Learning how to manage by watching TV

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Abstract
Purpose – The transfer of management knowledge is usually seen as a formal process involving business schools, training courses and books. This paper aims to investigate the managerial content of TV drama programmes, considering the mechanisms that determine this and showing how this changes over time. The paper also shows how the content forms part of management discourse and how it may be used by viewers to understand what good and bad managers do and to modify their behaviour accordingly.

Design/methodology/approach – Two links are discussed: between the economic system and cultural products and between cultural products and the individual. Police drama series are used as an example to show how current management practices are mediated through popular culture and how they are legitimised.

Findings – The management styles and practices observed in police drama series have changed over the past 40 years to reflect the most recent trends. Bureaucratic management styles are shown in a negative light, whereas teamwork is shown positively. New trends such as the heavy use of consultants are also represented in recent programmes, providing evidence of how popular culture can make management practices part of managerial discourse.

Originality/value – Films and TV programmes are analysed by management scholars, but usually to illustrate a particular theme. This paper does not take the managerial content as a given but identifies mechanisms through which it is determined and shows how it changes. Additionally, it shows the relationship between content and viewer. It provides evidence of the role of popular culture in the transfer of management knowledge and of how management related contents change over time.

Keywords Knowledge, Discourse, Culture, Management learning, Althusser, TV dramas

Paper type Research paper

Introduction
Managers are faced with a rapidly changing environment – the social, economic and cultural contexts within which they work – and so, new managerial practices are seen to become necessary to deal with the latest challenges, and new and different ways are found to deal with existing issues. What processes must have taken place so that managers somehow “know” that they have to do things differently from the way they did things five or 15 years ago?

The creation and diffusion of management theories and practice is generally viewed as a three-stage process (Mazza and Alvarez, 2000): business schools and consulting firms produce the knowledge, the business press disseminates it and there then follows a process of legitimization, as these theories become part of “common sense” and form the standard managerial discourse through their representation in non-business media. Attention has been paid to the first two of these stages (Huczynski, 1993; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Alvarez, Mazza and Pedersen, 2005; Frenkel, 2005), but relatively little attention has been paid to how management knowledge might be diffused through other methods.

The paper takes as its premise that the existing social and economic system influences management styles and practices, and also the form and content of cultural products, which
in turn influence the individuals who consume them. Management practices evolve according to the requirements of capitalism's stage of development and are depicted in cultural products that disseminate these practices by showing what managers should (and should not) be like and what they should (and should not) be doing at a particular point in time.

The paper concentrates on the role of television programmes in this process because watching TV is the most common leisure activity of people living in the West. Britons watch television on an average for just over 3.5 h per day [Broadcasters’ Audience Research Board (BARB), 2017]. The discussion focusses on programmes that have been produced in the past 30 years and on productions from Britain and the USA. Other countries' television industries have similar products, but these are not as well-known as those from the English-speaking world – Tatort (a long-running police series, first shown in 1970 and still on) has never been shown in Britain or the USA. On the other hand, the US programmes in particular are to be found everywhere on TV: a German viewer watching TV on 10 July 2017 would have been able to watch on basic channels How I Met Your Mother and The Big Bang Theory and the police series Hawaii Five-O, CSI: Miami, NCIS: Los Angeles, Law and Order and many more – here we can already note a possible mechanism through which management ideas might travel.

A straightforward example of how watching one of the television programmes discussed in this paper can influence expectations is the CSI effect, which is the effect that CSI and similar programmes have on what jurors expect in terms of scientific evidence (Kim et al., 2009). Tyler (2006, p. 1083) argue that “The CSI effect has become an accepted reality by virtue of its repeated invocation by the media”. As Fiske and Hartley (1978, p. 41) state in their classic text:

Both language and television mediate reality [...] Language is the means by which men enter society to produce reality [...] Television extends this ability, and an understanding of the way in which television structures and presents its picture of reality can go a long way towards helping us to understand the way in which our society works.

Some of the mechanisms involved are discussed below. Following a brief review of the relationship between economic and social structures and cultural products, the paper considers how cultural products can influence those who read, see, hear or watch them. It then presents a historical overview of approaches to management practices and then discusses how changes and developments in management methods and approaches are evident in TV police series.

### Base and superstructure, cultural products and identity

Two linkages are investigated in this section: between social and economic structures and art, and second, between the work of art[1] and the individual.

Implicit in this paper is the concept that a work of art, such as a TV programme, contains traces of the society in which it was produced. The relationship between the content of a work of art and the broader social conditions that led to its production has been widely discussed, not least since Marx (2010) stated in the 1859 preface to A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy:

The sum total of these relations of production constitute the economic structure of society, the real foundation on which arises a legal and political superstructure and to which correspond definite forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life process in general.
And therefore, the base/superstructure debate was brought into existence. The undialectical thoughts of vulgar Marxists that there is a mechanical determination by the economic base of the superstructure have largely been discounted. Many theorists have worked on this theme; one of the most important is Louis Althusser, who showed that straightforward economic determinism was an unsatisfactory model and argued that there exists a social formation consisting of three practices (or instances), the economic, the political and the ideological, which permits analysis of the “relative autonomy of the superstructure with respect to the base [and] the reciprocal action of the superstructure with respect to the base” (Althusser, 1971, p. 130).

Althusser borrowed the concept of overdetermination from Freudian psychoanalysis, where it means that a symptom can have several roots. He argues that any particular social construct may be overdetermined by instances of the economic, the political and the ideological. For Althusser, the economic base is not all-determining, so there is the possibility of different developments among the practices. However, the instances are hierarchised, with the economic being most influential (Lapsley and Westlake, 2006), but:

On the one hand, determination in the last instance by the economic mode of production; on the other the relative autonomy of the superstructures and their specific autonomy [but] from the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the last instance never comes (Althusser, 1969, p. 111).

Therefore, while it may not be possible to state exactly what has determined the content of a work of art, the economic instance plays a significant role. As the economic instance changes, so do the social constructs. Thus, when the economic conditions in society bring about new practices of management, these will be visible in the products that the culture industry produces.

Works of art, by their very nature, are part of the ideological instance. Althusser proposes that ideology is “the imaginary relation of individuals to their real conditions of existence” (Althusser, 1969, p. 153), i.e. it is a relationship to the world and it is through this that the individual constitutes herself or himself as a subject. Each individual is addressed in various terms when engaging in social practices, and this confers a social identity: “all ideology hails or interpellates concrete individuals as subjects” (Althusser, 1969, p. 162). Interpellation takes place in part through what Althusser calls Ideological State Apparatuses, like education, the family and media. It is through these that people gain their sense of reality and understanding of their identity. This has even been shown in film; Hunter (2003) illustrates this process in his discussion of the movie Boiler Room (2000), which is about a group of young men who sell questionable financial products. This film has scenes where characters refer to other films that deal with the business world – Glengarry Glen Ross (1992) and Wall Street (1993). The characters in Boiler Room use film to create their identities, just as the audience of Boiler Room use that film to model their own identities. These works of fiction both reflect organisational life and reproduce it, in that the audience draws conclusion about how to behave in the workplace in part from what it sees on screen.

A further attempt to avoid deterministic and reductionist explanations of the link between material and cultural production and consumption is the “circuit of culture” model of Du Gay et al. (1997). They argue (Du Gay et al., 1997, p. 2):

Because cultural processes dealt with seemingly less tangible things – signs, images, language, beliefs – they were often assumed, particularly by Marxist theorists, to be “superstructural”, being both dependent upon and reflective of the primary status of the material base [. . .]. Rather than being seen as merely reflective of other processes- economic or
political – culture is now regarded as being as constitutive of the social worlds as economic or political processes.

The five elements of the circle are:

1. **Representation** is about how signs are used in a cultural artefact to present a meaningful concept. The content, form and means of distribution all play a role in communicating the intended meaning: “[…] signs and symbols [are] used to represent or re-present whatever exists in the world in terms of a meaningful concept, image or idea” (Du Gay et al., 1997, p. 13).

2. **Production** deals with the processes through which the cultural product comes to exist and with the meanings that are encoded into the products. Television texts are generally constructed in such a way that there is a dominant and preferred reading of them, i.e. the consumer of the text is pushed in a given direction (Moores, 1997).

3. **Consumption** covers the ways in which the consumers of the artefact decode its messages and create meaning as they use it in their daily lives. It is concerned how people interpret the signifiers in the text they are consuming.

4. **Identity** as the artefact is being consumed, and after it has been consumed and meaning is constructed and internalised, it forms individual and group identities.

5. **Regulation** covers the various forms of control, both formal (regulations, laws and institutionalised systems) and informal (cultural norms and expectations) which tell us what meanings are acceptable and correct. For instance, television dramas are expected (with very few exceptions like *Lost* [2004-2010]) to have a beginning, a middle and an end, and it is very rare for the villain to get away with it.

The relationships between these five elements are complex – each one is in a relationship with all the other ones and each forms part of a whole; one must be aware of the danger of analysing them in isolation. Nevertheless, this is a useful model for it shows a framework within which processes exist that affect the content of programmes and how people “read” them. The programmes under discussion in this paper influence how individuals construct their identity as – and behave as – managers. As individuals watch television programmes, this leads them to an unacknowledged opinion of how a manager should behave and act. In other words, the programmes help to shape the discourse of management to the point where it becomes “common sense” (Gramsci, 1971) that a manager should act in the way that is constantly being paraded before them on the television screen.

Having established a framework for understanding the relationship between cultural products and social and economic structure, some mechanisms through which a television programme affects individuals are now briefly reviewed – how does what individuals see on the screen play a role in their identity and behaviour?

As Bandura (1977, p. 1) puts it, “Many theories have been advanced over the years to explain why people behave as they do”. Cultivation and social cognitive theories can help explain “how and why exposure to television programmes affects perceptions, values, and behavior” (Park and Villar, 2011, p. 80). They show how cultivation theory explores the ways in which general television consumption affects perceptions of reality:

Behavior in cultivation theory often asserts itself in response to exaggerated media content (number of police officers, crime, lawyers, and criminals as portrayed on television) mostly through inaction to do things or go places due to fear. Here, the exaggerated television world can become the “perceptual reference” point for heavy viewers, which can influence behaviour (Park and Villar, 2011).
Social cognitive theory (sometimes referred to as social learning theory), on the other hand, treats the individual as being less passive and allows for the possibility of reacting to what one sees by actively responding and adjusting one’s behaviour through a process known as modelling.

Bandura (1977, 2001) himself developed social learning theory, which argues that individuals modify their behaviour after undergoing a learning process initiated by experiencing one of the following three types of models:

1. live model, where someone demonstrates a desired behaviour;
2. verbal instruction, where the desired behaviour is described in detail; and
3. symbolic, where a real or fictional character demonstrates a form of behaviour using one of the forms of media, which include fiction and non-fiction books, documentaries and fictional films and television programmes.

Clearly, the last of these is of interest here. It implies a form of identification between the consumer of the text and fictional character, which is indeed the mechanism that underlies the model of this paper that viewers learn from what they see on the TV screen, through the consumption and identity elements of Du Gay et al.’s (1997) model. This is an assumption, though, and many researchers have investigated the question: does what we see affect what we do? Does watching violent films make you violent? Or as Sestir and Green (2010, p. 274) put it, “[...] can viewing a narrative produce changes in something as central as the viewer’s self-concept?” A key moderator that they identify is character identification.

Hoffner and Buchanan (2005) show how in the literature on mass media identification refers first to the process by which an individual puts himself or herself in the place of a character and vicariously participates in the character’s experiences during a programme. A second aspect of identification has also been described – wishful identification – where viewers feel that they would really like to be the people in the programme. Bandura (2001) contended that the modelling process goes far beyond simple identification and imitation of behaviour to include changing one’s attitudes and values to match those of a model. Giles (2003, p. 194) makes the point that “In cases where we identify with the figure, we may go on to incorporate some of that figure’s behaviour into our own”. Such wishful identification is linked to a greater or lesser extent to the following traits and characteristics of the character (Hoffner and Buchanan, 2005):

- perceived intelligence;
- success;
- attractiveness;
- humour;
- willingness to be violent (this is important for male viewers in contexts where violence “makes sense” in terms of narrative traditions); and
- admiration by other characters.

TV and film producers are aware that having characters with whom the audience can identify can play a key role in determining the success of a production (Giles, 2003). This corresponds to the production element of the Du Gay model – producers deliberately have such characters to build a large audience. In their study of Euston Films, who produced The Sweeney (1975-1978) (among other series, like Minder, Out and Fox), Alvarado and Stewart (1985) show how the characters of Regan and Carter were created to be sympathetic to the
audience, being dynamic and personable, in particular in comparison to Haskins, their bureaucratic boss.

**Approaches to management**

Before discussing how television programmes disseminate management knowledge, it is useful first to very briefly review the history management styles before considering how these are in evidence in television programmes. Braverman (1974, p. 68) stated that “Control is indeed the central concept of all management systems”, and three main approaches to management control can be identified in the literature on management theory: classical, human relations and systems.

The **classical approach** has two main strands: scientific management and bureaucracy. Most closely associated with scientific management is Frederick Taylor, although others made substantial contributions, not least Gilbreth with his time-and-motion methods [as demonstrated in the “biopic” film *Cheaper by the Dozen* (1950)]. Taylor’s theories of scientific management lie at the heart of mass assembly line work, as exemplified by the production lines introduced by Henry Ford, but were also introduced into offices. Just as the production line needed to be controlled and organised, so too did organisations themselves. The characteristics of bureaucracies were identified by Weber. The goal of bureaucracy is to use rational-legal rules to structure the organisation and to separate the person from the rules. Thus, there is specialisation, hierarchy of authority, a system of rules and impersonality. The bureaucrat simply exercises technical and professional expertise in a non-partisan way.

The **human relations approach** developed as managers started to realise that the scientific management approach was a source of problems, especially lower productivity. Basing his ideas on the Hawthorn experiments at the Western Electric Company between 1924-1932, Mayo (1930) argued for an approach which humanised the workplace. He and his followers suggested that more attention needed to be paid to social factors and behaviour. This approach emphasises the importance of work groups, improved communication with workers, motivation and a stress on personnel management. Other theorists representative of the human relations approach include Lewin (1947) and his work on groups, Maslow (1954) with his hierarchy of needs, Herzberg (1966) and his hygiene factors and McGregor (1960) with Theory X and Theory Y; they all argued that workers are not motivated only by money, but have more complex needs that must be met if the organisation is to be successful. The work of many management gurus and scholars today goes in this direction. For example, Peters and Waterman (1982) emphasise the need for management of corporate culture to provide an environment where workers feel valued, Handy (1976) argues that organisations function through personal ties between members, Mintzberg (1989) reintroduces the human element into strategy development and Kanter (1990) encourages managers to use to influence rather than control. Similarly, work on learning organisations [e.g. Senge (1990)] suggests that fulfilled workers are the most productive. All these authors emphasise the need for creativity and innovation and organic rather than mechanistic organisational structure and cultures.

The **systems approach** views organisations as a number of inter-related systems and attempts to combine the two earlier approaches (von Bertalanffy, 1968; Cyert and March, 1963). The organisation is viewed as an open system which interacts with broader external environment. Contingency management theorists (Burns and Stalker, 1961; Lawrence and Lorsch, 1967) argue that managers must consider social and psychological factors, as well as structural and technological requirements, when making decisions.

Witzel (2017, p. 10) argues that “management” as a discipline is fracturing, as specialisations (human resource management, finance, strategic management, etc.) have
developed independently of general management theory. However, even in specialisations, the responsibilities of managers include control and supervision (Mintzberg, 1973); the following section discusses how approaches to carrying out these responsibilities have been shown in television dramas.

**Management practices on television**

It has been shown that form and content cultural products are related to underlying social and economic factors, and that they are used by individuals to help in the construction of their identity. This section discusses how television programmes have reflected the changes in managerial styles discussed above and demonstrates how management knowledge is disseminated to people watching TV.

Primetime television provides a great deal of information about the world of work, showing many types of organisation and different kinds of workplace, but there is a bias towards the kind of workplace where televisual drama is more likely, like hospitals, police stations and lawyers’ offices, and the examples in this paper are from one of these workplaces – the police station – where what police drama series have to say about teamwork is examined.

A particularly clear example of how management practices are reflected in a drama is the BBC’s *Life on Mars* (2006-2007) which presents within a single programme the theories and practices of management of two eras. The programme depicts what happens to a detective who seems to travel back in time from 2006 to 1973. Central to the programme are clashes between the two central characters about issues related to police procedure (e.g. suspects’ rights) and about wider issues like sexism and racism. The detective inspector (Gene Hunt) from the 1970s treats his staff very differently to the way which the detective from 2006 (Sam Tyler) expects to be treated. Tyler assumes he will be consulted on how to proceed with the investigation, but he soon learns that subordinates of people like Hunt are usually issued orders with little or no explanation.

Hunt puts away the baddies, does not mind bending the rules as long as it is for the right cause, does not break the ethical code of being a police officer, and is ultimately a working-class hero who represents the anti-establishment challenges to bureaucracy, form-filling and managerialism (Garland and Bilby, 2011, p. 120). *Life on Mars* captures two approaches to management – the directive approach from scientific management which was still in wide existence in the 1970s and the collaborative style of the human relations approach which followed it and which was needed because the older management practice was no longer adequate.

**Crime shows and team work**

Police dramas are popular with programme makers because they make the depiction of workplaces full of people doing non-boring jobs possible, and the emotional intensity and dramatic tension attached to the work are compatible with the public’s love of glamour (Hassard and Holliday, 1998). The way in which preferred management styles have changed over the years from bureaucratic to team-centred is well illustrated by police dramas.

*Dixon of Dock Green* was shown on BBC television from 1955 to 1976. The eponymous hero, George Dixon, is a “bobby” who deals with minor local crimes. *Dragnet* was a police programme set in Los Angeles and was broadcasted from 1951 to 1957; its main protagonist, Sergeant Joe Friday, also deals with local crimes (although they may be more serious than those with which George Dixon is involved). What is strikingly similar about both these series is the way in which the main protagonists deal with their superiors. Both George
Dixon and Joe Friday are deferential, and they accept whatever instructions they are given without any question – they simply assume that if a superior tells them to do something, it is the right thing to do. Neither Dixon nor Friday bend the rules or work outside the system to achieve their goals.

In the 1970s, police dramas reflected the questioning of bureaucratic management practices. In Britain, several police dramas featured “maverick cops”, but without a doubt the best of these was *The Sweeney*, which aired on ITV from 1975 to 1978. The main character, Inspector Jack Regan of the Flying Squad, is played by John Thaw as a hard-drinking rebel who will stop at almost nothing to catch the criminals. He bends the rules, sometimes uses violence and is very unwilling to follow orders from his supervisor (Detective Chief Inspector Haskins), especially when he perceives that these orders will prevent him from doing his job. For Regan, results matter, not how he achieves them – he despises bureaucracy and ignores its rules. The way in which Regan and Carter (his sergeant) were shown on screen was obviously admired by the members of the real Flying Squad because they invited the actors several times to dinners (Hurd, 1981). As Hurd (1981, p. 67) pointed out, “television films of the 1950s […] sought to emphasize the technological infrastructure of criminal investigation and the current [1970s – 1980s] [programmes put an] emphasis on the human dimension”.

A similar philosophy lay behind the US programme *Starsky and Hutch* (1975-1979). Less violent than *The Sweeney*, and without the same “edge”, this programme also showed two police officers who sometimes had to bend the rules laid out for them by their superior (the gruff Captain Dobey) to catch the criminals. *Miami Vice*’s (1984-1989) police officers (unlike *The Sweeney* and *Starsky and Hutch*, there were also female officers, although they were usually at the periphery unless they were in danger and needed to be rescued) also tended to operate independently of rules whenever necessary, but their boss, Lt. Castillo, was more flexible thanCapt. Dobey or DCI Haskins.

*The Sweeney* and *Starsky and Hutch* show catching criminals as an effort made by talented and dedicated individuals who follow few rules – they are the prototypes of the kind of employee Peters (1994) sees as desirable. More recent police dramas depict catching criminals as a team effort which reflects changes in management knowledge. Initiatives like just-in-time manufacturing, total quality management and business process engineering were introduced in the 1970s and placed a great deal of emphasis on teamwork. These ideas either started in the USA (Hammer and Champy, 1993) or were popularised by the US academics (Juran, 1970; Deming, 1986). They became important parts in managers’ toolboxes around the world, and one of the keys to their successful implementation is teamwork. Teams started to become a widespread method of organising activities because “ample evidence indicates that team-based forms of organizing often bring about higher levels of organizational effectiveness in comparison with traditional, bureaucratic forms” (Guzzo and Dickson, 1996, p. 303). Contemporary police dramas provide plenty of evidence for this conclusion.

*The Bill* was on air in the UK from 1984 to 2010. During that time, there have been many changes in the way senior officers manage the police officers at the police station where the characters are based; an authoritarian management style has been replaced by one that emphasises teamwork. A detailed review by O’Sullivan and Sheridan (2005) of four episodes from 2004 that deal specifically with management style shows how the old management style was replaced by what they call New Public Management, which emphasises professionalism, competency in management, a focus on the client, a consultative approach and treating employees fairly. Their in-depth reading concludes that the new style of management is presented far more positively than the old one.
Law and Order (and its brand offshoots, Law and Order: Criminal Intent (2001-2011) and Law and Order: Special Victims Unit (1999-present) is an American production that was on air from 1990 to 2010. It shares with The Bill a depiction of management style which is non-authoritarian. The detectives and prosecutors in these programmes are treated as knowledge workers and generally are provided with only general instructions – they are left to do their work as they see fit. The individualism of a Jack Regan or Starsky is not wanted in these workplaces; these workers are expected to be team players. This is made evident by Law and Order, which saw many of its main characters replaced every couple of years. The viewer is led to the conclusion that there is not much room for stars in these work teams.

Smoothly functioning teams have been depicted as desirable in many other television programmes. Hill Street Blues (US, 1981-1987), NYPD Blue (US, 1993-2005), Homicide: Life on the Street (US, 1993-1999), The Cops (GB, 1998-2000) and Merseybeat (GB, 2001-2004) are other early examples of programmes that moved away from the depiction of a single, heroic character to showing how “getting the job done” needs a team effort. The Wire (US, 2002-2008) is one of the most highly praised police dramas ever, and it too emphasises teamwork and shows how the team members (generally) prevent each other from going too far in their efforts to make an arrest. None of these programmes had a star playing the main character, but were ensemble pieces, reflecting the kind of workplace that modern management theorists desire. These, and other similar programmes (such as hospital-based programmes like Casualty, St. Elsewhere and ER) are concerned with the challenges of work, but they also present the workplace as somewhere to which the employee should be committed. Working in each organisation is depicted as being part of a “family”: the workplace is a source of a feeling of community. The characters share a common goal – to solve the crime, to heal the sick – there is a professional code that has to be followed. The teams are committed to each other and to the job.

Even a programme like The Wire, set in a decaying Baltimore where drug dealers run parts of the city with impunity, where politicians are craven and corrupt and where the top-level bosses are also depicted in a negative light, does not stray too far from this model of management. The characterisation of the chefs of police is in contrast to that of those lower down the chain of command, where a commitment to the team and to arresting the bad guys is still in place. The craven, career-obsessed and selfish superiors serve as counter-examples of what a good manager should be like.

The focus of this paper is on management styles and practices, but, to illustrate the applicability of the approach proposed here, developments in two other fundamental themes from the workplace can also be traced through television police series: gender and race. Cagney & Lacey ran on CBS from 1981 to 1986, i.e. around the time when equality in the workplace for women was starting to become a major issue. It was the first crime series whose main characters were women; one was a single career-minded woman, while the other was a single parent. This added an extra dimension to the programme, as their boss now had to take non-work-related issues into account when making decisions – the job no longer stood alone and uncontestable among factors to be considered when taking decisions. There have been other series featuring women as the main character, like the British series The Gentle Touch (1980-1984), Juliet Bravo (1980-1985), Prime Suspect (1991-2006) and Scott & Bailey (2011-2016). In them, it is no longer unusual for a woman to be the boss. Similarly, it is now no longer unusual to see a person of colour in a position of authority. Far from the casual racism of The Sweeney and its parody in Life on Mars, series like Luther (2010-2016) and The Wire show that it is now no longer unusual for the person in charge to be from an ethnic minority.
Concluding comments
Mazza and Alvarez (2000, p. 567) argue:

The role of the popular press has gone beyond the mere diffusion and account of prefabricated ideas to the co-production and legitimisation of management practices and theories.

The same may be said about television programmes – they grant legitimacy to management ideas by helping to construct a discourse that privileges those practices and styles that are appropriate for a particular stage in the development of capitalism. Modern organisational processes often revolve around teams, with teamwork having been found to be a more efficient organisational method than bureaucracy, and it was shown how teamwork is depicted positively in police drama series and bureaucratic management styles are shown negatively. The viewer of the police drama is offered intelligent, successful and admired characters with which she can observe, with which she can identify and from which she can learn. The programmes themselves are products that must find success on the market place and must show modern ways of living and working if they are set in the contemporary world.

Most writing on management and popular culture, or organisation and popular culture, has looked at how television programmes and films can be used in teaching (Champoux, 2001; Huczynski and Buchanan, 2004; Watson, 2012). To show the role of television drama series in diffusing and legitimising management practices, this paper has outlined ways in which the form and content of the products of popular culture are determined and how these cultural products can affect individuals. A new practice like heavy use of consultants can be observed in the crime drama Criminal Minds (the USA, 2005-present), where a typical case involves the team flying in somewhere, solving a crime that was too much for the locals and flying out again, leaving appreciative customers behind them. That sounds very much like something the Boston Consulting Group does (or likes to think it does).

Evidence has been provided about how various management theories and practices have been mediated through the products of the mass culture industry, and it has been shown how the content of programmes has varied over time to reflect the most current theories. One way in which a manager or supervisor knows how to manage or supervise people – even if they have never taken a business course in their life – is because they have watched television. It is managerial common sense that today one should not manage like Gene Hunt of Life on Mars and that one should manage knowledge workers like Gil Grissom of CSI or Agent Hotchner of Criminal Minds.

Watching television programmes not only tells those who are in a supervisory position what they should and should not be doing but also shows their staff what they should and should not expect from their boss. The role of the manager in many of these programmes is to set the tone and create the right kind of environment for their staff to help them get their job done, i.e. to be an “enabler”. Gil Grissom and Agent Hotchner manage their team, make sure that it has what it needs in material and organisational terms and provide guidance. They are neither authoritarian nor bureaucratic. Their managerial practices are those which are taught today in business schools.

This paper is but a starting point, and the approach it has taken needs to be expanded in two different directions. First, it has discussed management techniques and given gender and race as examples of other areas that can be investigated. Many more themes come to mind – leadership, unions and technology, for example. Second, it used one particular genre (police series) in one particular narrative form (television). Other genres (such hospital dramas like Casualty and ER, comedies like the British and American versions of The Office, docusoaps such as Secret Boss) offer scope for
research, as do other narrative forms like novels, films and plays. Research also needs to be carried out on the viewing habits of managers and on how they interpret the content that has been discussed in this paper. And of course, all this should be done in an international context to investigate the spread of management ideas and to see how local management ideas are reflected in local productions.

Theories of management are present in comedies, dramas and thrillers; these products of mass popular culture can be as much a management text as anything that is on the shelves of a library. So if anyone is criticised by their partner for watching too much television, they can always reply that they are in fact learning how to become a better manager.

Note

1. The phrase “work of art” is used in a very broad way; no differentiation is made between “high” or “low” art, between soap opera and The Wire.

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