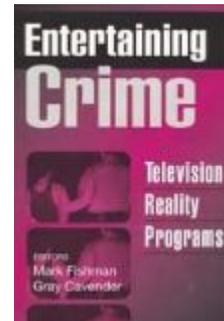


# H-Net Reviews

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Mark Fishman, Gray Cavender, eds. *Entertaining Crime: Television Reality Programs*. New York: Aldine De Gruyter, 1998. viii + 218 pp. \$43.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-202-30615-5.

Reviewed by Sara Knox (University of Western Sydney, Hawkesbury)  
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## Interrogating Reality TV

Writing of reality crime programming, Richard Osborne warns that such programming may be “creating a popular culture of cynicism and despair, mixed with a neo-fascistic longing for order and retribution.”[1] Contributing to the excellent ongoing monographs-in-series *Social Problems and Social Issues*, Fishman and Cavender provide a solid base of data with which to test Osborne’s rather nihilistic proposition. *Entertaining Crime* showcases content analyses aimed at theorizing the ideological contexts and the likely social impact of the increasingly routinized consumption of reality programming. In a lucid introduction, the editors define reality crime TV not by its troubled status in the liminal space between news and entertainment but, instead, by the nature of its *claim* to represent reality. That claim consists on one hand in the representation of the “truth” of people’s lived experience of policing and victimization by crime. On the other hand, the truth claim of reality crime programming seems to rest on its assumptions about an ideal community of the law-abiding—for whom the fear of crime is real, and in whose name the swift, decisive, or dogged justice of *America’s Most Wanted* or *Cops* is rendered.

Among the chief advantages of Fishman and Cavender’s introduction are its clarity and its concisely drawn historical context for the development of reality crime programming. The ideological context for the rather sudden ubiquity of reality crime is the generalized trend toward law and order discourse attendant to the backlash against the liberalism of the 1960s and early 1970s. In the radical criminology of the 1960s, the predominant theorizations of the production of criminality located “crime”

within institutionalized racism and poverty rather than within individual pathology. The backlash against liberalism on the rise since the late 1970s has reversed this trend, and a generalized concern about (or, more properly, fear of) crime has produced a state of affairs in which—under the auspices of a general bi-partisan stand on law and order—there are both more people than ever before incarcerated and more police to expedite their incarceration under stricter and less flexible laws relating to public order, drug-related, and violent crimes. In popular culture, as in economics, this increasingly punitive trend has been embraced. Just as the Stock Exchange registers a steady and confident flow of investment into Corrections, the major free-to-air and cable networks have seen fit to capitalise on the rise of the fear of crime and the answering need for spectacularized justice.

Fishman and Cavender sketch the generic ancestry of reality crime programming in radio, tabloid journalism, print media “true crime” and, of course, through the rich heritage in the television police procedural. The generic heritage of reality crime programming is essential for understanding the strategic nature of the truth claim of reality TV. The *real* in reality TV is established in inescapable reference to long-familiar *fictional* conventions in the representation of crime, as much (or more so) than journalistic traditions. The third major purpose of the introduction is to foreground the commercial and broadcasting context of reality crime programming. Part of a “general resurgence of tabloids” and infotainment (p. 12), reality crime programming has been driven, at least in part, by the development of video technologies

and the routinization of surveillance technologies that have delivered, at low cost, a significant percentage of the footage for such programs.

In general terms, Fishman and Cavender's introduction effectively frames the essays to follow. It sets the tone of enquiry (and the tone of address) by identifying the disciplinary premises of the collection (firmly sociological) and the comparative element of the work. That is, having spent the majority of the introduction discussing the American preconditions for the development of reality crime programming, Fishman and Cavender also flag the inclusion of three essays in the work, addressing—respectively—English, Dutch and French reality crime traditions. Certainly one would expect a collection of this type to mount some kind of comparative analysis, or at least to leave the reader—in dipping in to the individual selections—some sense of the staples of the genre in comparison to one another, and a sense of the culturally particular situation of reality crime programming. And to some extent *Entertaining Crime* succeeds in this purpose. But not without difficulties and, ultimately, limitations. These limitations, however, do not so much lie with the quality of the individual contributions (some of which are excellent) as with the degree to which so many of their central arguments, findings, methodological strategies, and samples overlap. In total, the collection is repetitious, and this reader was left with the rather alarming sensation that the total effect of the reading would have remained more or less the same had one arbitrarily skipped a chapter or two (or three).

In the first section on “Audience,” the contributors seek to address the effect of the consumption of reality crime on perceptions about race and crime where, according to Mary Beth Oliver and Blake Armstrong, reality programs “tend to paint a picture of crime in which African-Americans ... are cast as the ‘evil’ criminals and whites as the ‘good guy’ cops” (p. 20). This trend is in apparent contradistinction to raced representations of crime in fiction where whites are over-represented as offenders and (as borne out by Gerbner and associates in the Cultural Indicators project) racial minorities are over-represented as victims. Oliver and Armstrong, entering into the fraught debate about the correlation between television viewing and beliefs and behaviour, opt for the correlative relationship implied by the theory of “cultivation” (in which heavy television viewing of, say, reality crime programming, will reinforce already existent or nascent prejudices and presumptions on the part of the audience).

In their chapter “Crimewatch UK,” Dobash, Schlesinger, Dobash, and Weaver assess the influence of the “lived experience of crime” of their sample group of women upon that same groups interpretation of *Crime-watch* (the English equivalent to *America's Most Wanted*). The authors interrogated the differences in reception along the lines of race, and also along the lines of the individuals personal experience of violence—weighing the degree to which such programming might effect women's fears of being victimized (particularly by sex crimes); the belief of the group in the public service function of such programs; and their sense of its veracity and verisimilitude. Among other things, the authors found that those women with personal experiences of violence and victimization were less likely than those without to find such programs “entertaining.” Unsurprisingly, the authors concluded that “there is no single audience providing an unvaried response; rather, there are multiple audiences that appear to bring their personal experiences and cultural background to their responses” (p. 56).

The final chapter in this section plumbs the “popularity” of reality crime through a thorough analysis of the ratings for such programming. Rather than finding that the main examples of the genre consistently draw a large audience share, Fishman finds that they consistently *fail* to do so (although *Cops* and *Unsolved Mysteries* do hold their own). The persistence and growth of reality crime therefore needs to be explained in other ways. According to Fishman's findings, reality crime TV has become a veritable staple not so much for its popularity as for its (relatively) cheap production costs per episode. Perhaps even more important in explaining the ubiquity of reality crime TV is the fact that the genre produces a product with a long-shelf life. As Aaron Doyle points out in a chapter following, the “nowness” (p. 99) of reality crime TV (with its ride-along cameras and its generic urban scenes and domestic interiors) imparts a timelessness to each episode that allows for high-repetition scheduling. Fishman suggests that this timeless quality, along with the flexibility of the genre for being a “stand-in” slot (prime-time or not) and the continued aura of authority generated around the genre by its claim to serve the public interest, makes for a powerful claim on the programming interests of both cable and free-to-air networks.

The following section on “Ideology and Social Control” attempts to provide an expanding theoretical base for the preceding and following empirical analyses of reality crime's content and audience. Aaron Doyle's analysis of the implications of the ideological positioning of the audience beside the street cop in *Cops* is an indis-

pensable one. And Pamela Donovan's essay following provides substantial food for thought about the worldview of American reality crime TV as exemplified by its claim to represent the reality of crime. But Donovan's essay is also—at least in places—very poorly written. And, if the quality of some of her sentences is any indication, her contribution does very little credit to the technical skills of the editors.

It is toward the last third of the collection that the degree of repetition becomes noticeable, and with it, too, certain distinct contradictions. Thus, while Fishman has gone to some lengths to disprove the idea of the relative popularity of reality crime programming, Paul Kooistra et. al. refer in a later article to reality crime as “television's hottest genre' for [its] profitability and popularity” (p. 141). And as regards, particularly, the quantification of data related to the representation of the race of offenders and victims in reality crime programming, the level of repetition between and even within the chapters is disappointing.

In contrast to this, the final two chapters—on the very different cultural contexts to reality crime programming in the Netherlands and France—are a welcome change. But in reading them, I was struck by the degree to which the previous chapters on American reality crime programming seemed to have a limited grasp on the *meaning* of culture for the production of their genre. This omission was particularly noticeable given the degree to which the series in which this work appears dedicates itself to cultural frames for knowledge about crime and deviance, and the particular attention paid (for instance) to moral panics in the contemporary United States. *Entertaining Crime* seems to be more narrowly sociological than some of its forebears in the series, and the preponderance of quantitative analyses (and the basic con-

tent analyses that set about producing a simple typology of, say, “vignettes”) lends itself not only to repetition but also to a very limiting conceptualization of the discursive context for genre. Thus, while Hugh Dauncey interrogates the influence of the postwar cultural crisis around the “French tradition of informing” on state censorship of early attempts at reality crime programming, there seems to be no similar interrogation—at the level of cultural anxiety and the issue of identity—of the implications of, and context to, reality crime programming in the United States.

There is a fertile tradition of cultural studies responses to the representation of crime (perhaps exemplified by the work of the Open University), and this work is probably best read in tandem with more ambitious studies like Richard Osborne's *Crime and the Media: The Postmodern Spectacle* and Richard Sparks' *Television and the Drama of Crime: Moral Tales and the Place of Crime in Public Life*. And, although not addressing the phenomenon of reality crime programming directly, Alison Young's excellent *Imagining Crime* demonstrates that a single phenomenon (or medium) of representation cannot be taken in isolation from other representations and that representation, per se, gains intelligibility and mimetic purchase by both intertextuality and the interplay of form, medium and generic structures within an expansive cultural terrain of meaning production.

#### Note

[1]. Richard Osborne, *Crime and the Media: The Postmodern Spectacle*. London: Pluto, 1993: 39.

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