

⁶ The assignment editor started with these two stories because his superior in the newsroom had suggested that they be covered.
⁷ While my example of overlapping news judgments is drawn from a local television station, the same phenomenon occurs both on newspapers and national network news (Epstein, 1973:150).
⁸ The only exception that comes to mind is the coverage of mafia news by specialized reporters on large New York publications: *The New York Times*, the *New York Daily News*, the *New York Post*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and *Newsday*.
⁹ There was an occasional fourth source: phone calls from the police.
¹⁰ There were some exceptions. A handful of common crimes did appear over the police wire (e.g., four rapes in a thirty-day observation period). The journalists I observed could not explain why these were there, and they ignored them.

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FEAR AND LOATHING ON REALITY TELEVISION

AN ANALYSIS OF AMERICA'S MOST WANTED AND UNSOLVED MYSTERIES

Gray Cavender & Lisa Bond-Maupin

The media serve to stimulate our interest in crime. Newspapers, for example, detail the exploits of criminals, while television news and crime drama focus on crimes. Although most crime drama is fictional representation, programs like *The F.B.I.* modify actual cases.

Recently, a new type of crime program has been presented to the public. *America's Most Wanted* (AMW) and *Unsolved Mysteries* (UM) present vignettes depicting actual crimes in which theories of crime are dramatized. These dramatizations feature actors, actual photographs or film footage, and interviews conducted with participants and the police. Viewers are urged to call the police or program representatives with information related to the crime, and police officers are on standby in the television studio to take these calls.

AMW and UM represent a hybrid programming format in that a news or public service format is superimposed on entertainment to produce a new television genre, reality programming. But the line between fact and fiction is not so distinct in the media (Williams 1989, p. 5). Even the news represents a social construction of reality in which reporters transform occurrences into news events (Molotch and Lester 1974; Tuchman 1978). On television genres tend to blend together (Gitlin 1985, p. 6). However, such blending of fact and fiction represents a defining characteristic of reality programming inasmuch as these programs are intended to draw the audience into their reality through active participation.

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Crime and Danger in the Media

Scholars analyze media crime depictions ranging from the amount of crime news to the demographics of crime drama. The findings of such studies suggest that newspaper coverage bears little relationship to official crime statistics (Davis 1952; Fishman 1978). Although some analysts are not concerned about the divergence of newspaper coverage from official statistics, because such statistics are, like the news, a social construction (Tuchman 1978; Ericson, Baranek, and Chan 1991, p. 54); still others (Graber 1980) argue that newspapers offer a misleading picture of crime and criminals. Newspapers disproportionately report violent crimes, and reporters tend to focus attention on sensational matters such as the capture of a criminal and high-status offenders (Graber 1980; Garofalo 1981, pp. 323–25; Humphries 1981, pp. 195–96).

Crime news and fiction go hand in hand because a similar pattern emerges in television drama (Katz 1987). Dramatic criminal plots are featured—usually violence against individuals—and the chase is highlighted (Garofalo 1981, p. 327). Television criminals are predominantly male and disproportionately white, over 30 years of age, and members of a profession (Comstock 1978, pp. 289–93; Pandiani 1978). Television crime is detached from the social context in which it is committed, and non-law-enforcement personnel often solve crimes and capture criminals (Humphries 1981; Lichter and Lichter 1983).

Some research addresses the effects of such depictions on the audience, but the scholarly debate continues unresolved as to whether television affects the public's perception of crime (Gerbner and Gross 1976; Hirsch 1980, 1981). Other researchers suggest that the “meaning” of media crime depictions should be addressed prior to evaluating the effects these depictions have on the public (Gitlin 1979).

The ideological and symbolic dimensions of crime are also present. Television crime drama presents mythic morality plays that privilege a social control orientation (Gitlin 1979, p. 257; Schattenberg 1981), while newspaper coverage reinforces the symbolism of the dominant order (Ericson et al. 1991). Still other researchers analyze the newsworthy effect of such stories (Ericson et al. 1991, pp. 140–48), suggesting that these stories are simple, easily dramatized and personalized, and depict the unexpected. Deviance and control stories meet these criteria. Jack Katz (1987, pp. 50–55) offers four additional criteria for newsworthiness of crime stories: (1) they exemplify human viciousness or audacity, (2) collective integrity is threatened, (3) people who violate moral boundaries are featured, and (4) high status criminals are involved.

Jack Katz's newsworthiness of crime stories criteria parallel the elements of urban legends. Urban legends circulate as true stories, referencing frightening strangers who prey upon unsuspecting victims (Best 1990). Urban legends, such as poisoned Halloween candy, symbolize the strains and

unpredictability of modern life (Fine 1980, p. 237; Best 1990, p. 142). Newspaper crime stories produce motifs found in urban legends, expressing the frustrations of a world characterized by the fear of violence (Wachs 1988; Oring 1990).

Crime is an ideal idiom for expressing urban fear and a corresponding sense of danger. Sally Merry (1981, pp. 11–13), for example, identifies three aspects of danger that are linked to crime: a cognitive assessment of cues, harm that transcends the risk of crime, and danger, a cultural construct, learned as part of how the world functions. People who occupy ambiguous and interstitial statuses and roles, such as children, are likely victims (Merry 1981, p. 140). Criminals are beyond normal techniques of social control (Douglas 1966; Merry 1981, pp. 125, 163), and the fear of crime justifies increased control over those who are considered “dangerous” (Merry 1981, p. 220).

Television is especially suited for evoking fear. As a visual medium, television conveys situational cues that elicit fear, such as dark, isolated areas or menacing strangers (Merry 1981; Stanko 1990; Warr 1990). Cinematographic techniques make these cues more realistic (Graber 1990; Kellner 1990). In the following section the image of crime, criminals, victims, police, and the world view presented by AMW and UM are analyzed. This analysis also includes images conveyed through cinematographic techniques and formats.

Method

A content analysis was conducted of AMW and UM programs that aired between January 25 and May 31, 1989. These programs were videotaped and a subsample of 16 episodes was randomly selected: nine half-hour-long AMW episodes and seven hour-long UM episodes. The 16 episodes contain 77 vignettes (48 AMW; 29 UM); the vignette serves as the unit of analysis. In the analysis, all percentages are calculated on these numbers of vignettes.

The protocol used for data collection was focused on three aspects of the programming: (1) *demographics*: types of crime and general information on the crime, criminals, and victims; (2) *characterizations*: specific depictions of crime, criminals, and victims, such as brutality, dangerousness, or a victim's vulnerability; (3) *world view*: relative safety of people and places, the terror and randomness of crime, and what the audience should do about crime.

Information about cinematographic techniques (for example, camera angles and soundtrack) was coded across all three categories. Both programs feature updates about fugitives depicted earlier who are sighted or captured. Such updates were coded with the vignettes in which they originally appeared.

Data and Discussion

There are three parts to the analysis. Part one compares AMW with UM with prior research on crime drama. Part two considers the parallels between

AMW and UM's vignettes and urban legends. Part three focuses on the construction and the magnification of the dangers of the modern world depicted in these programs.

Television Crime Drama and Reality Programming

Television depictions differ significantly from official crime statistics. The analysis reveals that AMW and UM's depictions of "real life" crimes and criminals are consistent with crime drama representations.

Television crime is depicted as violent and usually directed against persons. AMW and UM offer a similar view of crime. As shown in table 1, in 92 percent of AMW's vignettes ($n = 44$ of 48 vignettes), the crimes depicted also are violent and personal (murder, attempted murder, rape, kidnapping, armed robbery and child molestation). Sixty-two percent of UM's vignettes ($n = 18$) include violence against persons. For both programs, murder is depicted in 52 percent of the vignettes ($n = 40$).

Ninety-one percent of the vignettes ($n = 70$) depict male criminals. Four percent of the vignettes ($n = 3$) feature female criminals, and these are portrayed as accomplices. Criminals are 30 years or older in 56 percent of the vignettes ($n = 43$), and Caucasians are involved in 64 percent of all vignettes ($n = 44$). African Americans ($n = 9$) and Hispanics ($n = 9$) are featured in 12 percent of the vignettes (see table 2).

Table 1 Number and Percentage of Vignettes that Depicted Offense Types by Program^a

Offense	Program Vignettes					
	UM ($n = 29$)		AMW ($n = 48$)		Combined UM/AMW ($n = 77$)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Murder	41	(12)	58	(28)	52	(40)
Theft/fraud/extortion	21	(6)	8	(4)	13	(10)
Escape	7	(2)	15	(7)	12	(9)
Bank robbery/armed robbery	10	(3)	10	(5)	10	(8)
Illegal arms/terrorism	0		4	(2)	3	(2)
Unexplained death/missing	14	(4)	2	(1)	7	(5)
Rape	3	(1)	6	(3)	5	(4)
Kidnapping	3	(1)	6	(3)	5	(4)
Child molestation	3	(1)	6	(3)	5	(4)
Attempted murder	0		4	(2)	3	(2)
Drug dealing	0		4	(2)	3	(2)
Other ^b	10	(3)	4	(2)	7	(5)

^a Percentages are based on the total number of vignettes for each program. Note that a vignette may contain depictions of more than one offense type.

^b The Other category includes bigamy and/or intimidation.

Table 2 Number and Percentage of Vignettes that Depicted Offender Characteristics by Program^a

Characteristics	Program Vignettes					
	UM ($n = 29$)		AMW ($n = 48$)		Combined UM/AMW ($n = 77$)	
	%	n	%	n	%	n
Gender						
Male	76	(22)	100	(48)	91	(70)
Female	3	(1)	4	(2)	4	(3)
Unknown/not depicted	21	(6)	0		8	(6)
Age						
20-29	21	(6)	31	(15)	27	(21)
30-39	17	(5)	21	(10)	20	(15)
40-49	21	(6)	31	(15)	27	(21)
50-59	14	(4)	6	(3)	9	(7)
Unknown/not depicted	28	(8)	10	(5)	17	(13)
Ethnicity						
Caucasian	66	(19)	63	(30)	64	(49)
African American	3	(1)	17	(8)	12	(9)
Hispanic	7	(2)	15	(7)	12	(9)
Mixed ethnicity	3	(1)	0		1	(1)
Unknown/not depicted	21	(6)	6	(3)	12	(9)

^a A vignette may contain depictions of male and female offenders or multiple offenders of the same gender, age, and ethnicity.

Contrary to television drama, criminals are frequently portrayed as professional criminals. Corporate and political criminals are absent from the vignettes. A motivation for crime is offered in over half of the vignettes ($n = 42$). Greed frequently prompts the crime, especially on UM ($n = 11$), while emotional motivations, such as jealousy, are prominent on AMW ($n = 6$). Some crimes are blamed on random violence or mistaken identity ($n = 9$).

AMW and UM provide a social history, re-enacting past key events in the life of the criminal, and describe their current lives. However, these caricatures tend to reinforce existing stereotypes about criminals.

Citizens play a significant role on both programs. The program hosts credit viewers with captures, while the police are depicted as competent and accessible to the viewers. AMW and UM also provide more information about trial and sentencing than usually appears in crime drama.

AMW and UM as Urban Legends

Fear-evoking cues magnified by sophisticated cinematographic techniques enable AMW and UM to construct entertaining programs that fit the standard format of the television crime genre. The vignettes are symbolic morality plays about good and evil.

As in urban legends, the crime portrayed on AMW and UM symbolizes the dangers and complexities of modern life that threaten the social order. Brutal, violent crimes are featured (for example, UM 2-22-89; AMW 2-12-89), and graphic details are shown, including the number and location of a victim's wounds. For example, one victim is stabbed 30 times through the heart (AMW 2-12-89); another victim is shot "5 times and died of massive bleeding" (AMW 2-5-89).

Cinematographic techniques enhance the affective aspects of crime. In some vignettes, the film speed is reduced to slow motion as a criminal draws a gun and shoots the victim, capturing the muzzle flash (AMW 2-5-89, 2-12-89, 4-9-89). One vignette employs fear cues: the host, emerging from the night on a deserted road, references a common fear of driving on a lonely stretch of highway where one's cries for help would go unheeded (UM 4-12-89).

Described are dimensions or harm that go beyond the risk of victimization. Victims are "embarrassed and devastated" (UM 3-15-89), and their families' and friends' lives are tragically disrupted (UM 1-25-89, 3-15-89, AMW 4-2-89). Dramatic irony intensifies the tragedy. Victims are murdered shortly after achieving an important goal (AMW 3-19-89) or on their birthday (UM 3-15-89). Victims do not merely lose property through theft, they lose "a precious family heirloom that was part of their heritage" (AMW 4-2-89). The narrative, the visual, and the soundtrack combine to communicate a sense of tragedy, e.g., the host notes that a slain policeman is buried with full honors. The vignette shows footage of his funeral as "Taps" is played in the background (AMW 2-5-89). Stories are simple and easily dramatized. Twenty AMW vignettes (42 percent) depict random, purposeless crimes often featured in urban legends, while nineteen UM vignettes (66 percent) offer such a depiction.

Criminals. Like the villains of urban legends, criminals are dangerous people who are beyond social control. Thirty-seven AMW vignettes (77 percent) depict criminals in this manner. Nineteen UM vignettes (66 percent) offer such depictions.

Fugitives are characterized as dangerous (for example, AMW 2-5-89; UM 4-12-89), and the bail bond imposed suggests that these criminals should be incarcerated (AMW 2-5-89). The camera often zooms in on a captured fugitive's handcuffs, providing a visual image of the physical restraints that are required to control these individuals (for example, AMW 2-12-89; UM 3-15-89). Some criminals are traditional urban legend villains, such as drifters (AMW 3-26-89) and hitchhikers (UM 3-1-89). Other criminals are portrayed as satanists (AMW 4-16-89; UM 3-29-89). AMW and UM also feature criminals who are gang members (AMW 2-12-89) and drug dealers (AMW 2-5-89; 4-16-89).

AMW and UM feature frightening criminals who have ambiguous psychological capacity. One criminal is a "crazed killer, a psycho, a maniac" (UM 3-29-89), while others are characterized as "schizophrenic" (AMW 4-2-89) or "emotionally disturbed" (AMW 2-26-89). Both programs feature criminals

who "showed no emotion" (for example, AMW 2-5-89, UM 3-29-89), or who demonstrate "a flamboyant disregard of authority" (AMW 4-12-89).

The programs define criminals through their actions, portraying criminality as a master status, noting such deviance is undifferentiated in that the criminal activity is generalized to other aspects of their lives. For example, one criminal "masqueraded as a construction worker but he was really an escaped murderer" (AMW 2-5-89). Another criminal who "appeared to be a model cop was in reality a child molester" (UM 3-1-89).

The program hosts provide physical descriptions of fugitives in derogatory terms, such as "a scraggly beard" (AMW 4-2-89), or "dirty blonde hair" (AMW 2-26-89). Other deviant behaviors unrelated to the crimes are mentioned, such as dabbling in voodoo (AMW 4-2-89). In one vignette, the host invites the audience to view the physical effects of depravity, using a time-lapse technique on a series of photographs in which the criminal's physical appearance deteriorates (AMW 2-26-89).

Victims. The victims often occupy ambiguous and interstitial roles and statuses and, therefore, are vulnerable to harm. Victims are similar to those of urban legends. Twenty-four AMW (50 percent) and twenty UM vignettes (69 percent) depict such victims. Children are molested and kidnapped (UM 3-1-89, 1-25-89). In this regard, AMW's opening features a visual of an empty playground swing, accompanied by a voice-over of the word "kidnapped."

Women are frequent victims as well. Approximately one-half of the victims whose sex is noted are female, thereby reinforcing the fear of crime and violence that women experience.

AMW and UM offer information about victims designed to achieve viewer empathy. Victims are referred to by their given names, and friends share personal anecdotes. Crimes are re-enacted so as to promote identification with the victim; the camera takes the victim's perspective, reproducing a good/evil dichotomy, with the victim and the audience aligned against the criminal.

The programs focus on the victim's personal and professional worth. In contrast to the criminals, victims are "hard working" individuals (for example, UM 3-15-89; AMW 4-16-89). UM characterizes one victim as a "devoted wife and mother who was active in the community" (UM 3-29-89), and another as "the kind of girl you'd like to have for your daughter" (UM 3-15-89). One vignette featuring wild horses as victims establishes their worth in human terms: "They symbolize the freedom of the American West, and each animal has its own unique personality" (UM 1-25-89).

Modern Danger

Both programs create a sense of modern danger analogous to the fears that urban legends convey. This modern danger is characterized as a world in which no one, no matter how careful, is safe.

Just as urban legends are portrayed as true stories, AMW and UM act as media storytellers of "real life" and the terrible uncertainties of life. The real-

ity program format enhances the sense of modern danger. As entertainment these hybrid programs combine fear cues and cinematographic techniques, and appeal to the conventions of news programming that bolster credibility of reality claims.

An Unsafe World. Good storytellers localize their tales in time and space. AMW and UM program hosts begin their stories with statements like, "27 years ago tonight" (AMW 2-5-89). Exact dates of crimes (UM 1-25-89) and phrases such as "20 days ago" (AMW 3-19-89) provide accessible temporal referents, contributing to reality claims.

Geographic settings are also important. Statements such as "it all started in this house on Chestnut Street" (AMW 2-19-89), or "a quiet blue-collar suburb on the outskirts of Cleveland" (UM 5-31-89) produce an identifiable sense of place. Some locations, such as an unfamiliar area or dark alley, serve as fear cues.

Featured are crimes that occur in safe places, and program hosts draw special attention to such settings. One vignette, set in a conservative Louisiana community, represents, the host notes, an unlikely setting for a crime (UM 3-1-89). In another vignette, "dark forces swirled beneath a small-town facade" (UM 2-22-89). Crimes often violate special places, such as the home. In one dramatization, the camera follows a schizophrenic killer as he observes the sleeping victims (AMW 4-23-89). Another vignette depicts a burglar sneaking through a house while the occupants host a dinner party. Later, a teenage girl showers and her unsuspecting mom works in a bedroom, while the burglar prowls through the house (AMW 4-2-89). When crime occurs in seemingly safe places, a sense of modern danger is enhanced.

Certain predictable people, such as menacing strangers, also serve as fear cures. However, the worst danger portrayed evolves from seemingly trustworthy persons. Likeable and normal people are portrayed as manipulative con artists or crazy (for example, UM 1-25-89; AMW 2-12-89, 4-9-89). In some instances, the unsuspected criminal occupies a special role, such as a policeman who counsels abused children but who also molests these children (UM 3-1-89), or a sociopathic nurse who kidnaps a newborn baby at gunpoint (UM 1-25-89).

The most terrifying criminals hold a special status with respect to the victim. Examples include the husband who murders his wife while she begs him to spare her life (AMW 2-5-89). Other vignettes depict special criminals who hold an interstitial status, such as the "All American" kid who becomes a drug user and murders his parents (AMW 2-26-89). Such vignettes emphasize the thesis that no place is safe; no person is trustworthy.

Random Terror. One message is that the modern world is filled with danger. Random and terrifying danger lurks everywhere, awaiting the victim and, by implication, the viewer. Powerful, emotionally charged vignettes produce images that reinforce a sense of danger that is commonplace in modern society. Some of the vignettes emphasize the criminal. For example, as the

host characterizes the criminal as dangerous, the frame freezes, leaving the criminal's intense stare directed at the audience (AMW 4-9-89). Program hosts urge the audience to remember these visually compelling images, and to be on the lookout for the fugitives.

Victims are also emphasized, many of whom are randomly chosen, innocent individuals who are "arbitrarily targeted" (UM 3-29-89) or murdered by mistake (AMW 4-16-89). On occasion a horror movie format is used in which the foolish character opens a door at the top of the stairs as the audience screams "No." People sense the impending danger and warn victims who rarely heed such warnings. Either victims do not appreciate the extent of the danger (AMW 2-12-89, 4-16-89), or they are engaged in common activities that escalate into sudden violence, such as the woman who became involved in a marital dispute and was murdered (UM 1-25-89).

Equally terrifying are the vignettes in which the victims realize their danger. The camera follows an obviously frightened woman leaving her house. Ominous music complements this fear as she nervously scans the street, searching for some threat. She is careful, but she still disappears (UM 1-25-89).

Other careful victims are murdered by maniacal killers (for example UM 3-29-89), or by satanic blood cults (AMW 4-16-89). Emphasizing victim terror, victims often describe their fear (UM 4-12-89). In other instances the host describes the fear, indicating how it feels for a family to be stalked by a prison escapee bent on revenge (UM 4-12-89).

Situational and fear cues heighten the sense of victim terror and audience frustration. Vignettes feature people who are isolated and alone when victimized (for example, UM 4-12-89). In other instances, people are nearby but do not render assistance to the victim. A woman whose baby has been kidnapped screams for help, but no motorist will stop (UM 1-25-89). Careful, normal, and hard-working people are victimized by base, depraved strangers. They are also victimized by their children, spouses, mates, and friends. In this area, AMW and UM programs extend beyond the content of urban legends, suggesting that modern danger is inescapable.

AMW and UM programs portray a world in which crime is so unpredictable and its consequences so devastating that public safety is at issue. Crime is a metaphor for a world gone berserk, for life out of control. The only recourse viewers have is to call the authorities or the program representative with information that will put criminals behind bars. Program updates attribute captures to viewer tips, and footage of captured fugitives supports these claims.

Modern danger legitimizes public surveillance. Forging a partnership between the police, the media, and the audience, these programs encourage wide dispersal of community social control.

Conclusion

Prior research has shown that television dramatizes stereotype depictions of crime and criminals. In the present study the authors conclude that reality

programming presents similar images. Crimes are portrayed as violent and personal, and fugitives are portrayed as dangerous people.

However, the present study diverges from the more traditional media crime approach in that the focus is on program meaning. AMW and UM programs present images common to popular urban legends in that crime is used to symbolize the uncertainties of modern life, that criminals are evil, abnormal people, and victims are portrayed as being vulnerable. Such tales nurture the very fears that produce urban legends.

Using a combination of case selection, cinematographic techniques, and claims, these reality programs depict a sense of modern danger. AMW and UM programs present a world in which anyone can be cast into the role of a criminal or victim. Such an image of reality is frightening because the victims are people with whom viewers can identify.

Reality programs nurture audience participation as one solution to the pervasiveness of crime, supporting the notion that viewers can be empowered in the fight against crime. Viewers are encouraged to watch for fugitives and report them either to the police or the program. Both programs claim that such surveillance leads to the capture of fugitives.

Reality program encouragement of surveillance supports the view that control is dispersing more widely into society. Images of dangerous fugitives who participate in a world characterized by violence and uncertainty justify surveillance and reporting to the police. This world view also supports the claim made by Gitlin (1979) and Schattenberg (1981) that crime drama endorses a control orientation.

In sum, AMW and UM's hybrid news and entertainment format continues the trend toward blurred television genres previously noted by media scholars. The influence of television is so great that it has become an important part of the viewer's reality. Participating in reality programs means the audience is a part of that reality, making that reality almost indistinguishable from any other aspects of life.

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