

MEDIA ATTENTION TOWARDS SERIAL KILLERS AND MASS
MURDERERS AND ITS IMPACT TOWARDS ATTITUDES
ON CAPITAL PUNISHMENT

by

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Abstract

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Attitudes towards the criminal justice system and capital punishment were researched among 164 undergraduate students at the University of Texas at Arlington. The findings revealed that participants who watched crime related media, or that involving murderers and/or criminal activity, on a regular basis were less punitive in nature. Participants who did not regularly engage in watching crime related media were more supportive of capital punishment.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

“The average eighteen-year-old has watched some twenty thousand hours of television programming, much of which has been devoted to crime-related news and drama” (Haney, 2008, p. 689). The infatuation with serial killers and mass murderers is a recently developed phenomenon that may be completely harmless, or on the other hand, may change our attitudes over time towards capital punishment and the criminal justice system in general. “A television narrative can influence policy support by reframing the dramatic situation to reduce the effect of prior ideology and values and by minimizing processing of the story as intentionally persuasive discourse” (Slater, Rouner, Long, 2006, p. 235).

This thesis will address these issues by developing a questionnaire in which it can be analyzed if whether watching crime related media may affect the way viewers of this type of media, respond to questions about the criminal justice system, and their thoughts on capital punishment. For example, has the fascination and curiosity with serial and mass murderers always been there? Is the media simply doing its job of trying to answer the public's questions to provide a deeper understanding of events which seem to captivate them? Or is there perhaps a deeper, underlying, ulterior motive to this up-rise in media attention regarding criminal activity? Is there a specific population these shows and movies target? If

so, what is the motivation behind that targeting? Is it to educate and promote knowledge and facts on the topic in the hopes of preventing future occurrences? Or could this rise in media attention backfire, and in result, desensitize viewers to heinous crimes?

The primary goal of this research, however, is as follows: will be answering the question of how the idolization of mass murderers by the media affects the public's views of criminals, and how they should be punished. Can watching television shows which portray criminals in positive light change the public's views on capital punishment? Are their views more or less punitive? As Dietz (1986) mentions, America is completely obsessed and preoccupied with celebrities, and serial murderers are now considered just that. People want to be like their favorite celebrity; they wear what they wear, eat what they eat, go on the same diet, and may change their personal views on matters based on how their celebrity idol views that issue. Furthermore, watching your favorite celebrity commit a murder makes it seem somewhat not as bad as an average Joe from the street doing so. This also strengthens the argument that all of this media attention can desensitize people to the morbidity of murder which can cause their views on capital punishment to fall more on the liberal side. "It is believed that repeated exposure to real-life and to entertainment violence may alter cognitive, affective, and behavioral processes, possibly leading to desensitization" (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold & Baumgardner, 2004, p.23). In a study by Funk et al., "children who

viewed an aggressive film later took significantly longer to seek adult assistance to stop what they thought was an altercation between younger children, compared to the children who did not see the film” (Funk, Baldacci, Pasold & Baumgardner, 2004, p. 25).

If the results of this research do in fact show that crime related media can shape our views towards capital punishment and the criminal justice system, is this a positive or a negative outcome? Also, what are some of the other symptoms that come along with shaping the public's views on a matter this relevant and important? In summary, when regularly viewing crime related media, meaning having a general knowledge of the characters and plot, who is affected, how , and is there a motive or purpose? Or, are any major outcomes while viewing such media purely coincidental?

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This research addresses the question of how the idolization of mass murderers by the media affects the public's views of criminals and how they should be punished. Can watching television shows which portray criminals in a positive light change the public's view on capital punishment? Will it make their views more or less punitive? As stated in *The Journal of Forensic Psychiatry*, "There are benefits for social control agents, particularly the police; for business interests as technology expands; for media interests as serial killing 'sells'; and for newly created 'experts' who have career interests to look after and reputations to enhance" ("The serial killer industry", 1993, p. 341). Mass murder is a multimillion dollar industry, it sells regardless of whether it is selling a movie ticket, a new novel, a television series, or even protection people buy to stay safe. Yet it was not long ago that the mention of serial murderers was far from an ordinary topic as it has become today.

Still the debate over whether idolizing and learning about serial murderers is detrimental and how it affects our views on punishment is under consideration. In an article in *American Behavioral Scientist*, Joanne Savage concludes: "that the empirical literature on media violence and aggression has not established that exposure to media violence causes violent criminal behavior" (Savage, 2008, p. 1123). So according to that article, watching television shows and movies about

serial murderers may not necessarily cause someone to want to commit the same acts as they have been shown. However, what about the other side of the media argument and the fame that surrounds these serial murderers; could that provoke someone to do what they have seen in order to achieve that same fame?

“Mass, serial and sensational homicides all evoke a high degree of publicity. The predictably high publicity attending these crimes is among the motives of their perpetrators. Offenders in each of these categories see headlines as one of the predictable outcomes of their behavior, which they pursue in part for this purpose. The American preoccupation with celebrity is no secret” (Dietz, 1986, p. 477).

As Dietz mentions in his article, America is completely obsessed and preoccupied with celebrities, and serial murderers are now considered just that. For people who have not yet committed a crime, seeing all of the publicity that surrounds crime scenes and all of their inner-workings may compel someone to want to get famous themselves (Dietz, 1986).

Some literature goes into the debate over whether selling serial killer related products has negative consequences. In Schmid's writing, we learn that there is a very large industry opportunity for mass murderers. This will obviously stir some controversy between the debate over the idolization of serial killers being harmful or not. “John Walsh's attack on the murderabilia industry was another skirmish in a campaign that has been growing steadily since the 1990's.

One of the campaign's initial targets was the internet trading site eBay, which was criticized for allowing serial-killer-related products to be sold online” (Schmid, 2006, p. 2-3). Schmid (2006) observes that by selling this kind of memorabilia, it can encourage and even promote behavior that can lead to a criminal path (p.3). It also strengthens the argument that an abundance of attention can desensitize people to the morbidity of murder which can cause their views on capital punishment to fall more on the liberal side. “The internet just opens it all up to millions and millions of potential buyers and gives easy access to children. And it sends a negative message to society. What does it say about us? We continue to glorify killers and continue to put them in the mainstream public” (Schmid, 2006, p.3). These murderers are made infamously famous, and younger populations are starting to admire them regardless of their actions. “The celebrity culture around serial killers has developed so far that one can now purchase the nail clippings and hair of some killers, as if they were religious icons” (Schmid, 2006, p.3). These killers are glorified and made to be seen so glamorously and it can really send a mixed message to children and people alike being told that crime is wrong and bad, but if you do happen to commit a heinous crime, fame may not be far behind! “The concept of 'fame' has evolved in ways that not only allow for the existences of criminal celebrities such as the serial killer but also make the serial killer the exemplary modern celebrity” (Schmid, 2006, p.4).

It seems that the public is not only fascinated with the perpetrator of the crime, but the crime itself. It is no shock that people are drawn to train-wrecks, so to speak. How many times have you been driving to suddenly be stopped by bumper to bumper traffic only to find out that all the commotion and hold up is over people wanting to observe an accident which has not yet cleared? “It seems that given the choice, most people would elect to take the spectator’s role rather than be directly involved in a dangerous situation. But why would one want to witness such a sight in the first place? There is no question that people do. Newspapers, news broadcasts, and other media sources are constantly publicizing violent crimes, keeping the general public informed, and afraid of, the world outside their homes” (Kass-Gergi, 2012, p. 7-8). Again, this could just be a result of curiosity, but when did our curiosity become so morbid? Is it feasible that all of the violence put out there daily by the web, news, and movies has caused this hunger that the public has for death and crime, and may, in turn, be causing general views on punishment to be more lenient?

Is it healthy to have such a strong curiosity for the things which we fear? Some authors feel that perhaps it all ties in with simply trying to achieve a better understanding. “Crime, however, constitutes a mainstay of popular culture, and we take great pleasure in its images: from television drama through news reporting and current affairs, through popular literature, to film. It is certainly not unprecedented that we should seek out that which we fear” (Young, 2010, p.1).

The question at hand is whether the media idolizing dangerous people, such as serial murderers, can be detrimental and affect the public's views towards punishment for these individuals? The research thus far has made some compelling arguments. Regardless of the question or debate, it seems as though the media's over exaggeration of crime and mass murderers has been more than detrimental to the public as far as causing a thirst for knowledge and peaking the public's curiosity in the area of murder and criminal activity. On one hand, the argument could be that the media is simply feeding our hunger for knowledge on these topics and that it is not condoning these horrendous acts. "Thus, the saturation of popular culture with images and stories of victimization, trauma, violence and death is not necessarily surprising, since it allows the consumer a sense of control over the source of fear" (Young, 2010, p.2). On the other hand, the media may very well have created a monster. "As a result, the serial killer was immortalized, and established as a household name. Thanks to the media, serial killing has become more than a series of homicides—it has been established as a career" (Kass-Gergi, 2012, p. 8-9). While watching media involving criminals and murderers in specific, viewers would fantasize about being the cop or detective. Now, however, it is possible that just as many viewers may fantasize about being the criminal due to the fame that surrounds them.

"By the time they are old enough to vote or serve as jurors, most citizens in the United States have earned the equivalent of a Ph.D. in 'media criminology.'

The average eighteen-year-old has watched some twenty thousand hours of television programming, much of which has been devoted to crime-related news and drama” (Haney, 2008, p. 689). Spending significant amounts of time gaining any kind of new knowledge on a subject can have an effect on one’s opinion of that subject. The majority of people I know can cite the Miranda Rights on cue even if they have never been arrested, nor had any previous criminal justice training, simply due to watching countless hours of the Law and Order television series. It may not be apparent to everyone how much the public is influenced by the media around us, but what is apparent however, is that we cannot deny the amount of knowledge we have on criminology due to watching the massive amounts of media we have to choose from involving the subject.

It is argued that the media has an effect on how the public views criminals, but can it also have an effect on our fears and enforcing protection over our person and belongings? “Analysis suggests that viewing police reality shows is both directly and indirectly related to the endorsement of capital punishment and handgun ownership, while also directly predicting a greater likelihood of actual handgun ownership” (Holbert, Shah & Kwak, 2004, p. 343). So perhaps it is the overwhelming fear that is placed in the minds of the viewers watching these types of television shows which begs the question, could they be the next victim? “In addition, TV news viewing predicts fear of crime in audience members, and this fear contributes to the endorsement of capital punishment and handgun

ownership. Crime drama viewing is positively related to support for the death penalty “(Holbert, Shah & Kwak, 2004, p. 343). Reality television can incite a higher level of fear to the public than fictional television series due to the real-life aspect. The news and other programs which portray true and actual crimes invoke a higher level of fear due to the realness and closeness of the criminal acts. It no longer feels like the murderer is in Hollywood, rather he/she could be in your town, your child’s school, or even in your own backyard. It is understandable how the people who have been on the fence about owning a weapon can be persuaded to take the next step due to hearing about heinous crimes happening at any given moment all around them. In the study conducted by Holbert et al., (2004) it is concluded that viewing crime media can even have an effect on one’s support for the death penalty. So it is not improbable to say that media involving crime and murderers can have an effect on the public’s opinions on capital punishment and policies. “Support for punitive policies is, conversely, a result of an affective process: fear. Both processes originate from particular patterns of media use” (Sotirovic, 2001, p.311). Understandably, certain categories of media can invoke higher levels of fear in its viewers than others. Violent media, or that which focuses around murder and/or crime, has a tendency of entrapping the viewer’s attention by causing fear and anxiety towards what is happening in the plot. “Crime- and violence-ridden television local news use is exclusively related to increased fear of crime. This study implies that media may affect individual

judgments by the structure of their presentation in addition to their content” (Sotirovic, 2001, p. 311). So it is not simply *what* the media is showing us that can impact our opinions on important policies, but *how* they are showing us as well.

Just how much of an effect can crime related media have on society’s support for public policies? Some critics argue that if a person has a strong prior opinion on a subject due to existing knowledge and experiences, then their opinion is not subject to be affected by being exposed to media on the topic. Slater et al. conducted an experiment to look at the effects of dramatic media on the public’s support towards controversial public policies.

“As predicted, exposure to the relevant drama eliminated the relationship between prior ideology (conceptualized as a continuous variable) and death penalty support. Moreover, the valence of the relationship between prior (increasingly liberal) ideology and salience of a relevant value (perceived importance of a safe and crime-free society) went from negative in the comparison condition to positive after exposure to the relevant drama” (Slater, Rouner & Long, 2006, p. 235).

It was concluded in their study that even a strong previous belief on a subject was affected and even changed after exposure to relevant media on the topic. “These and other results suggest that a television narrative can influence policy support by reframing the dramatic situation to reduce the effect of prior

ideology and values and by minimizing processing of the story as intentionally persuasive discourse”(Slater, et al, 2006, p. 235).

Does the media have an impact on the general public only, or are the policy makers and world leaders just as susceptible to having their views affected by stories and news? “Using an experimental design built around a single media event, the authors explored the impact of the media upon the general public, policy makers, interest group leaders, and public policy. The results suggest that the media influenced views about issue importance among the general public and government policy makers” (Cook, Tyler, Goetz, Gordon, Protes, Leff & Molotch, 1983, p. 16). If the media does impact the vast majority of society, is it at least portraying accurate views on policies? “Despite the strength of this finding in academic circles, the media tend to cover the death penalty as if it were indisputably favored by a majority of Americans. These findings suggest that the unrealistic media portrayal of public opinion on the death penalty is bolstering a sense of inevitability about the issue” (Niven, 2002, p. 671). Often times if a person is uneducated or uncertain of which side to take in a political debate, they tend to side with the majority. If a large amount of the public believes that television is the most accurate portrayal of news, and therefore rely on such for their information, then do we really have a precise depiction of society’s stance on capital punishment?

So even though many of us are onto the media shaping things in order to get the most viewers, the public still turns to the media in order to gain knowledge about certain matters. “It is well known that mass media have the ability to frame a sociopolitical issue in specific ways, which can have considerable impact on the public's thoughts and perceptions regarding the issue” (Dardis, et al, 2008, p. 115). Which has been shown in regards to the death penalty, as mentioned above. Dardis et al., also explain in their study that “individuals tend to resist changing their interpretations of issues based on arguments that contradict their core moral or religious beliefs; however, they seem quite receptive to new information along dimensions that they previously had not considered” (Dardis, Baumgartner, Boydston, De Boef & Shen, 2008, p. 115). So a viewer having a strong moral or religious belief may inhibit the media from arguing against that belief, however, being presented new information on a subject allows for new opinions and beliefs to be formed. How come society is so prone to believing everything they hear or see on television? “Not only has television news grown in popularity, but it has also become the most credible and powerful source of news. A 1982 poll showed that television was judged as the most credible source of news followed by newspapers. Indeed, the American public views television as providing the most ‘complete,’ ‘intelligent,’ and ‘unbiased’ source of news” (Bailey, 1990, p. 628).

It seems as though society believes so much of what is put out there by the media because unless they are educated on the topic at hand, and know to take

what the media puts out there with a grain of salt, it is their primary source of information. People want to be informed about hot subject matters and what is going on in the world around them. It is fun and enjoyable getting into heated debates over different types of controversies, trying to prove to an opponent that their opinion is the logical one.

“Law and media exist in a complex feedback loop. Television, with some help from other media, has become our culture’s principal storyteller, educator, and shaper of the popular imagination. It not only transmits legal norms, but also has a role in creating them. We are constantly constructing and interpreting our notions of law and justice based on what we know, or what we think we know. Relatively few people have direct experience with the criminal justice system, and so much of what we know, or think we know, comes from media coverage” (Bandes, 2003, p. 585).

The more information and understanding one has on a topic, the more empowered they can feel. The media hands out information on a silver platter, and for a society who is starving for knowledge on everything, that is a tough meal to pass up.

It appears as though the media may affect our personal views over criminals and punishment; however, can the media help influence a criminal’s fate? As citizens of the United States, at some point in our lives we each have the responsibility of ultimately deciding the fate of another human being who is on

trial for a crime. Being a citizen of the U.S. comes with the privilege of having a fair trial where one is judged by a jury of their own peers in order to determine their sentencing. Can a juror's opinion be affected by the media? "Jurors' decisions may be influenced by a broad range of legally relevant information gleaned from media sources, including newspaper reports, radio and television news, advertising, movies, and televised crime shows and courtroom scenes" (Greene, 1990, p. 439). Greene's article goes into detail about Judge Richard Baner issuing a peculiar rule during one of his cases asking that the hearings be scheduled late at night. The case involved a business man who was convicted of murdering his family, at which time NBC was broadcasting a drama which was "strikingly similar" to the case. The defense attorneys worried that the jury's opinions on the case would be biased due to seeing the NBC special, so they requested that the trial be scheduled at the same time NBC aired its program, this way there was no extra bias (Greene, 1990). Judge Baner's action on this case clearly demonstrated that he believed the media would have an effect on the juror's prejudice towards the defendant.

Obviously every defendant currently on trial cannot be offered that same benefit because there are far too many criminals on trial currently as well as far too many programs and news sources available to the public. "As media coverage becomes more extensive and accessible, it is likely to become more difficult to find jurors who have not been exposed to relevant pretrial publicity" (Studebaker

& Penrod, 1997, p. 428). It may not always be a conscious decision to let what we hear and see by the media affect our opinions on less than trivial matters, however, it also may not be a decision in which we have full control over. Trial coverage alone counts for a large percentage of crime television and news reporting. During the Casey Anthony and Zimmerman trials, it was easy to engage in heated discussions with peers of all sorts over what was currently happening in the cases. Even though the majority of the public was not allowed in those courtrooms, we still had a play by play of every step of the cases provided by numerous sources of media. Even if the defendants on trial were not celebrities before the incident, they most certainly become celebrity-like by the end of their trials.

Not all trials are automatically publicized and become household knowledge though, there has to be an aspect of the case that either the public can relate with or sympathize with. Celebrity cases however, are assumed to be public information since the lives of famous people are fair game to the media. Again, the media does have an ulterior motive in publicizing the events of these cases, to gain viewers and raise ratings. In doing so, public opinion can be molded by the information which attracts the most viewers, which consequently may involve some stretching of the truth. In an article determining the detrimental influences that media coverage can have over celebrity trials, in specific looking at the O.J. Simpson case, “Analysis indicates those who exhibited a stronger psychological

involvement with Simpson developed through repeated media exposure were more likely to believe his innocence. Those with a strong belief in the fairness of the United States justice system more strongly supported unrestricted media coverage of the trial” (Brown, Duane & Fraser, 1997, p. 261). It is presumed by a large portion of the public that when the media is covering a real life trial, they can only release facts. Therefore, if their opinions happen to be molded by the information received, it is harmless because the facts are all true and unbiased. It is rarely thought about that a news station may only release certain information or shape it in a specific way in order to make the defendant out to be either a victim or a monster.

Trials may not only be affected by media depictions of real life courtroom battles. It is questioned whether fictional media can affect the public’s opinions when it comes down to making decisions in courtrooms. “Beginning in 2002, popular media disseminated serious concerns that the integrity of the criminal trial was being compromised by the effects of television drama. Specifically, it was widely alleged that the popular CSI franchise, one of the most watched programs on television, was affecting jury deliberations and outcomes” (Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2009, p. 1336). Attorneys worried that a typical juror might assume certain capabilities by forensic professionals based on what they see being done on crime dramas. “Accordingly, jurors suffered from inflated expectations concerning the occurrence and probative value of forensic evidence. When forensic evidence

failed to reach these expectations, it was suggested, juries acquitted. In short, it was argued that, in circumstantial evidence cases in which juries would have convicted before the advent of the CSI franchise, juries were now acquitting” (Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2009, p. 1336). As mentioned earlier, since the rise in popularity of crime shows, average Joe’s, who have no previous education on criminal law, now assume they are educated thoroughly enough on the subject (due to what they have been exposed to by the media) in order to form and argue an opinion on a case which most times they know little about.

Both fictional and non-fictional media regarding crime is not specifically aimed at audiences interested in news and politics. Rather it is aiming to capture the attention of anyone willing to listen and watch. Soft news outlets are one of the primary sources of news and information about what is going on in the world for many Americans. Some people feel that ‘soft news’ programs such as *Entertainment Tonight*, *E! News*, *The Daily Show*, or a plethora of other entertainment based talk shows are a nice vacation from the primary news shows which seemingly offer much more bad than good stories. “And for some, such shows are their primary, if not sole, source of news about the nation and the world. With a few notable exceptions, however, scholars and journalists have by and large failed to treat the soft news media seriously” (Baum, 2003, p. VIII). Many people who are generally uninterested in politics and news rely on these soft news programs to stay in the loop, so to speak, about what is happening in the

world around them. “This, in turn, begs the question of what, if any, distinct effects might arise from relying on such decidedly apolitical programs for information about serious national or international political issues and events” (Baum, 2003, p. VIII). Can watching these ‘soft news’ programs be more detrimental than helpful in keeping viewers informed? The more specific goal of these types of shows is to entertain and keep viewers happy. So is it a good idea for people to count on a program primarily there for entertainment in order to keep them informed and up to date about the most recent political and world news?

“Soft news outlets have covered virtually every major U.S. foreign policy crisis over at least the past decade. And the evidence I present in this book suggests that the dramatic proliferation of entertainment-oriented informational television programming over the past two decades has had substantial effects on public awareness of these events, as well as a handful of other similarly high-profile political issues. As we shall see, this rising awareness, primarily among individuals not normally inclined to follow politics or foreign affairs, holds potentially far-reaching implications for public attitudes toward politics and foreign policy, and hence for public policy outcomes” (Baum, 2003, p. X).

On one hand, these entertainment based news programs get the attention of people who are not normally interested in learning about world and political

news. It helps to inform a wider range of the public on what is going on around them. In general, it is better to have a well-informed public when it comes to time for voting on important matters of public opinion. However, when the public is not all receiving their news from the same sources, it can cause an issue in determining the public's true opinion on a matter of importance. Often times, there is a bias which stems from the source someone chooses to get their information from. For instance, someone who is a big John Stewart fan is much more likely to believe the information they hear on *The Daily Show* than from a traditional news source. So even if two people are supporting the same side of an issue, it may be for completely different reasons or in some cases false information. An informed public can be good, but a falsely informed or a biased public can ultimately lead to more chaos.

It is presumed that people like watching shows about murderers and crime because they feel intrigued by the situation and watching how the crime scene is examined. It also gives people the idea that they are gaining more knowledge in the areas of law and the criminal justice system. However, can watching media that exposes executions and punishment for crimes committed cause views on capital punishment to be less punitive? In a study performed in California, participants were asked to complete Peterson and Thurstone's Attitude Toward Capital Punishment scale both before and after watching a video of an execution, or if they were in the control group a video about nature. "Significantly more

viewers of the execution videotape reduced their support for capital punishment than did viewers of the control film, suggesting that resumption of public (i.e., televised) executions may somewhat reduce support for the death penalty” (Howells, Flanagan & Hagan, 1995, p. 411). So even though the public appears to thrive on curiosity, apparently when it comes to punishment, there can come a point when they have seen enough. How come it is much easier to watch a program about crimes being committed than it is to watch a program about the person who committed those crimes receiving punishment for doing so? It is almost as though the crime spree is just entertaining fiction, but the punishment for said spree is real. Even though the perpetrator who is being executed or punished may have brutally taken one or more lives, the public seems to relate to the criminal’s fear and remorse when it comes time to face the punishment for their actions. The majority of people believe in second chances, and were it them in the place of the criminal, they would want to be offered the benefit of the doubt in the situation. So it is easy to comprehend how watching programs showing an execution or harsh punishment of a criminal may lead to the viewers of that program having less punitive attitudes.

The fascination with mass murderers and crime related media will not likely die down anytime soon. Obviously these types of shows and movies are popular due to the extensive amount of attention and detail that goes into making them. It is not unprecedented for the public to assume that the information they

are receiving from these types of media are as close to reality as possible and therefore, are a legit source to gain new awareness of certain issues regarding crime and punishment. Some authors believe the media should be more inclined to get the real scoop, so to speak, and to have criminologists weigh in on important matters of the subject so that at least a partial amount of the knowledge people are receiving from these types of programs are factual. “Accordingly, Barak and others believe that criminologists should participate in the various media presentations of crime and justice. By bringing their knowledge to bear on media presentations, criminologists can help make some news more representative and less distorted of the social reality of crime” (Barak, 1994, p. ix). Who better than criminologists could help to properly educate the media, as well as the public, in regards to shows based on crime and the criminal justice system? This way, at least when the public is watching programs involving law, crime, and the criminal justice system in general, they will be receiving some factual information to base opinions on. That would be especially helpful seeing as those opinions are what they rely on when voting on important public policies, including capital punishment. Reiterating my previous point, informed voters are advantageous, miss-informed voters however, are less than ideal.

Another important factor to consider when examining the issue of the media affecting views on public policies, is narrowing down which populations the media is targeting most as well as determining which populations are most

likely to take those opinions to the polls. According to *About.com*, women vote more often than men and younger Americans are less likely to vote than their elders. “44.9% of women and 38.8% of men 18-24 years old voted, 55% of women and 48.8% of men 25-44 years old voted, 68.3% of women and 65.9% of men 45-64 years old voted, 69.4% of women and 72.5% of men 65-74 years old voted” (Lowen, 2011). The media can have different effects on a person depending on their age and gender. In the majority of the age categories listed above, women were more likely to vote. Some may think this is reason to sigh with relief since men are *surely* much more likely to be the target of all these criminally based shows. Contrary to popular belief, women enjoy these crime related shows just as much if not *more* than some men. “If there’s one genre that’s really popular with men and women, science fiction is it—anything that deals with the occult really. To support his point, Adgate mentions long-running procedurals like *CSI* and *Law & Order: SVU*, which boast an overwhelmingly female audience” (Mitchell, 2013). So this crime related media is picking up vast amounts of female viewers, who are also more likely to take their opinions to the polls and vote on important public policies. This type of media, that involving murderers in particular, is now literally targeting all audiences, which makes it that much more important that the information being received by these sources is both factual and beneficial. “It seems we ladies aren’t wading through the scary

stuff—we are wholly engrossed in it. Girls may be sugar and spice and everything nice, but we also like to watch shows about serial killers” (Mitchell, 2013).

It is quite clear that the media, in all of its forms, can and does have a large effect on public opinion in regards to important public policies like capital punishment. Watching significant amounts of television regarding murderers and crime can both desensitize audiences as well as place an irrational sense of fear in audiences. These types of media also have an effect on juror’s opinions regarding cases on trial; so much so, that one trial was scheduled during a television program so its jurors could not be biased by it. The media is doing its job by feeding the public’s craving for crime related entertainment and knowledge, however, it may be more detrimental than informative when it comes time to decide on public policies. The media is significantly shaping the public’s views on criminal activity and its appropriate punishment. The public is likely to become more lenient towards punishment for harsh crimes due to the relationships they are forming and the attachments they have with fictional and likable characters portrayed in the media. The trend with this type of media is only getting stronger, and is in higher demand than any other category of entertainment. The concern over criminally based media shaping the public’s views on capital punishment, and other important matters regarding public policy, is extremely relevant and perhaps would not seem quite as alarming if the public

were more able to make the distinction between fact and fiction. Or even more appropriately in this case, the distinction between fact and entertainment.

Chapter 3

Methods

The primary reason for conducting this study was to discover the effect of watching media involving murder and/or criminal activity on one's opinion toward capital punishment.

3.1 Sample Selection

This thesis examines college student's attitudes toward the criminal justice system and criminal penalties, and whether watching media based on criminal activity may make these attitudes more or less punitive. For data collection, a quantitative analysis using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was used. The survey conducted was to determine if watching media mainly involving mass murderers and crime has an effect on a person's feelings about the perpetrator committing the murders, and the punishment they should receive. The types of media in question included movies, television shows, and news. The collected sample size was 175 students; however, 164 surveys were used in the final data analysis in order to keep anonymity a factor. The survey sample derived from undergraduate students from the Criminology/Criminal Justice Department at The University of Texas at Arlington during the fall semester of 2013. On the first page of the survey (which can be referenced in Appendix A), there is a paragraph, which was read aloud to each of the classes surveyed, explaining that

participation would be voluntary, anonymous, and that the students would not be compensated for their participation. Both lower and upper level undergraduate classes were surveyed in order to assemble a collection of well-rounded data. Those students enrolled in classes in the Criminology/Criminal Justice Department were targeted because there was a greater likelihood that they were both interested in the subject as well as probably watched media concerning the topic. The survey was conducted mid-way through the fall semester of 2013, in order to receive the best odds in regards to the number of completions. The survey ultimately helped answer the question of whether watching media involving mass murderers can cause the public to support a more lenient form of punishment due to the produced idolization for the perpetrator committing the crimes, as well as the media glorifying the crime itself.

Table 3-1 Selection of Classes

Class
CRCJ 2334---Introduction to the criminal justice system
CRCJ 2335---Ethics and the criminal justice system
CRCJ 2350---Introduction to law enforcement
CRCJ 3300---Theoretical criminology

Table 3.2 provides the descriptive statistics for the collected sample. Of the 164 students whose surveys were used in this study, 28.8% were White, 15.3% were Black, 39.9% were Hispanic, 11.0% were Asian or Pacific Islander, and 4.9% identified themselves in a category labeled as Other than those

race/ethnicity categories which were listed. There was a fairly equal amount of both genders who participated in the study, with a total of 48.8% male and 51.2% female. Additionally, 20.4% of students indicated that they were in the 18-19 years of age category, 41.9% (the majority of respondents) identified in the 20-21 age group, 17.3% were in the 22-23 age group, and lastly 20.4% of participants were age 24 and above. Among the students, 29.5% classified as under-classmen, while 68.1% classified as upper-classmen. Of the participants, 59.1% had a declared major of criminology/criminal justice, while 40.9% were a mix of majors categorized as other.

Table 3-2 Descriptive Statistics for Sample

Variable	Percent
<u>Race</u>	
White	28.8%
Black	15.3%
Hispanic	39.9%
Asian or Pacific Islander	11.0%
Other	4.9%
<u>Sex</u>	
Male	48.8%
Female	51.2%
<u>Age</u>	
18-19	20.4%
20-21	41.9%
22-23	17.3%
24 and above	20.4%
<u>Classification</u>	
Freshman	3.1%
Sophomore	26.4%
Junior	53.4%
Senior	14.7%

Table 3-2 Continued

Other	2.5%
Major	
Criminology/Criminal Justice	59.1%
Other	40.9%
Number of Hours	
Part-time	12.8%
Full-time	87.2%

3.2 Measurement Instrument

The self-administered questionnaire was divided into four sections (See Appendix A for the full version of the survey). Section 1 consisted of items measuring the student’s participation in keeping up with current and/or recent news stories about crimes. The second section generated questions towards the student’s attitude about the criminal justice system and its offenders, as well as attitudes towards capital punishment. Section 3 inquired about the sources of news the participant relied on most frequently, as well as television habits and the type of media most typically watched by the participant. This section’s purpose was to examine if the participant did more frequently watch shows on the subject of criminal activity and the criminal justice system, and whether this had, in fact, impacted their views on section 2 of the survey. Lastly, section four consisted of demographic inquiries. Racial/ethnic background, family’s yearly gross income, sex, age, classification in school as well as how many hours currently enrolled, and intended major were the questions included in this final section.

The administered questionnaire attempted to ask several diverse questions in each of the 4 sections in the hopes of receiving finalized data which would be both valid and unbiased.

3.3 Analysis

SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) was the program used in the analysis of the collected surveys. This program was used in order to perform a quantitative statistical analysis from the completed and valid surveys (11 surveys out of the 175 collected had to be discarded due to keeping anonymity of the students). A frequency table was created in order to determine the number of students who indicated that they watched or did not watch the following television series' which I believed would be significant in influencing their opinions on punitive attitudes (See Appendix B for summaries of the television shows) . The series which were chosen to test were as follows: Dexter, Law and Order, Law and Order: Criminal Intent, Law and Order: SVU, Criminal Minds, The Sopranos, and Snapped. While creating the frequency tables in SPSS, once all of the data from the surveys was entered, The Sopranos and Snapped were excluded due to the insignificant number of students who responded that they watched either show.

Table 3-3 Independent Variables

<u>Item</u>	<u>Yes</u>	<u>No</u>
Dexter	17%	83%
Law and Order	35%	65%
Law and Order: Criminal Intent	35%	65%
Law and Order: SVU	38%	62%
Criminal Minds	57%	43%

As indicated in Table 3.3, Criminal Minds was the most commonly watched television series with 57% of participants agreeing that this was a show which they watched on a regular basis, meaning enough to have a general knowledge on the characters and plot. The Law and Order series were the second most watched shows with 35% of participants indicating that they followed the original series as well as the Criminal Intent series closely. It was indicated that 38% of participants follow the SVU version of the show and 17% of students follow the television series Dexter.

Table 3.4 shows the average answer choice chosen in the third section of the survey. The questions chosen in Table 3.4 were later used to develop several t-tests in SPSS indicating whether the shows in Table 3.3 had a significant effect on the participant's opinions of punishment, media involving crime, and the criminal justice system.

Table 3-4 Dependent Variables

<u>Item</u>	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Standard Deviation</u>
1. Overall the criminal justice system is fair.	3.06	.938
2. I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment.	3.33	1.33
3. I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers.	3.58	.922
4. Capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders.	3.10	1.21
5. Criminal offenders have too many rights.	2.93	.988
6. Depiction of violence in media causes crime.	2.95	1.22
7. Watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.	2.72	1.17

As shown above, there were seven items included in this data set. For each of these questions, the answer choices comprised of a 1-5 scale, where 1 indicated strong disagreement and 5 indicated strong agreement. The mean for viewing the criminal justice system as fair was 3.06, indicating that on average the sample was neutral on that item. The mean for supporting the use of the death penalty/ capital

punishment was 3.33. This mean indicates a slight agreement on this item. The mean for thinking that the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers was 3.58, which indicates agreement from the participants. The mean for thinking that capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders was 3.10, indicating a neutral response. The mean for criminal offenders having too many rights in the criminal justice system was 2.93, indicating a neutral response. The mean for thinking that depiction of violence in media causes crime is 2.95, indicating a neutral response. Lastly, the mean for watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence was 2.72. This score indicates a slight disagreement from the sample. Overall, there were no strong opinions on any of the items from the sample population.

3.4 Hypothesis

There are two primary hypotheses being tested in this study. They are as follows:

H1- Watching media revolving around murderers and criminal activity will cause desensitization to real world crime.

H2- Those who regularly watch crime related television series or media, meaning enough to have a general knowledge on the characters and plot, will be less punitive than those who do not view such media.

Chapter 4

Findings

Table 4-1 Dexter t-test

(standard deviation in parentheses)

Item	Yes	No	t-value
1. Overall the criminal justice system is fair.	3.25 (.844)	3.02 (.954)	-1.2.71
2. I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment.	3.57 (1.372)	3.28 (1.319)	-1.051
3. I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers.	3.57 (.997)	3.59 (.909)	.067
4. Capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders.	3.21 (1.101)	3.08 (1.230)	-.572
5. Criminal offenders have too many rights.	2.86 (1.113)	2.94 (.964)	.372
6. Depiction of violence in media causes crime.	3.11 (1.315)	2.92 (1.205)	-.699
7. Watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.	2.54 (1.138)	2.76 (1.177)	.912

*sig. @ p< .10

** sig. @ p< .05

Table 4.1 shows the t-test results for those participants who watch Dexter versus those who do not. Of the shown items, there are significant differences for none of them. Only 17% of participants answered “yes” to watching Dexter, and it was observed that people who did regularly watch the show were more punitive, or supportive of capital punishment, than those who do not. This finding did not support the hypothesis stating that viewers who regularly watch crime related television series will be less punitive. On the second item, I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment, participants who answered “yes” to regularly watching Dexter were in agreement with the statement with a mean of 3.57. Those who do not regularly watch the show were neutral with a 3.28 mean. It was also shown that on the third item, I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers, the means for those who do and do not regularly watch Dexter were very similar. Both sides were in agreement with the statement with a mean of 3.57 for those who watch, and 3.59 for those who do not. Item 7 was used to test the first hypothesis listed stating that watching media revolving around murderers and criminal activity will cause desensitization to real world crime. This hypothesis was not supported as the mean for the “yes” group was 2.71, which signifies slightly neutral attitudes by the participants.

Table 4-2 Law and Order t-test

(standard deviation in parentheses)

Item	Yes	No	t-value
1. Overall the criminal justice system is fair.	3.07 (1.042)	3.04 (.868)	-.222
2. I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment.	3.09 (1.431)	3.48 (1.244)	1.809*
3. I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers.	3.54 (1.078)	3.61 (.835)	.469
4. Capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders.	3.16 (1.262)	3.09 (1.170)	-.339
8. Criminal offenders have too many rights.	2.95 (1.119)	2.92 (.923)	-.186
9. Depiction of violence in media causes crime.	3.14 (1.197)	2.83 (1.217)	-1.558**
10. Watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.	2.88 (1.294)	2.64 (1.101)	-1.192

*sig. @ $p < .10$

** sig. @ $p < .05$

Table 4.2 shows the t-test results for those participants who watch Law and Order versus those who do not. The data showed that 35% of participants agreed to watching the show. Of the shown items, there are significant differences

for the second item at a .10 significant level as well as the sixth item at a .05 significant level. Item 2, I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment, those participants who do watch the show were neutral with a mean of 3.09 while the participants who do not watch agree with the statement with a mean of 3.48. This item indicates support for the hypothesis stating that those who regularly watch crime related television series or media will be less punitive than those who do not. Item 6, depiction of violence in media causes crime, those who watch Law and Order were neutral with a mean of 3.14 while those who do not watch disagree with the statement with a mean of 2.83. Item 7, which tested H1, watching crime related media will desensitize viewers to real world crime, was not supported in this test as the mean for the “yes” group was 2.88, showing slightly neutral results.

Table 4-3 Law and Order: Criminal Intent t-test
(standard deviation in parentheses)

Item	Yes	No	t-value
1. Overall the criminal justice system is fair.	3.13 (1.028)	3.02 (.890)	-.686
2. I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment.	3.09 (1.431)	3.45 (1.266)	1.661
3. I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers.	3.46 (1.044)	3.65 (.851)	1.225

Table 4-3 Continued

4. Capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders.	2.93 (1.319)	3.19 (1.142)	1.299
5. Criminal offenders have too many rights.	2.89 (1.073)	2.94 (.950)	.312
6. Depiction of violence in media causes crime.	3.18 (1.266)	2.82 (1.188)	-1.777*
7. Watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.	2.79 (1.289)	2.67 (1.106)	-.584

*sig. @ $p < .10$

** sig. @ $p < .05$

Table 4.3 shows the t-test results for those participants who watch Law and Order: Criminal Intent versus those who do not. It is shown that 35% of participants agree to watching the show. Of the shown items, the only significant difference was expressed in the sixth item at a .10 significant level. For those who watch the show, the mean answer for depiction of violence in the media causes crime was neutral at 3.18. Those who do not watch Law and Order: Criminal Intent disagreed with the statement with a mean of 2.82. Again in this test, the results for item 7, which tested H1, went unsupported with a mean of 2.79 by the “yes” group indicating neutral attitudes toward the statement that watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world crime. Item 2 however, did show support for H2 with a mean of 3.09 for the “yes” group,

indicating neutral attitudes on support for the death penalty/capital punishment, while the “no” group had a mean of 3.45, showing slight to moderate agreement.

Table 4-4 Law and Order: SVU t-test
(standard deviation in parentheses)

Item	Yes	No	t-value
1. Overall the criminal justice system is fair.	3.15 (.938)	3.02 (.938)	-.828
2. I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment.	3.26 (1.353)	3.36 (1.316)	.437
3. I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers.	3.48 (.993)	3.64 (.878)	1.123
4. Capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders.	3.13 (1.274)	3.08 (1.172)	-.255
5. Criminal offenders have too many rights.	2.89 (1.103)	2.95 (.921)	.379
6. Depiction of violence in media causes crime.	2.90 (1.197)	2.97 (1.245)	.339
7. Watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.	2.79 (1.282)	2.66 (1.098)	-.672

*sig. @ p< .10

** sig. @ p< .05

Table 4.4 shows the t-test results for those participants who watch Law and Order: SVU versus those who do not. It was shown that 38% of participants agree to regularly watching the show. Of the shown items, there are significant differences for none of them. In this t-test, the same pattern exists for the third item as it does in the previous Law and Order and Law and Order: Criminal Intent t-tests shown in Tables 4.2 and 4.3. For item 3, I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers, for both the participants who watch the show, as well as those who do not, the means are very similar at 3.48 for the “yes” group and 3.64 for the “no”. Referring back to Table 4.3, the “yes” group answered item 3 with a mean of 3.46 and the “no” group with a mean of 3.65. Referring back to table 4.2, the “yes” group answered item 3 with a mean of 3.54 while the “no” group answered with a mean of 3.61. The means for these three Law and Order series t-tests show a pattern that the “no” groups were closer to agreement on item 3 than the “yes” groups. In this t-test it was also concurrent with the other Law and Order series t-tests in supporting H2, as displayed in item 2, with the “no” group having a mean of 3.36 (which signifies slight agreement on support for use of the death penalty/capital punishment) and the “yes” group having a mean of 3.26 (signifying neutral attitudes). Again H1 was not supported in this test with item 7 showing neutral attitudes towards their perceived desensitization due to watching crime related media.

Table 4-5 Criminal Minds t-test
(standard deviation in parentheses)

Item	Yes	No	t-value
1. Overall the criminal justice system is fair.	3.00 (.967)	3.14 (.899)	.953
2. I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment.	3.16 (1.337)	3.55 (1.296)	1.184*
3. I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers.	3.46 (.895)	3.75 (.937)	2.010
4. Capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders.	3.09 (1.231)	3.13 (1.182)	.214
5. Criminal offenders have too many rights.	2.81 (.970)	3.08 (.996)	1.798*
6. Depiction of violence in media causes crime.	3.04 (1.179)	2.83 (1.276)	-1.101
7. Watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.	2.71 (1.185)	2.73 (1.158)	.123

*sig. @ $p < .10$

** sig. @ $p < .05$

Table 4.5 shows the t-test results for those participants who watch Criminal Minds versus those who do not. It was shown that 57% of participants agreed to regularly watching the show, this was the highest number of viewers out of the five shows chosen. Of the shown items, there are significant differences for

the second and fifth items at .10 significant levels. For item 2, I support the use of the death penalty/ capital punishment, the “yes” group had a mean of 3.16 showing neutral attitudes while the “no” group had a mean of 3.55 showing slight agreement on the item. This showed support for H2, that those who regularly watch crime related shows will be less punitive. On item 5, criminal offenders have too many rights, the “yes” group had a mean of 2.81, showing disagreement, while the “no” group had a mean of 3.08, expressing neutral attitudes. Also, on item 3, I think that the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers, both groups had means higher than 3.0, which would indicate some level of agreement with this item. The group that does not watch Criminal Minds agrees more strongly that the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers with a mean of 3.75 compared to a mean of 3.46 for the “yes” group. Item 7, again, did not show support for H1, that watching media revolving around criminal activity will cause desensitization to real world crime, with a mean of 2.71 for the “yes” group indicating neutrality.

Chapter 5

Discussion & Conclusion

The main conclusion from this research to focus on is that those people who do not view crime related shows, or in specific the ones which were chosen to inquire about (these can be referenced in Table 3.3 with summaries referenced in Appendix B), are more punitive or supportive of capital punishment in general. Perhaps those people who do have punitive attitudes are not drawn to this type of entertainment. On the other hand, it may be that watching these types of fictional crime shows will make viewers less punitive. This study cannot determine the direction of the relationship, which comes first that is, the punitive attitudes or watching these television programs.

5.1 Interpretation of Findings

In summary, the more significant findings from chapter 4 show that in the Dexter t-test results, the people who did watch this show were more punitive which differed from the four other shows. The plot of Dexter is basically following the life of a man, who happens to be a member of the police department, finding the criminals who slip through the cracks of the criminal justice system, and taking their punishment into his own hands. Dexter is a cold-blooded, sociopathic serial killer, who only hunts murderers or other serial killers. In a way, he is taking the role of the criminal justice system by acting as the punisher. This may explain the results of the t-test in why this was the only show

which had viewers who were more punitive or supportive of capital punishment. In the second item on the t-test, I support the use of the death penalty/capital punishment, participants who watched Dexter agreed with a mean of 3.57. On item 3 on the t-test, I think the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers, the means for both those who did and did not watch the show were very similar. Both groups agreed with the statement with a mean of 3.57 for those who do watch and a mean of 3.59 for those who do not. The Dexter t-test had a disadvantage of having a very unequal number in the groups (only 17% of participants chose “yes” to watching the show while 83% of participants chose “no”) which very likely could have resulted in a lower amount of significant differences.

For the Law and Order t-test results, item 2 was significant with a mean of 3.09 for participants who watch the show, indicating neutral attitudes, and a mean of 3.48 indicating agreement from the participants who do not watch. In both the Law and Order and the Law and Order: Criminal Intent t-tests on item 6, depiction of violence in media causes crime, the participants who do view the shows are neutral while the participants who do not view the shows disagree with the statement. In the Law and Order: SVU t-test, there were no significant results, but there was however a consistent pattern with all of the Law and Order series’ regarding the third item. For item 3, I think the criminal justice system should be

harsher on murderers, the participants in the “yes” groups were neutral while the participants in the “no” groups indicated agreement with the statement.

On the Criminal Intent t-test, there was a significance with the fifth item, criminal offenders have too many rights, with the “yes” group having a mean of 2.81, showing disagreement, and the “no” group having a mean of 3.08 expressing neutral attitudes towards the statement. It was also shown that on item 3, I think that the criminal justice system should be harsher on murderers, both groups indicated agreement with the “no” group indicating a stronger agreement than the “yes” group.

5.2 Limitations

As I mentioned previously, the groups of people who do watch the listed shows and the people who do not were not equal. This obviously had some compromising effects on the amount of significance shown from all seven of the items analyzed in the t-tests in chapter 4. This is a non-probability sample of college students which poses generalizability problems. The research also did not explore the amount of exposure for the television shows considered, as well as results based on different combinations of shows watched. The survey simply asked if the participants regularly watched the television shows listed, meaning watched the shows enough to have a general knowledge on the characters and plot; which is a simplistic measure of media exposure.

5.3 Suggestions for Future Research

Originally I had hypothesized that watching media based on criminals and their activity would both desensitize viewers to real world crime as well as cause their attitudes towards capital punishment to be less punitive. H1 stated that watching media revolving around murderers and criminal activity will cause desensitization to real world crime. This hypothesis, as shown by the tables in the chapters above, was not supported. However, H2 stating that those who regularly watch crime related television series or media (having a general understanding of the characters and plot), will be less punitive than those who do not view such media, was in fact supported in this study. As presented in the tables above, there was overwhelmingly consistent support for this hypothesis, with 4 out of 5 of the t-tests for the television shows selected indicating more punitive attitudes from participants who do not view the shows and less punitive attitudes (indicating less support for capital punishment) from viewers who do watch the television shows listed. The Dexter t-test was the only example which did not show support for this hypothesis; however, as discussed previously in this chapter, this result may have been due to the role Dexter takes in the series as the punisher of the ‘bad’ criminals.

It would be extremely interesting to research the direction of the relationship determined between watching this type of media and less punitive attitudes. Those participants who agreed to watching the five crime shows listed

(Dexter, Law and Order, Law and Order: Criminal Intent, Law and Order: SVU, and Criminal Minds) appeared less punitive than those who do not engage in viewing this type of media. Conducting a longitudinal study with a new set of crime series and determining the participant's attitudes towards the criminal justice system and capital punishment prior to exposing them to media, then re-assessing their attitudes after prolonged exposure to the media, this could result in a better understanding of the cause and effect factor for these attitudes. This would not only make for a fascinating study, but would let researchers further explore the true depth of the effects that come from watching crime related media.

Appendix A

Attitudes and Beliefs of Media Attention Towards Serial Killers and Mass

Murderers

Attitudes and Beliefs of Media Attention
Towards Serial Killers and Mass Murderers

To be read aloud prior to passing out the survey:

My name is Febbee Qubtan and this study is being conducted as part of my thesis requirement through the Criminology and Criminal Justice Department at UTA. It is aimed at measuring the opinions of UT Arlington criminal justice and sociology students at the undergraduate level. This survey is strictly voluntary and anonymous. You are not required to participate in this project and you have the right to terminate this survey at any point before its completion. There are no anticipated risks associated with participation in the survey. You must be 18 years of age or older in order to participate in this study, for those students who do not meet this requirement, I ask that you please sit quietly so that your classmates can answer the survey questions to the best of their ability. You will personally receive no direct benefit as a result of completing the survey. The potential benefit of the research is increased understanding of the perceptions of students regarding media and crime.

Please circle the best answer choice to the following questions:

1) Overall, the criminal justice system is fair when dealing with criminal offenders.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

2) I always pay close attention to news about crime.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

3) I followed the Sandy Hook story closely.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

4) I followed the Boston Bombing story closely.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

5) I followed the Colorado movie theater shooting story closely.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

6) I watch and follow criminal trials that are shown on television. (Ex. Casey Anthony Trial, Jodi Arias Trial, Trayvon Martin Case)

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

7) I support the use of the death penalty/capital punishment for people convicted of murder.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

8) I think the criminal justice system should be harsher when dealing with murderers.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

9) I think capital punishment should be reserved for criminals who commit multiple murders as opposed to just one.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

10) Criminal offenders have too many rights in the criminal justice system.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

11) Depiction of violence in the media (both real and fictional) causes violent crime.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

12) I believe watching violence on television has made me less sensitive to real world violence.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

13) The media portrayals of crime and criminal justice that I have been exposed to have:

- A) Made me view the criminal justice system in a much more negative way
- B) Made me view the criminal justice system in a slightly more negative way
- C) Not changed my opinion of the criminal justice system
- D) Made me view the criminal justice system in a slightly more positive way
- E) Made me view the criminal justice system in a much more positive way

14) What is your primary source of news and information about current events? (Ex: Newspaper, Magazine, Internet, etc.) Please be as specific as possible when identifying the news source.

15) List the 3 television shows you watch most frequently.

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

16) Do you regularly watch any of the following shows? Please **circle** your answer choice.

A. Dexter	Yes	No
B. Law and Order	Yes	No
C. Law and Order: Criminal Intent	Yes	No
D. Law and Order: SVU	Yes	No
E. Criminal Minds	Yes	No
F. The Sopranos	Yes	No
G. Snapped	Yes	No

17) Approximately how many **hours** in a typical week do you watch television shows that portray a murderer as the main character? (Ex: Dexter, The Sopranos, Snapped)

18) Approximately how many **hours** in a typical week of crime related television shows do you watch with fictional stories? (Ex: Criminal Minds, Law and Order, Dexter)

19) Approximately how many **hours** in a typical week of crime related television do you watch involving real life crimes? (Ex: Snapped, Justice Files, The First 48)

20) Approximately how many **hours** of television do you watch in a typical week?

21) I prefer movies that portray violence as opposed to those that do not.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

22) The media gives too much attention to serial and mass murderers.

- 1) Strongly Disagree
- 2) Disagree
- 3) Neutral
- 4) Agree
- 5) Strongly Agree

23) Which of the following best describes your racial/ethnic background?

- A) White
- B) Black
- C) Hispanic
- D) Asian or Pacific Islander
- E) Other, please specify _____

24) What is your family's yearly economic gross income?

- A) Under \$20,000
- B) \$20,000-\$40,000
- C) \$40,000-\$60,000
- D) \$60,000-\$80,000
- E) Over \$80,000

25) Are you male or female?

- A) Male
- B) Female

26) What is your current age? _____

27) What is your current classification in school?

- A) Freshman
- B) Sophomore
- C) Junior
- D) Senior
- E) Other, please specify _____

28) I attend classes:

- A) Part-time
- B) Full-time

29) What is your major or intended major?

- A) Criminology/ Criminal Justice
- B) Sociology
- C) Psychology
- D) Other, please specify _____

Your time and participation in this survey are greatly appreciated!

Appendix B

Plot Summaries for Television Shows Used for Research

Plot Summaries for Television Shows Used for Research

The following plot summaries were retrieved from The Internet Movie Database website which can be found by going to www.IMDb.com.

Dexter

“Meet Dexter Morgan. By day he’s a blood spatter pattern expert for the Miami Metro police department. But by night- he takes on an entirely different persona: serial killer. But Dexter isn’t your average serial killer as he only kills people who fit a very prolific and precise ‘moral code’ taught to him by his late father. Dexter is a disciplined and murderous psychopath (a self-admitted ‘monster’), and he slakes his blood lust at night carefully killing the serial killers he tracks down during the day” (“The internet movie," 2013).

Law and Order

“In New York City, when a crime is committed, the victims are represented by two distinctly separate yet forever intertwined groups of people. There's the police department, represented here by the 27th precinct homicide detectives. It is their job to investigate the crime, collect evidence, interview witnesses and then, when the evidence points to a suspect or suspects, they will place them under arrest. The matter is then taken over by the prosecutors of the Manhattan District Attorney's office, who discuss deals and plea bargains, prepare the witnesses and evidence all whilst conducting the people's case in the trial of the accused. Both teams work together as well as with the Medical Examiner’s Office, Crime Lab and Police and District Attorney psychologists

or psychiatrists. Matters are rarely resolved easily, or for the people involved, satisfactory. Crimes are committed which frequently create public unrest and controversy, race, morals and beliefs are frequently challenged and manipulated, the guilty can go unpunished and the innocent ruined forever. The detectives and prosecutors are weary, cynical, flawed, human and vulnerable. And yet they are somehow still dedicated to their jobs, to make the guilty answer for their crimes and gain some sense of justice for the victim and the victim's family" ("The internet movie," 2013).

Law and Order: Criminal Intent

“Every crime has a history, and every perpetrator has a story. Some of them are presented here, as personal tensions develop, crimes are plotted and ultimately executed, sometimes planned, sometimes not, sometimes by obvious candidates, sometimes not so obvious. Whomever the perpetrator or the victim and depending on the severity of the crime in New York City, the matter could be handled by detectives of the Major Case Squad: a force of brilliant and skilled first-grade detectives who handle the most serious and the most complex crimes that New York has to offer. These are there stories” ("The internet movie," 2013).

Law and Order: Special Victims Unit

“In the criminal justice system, sexually based offenses such as rape, torture, pedophilia and child-abuse are dealt with in New York City, by a special unit of the

police department known as the Special Victims Unit. Its members include Detective Elliot Stabler, a family man trying to protect his family from the horrors of the world that he sees in his job on a daily basis, Detective Olivia Benson, herself the child of a rape victim, Detective John Munch, a cynical ex-Baltimore homicide detective beginning a new life in New York City, Detective Fin Tutuola, a streetwise cop from the Hood, and Captain Donald Cragen, their boss. The crimes they deal with are painful, emotional, disturbing, horrific and scarring - and every day there's more of the same” (“The internet movie,” 2013).

Criminal Minds

“In this crime series, a crack team of FBI profilers fly from Quantico to the focal point of the criminal activity of various serial killers. There they investigate the evidence from the crime scenes, compose a profile and try to prevent the next fatal strike. Top brain was academic Jason Gideon who left the bureau after some difficult decisions. His more by-the-book operational right hand man Aaron ‘Hotch’ Hotchner then took over the team. After Gideon leaves, David Rossi, previously retired, rejoins the bureau in an effort to make a difference in people's lives again and follow up on a case he worked years ago. The still juvenile Dr. Spencer Reid is an erudite on everything except real life, Penelope Garcia a brilliant computer whiz who gets access to any database etc. As they are mobile, cooperation with local police and FBI agents is important but often poses jurisdictional and other problems, as do some witnesses and suspects” (“The internet movie,” 2013).

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Febbe M. Qubtan earned her Bachelors degree in Psychology and Criminal Justice from Stephen F. Austin State University in 2010. She is only a few steps away from completing her Masters degree in Criminology and Criminal Justice from The University of Texas at Arlington in 2013. Her research interest consists of capital punishment attitudes, serial killers, and mass murders. Future plans include work in profiling or U.S. Militarily contract work.