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**Audiences for crime media 1946-91:
A historical approach to reception studies**

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ABSTRACT

The present paper argues that audience reception studies have tended to be ahistorical, neglecting consideration of the ways in which audiences' orientation to media may have changed over the decades. The paper explores the potential of combining oral history methods with reception studies, and addresses some of the difficulties which arise. An apparently simple way to introduce a historical perspective is attempted by including audience age as a central part of an empirical research design. By analysing a series of focus group discussions in which people respond to crime media from different points over the postwar period, the concept of age is unpacked in terms of generation and life course factors, and these are shown to influence reception of crime media from both the present and the past. Generation and life course, together with gender, also affect people's positioning in society in relation to real-world crime, and this too affects the reception of crime media. The paper concludes by suggesting three ways in which audiences may have changed over the postwar period in terms of their interpretive frames for making sense of crime media, namely the frames of personal relevance, realism and moral relativism.

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On the visibility of audiences in media theory

Media theory is committed to the integrated analysis of production, texts, and audiences. While traditional mass communication approaches analyse each as separate but interlinked elements in the flow of mediated meanings, more cultural and critical approaches focus on the interrelations of these elements in the (re)production of cultural meanings (Hall, 1980). Although the importance of all three elements of the media system has never been in doubt, the analysis of production and texts has often been of primary concern, while analysis of the interpretative activities of audiences has until recently been neglected, or taken for granted within media studies (Livingstone, 1998a). Audience reception theory aims to rectify this tendency, foregrounding the cultural contexts within which meanings are both encoded and decoded and acknowledging the importance of the socially shared (or diversified) aspects of those contexts, for 'the life of signs within modern society is in large measure an accomplishment of the audience' (Jensen, 1993:26).

Audience reception research is rendering audiences 'visible' within media and communication studies, establishing the necessity of examining empirically hitherto unexplored assumptions about audience interpretations and practices. The key findings of audience reception analysis

include the marked and often unanticipated differences between lay and academic interpretations of media texts. The point is not that audiences are 'wrong' but that they construct their interpretations according to diverse discursive contexts which are themselves socially determined. While not without problems, reception research challenges notions of a homogeneous, passive audience and asserts that media theory cannot investigate media texts and production contexts while presuming that audiences are predictable from those texts/contexts. Audiences act on media texts to make them meaningful in particular ways, thereby playing a role in the mediation of media influence. Yet audiences, acting in private, remain elusive.

Historically locating audiences

Making audiences visible within media and cultural theory becomes problematic when the media are analysed in historical perspective. In the main, media research restricts itself to the contemporary; it is all too easy to make the ahistorical assumption that present theory and findings apply equally well to past or future periods. Yet media researchers are studying a moving target and what were once 'new' media rapidly become 'old' and familiar media while yet newer media emerge. Moreover, changing sociocultural contexts, together with changing forms and contents of media alter audience practices. Audiences have changed as the physically contiguous mass spectatorship of the eighteenth century theatre or show shifted to the spatially separated 'virtual' mass of press and broadcasting audiences in the nineteenth and twentieth century (Neuman, 1991). Assumptions about shared media experiences, about critical viewers, about the appropriation of new meanings into daily lives and dominant social discourses are themselves historically contingent. Thus, audience research requires a historical perspective as well as offering an analysis of the contemporary (relying neither on mythic notions of how things used to be different or on ahistorical assumptions that nothing has changed).

Yet a theoretical commitment to the integration of audience analysis with media production and texts in combination with the historicising of media research raises serious difficulties. Insofar as it exists, the history of audiences is often a history of 'ratings', permitting analysis of the growth or decline of audiences for various media, and so supporting inferences about the importance of these media (Neuman, 1991). Less is known of the ways in which media practices and meanings have been, in different periods, embedded in everyday life, domestic relations and shared understandings, despite such questions providing a major focus for research on contemporary audiences: 'what is striking...is the relative absence of historical data and questions concerning the domestic, everyday presence and use of television' (O'Sullivan, 1991:160). Similarly, Schudson (1991) notes not only that 'the writing of communication history is woefully under-developed' (p.175) but that 'the history of reception is by far the most elusive' (p.176). While researchers have been slow to incorporate empirical audience research in accounts of contemporary media, so too audiences of the past appear to be only belatedly recognised within media history (although see Pickering, 1997).

This neglect of audiences is not accidental. Social and cultural analysts are often more interested in the analysis of power, elites and institutions than with the relatively powerless recipients of elite products - the public. Partly in defiance of this focus, and partly because the

subject matter of audience research necessarily involves 'ordinary' people, a prime motivation behind audience reception studies has been that of making visible and validating the otherwise taken-for-granted, neglected or misunderstood experiences of ordinary people in relation to popular culture. However, audiences are particularly easy to neglect within media history because of the problem of sources. Just as historians have come to realise that their main sources are predominantly those of the elites or the middle class, and of men, so that the history of women, children, minority groups and the working classes has gone largely untold (e.g. Davies, 1992; Guck and Patai, 1991), so too does historical audience research face similar, and substantial, problems. The institutional production of media and the actual media texts tend to be fairly well recorded -- there are memos, letters, policy statements, economic statistics and so forth documenting media production (e.g. Scannell and Cardiff, 1991), and there are archives of past films, newspapers, and to a lesser extent, television and radio programmes. While these are never as complete or accessible as one would like, they do exist. There are few records of past media audiences, for audiences in their routine daily activities leave no physical record (although see Richards and Sheridan, 1987). As Jensen (1993: 20-1) notes with some anxiety:

'reception does not exist in the historical record; it can only be reconstructed through the intervention of research...Whereas ratings and readership figures presumably will survive, the social and cultural aspects of mass media reception are literally disappearing before our eyes and ears.'

As in history more generally, this absence of contemporaneous material tempts researchers to focus on the impact of media on elites (using diaries, letters etc) or on specific locales (using ad hoc surveys etc) (Schudson, 1991). But the clear conclusion to be drawn from research on contemporary audiences is how little such generalisations may be valid, particularly those from elite to 'ordinary' audiences, but also those from one locale to another.

In respect of one data source audience history is fortunate. Most media have themselves been relatively recently introduced and thus many of the past media audiences are still living. Thus the method of oral history could be used, especially for audiovisual media. Despite its problems (Samuel and Thompson, 1990), even the possibility of an oral history of audiences is progressively disappearing: we suggest that research should now be exploring what can - or cannot - be obtained from this method. Contemporary audience research is divided into audience reception analysis (focusing on the interpretation of media contents) and audience ethnography (focusing on the appropriation of media products into everyday contexts). Conventional wisdom among oral historians suggests practices are more reliably recalled than meanings (O'Brien and Eyles, 1993). We may therefore have some confidence in asking people to recall going to the cinema in the 1940s but less confidence about asking them what they then thought of a particular film and how they interpreted it. Thus oral history may be least appropriate for historical reception studies. But as a result more is known of past media as embedded in everyday consumption practices than of media as sources of content or occasions for meaningful communication (although see Alexander, 1994). In this paper we ask how far the combination of oral history and reception analysis can overcome this problem.

A historical approach to the audience for crime media

The present paper reports on one part of a larger, interdisciplinary project, entitled 'Discipline and Desubordination? Changing Media Images of Crime', which has two inter-related aims. First, the project aims to systematically chart and analyse the changing images of crime and criminal justice portrayed by the mass media (specifically, film, television and the press) since the Second World War. Second, the project aims to discover and analyse how audiences may have responded to these changes in mediated images of crime. Crime media can be analysed on two levels. Most concretely -- at the denotative level -- we have analysed media representations of crime, violence, victims, law enforcement and justice agencies, charting trends in the characters and narratives of crime media. More abstractly -- at the connotative level -- we have analysed the deeper meanings of these representations, for crime media offer audiences an account not only of crime but also of the society in which crime occurs. Thus we have analysed the ways in which representations of crime and social order convey meanings about authority, fear and threat, individual agency, risk and responsibility, social struggle and division, morality and justice. In short, following our project title, we have analysed the media texts in terms of discipline and desubordination (Allen et al, 1998).

It remains an open question whether audiences respond to these media along similar lines to the analysis of media texts. How do audiences respond to crime media of the past 50 years? While historical work has been conducted for several genres (e.g. Corner, 1991; Gripsrud and Skretting, 1994; Hansen, 1991; Stacey, 1994), most if not all studies of media representations of crime (e.g. Schlesinger and Tumber, 1992; Sparks, 1992) and of audience response to these representations (e.g. Schlesinger et al, 1992) concern contemporary media. Clearly, historicising audience reception faces multiple problems: one is trying to capture experiences which are private rather than public, experiences concerned with meanings rather than practices, experiences which are past rather than present, experiences of all society not just the elite, experiences commonly regarded as trivial and forgettable rather than important, and experiences in which the subject is personally engaged (both in the past and present) rather than disinterested. While the elusive nature of the subject matter may seem disheartening, we wished, while older generations are still living, to explore how far oral history and audience reception methods could be combined to re-insert the audience into the history of postwar crime media.

Research design

For a reception study of past media, the respondents' age is crucial, although most reception considers gender, class and ethnicity but neglects age. We suggest that audience age indexes two phenomena. First, position in the life course (e.g. young person, parent, elderly; Hepworth, 1987). Second, generation (e.g. 'post-war' generation, 'sixties' generation), where this is popularly defined by the particular historical period through which people live out their lives. As generations are commonly defined by the period in which they were young adults (referring to the context in which their adult perceptions were formed), there is clearly an interaction between generation and life course: the significance of membership of a particular

generation is the result of being young at a certain period in history (Schuman and Scott, 1989). Both life course and generational factors may be supposed to affect how people interpret events around them, offering them cultural frameworks for perceiving and representing these events. How then do life course and generation frame reception of crime media?

Our textual analysis of crime media suggested three broad periods within the postwar time frame (1946-1991), each marked by shifts in the representation of crime and social order. We selected media materials at approximately 20 year intervals to stimulate focus group discussion of each media period (around 1950, around 1970, around 1990). Four age groups (around 20, 40, 60 and 80 years old) discussed media from periods 20 years apart throughout the period, and depending on age of the group this involved discussing media from before they were born, from when they were in their mid teens, mid 30s, mid 50s, or mid 70s. The point of also dividing people into age groups at 20 year intervals was to maintain constant age breaks across the three media periods in order to distinguish generation from life course factors.

Following a pilot interview, 16 focus groups were recruited from seven locations in the South-East of England (urban, suburban and rural). Each group was homogenous according to age, gender and social grade (4 age x 2 gender x 2 social class). In all, 96 people were interviewed (including 6 in the pilot group). Each interview was conducted as a flexible, semi-structured discussion based on open-ended questions according to a common schedule. Following transcription, each interview was coded using NUDIST, a computer programme for thematic coding based on grounded theory. In the analysis we combined a descriptive and analytic characterisation of the interviews with a sensitivity to interviewees' comments which may confirm or disconfirm expectations from the research literature (Lunt and Livingstone, 1996). In the present paper we discuss a linked series of themes which focus on the relation between audience age/generation and reception of media from the three postwar periods.

'Commuting' between media and everyday life

We begin by noting that for all groups reception of crime media was intertwined with many diversions into accounts of everyday life. In their discussion of the reception of *Dallas*, Liebes and Katz (1995) use the notion of commuting to describe the ways in which reception of a soap opera involves a continual shifting between the story and viewers' lives, and between the story and a meta-commentary on the story. While the soap opera form specifically invites exploration of interrelations between the worlds of the viewer and the characters, the evocative content of crime media seems in and of itself sufficiently powerful to stimulate such commuting. Respondents continually shifted between crime media and real life. Talk of mediated crime provoked reflections on crime in real life:

Glamorised, sort of, car chase at the beginning that's always typical of old films! (Laughter) They always start off with a car chase!... They were respected a lot more then, weren't they the police, it looked like... (woman, 16-24, C2DE/216-8)

Conversely, talk of everyday matters provokes reflections on media images of crime:

I was also taught to, not to steal and tell lies and all those ah, things... And I think some kids are taught that today but many kids are not taught it... and ah, in fact, they're quite, quite the reverse, they're actually encouraged to tell lies to ... get advantage of other people. Um, and that's really where I think a lot of the, uh, morals have actually changed.... and you can see that on, ah, you know, when you get a sort of press report on the television or even in the newspapers that Lord So and So has embezzled so many billion pounds ... (man, 56-64, ABC1/278-83)

Given that interpretation commutes thus between media and daily life, it is neither possible nor appropriate to attempt a separation between media reception and wider contexts of media use. In the accounts offered of the post war period, what is seen to have occurred in the world of real crime sets the context for perceptions of mediated crime and vice versa. Accepting this context-dependency of media interpretations, we attempt below to identify the areas of consensus and divergence within the accounts in order to build towards some conclusions regarding the potentially changing relation of audiences towards crime media over the postwar period.

Consensual representations of crime and crime media in the postwar period

Respondents were broadly in agreement in their characterisation of the postwar period, retelling a consensual periodisation of crime media which discriminates between the immediate postwar and present periods, and which identifies a clear transformation around the 1960s. Crime representations are seen to follow social transformations, shifting from the 'pre-sixties' days of little, mild crime, where difficult issues were often hidden, crime was largely nonviolent and the police were your friends. In the 'post-sixties' present, by contrast, crime is seen as much more prevalent and violent, media images as more explicit and upsetting, and the police are themselves more distant and more violent:

Yeah. They [crimes] just seem they are probably, er, a bit more brutal now, er, like old ladies ... (man, 16-24, ABC1/2945)

If my memory serves me right, when I was a kid, murder was used [in the press]. It was sensational because of the fact that it was murder. But now the murder is made sensationalist, if you know what I mean. (man, 56-64, C2DE/92)

But also there was a change in the policing style. If you go from *Dixon* to *Z-Cars*, I mean, the great thing of the sixties, if you remember them, were the panda cars, and the removal of the policeman from the beat, and the mobility... And there was a change in the style of policing, and that had to be reflected. (man, 36-44, ABC1/135)

[In the 40s and 50s] there wasn't the language, there wasn't the violence. (woman, 76-84, C2DE/673-74)

[speaking of *Bond*, *The French Connection*] It wasn't gratuitous violence at all. (man,

56-64, ABC1/698-9)

This shift is interpreted, again consensually, as the transition from the days when good and bad were clearly distinguished and authority structures were respected (a 'culture of respect and discipline'), to the present when the boundary between good and bad has blurred, criminals are sympathetic and authorities are corrupt (a 'culture of disrespect and desubordination'). As with the periodisation of crime, this shift in moral order is seen to describe both crime media specifically and society and crime in general.

This is the thing, though, I, I can see especially as you said about the changing society is that we seem to have a corrupt society today. But, whereas you tended to, I mean, certainly in the forties and fifties and... up to the early sixties you tended to have, people had more respect for the society figures. (man, 36-44, ABC1/247)

Generational frameworks for interpreting crime media

While a consensual periodisation of the postwar period is retold (see Addison, 1995), the generations differed markedly in their evaluation of this account. *Generation* is here understood in terms of the interpretative frameworks, cultural repertoires and moral concepts of the different age groups, following Schuman and Scott (1989: 378) who emphasise the importance of 'the openness of adolescents and young adults to events and influences from outside the home and neighbourhood' together with 'the importance of the first political and social events that people encounter for shaping their later views of the political and social world'. We would add to that the importance of the first mediated images, contents and genres which people encounter in shaping their later views of both media and the world portrayed by the media. At its extreme, the pre-war generation (now around 80 years old) regard the same media very differently from today's youth (now around 20). The two intermediate generations show a less clear pattern, although they more resemble the perspective of the older than the younger generations.

Older people are pessimistic about social change, telling a story of postwar decline. For them the 'do-gooders' of the 60s upset the social order: people started defending criminals, reversing traditional relations between authorities and subordinates and relativising moral criteria; the effect of such 'liberalism' is voyeurism and desubordination.

I think the change in the children, them getting their more violent views and doing silly thing, that's come from round about the sixties, the sixties. (man, 76-84, ABC1/306)

Yeah, but don't forget that the era that they're in, you know the fortyfives to sixties, you're back to what I say is the beginning. That because you came through a war you respected the law and you respected people and you had a sense of community. (man, 56-64, C2DE/364)

By contrast, young people are optimistic and tell a story of postwar progress. The civil rights movement especially was seen to legitimate alternative, previously marginalised viewpoints

and many once-hidden issues became visible:

[In the past] 'I think a lot of things were just shoved under the carpet, you know, just forgotten about.' (woman, 16-24, ABC1/461)

But you get punished though for crimes now, like, um, before if you beat the wife up or raped your wife within marriage it was fine, it was just an accepted thing of being married, but now... (woman, 16-24, C2DE/161)

Thus, what for the older people appears to be gratuitous and sensationalised violence is for younger people necessary for the realism of a media representation. Compare these two judgements:

You saw the knife but not it going into someone (man, 76-84, C2DE/86)

It is, at the same time, realistic in if you do cut your throat, blood is gonna come out. (woman, 16-24, ABC1/911)

The apparent relativism in moral judgements which worries their elders is construed positively by the youngest generation. They approve of the idea that morality should be decided not as a matter of principle but according to the context; similarly they believe that respect must be earned, not given automatically to those in certain social roles:

[INT: Should the police be respected more?]

W1: It depends if they respect you, then yeah, (others agree) but it's the way... But it's the way some of 'em, the way they talk to you sometimes, you d'you know what I mean? you just, you don't respect 'em. D'you know what I mean? If they're nice to you, and they... they're helping you and that, then yeah, fair enough, but if not, then no. (Pause)

W4 : I just think, um, it works both ways if they're, if the police are nice to you, then you get respect back... (others agree) But, I mean, I don't think all police are like... as bad as people say they are it's just the odd few (women, 16-24, C2DE/219-21)

Significantly, much rests on how the different generations construe that turning point, the sixties (or, for the youngest group, somewhat later). For those around 80 particularly, the sixties upset the known social order and turned the world upside down:

People never worried so much because they still respected the law from what they were taught when they were kids because they were the children of the previous, the last people who went through the war, the 3945 lot. They still respected the law; they still respected other people. But now they went through this period, and as it come out of 60s, then it wasn't the people then still continuing to go on and on. And respect became less and less. (man, 56-64, C2DE/196-7)

Whereas, as noted above, for those around 20, the sixties represent the rise of civil rights, the rise of the good life, and so turned the world the right way up:

What, well we know after the sixties about equal rights ... (man, 16-24, ABC1/910)

The standard of living now is so much higher than it was then (man, 16-24, ABC1/11320)

Life course and the importance of youth in audience reception

It is hardly new to suggest that the cultural ethos of one's youth has especial force in shaping interpretative frameworks. Yet this question of *life course* has been little considered in relation to audience reception. The importance of the life course is revealed by comparing the reception of crime media from the same stage in respondents' lives, irrespective of the actual date of production. Strikingly, respondents were almost universally positive about the media they encountered during their youth (and into their mid-thirties), irrespective of whether this was, in fact, media from the 50s, the 70s or the 90s. They also become increasingly critical of and worried by crime media as they age. It appears that the media of one's youth set the interpretive frameworks, and expectations for subsequent media experiences.

They are just good, eh, just like, they are longer as well, like *Homicide*, that's what life on the street's like... 'cause there is good story stuff in it, yeah. (man, 16-24, ABC1/147)

F3: There's another very good character, in a raincoat, he's always smoking a cigar -

F2: Columbo, Columbo.

F4: Yes, he's very good. [...]

F6: He relates more to our way of living.

F2: That's right.

F6: Like, you know, you think yes, he's sort of like us. (women, 56-64, ABC1/618-40)

F: *Dixon of Dock Green*.

F: That's nice yeah.

F: I used to like *Z Cars*.

F: It was nice 'cause he was the friendly policeman. (women, 76-84, C2DE/1028-33)

If previous generations approach today's media with frameworks constructed for earlier times, it makes sense that they perceive the media to address (rhetorically and as a market) those who are young:

I mean, I'm not going to condemn what they're [young people] doing. They're living in their world, that's not our world. (woman, 76-84, C2DE/306)

The media is geared to the young people... I think because they always seem to have the money... in my younger days, it was addressed to adults, you know, the bread winners sort of thing and they had the money, now it's the youngsters who have the money. (man, 76-84, ABC1/276-85)

They also recognise those current media made specifically to appeal to their interpretive criteria:

M: I mean, they wouldn't make a *Carry On* film now because it wouldn't show... but we liked them, didn't we? They were... We had a good laugh at it didn't we?

M: And you watch *Heartbeat*, you see now that's the old traditional style of copper.

M: Country bobby, hmm. (men, 76-84, ABC1/666-71)

Positioning the subject for crime media

We have argued that both generation and life course factors contribute to the differential evaluation - optimistic or pessimistic - of the otherwise consensual periodisation of the postwar period. It can be further argued that this is not simply a matter of the contemporaneous cultural climate prioritising certain discourses for certain generations within which they interpret media past and present. Recall that we noted earlier how everyday perceptions of crime in society provide a salient context within which media crime is interpreted. It was clear from the focus group discussions that audiences of different ages (i.e. different generations and different stages of the life course) are very differently positioned in relation to crime in real life. Thus we suggest that people's positioning in relation to real life crime is a more powerful determinant of their orientation to crime media than are the particular forms of address embedded within media narratives.

Very broadly, and particularly in the early postwar period, crime media offer audiences the subject position of 'criminal justice protagonist'. Thus the criminal becomes constructed as the 'other', and the victim is near invisible. However, a common subject position in relation to real life crime is not so readily found, although all deplore rising crime and violence, and all agree that the political agenda should address sentencing policy, the authority of police and parents, and the causes of crime. In contrast with the relatively more homogenous address of the media, one can identify three 'subject positions' for citizens in relation to 'real world' crime - police/law enforcer, criminal and victim. In our focus groups, the media were perceived significantly through the lens of these very different positions.

Hence, those aged 80 perceived media not only through the lens of their youth (the 'culture of respect') but also through the (partly mediated) lens of their perceived vulnerability as potential crime victims. Their sense that, given a culture of disrespect, they are targets of criminals weakens their faith in present-day authority, leading them to mourn the (perceived) loss of a reliable and effective police force.

F: I never heard of pensioners being knocked about, having their handbags stolen, never never....because I know some people that, they were, his wife was sitting at the side of him and they came along on a motorbike, they grabbed her bag and that was it...

F: There's no need to knock them about as well.

F: But they do, don't they?

F: I'll tell you what I, I've done, my daughter, our Geraldine, she said to me mother don't, you're going to be hurt one of these days... (women, 76-84, C2DE/140-7)

By contrast, the youngest groups particularly felt that they were continually portrayed by both the media and society as 'dangerous youth', and thus felt themselves faced with the threat not of victimisation but of being seen as perpetrators of crime. Thus they welcomed a civil rights focus and the questioning of police authority - of those police 'heroes' who - to them unjustifiably - stop and harass them in the streets, treating them as guilty till proven innocent.

And, I mean, they drive around, like, you know, ah, nothing else to do, yeah? What, I mean, like, from my experience personally, I can respect the police to a certain degree, but, but I said, they have their good points and they have their bad points. Personally, they just, like, one time, I went to work at five o'clock in the morning, you know? And the first thing they did is stop me, yeah?... and I'm going, hang on, what's going on here? (man, 16-24, C2DE/268)

Recalling that each generation is most positive about the media of their youth, we suggest that young people are relatively positive about today's media because they, like these media, are ambivalent about police heroes, desirous of seeing both sides of an issue portrayed, sympathetic to the questioning of authority and the analysis of the 'criminal mind'; nor are they uncomfortable with inconclusive narratives:

I think it [*The Blue Lamp*] was too, er, unrealistic from the start, because at the very beginning it said, like, this is dedicated to the Police, like, thanks for everything and stuff, and so from the start you knew that the Police would be made out to be really great and, you know, so, you knew you wouldn't have any chance to sympathize with the villain, and that's what you are expected, you, you know, you aren't to side with them, are you, just with us, the Police (man, 16-24, ABC1/446)

I think, er, films like that [*Silence of the Lambs*] ... instead of just having sort of an action, the action like someone killed someone and the police couldn't arrest him ... you get more of an insight, now, sort of psychologically, and that was like a prime example, you know, as a bit of cranky, you're trying to sort of go back in that person's mind and find what made him like that, rather than just accepting that they are like that, which is good becauseyou find the cause. (man, 16-24, ABC1/1126)

For different reasons, both generations accept that a shift from respect to disrespect has occurred in relation to authority. Older generations are frustrated that they fail to prevent or clear up crime, younger people consider that they unfairly suspect and harass young people.

Gender and generation in crime media reception

Such subject positionings are significantly complicated by gender. Unlike most of the men, young women tended to be seen as potential victims, particularly of male violence. In their response to mediated crime, young women therefore particularly welcomed coverage

of such crimes, although they differed from the older generation in sharing with their male peers a considerable scepticism regarding the criminal justice system:

The police are horrible now, like, you're just driving down the road and you'll see a car of 'em and they'll go... (Gestures) like that, as if you're doing something wrong but you're only driving down the road! ... I mean, they're sort of like, just out, looking for trouble all the time... (woman, 16-24, C2DE/211)

Thus while they see themselves as potential victims, they seem not to rely on authorities but, in accordance with their civil rights focus, want to be sufficiently informed to be self reliant. Their orientation to media centred on how the media provide information and opportunities to think through situations offering self-defence through realist portrayals:

F1: I think about, if I watch *Crimewatch*, you know, it's like, rapes and stuff on it, it plays in my mind for about a day and then I just forget about it.

F4: But it helps you not to become a victim too. (F1: Yeah.)

F5: And you're more confident, and you're more, I think when you're more aware of it, you're more confident and you can carry yourself better.

F1: Yeah, like when you walk down the road.

F5:... so you're less likely to be a target. (women, 16-24, ABC1/286-91)

Thus, in orientation to crime media, women start out in the victim position, unless they are very young, in which case they may also position themselves in relation to the criminal. They are less likely to accept an identification with the criminal justice system, unless police heroes are female or feminised:

Whereas, *Silence of the Lambs*, you've got a woman taking over. (woman, 16-24, ABC1/746)

The oldest women showed some ambivalence for crime media, being inclined both to respect the 'traditional' culture of respect yet feeling that it let them down - as potential or actual victims. Hence they expressed some approval of the destruction of the 'fairy tales' of their youth:

F: It was always the goodie that excelled in the end.

F: Also, the baddie sometimes used to be brought round to see the error of his ways.

F: Now you'd never get that nowadays would you?

INT: Well, which way would you prefer to see it...?

F: Difficult because the way it was done then would be, um, it's kind of fairy tale stuff isn't it? (F: Yes.)

F: It's the way you would like to see it, you'd like society to be like that.

F: Sugary sweet. (F: That's right, yeah.)

F: That's right, but now you know that's not possible... It's more realistic now.

F: .. exactly, yes, that's right. (women, 76-84, ABC1/369-387)

By contrast, neither the younger nor older men in our groups accepted views of themselves as

potential victims, although they feared for their wives and daughters:

You do get concerned for your family, yeah. Um, society has changed in that spell, in the last twenty years, and I, I have a daughter of twentythree, um... it terrifies me to think of some of, you know, if they go down to town, of some of the things that are happening down there! (man, 36-44, ABC1/66-7)

Instead, the older men accepted, apparently unproblematically, the proffered identification with the protagonist, typically a law enforcement hero (although all will on occasion identify with the criminal if portrayed as the narrative's protagonist). Younger men were most interested in crime media where the criminal was as much a focus as the law enforcers and in which the moral boundaries between the two were ambiguous or unresolved:

I think you get more of an insight on both sides... the *Usual Suspects*, for example... you had to quite admire the villain in the end because he was so clever... It was a brilliant film. (man, 16-24, ABC1/451-5)

Most of the cop programs, they all, all they show is, like I said, good versus evil. But yet again, there's always, like, on the good side, it can always be evil as well. (man, 16-24, C2DE/109)

Conclusions: audiences and cultural change

Audience reception research has explored the significance of gender, ethnicity, social class, and other factors in interpreting media contents, but paid little attention to age except when specifically focusing on children and young people. The present research clearly reveals the crucial dimensions of life course and generation in media reception of both contemporary and past media. We have also argued that text-reader interaction must be conceptualised within a wider cultural context, for audiences do not automatically accept the subject positions offered by the media. Central to this cultural context is the way in which society positions people in relation to crime - for people continually commute between their overlapping roles as audience and as citizen. The rise over the postwar period of the visibility of the victim as a subject position in crime narratives particularly divides the audience by gender and generation, for perceptions of real life potential victimhood (and criminality) influence preferences for and interpretations of crime media.

Two obvious but difficult issues arise in the attempt to draw on such research so as to develop a historical perspective for audience reception studies. One is epistemological: how far is it possible to obtain an insight into how audiences of the past may have interpreted media contents on the basis of audience accounts in the present? The second is ontological: is there reason to suppose that audiences have in fact changed in their relation to media contents - in this case, crime representations - over the postwar period? The second clearly depends on the first, for without evidence of past audiences, however indirect, no claims for either stasis or change are warranted. We consider these two issues below.

In attempting to extend the oral history of leisure practices to the domain of media reception,

it is problematic that oral history is itself caught between opposing arguments. On the one hand, the construction of a history 'from below' attempts to counter, or complement, the 'harder' history based on documentary evidence (e.g. Davies, 1992). But such a history risks naïve realism. On the other hand, oral history data is revisionist, for people tell stories about the past from the standpoint of the present and for the purposes of the present (Samuel and Thompson, 1990). Thus oral history interviews offer a persuasive rhetoric as well as a descriptive account, and the two may be epistemologically indistinguishable. The intention behind the present research design, based on interviewing different generations about media from several postwar periods - including for some, media from before and after their birth, was to attempt such a distinction, if possible, while the oldest generation can still tell their story.

A sceptical account (e.g. Pearson, 1983) claims that recollection cannot be distinguished from reconstruction of the past and, moreover, the impulse to reconstruct the past overtakes any attempt at recollection: each generation glorifies the period of its youth and is critical of the period of its old age. On this view, both crime and the media access powerful discourses of decline so that all talk of the past gets incorporated into an anxiety about the social and moral harm caused by mediated violence. Such a position has some validity but in wholly emphasising reconstruction it overstates the case. Let us consider whether our respondents offered recollections of the past as well as reconstructive accounts viewed through the lens of the present, while keeping in mind the motivation for the sceptical view, namely the dangers of slipping into a moral panic.

As has often been noted, the 'moral panic' discourse largely reflects the anxieties of the white middle-aged middle-classes about the apparently uncontrollable actions of 'others' in general and the youthful working classes in particular (Drotner, 1992). To the extent that we have identified consensus across generations and genders in response to past crime media, this consensus is unlikely to have been reconstructed at the point of interview, for the present-day perspectives and experiences of these groups is too divergent (particularly, how could our youngest respondents have managed this?). One way forward is to recall the oral historians' framing of this problem. They argue that people reconstruct the past from the standpoint of and for the purposes of the present. The importance of standpoint and purposes supports the notion that different generations and genders do not share a common basis for reviewing the past. Indeed, as the audience reception of present-day crime media has been shown to depend upon generational and gender differences in perspective, it seems implausible to assume that such differences would be obliterated when reviewing the past. We propose instead that the consensus identified in our interviews reflects recollection on the part of the older generations, which has then been passed down to younger generations as a received wisdom which they accept, even if they do not agree with it.

In other words, to the extent that people of different ages and gender perceive crime media similarly this is because those who first encountered particular images (e.g. the post-war generation watching 1950s cinema) establish the discourse -- contemporaneously -- for those born later and then pass it on as received wisdom to subsequent generations. For the older generation then, any consensus would be based on recollection, while for the later

generations it would be a matter of reconstruction, influenced by those who recollect the period. While difficult to establish in practice, there were indications that younger people had received it, and respected their elders' account of the past:

I think it's got worse. I mean, my, even my mother turns around and says to me now, you know, it's like, there was times when you used to be able to leave your doors open, you know? (M2: But that obviously is not now.) ... This is the nineties now, I mean, like, how many times have, like Chris or Dwayne's heard that sort of things from their parents? But, at the end of it, you watch programs like the old, the old style, sort of programs, and you realise that it, it's basically true. (man, 16-24, C2DE/225-7)

[INT: Where do you get those stories from?]

Mainly from your grandparents, 'cause they have lived years, so ... they can tell you the truth. (man, 16-24, C2DE/302-8)

The many clichés, retold by young and old, to the now-past culture of discipline and respect support the interpretation of the consensual account as referencing a ritualised process of cultural retelling. Disciplining children with a 'clip round the ear' is one example; there were also many comments about how the 'local bobby' used to be your friend, and about how you could leave your house door open with impunity:

You respected other people's property, you respected other people... You could leave your back door open, you know, you'd... you'd bob in and out of your neighbours' homes... (woman, 36-44, ABC1/224-5)

This accords with Samuel and Thompson's (1990) position that the view of myth as an impediment to doing history may be countered by arguing that popular myths have their own chronology and significance, being passed down the generations, recycled across locales, playing their own role in the construction of subsequent events: 'the mythical elements in memory, in short, need to be seen both as evidence of the past, and as a continuing historical force in the present' (Samuel and Thompson, 1990: 20). The result is to resist a simple opposition between reconstruction and recollection. Instead we distinguish between contemporaneous reception of media - where reception is always a constructive and motivated process whether conducted in the past or present - and reconstruction of past media from the perspective of the present. The former generates media interpretations which are amenable to subsequent recycling and recollection, and so may account for the observed consensus across the diverse groups. The latter, retrospective process generates some of the diversity observed, framed by the concerns of the present.

However, bearing in mind that each generation appears to adopt the interpretative frames of its youth, we have also explored whether more profound cultural shifts can be identified for audiences' responses to crime media over the postwar period. Interpreting further the responses outlined above, we tentatively identify three changes. First, a change from finding pleasure in crime media primarily for their escapist irrelevance to a concern for relevance. Here, Liebes and Katz' commuting concept becomes no longer just something audiences do

but also something they positively value; it has become part of the point of engaging with the media is that connections are made with ones' own life. For young women especially, this concern is glossed in terms of information and surveillance uses, is mainly applied to contemporary media, for there is little information value in learning about past threats and solutions.

Second, and connected with the desire for connection to one's own life is a change in judgements of realism. The current young audience preferred media which they considered realistic (including the appeal of 'just like us' soap opera characters dealing with crimes) and able to offer them information about crime risks etc. Realism for them also means fuzzy moral boundaries, complex situations, seeing both sides of an issue, unresolved endings, and being shown the physical consequences of violence. For the older audience, realism was little talked about for past media, but has been adopted as an evaluative criterion for present-day media, where it is more likely to mean that crime media are seen as having recognisable characters, everyday settings, an absence of glamour or melodrama, a concern with minor crimes, and a lack of gratuitous violence. As a result, younger audiences criticise past media for their lack of realism while older audiences criticise present media for their gratuitous violence and lack of morality.

Third, there is a change in the moral framework for interpreting media crime, from a frame of moral absolutism to contextualised relativism. With the former, the assumption is that authority is assigned according to functional roles in society. The police - on and off the screen - are expected to be good, and there is no need to ask why the criminals are wicked. As these roles are prescribed, the authorities in the 1950s (e.g. police, parents and teachers) are seen to act together:

That's right, a clip in the ear, and if you do it next time I'll tell your Dad and that was even worse. (man, 56-64, ABC1/475)

A series of symbolic reversals were enumerated by the older generations - the police get sued by the criminals, the criminals get financial compensation, the police fear the criminals, prison is comfortable, etc. These appear to have effected a shift in understanding so that a distressing reversal of how things should be, as understood by older people, becomes for younger people a legitimate relativism. For them, good and bad have become a matter of contextual judgement, less clear cut, more dependent on particular experiences. A 'good story' was exemplified by the concept of a 'mind film'. This change is captured by the way in which audiences appear to have shifted from an interest in working out *who* is the baddie and *how* s/he will be caught to an interest in working out what it *means* to be the baddie and *whether* they will be caught. This change may be in part a response to textual changes: the postwar rise of the victim in crime fiction breaks down the traditional opposition between good and bad, for the victim may be either, increasingly provides the central stimulus for the plot, and, also increasingly, becomes the point of identification for the viewer.

In different but linked ways, these three interpretative frames reflect the shift from a culture of respect to one of disrespect - and however labelled, all respondents agree that this has

occurred - and so explains why the older and younger generations evaluate this shift so differently. One respondent captures the cross-generational divergence succinctly:

But I think [now] it's sort of letting everything go a bit more, you know everything becomes more liberal and you can enjoy life a bit more, but you've also got the negative side of it, it's get more dangerous as well as more, you know, free. (man, 16-24, ABC1/1145)

If interpretive frameworks have shifted gradually over the period, this helps to explain why the oldest people feel relatively alienated from current media. One need not postulate that current crime narratives are particularly more shocking than previously but rather that first, all subsequent media are judged as failing to match the media of one's youth, and second that crime narratives have always attempted to push the boundaries of acceptability just one step further than previously defined limits of acceptability, where these limits must be seen as defined by the criteria of the younger (target) generation. The oldest generation has lived through a number of such transgressions and for them, current media are especially shocking when judged against expectations set when they were young. In the focus groups they reflected on how an image which now seems tame was shocking forty years ago (a murder in the press, seeing the knife or blood on the screen). Similarly, young people now are clearly not shocked by the routine violence in crime media which often does shock much older people, yet they too dwell on those images which, for their generation, transgress boundaries:

I'll tell you what I watched, that, um *Reservoir Dogs* and I thought that was really boring until the bit where he poured the petrol over that bloke and I was... thinking it wasn't as good as I thought... And he cut his ear off! (woman, 16-24, C2DE/503)

In this paper we have focused on the ways in which audiences may have changed in their reception of crime media. But of course, in other respects, little may have changed. People appear as likely as ever to find crime fascinating, to prefer a 'good story' which keeps them guessing, and to want to be informed about crimes in the 'real world'. In others, the historical-cultural context within which lives are lived, and the inevitable association between certain periods of time and certain phases of one's life, provides a cultural perspective, a set of concepts, frames and assumptions which serve to ground people's personal experiences and give them shape. And while these contexts frame responses to media experienced in the past, they are themselves further reconstructed according to a context in which respondents stand in various perceived relations to real-world crime in society. While disentangling the exact nature of changes in audiences' relation to media over time is complex, we hope in this paper to have advanced the argument that such a task must be attempted.

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