Detection in a Complex Age:
Collective Control in CSI: New York

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Abstract
This article examines the rejection of the heroic individual detective figure in the popular forensic crime solving drama CSI: NY. It explores how this archetypal modern figure is replaced by an integrated network of technologies and human investigators. By paying close attention to the postmodern conditions of the information economy and the global political context of the first decade of the twenty-first century—specifically, the U.S. legal response to the threat of networked terrorism—the article asserts that the demise of the individual detective is inspired by the recognition of the limited capacities of individuals to respond to complex threat. In particular, the alternative vision to the individual detective developed by CSI: NY is shaped by changing relations between state and individual in the wake of the 2001 USA PATRIOT Act. Asserting the essentially conservative nature of CSI: NY’s collective detective, the article considers how mass fears of chaos and complex crime are consoled through a team of “everyman” investigators, who draw their moral authority from the collective social body, and who justify their access to and exploitation of comprehensive databases through their selfless commitment to protecting the security of the collective. The postmodern and posthuman economic and theoretical basis of this shift is explicated, as is the series’ reliance upon the technologies and information paradigm of cybernetics, in order to account for CSI: NY’s contribution to the long tradition of detection, and to assert how thoroughly this popular narrative of consolation is implicated in the economic and scientific contexts and the political concerns of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

Keywords
detection, complexity, individualism, postmodernity, technology