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TO CATCH *WHO?* MORAL PANICS IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION MEDIA

A THESIS PRESENTED IN THE COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES AT GEORGIA STATE UNIVERSITY

by

CRYSTAL L. BAKER

under the direction of Susan Talburt

ABSTRACT

My thesis looks at the creation of moral panics surrounding childhood, sexuality, and media proliferation of "stranger danger," in American culture. I have chosen to analyze the television program "To Catch a Predator" to illustrate the ways in which these "stranger danger" narratives are related to childhood sexual moral panics and how these two phenomena work to encourage viewership and consumerism in American culture. The exacerbation of "predator" moral panics in reality television maintains the fear of *invasion of secure suburban space* largely due to the portrayal of African American men as threatening and/or violent within "To Catch a Predator's" narrative.

INDEX WORDS: Moral Panics, Predator, Television, Media, "To Catch a Predator"

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2011

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Georgia State University

December 2011

DEDICATION

To my parents: from the time I was very young, you taught me to value education, love to read, to always try my best, and to reach for my dreams. Your constant love, support, and encouragement have gotten me to this point. To Eric: your patience with me through this process has been incredibly valuable. You are the best and most supportive husband and friend that anyone could ask for. To Granny: you inspired me to love the smell of libraries, enjoy learning, and aspire to graduate studies. To those two people who helped me most through the spring of 2009 (you know who you are): you will remain my heroes always. I love all of you so much. This is for all of you.

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No one is immune to the influence of visual culture in today's media-saturated society. We all watch television shows and movies, read magazines and newspapers, and surf the internet to varying degrees. As a ubiquitous part of our society, the media remain an influential part of the cultural zeitgeist. The media are equally a site of positive innovation and technological advancement, as well as a site of negative images, impossible standards, and consumerism. My research looks at these issues, as well as the creation of moral panics surrounding childhood, sexuality, and media proliferation of "stranger danger," or fear of sexual abuse committed by strangers (Briggs, 1991, p. 14). In my thesis, I elucidate the ties between existing child-predator moral panics and what has been termed the "media-industrial complex."

The term "media industrial complex" was first used by Michael Wayne in his article, "Post-Fordism, Monopoly Capitalism, and Hollywood's Media Industrial Complex," to explain the ways in which multinational media conglomerates affect public opinion regarding military, global, and media conflict (2003, p. 90). The media-industrial complex has been explained as a paradigm for manufacturing fear and consumption among viewing audiences. The media industrial complex is also related to the idea of *secure suburban space* within the framework of reality television. Suburban "ideals" often support the propensity toward panic in small, frequently planned community spaces by increasing fear of strangers and "outsiders." Studies of the media-industrial complex have increased in the past several decades due to the rising awareness of the system of manipulation exercised by television media popularity of television and film media. For the purpose of this work, I unpack moral panics, discuss the media-industrial complex and its role in current popular culture, and trouble the notion of "the outsider" that viewers have come to dread due to the increase in the fear narrative within reality TV.

The trend of harmful media-constructed consumerism is especially apparent in the sphere of reality television. Reality television is pervasive and its consequences are as widespread as the media outlet itself. One of the most interesting and disturbing examples of reality television comes in the form of a series on *Dateline NBC* entitled "To Catch a Predator." It seems clear from the content of this show that the media first creates the image of the pedophile and then punishes the suspected "predators" in full view of the American public (Hunter, 2008, p. 352; Stossell, 2007). The creation of the pedophile presents many problems within the scope of reality television; but more importantly, it holds larger societal implications. Thus, if we as viewers reinforce the construction of an archetypal "monster" (e.g., the "predator"), it seems that we cease to question the implications of naming the panic in this particular way. Essentially, we then consent to the construction of the predator moral panic and accept it as Truth. In this way, "To Catch a Predator" is one of the best examples of this enabling of the monster/predator narrative in recent memory.

"To Catch a Predator" presents adult men who are led to believe that they are chatting online with minors; these "minors" are actually adult undercover members of the online watchdog organization called "Perverted Justice." After the man and the undercover agent arrange a meeting, police officers are waiting at that location to arrest the adult male and charge him with an attempt to solicit sex from a minor (Sharenov, 2008, p. 21; Stelter, 2007). The construction of the show and motivation behind its creation are closely related to the contemporary perception of the "problem of pedophilia" within our culture. The panics created around pedophilia are complex in nature and raise multiple questions about the media's creation of certain subject positions, both those who are meant to be protected (children), as well as those they are meant to be protected from ("sexual predators"). These subject positions are often

presented as media images that are framed in a way that makes viewers believe that "stranger danger" and victimization of children are constant threats. The media circulate images in ways that are often not only sensational, but also harmful to many television viewers. Through a reading of "To Catch a Predator," I explicate the complex relationship between consumer manipulation, pedophile moral panics, and the media-industrial complex.

Review of the Literature

The term "moral panic" was first used in the early 1970s by sociologists Jock Young and Stanley Cohen to describe a specific type of political, social, or media influence (Young, 2007, p. 53). Cohen defines a moral panic as "[a] condition, episode, person or group of persons [that] emerges to become defined as a threat to societal values and interests" (Cohen, 1972, p. 9). As Communications theorist Chas Critcher has stated, moral panics typically progress in cases in which there is:

- a convincing portrait of a new threat with a highly connotative label;
- unanimity among the media about the seriousness of the problem and appropriate remedies;
- effective alliance among at least two of the five P's (politicians and government; pressure groups; and claims makers; police and judiciary; press and broadcasting; public and audiences);
- claims makers who become accredited in the media as experts;
- consensus among elites about the seriousness of the problem and appropriate remedies;
- the availability of attainable remedies which can be presented as effective.

(Critcher, 2005, p. 10)

Although some previous examinations of moral panics have mainly dealt with the "folk devils" and "witches" that fit Cohen's description, more recent analyses have been closely related to Critcher's above conditions. The history of moral panics gives us clues into the uncertain cultural space of moral panics within the contexts of the Salem Witch Trials, McCarthyism, and other forms of reproduction of fear narratives. These historical examples are important to understanding the nature of the "moral panic"; however, they often fail to give a full picture of the ways in which moral panics have been co-opted and commodified by multinational media conglomerates (Young, 2007, p. 26). Through an analysis of moral panics and television, I uncover certain narratives within the medium of television and reveal the influences that they can have upon viewer culture. To accomplish this, it is first important to clearly define and explain the consequences of moral panics and their connections to media conglomerates.

Consequences of Moral Panics

One of the major issues within the subject of pedophilia and moral panics deals with the ambiguity surrounding real danger of victimization and media manufactured-moral panics, which I will discuss further in subsequent sections. Some cultural studies theorists claim that the "intellectual project [of moral panic research] is also a political one" (Critcher, 2002, p. 527). The current moral panics created concerning predators are both widespread and unsettling, due to the social consequences of marrying fear and consumption for profit (Critcher, 2002, p. 527); which I will discuss in depth in chapters 3 and 4. Critcher has described the pedophile moral panic as a "heuristic device" which is used to reduce anxiety surrounding child sexual victimization to notions of "common sense" in popular culture (2009, p. 24).

The discourse of fear has been consistently supported by media conglomerates in order to encourage consumerism. Thus, the mainstream media co-opt and commodify children's bodies, lives, and notions of childhood themselves. Alice Marwick cites social networking interfaces and reality television as locations of "technopanics" when discussing the devices used to maintain fears around children. She describes these "technopanics" as "an attempt to contextualize the moral panic as a response to fear of modernity as represented by new technologies" (Marwick, 2008, p. 2). The reasons for the creation of these moral panics mirror those of some past panic scenarios. Thus, moral panics are, above all, about manipulation of a subset of or an entire population (Cohen, 1972, p. 9). The motivation and rationale are simple: if a group or individual creates fear within a cultural unit, that group will find itself feeling helpless and hopeless. Helplessness and hopelessness leave individuals and groups vulnerable to panic and manifestations of group think and consumerism.

Group think is a sociological concept that maintains that a single person will follow a course of action based on group pressure, regardless of the consequences (Janis, 1972, p. 9). Thus, those who have the authority to uphold moral panics also have the power to manipulate groups of people. In many cases, these groups are admittedly small, as in the example of a cult atmosphere. Within the particular example of pedophile moral panics in the media, the American viewing public is used to reproduce fears and subsequently uphold group-think scenarios in order to influence viewers. In other words, the social construction of the pedophile subject becomes a frightening part of the cultural imaginary, even if this outcome is achieved on a subconscious level. In this way, realities of group think can affect a large percentage of television viewers and eventually become fully developed moral panics.

Angela McRobbie and Sarah Thornton illustrate the impact of moral panics on society when they state that these manufactured fears are "a process which politicians, commercial promoters and media habitually attempt to incite [within people]" Moral panics first create and then exacerbate common fears surrounding consumers' personal as well as collective/social security. These theorists surmise that "[panics progress] from local issues to matters of national importance, from the site of tension and petty anxieties to full-blown social and political crisis" (1995, p. 563). The motives behind the creation and dissemination of moral panics are complex in nature and hardly innocent. McRobbie and Thornton go on to state that "…moral panics seem to guarantee the kind of emotional involvement that keeps up the interest of, not just tabloid, but broadcast newspaper readers, as well as the ratings of news and true crime television, even the media themselves are willing to take some of the blame" (1995, p. 560). Thus, when viewers become emotionally involved in a moral panic, they are much more likely to comply with the tendency toward fear and continue watching the programming that reproduces their own anxieties.

As many theorists have implied, moral panics have shifted from an unfortunate, albeit (largely) unintentional consequence of media involvement into a deliberate attempt to manipulate public opinion for monetary gain (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p. 562). Moreover, moral panics such as the "Red-scare" and McCarthy's success in blacklisting particular groups were used to uphold hegemonic norms and practices (McRobbie & Thornton, 1995, p.267). Within the past several decades, panics have included not only fears of Communism and terrorism, but also numerous anxieties regarding sex and morality: gay marriage, "deviant" sexual practices, childhood sexual victimization, and children's sexuality have all been at the forefront of these social concerns. Although the moral panics themselves have changed, the

impetus behind their creation remains the same: they continue to incite fear in viewers through emotional manipulation for the purpose of increased viewership and profit. The site of media-prescribed panic on which I intend to focus lies in the controversial issue of children and sexuality.

Innocence, Protection, and the Creation of a New Kind of Moral Panic

The issue of childhood sexuality produces endless debate in scholarly circles, as well as in broader everyday social contexts. While it is important to defend children against sexual abuse, the current dialogue surrounding childhood sexuality allows little room for autonomy and agency for the children themselves. Society places great importance on protecting children, even at times to an extreme. Current social theorists surmise that the predominant discourse of child protection began over a century ago as part of an effort to produce agents of national stability (Durham, 1999, p. 45; Lesko, 2001, p. 49). Although efforts to police innocence and child sexuality began early in the 20th century, a full-blown panic regarding pedophilia did not emerge until the end of the twentieth century. Pedophilia was identified as a psychological disorder in the 1995 edition of *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (Frances, 1995, p. 318). Media attention and subsequent moral panics around adult victimization of children increased in the late-1990s, shortly after the release of this edition. The broadcast of specifically framed nightly news programs and "special reports" created both a new type of television and fears of "stranger danger" and childhood sexual victimization.

During a period of only a few years, fear of victimization morphed quickly from a minor anxiety to a full-blown moral panic (Kitzinger, 1999, p. 136). For the purposes of my research, I intend to focus on several theorists who have tackled the thorny terrain of moral panics and

militant protection of children from sex. Given the subject matter, it seems important to explore the cultural construction of childhood in depth, in order to unpack the complex intersectionalities that define the subject itself (Hunter, 2008, p. 352; Lesko, 2001, p. 41; Spigel, 1998, p. 111).

The discussion of children and moral panics has become problematic due to the media's insistence upon creating fear around any form of child sexuality, regardless of the context. Many theorists believe that maintaining moral panic regulating childhood sexuality and privileging "innocence" creates more problems than it attempts to correct (Angelides, 2004, p. 143; Fine, 1988, p. 323; Giroux, 2001, p. 276; Pillow, 2004, p. 176). Several scholars have developed new forms of looking at childhood, sexuality and identity that are important to the field of gender studies, as well as to the material realities of the lives of children, particularly girls (Harris, 2004, p. 125, Jiwani, 2006, p, iv, Kelleher, 2004, p. 151, Kincaid, 2004, p. 4, Lesko, 2001, p. 9, Mohr, 2004, p. 20). Broaching the subject of pedophilia can be difficult, as there is often a delicate line between sexualization and victimization (Zurbirggen, 2007, p. 2-3); this line is often complicated by the construction of specific subjects and binary divisions of these subjects within television media, for example monster/victim, moral/immoral, and innocent/experienced subject positions.

A large part of the debate over childhood sexuality deals with socially constructed subject positions that children are often forced to inhabit, whether these are principally regarding childhood or adolescence. It is important here to note the distinction between childhood and adolescence. Although both are now thought to be social constructs as well as common concepts of "natural" temporal space (James & James, 2004, p. 18), these models have clear divergences throughout history and discourse. In fact, the concept of childhood is believed to have been invented in the sixteenth century as a new distinct stage of development (Durham, 2008, p. 120).

Conversely, cultural studies theorists have argued that the creation of adolescence occurred near the turn of the twentieth century as a function of nation-building. During the time of the Industrial Revolution, children began to occupy different spaces of labor and home-life, which led to a separation of age groups (James & James, 2004, p. 35). All of these changes have widespread effects on current concepts of age and development (Lesko, 2001, p. 90). The distinction between childhood and adolescence is crucial to understanding how these categories of development are imagined within popular culture. Those imagined to be in the childhood stage are meant to be cared for, protected, and to remain innocent. As Nancy Lesko emphasizes, "the space and time of being a child…is defined, theorized, patrolled, and maintained by adults" (Lesko, 2001, p. 9), but also imagined in relation to adults and adult society (Jenks, 1996, p. 3). In contrast, adolescents are seen as existing in a liminal stage of development and are often feared instead of feared for (Lesko, 2001, p. 93). In fact, the concept of innocence is much more ambiguous in the adolescent than in the child; thus the space of adolescence is also consistently patrolled by adults.

The concept of innocence is deeply engrained in popular culture, yet it seems always to occupy an ambiguous space and often forecloses on the concept of childhood agency. Perceptions of childhood innocence have been a constant part of the cultural imaginary for centuries (James & James, 2004, p. 11); it is even the central theme of many timeless "coming-of-age" stories such as *Peter Pan* and *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Childhood innocence has often been seen as inherent within children in many different societies (James & James, 2004, p. 15).

Media constructions of innocence are ubiquitous in the current cultural atmosphere; thus, the creation and maintenance of the concept of innocence is problematic on several important levels. First, as some cultural theorists have noted, the manufacturing of innocence is

detrimental to the struggle to end childhood victimization, as the image of the innocent child only emphasizes the fetishization of children and could actually end in an increase of child sexual abuse (Ost, 2002, p. 158). Second, the construction of innocence is primarily about the manipulation of public consciousness and creating fear concerning children and sexuality (Kitzinger, 1999, p. 135). When discussing these panics about childhood innocence and sexuality, it is equally important to explore the creation of the pedophile subject in the media, due to the fact that each subject position cannot exist without the other.

The Question of Constructed Space

In addition to the concept of childhood innocence, the construction of the nuclear family ideal and the notion of secure suburban space play important roles in understanding the motivations behind "predator" moral panics, particularly those involving "safe" geographical locations. The nuclear family as we currently understand the concept only became culturally desirable in the US within the last century (Hareven, 1991, p. 254). In essence, the nuclear model became the ideal form of family structure for predominantly white middle and upper-middle class families during this time. However, the move toward this ideal was not merely about creating and maintaining a small, cohesive family unit. As sociologist Tamara Hareven states, "The persistence of a nuclear *household* pattern in Western society has significant implications for our understanding of the role of the home and its emergence as a way of life and a *symbolic* concept" (emphasis mine; 1991, p. 255). This symbolic concept is complex due to the fact that the nuclear family ideal extends well beyond the boundaries of the physical home itself. The locus of secure suburban space created within the model of the nuclear family concerns issues of *security* in addition to the original notion of living within a particular

geographic space. These concepts are constantly at play within the context of the "To Catch a Predator" series.

In "To Catch a Predator," both the locations that producers chose for each episode and the attitudes of the agents involved in the sting operations uphold traditional nuclear family ideals and models of secure suburban space in several significant ways. First, producers often choose rural or suburban locales for their operations and frame them as peaceful, quiet places where many viewers would feel secure. Second, they create a picturesque decoy home, full of the kind of privileged "creature comforts" that immediately suggest that the phantom home owners are successful middle/upper-middle class citizens. These two factors serve to create a clear distinction between the socially upstanding, yet demonstrably nonexistent homeowners and the socially aberrant and geographically alien suspects within the show's narrative. The act of luring suspected and frequently out-of-town suspects into these idyllic settings only aids in cementing the idea that "predators" could breach the boundaries of viewers' neighborhoods and victimize their children. Thus, the narrative of "To Catch a Predator" provides both captivating entertainment and a substantial amount of fear within its audience. This perpetual threat in turn feeds moral panics surrounding childhood sexual victimization and helps to construct the "predator" within the minds of millions of television viewers.

Constructing the Predator

As with the study of television as an important contemporary medium, the study of childhood, innocence, and pedophilia have also increased over the past several decades. Pedophilia is a problem in our society that physically and psychologically harms young people every year (Davies, 2007, p. 370, Hall & Hall, 2007, p. 457). In psychological terms, pedophilia

is defined as "[involving adult] sexual activity with a prepubescent child" (Frances, 1995, p. 318). Although I would never condone the actions of pedophiles, I feel that it is important to note that the media's portrayal of the pedophile is never without ulterior motives.

Media conglomerates use the image of the pedophile in order to create widespread public panic specifically for their own profit (Critcher, 2002, p. 527; Hunter, 2008, p. 352; Mohr, 2004, p. 20). In addition, panics around child sexual abuse are what some theorists consider "serial moral panics"; these occur repeatedly and are thus much more difficult to overcome in the cultural imaginary (Critcher, 2005, p. 12). Moreover, the media exploits consumers' fears by exaggerating incidences of "stranger danger" sexual violence; in fact, some theorists have claimed that actual rates of pedophilia are disproportionate to the amount that is publicized by the media (Angelides, 2003, p. 6). This trend is a strategic action of systematic media diversion. Thus, the real predators are the manipulative and illusive media themselves.

Pedophilia is a knotty site of discussion for most people--and with good reason. Unfortunately, most of the information currently available on pedophilia is purely anecdotal; statistical evidence is much more difficult to obtain due to various situational complexities. Like most sex crimes, pedophilia is thought to be underreported (*FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 2010). There are also problems of clarity in definitions of pedophilia, in which stranger crimes are often conflated with "crimes of convenience," or intimate/familial/trusted-person violence (Hunter, 2008, p. 351). Definitions of sexual abuse involving underage individuals have also become increasingly complicated within the past several years. Since 2007, many medical and psychological professionals have come to believe that the classification of pedophilia within the fourth edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* is not currently descriptive enough to encompass the varying age discrepancies between adults and underage

individuals. Thus many of these medical professionals are proposing three additions to the existing categories of pedophilia (Bering, 2009, p. 1).

The additions to *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* will include the categories of hebephilia, ephebophilia, and teliophilia. Within these proposed additions, hebophiles are defined as adults who are attracted to individuals "on the cusp of puberty," between the ages of 11 and 14. In contrast, ephebophiles are interested in those who are between the ages of 15-16; and finally teliophiles are attracted to teens who are 17 years or older. Although these new categories may be meant to provide specificity to what some consider a complex emotional and social issue, there is also the possibility that the proliferation of categories could exacerbate existing moral panics. The new categories may unintentionally serve to reify preconceived notions of childhood and adolescence that have been continuously constructed throughout the past few centuries.

In addition to the questions of proposed expansion of definitions, there also exist many theoretical concerns related to media exploitation and the creation of the "othered," and often deeply racialized, subject. As the following section will explain, "To Catch a Predator" and similar shows create specific subject positions that are neither innocent nor accidental; these are meant to maintain surreptitious forms of manipulation under the guise of entertainment and education. In this way, the media concentrate on a small locus of real danger and exacerbate fear stemming from perceived threats of childhood sexual victimization.

Building upon the preceding framework, I then clearly define and explore the image of the pedophile in popular media consciousness, as well as in social theory. In order to do this, I undertake an analysis of the reasons behind the exposure and exploitation of pedophiles on national television. It is particularly interesting that these pedophiles are accused of victimizing

and exploiting youth when the mass media is, in essence, perpetrating similar misconduct. In other words, by encouraging the pedophile narrative, the media also support an atmosphere of panic (Hunter, 2008, p. 353).

The Spectacle of a Scene: NBC and Double Standards of Victimization

One particularly interesting trend within "To Catch a Predator" is the concept of spectacle. The idea of spectacle was first thoroughly developed by theorist Guy Debord in the late 1960's. In essence, spectacle is a powerful force that has the ability to draw the attention of large groups of people in order to divert public attention from the material realties of dominance and global hegemony (Debord, 1968, p. 8). The concept of spectacle relates directly to the production and dissemination of moral panics within the dominant media paradigm. Some theorists believe that "the…phenomenon of reality TV deals with police, crime, and suspect interaction [that] blurs the line between news and entertainment," (Johnson & Prosise, 2004, p.73). Although the motivations behind the creation of spectacle are manifold, the primary purpose is the exercise of surreptitious manipulation in the lives of those drawn in by the spectacle. "To Catch a Predator" is again a unique example of spectacle due to the negative reactions that it evokes in viewers, as it represents a unique take on "the problem of the 'predator.'" The producers of "To Catch a Predator" use spectacle and sensationalism to attract and sustain viewership under the pretext of protecting children from harm. In addition to acts of sensationalism, NBC also creates dangerous double-standards within its broadcast schedule.

"To Catch a Predator" and other similar programs attempt to co-opt parents' safety concerns regarding their children in order to create fear. The media first creates the problem of fear and subsequently manufactures a solution, taking agency away from the viewer, turning

her/him into a fearful consumer. Manufactured solutions within "To Catch a Predator" are often presented in advertisements for alarm systems and pepper spray; but they also include product placement within the episodes themselves. These issues are important to the healthy social and personal development of all viewers, but particularly young women, who are often the most feared-for victims, as well as the most sought-after consumers.

Representation Matters

The work of several cultural theorists illustrates the motivation behind the creation of the feared "othered" subject and ensuing moral panics involving children. For the purpose of my research, I will briefly discuss the media in general and incorporate what I have learned from this in my final analysis, which focuses primarily on the medium of television. Television is one of the most powerful forms of cultural communication that is currently analyzed, possibly due to the rapid proliferation of television throughout the past half century. Although the degree to which it can influence the viewing public brings to light difficult questions of access to certain media, it is clear that we are all affected by television, and the challenges that come with embodying the "viewer" role. The roles that viewers inhabit relate closely to the creation and preservation of fears and moral panics. In the following section, I will unpack some of these theories and expound upon their connections to the current media environment.

Subject Positions and the Location of Representation

Social theorist Stuart Hall offers theoretical support that can help in analyzing the creation of subject positions related to media manipulation and culture. In "The Spectacle of the Other," Hall discusses advertising that uses African American models and the commodification

of black bodies within dominant media paradigms. As I will explain more in depth in forthcoming sections, Hall is central to understanding the ways in which "To Catch a Predator" and programs like it use a specific regime of representation in an attempt to sway popular opinion and support an unhealthy atmosphere of fear within viewers.

Stuart Hall explains that "signifying difference" is principally about two things: a.) a person's subordinate status and b.) her/ his imagined "innate primitivism" (Hall, 1997, p. 244). Although Hall's work speaks principally to signifying racial difference, his theory can be extrapolated to other forms of social categorization. Hall specifically discusses stereotyping as a signifying practice within television and film media. He explains that there are four essential aspects of stereotyping that maintain systemic inequality within culture: (1) the constructions of "Otherness," (2) the exclusion of certain groups; (3) stereotyping as an exercise of power; and (4) the use of fantasy and fetishism in supporting hegemonic regimes. Hall notes here that there is a difference between typing and stereotyping: Within this view, typing is necessary in order to produce meaning, while stereotyping is a purely reductive strategy. Hall refers to this as a "strategy of 'splitting" or, put another way, the use of binary divides (normal/abnormal; acceptable/unacceptable; white/nonwhite) in order to categorize people based on perceived "Otherness." Hall believes that "stereotyping…is a part of the maintenance of symbolic and social order." He goes further to say that "stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power" (Hall, 1997, p. 261). These "violent hierarchies" of power and manipulation within social systems are sustained through simultaneous media manipulation and disavowal of knowledge of that manipulation (Derrida, 1972, p. 147). "To Catch a Predator" is an excellent example of this manipulation, due to the fact that it facilitates these representations through its typical narrative structure.

The Regime of Representation

Hall uses Edward Said's concept of 'Orientalism' in order to explain the complex relationship between stereotypes, representations, and power differentials. Through a study of movies and television, Hall notes the ways in which "… [black masculinity] is represented within a racialized regime of representation; [through] histories of slavery, colonialism, and imperialism" (Hall, 1997, p. 262). In Hall's view, representation cannot exist outside of a historical context. This is important to a more complete understanding of both media saturation and the ability to manipulate consumer opinion in our culture. Patricia Hill Collins adds to this theory when she states that "historically, African American men were depicted primarily as bodies ruled by brute strength and natural instincts, characteristics that allegedly fostered deviant behaviors of promiscuity and violence. The buck, brute, the rapist, and similar images routinely applied to African American men all worked to deny Black men the work of the mind that routinely translates into wealth and power…" (Collins, 2005, p. 153).

The power differential and the regime of representation that both Collins and Hall speak to are frequently at play within "To Catch a Predator" and in other portrayals of African American men in reality television. The popular television show *Cops* is another example of the ways in which African American men have been portrayed as intrinsically violent and dangerous. *Cops* premiered on the newly created Fox television network in 1989 and is still airing new episodes as of this writing. Essentially, *Cops* is a reality TV show that follows on-duty police officers on patrol as they locate, question, and arrest suspects who are committing various crimes. Much like in "To Catch a Predator," those involved with *Cops* also treat suspects of color with much more force than white suspects; once again falling prey to the regime of representation. In fact, *Cops* was really the first reality television show to show

formulaic arrests and differential treatment of suspects of color. As law theorists Theodore Prosise and Ann Johnson state, "whether it is called racism, discrimination or profiling, the practice [of stereotyping African American men as violent is] historically rooted in American culture" (2004, p. 87). The profiling practices utilized by police within the scope of reality television has serious consequences for those who view shows like *Cops* and "To Catch a Predator." In fact, the portrayals, treatment, and ultimate arrests of African American men on these shows "provide 'poor medicine' for millions of viewers" who watch the shows. Those who watch the shows agree with the programs' precept that particular races (especially African American men) are violent, deviant, and inherently dangerous (Johnson & Prosise, 2004, p. 87). This relates closely to both Patricia Hill Collins and Stuart Hall's claims regarding representation and reproduction of stereotyping practices within the media at large, as well as specifically within reality TV. Thus, if attitudes of racism are being produced and reproduced ad nauseum, the viewing public may see depictions of men of color as *fact*.

The above analyses also directly relate to the sexual dimension within reality television portrayals of African American men; and when the socially prescribed element of sexuality is added to the mix (in addition to race), relations of power become even more complex. As Hall states, "…the introduction of the sexual dimension takes us to another aspect of 'stereotyping': namely, its basis in fantasy and projection--and its effects of splitting and ambivalence" (Hall, 1997, p. 264). The above theories will re-emerge in the forthcoming chapters when I discuss representation and differential treatment within the narrative structure of "To Catch a Predator."

Areas of Research/Research Questions

Given the construction of moral panics around pedophilia in our culture, I seek to understand common representations circulated by the media. Through an analysis of "To Catch a Predator," I identify whether and in what ways television "news" programs [that actually amount to reality television] frighten parents and circulate moral panic scenarios. In order to accomplish this, I answer the following questions: 1.) What are the narrative structures of 10 "To Catch a Predator" episodes? 2.) What are the subject positions of actors and suspects and how are these racialized?

Methods

In order to understand the circulation of moral panics around "predators" in "To Catch a Predator," I will use a textual analysis of "To Catch a Predator" to uncover the complicated characterizations of subjects within the show. In each episode of "To Catch a Predator," certain formulas are present in nearly every scene. Thus, defining the narrative structure of "To Catch a Predator" becomes important to understanding the intentions underlying the show's creation and distribution. In order to properly analyze "To Catch a Predator," I have chosen to investigate ten of the nearly thirty episodes that aired between 2004 and 2008. I chose these ten episodes because they clearly illustrate the range of suspect characterizations and the various ways in which suspects are treated. After studying each episode of "To Catch a Predator" in close detail and taking extensive notes, I decided to focus on several aspects of its narrative structure. It is my belief that certain narrative deviations from the typical show format have cultural implications. For example, the ways in which suspects are treated by those involved with the show vary greatly by race, location, and socioeconomic status. Although the majority of the

suspects included in the investigations are white, I decided to concentrate primarily on suspects of color, due to the differential treatment that they continually encounter on the show. This will also serve to highlight deviations from the typical narrative structure that largely includes white men. Keeping Stuart Hall's theories in mind, I identified these distinct treatments, looking for visual cues of behavior from the host, the suspect, and others directly involved with each episode. I will discuss this in greater detail in following chapters.

Identifying subject positions within the aforementioned narrative structures can be a bit problematic, as subject positions are often a matter of idiosyncratic classification. In order to accomplish this, I observed the behavior of each participant in the show to explain the ways in which they create and maintain specific subject positions. For example, when studying episodes of "To Catch a Predator," I found that suspects embody an "aberrant," "abnormal," and often "subhuman" subject position, while the host Chris Hansen, police officials, and agents of "Perverted Justice" embody a highly "moral" and "correct" position. These manufactured subject positions clearly demonstrate the producers' attempts to create certain defined subject positions that are intended to evoke specific reactions and emotions within the viewer.

Throughout my research on "To Catch a Predator," I have discovered many interesting details regarding network television programming, as well as the consequences of consumerism and viewer persuasion. As I have previously discussed, certain themes are present in many of the episodes of the show; thus, it rarely deviates from the set formula. For example, nearly every episode begins by introducing the host of the series, Chris Hansen, who sets up the formulaic relationship between NBC, its show *Dateline*, "To Catch a Predator," and connections with law enforcement and Perverted Justice, the vigilante group that seeks out predators. "To Catch a Predator" is usually set in a new locale, although sometimes locations are revisited. A few

aspects of the set-up vary, but most remain static in each show. The scenes function much like a scripted play, although *Dateline* assures viewers that the show is entirely genuine and unstaged, despite the fact that *Dateline* has been repeatedly accused of manufacturing the scenarios (Stelter, 2007).

In each episode of "To Catch a Predator," undercover Perverted Justice representatives pretending to be teens chat online with adult men and lure them to the sting house that has been set up by Perverted Justice, *Dateline*, and police officers. The undercover agent asks the suspected "predator" to bring an item, usually condoms, to a location that the undercover agent has chosen, which will be the house where the trap has been set. When the suspect arrives at the house, a different undercover Perverted Justice affiliate, who looks underage, but is always 18 or over, greets the man and makes an excuse to leave the room. Host Chris Hansen then appears and says his tagline, "Why don't you have a seat, right over there?" and proceeds to publicly humiliate, interrogate and scold the accused. At the end of the segment, Hansen "lets the man go"; however, the suspect is immediately arrested by police officials who have been stationed outside the home.

One point of interest presents itself when the show is set in more affluent areas of the US; in these episodes, the tone and direction of the show are much different than when the show is set in rural or urban areas. The law enforcement agents involved in the episodes filmed in less affluent areas are much more reactionary and violent toward the suspected "predators." In addition to differences in suspect treatment based on filming location, the race and (largely assumed) socioeconomic status of the suspected predator create a clear distinction between suspects. When a white man is lured to the location, he is treated much differently than an African American or Latino man, seemingly regardless of the location. These differences

suggest that race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and location are used to create fear and apprehension within viewers regarding these social paradigms. The impetus behind the producers' distinct treatment of suspects may at first seem ambiguous; however, as I will discuss at length in Chapter 3, I believe that specific episode narratives are part of a larger structure that creates and maintains systemic inequality through media manipulation. Thus, it is important to explore media control and exploitation through the lens of representation of "otherness" and perceived "difference."

The work of social theorists Stuart Hall and Patricia Hill Collins are integral to cultural media research due to the tendency of "To Catch a Predator" and other shows like it to represent the subjects of interest in very specific ways. The producers of the show perpetuate the myth of African American men as violent and dangerous through their distinctive treatment of men of color. The distinct treatments of the African American and white men raise many questions about racial profiling and personal stereotyping behaviors. Representations of race, class, gender, sexuality, and many other social constructs bombard us daily; no one can escape the "regime of representation." This regime exploits "difference" and exercises power over the racialized "other" through reproduced stereotyping practices (Hall, 1997, p. 259).

Sociologist Patricia Hill Collins' theories regarding media images and representation are also important to understanding some of the sensationalism that is present in "To Catch a Predator." When considering reality television, Collins states that "mass media's tendency to blur the line between fact and fiction has important consequences for perceptions of Black Culture and Black people. Images matter, and just as those of Black femininity changed in tandem with societal changes, those of Black masculinity are undergoing a similar process" (2005, p. 151). When the lines of reality are blurred, it creates a space in which representation is

as constructed as the scenes themselves, and African American men are portrayed as violent and dangerous. These issues of representation and perceptions of race are also related to the constructed pedophile subject position that Hall highlighted as well as the concept of the "innocent child" that I discussed earlier. Within an analysis of "To Catch a Predator," each of these positions cannot exist without the other, as they are all predicated on fear and maintenance of moral panics in popular culture representations, which I will discuss further in forthcoming sections.

Research Implications

As previously discussed, issues of representation and subject positions within "To Catch a Predator" are important to understanding current trends in media and the ways in which they influence viewer opinions. As Stuart Hall makes clear in his research, representation is never innocent. Thus, when the dominant order imagines the "other," the concept of the other is a kind of farce which has been described as "…a room full of mirrors" (Tal, Lymon, Ferrell & Saunders, 1995, p. 14) in which the imaginary of the dominant order reflects and reproduces itself (Barthes, 1972, p. 96).

Each of us is a part of the consumer public and must remain aware of our own tendencies toward fear and panic; this is the first and most crucial step in upsetting the dominant, hegemonic, and manipulative norms of marketing and advertising (Zurbirggen, 2007). This is an important part of creating a dialogue dealing with the problem of fear and consumption within the media. As many in academia have noted, the most tangible solution to the problem of rampant media manipulation is consumer awareness and dissemination of information to the general public. It seems apparent that the majority of the viewing public are the true targets of

the media's manipulation (Kilbourne, 2000, p. 281; Kopowski, 2008, p. 36; Spigel, 1998, p. 129; Stelter, 2007; Walkerdine, 1998, p. 263). Some social theorists have emphasized that responsible consumers can allow the public to use the media in constructive ways so that they will not be privy to the intentions of multinational conglomerates (Durham, 2008, p. 15). In the following chapters I will first highlight the basic structure of "To Catch a Predator" and then analyze particular episodes in order to explain the ways in which the show's structure relates to the reinforcement of moral panics within television media.

Chapter 2: "To Catch a Predator" Show Structure

Dateline NBC is a weekly television news program that first aired on March 31, 1992. Although the show has usually held its regular Friday 9:00 p.m. time slot, it has been moved to Monday nights several times, only to be returned to its original Friday time, where it has remained for the past decade (*Dateline*, 2011). The format of *Dateline NBC* is very similar to other networks' nightly news programs, such as *60 Minutes* (CBS) and *20/20* (ABC), in that the program is usually between 60–120 minutes in length. It is also similar in that it covers a wide variety of national and international news issues, which I will discuss further below. The individual segments are typically between 15 to 30 minutes in length, largely based on the weight of importance that NBC has given the topic (*Dateline*, 1992).

In its nearly twenty years, *Dateline* has employed quite a few notable newscasters including Jane Pauley, Stone Phillips, and Ann Curry; all of whom achieved broadcasting success on various other NBC news programs such as *The Today Show* and *NBC Nightly News*. In addition to this core group of newscasters, *Dateline* also employs a host of correspondents who cover the show's field stories in individual segments. *Dateline*, like other similar news shows, has covered many different topics, issues, current events, and various other "problems" since its inception. For example, *Dateline* has covered natural disasters, criminal activity, and run biographical sketches and accounts of "everyman's" triumph over adversity.

Dateline NBC's website states that it is "…pioneering a new approach to primetime news programming. The multi-night franchise, supplemented by frequent specials, allows NBC to consistently and comprehensively present the highest-quality reporting, investigative features, breaking news coverage and newsmaker profiles" (*Dateline*, 2011). Since *Dateline NBC* began, the show has received high ratings and is usually thought of as the "show to beat" in its Friday

timeslot (Nielsen, 2007). Recent reports even state that during its time on air, *Dateline* had as many as 6.1 million viewers each week (Vascellaro, 2011).

Introduction of "To Catch a Predator"

Dateline NBC's "To Catch a Predator" originally aired in November of 2004. As a part of *Dateline*'s long-running time-slot, the segment normally accounted for nearly half of each episode of *Dateline*. At first, "To Catch a Predator" only aired one episode per year in 2004 and 2005. However, as "To Catch a Predator" became an extremely popular and controversial part of NBC's programming, *Dateline* began to air the series much more frequently. In fact, in 2006 alone, "To Catch a Predator" was part of *Dateline NBC* a total of 14 times; in August 2006 alone there were four (hour-long) "To Catch a Predator" specials on the popular news program. It is estimated that over 7 million Americans watched "To Catch a Predator" each week by March of 2007 (Stelter, 2007).

When each segment begins, *Dateline NBC* hosts Stone Phillips and/or Ann Curry present the premise of "To Catch a Predator" and introduce host Chris Hansen. Hansen began work as a news anchor in Detroit, Michigan in the late 80s and early 90s before landing a position as a *Now with Tom Brokaw and Katie Couric* correspondent in 1993 and has been with NBC ever since (MSNBC, 2011). Before he began "To Catch a Predator" investigations, he did extensive reporting on child sex-trafficking in Cambodia. In fact, a great deal of his work has involved exposing various kinds of predators; in fact, he seems to use the "save the children" narrative quite often (MSNBC, 2011).

As the main host of "To Catch a Predator," Hansen leads parts of the investigation and handles all of the interviews. His work on "To Catch a Predator" led to his 2007 book, *To Catch*

a Predator: Protecting Your Kids from Online Enemies Already in Your Home. The book itself essentially follows the same format as the show, except that it includes very detailed transcripts, along with Hansen's in-depth analysis of each suspect and personal experiences during filming (Hansen, 2007, p. 2).

When the segment begins, the viewer cannot see the host but can clearly hear Chris Hansen in a voiceover. This voiceover style is typical of *Dateline*'s usual format, as well as many other current TV news programs. However, the viewer finds that Hansen takes the voiceover a bit further than many similar news programs. Hansen's voiceover grabs the attention of viewers, while the visual introduction begins with a faceless person typing computer keys as a superimposed image of online chat rooms appears above the typing hands. Chris Hansen, still in voiceover, states that child predators are a "growing national epidemic" and that those who use the internet to talk to underage girls "must be exposed" (Corvo, 2004). The next shot shows a nondescript street corner on a sunny day, as people roam the avenues of suburban America, smiling, shopping, and eating. Hansen then introduces the location, often describing it as a "peaceful place" or "quiet hamlet." The tone of the show then quickly shifts as Hansen begins to illustrate the purpose of his visit to the "quiet hamlet." He explains that *Dateline* and the "To Catch a Predator" team are working with the Perverted Justice organization to catch online predators by luring them to a decoy house, where an undercover Perverted Justice agent, who is playing the role of an underage girl or boy, greets the suspect and invites him in.

Perverted Justice, the civilian watchdog organization featured on "To Catch a Predator," was founded in 2002 by Frank Fencepost and Xavier Von Erck. Although Perverted Justice is technically a "vigilante group," it works with police in order to catch suspected predators, which makes its self-classification a bit nebulous. Agents within the group enter regional chat rooms

claiming to be underage girls and boys to attempt to catch potential predators. Regional chat rooms are those designed to be used by individuals within specific geographical locations. Perverted Justice consists of both men and women, all 18 or over, who are predominantly computer programmers and others who have had extensive experience working with computers and/or participating in chat room discussions. Agents and contributors to Perverted Justice believe that their mission is to create a "'chilling effect' in regional chat rooms and other easy targets of opportunity online such as social networking websites" (Corvo, 2006). On their website, they claim to work with police officials "on a daily basis" to catch online predators, both within the context of "To Catch a Predator" as well as through their own independent organization. Since most states have laws stating that sting operations must directly involve law enforcement, local police temporarily deputize volunteers and agents within Perverted Justice, so that their findings can be entered as admissible evidence in court (Corvo, 2006).

Owners of and agents within Perverted Justice claim that they are extremely successful when it comes to catching internet predators; in fact, they assert that they have been responsible for the conviction of 544 predators since June of 2004. They seem to still be going strong, even today; although *Dateline* has not aired a "To Catch a Predator" segment in several years, Perverted Justice is still performing its sting operations with the help of local law enforcement every day (Perverted Justice, 2011). *Dateline NBC* paid Perverted Justice sizeable consulting fees, at times surpassing $70,000 per episode (Stelter, 2007).

To return to the program format, once Perverted Justice has "made a date" online and the suspect is in the house, the decoy gives an excuse to leave the room and is quickly replaced by Chris Hansen. Hansen, swaggering into the room, usually a kitchen or bar area, does not identify himself to the suspect; the suspect often appears to believe that Hansen is a cop or the underage

person's father. Hansen then points to a nearby chair or barstool and implores the man to sit down. At this point, Hansen's disembodied voice resurfaces, telling the viewer how far the suspect drove in order to arrive at the sting house for the date that agents of Perverted Justice had previously set up. Soon, the again on-camera Hansen asks the suspect, "What are you doing here?" The almost always dumbfounded suspect then gives Hansen a meek reply, usually a quick excuse involving "just hanging out" and in many cases claiming that he believed the person he was talking to was 18. In a mocking and accusatory tone, Hansen then reads graphic details from a transcript of a conversation that the suspect has previously had with the decoy, as the camera cuts to a picture of a child and Hansen's voice tells us that this is the child that the suspect thought he was meeting. In reality, the photograph is always of either a *Dateline* employee or Perverted Justice agent when she/he was younger. As the voiceover continues, Hansen's tone only seems to belittle and mock the suspect further, as there is little screen time in which the viewer does not hear his voice. This initial positioning attempts to inundate the viewer, endeavoring to fill the audience with ire and leave little doubt that the suspect is the bad guy and Chris Hansen is the saint, bringing a "pervert" to justice.

Hansen goes even further to disparage the suspect, asking questions but giving the suspect almost no time to answer. In most cases, the Perverted Justice decoy has asked the suspect to bring one or two specific items with him when he comes to the house, usually condoms or alcohol, but in some cases candy or gum as well. The suspect nearly always complies with these requests, carrying a six-pack or a plastic bag in-tow. Hansen points down toward the bag and asks what the suspect has brought. Again the suspect usually gives a meek answer or excuse, reiterating that he just wanted to "hang out" or that he thought that the person in question was 18. After a bit more scolding, Chris Hansen then pulls out the "big-reveal" and

finally identifies himself as Chris Hansen from *Dateline NBC*, just as a very large NBC camera crew surrounds the suspect. Hansen informs the suspect that he is now on national television and the man tries to hide his face and sometimes attempts to flee. If the man does not flee, Hansen asks him to leave in a disgusted tone. In either case, once outside the house, the suspect is immediately greeted by the local police department and an even larger camera crew and arrested on national television.

In the next shot the camera cuts to a police interrogation room in which the suspect is being grilled by local police officers, as Hansen's voice still hovers above the entire scene. The disembodied yet smug voice then tells the viewer the fate of the suspect: in all cases after the first two episodes (that is, every episode since 2006), the suspect is shown being sent to county jail for the night, and in some cases, the entire weekend. In the final shot of each segment, the suspect is shown in a courtroom, but the ultimate fate of the suspect is not revealed.

At this point, the viewer might begin to think that the show is over; they have seen the predator caught and taken to jail, after all. However, Chris Hansen and *Dateline* have quite a bit more in store for the viewer. The above description of Hansen's interaction with a suspect is one of many that appear on each episode of "To Catch a Predator." In fact, depending on the length of the *Dateline* episode, most "To Catch a Predator" episodes showcase 7-18 different suspects being lured, interrogated, and ultimately apprehended and detained by law enforcement officials. When the final suspect is taken into custody by police, Hansen's voice tells viewers how many different men were caught in that particular location's 2-7 day sting operation.

In many cases, Hansen will go on to offer the number of suspects that were ultimately convicted of a crime. Although he rarely says specifically what crimes the suspects are convicted of, he will occasionally note that they are charged with "solicitation of a minor." At

the end of each "To Catch a Predator" segment, *Dateline NBC*'s newscasters give parents tips and resources for finding out more about how to "protect their children" from online predators. This often includes what *Dateline* has dubbed "Home-safety kits" which include various contracts for families to sign, which include ways to use the internet "safely." These kits, which are still updated monthly on *Dateline NBC*'s website, include articles about how to talk to teens about online threats, "safety contracts" for teens and their parents to sign, and advice for parents on high-risk internet surfing (MSNBC, 2011). Although these seem like harmless and perhaps even beneficial tips and tricks to avoid online risks, it is clear, even from the titles of the articles and their content, that the "Home-safety kits" also serve to perpetuate a sense of panic within parents regarding their kids' online activity. When one considers all the above factors, it seems clear that the *compulsive repetition* within the narrative structure of "To Catch a Predator" only cements a fear and moral panic around internet sex and childhood victimization. In addition, the polarization of roles in the show creates a rigid narrative in which "the bad guy" is always ultimately "brought to justice." I will discuss this polarization in greater detail in the following sections.

The Problem with "Predator"

There are myriad legal and ethical issues at play within the context of "To Catch a Predator." First, it has a questionable relationship with Perverted Justice, not to mention Perverted Justice's problematic connections to local law enforcement. Although technically the actions of "To Catch a Predator" producers and newscasters, Perverted Justice agents, and police officials are not considered entrapment, many attorneys claim that they walk an extremely fine legal-ethical line, particularly in the case you will see below (Gaeta, 2010, p. 522). Entrapment is defined as referring to an "affirmative defense in criminal law that excuses a defendant from

criminal liability when law enforcement agents use traps, decoys and deception to induce criminal action…However, when the police…coerce individuals into bringing about a crime," it can be termed entrapment (Senna & Siegel, 1996, p. 159-160). Although there has not yet been a successful entrapment indictment of *Dateline NBC* or Perverted Justice in the hundreds of cases in which men on "To Catch a Predator" have been brought to trial, the methods of the network and vigilante group seem highly suspicious.

An important legal-ethical question within the "To Catch a Predator" sting operations arose early in the filming of the show. In May of 2006, decoys began asking the adult men they were chatting with online to go beyond their usual gifts of candy, alcohol, and condoms; they asked them to bring illicit substances (Corvo, 2006). As Hansen has stated repeatedly, the decoys ask the suspects to bring items because if they concede to the request, it expresses *mens rea*, or the intent to commit a crime (Senna & Siegel, p. 149, 1996). However, after Perverted Justice actors began asking suspects to bring marijuana to the decoy house, questions of entrapment again arose within legal circles (Gaeta, 2010, p. 524). When police, or deputized agents of law enforcement, involve illicit substances in their already shaky and often poorly-handled investigations, it could be considered entrapment for the purpose of ultimate indictment. If there is any question of whether or not the police officials will be able to get a conviction, the addition of drugs seems a concrete way in which to get a conviction, particularly due to the fact that they already walk a fine line between law enforcement and entrapment. Some attorneys throughout the country are now stating that the entire "legal rubric" needs to be shifted in order to fully understand entrapment and the reasons why it is currently such an easy defense for prosecutors to bypass completely (Valentine, 2009, p.23).

Another substantial problem within "To Catch a Predator" is apparent in the 2006 Murphy, Texas investigations. Several former Murphy police officers, Murphy District attorney John Roach, and reporters from ABC News' *20/20* claim that the Murphy police chief was "not calling the shots" and that it ultimately led to a horribly botched operation. None of the 23 men who were arrested in the Murphy sting were properly Mirandized, leading to zero convictions in any of the subsequent cases. In fact, fewer than 50% of all of the men exposed on "To Catch a Predator" were ever convicted of any crime (Gaeta, 2010, p. 523).

In addition to this sting failure, the Murphy investigation also ultimately led to the death of a prominent local politician, who took his own life to avoid humiliation at the hands of *Dateline* and Perverted Justice (20/20, 2007). Bill Conradt Jr., then Assistant District Attorney of Collin County Texas, was one of many suspects that "To Catch a Predator" tracked during its investigation. The problem that arose for the sting's ensemble cast lay in the fact that, although Conradt chatted online with the decoy, he never actually showed up at the decoy house in Murphy. When it seemed as though they had lost the opportunity to catch Conradt in the act, Hansen and Perverted Justice agents told the police that they should "go get him" at his home. When the parties arrived at Conradt's home, they cased the house and knocked on the door, but there was no answer. Hansen then ordered the Murphy chief of police to call Conradt on the phone, but Conradt did not answer. Finally, Murphy police officers forced their way in and found Conradt standing in the hallway with a gun. Conradt then told the officers that he was not going to hurt them and turned the gun on himself; he was pronounced dead an hour later. Within the year, Conradt's sister Patricia sued NBC for $109 million, citing emotional distress and civil rights violations. The investigative failures and tenuous police work make this situation even more disturbing than one might initially believe. In fact, a later investigation into the Murphy

episodes shows that local police were simply attempting to "put Murphy on the map," and possibly gain personal fame for themselves (Corvo, 2007).

Continuing Representations

Although "To Catch a Predator" has been off the air for several years, it is still present on *Dateline NBC*'s website, as well as in syndication as "To Catch a Predator: Raw" on MSNBC Sunday nights (*Dateline NBC*, 2011). In addition, it remains an important topic within popular culture outlets, as well as in academic circles. It has been especially prevalent in discussions within the legal community; students and attorneys from New York and Northwestern Universities have published several articles within the past year dedicated to the "To Catch a Predator" phenomenon and its legal and cultural consequences (Adler, 2010, p. 3; Gaeta, 2010, p. 532). Many of these works parallel much of what I have discussed in this chapter.

As previously discussed, there are many questions about the ways in which producers construct geographical space in order to evoke certain emotions within viewers. For example, by using phrases like "quiet hamlet," the show's producers attempt to convince viewers that even their neighborhoods could be "invaded" by sexual predators. The fear narratives created within these narratives of secure suburban space make "To Catch a Predator" deeply problematic.

In addition to problems of fear within the show's structure, there also exist issues based on the construction of the "othered" subject positions that I discussed in Chapter 1. In addition, "To Catch a Predator" portrays adult decoys as "innocent teens;" although this representation is merely a simulacrum of an ideal of "purity." Police officials and other agents involved with "To Catch a Predator" strongly reinforce the creation of standards of purity and innocence through what they feel is their duty: seeking "justice" for teens and children who are the would-be

victims of sexual crime. The role of law enforcement within the show is extremely challenging in myriad other ways. Some theorists even posit that the actions of these officials often "do more harm than good" within the context of "To Catch a Predator," and do so with complete impunity (Gaeta, 2010, p. 523).

It is my opinion that the actions of all of those involved with the "To Catch a Predator" series not only are misguided, but also create an environment in which justice is simply a convenient excuse for television sensationalism. In the following chapter, I will analyze 10 segments of "To Catch a Predator," in order to further illustrate the problems and complexities within particular examples of the show, NBC's programming schedule, and the moral panics around sexual predators in "To Catch a Predator" itself.

Chapter 3: Analysis

In order to introduce my analysis, it is important to describe some of the themes within the structure of "To Catch a Predator" that I highlighted in Chapters 1 and 2. In order to accomplish this, I have created 4 codes that illustrate certain formulas within the show itself; these are (the):

1. Code of secure suburban space
2. Code of racialized threat
3. Code of innocence
4. Code of perversion

I created these codes by identifying specific trends within the narrative structure of "To Catch a Predator." After creating the codes, I then identified the presence of the corresponding codes within each episode's narrative.

The code of secure suburban space is principally about geographic location as a symbol of security and stability. Essentially, secure suburban space centers upon the idea that certain geographic areas are more desirable due to perceived status and "safe distance" from other (frequently urban) locales. As previously noted, the concept of secure suburban space relates closely to the coveted nuclear family model that some theorists claim has been perpetuated in the domains of constructed childhood and adolescence for much of the last century (Perry, 1995, p. 345). This code is important to the understanding of moral panics within "To Catch a Predator," in that these panics have been predicated on the belief that middle class (and predominantly white) people can "escape" to areas where they will be "safe" from the "dangers" of urban areas. This area of panic is fully cemented when "To Catch a Predator" troubles suburban "safe space"

with narratives of invasion by those who exist outside of predetermined physical and social spaces. The code of safe suburban space also relates directly to the code of racialized threat that I will discuss further in the next section.

The second code that I developed for my analysis deals with the concept of racialized threat within "To Catch a Predator." This code is largely based on Stuart Hall's concept of the "othered" subject position that is often embodied by suspects featured in the show. After viewing "To Catch a Predator" in its entirety, I chose to use this code due to the fact that certain suspects, namely those who are not white, are treated very differently than white suspects; this differential treatment is questionable for several reasons. First, it suggests that suspects of color are seen as more dangerous than their white counterparts. Second, it supports the belief that people living in these "safe" areas can and will be victims of the kinds of crimes depicted on "To Catch a Predator." Thus, the predator moral panic is reinforced once again.

The final two codes that I will discuss are the codes of innocence and perversion. The code of innocence is present in nearly every segment of "To Catch a Predator" and is also apparent within Chris Hansen's dialogue. When Hansen reads the explicit chat logs back to the suspects, he speaks of the phantom teen as if she/he is a real person. In addition, Hansen frequently uses the words "child" and "innocent" (victim) when discussing the decoys with the suspect. The code of innocence is also closely related to the final code of perversion, which I will discuss next.

Much of the code of perversion also lies within Chris Hansen's dialogue, as well as within the general narrative of the show. After Hansen asks the suspect what he is doing at the house and what he has brought with him, Hansen then begins reading highly explicit transcripts of the chat logs between the Perverted Justice agent and the suspect. Although much of what

Hansen reads aloud is censored for television, the viewer is able to understand much of what is being said. In many of Hansen's discussions of the chat logs, he seems to *make* the conversation almost pornographic, thus exacerbating the atmosphere of spectacle relating to perversion.

The code of perversion is most apparent in the requests that the Perverted Justice decoys make to each suspect. As I noted earlier, decoys often ask the suspect to bring specific items to the sting house. The most frequent behests are alcohol and condoms, although sometimes they request food and/or candy. The request for alcohol clearly sets up the intent to give alcohol to a "minor," just as condoms imply the intent to engage in sex with said minor. Although the decoys are the first to even introduce the idea of bringing these items, the suspects almost never fail to deliver them.

In the next section, I will discuss 10 specific suspects, discussing each, segment by segment, and then use the aforementioned codes in order to fully explain both consistent patterns as well as deviations from the typical narrative structure of the show. Following my analysis, I will discuss some of the conclusions and implications of my findings throughout the research process.

Suspect 1: Typical "To Catch a Predator" Narrative

The first suspect that I chose to study for the purposes of this project was Gregory Stewart, a 44-year-old white male and collection consultant featured on the Ocean City, New Jersey episode of "To Catch a Predator." Stewart provides an excellent example of the typical narrative structure at work within the show. In fact, Stewart's conversations with the Perverted Justice decoy, Hansen's interrogations, and his eventual arrest follow the description that I highlighted in chapter 2 quite closely. Like the majority of segments with white suspects on "To

Catch a Predator," only the codes of innocence and perversion were present in this instance. Stewart brought the usual items to the sting house: condoms, alcohol and take-out, which makes the code of innocence clear in this and other episodes of the show. Since the decoy requested these things while pretending to be an underage girl, it suggests that her "innocence" is being threatened by the introduction of alcohol and condoms into the scenario. In addition, the "take-out" food is a signifier of "innocent" items that a teen might ask for in this situation, either to "fool" the suspect into believing that s/he is a teen or to detract attention from the other (and much more "adult") requests.

Like many other suspects, Stewart informs Chris Hansen that he thought that the "girl" was 18. After Hansen tells Stewart that he is free to go, he is arrested by local police outside the sting house with little incident. In fact, police only ask Stewart to put his hands behind his back, instead of commanding him to prostrate himself on the ground outside. This distinction will become important in later analyses of suspects, as the difference in arrest scenarios creates a different position for suspects of color, as well as a distinct level of television sensationalism. The major reason that Stewart's case is important to my research is that it is an extremely typical episode of "To Catch a Predator." It is essentially a model example of a common process that takes place within episodes of the show, especially when it comes to white suspects.

Suspect 2: Extreme Sensationalism (Spectacle)

The second suspect who I looked at for this analysis was John Kennelly, who was featured in the 2004 Herndon, Virginia episode. 43-year-old Kennelly is a good example of the repeated humiliation that producers and agents involved in "To Catch a Predator" endorse. As with the previous suspect, the Perverted Justice decoy that chatted online with Kennelly asked

him to bring many of the usual items: beer, take-out, candy, and condoms. However, in this instance, the agent has requested that Kennelly arrive at the decoy house and strip naked in the garage before coming in through the back door. When Kennelly enters the sting house, he does as the decoy asked: he strips and comes inside. The decoy then leaves the room immediately and is quickly replaced by Chris Hansen, who tells the suspect in a repulsed tone to cover his body with a coat. Hansen then goes on to question the suspect in the usual manner. Like the majority of suspects featured on "To Catch a Predator," Hansen asks Kennelly what he is doing at the house and what he planned on doing once he arrived. However, in this case, Hansen shames the suspect much more than usual, accusatorily inquiring about his nudity.

In this segment, I observed the codes of secure suburban space, perversion, and innocence; only the code of racialized threat was not present in Kennelly's case. The codes of perversion and innocence were particularly apparent due to Kennelly's nudity and Hansen's pointed and explicit interrogation. As I discussed in the case of Gregory Stewart, the items that Kennelly brought at the decoy's behest, alcohol, food and condoms, highlight the juxtaposition of themes of perversion (condoms and alcohol) and innocence (fast food take-out and candy) are clearly signifiers of the corresponding codes. In addition, the code of secure suburban space is closely related to the codes of perversion and innocence in the instance, largely because *Dateline NBC* and "To Catch a Predator" use the humiliation of the suspect to support a feeling of fear around predators "invading" viewers' "safe" neighborhoods. After he interrogates Kennelly, Hansen, again in a disgusted tone, asks Kennelly to "put some clothes on," and tells him that he is "free to go." Kennelly then gets dressed and walks outside and back to his car. This suspect is unique in that police did not arrest him until the following day, after "finding new evidence." The arrest is not shown on camera, but Hansen's voiceover makes it clear that Kennelly was

indeed arrested and eventually convicted of an attempt to solicit sex from a minor. The television sensationalism included in this episode has made it one of the more famous airings of "To Catch a Predator." Even years after the episode's first run, Kennelly's name still appears on many websites and blogs. This suggests to me that the sheer sensationalism of this episode has given "To Catch a Predator" power within the recent and even current media environment.

Suspects 3-8: Constructed "Otherness"

The third suspect that I analyzed was a 52-year-old African American male named Glenn Mitchell from Greenville, Ohio. Greenville is a fairly small suburban town of fewer than 14,000 people. In addition, according to the 2010 Darke County census (the county in which Greenville is located) is nearly 98% white (U.S. Bureau, 2010). All four codes (secure suburban space, racialized threat, innocence, and perversion) are present within this segment. The presence of all four codes appears to be a trend in the narrative when African American men are involved; I will discuss this trend further in the next sections. In this segment, the suspect drives around the neighborhood several times but never actually comes to the sting house. The codes of innocence and perversion are present in this segment, even though Mitchell never entered the sting house. This is due to the online chat conversations between Mitchell and the Perverted Justice decoy. In this instance, as in others, many of the chat logs had sexual overtones, but were not explicit.

As I stated above, Mitchell never entered the sting house; however, local police, members of Perverted Justice, and Dateline NBC obtained a search warrant for Mitchell and police arrested him during a "routine" traffic stop with the intent to solicit a minor for sex. Police actually crossed state-lines to apprehend this suspect, and although the suspect does not resist arrest, officers use much more force than seems necessary. In fact, officers throw Mitchell on

the squad car and then handcuff him before reading him his Miranda rights. Mitchell's treatment by police and their persistent pursuit of the suspect indicates the presence of the code of racialized threat. All of the above suggests that Hall's model of the "othered" subject position, as well as Patricia Hill Collins' theories on controlling images, are very much at work in the narrative of "To Catch a Predator." In Mitchell's case, the reactions of police suggest that although Mitchell never came into the sting house, he is posing a threat to the small rural community, simply with his presence. In the beginning of the episode, like many others, cameras cut to shots of trees, quaint houses, and perfectly manicured lawns, which suggests that producers are setting up a dichotomy between those who "belong" in this space and those who are "invaders." This is precisely where the code of secure suburban space is made most apparent.

The fourth suspect that I analyzed, whose name was not given during the broadcast, was a 23-year-old African American male who was also featured in the Greenville, Ohio investigation included on "To Catch a Predator." All four codes were also present within this suspect's segment. This is one of the only suspects whose name was never revealed. This could be due to several factors that remain unclear. However, it is most likely that the suspect's attorney(s) did not allow the release of his name. As in previous segments, the suspect admits that he has seen "To Catch a Predator" before, but came anyway. In this, like other instances, Chris Hansen pretends to let the suspect go. However, the suspect is not only immediately arrested, but tasered without provocation. After the suspect walks out of the house slowly and puts his hands in the air, the local police use air tasers on him repeatedly, even after he has fallen to the ground. As the unnamed suspect lies on the ground, shaking from the effects of 50,000+ repeated volts of electricity, the police swoop in to put him in handcuffs.

In addition to the forceful police treatment of the suspect in this case, there are other important questions of racial profiling at work within the narrative of this segment. As I stated above, 98% of the population of Greenville, Ohio is white; and a mere 0.5% is African American (U.S. Bureau, 2010). These percentages are important to note here due to the fact that in the combined Greenville episodes, 15% of the suspects highlighted were African American. Again, this suggests that there is a real feeling of race "invasion" when it comes to this "quiet hamlet," which "To Catch a Predator" only succeeds in encouraging in their sensationalizing broadcast.

The fifth suspect that I studied was 32-year-old Christopher Cannon, an African-American church media-director from Georgia. Cannon was featured in the rural Fortson, Georgia investigation of "To Catch a Predator." As with the case of Glenn Mitchell and the above unnamed suspect, all four codes are present in Cannon's segment. However, in this case, Cannon does come in to the decoy house. As with the majority of other suspects, Cannon brings take-out food, condoms, and alcohol, again demonstrating the codes of innocence and perversion within. In addition, Cannon's segment in particular sets up a slightly different picture of the "othered" subject position, which conveys the codes of secure suburban space and racialized threat. This is also the first time that "To Catch a Predator" is filmed in a rural setting. In this segment, Chris Hansen again plays the "innocence card" by questioning the suspect about his religious affiliation. He even asks the suspect "If you are such a 'man of god,' how can you come here and try to take advantage of a 15-year-old girl?" This trend brings the second two codes directly into play with the first two in that the narrative marries the concepts of perversion and innocence with the supposed disruption of a "peaceful" pastoral space (the code of secure suburban space) by unwanted outsiders of color (the code of racialized threat). In Cannon's case, police also use excessive force, much as they do with other African-American suspects. In

fact, Cannon is forced to the ground crying, yet police only seem to hold him down with extra force, yelling at him to be silent.

Elezar Henson, the sixth suspect that I studied, is an African American male from Fort Meyers, Florida. Henson came to the sting house with the usual offerings of condoms, alcohol, and food (including candy); together, these indicate the codes of perversion and innocence. The themes are also illustrated in Chris Hansen's readings of highly explicit, but largely censored, chat logs during his interrogation. However, this operation differs from others in a several ways: first, the decoy asks Henson to bring more items to the decoy house than previous suspects. Second, it is the first (but certainly not only) time that the decoy specifically requests that the suspect bring an illicit substance—in this, as in several other cases within "To Catch a Predator's" narrative, the illicit substance is marijuana. The request itself brings back to the forefront possible issues of entrapment. If the decoy is asking for the illicit substance specifically, it is most certainly walking the line between lawful arrest and entrapment, as I discussed in Chapter 2. Again, all four codes are present within this segment. Like other suspects of color, Henson is arrested with much more force than his white counterparts. The majority of white men shown on "To Catch a Predator" are arrested, but only asked to put their hands in the air or behind their backs, instead of immediately commanded to get on the ground. In this particular situation, the suspect is not tasered, but "taken down" with quite a bit of force while police officers yell loudly. Henson's forceful treatment by police officials and the implication that he is invading a "safe" suburban space are clear representations of the codes of secure suburban space and the code of racialized threat. Again in this segment, shots of perfectly manicured lawns, nearly identical suburban houses, and an occasional American flag flying, create a picture of "security" that has the potential to be "invaded by outsiders."

Alonzo Wade, a 40-year-old Latino male, was the seventh suspect that I analyzed for my research. Wade was lured to the sting house under the assumption that he was going to be meeting a 15-year-old girl. Like other segments, Wade's segment includes all four codes. In this case, Wade actually pled guilty to charges of attempt to solicit a minor. This plea is extremely rare within the narrative of "To Catch a Predator." At the decoy's request, Wade brought condoms, Mike's Hard Lemonade (alcohol), and take-out, which again suggest the codes of innocence and perversion. It is possible that the inclusion of Mike's Hard Lemonade is a product plug, and although the product placement seems almost surreptitious in nature, the particular inclusion of Mike's is present in many episodes of the show. In Wade's segment, like the above segments that include African American suspects, the codes of secure suburban space and the code of racialized threat are also apparent. Wade is arrested with a great deal of force; upon exiting the house, he is forced to the ground and handcuffed. Chris Hansen's voiceover makes it clear that Wade is somehow disrupting the suburban neighborhood's "secure space," when he states that Wade drove over 100 miles to this "*quiet town* in Ohio" in order to see a "15-year-old girl" for sex.

The eighth suspect in my analysis was 32-year-old Mohammed Abdalah of Flagler Beach, Florida. Abdalah's segment is a good example of a non-African American man of color who is treated with extreme force. Abdalah's case displays all four codes; in fact, the codes of secure suburban space and racialized threat are well-defined, as seen in his treatment by police officials and in the insinuation that he represents some sort of *invading force*. Much like previous suspects of color, Abdalah is taken down with extreme force. In this case, the suspect is not only tasered, but also shown bloody, sandy, and bruised, following his arrest. Although much of the segment was apparently cut, it is clear that the suspect was handled with more force

than many white suspects. This is indicative of the tendency of "To Catch a Predator" to show men of color as more threatening than white suspects. Abdalah's case brings to light a different locus of panic centering on viewers' view of the "Arab male" as a "terrorist" in post-9/11 America. Thus, Abdalah represents a special kind of suburban "interloper." As I illustrated above, this fear of "invasion" is apparent in the manner of his arrest.

Suspects 9&10: "Outliers"

The ninth suspect that I analyzed was 26-year-old Dustin McPhetridge, of Bowling Green, Kentucky. McPhetridge is an unusual suspect within the narrative of "To Catch a Predator," due to the fact that he is a white male with cerebral palsy. The code of secure suburban space and racialized threat is not present in this segment, due to the fact that the white McFetridge was not assumed to be a "dangerous invading force" by Chris Hansen, Perverted Justice agents, or police officials. However, McPhetridge did embody an "othered" subject position, due to his physical challenges. In fact, he has a difficult time moving around without the aid of a cane. McPhetridge's segment shows quite a different take on the "othered" subject position; for instance, instead of being portrayed as inherently dangerous, like the majority of the African American suspects, McPhetridge is depicted as somewhat innocuous and subsequently condescended to and humiliated by Chris Hansen. In fact, Hansen repeatedly mentions McPhetridge's "condition" as something that should essentially prevent him from coming to the decoy home in the first place. Like all of the other suspects, he is immediately arrested with (fortunately little) force. As McPhetridge is arrested, Chris Hansen's disembodied voice assures viewers that "every possible precaution" was taken to ensure the suspect's safety. In fact, local police actually very calmly call out his name and ask him to step out slowly, as they holster their

guns. Police then carefully take him into custody and later he is "processed" at the Bowling Green Police station.

The final suspect that I analyzed was Jonathan Steman of Petaluma, CA, a Marine Sniper. Steman's segment is important because of the subject position of the suspect that is supported by the narrative of "To Catch a Predator." Like Gregory Stewart, the first suspect that I examined, Steman was a white male who brought many of the usual things with him to the sting house, including condoms, alcohol and food. As in the previous cases, all of these items were requested by a Perverted Justice agent in their previous chats. However, during the last chat with Steman, a Perverted Justice agent learned that the suspect frequently carried weapons with him in his vehicle. Despite the potential danger of luring a predator who could be carrying guns and ammunition, local law enforcement officials agree to let Steman come to the sting house. Like several other suspects, Steman does not immediately come into the house; but drives around for about half an hour. After he finally arrives, he is received in the same way as most white suspects featured on "To Catch a Predator." No one seems "on high alert," despite the fact that the man may be "packing." The exchange between the suspect and Chris Hansen is fairly typical: Hansen interrogates Steman, tells him that he is free to go, and then Steman is arrested in a way typical for white suspects.

Again in this instance, Hansen, agents of Perverted Justice and police officers know that there is a distinct possibility that this man may have one or more weapons on his person, but police arrest him with no considerable force. Later, police find a variety of loaded weapons in the trunk of Steman's car. In fact, as in the case of Gregory Stewart, only the codes of innocence and perversion are present in this segment. This clear absence of the code of racialized threat is not very surprising, due to the fact that Steman is a white male. However, the absence of secure

suburban space is a bit surprising. After all, Steman is in Petaluma, a small suburban town, with loaded guns, and although he brought weapons with him, he is not treated like someone who is disrupting this suburban home-space. Instead, he is treated with much less force than many suspects of color. This suggests that, instead of being depicted as a true interloper, Steman is shown as a white suburban neighbor who has "gone astray." Steman is not shown as a threat, but as someone who has been influenced by outside factors; and thus he is essentially treated with the kind of respect that those in suburbia would extend to their neighbors. Regardless of this initial differential treatment, he is ultimately arrested. However, he is only asked to put his hands in the air, instead of being wrestled to the ground (as is so often the case with suspects of color).

The above analysis leads me to believe that the treatment of white suspects is vastly different from that of suspects of color within "To Catch a Predator." The variable treatment of suspects within the narrative of the show leads me to believe that there are several complex issues at play not only within "To Catch a Predator," but also in the sphere of reality television in general. The signifying of difference based upon race and a presumed threat to the "safe and protected" space of largely white suburban and rural areas remains an important piece of this analysis.

Chapter 4: Implications and Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have explained the ways that "predator" moral panics are circulated in the medium of television. In chapter one, I looked at previous research, cultural studies theorists, and some important parts of the history of moral panics within American culture. In chapter 2, I discussed the general structure of "To Catch a Predator" and the formulas that it follows in the majority of the episodes. In chapter 3, I highlighted ten specific episode segments that showed a variety of different suspects and their differential treatment by all of those involved with the production of "To Catch a Predator." In this final chapter, I bring all of these concepts together and discuss some of the conclusions that I have come to in the research process, as well as some implications of my findings. I also discuss some ideas for further research.

Sensationalism and Repetition

When sensationalism is mixed with an obvious theme of difference that is largely based upon race, it creates a media environment based on fear. As I discussed in the introduction, the media-industrial complex also plays into fear and sensationalism. This fear is exacerbated by "reality" television shows, including, but not limited to, programs like "To Catch a Predator," that very often cut to commercials featuring home security systems and other products that are meant to "protect" viewers and their children from the constructed predator archetype. *Dateline NBC* still airs at least once a week on network television, and shows like *COPS* and "To Catch a Predator: Raw" are still shown in wide syndication on MSNBC and other news channels. This is a strong indicator of the impact of sensationalistic "reality" television, continuing circulation of moral panics, and support of the media-industrial complex. In addition, as I discussed earlier,

when sensationalism is connected to the reproduction of representation narratives, as within *Cops* and "To Catch a Predator," viewers may begin to trust what is being shown to them and accept the reading of the African American man as the *unwelcome, violent, and dangerous outsider*. Thus, the repetition and recirculation of this type of show becomes increasingly problematic within the realm of cultural experience. When the line between fact and fiction is obscured, it becomes very difficult to know what is real, especially on television.

Building on the idea of sensationalism and representation, let me return to my first research question regarding the narrative structure of "To Catch a Predator." The compulsive repetition within the narrative structure of "To Catch a Predator" actually serves to exacerbate its sensationalism. The repetition keeps the moral panic itself alive and reifies it for the viewer. However, some of the subtle differences between segments have made "To Catch a Predator" popular throughout the years. For example, the viewer may ask her/himself, "In what new and different way will Chris Hansen humiliate this suspect?" or "Will this suspect run or possibly even be tasered?" The anticipation of these minor structural differences makes the show somehow novel each time. Thus, repetition and sensationalism work together to increase viewership and ultimately panic within the viewing public. Part of that sensationalistic repetition entails a sense of reassurance within the narrative of "To Catch a Predator; after all, each segment ends with the ultimate capture of the feared suspect.

Encouraging Fear and Selling Protection

One of the most important themes at play within sensational television and moral panics deals with the myriad ways that these shows perpetuate and subsequently reproduce themselves. In the case of "To Catch a Predator," producers provide reasons to fear "stranger danger" that

serve to exacerbate preexisting panics such as teen victimization; subsequently, Dateline NBC and "To Catch a Predator" create solutions to that "danger." The Perverted Justice decoys, which are mere simulacra of actual teens, are the focus of the sexual "predator" protection narrative. However, these "teens" do not actually exist, except in the imaginations of the Perverted Justice decoys and the suspects themselves. The question that seems to logically follow is, "Who is it that we protecting?" "To Catch a Predator" claims that its efforts protect "innocent victims" of sexual violence, yet it seems as though the actual teen, as well as the teen voice, is all but absent within the narrative. In fact, the concept of innocence within "To Catch a Predator" is merely a part of the historical construction of "the innocent child" that is exacerbated by media and popular culture portrayals of young adults that I described in chapters one and two. As I alluded above, after producers use adult decoys posing as teens to maintain this fear of teen victimization within the medium of television, they then manufacture novel safety solutions to the given "problems." For example, commercial breaks during the show include advertisements for self-defense DVDs, pepper spray, and even high-tech (and often very expensive) security systems. Often, these solutions and advertisements highlight the fear of the "invasion" of "othered" and "different" outsiders, which I will expound upon further in the next section.

Subject Positions and the Regime in "Reality"

As I have noted throughout this work, the differential treatment of suspects in "To Catch a Predator" leads to many questions regarding the ways in which race is portrayed within reality television. Although nearly all of the suspects featured on "To Catch a Predator" are arrested at the end of each segment, the manner in which the men are arrested varies greatly by race. In

addition, Chris Hansen, the white host, is portrayed as good and just and is aligned with police and agents of Perverted Justice. Conversely, suspects of color are seen as especially bad and unjust; and, as I illustrated in chapter 3, men of color (African American men in particular) are treated with much greater force than white suspects. This suggests that African American suspects are viewed as inherently dangerous; that is, they are shown to pose a much greater threat to the sexual safety of teens than white suspects. This characterization brings me back to Stuart Hall's regime of representation that I discussed in chapter 1. Essentially, the African American suspect becomes the signifier of "otherness" that is presented to the viewer as nearly imminent danger. In this way, he becomes the picture of "the problem of the predator." In addition to the regime of representation, Hall's theories regarding race also come into play when analyzing "To Catch a Predator." The theme of racialized threat is clear in the distinctive and often violent treatment of African American men in the show. "To Catch a Predator" not only supports the current "predator" moral panics in general, but also gives the "predator" a very particular (and fetishized) characterization: that of a "dangerous" and "unwelcome" man of color.

I believe that this trend toward portraying men of color as intrinsically dangerous further maintains a cultural race division within the medium of television, principally for the purpose of gaining viewership and achieving ratings success. Within "To Catch a Predator," this depiction of men of color is primarily expressed through a narrative of invasion and threat to "suburban safety." This is particularly apparent in the example of African American males as automatically linked to criminal activity; in fact, African American males are often represented as having some sort of *innate criminality*. Patricia Hill Collins also speaks to racialized threat and representations when she says that "controlling image[s] of Black men as criminals or as deviant

beings encapsulates this perception of Black men as inherently violent and/or hyper-heterosexual and links this representation to poor and/or working-class African American men," (2005, p. 158). In this way, the predator moral panic only serves to disturb the idea of "calm" in the predetermined social space often referred to as "suburbia." This pervasive *invasion narrative*, which is very apparent in shows like "To Catch a Predator" has the potential to recirculate racism in order to perpetuate a moral panic around youth, innocence and sexuality. Moreover, with the wide popularity of "To Catch a Predator" and shows like it, in which African American men are portrayed as suburban interlopers within the context of a widely popular television news programs, it seems as though this reproduction of racism may persist.

Potential for Further Research

Although my work focuses closely on a textual analysis of "To Catch a Predator," there are many other methods of research that could be employed when analyzing the show itself. These research options could include, but are certainly not limited to, viewer surveys, in-depth content analysis, and post-viewing group reaction analysis. These forms of analysis could be useful for many reasons, primarily because analyzing actual viewer reactions to "To Catch a Predator" could help to illuminate the ways in which this show, and perhaps other shows that are similar in nature, tap into existing emotions and opinions of a sample of the viewing public. Certainly there are particular idiosyncrasies that exist in "To Catch a Predator" that viewer interviews and surveys may be able to expound upon. Further research may unpack the phenomenon of sensational programming and viewers' reception of it.

Although further research could be an important part of understanding the production, dissemination, and ensuing reproduction of programs that support moral panics concerning

sexual "predators," there remain questions about what viewers themselves can do. After completing my research, I believe that the first step in addressing the issue of moral panics around sexual "predators" is a marked increase in viewer awareness. If the public is made aware of the proliferation of this specific moral panic, it may be possible to change their attitudes toward what they watch on a regular basis and even how they choose to assess reality television. Of course, raising viewer awareness is no small task. However, there are several progressive organizations that may be useful in opening the door to understanding and questioning current media moral-related panics.

The first organization that I found in my search for progressive media organizations was "Media Watch." Media Watch first emerged in 1985 as a small grassroots association. Now a largely web-supported group, "Media Watch" seeks to "challenge abusive stereotypes and other biased information commonly found in the media through education and action" (Simonton, 2011, ¶ 1). Since its inception, "Media Watch" has uncovered corporate media proliferation of racial, gender, and sexual stereotypes within many different forms of media, including, but not limited to, television. Media Watch uses various methods to attempt to bring about change within the media. These methods include political organization efforts, consumer awareness, and campaigns lobbying against the media outlets that they feel are harmful to citizens, as well as society in general. In addition, "Media Watch" facilitates community organization through web campaigns that encourage media literacy. Although "Media Watch" has not yet written about Dateline NBC or "To Catch a Predator" specifically, I believe that they could be an extremely useful resource in illuminating the current state of media and perhaps helping viewers develop more agency in what and how they watch television.

Another organization that I discovered during the course of my investigation into progressive media organizations is the almost completely web-based "Corrupted Justice." Unlike Media Watch, which deals with a wide array of media issues, "Corrupted Justice" primarily focuses on the aforementioned Perverted Justice agency, and to lesser degree, "To Catch a Predator" itself. "Corrupted Justice," which is essentially a counter-watch-dog organization, consists of a group of attorneys, political activists, and other concerned viewers who contribute to the site in their free time. Since "Corrupted Justice" was founded in early 2004, it has sought to explore investigative inconsistencies, police negligence, and some important media implications of Perverted Justice and its affiliate agencies. Many of their findings suggest that agents within Perverted Justice and "To Catch a Predator" have a variety of ulterior motives for their persistent investigations into so-called "predators." I actually had a chance to speak with Scott Morrow, the senior administrator of "Corrupted Justice," on several occasions. In our conversations, Morrow explained to me that there are many questions regarding the income of Perverted Justice and their status as a "nonprofit" organization. The website also has many articles that detail problems of vigilante justice, particularly when these civilian groups work with (and sometimes even appear to overtake) police officials in their investigations. As Morrow informed me, the last-minute deputizing of civilians can lead to problems in arrest and convictions ("Corrupted Justice," 2011).

Viewer Consciousness in Action

Although "To Catch a Predator" has not been a part of Dateline NBC's programming schedule since early 2008, its continued presence in syndication, as well as the ongoing vigilante efforts of its ally, Perverted Justice, suggest that the show still has some power within the media.

In addition to its continuing pop culture status, as I briefly alluded in chapter 2, “To Catch a Predator” remains a widely discussed topic in current scholarly discourse. In fact, several law reviews and social theory articles have detailed the complexities, possible miscarriages of justice, and other ethical challenges at play in the show, even within the past year. To me, this implies that “To Catch a Predator” and the representations it circulates will not easily fade into late-night television obscurity, but may instead remain a significant topic within media studies for many years to come. Although continued discussion of this program could prove to be a positive step in changing attitudes toward shows like “To Catch a Predator,” in order to avoid a resurgence of fear and moral panic programming, I believe that it will require action on all sides of the issue. This is precisely where an active public consciousness comes into play: if those viewers who are willing to speak out against the kind of programming that “To Catch a Predator” exemplifies can work closely with social action groups like “Media Watch” and “Corrupted Justice,” they have the potential to challenge the message of shows like “To Catch a Predator.” After all, awareness and action are the first and most important steps to avoid succumbing to the phenomenon of cultural and media-based moral panics.

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