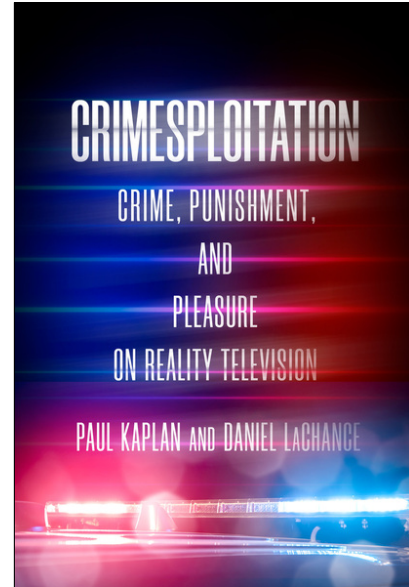


Paul Kaplan and Daniel LaChance, **Crimesploitation: Crime, Punishment, and Pleasure on Reality Television**, Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2022, 180 pp., \$25.00 (paperback).

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Crime and mass media have a longstanding connection. Depictions of criminal justice issues never cease to captivate audiences, and audiences' relationships with these media depictions are becoming increasingly complex. Paul Kaplan and Daniel LaChance's **Crimesploitation: Crime, Punishment, and Pleasure on Reality Television** zeroes in on a reality television subgenre that promises audiences "unfiltered access to scenes of crime and punishment" (p. 1). By examining the intricate dynamics between crime-related reality television and the U.S. criminal justice system, the authors illuminate the broader cultural, social, and ideological implications of what they term "crimesploitation"—a portmanteau that combines "true crime" texts with "exploitation" films. Ultimately, they probe this subgenre to reveal that such programming cannot be brushed aside as mere entertainment but rather should be recognized for its power to influence public perception and reinforce the neoliberal carceral state.



Kaplan and LaChance effectively achieve this objective by combining in-depth theoretical analysis with thorough case studies of popular reality television shows such as *America's Most Wanted*, *Cops*, and *To Catch a Predator*. For example, the authors note that crimesploitation programs depict "a kaleidoscope array of deviants" (pp. 4–5) to tap into societal anxieties and reinforce stereotypes about what criminality looks like. However, this subgenre also presents an alternative to the anxiety-inducing nature of other media coverage of crime: "If the nation's politicians and journalists stoked fear of crime, crimesploitation offered Americans a way to replace their anxiety with different, more pleasurable feelings" (p. 19). Specifically, crimesploitation allows viewers to experience a sense of superiority over the criminals depicted through some shows (e.g., *Cops*) and, at times, gives viewers the illusion of participation in justice through shows that invite audience participation (e.g., *America's Most Wanted*).

As made clear throughout the book and at the outset of this review, public fascination with crime and punishment is not new. However, the authors present compelling arguments as to how this fascination has only deepened in the age of reality television. The authors draw clear parallels between crimesploitation and earlier forms of crime-related media, such as exploitation films that "pretended to have a pedagogical purpose" (p. 4). Through this analysis, they emphasize that although the medium has evolved, the exploitative nature of these representations has remained consistent. The book's analysis is particularly relevant in the current sociopolitical climate, where social justice issues such as police brutality, racial inequality, and mass incarceration are at the forefront of public discourse. Critically, the authors argue that crimesploitation not only reflects these societal issues but actively contributes to their

perpetuation by offering a distorted view of crime and justice that aligns with the values of the neoliberal carceral state. As they contend, this subgenre often reinforces neoliberal carceral state ideologies by depicting crime as a pervasive threat that requires constant surveillance and punishment (pp. 9–11). As such, this book is a timely intervention in ongoing debates about media representation and its individual and societal impacts.

Notably, Kaplan and LaChance expand their analysis beyond reality television programming that casts criminals in a unidimensional, negative light. They bring in additional crime-related reality television shows as case studies, such as *Lockup*, *Lockdown*, and *Dog the Bounty Hunter*. However, the authors ultimately conclude that these “humanizing portrayals of inmates” on such programs “do little to undermine the logic and practice of harsh punishment”; in fact, “such messages work to make harsh punishment more justifiable, more meaningful, and even more satisfying to the public” (p. 73). To achieve this effect, such shows represent incarceration as a mechanism of rehabilitation. Punishment is portrayed as “doing good,” not just for society but also for those who are punished. These types of media representations ignore the realities of a dehumanizing carceral system, and ultimately, “by appealing to viewers’ progressive instincts, crimesploitation exploits its viewers as well as its subjects” (p. 89). This critical point underscores the subgenre’s dual nature of manipulating not just the on-screen participants but also the audiences that consume such skewed portrayals.

These wide-ranging arguments about the media effects of crimesploitation will not come as a surprise to media studies scholars. However, for those in other fields, the book sometimes presumes a level of prior knowledge of communication science that might be a barrier. This is worth noting because academics and students in other fields, such as criminology, sociology, and cultural studies, would benefit from reading this book. For these individuals from other fields, I recommend pairing this book with an introductory primer on media effects. Of all the potential academic audiences, this book is best suited for graduate courses exploring the intersection of media and crime. Moreover, the book’s critical analysis also makes it relevant to journalists, media producers, and policymakers interested in understanding how media shapes cognitions, emotions, attitudes, and behaviors related to crime and justice. The accessible writing style, coupled with the authors’ rigorous analysis, ensures that a broader audience can engage with its insights.

While this book builds on existing scholarship in media studies and criminology, it distinguishes itself by focusing specifically on the genre of reality television as a site of ideological production. The book’s analysis of the “new transmission and dissemination technologies” (p. 5) that have amplified the reach and impact of crimesploitation offers fresh insights into the media’s role in shaping public perceptions of crime. Moreover, the authors are astutely aware of how new and emerging technologies will continue to reshape the subgenre in ways that could not be fully understood at the time of their book’s publication. As they acknowledge in their epilogue, “perhaps the most significant development in the recent cultural history of crimesploitation has been the rise of true crime podcasts, a profitable and growing media form” (p. 123). Indeed, true crime dominates the contemporary podcasting landscape, thereby offering audiences a seemingly endless array of messages about crime, punishment, and justice. Moreover, this expands crimesploitation audiences because podcasts do not have the traditional access barriers that other forms of media do; they are generally free and easily accessible. Although it is not possible to fully predict how

podcasting will impact the crimesploitation subgenre, the authors' contention that "crime stories seem more 'up for grabs' in the podcast universe than in the television universe" (p. 124) is a noteworthy reminder about media's ongoing evolution.

In short, this book is a critical and timely work that sheds light on the darker side of reality television. At first blush, the genre of reality television, from *American Idol* to *Keeping Up with the Kardashians*, might invoke images of more trivial topics than crime. However, this genre, like all forms of media, is populated by ample depictions of crime. Even Kim Kardashian has increased visibility around criminal justice reform. As audiences of true crime continue to grow, it is imperative that ethical implications and potential media effects are not ignored. This book provides a nuanced analysis of how crimesploitation programs reflect and reinforce both individual and societal attitudes toward crime, punishment, and justice. As such, the book is not only a powerful commentary on why reality television is more than entertainment but also serves as an invaluable contribution to the fields of media studies, criminology, and cultural studies. It challenges readers to consider the broader implications of consuming crime and punishment for enjoyment, and calls for a more critical engagement with the media we consume.

In the end, Kaplan and LaChance suggest that the future of crimesploitation may hinge not on "sympathy for the exploited but on empathy with them" (p. 125). This shift from a detached enjoyment of others' pain and punishment to a more empathetic engagement with the realities of crime and justice could signal a potential transformation in how audiences interact with this subgenre. Granted, it would be a fool's errand to argue that one book is enough to overhaul audience engagement with such a wide-ranging subgenre. However, it serves as a foundational first step, and I exhort my fellow educators to use this book as they train their students to be critical consumers of media. Whether or not such a transformation ultimately occurs, *Crimesploitation* provides an essential framework for understanding the cultural and ideological underpinnings of crime-related reality television and its broader societal impacts.