



Physical Anthropology Section – 2004

H92 Forensics and Television: A Learning Experience or Beguiling Obsession?

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This paper will examine how the recent influx of television programs with forensic science themes is changing the public awareness of the field.

This paper explores the recent increase in the popularity of forensic science on television. It will present the issues associated with the presentation of the field in the media, as well as a survey of a study group and their perceptions of the forensic science television programs.

On an average day in the Baton Rouge, Louisiana viewing area, approximately 45 hours of television programs with crime or law enforcement themes are broadcast on 26 channels. Some stations, such as Court TV, are almost entirely devoted to the subject. The programs range in reality from the fictional *Crossing Jordan* and *CSI* to those based on real cases such as the *New Detectives* and *Forensic Files*. *CSI* is currently one of the most watched drama programs on television with more than 8 million viewers per week. The new programs differ from the detective programs of the 1970s and 1980s such as *Dragnet* and *Hill Street Blues* in that forensic science has now become a major component of the programs. On programs such as *CSI*, *The New Detectives* and the *Forensic Files*, forensic science is the focus and often more details are revealed about the victims than the characters or individuals who investigate the crimes.

While the programs incorporate real science, liberties are often taken. The most common is a compression of time. Scientific tests and results may be simplified for the viewers. On the fictional programs, often the detectives may act upon their hunches or visions. Laws may be disregarded for the sake of the plot and the cameras. Finally, the limited number of characters are put in a variety of settings resulting in their being well versed in many different aspects of forensic science. It is not uncommon to see the same individual who examines blood spatter also examining a body or even interviewing suspects.

The increased interest in forensic science is in part the result of television. Major events in the past decade have focused on forensic science. The O.J. Simpson trial, the Bill Clinton and Monica Lewinsky scandal, and the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, were perhaps the three most widely chronicled of these events. In all three of the events, forensic techniques, particularly the use of DNA, were reported on regularly.

The popularity of television programs based on forensic science may be met with mixed feelings among those in forensic science fields. Questions to be considered include whether or not too many details are being revealed and what the effects of programs that take liberties with real scientific techniques are. Do these programs have the potential to create a new kind of criminal who can anticipate the investigation and prevent or contaminate evidence? Will individuals who watch these programs feel a greater competence and knowledge than they really possess and seek careers in forensic science or even attempt to be involved in a crime scene without the proper training?

A survey of university students enrolled in an introductory level anthropology class at Louisiana State University suggests that these programs are popular among this group. The students did not believe that the programs were completely accurate but a significant portion felt that the programs were 'somewhat realistic.' The majority of the students thought that they had a good understanding of the field of forensic science and that watching the programs had changed their perception of forensic science.

The popularity of these programs as evidenced by the survey of university students and the Nielsen ratings, suggests that the interest in forensic science and crime programs has become a noteworthy and influential part of popular culture, at least for the present. The use of consultants on many of the programs, both fictional and based on reality, gives the viewers the feeling of authenticity. But, as television executives bring more forensic science-based programs to the public, more liberties with the actual science may be taken to maintain the interest of the viewers. The end result may be programs that appear authoritative giving viewers a distorted picture of the forensic science profession.

Television, Forensics and the Public, Changing Perceptions