

# **The History of Violence: Mega Cases of Serial Murder, Self-Propelling Narratives, and Reader Engagement**

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Media coverage of serial murder is both sensational and exhaustive. This article examines the “trajectories” of several high profile serial murder cases within the Canadian news media. The murder cases identified are considered mega-murder cases because they are highly publicized and frequently presented within various media forms. There are three predominantly media driven murder cases in Canadian history, which include: the Clifford Olson case, the Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka case, and the Robert Pickton case. Overall, these cases create fear within the public, reinforce the need for increased police and police resources, exhibit how victims are selected for news stories, and replicate the good/evil dichotomy that is present in media forms. The article also reveals that reporters create cases, in the form of “dramatic articulation”

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## **INTRODUCTION**

*“Criminal homicide represents one of the most serious infractions of our moral and legal codes. For this reason, it is attributed a special symbolic status, and held to warrant a particular response from the state.” (Innes, 2003: 269)*

Few crimes elicit as significant a public response as serial murder (Hickey, 2006; Jenkins, 1994). Over the past twenty-five years in Canada, there have been three serial murder cases which have received sustained media attention and “are invested with a particular expressive content for police and public.” (Innes, 2003:243). These are, by the year in which the individuals were arrested; Clifford Olson (1981); Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka (1995); and Robert Pickton (2002). These cases have all been the subject of extensive and extended mass media coverage. Recently Soothill and colleagues (2002, 2004), and Peelo et al. (2004) have reported on an historical study of media coverage of major murder cases in the British press using the Times historical index. In this article I wish to explore the presentation of serial murder in the Canadian press, a subject area that has not prompted serious criminological research to date.

Following the argument developed by Innes (2004) I argue that coverage of this form of criminality has served several important functions in Canadian society. Innes suggested that media coverage of crime is important since it prompts societal reactions which move far beyond the actual facts of the cases. While the primary role of media reports resides in the sale of

newspapers, the important secondary role ascribed to it, that is, the production of “justice stories” as a means of permitting public review of the justice process is inherently understood (Surette, 2007; Sparks, 1992). Reports of serious crimes may also serve as the basis for moral panics and “sporadic moral crusades” (Fleming, 1981, 1987; McRobbie and Thornton, 1995) and as a launching pad for stronger intervention or punishment, as well as prompting calls for an increased policing presence in society (Chibnall, 1977; Fleming, 1981, 1987) and concomitant intrusion into the civil liberties of societal members. It can also be suggested that each of the cases above have had a profound effect on society, acting as a catalyst to widespread concerns about the cases as indicators of deep rooted ills in society. Moreover, as I have argued elsewhere (Fleming, 2006) each of these cases raised and continues to raise serious concerns regarding the ability of police services to investigate serial murder cases efficiently, and to deal with issues arising from the cases in a manner acceptable to the general public. They have also pointed towards problems with the criminal justice system, the attitudes of the criminal justice system to those Egger (2002) describes as “the less dead”, concerns regarding the safety of women and children, and the criminal justice response to pedophiles.

In these cases, and similar cases in the United States and England, journalists as well as writers have spent a great deal of time examining every aspects of what Soothill et al. (2002, 2004) term “mega murder cases”. These are defined as the “top” cases that receive the most reports annually or cumulatively over the media life of the case. Essentially this approach tracks the trajectories of cases examining the issues which either prompt or are selected by the media to highlight at specific junctures in the investigative, arrest, trial, or post-trial periods.

One of the questions which has received some attention in the literature is the issue of why homicide, as an atypical crime, receives more media coverage than other forms of offences (Fleming, 1987; Surette, 2007). As Soothill et al (2002:416) claims, “all homicides are unusual social behavior.” Recent research has demonstrated the high frequency of murder cases as national news items in America (Humphries, 1981, Fleming, 2006, Katz, 1987). In Canada however, we are faced with a geographical structure that does not tend to regularly produce national news stories focused on murder cases gathered from across the country. As a nation of ten separate provinces, news reporting of homicides is generally restricted to local and regional broadcasts confined to each province. In order to qualify as a national news item, homicides must necessarily have story elements that are considered appealing for a more widespread audience. These can include a large number of victims or suspected victims, the kidnapping and murder of a child or children, bizarre method(s) of murder or body disposal, or stories which support Innes’ conception of those which speak to broader social issues. This phenomenon has been well documented in the literature. Peelo et al. (2004) cite crimes involving strangers, very young children, a sexual element and essentially “motiveless” are more likely to be reported. Given this selection process which feeds a readership audience identified by newspapers, it has the impact of producing ideas about homicide and homicide offenders that are far removed from the occurrence of murders which occur on a daily basis (Boyd, 1988; Leyton, 1996). Fox and Levin’s (1996) article on the occurrence of mass murder demonstrated clearly that the same phenomenon occurs in the American context. While four mass murders occur every month in the United States according to their review of homicide data, the reality is that news reportage of these cases generally remains geographically isolated in the absence of the above factors.

A case that demonstrates the validity of Inne's (2004) thesis is that of Jane Creba. The December 2005 shooting death of the 15-year-old teenager on Toronto's Yonge Street in daylight hours during the Boxing Day sales was a case that elicited considerable national coverage. The case became an issue in the federal elections as a symbol of the decline of Canadian society, the rise of gang violence, a supposed lack of funding to police, and a catalyst to the passage of stronger illegal gun legislation by the federal government. A Toronto Police Services spokesperson asserted that the murder was so important that he maintained "...Toronto has finally lost its innocence" (cbc.ca). Mayor David Miller stated that less police should be behind desks. However, this case begged the question of why none of the other deaths by gun in Toronto during that year provoked a similar response, or in many cases, very little response. Given that the murder was the 78th of the year, and the 52nd by gun in 2005, why did this case spur such a strong media, political and public response? It is a question beyond the scope of the present analysis but worthy of further research.

An earlier 1981 Toronto murder case, the sexual assault and strangulation of Emmanuelle Jacques demonstrated that key elements revolving around the specific nature of the murder act, the heinous background of the murderers, the innocence of the victim, and the emotional appeal of the case separated it from similar deaths which received minimal reportage (Fleming, 1987). As another example, the kidnap/murder of a young girl, Holly Jones in 2004 received enormous publicity with the elements of stranger abduction, sexual molestation, and a vicious dismemberment of the corpse.

It is well known that murder represents a form of criminality that the news media, whether newspaper, television or the Internet considers a potential source of ongoing reportage (Cohen, 1975; Ericson, Baranek and Chan, 1987,1991; Fleming, 1981, 1987). Leyton (1996) refocused our academic attention on the concept of murder committed in everyday life extending the discussion of factors that are key to placing homicides in a social and cultural context. The question which confronts us is why cases of serial murder become enduring, forming part of an ongoing pattern of homicide reportage that extends the life of the story over years and, indeed, decades? Why do serial murder cases, the most atypical of homicides, itself an atypical crime, form a continuing source of reportage long after the details of the crime are well established in the public mind? It is this question that I wish to address in this article.

### *The Modern Age of Serial Murder*

Elsewhere I have argued that the modern age of serial murder begins with the crimes of Ted Bundy, a not unique or wholly original position (Fleming, 1996). Fox and Levin (1985) and Leyton's (1986) pioneering works on serial and mass murder set the stage for a virtual explosion in academic interest in the topic. Ted Bundy's criminal career and the extensive media focus on his crimes, trial, interaction with the F.B.I, and execution served as a model for public understanding of the emerging phenomenon of serial murder. Excellent historical research by Jenkins (1994), Hickey (2006) and others has clearly demonstrated that serial murder was neither new nor a strictly 20th century phenomenon. Prolific murderers like H.H. Holmes (Schechter, 1998); and Albert Fish (Schechter, 1990) had emerged much earlier in the United States but before the rise of contemporary mass media. The case of Fish with its elements of multiple sexual paraphilias, cannibalism, child kidnapping, sexual assault, drama and detection has

become well known since the 1990s, but was the subject of primarily local attention at the time of his apprehension. Even Ed Gein's (Schecter, 1989) case, with its elements of grave robbing, desecration of human remains, and murder did not have a trajectory of sustained media attention. It is because these cases occurred before the rise of Marshall McLuhan's (1964; 1988) global village that they did not reach the popular imagination as cases of the modern era have. The one exception remains the 1888 British case of Jack the Ripper which as Soothill et al (2002:403) assert, "few today have not heard of the late-19th century murders..."

However, the elements of the Bundy case contained the drama and story elements which meshed well with media priorities. A short list of these factors would include: (1) Bundy was young, white and handsome; (2) he killed a large number of attractive young white women over a short period of time; (3) police agencies were not able to identify him as a serial killer; (4) he appeared to have the ability to embrace the "American dream" but rejected it to go on a killing rampage; (5) he made a dramatic escape from jail in Colorado and fled to Florida where he again murdered more young women and children; (6) he was arrested on a routine traffic stop; (7) he defended himself at trial; (8) he maintained in interviews with the F.B.I. to have killed many more victims and attempted to trade the location of their remains to forestall execution; (8) he claimed days before his death that his crimes resulted from the use of pornography in a taped interview with a religious leader; (9) his death was both celebrated and condemned outside the prison walls. Bundy was the subject of several true crime accounts including Ann Rule's (1980) seminal book, *The Stranger Beside Me*, and several television movies. For readers and viewers, the foremost question appeared to be why a young man with seemingly so much promise would turn away from the American dream and kill dozens of young women? Americans had also been familiarized with the horrible reality of multiple murder in Truman Capote's (1966) book on the senseless murder of a farm family.

While the number of serial murderers identified during the three decades that have passed since Bundy's crimes has increased greatly over previous eras (Hickey, 2006) it is interesting that apparently only a very few have the requisite elements associated with the crimes or the criminal's behavior to elicit national response. Even fewer cases qualify as "mega cases" in the American context. However, this said, it would be important to establish specific benchmarks for the number of reports that would qualify cases for inclusion in this category in the United States. I have already suggested that victim counts, stranger killings, very young child victims, elements of sexuality, bizarre methods of killing victims, ability to elude police authorities over extended periods of time (The Green River Killer and The BTK killer, for decades), method of body disposal amongst other factors can be a catalyst to sustained media attention (Guillen, 2007, Holmes and Holmes, 2001). But again, only a handful of cases develop media trajectories that span years rather than months.

### *Murder for Life: Mega Canadian Serial Murder Cases*

Using Soothill et al's (2002) categorization system, three cases meet the criteria for mega cases in the Canadian context, easily claiming the mantle of "top cases". Using the Factiva search engine I identified all reports concerned with well-publicized examples of serial or mass murder cases from 1980 to 2006 reported in *The Toronto Star*. This search yielded three cases that had received enormous and continuing press coverage far beyond those reported in Soothill

et al (2002). Table 1 provides an interesting overview of the number of reports per case in comparison to other well-known mass murder and terror cases over this period.

**Table 1**  
*Reports of Serial and Mass Murder Cases in Canada, 1980-2006*

<b>SERIAL MURDER</b>			
<b>Name of Case</b>	<b>Number of Reports</b>	<b>Year of Crime/Capture</b>	<b>Avg./Year</b>
Clifford Olson	1750	1981	70
Bernardo and Homolka	5043	1993	387
Homolka only	9678	1993	744
Bernardo only	8684	1993	667
Robert Pickton	4773	2002	1193
Alan Legere	2	1990	-
<b>MASS MURDER</b>			
The Montreal Massacre	1252	1989	73
Air India Bombing	3993	1985	73
Valerie Fabrikant*	2	1992	-

Source: *Factiva –The Toronto Star*

\**Fabrikant was a Concordia Professor who murdered several colleagues in a case of mass murder*

\*\**Legere murdered three women and a priest (MacLean and Venoit, 1990; MacLean, Venoit and Waters, 1992).*

In the next section I provide a brief overview of the salient features of each case and of the factors associated with each of the histories of these cases that made them the focus of repeated media attention. My intent is to identify salient features of these cases which act as a catalyst to continuing press coverage and to place these cases in a broader cultural context which allows us to make sense of the role of these cases and hence move beyond mere reportage to making sense of the reader reaction to these cases.

*Clifford Robert Olson: The “Beast of Burnaby” 1981*

Clifford Robert Olson, a career criminal spent the vast majority of his adult life in prison. In the summer of 1981 he was arrested and charged in the murders of 11 children in British Columbia. Until recently Olson was commonly identified as Canada’s first serial murderer. However, in 2004, Vronsky (2004:249-258) identified a previously unknown perpetrator, Peter Woodcock. His case provides an interesting contrast to that of Olson. In 1957 the murders of three children: a seven-year-old boy, a four year old girl and a nine year old boy were linked to Woodcock, who had a history of mental instability and expressed hostility to other children in interviews with the Children’s Aid Society. Woodcock’s crimes were not widely reported, and as

Vronsky indicated, are not listed in any previously written book on serial killers. There are a number of factors that likely contributed to this lack of interest by the public and the press. First, these were a series of crimes committed before the rise of a global media. They were identified in a highly conservative era in Canada where public knowledge of crimes of this nature was limited in comparison to today. There was no “true crime” book industry such as that which exists today. Woodcock’s crimes arose not from the mind of a calculated killer, but rather were the work of a mentally unstable individual (Vronsky, 2004: 251), thus he was viewed as “mad” rather than “bad”. This permitted the press and the public to categorize this case as tragic while portraying the murderer as an individual in need of help. The murders did not have an apparent sexual motive, a major factor, I would argue, in those cases which have attained mega status in Canada. Finally, Vronsky fits well the disorganized murder typology developed by Ressler et al (1988). His crime scenes reflected sexual ignorance (there was no attempt at sexual intercourse) rather he defecated beside the bodies. The bodies had been undressed and redressed reflecting the killers need to position victims. Pennies were ritualistically deposited in the vicinity of the bodies. Woodcock also bit the victims. The case excited very little media attention and passed into the annals of Canadian homicide virtually unknown.

In contrast, the Olson case (Mulgrew, 1990) both initially contained, and throughout its trajectory in the media, reflected several compelling and unusual case factors which made it appealing to reporters seeking audiences with a “recipe knowledge” of the case, in other words a basic understanding of the case features, and readers. These features can be readily identified. (1) Olson murdered eleven known victims. He lured them from public locations with offers of summer jobs and then brutally murdered them. (2) The victims were children (some teenagers). They were buried in forested areas where they had been killed. (3) There was a sexual element to the cases. (4) Olson plead guilty at the beginning of his trial to avoid evidence regarding sexual interference with his victims from being heard in court. (5) The Vancouver Police and R.C.M.P. were unable to coordinate their investigative efforts to identify the murderer of a growing number of children. (6) Olson killed while under surveillance. (7) The Attorney General of British Columbia authorized a payment of \$100,000 to Olson’s wife in order to locate the victims’ bodies. (8) Olson wrote to the families of his victims about the details of the crimes. (9) Olson was moved from Kingston Penitentiary after he threatened to escape and kill students while receiving medical treatment. (10) Olson sought early parole consideration after serving fifteen years of his sentence under Section 745 of the Canadian Criminal Code. (11) Olson retained a prominent attorney the late Melvin Belli. (12) Olson claimed to have knowledge of the Green River Murders case. (13) Olson offered to lead police to the graves of additional victims after a period of time in prison. He was flown to the Vancouver area but the trip yielded no victims’ graves.

*Paul Bernardo and Karla Homolka “The Ken and Barbie Killers” 1993*

Bernardo and Homolka were first identified as serial killers in 1993 when Karla attended at hospital with pronounced black eyes, claiming to be a victim of a beating by her husband, Paul. Bernardo would soon be arrested as the “Scarborough Rapist,” an individual responsible for a series of brutal attacks on women leaving late night buses. But it was Karla’s confession that her husband was responsible for the deaths of two teenagers, Lesley Mahaffy and Kristen French that first alerted the Green Ribbon Task Force assigned to these murders to the identity of the perpetrator. Homolka also claimed that he was responsible for the death of her own younger

sister who had been drugged, sexually assaulted and eventually died in the basement of her parents' home in suburban Toronto on Christmas night, the victim of animal tranquilizer secured by Karla (Williams, 1999, 2003; Burnside and Cairns, 1995; Davey, 1994).

Despite an intensive forensic investigation of their rented home in St. Catharines, Ontario, a small town located an hour's drive outside of Toronto, no compelling evidence had emerged which would ensure the conviction of Bernardo. Karla struck a plea bargain with the Crown prosecutor, being permitted to enter a plea of manslaughter, arguing that she too was a victim of her husband. Adopting the battered-wife syndrome defense, she claimed she had not voluntarily participated in the three murders. Shortly afterwards police uncovered videotapes of the sexual assault and torture of the victims, lasting over several days. Homolka figured prominently in the videos, engaging in sexual acts with the victims, and torturing them. The case was reminiscent of that of Ian Brady and Myra Hindley, the "Moors Murderers" who as young lovers tortured and killed several child victims recording the pleas of one victim for help on a tape recorder (Fleming, 1996).

The Bernardo/Homolka case like that of Olson contained or has developed compelling issues that elicit a strong reader response during its history. These can be identified as: (1) Bernardo and Homolka had the appearance of "normal" young persons. The "Ken and Barbie" profile made the extremity of their acts even more difficult to understand for readers. It also generated fear since it impressed upon the public that serial murderers may appear to be quite normal, not the monsters of fantasy. (2) Child victims disappeared from the area of St. Catherine's Ontario in daylight hours giving rise to a concerted police-media campaign to find a subject vehicle ("a white Camaro"). Several failed abductions of children and women occurred during this period which were attributed to Bernardo and put more pressure on police to find the killer. The dismembered body of Lesley Mahaffy was found during this period, and finally that of Kristen French, whose body had been shorn of its long hair by Homolka. (3) Homolka's claim of being a victim of "battered wife syndrome" and her subsequent plea bargain which reduced her charge to manslaughter in exchange for her testimony against her husband (Williams, 2003:311-318). (4) The discovery of videos recording the torture and deaths of victims after the plea deal had been struck which would have negated the need for the deal and resulted in Homolka being charged with first degree murder. This also raised serious questions concerning lack of police inter-agency cooperation, the conduct of the inquiry, the competence of the forensic investigation of the Bernardo/Homolka home, and the need for the plea bargain (Campbell Inquiry, 1996; Williams, 2003:181-212) (5) The publication ban imposed in the case that was broken by media outlets and internet news providers. (6) The sexual nature of the crimes and the deviant sexual activities of Bernardo and Homolka during their marriage. (7) The case involved the murder of Homolka's sister. (8) The existence of video "souvenirs" which recorded the torture and deaths of the victims. (9) The callous attitudes towards victims exhibited by Homolka. (10) Continuing pictures released showing Homolka enjoying parties in prison. (11) Continuing reports of Homolka receiving her university degree while in prison. (12) The focus on Homolka's release from prison, as well as attempts to remove all restrictive conditions, despite the assurance of Ontario's legal apparatus that this would not occur. (13) Homolka's appearance in a nationally televised interview pleading for the media to leave her alone and to argue that she posed no danger to society. (14) Reports of Homolka's "new life" in Quebec.

Interestingly, Bernardo has almost disappeared from the public forum superseded by a continuing media focus on Homolka as an exemplar of what is wrong with the justice system, the inability of police to effectively solve the case and thus ensure Karla would not have been released from prison and critiques of our “soft” approach to dangerous criminals.

*Robert Pickton: The Pig Farm Murders*

As far back as 1978 prostitutes working Vancouver’s notorious downtown east side, the poorest area in Canada, had been reported missing. It can be argued that sex trade workers who ply their trade on the streets may have loose connections with society, their families and friends, are highly mobile, and may move locations without notifying anyone. However, by the early years of the new millennium, the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (R.C.M.P.) estimated that there were 144 women considered missing or murdered in the province of British Columbia, Canada. During the period of 1995-98 Kim Rossmo found that the number of incidents of reporting missing prostitutes was “abnormally high” (CBC News Online, 2006). While relatives of the missing women pleaded with police to investigate the disappearances as the work of a serial killer, the police response was to discount this possible explanation. Both the local Vancouver Police and the regional R.C.M.P. were warned by Rossmo that “...a serial killer was a work in the Vancouver area and (he) was ignored.”

On February 7, 2002 the Missing Women Task Force announced that they were investigating the 14-acre pig farm of Pickton. On February 22, 2002 Pickton was arrested and formally charged with the murders of several women. During the next several years the R.C.M.P. undertook a massive archeological dig at the farm in order to try to find evidence connected to women reported missing. The effort would eventually cost over \$70 million since forensic investigators had to excavate virtually the entire farm to a depth of several meters. Eventually, Pickton was charged in the murders of 26 victims reflecting the DNA, identification and forensic materials retrieved from the site. Pickton is being tried however on only six charges of first-degree murder due to the evidentiary difficulties inherent in proceeding on 26 counts (Yahoo News, August 5, 2006).

The appeal of the Pickton case which, as Table 1 illustrates, has been generating reports far in excess of the other two under examination in this article is found in the following features: (1) Women literally “disappeared” from the streets of Vancouver for over two decades. (2) There was substantial public pressure on police from family, and from experts in serial murder to concede that a serial murder was operating, although this did not occur. Innes (2003:243) in commenting on “cause celebre” homicide cases in England notes that, “criticisms of police investigations have involved the media exposing the dissatisfaction of surviving relatives with how the police are handling the enquiry.” (3) The women’s remains began to be found on a pig farm invoking readers’ fears concerning strangers, and the unspeakable horrors associated with the women’s deaths. (4) The case involved the largest forensic investigation on Canadian soil in history. Little in the way of remains was discovered by the investigators. (Girard, Daniel, 2004). (5) A false report that human remains may have been sold as meat from the farm further inflamed media and public interest in the case (AP Worldstream, March 10, 2004). (6) The case yielded more murder victims (27) than any other case in Canadian history. (7) A reporting ban has been imposed on the trial despite media complaints. (8) There was considerable criticism of



the police for their inability to solve this case and save lives at a much earlier stage in the investigation. It underscored Egger's (2002) thesis that the police generally invest less investigative resources in the "less dead", or marginalized persons. Recognizing this, serial killers often pick sex trade workers as victims. (9) There are obvious sexual elements to the case.

While the alleged murders in this case do not include child victims, its "sensational" (Dietz, 1986) nature including the large number of victims, the unclear manner of their deaths, and the failures of police to protect and solve the disappearances of so many women ignited fears concerning the safety of women in our society. It is also serving as has the other two cases as a form of narrative about what is wrong with society, the police and the Canadian justice system.

### *Identification, Engagement and Self-Propelling Narratives*

Research on the media's presentation of crime has been illustrated to serve the interests of media organizations, which are ultimately economic in nature (Cohen and Young, 1973). Crime news is predominantly constructed as entertainment rather than news, calculated to draw the reader into identification with the victims of crime, even if those victims are often reduced to numbers, or depersonalized. It may also serve less easy to discover ideological purposes (Fishman, 1978), which I explore later in this article.

A good deal of our focus in reporting on homicides is almost entirely on the offender across media forms. Offenders receive monikers and their lives and crimes are analyzed in minute detail while victims are generally presented as vulnerable and worthy of reader sympathy. This applies even when victims are drawn from the marginalized groups which typically constitute targets of serial killers including prostitutes, visible minorities, and gay men (Hickey, 2006; Egger, 2002; Holmes and Holmes, 2001). While it may be difficult for various portions of news audiences to identify with the victims, they are certainly capable of identifying with their suffering and violent deaths.

When the victims are children, as in the case of the victims of Olson and Bernardo/Homolka there is undeniably a widespread identification with the victims, their innocence and vulnerability which provides an opportunity for readers to experience various effects which propel engagement with the story. As Guillen (2007: 27-37) instructs us, "reporters... have become literary experts at crafting narratives that capture the emotion of the moment or the depth of the pain... elicit(ing) sympathy and empathy from the public... heavy on a victim's pain, tears and travesties." But to attain these ends reporters have also become experts at intruding during grief, psychologically intruding on victims' families, intruding on the characters of the victims by "painting a one-dimensional picture" focusing on negative aspects of the victims' lives, intruding into private matters (Guillen, 2007: 27-37).

This engagement, I argue, is used by news reporters through the medium of repetitive accounts of salient features of the cases coupled with a focus on victims to re-engage the reader creating the long term trajectory of the case. Variants of this phenomenon have long been recognized in the extant literature in the field where the practice of reporters using key words, ideas and symbols in isolated or recurring crime stories is used as a method of re-engagement (Fleming, 1981). The superficial and simplified nature of the majority of crime reporting with its

unending focus on addressing or creating dramatic elements in crime stories is intended to produce a number of responses in audiences. At their base level, crime stories associated with the three serial murder cases under examination have several intended impacts.

First, they create fear of others in society. While the number of reported serial killers that can be identified in Canada since 1900 numbers only 9, stories emanating from the cases considered here map the world of unknown strangers who enter the world of the vulnerable and engulf them in a world of torture and death. That police seem powerless to prevent deaths is the message that clearly emerges from coverage of these cases. Innes (2003:241-243) has remarked on the capacity of the media to both cooperate with police in trying to identify perpetrators, and also to “turn” on the police when there are “unsuccessful investigations”. Women disappeared in Vancouver and were never seen again over a period of over twenty years. Olson kidnapped and murdered eleven known child victims, snatching them from the Port Coquitlam area. He was able to boast that he had “solved” the crimes since without his assistance the bodies his victims would not have been discovered by police. Bernardo and Homolka seemed able to elude police. Their murder of Tammy Homolka, and the inability of police to discern foul play telegraphed a note about police forensic abilities contrary to that portrayed in the television program CSI (Williams, 2003).

The audience is also engaged through attempts to portray police in a manner which reinforces the need for increased policing and resources to ensure that serial killers will not emerge again. This is in sharp contrast to the findings of *The Campbell Inquiry* (1996), which cited significant problems in police investigative procedures in the Bernardo/Homolka case.

Engagement with the audience also emerges through the very process of victim selection in each of these cases. Women and children are the victims which emerge from these three cases. Audiences are encouraged to “look beyond” the lifestyle choices of prostitutes and thus they are re-cast in terms of personal information in an attempt to “humanize” these victims, while at the same time emphasizing the negative components of their lives. Children are ultimately understood as innocent and their appearance as victims incite feelings of anger and revenge in readers. The status of children is not invented by journalists but stories are, again, written to highlight the minutiae of victims’ lives to make them accessible to readers as individuals. There is certainly a clear and apparent shock value to these stories. They can create concerns about the potential for victimization utilizing the “knowledge gap” which separates readers from the world of the serial murderer (Fleming, 1981). In the absence of direct experience of serial murderers audiences search for information, clues and cues which can alert them to potential danger in day-to-day life. Given that the academic and true crime literature is replete with evidence that indicates that neither the intimate partners of serial murderers, nor victims who have escaped death at their hands can or could identify these individual based upon physical characteristics, placement in the urban environment, or pre-homicidal behaviors.

As Stuart Hall et al (1978) have argued crime stories have a duality which presents a good/evil dichotomy as parts of a whole story. The Olson, Bernardo/Homolka and Pickton stories possess these dual elements in a highly understandable form. Readers are both fascinated and repelled by stories of unimaginable pain and tragedy. Over the long term trajectory of these cases, readers are constantly re-introduced to familiar terrain, moving with the journalist through

the agony of the discovery of bodies, to the suffering and anguish of victim's families, through police investigative failures, the prison behaviors of convicted killers, their attempts to obtain early release and parole, and in the case of Homolka, post prison efforts to move beyond supervision and scrutiny. In constantly returning to the initial foundation of the cases rooted in violence and tragedy, reporters move beyond simple reporting case facts to a process articulated by Innes (2004) wherein "dramatic articulations" are created. The net effect of these crimes stories is to unleash fears about "the forces of disorder". Readers are compelled to consider issues regarding unstated dangers and fears about the nature of society. (Innes, 2003, 2004). Whether the serial murder cases under consideration in this article reach the level of Innes' "signal crimes" with the power to provoke changes in belief systems or the adoption of life changes embracing protective technology is beyond the scope of this article. However, there is at least one example which supports his contention. In the wake of the murders of the Bernardo/Homolka victims, some 6,000 stun guns were sold in the St. Catharines area in a one-week period (Fleming, 1998).

A review of the number of reports of mega cases of serial murder cases over their trajectory yields interesting data concerning news coverage which deserve consideration. Comparing both gross numbers of reports and yearly averages, it is the Pickton case which yields the greatest number of reports per year than either the Olson or Bernardo/Homolka cases. The Pickton case (4,473 reports) has produced some 1,193 reports per year over the period 2002-2006. In contrast the Olson case (1750 reports) has produced 70 reports per year over a twenty-five year period, while the Bernardo/Homolka (5043 reports) case has yielded 387 reports on average over the past thirteen years. Individually Bernardo has produced 8684 reports since 1993 while coverage of Homolka has yielded 9678 reports. When further refined to reflect headline stories only, the following number of reports occurred for each of the cases contained in Table 1; Air India (711); Homolka (524); Bernardo (169); Bernardo and Homolka (32); The Montreal Massacre (173); Leger (0); Fabrikant (0). There is no doubt that these represent Canada's top murder cases over the past quarter century.

The cases discussed in this article are, far more than any others which have occurred in Canada, part of "our general knowledge of murder" (Soothill et al, 2002:404). They have a life in the public sphere which extends well beyond the factual recounting of the details of the murders, propelling and being propelled as moral cautionary tales about the nature of Canadian society, homicide and the failures of policing and the criminal justice system. These "socially produced meanings" (Innes, 2003: 270) are largely constructed by the public through information created by the media. As accounts of victims' lives, they exploit human tragedy, again and again, revisiting the suffering of the "living victims" of serial murder (family and friends of victims) as they continuously find issues within and beyond the prison life of offenders to bring to light. In this sense, the initial components of the crimes, with their tremendous shock value, give the cases a self-propelling quality which is exploited by reporters. As we further explore these cases and their impacts, particularly the wider cultural impacts they generate and the reasons why they have extended lives our knowledge of societal approaches to homicide will increase. It is through the pursuit of this inquiry that we will become more aware of how as a society we make sense of senseless homicide.

## ENDNOTE

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