

Nigel Atkin

Crime, Technology, and Media



The hit television show about crime scene investigation—*CSI*—follows the classic formula of many other cop shows.

An individual (usually male) policeman operates independently, with a very large, dominant, and iconic American city as his backdrop.

He is very intelligent and usually supported by a crack backup team and the latest technology.

CSI Miami and *CSI New York* are the latest platforms for this reassuring formula, which hasn't changed much from *Dagnet*, *Streets of San Francisco*, *Miami Vice*, and countless others over the past 6 decades.

The formats might not have changed much, but the technology—the real star of the show—has.

Many people seem enamored by the *CSI* shows and place a great deal of trust in the technology they showcase. This is causing forensic professionals—our regular police, the courts, attorneys, and even criminals—some second thoughts about crime, technology, and media.

Technology's Twin: Propaganda

The late French philosopher Jacques Ellul understood how the technology of the mass media exerts control over human destiny. He describes technology as having a twin—propaganda—and used that term when he wrote about both commercial and political communication.

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Public expectations of individuals in the crime-solving business and justice-policy fields are exceedingly higher than the realities of those in their respective professions. Recent trials of individuals accused of mass murder, bombings, war crimes, fraud, and identity theft all indicate there is a great chasm between the images we consume nightly on *CSI* and the abilities, time, and budgets that support our local gendarmeries, our federales, lawyers, and judges.

It is difficult living up to the speed, intelligence, science, and success portrayed in popular TV

images. To many, this perception is reality, as Walter Lippmann noted in his comments of mass media and propaganda in the 1920s.

In most cases, our police forces and the experts who support juried and judged convictions and defences do admirable work as they adjust to the transparency of the sea of change in technology and public assumptions. There are notable public exceptions in dubious pathology and bad detective work.

As we depart the industrial age into the information age, some assumptions must be replaced. New technology, say of DNA, is proving the innocence of countless individuals wrongly convicted by yesterday's methods.

For society, *CSI* is a double-edged sword. We consume more and wondrous technology on television. Thinking it is ever-present and readily available can have consequences. This requires some critical thought.

McLuhan's Four Laws of Media

Canadian media guru Marshall McLuhan's book, *Four Laws of Media*, offers insight into the context and consequences of new both new technology and media.

In his extensive study of "media," McLuhan developed a useful series of

questions that professionals and lay people alike can apply, to understand the effect of new technology. He developed a systematic process of four questions that can be applied to any new product or service.

These relatively simple questions can be used to learn more about the consequences of police and forensic tools and many other things.

Consider asking the following generic questions about aspects of using DNA as evidence or the use of Tasers or Facebook or even Global Positioning Satellite (GPS) technology. Or, ask the questions about the latest police shows.

1. What does it **enhance** or intensify?
2. What does it displace or render **obsolete**?
3. What does it **retrieve** that was previously obsolesced?
4. What does it become, produce, or **reverse** into, when pressed to an extreme?

Think of the car enhancing transportation, obsolescing the horse, retrieving romance, and when pushed to an extreme, reversing into gridlock and pollution.

In the accelerating rate of change we face daily, these questions can be useful in predicting both expectations and in managing consequences. They are also fun to ask yourself when watching *CSI* or investing or reading the news.

For more information, see the original 1988 University of Toronto Press publication, *Laws of Media: The New Science*, by Marshall and Eric McLuhan. If you use Google to look this up, make sure you use the Four Laws of Media on it. ▲

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