

## **“BREAK THE RULES, NOT THE LAW”: NORMALIZING BRUTALITY AND REINFORCING POLICE AUTHORITY IN US SERIES**

**Melina Meimaridis**

Programa de Pós Graduação em Comunicação, Instituto de Artes e Comunicação Social, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, Brazil  
Conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, supervision, writing – original draft, and writing – review & editing

**Rodrigo Quinan**

Programa de Pós Graduação em Comunicação, Instituto de Artes e Comunicação Social, Universidade Federal Fluminense, Niterói, Brazil  
Data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, and writing – review & editing

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### **ABSTRACT**

Since the 1950s, the institutional police series have been among the most popular productions on US television. Through the reiteration of the “us versus them” mentality, police officers are fictionalized as normative agents who uphold “goodness”, while crime is portrayed as a moral and individual flaw of the criminal. Not only do these productions recurrently ignore systemic problems in US society, which are used to explain crime in the real world, but they also reinforce the authority of the institution as the force capable of maintaining the status quo. From the perspective that these series act in the construction and mediation of meaning about the role played by real-world police institutions and their members in society, we structure the text around two main arguments: (a) TV series reinforce the police institution’s authority, treating its actions as unquestionable and, most importantly, allowing real-world institutions to interfere in their fictionalization processes; (b) TV series normalize police brutality, with narratives often justifying violent acts as an efficient investigative tool, illustrating norms and bureaucracies as major impediments to the police officer’s work. By framing ethical and human rights violations as efficient and necessary acts, these series contribute to normalizing some of the dirtiest aspects of the profession.

### **KEYWORDS**

television, fictional institutions, police series, police brutality

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## **“QUEBRE AS REGRAS, NÃO A LEI”: A NORMALIZAÇÃO DA BRUTALIDADE E O REFORÇO DA AUTORIDADE POLICIAL NAS SÉRIES ESTADUNIDENSES**

### **RESUMO**

Desde a década de 1950, as séries institucionais policiais estão entre as produções mais populares da televisão estadunidense. Por meio da reiteração da mentalidade do “nós versus eles”, policiais são ficcionalizados como agentes normativos que defendem o “bem”, enquanto o crime é retratado como uma falha moral e individual do criminoso. Além dessas produções

recorrentemente ignorarem problemas sistêmicos da sociedade estadunidense que são utilizados para explicar a criminalidade no mundo real, elas também reforçam a autoridade da instituição como detentora da força para manutenção do status quo. Partindo da perspectiva que essas séries atuam na construção e mediação de sentido sobre o papel desempenhado pelas instituições policiais do mundo real e de seus membros na sociedade, estruturamos o texto em torno de dois principais argumentos: (a) as séries reforçam a autoridade da instituição policial, tratando suas ações como inquestionáveis e, mais importante, abrindo espaço para intervenções das instituições policiais do mundo real nos processos de ficcionalização das mesmas; (b) as séries normalizam a brutalidade policial, com narrativas frequentemente justificando atos violentos como uma ferramenta investigativa eficiente, ilustrando normas e burocracias como grandes empecilhos ao trabalho do policial. Ao enquadrar as violações éticas e de direitos humanos como atos eficientes e necessários essas séries contribuem para normalizar alguns dos aspectos mais sujos da profissão.

#### PALAVRAS-CHAVE

televisão, instituições ficcionais, séries policiais, brutalidade policial

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

On May 25, 2020, the brutality of the police action that led to the death of George Perry Floyd Jr. in the city of Minneapolis, Minnesota, stunned people around the world. Floyd, a Black man, was murdered by a white police officer who knelt over his neck, suffocating him. Floyd's death provoked hundreds of protests in the US, with the population demanding reforms in the nation's police institution, such as the Defund the Police campaign, which proposes to reduce the funds directed to the institution (Andrew, 2020). Society's backlash to the video that captured Floyd's death was problematized in journalistic stories (Grady, 2020; Zeitchik, 2020) that disputed the role of the media in general and television in particular in glorifying police action, for example, the reality show *COPS* (Langley & Barbour, 1989–present). Meanwhile, fictional scripted series have been questioned for presenting police officers as society's heroes and representing only these professionals' views of law, crime, and justice. The incident has put the fictionalization of the police institution in TV series under the spotlight (Siegel, 2020; Thorne, 2020).

Here, it is necessary to highlight the popularity of police series on US television. Brooks and Marsh (2007) identified that approximately 300 productions have aired since 1949. To this day, these series are among the most watched in the country. For the 2020–2021 season, Nielsen listed five institutional police series in the top 10 most-watched productions (Schneider, 2021): *NCIS* (Bellisario et al., 2003–present), *FBI* (Wolf et al., 2018–present), *Blue Bloods* (Goldberg et al., 2010–present), *9-1-1* (Murphy et al., 2018–present), *Chicago P.D.* (Wolf et al., 2014–present). Although they might vary, police series reproduce the same formula where a criminal act disrupts an ordered world, and police officers and detectives strive to restore order (Meimaridis, 2021; Sparks, 1992; Turnbull, 2014), an institution-imposed status quo. At the same time, these productions tend to reproduce narratives centered on the binarism of “good” versus “evil”. In other words,

they present stories where the police work hard to safeguard society while criminals fulfill the role of a threat to be thwarted by the police.

In this article, we lead from the discussions proposed by Meimaridis (2021) about the significant role that television fiction accomplishes in mediating and constructing meaning about social institutions. The researcher proposes the term "institutional series" to refer to fictional productions "focused on the daily functioning of social institutions. Police, legal and medical series are its main models" (p. 15). Regarding the fictionalization of the police institution, we contend that institutional police series normalize the brutality of police action as the means for obtaining justice by constructing stories around myths and framing the use of excessive force by the police as justifiable. In this process, these productions reinforce the institution's authoritative role in maintaining order in society. Thus, we problematize the processes of fictionalizing the police institution in TV series from the US. Considering that these TV products are largely exported to the rest of the world (Moran & Malbon, 2006), this mediation is not limited to local audiences. It travels through transnational television flows, creating meanings that can be reflected in different cultural perspectives, influencing understandings about the authority and credibility of police institutions in the US at a global level.

First, we briefly present an overview of institutional police series in the US in order to contextualize these productions. Then, we address how the police institution is fictionalized in these TV series and which elements characterize this process. Finally, we focus on two significant constructions: (a) authority reinforcement, and (b) normalization of police brutality. We contend that, in the face of the crisis that this institution currently faces in the US (Cobbina-Dungy & Jones-Brown, 2021; Hudácskó, 2017), institutional police series become attractive and powerful objects in legitimizing the real-world police institution, especially by allowing the institution to regulate fiction's discourses about itself. Police series are, then, part of a larger problem since they legitimize and glorify police actions.

## 2. OVERVIEW OF POLICE SERIES FROM THE US

The first US television series to represent the police universe is from 1949, entitled *Stand By For Crime* (Garrison, 1949). The drama presented the killer's point of view while a detective investigated the crime. Before the episode ended, the audience was asked to call in and guess the killer's identity (Dowler, 2016). Between 1949 and 1951, other police series appeared. Among them, the most important was *Dragnet* (Webb, 1951–1959). Centered on the work of Sergeant Joe Friday (Jack Webb), the production focused on weekly crime solving. To make the production, Jack Webb approached William H. Parker, the controversial head of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) in the early 1950s, and traded creative control of the series for access to department resources (police cars, badges, etc.). This proximity to the actual institution enabled *Dragnet* to become a powerful propaganda tool in favor of the institution (Sharrett, 2012). Over the course of its 276 episodes, the series reproduced a simple formula in which every case was resolved by the end of the episode. According to Mittell (2004):

the conservative ideology that *Dragnet* articulated to the police genre is not an idealized vision of society as presented in idyllic sitcoms but the authenticated and unswerving belief in the system to continually discipline offenders and protect the innocent by reacting to ever-present threats and manifestations of crime. *Dragnet* reassures audiences that the police system functions efficiently by positioning viewers as allied with the police, invisible observers of authentic procedures as they happen. (p. 139)

Therefore, despite the criminal action that drove the episodes each week, the police in *Dragnet* were presented as an institution that fulfilled its duty in society.

Between 1960 and 1970, a new wave of successful police productions emerged and dominated primetime television schedules, such as *Starsky and Hutch* (Spelling & Goldberg, 1975–1979). Alternatively, TV series presenting other law enforcement institutions began to appear, such as agents belonging to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) in *The F.B.I.* (Martin & Saltzman, 1965–1974). On the other hand, institutional police series in the 1970s were influenced by two distinct processes. On the one hand, they began incorporating demands for more diverse racial and gender representation<sup>1</sup>. On the other, they started to present the judicial system as more bureaucratic and, in many cases, inefficient (Dowler, 2016). In light of this, a more violent police officer/detective was needed, one that was hungry for justice in the fight against criminals (Stark, 1987). The protagonist of the drama *Kojak* (Mann et al., 1973–1978) was precisely this “new” type of cop, tougher, more violent, fighting both crime and the institution’s bureaucratic inefficiency.

It was in the 1980s that the institutional police series began to further complexify the constructions of the institution. The productions of the decade marked a significant process of framing crime as a national problem (Donziger, 1996; Males, 1999), and television was responsible for portraying it as a problem that affected everyone. The most important police drama of the time was *Hill Street Blues* (Bochco et al., 1981–1987). The series featured the chaotic routine of a police station in a major urban center and introduced troubled cops and detectives who broke institutional rules and norms in favor of obtaining justice.

After the great success of *Hill Street Blues*, the 1990s saw the proliferation of new police dramas. While *NYPD Blue* (Bochco et al., 1993–2005) continued to feature police officers with moral and conduct shortcomings, *Law & Order* (Wolf et al., 1990–2010) reflected on the more punitive dimensions of the New York justice system. The series presented prosecutors and detectives as heroes fighting evil, represented in the figure of

<sup>1</sup> The demand for greater participation of female characters in police series is related to the federal legislation that enabled increased gender representation in police institutions between the 1960s and 1970s. However, Dowler (2016) points out that, upon entering the institution at the time, most women were given “specialized duties” (p. 13). Some were secretaries, while others were assigned to the Vice Squad, where many disguised themselves as prostitutes to get important information and apprehend criminals. Although this same logic was reproduced in fiction, one exception was *Police Woman* (Gerber, 1981–1987), a drama about the work of Sergeant Pepper Anderson (Angie Dickenson) in the LAPD’s criminal conspiracy unit. It wasn’t until the 1980s that female characters in police series were more prominently featured. The drama *Cagney & Lacey* (Rosenzweig, 1981–1988) presented detectives who not only solved crimes but also fought against sexism. The production addressed several issues that moved the liberal feminist debate of the decade. In many ways, the series challenged the male hegemony ingrained in the police genre (D’acci, 1994).

criminals and the lawyers who defended them. Another significant production of the decade was *Homicide: Life on the Streets* (Finnerty et al., 1993–1999), which endorsed a more realistic view of the work of Baltimore’s homicide division detectives and desensitized death by presenting it as a routine part of the profession. Unlike the clear-cut resolutions of *Law & Order*, many episodes of *Homicide* ended with unsolved cases.

In the early 2000s, other crime series began to gain even more airtime on broadcast television, many introducing elements of forensic science and profiling techniques in the apprehension of criminals, such as *CSI* (Zuiker et al., 2000–2015), *NCIS*, and *Criminal Minds* (Gordon et al., 2000–2015). These productions have become some of the most enduring series on US television and replicate the procedural model in which most episodes end with cops successfully arresting criminals and the narrative returning to the status quo. At the same time, cable television has also begun to fictionalize the police institution, as in *The Shield* (Ryan et al., 2002–2008) and *The Wire* (Simon et al., 2002–2008). While broadcast television productions often highlighted the central role of police institutions in maintaining order, cable TV series constructed a more flawed view of the institution with morally ambiguous professionals and, in some cases, an institution weakened by bureaucratic inefficiency. The serialized nature of cable television series was essential for plots where police officers would face some kind of consequences for their actions.

Contemporary productions keep reproducing established genre formulas with minor variations, many featuring the procedural format. Institutional police series from the 2010s, such as *Chicago P.D.*, *Blue Bloods*, and *The Rookie* (Hawley et al., 2018–present), present transgressions by police officers and detectives as routine and often as harmless and justifiable actions. These series generally frame conduct violations as the means for certain ends to be achieved, notably apprehending the criminal and obtaining justice. But it is not necessarily about obtaining legal justice; the fictional police institution presents professionals who seek moral justice (Meimaridis, 2021). That is because the police institution, when fictionalized, traditionally approaches the ideological spectrum of conservatism, illustrating a worldview from the perspective of the status quo. To understand this process, we need to grasp the role of this institution in US society and examine its fictionalization process in TV series.

### 3. THE POLICE INSTITUTION AND ITS FICTIONALIZATION IN US SERIES

The first police departments in the US emerged in the 19th century, many under pressure from the bourgeois class who, as they rose economically, sought a force to secure and protect “order” and “private property” (Mitriani, 2013). Inspired by the London model of the metropolitan police, police departments in large urban centers such as New York and Chicago reproduced a militarized command structure. Initially, police work was more concerned with regulating the behavior of the working classes and maintaining order in various spheres, both moral and social, than with arresting criminals. However, as cities developed, social inequality increased, and violence intensified, the police became a symbol of the fight against crime.

Often, the work carried out by members of the police institution is related to the concept of "dirty work" (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Cummins & King, 2015; Dick, 2005). The concept, proposed by Everett Hughes (1950), addresses occupations that are socially perceived as degrading or disgusting. They are, therefore, occupations that involve some kind of "moral, physical, or social" taint (Hughes, 1958, p. 122). For Ashforth and Kreiner (1999), moral taint refers to occupations of sinful or dubious morals (e.g., casino manager). Physical taint relates to occupations associated with dirt or death (e.g., firefighters), and social taint concerns occupations that deal with stigmatized individuals (e.g., public defenders) or that have a certain relationship of servitude (e.g., janitors).

Police officers present a combination of all three types of taint. They work under harmful conditions and risk their lives on a daily basis (*physical taint*). They also use questionable methods (*undercover police*) to do their jobs (*moral taint*). At the same time, they deal directly with "contaminated" people like prostitutes, homeless people, and especially criminals (*social taint*). This combination ultimately threatens the moral status of the professional. For Waddington (1999), members of the police institution perform dirty work since the police act in ways that are otherwise "exceptional, exceptionable or illegal" (p. 299). We emphasize, however, that society bestows authority upon the police institution. That is, "instituting a police force entails the general population licensing a specific occupational group to exercise authority over them – to intrude into their privacy, interfere in their conduct and ultimately to use force against them" (Waddington, 1999, p. 298). To cope with the profession's stigma, members of the police institution reproduce a strong group identity based on the logic of "us" (police officers) versus "them" (criminals; Cummins & King, 2015). In this process, police officers cultivate an "occupational self-image of crime-fighter" (Cummins & King, 2015, pp. 2–3), which is closely related to the construction of the police officer as a hero.

The dimension of police officers' dirty work emerges mostly through an officer who is tortured by his/her day-to-day duties in institutional police series. By dealing with the "worst" of mankind, this officer is tainted and recurrently seeks refuge in a bar, as in *Chicago P.D.*, *NYPD Blue*, and *Hill Street Blues*. Alternatively, the dirty work dimension is also present in the everyday risks that policemen and detectives encounter in the exercise of their profession. Fictional series, then, lend themselves well to reinforcing the image of the hero cop. For Sparks (1992), these television productions are like morality tales that society reproduces as a way of reassuring itself. They serve a desire to see punishment imposed upon a particular group in society. To do this, they tend to villainize the criminal who "deserves" to be punished (Marc, 1984). In this way, these productions are focused on a criminal action and an institution's response (such as punishment; Raney & Bryant, 2002). For Marc (1984), the attraction of this formula lies in its "ritual affirmation of the potency of law and order" (p. 69). It is precisely the opposition of binaries, such as "good" versus "evil", "law" versus "crime", "action" versus "punishment", and "order" versus "chaos", that enable institutional police series to reinforce the image of the policeman as a crime fighter and feed specific national myths (Mittell, 2004).

Police institutional series are ideologically connected with conservative beliefs by portraying the officer as a hero and the civilian as a potential opponent. These productions illustrate the moral and legal facets of the police institution's actions. The narrative presents a conflict between two adversaries: police officers on one side and criminals who are predetermined to be wicked on the other. In this process, the ability to reinforce the conservative discourse becomes distinct since these productions justify the police's actions against criminals (Meimaridis, 2021). However, many police series reduce crime and poverty to the moral sphere rather than attributing them to sociological and structural issues in US society (Buxton, 1990). That is, the underlying causes of crime in the real world, institutional shortcomings or economic inequities, are underrepresented. The racial component is also frequently overlooked. In this way, these productions minimize the social and economic dimensions of crime. In fact, very few series explore the social conditions that contribute to crime, such as *Hill Street Blues*, *Homicide: Life on the Streets*, and *The Wire*. In these productions, the police authority is succumbing to lawlessness. We again stress that these works are exceptional examples and that, in some cases, they exhibit an ambiguous ideological alignment that may be both conservative and progressive, as in the case of *Hill Street Blues*.

Meimaridis (2021) established two separate dimensions of conservatism in police institutional series that are directly tied to institutional regulation. The first manifests itself in productions based on police personnel carrying out their tasks in society and characterized by strict institutional regulation, such as *Dragnet*. The second dimension involves law enforcement officers breaking the law and acting as agents of "moral justice" in society. Institutional police series encourage the notion that police officers can use excessive force to apprehend a criminal by reiterating a utilitarian rationale. These professionals ultimately abuse their authority and foster a conservative "us versus them" mentality as a result of their actions. We contend that this framing of unethical behavior and human rights abuse as heroic deeds contributes to normalizing the profession's dirtiest aspects.

Taking this into account, in the next part, we will emphasize two significant roles that US police institutional series play in legitimizing the real-world police institution: (a) authority reinforcement, and (b) normalization of police brutality.

#### 4. AUTHORITY REINFORCEMENT

The disclaimer "the story you are about to see is true. Only the names have been changed to protect the innocent" displayed at the beginning of each episode of *Dragnet* is emblematic of assuming that the truth lies in the policeman's point of view, whom the viewer will follow throughout the episode. In general, modern US police series continue to follow the formula established in *Dragnet*, with the hero officer committed to solving the "case of the week" and apprehending the villainized perpetrator. After restoring normality, the production is ready to repeat a variation of the formula the following week. Ultimately, the narrative movement toward resolution solidifies the cop's moral victory.

In this way, institutional police series tend to prioritize the police officers' victories and efforts. Thus, these productions concretize the institution's and its members' authority in upholding social order.

The fact that some real-world institutions already take part in their fictionalization processes makes the capacity of institutional police series to strengthen police authority even more blatant (Jenkins, 2016; Sharrett, 2012). They often justify this interference as a way to ensure that the representations are more "accurate" (Jenkins, 2016). However, this justification only serves to camouflage the institution's real interest: the need for positive portrayals of law enforcement personnel in television series.

Consider, for example, the success rates — solving the crime and apprehending the criminal — of US police series. Although the number of homicides in these productions is higher than in the reality of the country's major urban centers (Brown, 2001; Deutsch & Cavender, 2008; Donavan & Klahm IV, 2005), professionals consistently prevail through their expertise. Eschholz et al. (2004) observed that the success rate of professionals in police dramas was much higher than in reality. The authors examined episodes of *Law & Order* and *NYPD Blue* aired between 1999 and 2000 and identified that the conviction rate in the former was 61%, and the arrest rate in the latter was 78%. Yet, the New York City police department's success rate for violent crimes was 29% during the same timeframe. This finding has been corroborated by other investigations, including Britto et al. (2007).

Naturally, the favorable fictionalization of the police force is fraught with controversy. One of the most emblematic cases refers to the "CSI effect" (Cole & Dioso-Villa, 2007). The phenomenon, defined as "the belief that watching television shows such as *CSI* can actually cause a viewer to have heightened expectations of what science can do" (Harvey & Derksen, 2009, p. 5), has been addressed by both the academic literature and the media. Although several works indicate the non-existence of such a phenomenon (Maeder & Corbett, 2015; Podlas, 2006; Schweitzer & Saks, 2007), Brewer and Ley (2010) found that regular viewers of *CSI* tended to believe more in the reliability of forensic science than individuals who did not consume this television drama. As a result, we believe that the focus of the debate over the *CSI* effect has shifted the attention away from the simple fact that series like *CSI* depict a technical reality of the police institution that most people do not have access to. In this way, these productions are able to attribute legitimacy and authority to real-world police institutions and forensic science (Deutsch & Cavender, 2008).

However, it is not just *CSI* and forensic science. Institutional police series as a whole revolve around systems of specialized expertise (Meimaridis, 2021), such as federal intelligence agencies (FBI, Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], National Security Agency [NSA]), police and criminal investigative forces (New York City Police Department, LAPD), specialized squads (Special Weapons and Tactics, SWAT), among others. All these systems rely on experts' knowledge (police officers, detectives, forensic scientists, analysts, field agents, etc.). Science, in this way, is used as a form of symbolic action to find and construct the truth, approximating police work to one rationality that satisfies the criteria of acceptability (Ericson & Shearing, 1986). Thus, we perceive the police as an important

expert system (Giddens, 1991) that relies on the subjects’ trust. Ordinary people do not need to grasp all aspects of the police institution, its organization, or the technical knowledge associated with this system since they trust the expert system. By constructing favorable visions of the performance of the police force in US society, many institutional television series present skilled professionals who routinely perform their duties based on their specialized knowledge. These productions, in this process, reinforce the police institution’s conduct in the people’s daily life.

Considering that real-world police institutions participate and/or interfere in their fictionalization processes, we defend that institutions like the LAPD and FBI use television series to regulate the discourses produced by fiction about themselves. A fundamental component of this process is the reinforcement of the police’s authority and trust in this expert system. The proximity of these institutions to serialized fiction, we believe, lends legitimacy to these productions. On the other hand, police series, when they frame the police institution as being “strong” and “orderly” — as in *FBI* and *Law & Order* — contribute to reinforcing trust in experts. That is only possible because society constantly reminds individuals that these systems work through various mechanisms, which, in the end, promote trust in expert systems (Giddens, 1991). Consequently, we propose that institutional police series can serve as one of these mechanisms by fostering societal trust in a variety of real-world police institutions.

## 5. NORMALIZING POLICE BRUTALITY

The saying “break the rules, not the law” is the tagline of the institutional drama *Chicago P.D.* centered on the actions of uniformed police officers and detectives of the intelligence unit of the 21st district of the Chicago police department. Of course, the statement is pure rhetoric since the professionals violate various human rights, not just the institution’s “rules” of conduct, to solve the cases of the week. By framing methods of police brutality — torture, kidnapping, physical threats — as the means of obtaining relevant information, as in “Wrong Side of the Bars” (Brandt, Haas, & Chapelle, 2014, Season 1, Episode 2) and “Don’t Bury This Case” (Brandt, Haas, & Nowlan, 2017, Season 4, Episode 9), and apprehending criminals, as in “8:30 P.M.” (Brandt, Haas, & Tinker, 2014, Season 1, Episode 12) and “Emotional Proximity” (Brandt, Haas, & Tabrizi, 2017, Season 4, Episode 16), the series portrays illegal behavior by police officers as routine, if not vital, to the job. Although questionable, the abusive actions and violations employed by professionals in *Chicago P.D.* are often portrayed as effective, which minimizes the issue of police brutality and promotes misconceptions about the police institution’s real role. Here we understand police brutality as the illegal exercise of excessive force (Skolnick & Fyfe, 1994), yet the legal boundaries between authorized and exaggerated police aggression are traditionally difficult to draw. Controlling violence is the profession’s great humanitarian dilemma, and professional boundaries are not well clarified in US law (Chevigny, 1995).

The drama *Chicago P.D.* should not be regarded as an exception among US institutional police series but rather as part of a model of fictionalization of the police institution that normalizes police violence. In January 2020, the non-profit organization Color of Change did an extensive study on representations of crime, race, and justice in US police series (Color of Change, n.d.). The organization analyzed 26 productions that aired between 2017 and 2018. The results pointed out that in the fictional world, actions such as the abuse of force, similar to that employed by Floyd's killer, are not only normalized but portrayed as efficient and even necessary. In the analysis, out of 353 illegal actions committed by police officers, only 13 (3.7%) were investigated. Of these 353 actions, only six discussed any reform in the police system. Excessive force, when it appeared, was framed as rare and unusual. The report concluded that the US police institutional series glorify, justify, and ultimately normalize systematic violence committed by the police, especially against minorities.

These series present the police as the normative power, authorized to use excessive force to restore order and harmony in society. They are positioned as the armed branch of the state. Situated as the "good", the police function in relation to the "other", the criminals, whose perspective will only be shown when their criminal actions are investigated. These actions are the result of the criminals' individual failures. In institutional police series, the criminal is typically an individual with moral deviations, and the evils inflicted on society result from his/her dishonesty, disdain for norms, or even sadism. The offender is portrayed as dangerous and capable of carrying out his/her illegal actions again if they escape arrest. There is a need for an immediate response, which the police deliver since its use of force is authorized as a necessary measure for the protection of ordinary citizens. Criminals are dehumanized for their transgressions and shown as people who have rightfully lost their civil rights as a result of their immoral deeds.

In an effort to normalize police violence, police institutional series began in the 1980s to foster the perception that bureaucracy was impeding professionals from doing their jobs effectively. Constitutional constraints, human and civil rights, laws, and chain of command are portrayed as obstacles; their role as institutional safeguards of order and the rule of law often being downplayed. Order is forged by the individuality of police officers willing to break the law to apprehend criminals. We underline that this construction has a conservative bias and glorifies the role of the police officer as an anti-establishment figure who disregards civil rights and bypasses institutions to do "good", in this case, saving a life or protecting a community.

Let us consider, for example, the pilot episode of *The Shield* (Ryan & Johnson, 2002, Season 1, Episode 1). The narrative follows the questionable acts of a group of police officers in the LAPD. In the episode, a division of the LAPD fails to elicit information about the whereabouts of a victim from a pedophile. The criminal is legally supported by lawyers and manages to resist charges. The bureaucratic process is shown to be a burden in an urgent situation, and the cops solicit the assistance of Vic Mackey (Michael Chiklis) to unmask the pedophile: he shuts off the cameras in the investigation room, refuses

the criminal's demands for his lawyer, and physically tortures him into divulging the whereabouts of the kid, who is ultimately saved. That is just one example of the brutality depicted in *The Shield* as a means to an end.

Although institutional police series occasionally question the abuse of force, their portrayal is more generally favorable and efficient (Bandes, 2021). Corrupt and violent police officers who fail to succeed in investigations are rarely featured in US fictional television. Brutality, then, is almost always rewarded. Excessive force is also depicted as an individual trait of some law enforcers, in contrast to their systematic nature in the actual world. The series *Justified* (Leonard et al., 2010–2015) is a good example. The drama embodies the issues in its title: "justified", a predicament that Raylan Givens (Tymothy Olyphant) attempts to thrust himself into in order to justify the execution of criminals. A Western movie-style gunman, the cop begins the series reprimanded for the execution of a criminal and transferred from a prestigious police unit in Miami to his small hometown. There, Givens continues to follow his code: induce the criminal to draw first, guaranteeing him self-defense. Internal police divisions, interested in investigating the officer's inappropriate behaviors, are also shown as hindrances (Yost & Werner, 2012). Givens also agrees to extortion, strikes deals with criminals, and uses physical torture to extract information.

Erasing the racial factor is another process undertaken to normalize police violence. As the well-known US cases from Rodney King (1992) to George Floyd (2020) show, race is one of the main factors behind real-world police brutality (Graham et al., 2020; Holmes & Smith, 2008). Police series from the US tend to depict crimes committed by Caucasians in an exaggerated way, trying to avoid racial controversies that could alienate their audiences. In 1995, for example, 79% of the convicted criminals in *Law & Order* were Caucasian, while in real life, only 9% of those arrested in New York City were white (Selepak & Cain, 2015). African Americans (9% in the series, 55% in the real world) and Hispanics (12% in the series, 30% in real life), on the other hand, were underrepresented (Selepak & Cain, 2015).

Increasing exposure to Caucasian criminals has formerly been advocated academically as an acceptable strategy for addressing racism (Dixon, 2006). However, in reality, this criminal "affirmative action" leads to further erasing the racial issue in these works. By effectively removing the debate about race, these series have ignored systemic problems and framed crime as a moral and individual problem. In the institutional police series, racism is not fought but rather overlooked. If, on the one hand, news reports depict a more realistic portrayal of crime while failing to criticize the systemic issues that contribute to it, fictional series, in order to avoid controversy, whitewash crime, which contributes to disconnecting these actions from the real world and stifling any critical discussion (Doyle, 2003).

Among the many productions normalizing police brutality, *24* (Surnow et al., 2001–2010) is the most evocative, with its depiction of torture so problematic that its makers were chastised by military and FBI operatives (Mayer, 2007). Despite the fact that its first

season aired before the 9/11 events, the series became synonymous with the war on terror era, when concern over terrorism made domestic surveillance, sadism, and torture, common topics on television, whether the material was fictional or not (Hall, 2013). Like its title and real-time narrative structure, the series put its protagonists in "the ticking bomb scenario", a hypothetical circumstance in which horrific means of physical torture would be ethically justifiable owing to the urgency of finding a device that would kill millions. The production revolved around anti-terrorism agent Jack Bauer (Kiefer Sutherland), a member of a fictitious government division called the Counter Terrorism Unit (CTU). Because the CTU's methods were frequently framed as ineffectual, it was up to Bauer to act independently of his superiors (and the law) to avert tragedy, which often included torture and other cruel tactics<sup>2</sup>.

The violence in *24* is portrayed as regrettable but essential to maintain the status quo, which also reflects the "us" against "them" mentality of the actual world as expressed by the words of then-President George W. Bush: "you are either with us, or with the terrorists". Torture is directly shown as legitimate, despite being a "last resort". In a society where police legitimacy is lacking to achieve results, Bauer acts this way and is framed as efficient (Kearns & Young, 2017). "If we don't do this, millions and millions of Americans will die", the characters in the series often reiterate. The brutality was not only related to a "vigilante" police officer but also happened in an institutionalized way, with the CTU having an agent (the character Rick Burke [Martin Papazian]) and a room dedicated to sophisticated torture methods. Significantly, the narrative framed traditional peaceful investigation and interrogation procedures as ineffectual (Kearns & Young, 2017).

Currently, the crises experienced by the police institution, especially regarding police brutality, have also appeared in police institutional series. However, criticism directed at the institution is rare. As we mentioned before, some productions reinforce the rhetoric of exceptionality, and the misbehaving police officer suffers consequences for his actions. Yet, in other productions, the victim of police brutality is unmasked for having lied or committed some offense that would have warranted police action, clearing the professional of culpability, as in the episode "Excessive Force" (Burns & Zakrzewski, 2014, Season 5, Episode 4) of *Blue Bloods* and in the episode "Justice" (Brandt et al., 2016, Season 3, Episode 21) of *Chicago P.D.* We find this image, with a pro-establishment tone, disturbing, in which police violence, particularly against minorities, is condoned and injustice is normalized by belittling the victims.

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this article, we seek to contribute to the discussions about the fictionalization of justice and crime by institutional police series from the US. We demonstrate the creation of an imaginary in which law enforcement characters are primarily portrayed as heroic and unassailable. At the same time, these productions justify the abuse of authority by

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<sup>2</sup> There were 67 torture scenes in the first five seasons alone (Miller, 2007).

these professionals and frame police violence and conduct infractions as a “necessary” evil essential to prevent something even “worse”, the criminal’s deed. The perception that using excessive force is a legitimate and useful tactic contrasts sharply with the institution’s crisis in the real world, where incidents involving police violence, such as those of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, emerge with frightening frequency. Recognizing that these depictions and framings of the police and criminals foster expectations and perceptions about real-world violence, we contend that these productions have failed to sufficiently educate the public about the complexities of crime and, more significantly, the roles of police institutions. An overabundance of decontextualized images alienates a more realistic and nuanced perspective of police work, with these productions dangerously being the closest representation of this reality that most people have access to (Mclaughlin & Murji, 1999).

By legitimizing the brutality of real-world institutions in the face of US society, police series collude with these entities by fulfilling a subservient role to them. Alternatively, by reverting to the status quo on a regular basis, these shows address a core audience demand: the need to see justice achieved promptly in an increasingly complex, bureaucratic society with weakened institutions. Hence, it is a fantasy about institutional protection of the populace based on conservatism and the hollow struggle between “good” and “evil”. This thirst is demonstrated by the popularity and duration of these shows, which continue to air on television for decades, integrating a substantial part of the population’s daily lives. Television, in general, and its serialized fiction, in particular, protect these erroneous and even broken institutions in a kind of quid pro quo in exchange for the legitimization of its products. They accomplish this by romanticizing the day-to-day lives of these professionals, mostly omitting the internal and deep-seated issues that the police, in particular, face, as well as a propensity for violence aimed toward minorities. We reiterate, then, that by shielding the audience from the institution’s failures, fictional television series contribute to the institutional crisis faced by the police, who simply cannot sustain the fantasy in their everyday lives. Therefore, it is crucial that we analyze not just how the media fictionalizes the police but also how real-world institutions regulate the discourses created by fiction about themselves.

**Translation: Melina Meimaridis**

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## BIOGRAPHICAL NOTES

Melina Meimaridis received her master's and PhD degrees from the Graduate Program in Communication at the Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) in Brazil, where she is now conducting postdoctoral research with a fellowship from Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado do Rio de Janeiro. She is investigating how serialized television fiction constructs understandings of institutions and how these meanings circulate in transnational television flows. Other interests are media industries, comfort series, and video streaming services in national and regional markets. At the moment, she is one of the coordinators of the research group TeleVisões: Núcleo de pesquisa em televisão e novas mídias (TeleVisions: Research group on television and new media; UFF) and an associate researcher of Nemacs: Research group on mass communication and consumption (UFF).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3481-817X>

Email: [melinam@id.uff.br](mailto:melinam@id.uff.br)

Address: Rua Professor Marcos Waldemar de Freitas Reis, s/n. Block A, Class 202, São Domingos – Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, CEP: 24210-201

Rodrigo Quinan has a master of arts in communication and is a doctoral candidate at the Graduate Program in Communication at Universidade Federal Fluminense (UFF) in Brazil. His research is dedicated to analyzing the rise of conspiracy theories, the epistemological crisis, and the representation of reality in television serialized fiction. He integrates the Laboratório de Mídia e Democracia (UFF), the Rede Conecta (UFF), and the Laboratório de Investigação, Ciência, Inovação, Tecnologia e Educação (UFF).

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5344-0574>

Email: [rodrigoquinan@id.uff.br](mailto:rodrigoquinan@id.uff.br)

Address: Rua Professor Marcos Waldemar de Freitas Reis, s/n. Block A, Class 202,  
São Domingos – Niterói, Rio de Janeiro, Brasil, CEP: 24210-201

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