in 1965," (Lepore, 2020). The broadcasting of police violence and misconduct led to more people protesting police brutality in the 1960s. At the same time, the government gave more money to the police departments. This money could

then be invested in improving the public image, as well. As previously stated, one way to achieve this was through funding productions for televisions.

The “War on Crime” is a well-known phrase in American culture, along with the “War on Drugs”. The War on Crime is a campaign originating back to 1965, when President Lyndon Johnson asked Congress to pass the Law Enforcement Assistance Act. The act was intended to authorize the U.S. Attorney General to help fund the training of law enforcement officers from various agencies. The goal was to improve crime control (Law Enforcement Assistance Act of 1965 […] Office of Justice Programs). The act led to local police forces being supplied with military-grade weapons by their federal government. These were the same weapons that were used in the war in Vietnam at the same time (Lepore, 2020).

The Vietnam War is considered to be the first war the United States was involved in that was met with opposition by the people. The opposition began in 1965 with demonstrations, and over the years, it developed into a social movement, focusing on anti-war sentiments and criticizing the government (Lunch & Sperlich, 1979). The opposition to the Vietnam War was a gateway to criticizing the domestic issues the United States was facing. In August 1965, riots started in Watts, California. The civil unrest was motivated by allegations of police abuse. During the six days of riots, law enforcement officers killed 31 people and made over 4000 arrests. The chief of the LAPD at the time, William H. Parker, compared fighting the protesters to fighting the Viet Cong (Lepore, 2020).

Real police in the 20th century: Anti Police Movements

Phrases like “abolish the police'' and “defund the police'' have gained notoriety in recent years, especially since the killing of George Floyd in the summer of 2020. The rallying cry can be traced back to 1988, however. The same year in which the popular hip hop group N.W.A. released the song Fuck Tha Police. The beginning of the police abolitionist movement arguably began with the ending of a controversial police program named STRESS. Inspired by the writings of political scientist James Q. Wilson, Detroit started the new policy Stop The Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets in 1971. Wilson argued that the police should focus more on maintaining order instead of law enforcement. At the same time, he suggested that people committing petty

crimes should be arrested, he thought that these people contributed to more serious crimes (Wilson, 1968). Detroit's STRESS program had undercover cops attempting to lure out criminals. While the STRESS unit only existed for three and a half years, it was responsible for the killing of 24 men, 22 of which were African-Americans Merriman (2017). An organization of Black police officers united together and demanded that the STRESS unit ends (Lepore, 2020).

The Aim of Realism in Cop Shows

Ripped From The Headlines

The creating process of *Dragnet* showed that from the beginning of the cop show genre, the creators aimed for a guise of realism over their work. Input from real police officers on the script, storyline, props, and other details was how the show achieved that. Another way to create the feeling of realism is to simply take real life events and turn it into a script. The show *Law & Order* (Wolf, 1990-) is known to copy cases from real life and transform it into a chilling episode. The creator of the show, Dick Wolf, himself, has said that he does not worry about a lack of inspiration, even after three decades and several spin-offs of the *Law & Order* franchise. In an interview, Wolf stated that "we can't come up with any stories better than a headless body found in a topless bar" (Gallagher, 2008). He referred to the front page of the New York Post as the "Bible" for the show. The team behind *Law & Order* finds their inspiration in the headlines from the newspapers, but only the headlines. "We steal the headline but not the body copy. But what usually reminds people of a specific case is the headline but if you think of what goes on after that, it usually doesn't reflect reality," Wolf added (Gallagher, 2008). This method allows the shows to capitalize on the audience's familiarity with actual cases and incidents, creating a sense of immediacy and relevance.

This connection to current events strengthens the perception that the series accurately reflects the work of law enforcement. As Jackson Maher argues, "I think when these shows rip their storylines from the headlines and tie themselves to real police agencies, they adopt an unmistakable tone of authenticity and realism. These shows aren't called the fictional police of Metropolis. They're called things like *Chicago PD, FBI, S.W.A.T.*, and *East New York*, these take place in real places and insert real things like fentanyl to double down on that perception of legitimacy." (Skip Intro, 2023).

Throughout the show, several famous cases have been covered on the show. On *Law & Order*: *Criminal Intent*, episode six on the sixth season, titled Masquerade, a young pageant girl is murdered. The investigation takes some turns but confidential details point the detectives to the real perpetrator (Wolf, 2006). This case closely resembles the case of JonBenét Ramsey, who was murdered in 1996. The case of JonBenét Ramsey has been in the spotlight since it happened, as it is still considered unsolved (Flynn, 2023).

Incorporating ripped-from-the-headlines storylines in police dramas like *Law & Order* contributes to the illusion of authenticity. By drawing inspiration from real-life events, these shows create a sense of familiarity and relevance, enabling viewers to connect the depicted scenarios with their own experiences and knowledge. The ability to address contemporary issues and explore ethical complexities adds depth to the series, making it both entertaining and thought-provoking. In addition to finding ideas in the news, show productions to this day still use the police themselves for guidance. It is still customary for cop shows to have real police officers in the writing room as consultants for their stories (Grady, 2021).

Use of Celebrities

In addition to taking real-life stories and implementing them into their storylines, television shows are also known to take famous people and have them portray themselves on the show. By mixing fictional and authentic elements in the stories, these shows are blurring the lines between reality, and their fabricated world.

This world that the show portrays only becomes more convincing. One example of this occurrence happened on the show *Madam Secretary* (Hall, 2014-2019). While not focused on the police exclusively, the show about a fictional Secretary of State still carries political value, as do cop shows. In the premiere of the show's fifth season, three former real-life Secretaries of State appeared. Madeleine Albright, Hillary Clinton, and Colin Powell all gained a special guest show on the show. Having these famous, real-life people on a fictional show adds to the legitimacy of the world shown, and in addition to that, it can also be seen as a kind of endorsement. It

triggers the idea that, if 'the' Hillary Clinton, who has been in the political spotlight for decades, interacts with the fictional characters, there must be some core of truth to it. It must be accurate. *Law & Order: SVU*, has been the stage for special appearances of Rudy Guiliani, Michael Bloomberg, and Joe Biden, all appearing as themselves. The popular show *NCIS* (Bellasario, 2003-) also managed to include special guest stars on screen. In the thirteenth season of the show, Michelle Obama makes an appearance. At the height of its popularity, according to The Guardian (Heritage, 2016), it reached into the living rooms of millions of Americans. The Obama's are known to appear on a variety of different media, from *MythBusters* to the Nickelodeon show *iCarly*. The Guardian's television specialist Stuart Heritage described the appearance on *NCIS* an "incredibly dry government-sanctioned infomercial". (Heritage, 2016).

Similarly to how both the LAPD and *Dragnet* benefited from their cooperation, both CBS, the network that airs *NCIS*, and the Obama's have interest in the special episode. Seeing the First Lady on a fan-favorite drama series would help the ratings, and at the same time, Obama had the chance to reach a different category of audiences, one that may not be as engaged in political discussions (Heritage, 2016). The producer of *NCIS*, Gary Glasberg, has said that the episode was not only intended for entertainment but also to send a message to and about real-life military families in The United States, "Whenever we can do a story that supports and explains the difficulties that our military families, we embrace it and we want people to understand", (Bentley, 2016).

This is yet another aspect of television shows becoming more convincing that what is happening on the screen is the equivalent of the real world, pushing the perception of reality.

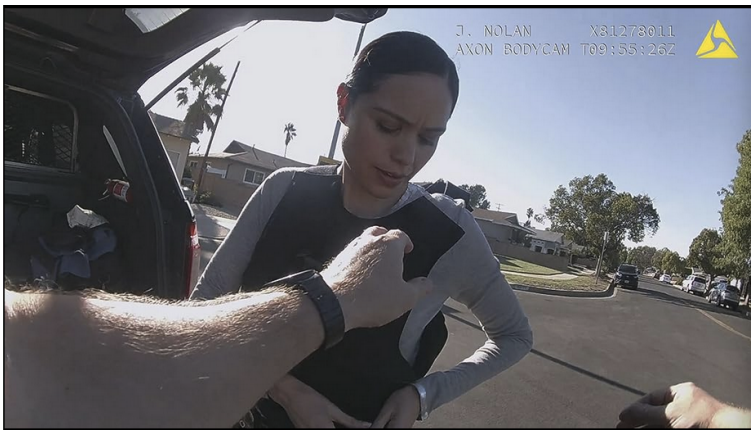
Michelle Obama on *NCIS*.

Camera Use & Body Cams

The use of 'shaky cam' is popular among drama television series, particularly cop shows. The camera appears handheld and shows a lot of movement to the viewer, it gives it a chaotic and unfocused view. Shaky cam is often used in cop shows, specifically during action sequences. The creators of the cop show *NYPD Blue* have said that they use shaky cam to simulate the detective's point of view, to give the episodes a hyper realistic feel (Chapman et al., 1994). Gary Needham from Syracuse University wrote in a paper about the production style of *The Shield* that shaky cam gives the impression of something more real, instead of a carefully crafted production. Cop shows that utilize production choices such as the shaky cam, influences the viewers experience as if "we were watching a form of documentary or news; something akin to a front line experience of LAPD's war on crime." (Needham, 2012).

The ABC cop show, *The Rookie* (Hawley, 2018-), takes this concept of the shaky cam and expands on it. Much of the footage seen on the show is viewed from the police officers' body cam or dashcams. The body cam footage throws the audience right into the action, as Needham argued, it highlights the supposed authenticity of the events. The presence of the body cams is also a big part of the story in *The Rookie*, often used as a plot device. They are explicitly talked about in many episodes, from Officer Nolan, the main character, explaining to his new trainee that they should always be wearing their body cams the moment they leave the car, to reviewing arrests, Nolan says, "I looked at the body cam footage, that is a take-down any one of us has done a hundred times". Body cams as a tool police can use to do their jobs is heavily supported by *The Rookie*, showing both the importance and convenience it carries. The show tells the audience that bodycams keep police accountable. The rise and support of body cams in real life has also reached new heights in the real world. Data shows that 93% of the American public supports the use of body cams, 66% believes that, with the use of body cams, police will behave more appropriately (Mitchell, 2020). In reality, however, there is yet to be found strong evidence that body cams have a positive effect on policing. A 2017 analysis on body cam use, found that body cams "do not seem to affect other police and citizen behaviors in a

consistent manner, including officers' self-initiated activities or arrest behaviors" (Lum et al., 2020). On *The Rookie*, body cams are, along with other gadgets, a good thing. They help the officers catch the bad guys, the tools are effective and necessary. The message this gives is that better equipment is important for police, and it is also good for the communities they work in.



This screenshot from *The Rookie*, season 4, episode 8, shows the view the audience sees from the body cam. As stated, this footage is seen often in the show. In the top right corner, it says the name of the officer the body cam belongs to and below that, "Axon Body Cam". Axon is a real company that has had a near-monopoly on supplying the police with technology such as body cams or Tasers (Brustein, 2018). Since 2018, the Axon company has owned almost 80% of contracts with the U.S. law enforcement (Lacy, 2021).

While this detail of the company name on the screen is easily overlooked, it is still part of the show. It supports the idea that technology, and in turn, funding for technology, will only improve policing. The use of the Axon name only blurs the lines between the fictional world and the real world, making it even easier to influence perceptions of police in its audience.

Fentanyl on TV: Lines Between Fiction and Reality Are Blurred

A specific case of the ripped-from-the-headlines phenomenon is the presence of fentanyl. Fentanyl has been an issue in the United States, recently, and police shows have been quick to include it in their episodes. This chapter compares and contrasts the representation of fentanyl on fictional cop shows to the reality of fentanyl.

The Fentanyl Panic

In recent years, the United States have had a worsening drug crisis going on. According to American University, it is the deadliest drug crisis in US history (Housman, 2023). This driving factor behind this current crisis is the drug fentanyl, which has a daily death count of 200 Americans. In 2021, 100.000 Americans died of a drug overdose which involved fentanyl (Keating & Bernstein, 2021). As outlined above, many cop shows will take their inspiration from current events, and the fentanyl crisis is no different. Like many news stories, fentanyl has a lot of misinformation surrounding it. The most famous myth is concerning the risk of incidental exposure to fentanyl. It is often believed that simply touching or inhaling the drug will cause symptoms of an overdose, such as shortness of breath, heart palpitations, or fainting. None of these symptoms, however, are consistent with drug overdoses (Beletsky et al., 2020). Scientific research has long debunked the rumors of fentanyl posing such a risk. However, even the Drug Enforcement Administration, DEA, has been complicit in the spread of misinformation on fentanyl. In an internal warning to law enforcement officers in 2016, the DEA stated that “a very small amount ingested, or absorbed through your skin, can kill you.” (DEA, 2016). There have been multiple recorded cases of people allegedly experiencing overdose symptoms, all while it is proven that “fentanyl does not pose a risk through accidental skin contact or proximity” (Marino, 2022). A news report from WSMV4: “She said her body went numb within 10 minutes after picking up the dollar. She said she could barely talk or breathe before passing out...(they) believe the dollar she picked up was laced with fentanyl." (Allen, 2022). The New York Times in 2021:

“Deputy Faiivae tested three bags found in a suspect's car using a portable narcotics analyzer in the back of the patrol vehicle...the first two bags tested presumptive positive for fentanyl...when he stood up 'he began to feel lightheaded and fell down'...he was administered four doses of Narcan...Deputy Faiivae's field training officer recounted that Deputy Faiivae 'was OD'ing the whole way to the hospital.” (Paz, 2021).

The Fictional Side of Fentanyl

The myth of contact exposure has often been perpetuated on television shows. In recent years, several television shows have included episodes centering around fentanyl. From medical drama’s such as *Chicago Med* and *The Resident*, to the mainstream cop shows, like *Law & Order*: *SVU*, *NCIS*, and *The Rookie.*

One episode in the third season of *Chicago Med* (Wolf & Olmstead, 2015-) from 2018 handled fentanyl. The episode is filled with inaccurate information about the drug. “even absorbed through the skin, fentanyl can cause mental status changes and respiratory distress”. Later in the same episode, the hospital administrator explains, “even a minute amount inhaled or absorbed through the skin can cause an overdose, and even death”. *S.W.A.T.* (Ryan, 2017-) has said, “you touch the pure stuff without wearing gloves, you can say good night”. In an episode of *Blue Bloods*, a cop picks up a tray with small amounts of heroin traced with fentanyl on it during a house search. In the next scene, she appears to be overdosing, struggling with breathing and losing consciousness. In an *NCIS Hawai’i* (Nash, 2021-) episode from 2022, a man dies from a fentanyl overdose by stepping barefoot into a tide pool that had traces of fentanyl in it. The medical examiner claims that the drug entered his bloodstream through abrasions on his feet. In reality, even by covering both your hands in concentrated fentanyl patches, it would still take fourteen minutes to receive the standard dose of fentanyl, according to Dr. Ryan Marino (Ryan Marino, MD, 2023). An NCIS officer later explains his personal experience with Fentanyl. Special Agent Boone tells how one his old partner found two kids who had overdoses on fentanyl, and attempted life saving measures, as training dictates. As a result of mouth-to-mouth resuscitation, his old partner dies as well. “Gave the kids mouth-to-mouth, and just like that [he

snaps his fingers], stopped breathing. Just from the residue on their lips''. This episode appears to be based on a fentanyl-related news story from March 2022, “Possible fentanyl overdose lands students on spring break in Florida hospitals' ' (CBS News, 2022). In this case, two young people attempted CPR on their friend who had overdosed and because of that, according to the police, they were exposed to the drug, as well. The Journal of Emergency Medicine responded to this statement and said that “two of the victims absorbed enough fentanyl to overdose while performing CPR and mouth to mouth resuscitation are dubious and scientifically extremely unlikely” (Taxel, 2022).

The exaggerated portrayal of fentanyl and its risks on fictional television series will only strengthen the perceived fentanyl panic in the audience. The treatment of fentanyl on television is part of the discussion on how police are portrayed on television. The risks of fentanyl being magnified, is along the same line of the importance and effectiveness of the police having been magnified over the years.

The Formats and Tropes

Varieties and Similarities

Over the past 70 years, there has been a wide variety of American television shows centering around police work. There are Navy cops on *NCIS*, detectives with quirky sidekicks on *Castle, Psych, The Mentalist*, shows that pay extra attention to the forensic part of criminal investigations, like *CSI* or *Bones* and there are even shows where serial killers help out the police, like *Dexter* or *Hannibal*. With such an array of differences it is to be expected that these shows would vary from each other. However, it is the case that there are many similarities between the different shows in this genre. There are several commonalities, from character traits to set design, that appear in the majority of cop shows. This chapter will explore numerous aspects, including story arcs and tropes, found in network television shows centering on police or criminal investigations.

The Use of Language and Flow of the Story.

With the exception of a handful of shows, like the popular sitcom *Brooklyn Nine Nine*, almost all cop shows run for roughly 42 minutes. Television in this genre and on network television is often episodic. Episodic television means that every episode presents a new story. In cop shows it's often a new crime, and this story is always resolved by the end of the episode. In more recent years, along with the rise of streaming, more television has become serialized, focusing on season-long arcs. On streaming platforms, shows are often released all at once and the viewer is able to watch it all back-to-back. On network television, shows tend to air weekly. "Because they require a new case, situation, or monster each week, episodic dramas tend to be workplace shows. They're about detectives, doctors, lawyers, vigilantes, ghostbusters…. professions which operate on a "case-by-case" basis." (O'Connor, 2021). By having each episode be able to exist on its own as a story, the episodes are ideal for reruns and to appeal to new viewers who don't need backstory to understand and enjoy the show. In addition to episodes each containing a singular story, another reason why shows follow the same formats is to keep the audience interested. By following the conventions of the genre and delivering on the

expectations of the audiences since it is known that this format is simply successful, Television developed into something that has "inherent repetitions and thematic recurrences of each specific genre" (Badia&Brumme, 2014; and Wolff, 1984).

The format of episodic drama's even find their origins with police procedurals, specifically. *Dragnet*, starting off as a descendant of a radio show, is one of the earliest examples of the episodic format on television. According to the WGA, *Dragnet* predates formal act structure as what we see on contemporary television. The show did, however, have three set commercial breaks during the hour-long episode, something still discernible on television now. By the last commercial break, *Dragnet* would have made it to the courtroom part of the criminal justice process. Right before the break the evidence would be presented to the jury. But to know what the jury's final verdict is, the viewer would have to wait and come back after the commercials for closure (O'Connor).

Dragnet as the Leading Example

Dragnet's narrative structure already followed the conventions of the police procedural genre as we know it now. The lead cops would tackle a new case each episode, following standard, and realistic, police procedures and techniques to investigate the crime, gather evidence, and as is still seen in the format today, the episodes often concluded with the arrest and prosecution of a criminal. The show's emphasis on following established procedures and protocols was a key distinguishing factor from other crime dramas at the time, entirely intentional on Webb's part. On the other side of this clinical approach is a sense of shallowness. The episodes consistently end with the bad guy being arrested, simple as that. As Jackson Maher puts it, "Criminals were treated with little to no empathy. *Dragnet* was intensely uncurious about the conditions that led to crime or the people who committed them. Opting instead to paint the police as the one thing that stood between the viewers and the powers of evil." (Skip Intro, 2020).

The following cop shows, after *Dragnet*, would adopt a more standard formatting, opening with being presented with a new case, or a dead body being discovered, the investigation that follows and ending with a satisfying ending with the crime being solved, the perpetrator arrested, and occasionally being convicted. Earlier shows

would follow a three-act structure beginning with a teaser, as seen below. Soon after this would shift into four separate acts (WGA, 2021). The show, *Adam-12*, dating back to the early 1970s, and being a direct follow-up to *Dragnet* created by Jack Webb as well, is an example of the shifting formatting between *Dragnet* and later television. The three breaks in the episode are still visible but the episode becomes more clearly split up. Cop shows in the 1980s such as *Hill Street Blues* and *Cagney & Lacey,* turned to the four-act structure, leaving the teaser behind during this decade. The teaser becomes part of the four-act structure during the 1990s, mixing all previous formats together. In the 2000s however, television went to another change. Televisions become equipped with the feature that allows the viewer to record and rewatch programs; the DVR, and streaming is slowly but surely becoming more important on the stage. The need for more commercial breaks than there were at that moment arose. Four acts became five or six, still including the teaser. The teaser is one of the most distinct aspects of the cop show genre, easily recognizable within the first few minutes of an episode. The camera will focus on unknown characters doing mundane things such as having dinner or walking on the street, when suddenly they come across a dead body. Usually the shocking discovery will transition back to the characters we know, doing their own thing. This scene will be the setup of the personal storyline, outside of the case in that episode. 'Cold opens' like this are part of an abundance of recent cop shows for the past three decades, such as *Castle, Law & Order,* and *Criminal Minds.*

A three-act format, including a teaser. Utilized in the early 1960s.

A four-act format. Popular during the 1980s

A four-act format, this time including the original teaser. Mostly used in the 1990s.

A fifth (occasionally sixth) act is added to the previous format. Since the 2000s. (O'Connor, 2021, WGA).

The Content of the Acts

In the paper, Subtitling stereotyped discourse in the crime TV series *Dexter* (Manos Jr., 2006-2013) and *Castle* (2009), Badia and Brumme look at several episodes of the shows *Dexter* and *Castle* and investigate how these series follow the expectations of the genre through the use of language and sequence of events, and how this leads to "the use of recurrent, stereotypical language in these audiovisual products''. (Badia&Brumme, 2014). In addition to the lexicon, Badia & Brumme also argue that by following the genre conventions to create the sense of recognition, it is also necessary for shows to offer something new and original to become successful. Shows do that by taking the basic format and add a twist to it. The show *Castle* (Marlowe, 2009-2016) does so by having a mystery writer tag along with the police investigations. *Dexter* gives the genre something else by making the lead character secretly be a serial killer.

The format of cop shows already showed that there is not much room for complexity or intricate details. A crime needs to be solved in 42 minutes, after all. As established, most cop shows follow the same five act structure. Even if the subjects of the shows wildly differ, the contents of the acts are still similar.

The episode opens with the crime that the rest of the episode will focus on. In the pilot of *Castle*, the murderer is putting flowers on the body of the girl that has just

been killed, staging the scene. The first three minutes of *NCIS* shows a Navy Commander being poisoned while on Air Force One.

Modern procedural cop shows will intertwine the characters' personal lives with the case they are currently working on. Act one thus tends to open on the main characters either being outside of work, or finishing up a previous case. The first act introduces the characters to the crime. The viewer follows the investigators coming up to the crime scene, where other police officers and medical examiners are already working on the crime scene. The investigators will ask what has been discovered so far, a way to deliver exposition to the viewer at the same time about the case.

The following few acts will focus on the investigation. The medical examiner will explain to the investigators how the victim died and what other forensic evidence was found. Especially when investigations talk about specific medical jargon or procedures, this needs to be explained to the audience. The character will first state their findings and conclusions and it will be followed up by an explanation in layman's terms. Dexter elaborates, "and that's important because…?" "Sure sign of post-mortem severance. Meaning: the victim was already dead when she was relieved of her fingertips," in the second episode. "So what's the evidence of sex?" "Traces of spermicide." The other characters have a confused look on their face. The medical examiner continues, "The guy wore a condom" in *Castle*, second episode. The use of medical terminology gives the speaker a sense of authority, as they sound like an expert who knows what they are talking about. The paraphrasing to something more colloquial ensures the viewer still follows the story, but also makes the crime and crime-solving more straightforward.

By the final act, the investigators will have apprehended the perpetrator. All the dots have been connected, the evidence processed, and confessions have been made. The episode ends with the case closed, and the characters moving on to the next thing in life, whether that is personal or the next crime.

The formulaic nature of the cop shows, that is found in nearly every single one of them, oversimplifies the work of the police by miles. The audience takes this message, and believes it to be accurate. A former Homicide Task Force commanding officer for the NYPD has said that the oversimplification of criminal investigations has harmful consequences. "He said because everything is done so quickly on

television, real-life detectives are pressured by the public to do everything at high speed as well," (Miller, 2009).

The Hero Cop

Perhaps the most prevalent trope in cop shows is that of the 'hero cop'. The online archive TVTropes describes this character as, "this is a cop's cop. He is incorruptible, competent, and feared by evildoers. If he is not Da Chief it is likely because either he is too young, or his path is blocked by Obstructive Bureaucrats who fear him for obvious reasons." The hero cop can be found in nearly every cop show, dating back to Joe Friday in *Dragnet* to Olivia Benson in *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. In reality, nearly 80% of Americans believe this applies to real police officers, too. A study shows that 79% of Americans believe police officers care about them all of the time and they believe that police officers provide fair and accurate information (Murphy, 2019). This image has been reinforced in nearly every fictional police officer in the last century.

Humanizing The Police Officer

Jack Webb, with the help of FBI director J. Edgar Hoover, shaped the origins of the heroic police officer in the 1950s and 1960s. In 1971, former LAPD officer Joseph Wambaugh wrote a novel building further onto the trope, but making the cops complex, humanized characters instead. Wambaugh was a LAPD officer during the *Dragnet* era, well aware of the censoring policies surrounding police fiction. His book, *The New Centurions,* still portrayed the cops heroically, but it also had a focus on the human side of cops, their personal struggles and flaws such as alcoholism and emotional outbursts. Wambaugh was aware that his book would not be approved by the LAPD, as it undermined the "sanitized portrayal" (Rosenberg, 2016) Hoover and Webb had worked to create (Rosenberg, 2016). Wambaugh also created the cop shows Police Story and The Blue Knight, police here were portrayed similarly, as "working class heroes with anxious lives and strained marriages," (The Take, 2020). The portrayal of cops as superhumans had been replaced by the portrayal of cops as regular people, something that much of the audience could relate to and see themselves in. The changing themes in police stories helped the audiences'

perception of cops as sympathetic people who heroically and selflessly risk their lives for the public's safety. Whereas American film and television used to be filled with private investigators and defense attorneys fighting for the innocent and falsely accused, with the rise of police as protagonists, the angle of the stories has changed from against the system to becoming the system.

Special Agent Gibbs on *NCIS*

Crossing Lines Seen as Justified

The hero cop is often seen breaking the rules and ignoring the procedures; entering without warrants, excessive force, avoiding involving lawyers. From Detective Elliot Stabler beating up suspects on the street or even in the interrogation rooms on *Law & Order: SVU* to Detectives Ryan and Esposito in *Castle* pretending they heard yelling so they can kick down the door without a warrant. All these choices are always framed as justified. After all, we are rooting for the cops to succeed for them to arrest the bad guy and get justice for the victims.

The activist organization Color Of Change looked at just how often rules are broken by cops on television. A study examined the wrongful actions committed by the police in over twenty popular cop shows in the 2017-2018 tv season. The acts considered 'wrongful actions' include the categories coercion & intimidation, violence & abuse, lying & tampering, corruption, rule violations, illegal searches, and overt racism. They found that "Most series depicted CJP [AN: Criminal Justice

Professionals; cops] wrongful actions as routine, harmless, necessary—or even noble—in the pursuit of justice, rather than as problematic, harmful, counterproductive or warranting judgment and accountability." (Color Of Change, 2020). In fact, in 18 out of a total of 26 shows studied, the police protagonists committed more wrongful actions than the criminals they were after. Because of this, the actions were framed in such a way that shows them as "relatable, forgivable, acceptable, and ultimately good (Color Of Change, 2020).

Every so often, an episode does come along where a cop is called out on their problematic behavior and the story arc occasionally ends with the character arrested or fired. When a bad cop is shown, they are made to be an outwardly corrupt cop. As opposed to the actions being framed as understandable, the bad cop is clearly racist, or greedy or disloyal.

For example, when Officer Doug Stanton is introduced as a training officer in the third season of *The Rookie*, he instantly racially profiles a civilian on the street, along with making a racist comment, "we wouldn't have half the problems we have if more of them behaved like that one". When in the first season, a main character, Officer Tim Bradford exhibited racist behavior similar to this, stopping a car of Hispanic men and making insulting comments, it was framed as nothing but a lesson for his training officer, making it okay. The character of Doug Stanton becomes increasingly overt in his corrupt behavior, emphasizing the contrast between the main characters, who are supposedly good and the bad cop, who should be seen as an exception, a bad apple. Near the end of his run Stanton uses physical violence on an innocent person, this is not what causes his downfall, however. When his partner, a black man, gets attacked, Stanton is discovered to not have made an effort to stop it, instead allowing him to be beaten up. This leads to him being placed on administrative leave, still being allowed to keep his job. When he begins working at a new precinct, his previous partner openly tells his new coworkers what had happened. Note that it is not Stanton's consistent use of excessive force and racist actions that are shown to be the problem, it is the fact that he did not help his fellow police officer. This episode ends on a victorious note for the main characters, most of which are also guilty of abuse of power. That is not seen as problematic, though. The shows convey the idea that the actions of the hero cop are inherently just and good since it is done by the

cop in the name of pursuing justice. As Detective Danny Reagan said on *Blue Bloods:* "If I got to bend the rules a little bit to get a bad guy off the street, I'm gonna do it."

Defense Attorneys As The Villains

Defense attorneys are a crucial part of the justice system. A defense attorney represents the defendant in lawsuits or criminal prosecution. New York University describes the role of defense attorneys within the justice system as the attorneys serving "as a bulwark against these errors and injustices," (NYU, 2021). The errors referenced are people not being advised of their rights, individuals being misled by the police, discrimination, or "other untoward motivations''. All of which could lead to being an obstacle for due process and equal treatment in the eyes of the law (NYU, 2021). Defense attorneys act as a guide for their client through legal proceedings, ensuring that they are treated correctly and that the police and prosecutors do not make mistakes throughout the process. The objective of criminal defense attorneys is to make sure that innocent people do not go to jail, and that guilty people are convicted fairly and accurately. "Defense attorneys keep the system honest," (NYU, 2021).

Historically, defense attorneys had positive representation in popular media. The famous fictional character Perry Mason, who appeared in 1933 the earliest as a main character in Erle Stanley Gardner's crime novels. This grew into radio shows, comic books, movies, and, most successfully, television shows all about the lawyer Perry Mason. In 1957 CBS first aired the legal drama and it became the epitome of lawyers on television. *Perry Mason* was the first show to make heroes of defense attorneys (Shine, 2020). This legacy grew with the series *Matlock*, airing in 1986 about a criminal defense attorney who defends his clients by finding the real perpetrator.

The reputation of defense attorneys as good guys changed with the show *Law & Order,* where they are often portrayed as villains, instead. This was a conscious decision by creator of the *Law & Order* franchise, Dick Wolf. He did not think the portrayal of heroic defense attorneys "who were getting these scumbags off" was accurate but that instead the prosecutors were the real heroes (Horton, 2022). In *Law & Order* and since many other cop shows as well, the defense attorneys are villainized, made out to be bad people who are nothing but an obstacle to pursuing justice. *Law & Order* was never subtle about this portrayal, including lines like,

“defense attorneys distort the facts. They twist evidence,” and, “I believe in things that go bump in the night, Jack. May they rot in hell, along with their attorneys,” said by the assistant district attornies Jack McCoy and Jamie Ross, respectively.

If the defense attorneys are not being villainized, it has almost become tradition for shows of the police genre to equate asking for a lawyer as an admission of guilt. The idea that a defense attorney only defends the guilty and is unnecessary if the suspect were innocent, is prevalent in cop shows. Interrogators will rattle off a compelling dialogue. The suspect will say ‘I want a lawyer’ and the interrogators will sigh as they see it as an obstacle on the road to getting a conviction and justice. The cop shows are openly hostile towards the profession. In one episode of *Castle*, police captain Roy Montgomery says, “Show him the warrant. Odds are he will lawyer up, but try to stop him”.

Even in the police sitcom *Brooklyn Nine Nine* (Goor, 2013-2021), a show far removed from the basic genre conventions seen in shows such as *Law & Order* or *Blue Bloods*, defense attorneys are still the bad guys. Being a comedy show, many lines can not be taken literally, as it is meant as a joke. However, it does represent the general view of defense attorneys in cops and cop shows. When detective Jake Peralta and Sergeant Terry Jeffords need to testify in court for a case they worked on, the district attorney tells them that the defense attorney will not make it. Jake and Terry respond, “oh, is he sore from high-fiving criminals he's gotten out of jail?” and “did he get a murderer off who then murdered him to celebrate?”. The district attorney then tells the pair of officers that the defense attorney will be replaced, Jake asks, “So who's the new sub-human piece of human garbage?” The plot of the episode revolves around Jake and the defense attorney, Sophia Perez, beginning to date for the following season. The character of Sophia gets a more positive portrayal and less one that of a villain. In her first episode she defends her profession, “Look, my job is to make you prove he did it. It's the basis of our entire justice system.”

Blue Bloods as the Epitome

The myths perpetuated in cop shows are abundant, particularly where the cops are always considered the good guys, and anyone who goes against the police, or

criticizes the police, are on the wrong side. These myths become especially evident in the CBS series *Blue Bloods* (Green, 2010-). Since 2012, two years after the pilot, *Blue Bloods* has been rated in the top 15 shows each year (Andreeva, 2023). This chapter will look at how *Blue Bloods* is a near archetype of the genre, almost a caricature.

Blue Bloods is centered around a family of cops in New York City. The patriarch of the family is the police commissioner, succeeding his own father in the position. The two sons are a detective and officer, respectively, and the daughter is a district attorney. The family and the NYPD are entirely intertwined. With the majority of the Reagan family being part of law enforcement, they are easily one of the more powerful families in New York and definitely within the NYPD. The show does not portray them that way, however. "*Blue Bloods* insists on depicting them as salt-of-the-earth, blue-collar types who don't get any special privileges," (Hudson, 2014). They are seen as a normal, relatable family, giving the NYPD a familial nature by association.

The merging of the NYPD and the nuclear family emphasizes the notion of "us versus them". The police are a family that should stick together against outsiders. When an officer is accused of using excessive force resulting in a suspect dying in custody, the daughter of the family is appointed to look into it as the district attorney. While the men in the family think it is a conflict of interest; this highlights the flaws in real-life police oversight, the police and the district attorneys are on the same team, after all (The Daily Show With Jon Stewart: Instigate, 2014). The resolution the show gives to this situation argues the opposite. According to Erin Reagan, the district attorney, it is a good thing that they can keep the investigation in-house, pushing the idea that outsiders are the enemy.

Another example found in *Blue Bloods* that perpetuates the myth of trustworthy cops is the season five episode aptly titled Excessive Force. Detective Danny Reagan follows a suspect three stories up a staircase, when he corners the man by a window, he draws his gun and threatens to throw the suspect out of the window. The suspect, a black man, sees this as an opportunity and instead, throws himself out of the window and frames Danny for police brutality. Using excessive force is something that has always been part of Danny's character, being seen as a rough and harsh cop. This time, when police brutality and excessive force is the explicit subject of the episode, it is clearly shown to be a false claim. There is an uproar in the community

speaking out against police violence, led by Reverend Potter, a black community leader. The show makes it clear that he is only speaking out against Danny as a way to gain political points, even when he knows Danny did not throw that man out of the window. Eventually, Danny is cleared of all charges when a witness comes forward. The picture painted here remains, however. Excessive Force shows police brutality to be nothing but a hoax, and anyone who speaks out against it is nothing but a manipulator out for their own gains. "*Blue Bloods* has a habit of depicting people who speak up against the police as malicious, manipulative, or deceptive," (Hudson, 2014).

Reception and Impact of Cop Shows

While cop shows, as we know them now, are almost a century old, criticism reached new heights during the summer of 2020 when the Black Lives Matter movement reached outside of activist circles and gained global notoriety. When in May, 2020, a man was killed by police violence protests erupted world wide. The Black Lives Matter movement had already been around before this, as had police violence and criticism. But during this period it became an international phenomenon and people also turned to television shows about the police as a point of interest in the discussion of police violence. The previous chapter established that cop shows almost always portray the police as good, as righteous heroes, who "are the thin blue line between order and chaos," (*CSI*: season 9, episode 10). While the argument that it is just fiction, just a television show, is often used to negate the impact of these shows and the importance of the discussion, multiple studies have shown how television can have real consequences on the real world. In this case, cop shows can have a real impact on how people view the police in the real world. The portrayal of these cops on television will translate into people's perceptions about their local police force.

This chapter will compile and analyze the impact of fictional television on the real world, and how it affects the perception people have of the police.

Critics on the Cop Show Genre

During the summer of 2020, the Black Lives Matter movement received support from all over the world, including television companies and creators. CBS, the current biggest supplier of cop shows, released a statement openly supporting Black Lives Matter. Considering the impact of cop shows on society, this statement was faced with backlash. People pointed out the irony of CBS giving a majority of its airtime to fictional police officers who often commit the same acts the movement was protesting against (Rao, 2020). Several cop shows and its creators were influenced by the movement. One person part of the television industry anonymously said, "we are taking the opportunity to examine our police shows through this lens, both in regards to what happens on screen as well as what we are doing behind the scenes,"

(Sacks, 2020). The showrunner of *Law & Order: SVU* said in an interview that the show will address the fallout of George Floyd's murder (Sacks, 2020).

The people who worked on *Brooklyn Nine Nine* also openly supported the Black Lives Matter movement and considered their own impact on police perception. On *Late Night with Seth Meyers*, actor Terry Crews, who plays sergeant Terry Jeffords on the show, said that the cast and crew "all got together on a Zoom call [...], because of what's happening in this country and we were witnessing so many abuses of power. We had some somber talks and some really, really eye-opening conversation about how to handle this season," (Terry Crews on the Future of *Brooklyn Nine-Nine*, 2020). Crews shares that the creators had already written and scrapped four episodes of the upcoming season, feeling they should start over and ensure taking the show in the right direction. Actress Stephanie Beatriz, Detective Rosa Diaz on the show, took to Twitter to show her support. She showed the receipt of her donation of $11.000 to the Black Lives Matter movement, captioning it with "I'm an actor who plays a detective on tv. If you currently play a cop? If you make tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars a year in residuals from playing a cop?" (Beatriz, 2020).

The Mean World Syndrome

The term 'mean world syndrome' wrs". In reality, however, the majority of the crimes that have been solved go to trial. as originally coined by a professor of communications, George Gerber. He used it to describe a phenomenon where people's perceptions of violence are affected by depictions of it. According to Gerbner, "people who viewed violence in the media could experience anxiety, fear, pessimism and an increased sense of awareness of perceived threats." (Straughan, 2021). During the time Gerber was working on his hypothesis, the number of violent crimes were increasing in the United States. During the 1970s, the United States suffered the highest number of murders in decades. However, ever since, violent crimes have been steadily dropping. The Bureau of Justice Statistics found that between 1993 and 2019, violent crime rates fell by 74% (Straughan, 2021). During the same time, Americans' believed that the amount of crime was only increasing. Surveys conducted by American research organization, Gallup, found that more than half of the American population believed there is more crime now, than there was

the year before (McCarthy, 2020). However, crime statistics vastly disprove this perception. This is the highest perception of violent crime since 1993.

Crime in the United States had been rising since the 1960s and 1970s, and at the same time, the amount of violence depicted in popular media, such as movies or television, increased along with real life. In the 1990s, crime rates began dropping, and have been doing so steadily ever since. This time, popular media did not follow in its footsteps, however. The amount of movie violence has only been increasing since the 1990s, according to a study done by Stetson University (Ferguson, 2014). The presence of trials has also been exaggerated by cop shows, particularly due to the *Law & Order* franchise. The courtroom is an important set within that fictional world; the intro of the series even describes it as equally important as the police themselves. "In the criminal justice system, the people are represented by two separate yet equally important groups. The police who investigate crime, and the district attorneys who prosecute the offenders. Only 3% of criminal cases make it to the trial (Canon, 2022).

The 24-hour news cycle is often brought up as an explanation of the mean world syndrome phenomenon, and that is likely to have played a part. The data concerning perception of crime, and the effects of media on people are simply insufficient. In addition to news, fictional television is also likely to contribute. Nearly half of the most popular shows of the 2022-2023 television season are about law enforcement. The shows *NCIS, FBI, Blue Bloods*, *The Equalizer*, *Chicago PD, FBI: Most Wanted, FBI: International, NCIS: Hawai'i* and *Law & Order: SVU* all make it to the top 20 (Schneider, 2023). Murders are the prevailing crimes in these shows, along with other violent crimes such as kidnapping. Dramatic storylines about crimes are simply popular among audiences (VanArendonk, 2019). Television shows about a cop sitting at their desk all day, filing paperwork about a stolen bike is just not as captivating as watching Detective Stabler chase a criminal through the streets of New York. "*Law & Order* cannot reflect that reality. It would be unwatchable! Nobody wants to watch a show were 97 episodes end with two lawyers striking a deal in a windowless room, and then you get to watch the defendant serve six months," (Oliver, 2022). But as previously stated, the amount of murders committed on television shows is much higher than the amount of murder committed in the real world. In fact, murders make up 0.005% of all crimes in the United States (Gramlich, 2020). The constant

stream of stories about the police locking up murderers and rapists gives the impression that cops are necessary and successful in stopping criminals.

The CSI Effect

Starting on October 6th, 2000, *CSI* aired on the CBS Network. Going on for several decades, up until present times, it franchised several other spin-offs with the same premises in different cities. It is the first police procedural to focus on the forensic sciences side of criminal investigations. The *CSI* shows follow the investigative work of forensic scientists, crime scene technicians, and law enforcement personnel who use scientific methods to solve complex criminal cases. The *CSI* franchise has garnered significant popularity and widespread viewership due to its engaging storytelling, meticulous attention to forensic details, and high production values.

The CSI Effect, real or not?

The so-called CSI Effect has been a point of discussion for two decades now. Simply said, it is the belief that the growing popularity of forensic science on mainstream television has the ability to affect public opinion to the degree it can influence the integrity of a criminal trial (Cole&Dioso-Villa, 2009). "Investigating the 'CSI Effect' : Media and the Litigation Crisis in Criminal Law" by Cole Dioso-Villa, explores the concept of the CSI Effect in the context of the trial process in criminal law. The authors define the CSI Effect as the perceived influence of forensic science television dramas, such as *CSI*, on jurors' expectations and behavior in the courtroom. They argue that the CSI Effect is characterized by jurors having higher expectations for forensic evidence, demanding more conclusive and sophisticated scientific proof in trials. This effect is believed to result from the portrayal of crime scene investigations in popular media, leading jurors to expect the same level of evidence and certainty in real-world cases. The authors discuss the implications of the CSI Effect on the criminal justice system, including potential challenges faced by prosecutors and the need for increased education and awareness among jurors about the limitations and realities of forensic science. “These distorted views actually affect jury verdicts: cases in which jurors would have the media influence of *CSI* and

similar television program acquittals or hung juries," (Cole&Dioso-Villa, 2009). The article emphasizes the importance of understanding the complex relationship between media, public perception, and the criminal justice system to address the challenges posed by the CSI Effect.

CSI Effect As A Myth

The phenomenon of the CSI Effect is controversial, however. Media professor at Greenboro University Kimberlianne Podlas wrote a paper arguing against the concept, titled The CSI Effect: Exposing the Media Myth. Podlas challenges the widely held belief that the popular television series has had a significant impact on the criminal justice system. She argues that the CSI Effect is largely a media myth, with limited empirical evidence to support its existence. Podlas asserts that studies examining the effect of CSI on jury decision-making have produced mixed results and that other factors, such as the quality of evidence presented in court have a more significant impact on jury decisions. Podlas suggests that the media's focus on the CSI Effect has created a misleading narrative that oversimplifies complex issues in the criminal justice system. She emphasizes the need for a more nuanced understanding of how media representations of crime and justice influence public perception and calls for further research to separate fact from fiction regarding the CSI Effect. Overall, Podlas challenges the prevailing narrative surrounding the CSI Effect and highlights the importance of critically evaluating the impact of media on the criminal justice system.

The Real-World Consequences of Law & Order

Law & Order: SVU has been on the screen since 1999. It is a spin-off of the original series *Law & Order*. It is arguably one of the most well-known police series today. *Law & Order: SVU* centers around a group of detectives who deal with cases which fall under the purview of the 'Special Victims Unit', mainly taking on sexually-based crimes.

Law & Order and *Law & Order: SVU* both have become such staples in American society that people often use it as their main source of education on the American

justice system and law enforcement. Political commentator and late night talk show host John Oliver collected several cases of this in a segment he did on *Law & Order*. "I'm not an attorney, I just watch *Law & Order* from time to time," Senator Thom Tillis said during the confirmation hearings of Judge Ketanji Brown Jackson in 2022. "My legal experience is, like, watching *Law & Order* and *Law & Order: SVU*," a CNN presenter said during a segment of the 2016 Presidential Elections. "I think an average viewer of *Law & Order* knows you're not supposed to do this," political analyst Kirsten Powers said in 2019 (Oliver, 2022).

However, the average viewer is not the only one taking information from the NBC crime drama. Warren Leight, the former executive producer of *Law & Order: SVU* was a guest on the *Law & Order: SVU* Podcast produced by NBC where he shares unexpected responses he has gotten from the show. "We've also found out over time, and this is a little anxiety-provoking for me, that a lot of cops aren't trained in how to do their job in certain cases of sexual assault, and a lot of cops get a lot of their information from watching *SVU*," (Roman, 2019). This case of police shows being used for educational purposes is not exclusive to *Law & Order: SVU*, as *Dragnet*, the original trendsetter, *Dragnet*, was used as training videos for some police departments (Shine, 2017). Yet another similarity between *Dragnet* and the *Law & Order* franchise is the close relationship with the local police departments. Dick Wolf also worked with the police to gain insights, inspiration, and authentic props. "I probably spend more time with cops than anyone who doesn't carry a badge. You meet people, you meet cops, [...]. There is a shared interest in putting away bad guys" (Dick Wolf Interview, 2003).

The police tend to be fans of the *Law & Order* shows. Actors from the show have shared being approached by police officers and praised for the work they have done on the show. Actor Jamey Sheridan, who portrays Captain James Deakins on *Law & Order: Criminal Intent* said that once when a few real homicide detectives visited the set, they thanked him personally, and that "they felt like they were being well-represented". Similarly, actor Jerry Orbach, Detective Lennie Brischoe on several shows from the *Law & Order* franchise, stated, "my favorite quote from the police is; 'keep making us look good,'" (Oliver, 2022). This portrayal does not match the reality, though. While cops enjoyed their portrayal on television, for civilians it

was a harsh shock interacting with real police that were nothing like their *Law & Order* counterparts. The nonprofit newsroom The Appeal that aims to expose the harms of the criminal legal system talked to several women who interacted with the real police regarding their sexual assaults. "'*Law & Order: SVU*' gave me the false impression that this squad cared deeply about victims and their jobs. The show is nothing more than a fantasy, as an accurate dramatization of the unit would depict detectives sitting around the station disparaging rape victims in front of their peers and pressuring them to drop their cases so they could avoid doing work," Gina Tron told The Appeal (Iannelli&O'Connor, 2021).

Olivia Benson on *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*

Positive Consequences

While *Law & Order* has created views on the legal system, which are often distorted or incorrect, it would be an injustice to the show's legacy to not address the positive impact it has had on society. The show differs from its counterparts by how it not only focuses on catching the criminal, like many cop shows, but it also shows the outcome of conviction. In addition, it places more focus on the victims who, in the case of *SVU*, were predominantly women and children. This shift led to a change in how people view crimes of abuse of sexual assault. A study conducted by Stacey Hust at Washington State University found that viewers of *Law & Order: SVU* tended to have a better understanding of consent and the causes of sexual violence compared to viewers of the shows *NCIS* and *CSI* (Hust et al., 2015). "Not only do viewers see the crime take place, they then see the perpetrator punished. The message is that, yes, this occurs, but it's bad and you can get in trouble for doing it." Hust said (Gajanan,

2019). Mariska Hargitay, Detective/Captain Olivia Benson on *Law & Order: SVU* since the pilot in 1999, is aware of the impact the show has had. said, "I have so many times encountered people that have said because of this show they knew what to do Real police in the 20th century after their assault. Because of this show, they had a rape kit done. Because of this show, they report it and had faith in that. Because of this show, most of all, they didn't feel alone anymore." (NBC, 2020). Both inspired and shocked by the contents of the show, Hargitay moved to activism. In 2004, she founded the Joyful Heart Foundation, an organization which advocates for victims of sexual and domestic abuse (Joyful Heart Foundation).

The Hero Cop as a Crook

While most of the cop shows are led by one or another embodiment of the hero cop, upholding the idea that cops are good, necessary, and justified in whatever their actions may be, there are exceptions. One exception is Vic Mackey and his colleagues on the show *The Shield* that aired from 2002 to 2008 on FX. Mackey and his colleagues are dirty cops; the show centers around their work and lives as they steal and sell drugs, shoot and frame criminals, and corrupt the ranks of the LAPD.

Difficult Men and Their Fanbase

In 1999, a new show aired on television that redefined quality television (Jerome, 2021). *The Sopranos* was one of the first mainstream television series that pushed the moral boundaries expected on television by centering around a criminal, a "nuanced antihero" (Jerome, 2021). *The Sopranos* went on to inspire several more shows with the same kind of lead character, such as *Breaking Bad, Mad Man*, and *The Shield.* The popularity of these shows can be explained through the ever-trending trope of the 'difficult man'. Coined by journalist Brett Martin in his book Difficult Men: Behind Behind the Scenes of a Creative Revolution: from the *Sopranos* and *the Wire* to *Mad Men* and *Breaking Bad*. In this book, Martin summarizes the increasing number of male protagonists on television in the 21st century who range from damaged anti-heroes to unequivocal villains, and consistently have audiences rooting for them. (Skip Intro, 2021). The definition given by Martin for the term difficult men is, "a monster, but a person that we root for and care for despite his monstrosity" (Martin, 2014). When that monster takes place in the form of a police officer, it gives

the trope of difficult men a new meaning. Police officers are supposed to be the good guys, that is also what television has been telling audiences for decades now, but Vic Mackey is violent and immoral. The show does not, and in turn the audience is not supposed to, condone Mackey's behavior, but it is still somewhat portrayed as necessary. Detective Claudette Wyms, considered a 'good cop' as she is not part of Mackey's corrupt group, says in the pilot, "What people want is to make it to their cars without getting mugged. Come home from work, see their stereo still there. Hear about some murder in the barrio, find out the next day the police caught the guy. If those things means some cop roughs up some nigger or spic in the ghetto, as far as most people are concerned it's don't ask, don't tell," expressing the idea that, even though Mackey is clearly crossing lines, his behavior is still imperative to keep the people safe and take down the bad guys.

The Shield does not attempt to excuse Mackey's behavior, it is not portraying him as a good cop. However, he is still the main character, he receives nuance to his character, while the criminals on *The Shield* are majority one-dimensional bad guys. Not all of Mackey's actions are bad or corrupt, the show also sees him genuinely care for people, or get weapons off the street without personal gain. *The Shield* posits the idea that the only way Mackey can be a good cop, is to simultaneously accept his horrendous actions as simply the only way to go about it. The profession of police officer complicates the trope of the difficult man, as the audience is supposed to both root for and condemn his actions, at the same time. Shawn Ryan, the creator of *The Shield* was interviewed for Martin's book, where he discusses Mackey's character. He said, "if I said to you: I'm going to have a story about a corrupt cop who murdered another cop and stole a bunch of money. And that there's a pretty virtuous internal affairs detective who starts digging into the case and becomes hell-bent on bringing this man to justice. Who would be the hero of that piece? But our audience viewed Vic as the hero. They wanted Vic to get away with it. They found every negative thing to say about Whitaker's character they could think of. When we wrote it, I was convinced: 'boy, we're really going to make it tough for the audience. They are not going to be sure who to root for.' I was an idiot. They knew who to root for" (Martin, 2014). The reaction of the audience shows that, even if the 'hero cop' is lacking, and the cop is explicitly a bad guy, the public will still make excuses for his behavior, will still believe this kind of behavior is necessary to keep the peace. While *The Shield*

tries to show the complexity around Mackey's corruption, it simultaneously glorifies it. The action sequences are exciting, and Mackey is seen as powerful and commanding. French filmmaker François Truffaut once said that it is impossible to make a film about war without condoning it, every film about war ends up being pro-war (Brook, 2014). The same thought can be applied to cop shows. Even when the show deliberately tries to show the dark side of police officers, the audience will still cheer them on.

Conclusion

A study published by the academic journal Criminal Justice and Behavior found that the viewers of cop shows are "more likely to believe that the police are successful at lowering crime, use force only when necessary, and that misconduct does not typically lead to false confessions," (Donovan & Klahm, 2015). The impact of cop shows on its audiences are real and have been established. The consistent portrayal of police as the inherent good guys has perpetuated the myth that simply does not correspond with reality. Eliot Stabler on *Law & Order: SVU* has a closing rate of 97%, his real-life counterpart, however, is merely 3%. Still, the cop shows use elements of reality in their shows, portraying real law enforcement agencies like the FBI, or LAPD, in real cities like Los Angeles or Washington, making these shows appear real and accurate.

Since the protests against the police in 2020, Americans -and others- have been rethinking the police as an entity, but also how police has been portrayed on screen: constantly positive. There are studies like Color of Change's looking into the lines crossed by the heroes in cop shows. There are studies researching the distorted views caused by cop shows like Hust (2015) and Donovan & Klahm (2015).

This paper has compiled the three aspects of cop shows in our world. First, how they were initially created from its history to contemporary inspiration. Second, the production and contents. Third, the response to the shows from the audience. The three components all tie into each other. The real world has served as an inspiration to the fictional cop shows, and in turn, the cop shows influence the real world, by causing the public to gain a distorted view of the police.

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