The fact in the fiction: An examination of perception vs. reality in the field of forensic anthropology, and the ‘CSI effect’

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ABSTRACT
Television has demonstrated an impact on the way we perceive and understand the things with which we are unfamiliar. This research examines the impact of watching crime shows on jurors and the public, and how watching television portrayals may affect these jurors and the public’s understanding of forensic science, specifically forensic anthropology, and the role it plays in court proceedings. This research analyzes the stereotypes and misconceptions that result from learning about the field through shows like *Bones* and *CSI*, compares them to the realities of the field, and examines the way in which those stereotypes may influence jurors’ expectations and decisions in a trial setting.

WHAT IS A CRIME SHOW?
A crime show, or crime procedural, follows a generalized format that can be used to describe television programs like *CSI*. These shows are characterized by the following: a murder or other serious crime takes place, and a team of forensic experts is called to investigate. The team, a group of highly skilled generalists, centers its investigation around abundant forensic evidence, and uses things like DNA to follow leads. Each episode ends with an arrest, and usually a confession, neatly wrapping up even the most complex crime in under an hour.

FORENSIC ANTHROPOLOGY AND FORENSIC SCIENCE ON TV
Crime shows dominate primetime ratings, evidencing the widespread impact of these shows on the American public. Millions of viewers watch crime shows every week, and many claim these shows as their main, sometimes only, source of information on forensic science and forensic anthropology. These shows may lead viewers to believe forensic science is more accurate and accessible than it really is, and may cause jurors to put too much emphasis on forensic evidence at trial.

Out of 104 survey respondents:
• 68% listed TV as a source of information about forensic anthropology
• 52% listed TV as their only source of information

• *NCIS* has been named America’s #1 show since 2009
• *NCIS* averaged more viewers in the 2012-13 season than the Super Bowl (21.48 million)
• *CSI* has been named the most-watched show in the world five times, most recently in 2012

Survey responses tended toward less familiarity with forensic anthropology, and higher expectations of the role forensic evidence at trial.

METHODS AND RESULTS
I created a survey to gather data on crime show viewership and expectations for forensic evidence in criminal trials, using both people who had previously served on a jury, and those who have not been jurors. The survey received 117 responses from people across the United States. 87% were female, and 89% reported either some college, completed college, or an advanced degree.

Those who had previous jury experience (both civil and criminal) were asked how much evidence they expected to see before the trial began.

Those who have not served on a jury were asked how much evidence they would expect to see in a criminal trial.

CASE STUDIES
The O.J. Simpson and Casey Anthony murder cases act as two unusually high-profile cases demonstrating the role that forensic evidence played at trial, both before and after the *CSI* phenomenon began. The defense in the O.J. Simpson case fought against a mountain of forensic evidence by taking advantage of the fact that jury had very little knowledge of what forensic evidence was, and the role it played in solving the murders of Nicole Brown Simpson and Ronald Goldman. Casey Anthony’s defense team took advantage of the fact that the medical examiner could not determine cause of Anthony’s daughter’s death. The defense team exploited this uncertainty to create reasonable doubt that a homicide actually occurred. The Anthony defense exploited the crime show fantasy of a case based entirely on unimpeachable forensic evidence, basing their defense on the fact that the prosecution presented an almost entirely circumstantial case. This was not enough to convince a jury that would only be satisfied by hard evidence.

CONCLUSIONS
There are many sources of information about the criminal justice system and forensic science. It is impossible to point to a single facet of the media and credit it with causing a fundamental change in juror behavior and expectations. Jurors may be influenced by the news media, by technology, and even by attorneys who warn jurors of the CSI Effect before a trial.

However, it does appear that the CSI Effect affects attorneys, police, and criminals more than it does jurors. Criminals use techniques from crime shows to destroy evidence, police collect more physical evidence, and attorneys consider television viewing habits when choosing juries. Further study should be done to determine how crime shows impact the rest of the criminal justice system.

REFERENCES
Ramsland, K. (2013, Feb 21). The defense team’s advantage of the fact that the prosecution presented an almost entirely circumstantial case. This was not enough to convince a jury that would only be satisfied by hard evidence.

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