

Institution: 10007140 Birmingham City University		
Unit of Assessment: 20: Social Work and Social Policy		
Title of case study: Enriching Crime Media – Informing content of television programmes through homicide research		
Period when the underpinning research was undertaken: 2007-2017		
Details of staff conducting the underpinning research from the submitting unit:		
Name(s):	Role(s) (e.g. job title):	Period(s) employed by submitting HEI:
Professor Elizabeth Yardley (EY)	Professor of Criminology	2010 – Present
Professor David Wilson (DW)	Professor Emeritus of Criminology	1997 – Present
Dr Sarah Pemberton (SP)	Associate Professor in Criminology	2012 – Present
Dr Adam Lynes (AL)	Senior Lecturer in Criminology	2011 – Present
Donal MacIntrye (DM)	Visiting Professor and Lecturer in Criminology and Media	2013 – 2019
Liam Brolan (LB)	Lecturer in Criminology	2017 – Present
Period when the claimed impact occurred: January 2016 – December 2020		
Is this case study continued from a case study submitted in 2014? N		
1. Summary of the impact (indicative maximum 100 words)		
<p>Our research has led to higher quality true crime television programmes, rooted in cutting edge empirical enquiry. Our research has directly shaped programme narratives, improving the rigour and accuracy of 131 episodes across five series made in the UK, Ireland and distributed globally, representing a step change from the low quality, populist media, driven by stereotypes and prejudices which previously dominated such genres. The key beneficiaries are the television channels CBS Reality and Sky Crime, the online streaming service Netflix, multiple television production companies in the UK and Ireland and the audiences of the programmes they make.</p>		
2. Underpinning research (indicative maximum 500 words)		
<p>We have developed an international reputation for explaining the complexities of homicide in a manner accessible for non-academic and non-specialist audiences. We are an established primary point of contact to inform crime content for Netflix, CBS Reality and multiple production companies in the UK and Ireland.</p> <p>We undertook the first study in the UK to approach serial homicide from a victim perspective. It focused upon victim socio-demographics instead of offender motivation and biography, which had characterised earlier scholarship influenced by psychological focus of the FBI's work in this area (R01). Uniquely, our findings established five main victim groups targeted by British serial killers; established through interviews with serial killers and victim groups, observations of a serial homicide police investigation and analysing official inquiries as well as police and court records. Our research highlighted that victim groups reflect wider structural power relations and inequalities - a significant departure from the orthodox focus upon the psycho-social development of individual serial killers. R01 has since been cited by over 100 other scholarly works, representing considerable recognition in this relatively small sub-specialism of homicide studies.</p> <p>Theoretical development continued in R02, which outlined an integrated, multilevel explanation for homicide. This identified the individual, community and societal factors that combined to create the conditions in which serial homicide occurs. This was significant in that it was the first study in the world to apply concepts of <i>pseudo-pacification</i> and <i>special liberty</i> to homicide.</p>		

Pseudo-pacification challenges the orthodox narrative that violence has declined throughout modernity, arguing that it has instead changed in shape and form. Special liberty describes the tendency of the neoliberal citizen to do whatever necessary to secure their own interests, regardless of the impact on others – a clear trait of contemporary serial homicide offenders. The integration of these concepts moves the study of serial homicide beyond a focus upon harmful individual values and behaviours, understanding them as inextricably linked to wider political and economic factors. The publication of R02 in the highly regarded, peer-reviewed journal, *European Journal of Criminology*, is testament to its quality.

In R03 we developed a methodology to enable empirical enquiry through the collection of primary data – the criminological autopsy. We then applied this to the Dunblane mass murder. The criminological autopsy utilises ethnographic-style observations and data collection in the places of the locality and a structured review of documentation relating to the case. For example, the Cullen Enquiry into the murders, the perpetrator's personal letters and the accounts of secondary victims. This approach has since informed further scholarship in the serial homicide field, notably Wattis's multiple works on Peter Sutcliffe, the so-called "Yorkshire Ripper".

Our ground-breaking research into 'hitmen' (R04) was the first study to identify cases of contract killing in Britain during the rise of neoliberal political economy. We explored the physical locations of contract killings and the nexus between public and private space through thematic analysis. We collected data on demographic and criminological variables relating to contract homicide convictions to develop the first typology of British hitmen. Our research challenged the common portrayal of hitmen as expensive, underground, and elite: we found the reality was much different and these killers operated at a more public, open and relatively affordable level.

Our research progressed to examine networked technology (R05, R06), exploring the significance of digital connectivity and social media for homicide. R05 was the first homicide study to examine social networking sites, analysing 48 international cases where Facebook had been used by perpetrators. This led us to establish a typology of how offenders use Facebook. R06 broke new ground as the first to empirically explore perpetrator use of social media by formulating and applying our new methodology – *Ethnographic Media Practice Analysis for Criminology (EMPAC)* - to examine the use of a range of digital platforms by three perpetrators in the USA and Canada. EMPAC is a framework for analysing individual cases, and consists of a series of themes, terms and questions, enabling both an analysis of individual experiences and the broader contexts within which these lived realities exist.

3. References to the research

R01 Wilson, D. (2007) *Serial killers: hunting Britons and their victims, 1960 to 2006*. Waterside Press. ISBN 978-1904380337

R02 Hall, S., & Wilson, D. (2014) New foundations: Pseudo-pacification and special liberty as potential cornerstones for a multi-level theory of homicide and serial murder. *European Journal of Criminology*, 11(5), 635-655. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1477370814536831>

R03 Wilson, D., Yardley, E. and Pemberton, S. (2017) The 'Dunblane massacre' as a 'photosensitive plate'. *Crime Media Culture*, 13(1), 55-68. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1177/1741659016644842>

R04 MacIntyre, D., Wilson, D., Yardley, E., & Brolan, L. (2014) The British Hitman: 1974–2013. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 53(4), 325-340. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12063>

R05 Yardley, E., & Wilson, D. (2015) Making Sense of 'Facebook Murder'? Social Networking Sites and Contemporary Homicide. *The Howard Journal of Criminal Justice*, 54(2), 109-134. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1111/hojo.12109>

R06 Yardley, E. (2017) *Social Media Homicide Confessions: Stories of killers and their victims*. Bristol: Policy Press. ISBN 978-1447328018

4. Details of the impact (indicative maximum 750 words)

Increased stakeholder participation, empowerment and engagement

Our research has directly influenced the development of 131 episodes of programming across five series, with both national and international audiences, reaching around of 330 million people. This is evidence of the unit's considerable capacity to influence perceptions of crime and criminality across the globe. According to industry calculations, DW and EY generated advertising value equivalents (AVE) in excess of £9million, through media coverage of their research and associated programming during the assessment period (S01).

Our involvement and research insights enhanced the legitimacy of programming, increasing stakeholder confidence in the productions and the likelihood of their participation. We also advocated the need for the perspectives of stakeholders, such as psychologists, police detectives, families and friends of victims and perpetrators to be heard, which led to these individuals' voices being included in the programmes.

"Having the strong academic research behind the programme gave the families of the victims the confidence to be part of the programme and share their experiences, with the hope of preventing it from happening again" Director of Programming, CBS Reality (S02)

"Professor Wilson's involvement in the programme was important in bringing other experts on board due to his status as an established scholar in this field. This also enhanced the confidence of the audience in the validity and reliability of the programme's investigation and conclusions." Executive Producer, BBC Studios (S02)

The involvement of such stakeholders represented a meaningful change in the way true crime programming has been produced. As opposed to families simply being 'talking heads', reinforcing a producer-led narrative, our research, in placing victims and their families at the heart of cases, ensures that their voices have informed programme content. The cooperation of such stakeholders was a necessary step in creating rich, informative programming that highlighted the previously misunderstood aspects about serial homicide and professional killers.

Informing, enriching and influencing television content

Our research acted as an evidence base to enable programmes to move away from a focus on homicide offenders to better encompass social and political-economic contexts (S03)

Furthermore, programmes have directly used our work to highlight the structural inequalities that lead to vulnerabilities in specific victim groups. R05 was drawn upon in exploring Stephen Port's use of *Grindr* as a predator serial killer. *Click for Murder* highlighted the broader context of homophobia identified in R01. *Murderers and their Mothers*, referred to the social and cultural ideological frameworks around gender roles to increase awareness and understandings of individual behaviour.

Our typology of homicide perpetrators and social media use (R05) informed the concept for the highly successful Netflix show *Click for Murder*, which was also screened on CBS Reality.

"Research such as Dr Yardley's paper 'Making Sense of Facebook Murder' creates a strong starting point for television series in the true crime genre" (S02).

R04 provided the structure for, *Assassins: Ireland's Contract Killers*, which aired on Irish channel TV3. By applying our academic knowledge on British Hitmen to Irish cases we were able to introduce the concepts to Irish audiences and programmes (S03).

BBC documentary *Jack the Ripper: The case reopened* (2019), was shaped by our multilevel model of homicide and serial homicide (R01, R02) and applied both the victim-centred approach (R01) and criminological autopsy (R03). This programme was made by the BBC Science department and their use of our research is testament to the quality of our scholarship. This programme secured considerable reach for our research with viewing figures of 3.6 million people of different ages and genders from across the social class spectrum (S02). The Executive Producer for BBC Studios stated,

“[the] criminological autopsy technique was an important component of the programme’s content. Professor Wilson’s research informed the content and structure of Jack the Ripper: The Case Reopened and played a significant role in producing a forensic, empirical and rigorous programme that stood apart from other programmes about unsolved murders which tend to focus heavily on style, dramatic reconstructions and opinion.”(S02)

Enriching the narrative to influence television portrayals of homicide

Our research has directly informed TV programme narratives, challenging orthodox understandings of homicide (R01, R02) by emphasising *how* homicide is presented and examined. Traditionally, homicide is presented as an act perpetrated by someone who is inherently ‘bad’. The analysis is often abstract, focusing wholly on the psychology of the perpetrator, and precluding a consideration of *how* their harmful behaviour developed within the familial, community, social, cultural and political context, which creates a misinformed idea in the minds of the audience. Instead, our unique approach enabled production companies to create a detailed picture of the crimes and the forces that drove the criminal(s). This serves the audience by demonstrating how the range of factors, operating at different levels, combine to create the circumstances in which perpetrators decide to kill (S04)

“...Your research enables our shows to go into more depth and therefore gives the audience a deeper understanding and more information. This is vital as the true crime genre progresses – we can’t simply say ‘who dunnit’ – we need to say ‘why’ and look at how we can prevent it in the future...your insights definitely help drive the storytelling of each programme” CEO, Woodcut Media (S02)

“The involvement of the criminologists from Birmingham City University has resulted in insight-led Sky Crime programmes, shaped and informed by their cutting-edge research...resulting in detailed and educational Sky Crime programmes.” Scheduling Controller, Sky Crime (S02).

EY’s research (R05) has been particularly significant in shaping the narrative of *Click for Murder*,

“The paper informed how our series could look at individual cases and discuss how and why the murderers acted as they did and how social media enabled their crimes.....it did give us a strong editorial basis for Click for Murder. We also used it as the basis for analysis within each programme and for PR purposes...her research and onscreen commentary as an expert criminologist underscored the journalistic thrust and narrative of these programmes and others” (S02).

Click for Murder was also successful in communicating our multilevel understandings of homicide, as evidenced in a TV Guide review which typically receives 2.5 million hits per month (CBS, 2017),

“One of the excellent things about the series is that it is not tunnel-visioned to see social media as the one and only cause of heinous crimes. It is not just the online world that is presented as a danger on the show, as others factors are taken into consideration too. It is refreshing to see a crime documentary tackle the fatal consequences of stigmatisation and repression of homosexuality, for example.” (S01)

Increasing audience awareness, understanding and engagement

Our involvement in informing television content has equipped and stimulated programme audiences by enhancing their awareness and understanding. As a result, audiences are more engaged due to the new knowledge. One production company executive stated,

“By drawing on factual research, it is easier to mould and shape the programme to allow the audience to have an in-depth understanding of a specific area of crime. Rather than looking at a single crime case in isolation” (S02)

Our commitment to explaining the complexities of homicide in an accessible manner for the general public has ensured that audiences learn and understand specialist terminology associated with homicide, as well as the potential indicators of criminal behaviour. The Director of Programming for CBS Reality stated that,

“Crime documentaries often bandy around a lot of 'lingo' describing perpetrators, without actually providing the audience with a comprehensive understanding of what that means. By collaborating with experts such as those mentioned above, we provide new and accurate information to an audience who believe they already know everything about crime, victims and perpetrators. As such the audiences consume the programmes with more dedication and interest as they are also learning than programmes on many other channels. By providing the general public with factual research base information, not only does it make better programming, but it also provides them with knowledge to enable them to understand people, and in many cases red flags of crimes, far better. It helps people determine warning signs that may otherwise have passed them by allowing them to protect themselves and their families, and in some cases, gives them the catalyst they need to remove themselves from a situation which may be destructive.” (S02)

“Criminologists at Birmingham City University have succeeded in building relationships with media organisations and in doing so have put their research to work in gradually shifting popular attitudes towards serious forms of violence.” Scheduling Controller, Sky Crime. (S02)

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

S01: Press Relations coverage reports for ‘Click for Murder’, ‘Murders and their Mothers’ including AVE data.

S02. Testimonials from TV producers and production companies (including CBS Reality, Emporium Productions, Woodcut Media, BBC, Sky Crime) **[Named Corroborator 001]**

S03. Television programmes and podcasts

Hyperlinks, programme information and screenshots from CBS Reality, Apple Podcasts, Netflix, BBC, Sky Crime and Pick TV

S04. Online articles and blogposts corroborating impacts

S05: Media Trade Press Article “Click for Murder”, “Written in Blood” Join CBS Reality Fall Line-Up, *Real Screen*.

<https://realscreen.com/2017/08/11/click-for-murder-written-in-blood-join-cbs-realitys-fall-lineup/>