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The Coming of Age of Popular Culture Research in Criminal Justice

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Welcome to the relaunch issue of the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture*. It is an honour and a privilege to carry on the work of pioneers in this field, and as you will hopefully see from the contributions of our authors in this issue, we look forward to showcasing future generations of criminal justice media scholars. Given the current political climate and its influence on criminal justice policy and practice, it is not an exaggeration to say that media literacy and cultural awareness (or the lack thereof) can profoundly affect public safety. As this journal has demonstrated throughout its history, social scientists play an invaluable role in helping us understand how mediated messages can influence public perceptions, and in return, how these perceptions can shape the creation and distribution of popular media. In an empirically verifiable sense, we are learning that the words that we say and the images we produce do not operate in a vacuum. They are consumed, internalized, and acted upon. And as information technology has become more affordable and more widely accessible, it has become easier for individuals and small groups to greatly influence public perception in ways that can further compound social unrest and ultimately lead to tragic real-world consequences.

But all is not gloom and doom. Although popular culture research has not always enjoyed the scholarly respectability that it has earned over the past few decades, it is now one of the most exciting and rapidly expanding fields of scientific inquiry. It is also reassuring to note that the processes of popular culture do not necessarily result in negative outcomes. We can learn much from how popular culture can educate, entertain, and inspire us to discover the better aspects of what it means to be human. As someone who began his journey as a popular culture scholar by studying comic books and superheroes, I have seen firsthand the great power that popular culture wields to shape the minds and beliefs of people across the globe.

However, as young Peter Parker discovered, “with great power must also come great responsibility,” and this holds particularly true for the power of the media and popular culture to shape what human beings hold to be objective reality. In the “fake news” and “deep fake” era we now find ourselves in, it is of utmost importance that the global community comes to value and protect media literacy and critical inquiry into all

forms of media. As such, critical media scholars now find their research to be not only accepted as a respected contribution to social science, but pivotal to promoting more enlightened discourse on the power of media to shape our lives. If we don't also understand the responsibility that comes along with the power to create "reality" for the billions of inhabitants of our world, the consequences could be catastrophic. Therefore, I am grateful for the opportunity to encourage scholars from all disciplines to share their research and expertise into criminal justice and popular culture.

I would imagine that, like me, many pop culture scholars and educators are attracted to this research because of their own interests (and possible obsessions) with mass media entertainment. After all, why dedicate the time and energy to study something unless you are really interested in the subject matter. Popular culture scholars have historically faced the additional challenge of publishing and developing curricula which mainstream academia might not appreciate. Growing up, I remember all too well the subtle and not-so-subtle ways that my peers and adults disparaged my interest in comic books, which unfortunately carried over into my academic career when I began to receive discouraging feedback from other scholars about pursuing a doctoral dissertation focused on the relevance of Spider-Man and comic books to the study of crime and justice.

Fortunately, however, I was lucky enough to have several faculty mentors who openly encouraged me and who showed me how to argue for the legitimacy of research into the cultural implications of criminal justice. They introduced me to the pioneering work of scholars such as Howard Becker, Greg Barak, Jeff Ferrell, Ray Surratt, Gary Potter, Clinton Sanders, Victor Kappeler, Frankie Bailey, Donna Hale, and Nicole Rafter. They also encouraged me to check out an on-line peer-reviewed journal that focused specifically on the intersection of crime, criminal justice, and popular culture. After scanning through the diverse subjects covered in the early days of the *Journal of Criminal Justice and Popular Culture* and seeing so many prominent criminal justice researchers making the case for legitimizing this path of scholarly inquiry, I knew I had found my calling. With the encouraging support of my dissertation committee, my topic was approved and the project was completed in 2005. It has resulted in several publications as well as speaking opportunities which have allowed me to focus and share my expertise in comic book research. As popular culture research and comic book scholarship has continued to grow and influence academia, I have also enjoyed tremendous support from my university to develop course offerings and other campus initiatives to capitalize on the now almost ubiquitous student enthusiasm for all things "Geek."

It is important to recognize that today's media and pop culture scholars were yesterday's undergraduate and graduate students. We have a wonderful opportunity to nurture their interests by showing them that pop culture research is not only legitimate, it can be a gateway to encouraging their own growth as critical media consumers and educators. Having them read articles from media-centric journals such as *JCJPC* and *Crime, Media, Culture*, teaches them about research methodology and exposes them to the wide variety of topics that can be the focus of scientific inquiry. When I realized that I could study comic books and publish articles and teach classes about them, it was a game changer for my enthusiasm for pursuing a career in academia. By tapping into students' love of popular culture, we are paving the way for the next generation of media scholars. In addition to being encouraged by the presence of criminal justice journals featuring popular culture research, they also have the luxury of participating in scholarly societies and conferences that either focus specifically on popular culture or have prominent sections dedicated to showcasing this type of research. The growing acceptance and popularity of undergraduate and graduate courses covering pop culture-related subjects also helps provide fertile ground for nurturing the interests and research talents of students who are inspired to study the relationship of culture and crime.

As you will see from our relaunch issue, these efforts continue to come to fruition in expanding the frontiers of popular culture research. Thank you to all of the authors of our relaunch issue for your insightful and important contributions.