Law Enforcement and Crime on *Cops* and *World's Wildest Police Videos*: Anecdotal Form and the Justification of Racial Profiling

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Crime-based reality TV continues to be a mainstay of contemporary prime-time viewing. This crime-based reality programming offers audiences information about police, crime, and police-suspect interactions, presented in dramatic form. The present study considers the dramatic elements in two of these popular prime-time programs, *Cops* and *World's Wildest Police Videos*, focusing on the ways in which the reality-based programming represents police/suspect interaction through an examination of 81 anecdotes. Specifically, this rhetorical study identifies a representative anecdote of the programs and comments on an important and troublesome feature of the anecdotal form. The paper argues that the form of these programs serves to justify controversial police practices and, of particular significance, the programming implicitly justifies the practice of racial profiling. Such programming offers audiences poor "equipment for living" in a society that needs to continue confronting the problems of racism and discrimination.

F OR DIFFERENT REASONS, "Reality TV" programming has captured the attention of television executives, public audiences, and media scholars. Whereas much of the recent popular attention is directed at programs such as *Survivor* and *The Bachelor*, the crime-based genre of reality TV programming became a staple for prime time viewers in the 1990s and continues to be a mainstay of prime-time television viewing (Coe, 1994; Eschholz, Blackwell, Gertz, & Chiricos, 2002). The media's portrayal of law enforcement and crime tells public audiences about such things as "good and evil," heroes and villains, "morality," and it

suggests appropriate societal responses to crime and social problems (Surrette, 1998 p. 34).

Most people report that their information about crime and their understanding of law enforcement comes through the media rather than through direct experience (Oliver & Armstrong, 1998). Although some of this information comes from audiences' consumption of televised news and from viewing dramatic fiction, the new phenomenon of reality TV that deals with police, crime, and police-suspect interaction "blur[s] the line between news and entertainment . . . fact and fiction" (Cavender & Fishman, 1998, p. 3). Fishman (1999) maintains that "stories told about crime have tremendous potential to reinforce a moral community's internal solidarity" (pp. 283–284), and the presentation of crime, deviants, and police may influence how audiences view themselves and their society. Audience members may have little or no first hand experience with crime and the police. Since audiences may perceive the reality programming as an accurate reflection of police, crime, and criminals in society (Eschholz et al., 2002), critical examination of this crime-based programming is important.

The focus of this study concerns two prominent crime-based reality programs: *Cops* and *World's Wildest Police Videos* (*WWPV*), both of which boast of representing the reality of police-suspect interaction. According to John Langles, *Cops* executive producer, his show is "as pure as you can get in documentary film making" (as cited in Doyle, 1998, p. 98). John Bunnell, a former Sheriff from Portland, Oregon, the host and co-producer of *WWPV* introduces every one-hour show by stating: "What you're about to see in the next 60 minutes is real: Real cops. Real crooks. Real cases . . ." (Kurtz, 1999, p. A1). This crime programming employs videotaped episodes of police and citizen interaction to fashion drama out of real-life footage (Zoglin, 1988). The edited segments in *Cops* and *WWPV*, accompanied by narratives and interviews, present audiences with short dramatic engagements between law enforcement officials and citizen-suspects. These videotaped interactions intend precisely to present public audiences the encounters between these characters as "real" rather than fictional.

Both programs are very popular, and their longevity impressive. The prominence of crime-based reality TV is not only due to the popularity of the shows, however. Producers like the genre because it is relatively inexpensive and the stories do not become stale. They present the formulaic depiction of police-citizen interaction over and over, place the programs in syndication, and re-run them to audiences. Testimony to the staying power of *Cops* and *WWPV*, the programs present a lasting formula, whereas other reality programs are based on innovative scenarios to attract viewers. As early as 1994, for example, *Cops* was the "No. 2" ranked program among "adults 18–49 from 8–9 PM and some weeks it's No. 1" (Coe, 1994, p. 30). At the time of this research, *Cops* continues to air on Fox in prime time family viewing

hours, has about 8 million viewers a night (TV Winners, 2001), and enjoys wide syndication. *WWPV* emerged more recently, aired on Fox during prime time on Friday nights. In its first year, *WWPV* grabbed the number two spot in the Neilson ratings for its time slot (James, 1998). It was put into syndication in 2001. For Mike Darnell, Fox's executive vice president, the program is "milk . . . until it dies" (cited in Kurtz, 1999, p. A1+). In 2001, it had 8.2 million viewers, an increase of 11% over the 2000 season (TV Winners, 2001).

Because the programs offer audiences the "reality" of police work, scholars interested in reality television programming should consider what the programs present to viewers. For Kenneth Burke, "literature" offers "equipment for living," meaning that people cope with their society and their world through language, which provides a sort of "medicine" to understand their world and their social problems (Burke, 1967). In more general terms, Brummett (1984a) expands Burke's definition to televised forms of communication: "Discourse" is "equipment for living" (p. 162). Following Burke (1967) and Brummett (1984a), this study examines several programs as a way to identify a representative anecdote, a generalized drama providing a series of lessons and expectations for audiences. Based upon our rhetorical analysis of these programs, noting in particular the characterization of agents and the form with which the programming presents police-suspect interactions, we argue that a representative anecdote of these programs serves as justification for controversial police practices. Particularly troublesome, the representative anecdote that we identify may serve as an implicit justification for the controversial practice of racial profiling.

Following a review of relevant research on reality TV crime programming, which focuses particularly on the ways in which police and suspects are characterized, and on the "myths" of crime portrayed by these reality TV programs, the paper turns to our treatment of the rhetorical features of *Cops* and *WWPV*. After the nuances of these programs are developed, we consider the implications of the findings, particularly in regard to race and prejudice.

Law Enforcement and Crime in Reality TV

Kappeler, Blumberg, and Potter (1996) point to four general elements of the media's treatment of crime. They argue that the media (1) highlight "deviant populations"; (2) cast ordinary citizens as victims; (3) outline clearly the "threat to established norms, values, or traditional lifestyles"; and (4) display heroic police as "a thin blue line" between innocent folk and dangerous criminals (p. 18). An examination of the literature addressing crime-based reality programming suggests that shows depicting the "real" thing also contribute to these myths about crime.

Most clearly, reality crime programming reinforces certain "myths" of crime and crime fighting in America (Fishman, 1999; Kappeler, Blumberg, & Potter, 1996; Robinson 2000). Central elements of the media's dissemination of crime mythology involve characterizations of police and criminals. Specifically, a central myth of crime in American society concerns those types of citizens who are perceived to be criminals. "Typically," Robinson (2000) notes, "crime myths" focus on "lower-class minority males" (p. 133). A pervasive myth is that "minorities," and in particular "African Americans, commit more crime than whites" (pp. 134–135), fostering a fear of crime associated with minority males (see also Oliver & Armstrong, 1998). "Blackness," Robinson (2000) continues, "is treated as a sign for increased risk of criminality" (p. 134). Media depictions of crime serve to reinforce this myth. As Eschholz et al. (2002) maintain, the depictions further racism by bolstering audiences' conceptual link between minorities and crime (p. 331).

Reality TV typically portrays crime as a threat to citizens that results from the pathology of individual criminals — not from the social and environmental conditions within which citizen-suspects are situated (Cavender & Fishman, 1998). Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993) argue that the suspected criminals in *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* were portrayed as "dangerous people who are beyond social control" (p. 311), a characterization that fits into a broad theme of modern danger. Elias (1994) argues that the "media typically treat crime in simplistic and Manichean terms: victims are innocent good people and offenders are guilty bad people, even though many offenders have themselves been victimized" (p. 4). Thus, the solution to such a social problem is to apprehend and arrest the individual criminal.

Ironically, according to Oliver and Armstrong (1998), crime-based reality T.V. misrepresents actual crime in society, principally by exaggerating the scope of violent crime. Oliver's (1994) study not only found that whites were overrepresented as police officers and African Americans were underrepresented in that role, but that African American and Hispanic citizen-suspects were to a substantial degree more apt to be physically attacked by police. So, even as violent crime rates decline, these programs may encourage fear by over-representing violent crime (Merlo & Benekos, 2002; Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2000). By promoting a fear of crime and the image that minorities are responsible for most crime, these reality programs may serve as justification for harsher penalties and even police aggression toward citizen-suspects (Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Doyle, 1998; Oliver & Armstrong, 1998).

An important aspect of much of the reality crime programs is the exclusive focus on the "front end" of the criminal justice system (Surrette, 1998, p. 35). Unlike the crime drama *Law and Order* that depicts

the detectives investigating crimes and then the prosecutors putting the criminals behind bars, the reality programs that employ video-taped footage of law enforcement-citizen interactions, such as *Cops* and *WWPV*, only focus on the police and the arrest of suspects (Fishman, 1999).

In this front-end perspective, police work is portrayed as exceedingly dangerous and constantly exciting, when, in actuality, the majority of police work is rather banal (Kappeler et al., 1996, p. 212). Of course, to base a show that reflects this would be tantamount to committing professional suicide as the program would likely be met with very poor ratings. Contrasting with the violent and out of control deviants in society, police are depicted as wholly beneficent defenders of the just social order, heroes who oppose those who present a clear and present danger to the common folk of a decent society (Anderson, 1994; Fishman, 1999). This front-end perspective is offered exclusively from the perspective of the police officers and portrays their roles most positively (Cavender 1998; Doyle 1998). Viewers are encouraged to identify with the heroic officers. Citizen-suspects are nameless, whereas officers are humanized and their work is celebrated (Doyle, 1998).

In addition, the programming generally reinforces the perception that police are effective in combating crime (Kooistra, Mahoney, & Westervelt, 1998; Oliver, 1994). In one study of six reality T.V. programs, an arrest rate of 60% contrasts sharply with the actual 18% of cleared crimes in the same year (Eschholz et al., 2002; see also, Cavender & Bond-Maupin, 1993; Oliver, 1994). Kooistra et al's (1998) study of *Cops* showed that "crime is a battle between white officers and nonwhite violent offender, and the war on crime ends in arrest almost 75 percent of the time" (p. 153). Such messages should not be too surprising if one considers that these reality TV programs are products, at least partly, of a cooperative effort by media and law enforcement (Cavender & Fishman, 1998; Seagal, 1993).

Particularly troublesome, given these findings, is Oliver and Armstrong's (1998) conclusion that reality crime programs "are perceived as realistic by many of their viewers" (p. 30). Geiser-Getz's (1995) research on college-aged viewers of *Cops* identified a range of expected viewer pleasure, which included "voyeurism, positive portrayals of police, [and] the news-like power of the verite form" (para. 65). Incorporating elements that signify reality, such as the use of hand-held cameras and synchronization of sound and image, these programs are carefully constructed narratives designed to appeal to audience expectations (Johnson, 1999). For example, Cavender and Bond-Maupin (1993) found that *America's Most Wanted* and *Unsolved Mysteries* depict crime in a manner that resembles popular crime dramas and even urban legends about crime.

Along with obvious element of videotaped footage of police-suspect interactions, which is designed to give the audience the impression that they are seeing exactly what law enforcement sees every day, other techniques enhance viewers' expectation that they are seeing the real thing. Doyle (1998) concludes that *Cops* is designed to naturalize the interaction so that audiences can see the events as they "really" happen. Techniques to encourage such a belief include the presentation of "real-time" events, signaled by sub-titles such as "Burglary call, 6:33 PM" (Doyle, 1998, p. 99), even when it may take an hour or more of taping to present a sufficiently interesting seven minute vignette (Doyle, 1998).

Given that myths are so prevalent in reality-based crime programming, and that many viewers may come to understand crime, criminals, police, and police practices through such programming, rhetorical scholars can help provide insights into these messages. The following section outlines the Burkeian approach we have taken to understand this programming, as well as the approach we took to assessing program messages.

Discourse as Equipment for Living and The Representative Anecdote

As introduced earlier, "literature" is "equipment for living," providing a sort of "medicine" (Burke, 1967, p. 293) by which people understand their situations and cope with the world around them. As such, it provides "realism," but not the type of realism that reality TV purports to present and not a realism that mirrors or reflects reality. The realism is symbolic, a "realism for promise, admonition, solace, vengeance, foretelling, instruction, charting, all for the direct bearing that such acts have upon matters of welfare" (p. 296). Literature offers audiences a "realistic" message in the sense that it offers the means to name, to judge, to celebrate and condemn, to encourage and vilify. In short, the equipment for living provides a means of understanding reality and offers "strategies for dealing with situations" (p. 296), where particular attitudes find expression and encouragement.

Brummett (1984a) widens the circumference of Burke's definition to include mediated communication, particularly television, writing that such discourse is now "equipment for living relied upon by millions" (p. 162). We agree with Brummett's (1984a) observation that a strong current in Burke's work is the idea that naming a situation provides audiences with a way to make sense of themselves and their society. And so by considering discourse, we may come to understand what a society celebrates and condemns. In that discourse always selectively reduces a situation, critics should consider how discourse describes a situation and the ramifications of such description (Burke, 1967, p. 59). Before that evaluation, however, an essence of the message should be discerned to indicate where the most useful notion of the *representative anecdote* resides (Brummett, 1984a).

The concept of the representative anecdote has been the subject of differing interpretations (e.g.; Brummett, 1984a; Brummett, 1984b; Conrad, 1984; Madsen, 1993). Madsen's criteria for adequately evincing the presence of a representative anecdote include three elements: "the anecdote" (1) should "reflect human action;" (2) "possess adequate scope;" and (3) represent the essence of a text (p. 213). Brummett (1984a) argues that "to *represent* something is to sum up its essence; and the *dramatic* aspects of what people do and say are the *essence* of human action" (p. 162). Understanding the dramatic *form* is the way to understand the "motivational essence" of the discourse (Brummett, 1984b, p. 3). As a critical guide, the representative anecdote orients critics to search for an understanding of the basic dramatic plot lines in discourse; it offers a way of exploring and evaluating the underlying elements or motives across particular texts.

As Madsen (1993) points out, the representative anecdote should not only be a method by which a critic imposes a structure on a text. On the contrary, the representative anecdote should be textually grounded: "the anecdote" must be found "in the text," not "superimpose[d]" (p. 210). But Brummett's consideration of dramatic form is most useful to an understanding of what a critic should be looking for when considering a text's representative anecdote. The search for the form allows the textually grounded criticism of the representative anecdote from which a critical assessment of the message can be made. An anecdote, in this technical sense, "is a dramatic *form*" that "underlies the context, or the special vocabulary, of discourse" (Brummett, 1994a, pp. 162–163).

Representative Anecdote and Form

A return to Burke's (1968) early definition of form may clarify a way in which to observe a representative anecdote. Burke defines form as "the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (p. 31). The search for a representative anecdote in television shows involves attention to the ways in which discourse presents its audience with ways to recognize, understand, make sense of, and even anticipate the unfolding of a situation. Thus, the form of the anecdote teaches an audience what to expect in similar situations, what to anticipate, and what to conclude when presented with a similar unfolding of events. Form involves an entelechial element whereby the anecdote encourages an audience to recognize an event, and thus to anticipate a particular unfolding of the event culminating in an expected and satisfying conclusion.

This study of the representative anecdote of reality TV crime programming considers particularly two elements of Burkean form: (1) qualitative progression; and (2) repetitive form. In qualitative progressive form "the presence of one quality prepares us for the introduction of another," whereas repetitive form "is the consistent maintaining of

a principle under new guises," essentially a "restatement of the same thing in different ways" (Burke, 1968, pp. 124–125). Combining a consideration of both notions of form, the critic obtains a useful means by which to identify a representative anecdote. First, a critic may ask, How do the elements of the programs employ a progression of events that prepares one for a particular conclusion? Second, Is a similar qualitative form presented repetitively across particular texts?

We believe that such an approach to the representative anecdote is ideal for an analysis of reality TV crime shows. As Brummett notes (1984a), televised media are anecdotal in general. Second, the shows we are studying are composed of multiple vignettes. Both *Cops* and *WWPV* include segments that display an interaction between police and citizen-suspects, and each segment stands alone as a complete story. As Johnson (1999) notes, the segments in *Cops* are designed as short stories, each containing an introduction, rising action, climax, and resolution. Third, the programs link the vignettes together and purport to represent the reality of police-citizen interaction through these short stories.

In contrast to the more typical method of content and audience effects studies of reality TV crime programming, our study is a rhetorical analysis of *Cops* and *WWPV*. Given the similarity of findings across reality TV crime programming in previous research, the goal of this study is to examine in depth a smaller sample, emphasizing rhetorical features. Before previously viewing the episodes, we selected the six hours of programming from shows recorded between November 2000 and February 2001. We examined the six hours of programming (six one-half hour episodes of *Cops* and three one hour episodes of *WWPV*) which included a total of 81 self-contained stories depicting encounters between law enforcement officials and citizen-suspects. In assessing the qualitative and repetitive form, we paid particularly close attention to the role of the narrator and the explanations of police and citizen-suspect behavior and attitudes because these elements provide audiences with a way of understanding the events. We also considered closely the descriptions of the initial justification for the law enforcement officials' stops and interviews with citizen-suspects. We were also interested in the presentation of the ethnicity of law enforcement officers and their suspects.[1] The following section describes the elements of *Cops* and *WWPV*, and details elements of programming that led us to a particular understanding of the representative anecdote inherent in the programming.

Cops and *WWPV* and a Representative Anecdote

The three hours of *Cops* we examined contained 22 vignettes involving police-suspect interactions. These "ride along" segments give individual police a voice, beginning with the officer discussing the nature

of his or her job. The edited segments then progress to interactions between the police officers, their back-up officers, and various suspects. The data from *WWPV* consisted of 59 vignettes involving police-suspect interactions. Each segment is substantially shorter than those in *Cops* and developed through images from squad-car video, sounds edited to correspond with the action, and John Bunnell's narration. A few interviews with police offices were used to develop the themes and situate audiences' understanding of upcoming anecdotes, but Bunnell is the principal voice, framing each vignette for viewers.

Both programs begin by developing a sense of realism for audiences. Introducing the program in *WWPV*, for example, Bunnell enlists viewers in the fight against crime, stating that they "will ride shotgun" and get a clear picture of what police experience every day. A principal means employed to encourage audiences to view the programs as reality is the heavy reliance on video images, intended to give viewers the impression that they are right there with the police. In *Cops,* the action on video is presented as if in real time. In *WWPV,* the action of each vignette is situated in a particular county and state with on-screen text and Bunnell's narration. But the images are not intended to stand alone, so the narration, whether from the police, in the case of *Cops,* or Bunnell, in the case of *WWPV,* provides explanations of the action visible on screen, as well as background information attributing motives to police and citizen-suspects' actions. Once a call is received or a traffic offense is detected in *Cops,* for instance, the officer explains to the camera the situation and the action he or she will take. In *WWPV,* segments often begin with action in progress, and Bunnell brings audiences up to speed, so to speak. Each segment is enhanced with myriad sound effects, including sirens, screeching tires, and enhanced crashes when there is a collision. Bunnell states that "we don't use sound effects to change the story, it's [sic] to enhance the reality. We'll add screeches and we'll add sirens and we'll redub what the officers say. It's to get the audience into what's happening" (Kurtz, 1999, p. A1).

Vignettes and Themes in Cops and WWPV

As one would expect, a complete correspondence between the types of vignettes in the two programs is lacking. In *Cops,* vignettes depicted (1) traffic stops, (2) crimes in progress, (3) police chasing suspects in cars and/or on foot, (4) drug and prostitution "stings," and (5) a few miscellaneous segments where police combat wild animals, such as snakes and raccoons. *WWPV* was more consistent in that it displayed traffic stops and high and low-speed car chases almost exclusively. Even with these differences, the vignettes share key elements.

To begin, a clear moral distinction exists between the heroic police and dangerous citizen-suspects. In *Cops,* for example, one officer comments that "we" are out here to "get the bad guy" and "fight crime."

Officers describe their work as "doing our good deed." In *WWPV*, Bunnell at one point describes how a "well-trained" officer is up against a "boozed up crook." These criminals are "beyond insane," and the well-trained police must use many means, both standard and improvised, to combat them. The police, according to *WWPV*, are on the "front line, players in the war for the road."

Whereas police are humanized through the use of actual names and portrayed as courageous defenders against the hordes of the criminally insane, the voice of the citizen-suspects is given little credibility. In *Cops*, requests for clarification of the reasons for stops are dismissed and met with increasing aggression by police. Much of Bunnell's narration in *WWPV* addresses the motivations and attributes of suspects, negating their perspectives because they are beyond reason. Consistent with Cavender and Fishman's (1998) findings, crime is presented as the result of individual pathology. These criminals are described as irrational, desperate, and "mad." They are "dangerously unpredictable" and "drunken nightmares." Suspects' actions are never portrayed as reasonable responses to their situation. Instead, they "drive like hardcore felons," who "feel invincible;" they "live for the chase, no matter what the consequences."

Police work is also portrayed as exciting, a result of the menace of those who would antagonize the police. Officers in *Cops* explain that the street is "a madhouse, and that keeps you going." The life out here is much different than his memories of life on the street of his middle class upbringing, opines one officer. Along with the excitement, however, is a sense of freedom. One officer states "we can pretty much do whatever we want. We're still responsible for calls for service. The rest of the job there is no limit to what we can do. What can you imagine to do? What do you want to do?" In *WWPV*, "it's crazy chases 24–7," and although police work is tough and dangerous, it is also "exciting" and the officers love it.

Law enforcers are in total control and always in the right. When a citizen-suspect attempted to assert his rights in one segment on *WWPV*, he was met with an aggressive response from officers. In this traffic stop in Camden County, Louisiana, a white male claims to know his rights and refuses to submit to a Breathalyzer test. Rather than explaining if the suspect is in error or not, the officer attempts to constrain him, resulting in a scuffle. Eventually, with the assistance of a back-up officer, the man is wrestled to the ground and handcuffed. Bunnell explains that when the man "tried to give the officer a misguided lesson in the law, two officers gave him a lesson in tough police work."

In one segment of *Cops*, an officer searches a Hispanic male that was interviewed initially because he was, according to the officer, "acting suspicious or something" in a car. When the suspect asks why he is

being searched, the officer responds that they are searching him "for weapons" because "we do that to everyone around here." Another officer whispers to the first that there is an outstanding warrant on the man, but rather than informing the suspect that he has an outstanding warrant, the officers begin to handcuff him. The suspect asks the officers what he did wrong, but he does not get an answer as three officers grab him, wrestle him to the ground, putting a knee on his neck. One of the officer tells the suspect; "*you're* going to break your arm," as another pushes his face to the ground. After the apprehension, the suspect yells at the officers complaining of his treatment, and the initial officer responds to the camera repeating three times, "all you had to do was follow instructions."

Aggression by police takes another form in several examples for *WWPV.* Officers are often shown ramming fleeing vehicles. Bunnell invariably states that no one is seriously injured, and the actions are always described as textbook maneuvers. For example, in Conway, South Carolina, Bunnell describes police as "seiz[ing] the opportunity" as they ram a fleeing car. In another chase situated in Provo, Utah, police wait "for just one opportunity to take" the driver "out with a textbook punch." In the past officers had to wait until the suspect simply gave up, Bunnell opines, but today officers "take control" of the situation.

A Representative Anecdote in Reality TV Crime Programming

From these vignettes we begin to see some of the messages sent to viewers about crime, criminals, and police and their practices. And from the basic themes we can then consider a representative anecdote and assess the quality of the programming as equipment for living.

Considering basic elements of form in the programming offers a textually-grounded approach to identifying a representative anecdote. We considered the basic conflict presented and then looked at how this unfolded, drawing on two elements of Burkean form. Determining the dramatic alignment or conflict in a text is one of the key elements in an endeavor to identify a representative anecdote (Madsen, 1993). In these programs police are cast as competent, capable, and heroic individuals in a constant struggle with desperate, dangerous, and irresponsible criminals. The police provide a thin line between the "criminal insanity" and ordinary law abiding citizens. This basic agonistic equation involves other important elements of form that offer viewers the "reality" of police-suspect interactions. Together, this constitutes the representative anecdote, what Madsen (1993) calls "the central construct from which other elements radiate" (pp. 214–215).

Qualitative form is where "the presence of one quality prepares us for the introduction of another" (Burke, 1968, pp. 124–125). The essence of this programming involves the interactions between police

and suspects, and by considering the progression of events in the interaction between them we can see how the programming presents certain expectations to viewers. The initial contact, proceeding events, and eventual resolution offer a simple but important element of the representative anecdote. *Repetitive form* involves the restatement of the same message in different ways. Tying these two types of form together, in the case of the programming we considered, each of the vignettes begin at different stages of police-suspect interaction and deal with differing levels of crime, but they end in the same manner: Evidence of a crime is produced or maintained, suspects are arrested, and their guilt is presumed.

In *WWPV*, all but one of the vignettes ends with an arrest of a suspect. Viewers see the suspect handcuffed and placed in a police vehicle or they are told that the suspect is "going to jail" or that he "will have a long time to think about what he's done." Illustrating the message rather clearly, Bunnell introduces one program by stating that "during my years in law enforcement I was struck by the sheer insanity of criminal behavior. Because when somebody makes that first insane decision to break the law, no matter how it starts, this is how it ultimately ends up." Accompanying his narrative is a depiction of a handcuffed young black male being placed in a police vehicle.[2] In the segments of *Cops* that focused on traffic stops, each resulted in the arrest or citation of one or more suspects for drug possession and/or prostitution. The language used to describe suspects also emphasizes the suspects' guilt. The suspects are depicted generally as dangerous individuals who need to be removed from free society. Even when the seemingly fair "suspect" term is used, it does not signify a lack of guilt because all suspects are arrested, their crimes made explicit, without any details of the back of the criminal justice system.

An important element in this representative anecdote is the justification for initial contact and the practice of pretextual stops. The pretextual stop is a technique where officers pull over motorists for a minor traffic violation or a "routine traffic stop" with the expectation that they will find evidence of a more serious crime. Police in these programs are shown or described as suspecting a citizen of committing a crime, and they are invariably rewarded for their hunches. For example, a Florida highway, Bunnell tells audiences, is a "major drug thoroughfare," and police pull over a van for a "routine check of a suspicious vehicle." The police later come to find that the three African American males are jewel thieves. In Nassau County, another minority male is stopped for displaying "incorrect license plates." Elaborating on the situation, Bunnell states that officers noticed that there were Dodge license plates on a Ford vehicle. The suspect is arrested for marijuana possession. In another instance in Sturges, South Dakota, a man is pulled over for having "out of state plates." The police discover that he is a burglar.

As with *WWPV*, *Cops* segments also feature police acting with limited knowledge about suspects. *Cops* does not have an all-knowing narrator. Instead, the officers describe the reasons for stopping and interviewing suspects, or they describe the nature of their call. The programming provides similar pretexts for stopping suspects. For example, in Fort Worth, Texas, an officer informs the camera that a black male keeps "acting squirrelly each time we go by," and that he is walking in a "known drug area." As the officer finally pulls over, the man runs and is eventually apprehended and arrested. Although they find no evidence of drug possession, the officer tells the camera that he saw a "baggie" in the man's hand, and "that's the way they carry them around here." Despite the officer's failure to locate the baggie, the segment ends with the arrest of the suspect. In another instance, the officer informs viewers that he is pulling over a motorist because the suspect was "driving slowly and then sped away." The suspects were Hispanic males. In another example, an officer pulls a black male over in a "routine traffic stop." The officer then tells the man that he has no business driving in the area because the only people in this area are here to solicit prostitutes or to buy or sell drugs.

The hunches of police officers are also justified through the sequencing of information provided to the viewers, which differs from the sequence of information seemingly available to the officers. It is unclear when police officers actually become aware of the various crimes committed by citizen-suspects. Bunnell, as narrator, provides viewers with information about the suspects that may not be known by the officer at the time of the chase, stop, or initial interview. The audience, for example, may be told at the beginning of the anecdote that the driver of a fleeing car has an outstanding warrant or is intoxicated. The pursuing officers may only know this information after the suspect is apprehended. Nonetheless, according to the programs, the officer is clearly making the appropriate choice by following his or her hunch. Viewers are provided the illusion that they are watching real events unfold but with knowledge based on hindsight (a product of editing), which the officers do not have. Viewers are provided with initial information that is available to the officer after the stop and search, giving legitimacy to the initial pursuit, interview, and search. Thus the sequencing for audiences confirms the hunches and suspicions of the officer.

Although our analysis cannot reveal the unexposed intentions of officers when they choose to stop a citizen, the fundamental justification of the pretextual stop – officer intuition – is regularly emphasized in both *Cops* and *WWPV*. The vignettes invariably portray pretextual stops as an effective and acceptable police practice. The correctness of officer intuition is also emphasized by the narrative commentary either by the officer in the case of *Cops* or by Bunnell in the case of *WWPV*. Clearly, police hunches pay off in successful arrests, and, due to the

front-end focus of the anecdote, the guiltiness and conviction of the suspect are implied. Audiences thus view a representation of reality where officers' suspicions are justified because of what they will invariably find. The essence of the message is retold "in different ways," (Burke, 1968, pp. 124–125) where any and all types of police-citizen interaction resulting from officers' hunches or suspicions are justified. Because these reality TV programs all but eliminate examples of police-suspect interactions that do not result in arrest or evidence of a more serious crime, the anecdotal form implies that police suspicions are always correct and thus the stops are invariably legitimate, simply products of good police work that makes society safer.

Racial Profiling as Equipment for Living

Previous research has shown a connection between reality TV viewing and viewers' attitudes toward police, criminals, and race and crime (Eschholz et al., 2002). Although this study is not an attempt to demonstrate a causal connection between the representative anecdote and viewers' beliefs and attitudes toward police, we do focus on the equipment for living the program provides to millions of viewers. *Cops* and *WWPV* offers accounts of law enforcement and crime for viewers so that they may understand themselves and social phenomena around them. The rhetorical implications stemming from a representative anecdote in these programs deserve comment.

In general, these programs work to legitimize police actions, even controversial police practices. For example, the celebration of police competence combined with their aggressive behaviors sends a message that the types of aggression by police are legitimate, given the intense danger suspects pose to the public.[3] An evaluation of the portrayal of police aggression is one example of troublesome elements of the programs, and many possible implications could be developed from the present research, but we are not able to cover them all. Based on Klumpp and Hollihan's (1989) call for a morally responsive rhetorical criticism, we have chosen to focus on a particularly salient police practice and social issue that lies at the intersection of police practices, beliefs, and race, and one that radiates from the representative anecdote that we have identified.

Of significant concern, these programs justify the practice of racial profiling implicitly through the depiction of pretextual stops. Such profiling has recently become a major concern and public controversy. Studies drawing on victim testimony, police records, and court records reveal patterns of racial profiling from San Diego to New Jersey (Barstow & Kocieniewski, 2000; Harris, 1999; Rogers, 2000). According to deCourcy Hinds (2000), "four in ten blacks . . . say they have been stopped by police just because they were black" (p. 22). Representative John Conyer, Jr. (Dem. From Michigan) maintains that "race-based traffic stops turn driving, one of our most ordinary and fundamental

American activities, into an experience fraught with danger and risk for people with color" (as cited in Rogers, 2000, para. 2). Conyer continues, although African Americans comprise less than one-sixth of the population in the United State, they make up almost three-fourths "of all *routine* traffic stops" (emphasis ours, para. 2). A recent investigation conducted by the *Seattle Times* that considered over a million and a half traffic stops found that although Washington state troopers pulled over white and minority drivers at the same rate, minorities are over twice as likely to be searched (Cornwall & Phillips, 2003). Furthermore, when suspects are searched, minorities are actually less likely than whites to be found with "contraband" (Cornwall & Philips, 2003, p. A1).

Although the data we collected on the ethnicity of suspects and officers indicate that non-whites are more likely to be depicted as suspects of serious crime, our argument about racial profiling rests not on the depiction of ethnicity. We did notice what we considered to be significant disparities in the police and suspect portrayal.[4] Our argument, however, rests on the depiction of pretextual stops as an effective method of law enforcement. Whereas the open practice of racial profiling is prohibited, pretextual stops have been upheld by the Supreme Court, and legal scholars maintain that this serves as the loophole by which racial profiling is carried out (Abramovsky & Edelstein, 2000; Harris, 1999; Thompson, 1999). The practice is challenged by civil rights advocates precisely for this reason (*Arrest the Racism*, 2002). Pretextual stops provide officers with a great deal of discretion, allowing them to act on a hunch or their intuition to determine who to tail, pursue, stop, and interrogate. Race and suspicion may be tangled in officers' minds. "Some troopers believe minorities are more likely to commit certain crimes, such as dealing drugs," according to Cornwall and Philips (2003, p. A11), and according to Officer Chris Powell: "their experience, their training, their inclination tell them it may be this person of color that's a higher suspect" (cited in Cornwall & Philips, 2003, p. A11).

Because the programs under study here show only successful stops, searches, seizures, and arrests, and many of these suspects are minority males, the programming sends a clear but disturbing message: stopping minority drivers or pedestrians when police notice minor traffic infractions or anomalies in behavior, such as possessing out of state plates, or because they are "acting squirrelly," or because they are "acting suspicious or something," is appropriate because it invariably leads to incarceration of serious criminals. It is worth noting that "minorities," in general, "may be more nervous around police," because of concern that they may be harassed or abused, and "troopers may misinterpret that as suspicious behavior" (Cornwall & Phillips, 2003, p. A1).[5] But such a message will not be found in the programs we

studied. Racial profiling is legitimated through the celebration of the intuitive capacities of law enforcement officers.

Conclusion

This study of two reality TV crime programs drew from Kenneth Burke's concept of the representative anecdote to assess the programming as equipment for living. The essay has sought to show the utility of Brummett's (1984a; 1984b) notion of the representative anecdote with an emphasis on Burkean form, as a way to approach rhetorical criticism of mediated discourse, and in doing so the analysis has aimed at developing a textually-grounded approach to the study of representative anecdotes. From this grounded analysis we chose to focus on a specific element stemming from the representative anecdote: the programming's legitimation of racial profiling. We hope the study has demonstrated how the concepts of the representative anecdote and discourse as equipment for living offers a valuable means by which critics can offer morally-responsible commentary on contemporary mediated discourse.

This criticism, of course, is not without limitation. The sample we have chosen is small. Although we selected the episodes in this study before previously viewing them, the programs were not randomly selected in a scientific sense. Furthermore, we do not claim that the representative anecdote we have identified is statistically generalizable. Perhaps future research could complement this study by expanding the scope of the data set and assessing the generalizability of these findings.

Although previous research on reality-based crime programming has offered many important insights on the ways in which police, crime, and criminals are portrayed, this study does address a gap in that body of research. By focusing on the significance of the justifications for police stops, interviews, and searches, we were drawn to consider a particularly significant police practice at the intersection of perceived suspicion and race. As equipment for living, the programs provide poor "medicine" for millions of viewers. In that many viewers experience and understand law enforcement and crime through these reality TV programs, these shows teach audiences to view certain police practices as legitimate and certain social groups as deviant; perhaps groups deserving less protection than innocent citizens the police protect.

In the form of the programming, no element of due process or civil rights is presented, because the shows focus only on the police/suspect interaction, the front of the legal justice system. We agree with the sentiment that "whether it is called racism, discrimination or profiling, the practice is deeply, historically rooted in American culture. To root it out, citizens must expose it at every level and object when it occurs"

(Racial profiling, 2000, p. 28A+). In the case that we have studied, the practice is legitimized for millions of viewers during prime-time family viewing hours around the nation. This representative anecdote of police/citizen interaction seems poor equipment for living in a society that is in desperate need of ameliorating discrimination.

ENDNOTES

[1]Although we did not collect data in a way to make a claim of statistical significance or to make the argument that our analysis is scientifically generalizable, we did collect some simple statistical information to see how minorities were portrayed in the programs.

[2]The single segment that resulted in a successful evasion of police pursuit concludes with Bunnell informing viewers that due to the concern for the safety of a child in the car, police abandoned the chase but that the suspect was caught by police three days later.

[3]The sudden decision by police to ram a suspect's car is described in *WWPV* as "split-second" thinking by well trained officers. Although this may be a standard police procedure, enhanced through careful training and the careful weighing of risks to suspects, the police themselves, and innocent bystanders, the practice of aggressive approaches does not always result in the best outcome. High-speed chases resulting in death to innocent civilians has, just in the state of Washington, recently led to $854,000 in settlements (ACLU, 1998).

[4]Of the routine traffic stops in *WWPV* (26 in total), ten involved African American suspects, four were white, one was Hispanic, and one was Asian. The ethnicity in the remainder of the anecdotes was not clear, because the squad car camera is limited in scope and clarity. Of the stops involving drunk drivers, nine of the suspects were white, one was African American, one was Hispanic, and the ethnicities of the remaining two were unclear. Linking suspicion with race in one narrative, Bunnell tells audiences that one "can't disguise suspicious behavior," referring to the suspect shown on camera as "homie." Racial disparities between officers and suspects were evident in *Cops*. Overall, 65 of the 83 officers were white men, which means that approximately 78% of the officers were white males. Of the 27 suspects, eight were African American males, nine were Hispanic males and three females, one was a Native American male, one was an Asian female, two were white females, and two were white males, and one female's ethnic identity was unclear. Whereas white men make up the substantial bulk of officers, the citizen-suspects are mostly minority males. Two segments in *Cops* involved police responding to citizens complaining of confrontation with wild animals. In one call, the police respond to a complaint about a family of raccoons that had taken residence in someone's chimney. In another segment, the police respond to a snake in a private residence. Although these two examples do not, at first glance, fit with the other vignettes, it is worth noting that officers fight not only crime and criminals, but other types of wild animals as well. All the antagonists, of course, are unreasonable and potentially dangerous

[5]Even the segments that involved stops of white male suspects support this practice of racial profiling. First, sequences depicting white drunks are often humorous, where suspects act silly and stupid in front of officers. Although certainly dangerous while behind the wheel, these suspects are displayed as buffoons and clowns. Second, the practice of pretextual stops, the result of hunches and suspicions, is bolstered in general. Whether it is shown to be used against whites or minority drivers, it is through this general practice that racial profiling can be practiced. Furthermore, these stops are for suspicion of drunk driving, while the other pretextual stops for "routine checks" are, according to police, means by which officers search for drugs or evidence that a driver has committed a more serious crime (Cornwall & Philips, 2003).

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