

# From *Dock Green* to docusoap: decline and fall in TV copland

From caring copper to corruption and conspiracy, Frank Leishman and Paul Mason chart the changes in public attitude embodied by the British television policeman.

Following his untimely murder in the 1950 Ealing film *The Blue Lamp*, PC George Dixon was famously resurrected by the BBC in 1956, to continue as the central character in the TV police drama *Dixon of Dock Green*. For twenty further years Dixon served the citizenry, latterly as a saintly, septuagenarian station sergeant. Anachronistic, incongruous and too good to be true he may well have become, but iconic he remains: a potent point of reference in contemporary debates about a return to neighbourhood beat patrols, prompting recent headlines such as “Dixon with a Mobile Phone”. Contrast this with the fate in February 2005 of another long-running TV cop show character, PC Jim Carver of *The Bill*. Two decades on from *Woodentop*, the 1983 pilot play that spawned “the nation’s number one police drama” ([www.thebill.com](http://www.thebill.com)), Carver – the original ‘woodentop’ of the title – has left Sun Hill Station, and sits alone in a bedsit, a bottle for company, reflecting on a career and life that have hit rock bottom: alcoholism, gambling, failed relationships, dodgy decision-making and ultimate self-destruction.

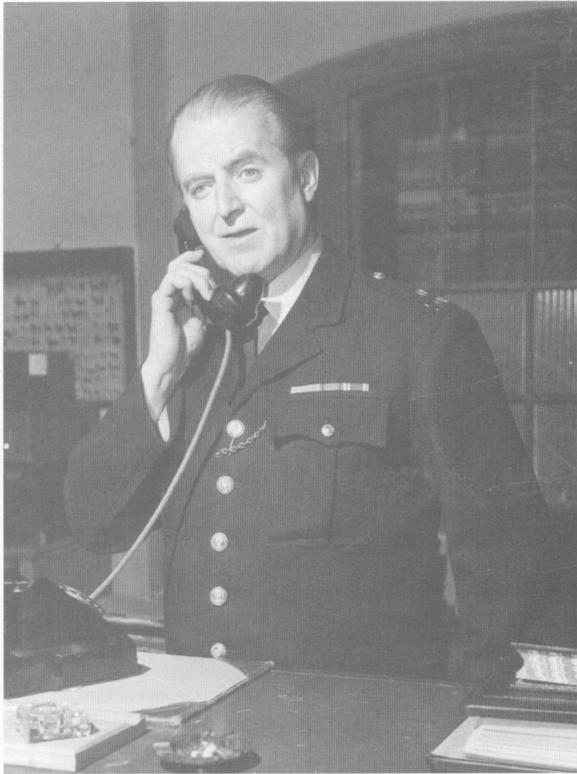
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Both characters illustrate how the contours of TV copland have altered over the last thirty years, suggesting ways in which the police procedural dialectic described by Robert Reiner (1994) has been played out, the contemporary TV fictional cop no longer representing reassurance and moral certainty, but rather risk and moral ambiguity. Elsewhere (Leishman and Mason, 2003, Chapter 6) we revisited Reiner’s thesis and posited how it has progressed in the intervening years. *Dixon*’s caring community coppering gave way to a wave of rougher tougher representations of policing beginning with BBC’s *Z Cars* in the 1960s and reaching its zenith with *The Sweeney*, an uncompromising portrayal of police as controllers fit for the politically charged law and order climate of the 1970s. In its earliest incarnation, *The Bill* established a kind of balance between the two poles of policing and also achieved an accommodation between CID and uniformed police.

In our view the programme that changed the

fictional British cop show landscape forever was J C Wilsher’s *Between the Lines* (1992 – 4), which inspired a new breed of ‘hybrid’ police procedurals where cop culture, corruption and conspiracy have become embedded features. No longer is police deviance portrayed in terms of ‘one rotten apple’, or the single clean apple in an otherwise rotten barrel, but rather as an ‘apple crumble’ effect. In today’s TV copland, under a crumbling façade of police propriety, good apples and bad apples coexist in a mix, and are not always easily distinguished one from another: ‘good cops’ are very often bad people. The focus on tight teams of three or four main characters working in a specialist area of policing has become a familiar format, for example in *Cracker* and *The Vice*. *Between the Lines* also extended the sights of the modern cop show beyond the public police, using news-responsive storylines to probe the dysfunctional activities of other members of the “extended policing family”, including private security and counter-terrorist operatives, as in the emblematic *Spooks*. In the hybrid procedural, in marked contrast to its more conventional counterparts, policing frequently fails and the guilty go free.

This brings us back to Jim Carver in his bedsit. By the late 1990s and early 2000s, *The Bill* began to exhibit this apple crumble effect. Long-serving characters – like Carver – began to develop serious character flaws and addictions, while a number of morally dubious, disturbingly corrupt and downright dangerous officers swelled the Sun Hill ranks. Interestingly the actors who played two of those – PC Eddie Santini and DS Don Beech – have essentially reprised their *Bill* bad boy roles in *Eastenders*. Like that other long-running soap opera, *The Bill* can be viewed as a mass-media morality play, defining the virtually real territory of a contemporary TV copland, where the central protagonists’ moral status is ambiguous and contestable. This is policing for the risk society where, unlike *Dixon*’s *Dock Green*, there is no happy homily for an ending. Increasingly, if viewers are searching for that, they have a choice of watching re-runs of *Heartbeat*, or else immersing themselves



6/11/1959@BBC

Jack Warner as PC George Dixon in 'Dixon of Dock Green'.

in the world of reality TV cop shows or both!

The police have not been immune to the vice-like grip that reality television has on prime time television scheduling. Indeed, alongside game shows and docusoaps, the cop car ride-along and repackaging of CCTV and police camera footage has been at the forefront of the shift towards infotainment. Shows such as *Police, Camera, Action!*, *Blues and Twos* and the American imports such as *COPS* have generated an explosion in reality TV police programming. Chase, arrest and accompanying interviews with the victim are all essential elements for the cop show ride-along which has to a significant extent supplanted more traditional forms of documentary – journalistic inquiry and radical interrogation – with a post-documentary format borrowed from advertising, drama and the music video.

What is most interesting in these shows is the counter-discourse regarding police propriety when compared to their more risky fictional counterparts. The cop-sided construction of events suggests an heroic, homogenous team keeping the British public safe in their beds at night. The dominant view of the reality police show is predicated upon a hierarchy of narrative, with commentary provided by the officers involved, while the partisan voice-over is ever keen to remind its audience of the perils of binge drinking, dangerous driving and antisocial antics on

the weekend city centre streets. This image, created and managed in large part by police-media relations professionals, equates to the crime fighting trope often championed by the police themselves. This image is in turn perpetuated by the media's over-reliance on the entertainment value of the law enforcement establishment and ultimately fails to adopt a critical stance on police work.

Conspicuously absent are the voices of those involved and/or arrested. Indeed, these two things are often conflated, with guilt inferred from the very fact that an arrest has been made, the pixelated faces of those captured further 'othering' them as 21st century reality TV digital folk devils. This is further underscored by allusions to older, conventional police drama, where the certainty of conveyor-belt criminal justice from police arrest to conviction is evoked by the *Sweeney*-esque phrase "you're nicked". Such constructions of events from an essentially police perspective in reality shows, present the very real possibility of prejudicing the trial of the defendant under the *Contempt of Court Act 1981*, not to mention breaches of privacy under *The Human Rights Act 1998*.

And so police propriety, ostensibly now more certain in reality shows than in fiction (or even in 'factual' news/coverage), is ultimately itself tainted by 'rule-bending', albeit on a less grand scale than in *The Bill*, *Between The Lines* or *The Shield*. By adopting the tone and traditions of the more conventional TV police fiction, the media can be seen as colluding in the justification of legal transgressions, namely that once the villain is caught, justice is inevitably done and the public are served. The public, however, are surely not well served if suspects' rights are routinely compromised, cheered on by the reality TV cop show and its complicit audience. It is not only the erosion of due process, witnessed by cameras and explained away by programme makers as a necessity of justice that is problematic, but also the decline and fall of media independence, in which they appear to reposition themselves from the role of observer to that of active protagonist. It is perhaps ironic that, cutting through the murky moral fog of TV contemporary copland, Dixon's blue lamp shines brightest not in fiction, but in factation. ■

*Frank Leishman is Professor of Criminology at Southampton Institute. Paul Mason is Lecturer in the School of Journalism, Media and Cultural Studies at Cardiff University.*

## References

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