Anatomy of Three Crime Dramas

Police procedurals and legal dramas are the bread and butter of primetime lineups, drawing the largest audiences in the US: an average of 112 million viewers tune-in each week for crime shows on network television, with presumably millions more watching on streaming services. To explore how different ideological groups respond to the same shows, we chose three perennial police procedurals that were liked by all three groups, and we compared current reactions to those of ten years ago.

Criminal Minds

Criminal Minds is the rare show that is equally favored among Blues, Purples and Reds, even when we control for age, race and gender. All groups gave it an average score over 80 on the 100 point “liking” scale, with at least one-third from each group reporting they watched it. The show was a preferred show for 18% of respondents in 2008, ranking highest with Purples followed by Blues and then Reds, and we found the same pattern in 2018. Thus, Criminal Minds can be considered a color neutral show, appealing across demographic and ideological groups. If a social issue is covered on this show, it will reach a broad range of viewers.

Further analysis of what each group specifically liked about the show revealed some common themes, but also some interesting contrasts. For example, all groups most frequently selected the characters as what they liked best. After characters, Reds were next most likely to say they liked the style and tone, whereas Purples noted both suspense and the educational value of the show. Almost half of the Blues liked its emotional impact and the way it makes them feel. More than half of Blues indicated that the emotional responses they most often feel while watching are surprise, fear and sadness. Half of the Purples also felt surprise and fear, although Purples were as likely to say they felt hope. Some 40% of Reds also felt surprise while watching the show, but the fear, sadness and hope felt by the other groups were not reported as often by Reds. In fact, Reds’ second most frequently reported feeling was neutral while they watched this show. Reds and Purples also selected disgust and anger far more often than Blues.

See the Media Impact Project’s forthcoming 2019 report: Racial Disparities in the Criminal Justice System: An Examination of Depictions in Mainstream Television.

Due to differences in how questions were posed and discrepancies between number and types of other shows investigated by both studies, these comparisons are provided as indicators of general feelings and trends in viewership behavior.
The Purple group’s responses stood apart in several ways. Purples watched this show most often to learn about other people’s lives; they were more likely to say it makes them feel inspired and helps them think about their own lives more than other groups. Purples also enjoyed social viewing more than the other groups. Blues most frequently watched Criminal Minds because it allowed them to experience things they can’t in real life, while both Reds and Blues watched to forget about their own problems at double the rate of Purples.

**Law & Order: SVU vs. NCIS**

Although both of these long-running police procedurals enjoy broad appeal, analysis revealed an interesting fact: both today and ten years ago, NBC’s Law & Order: Special Victims Unit appealed more to Blues, whereas the Reds -- the group that generally eschewed most entertainment programming -- watched CBS’s NCIS at a higher rate than most other shows and more than other groups. We found that just under half of those who selected SVU as the show they liked best (n=152) were Blues (47%) while 35% were Reds. Those who most liked the show were generally consistent in their reasons, praising the characters and its story and plot most frequently. The emotion they reported feeling while viewing the show was surprise.

For NCIS, those numbers flipped: of those who selected NCIS as the show they liked best (n=233), half were Reds and one-third were Blues. Although Reds are generally infrequent TV watchers, NCIS appears to have a special attraction for this group, perhaps related to the adrenaline boost that Reds say it provides. Still, all fans agreed that the characters were what they enjoyed most, followed by its story/plot. Thus, we see that despite differing values, priorities and interests in many of their outlooks, viewers were drawn to shows with compelling characters and intriguing stories. Since this is the stock in trade of police procedurals, these findings provide some evidence for why the subgenre remains a TV staple.

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30 Only the two most watched shows for all groups (The Simpsons and The Big Bang Theory) were more likely to be watched by Reds.