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# True Crime Obsession: Analyzing the Effects of True Crime Media from the Past to the Present

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GH 401: Honors Thesis

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May 6, 2024

#### Abstract

True crime media has affected the way people perceive the true crime genre from the 1500s until the present day. This thesis will first introduce the popularity of true crime media and describe the important role that true crime plays in today's society. Historical examples of true crime depictions will be outlined in the first section to display how the true crime obsession has been prevalent for centuries and how the examples compare to present day depictions. Once the history of true crime media is understood, the ethical boundaries that should be kept by podcast hosts and documentary directors is discussed for the purpose of highlighting the positive and negative effects of true crime media. Next, the psychological effects of overconsuming true crime media will be discussed to uncover how a person can become so enthralled with serial killers that they admire them, and act like them. Additionally, true crime stories publicized by new media outlets such as podcasts and documentaries will be analyzed to discover the effect they have on the true crime genre. Lastly, the relationship between law enforcement and the media will be established to connect how true crime media influences the way criminal investigations are conducted.

*Keywords:* true crime media, ethical boundaries, psychological effects, criminal investigations, historical examples

## True Crime Obsession: Analyzing the Effects of True Crime Media from the Past to the Present

### Introduction

A study by the Pew Research center states that "True crime is the most common topic among top-ranked podcasts – defined as those with highest average daily rankings on Apple's and Spotify's lists of top podcasts in a six-month period in 2022" (Nascer & Aubin, 2023). According to Naseer and Aubin from the Pew Research Center, 44% of women compared to 23% of men listen to true crime podcasts (2023). With true crime podcasts, they "have the ability to entertain listeners, but they can also serve as powerful storytelling spaces capable of drawing attention to complex issues in the criminal justice system" (Keeler, 2021, p. 124). The popularity of true crime has skyrocketed in the current age of technology and not just with podcasts, but with documentaries and books too. Roberts states that "35% of Americans consume true crime content (e.g., podcasts, movies, television shows, books, etc.) at least once a week and ...62% of American adults report being fans of media specifically about serial killers" (2023). True crime media has an impactful presence as a genre that draws a large audience. There are no simple reasons for human beings to develop a strong infatuation for true crime because it is a complex genre.

### **Background**

"The phrase 'true crime' is usually used quite broadly to include any true accounts or case studies of real crime and its aftermath" (Biressi, 2004, p. 402). For centuries, human beings have had an extreme fixation with true crime, but that should not come as a surprise due to its historical upbringing. "Despite the widespread appeal of what might be called 'true-crime culture,' its embrace by the populace generated controversy, especially among moralists who

frowned upon what they saw as others' taking pleasures in murderers' villainy and victims' misfortune, a tendency easily exploited for profit" (Whitehead, 2004, p. 62). Whether murder is happening on the screen, stage, or behind the microphone in a podcast studio, people cannot help but be enthralled by the experience. The dramatization of true crime began back between the 1500s and 1700s, when "hundreds of crime pamphlets—short, unbound books of roughly six to 24 pages, usually detailing horrific murders—circulated during this era" (Burger, 2016). The world's fascination with true crime is unnerving and psychologically fascinating due to the gruesome nature of the topic. There are many factors to consider when analyzing how true crime has become a spectacle, such as the ethics behind exploiting a person's death for monetary gain and the psychological effects of the public's close involvement with criminal cases. These factors are the most important to consider when examining historical and modern cases to understand the effects that true crime has had on society over many centuries.

True crime has evolved from documents describing recent crimes to podcasts and documentaries breaking down every detail of a crime. The growing obsession with the true crime genre has had a widespread effect on media due to the immense number of podcasts and documentaries that are being released today. Not only has this affected everyday crime addicts, but it has also torn a hole in the lives of victims' families that have to relive the horror once more. This horror may or may not be depicted accurately along with no consideration for the psychological or ethical concerns it may cause. The true crime obsession is an enigma that needs to be investigated from its origin to the modern age to fully grasp the tight grip that strangles society.

### The Unknown

It is difficult to pinpoint exactly when society started looking at true crime as appealing to watch or listen to, but it can be traced back to a variety of historical examples. From a psychological perspective, it is mostly unknown why the brain responds positively to gruesome horror stories in a way that allows for an uncomfortable amount of consumption. It is possible that loosely "participating" in these heinous crime stories gives us a purpose in the criminal justice system. In general, true crime makes people feel threatened and scared while also exotic and wild because the crime is not happening to them (Kaplan & Lachance, 2022).

Understanding the effects of true crime depiction and the gravitation towards it are the main curiosities that should be analyzed. In the nineteenth century, plays based on actual murder cases were being performed along with the distribution of documents that advertised crimes and executions (Kaplan & Lance, 2022). Monetary gain from exploiting real murders started out at the theater and has since moved on to television screens, but the motivation behind all the attention is still unclear. Ethics should be considered when displaying a person's murder story in the limelight, but it in many cases, money and popularity are considered the top priority.

Depictions of these murder stories bring about the public's theories, questions, and concerns regarding the investigation, investigators, and the progress. When examining a historical case of a daughter that supposedly killed her parents with an axe in 1892, "The New York Times provided factual, emotionless information, while the Boston Glove sensationalized the case with frequent references to "bloody hatchets and crushed skulls" (Burger, 2016). While both reports provided information on the case, they had vastly different writing styles that drew the line between fact and fiction. Whether reading, watching, or listening to true crime, one must wonder about the historical, psychological, ethical, and investigative impact it has on society.

### **Thesis Statement and Research Questions**

Although many factors of the true crime obsession have been delved into, the history, psychological impact, ethical implications, new media portrayal, and the effect on law enforcement have not been analyzed in detail, thus I propose to research the following questions to fully understand the effects of true crime media.

### How has the depiction of true crime changed over time since the 1500s?

The true crime obsession has been around since the 1500s with mass publication of crimes (Burger, 2016). The only thing that has changed is the effect it has on people today and the media platforms that true crime is displayed on. There is an abundance of history that can be delved into with the use of historical databases and real museum artifacts. To fully understand the impact of true crime media today, analysis of its history is crucial to see if human beings have always shared the same passion for the genre.

### What evidence exists that excessive true crime consumption has psychological effects?

An overconsumption of gruesome murder stories may impact a person's health and the effects of it must be studied. A deep dive into psychology and health journals will be conducted to find out how true crime affects a person who watches, listens to, or reads true crime excessively. This may be a challenge due to the lack of studies done in this area, but the hope is to understand a new perspective of true crime no matter the impact. Positive and negative psychological impacts will be analyzed to keep an unbiased narrative by gathering information from both sides. Theoretically, there should be more negative impacts of excessive true crime consumption, but it is a genre that enamors many human beings so it should come as no surprise if the psychological effects end up being more positive.

### What is the current discussion about ethical boundaries in true crime media?

Crossing ethical boundaries is one of the main concerns of true crime media, but the discussion surrounding it is unclear. Criminal ethics, criminology, and media journals will be the most useful when researching this question. Criminal ethics is a wide-ranging topic, so it should be easy to find information on it, but the challenging part is combining it with media portrayal. The media has become more advanced over the years leading to an abundance of publicized true crime stories, so journals within the last five years would be the most accurate. An in-depth discussion of how different types of true crime media are dealing with ethical boundaries in today's age of technology is the goal of this research question. In the end, the pros and cons of true crime media ethics will be analyzed to discover the best and worst ways that media is dealing with the boundary.

### How has new media platforms contributed to or negatively impacted the true crime genre?

Media platforms have a long history of distributing the true crime genre to consumers. When media platforms and types share true crime stories, the information may or may not be true depending on the source. Media outlets and criminology journals will be useful sources to find accurate data to analyze the major effects of true crime in the media. With many different media platforms discussing the same true crime stories, it is hard to know the truth, which has a negative impact on victims' families. The goal of this research question is to weigh the positive and negative impact that media platforms have on the true crime genre with the insight that there will be more negative effects.

# How has the depiction and public awareness of true crime affected the way law enforcement solves criminal investigations?

Public awareness is a main component of true crime stories due to the popularity that these stories gain. Legislation from government websites will be investigated to understand how

much the government does to protect criminal investigations from the public and media sources. The public may become invested in criminal investigations when said cases are publicized in true crime stories in the media. In certain cases, media attention can help with case investigations but many times, it can lead law enforcement down the wrong path. Due to the publicity of these stories, sometimes law enforcement may need a way to control the narrative to make sure confidentiality can be maintained. When the public interferes with criminal investigations, it may place a strain on law enforcement to solve cases ethically and professionally. The goal of this research question is to fully understand the legislation out there that protects the integrity of criminal investigations and assists law enforcement. Along with looking at legislation, it is important to analyze how true crime media helps and hurts law enforcement in criminal investigations.

### **Summary**

The true crime obsession has a history that has lasted centuries, but a lot remains unknown about it today. The purpose of this research is to fully understand how true crime media has affected psychological health, ethical behaviors, and criminal investigations.

Understanding the effects of true crime media will help uncover the cause of people's infatuation with true crime stories along with ways to improve media depictions.

### The Effects of True Crime Media

A list of contributions and ramifications on society and law enforcement can be made for the depictions of true crime. True crime documentaries, podcasts, and written stories have been glorified to the point of making the public question whether factual material is fictional. Diving deeper into research about true crime media will unveil the truth about the psychological effects of consumption, ethical boundaries, negative impact on the true crime genre, and the effect on criminal investigations. Depictions of true crime have been around for centuries, so it is critical to break down how the obsession has grown over time and how it relates to modern discussions of it (Biressi, 2016). Excessive true crime consumption psychologically affects people, specifically women, in a way that makes them fear violence, which is a phenomenon that needs to be discussed to fully understand the motivations behind the making of true crime media (Vicary & Fraley, 2010). Within true crime media lies ethical boundaries that hosts and narrators walk the line on while crossing over when they need to. With that in mind, new media platforms that have emerged in recent years have negatively impacted the entire true crime genre. Finally, depiction of true crime has affected the way law enforcement solves criminal investigations so much so that depending on media popularity, some cases may or may not get the attention they deserve.

### **Historical True Crime Representation**

### 1500s-1600s

Media coverage of crimes began in the 1500s with the use of chronicles and pamphlets to share stories with the public. "Medieval chronicles record acts of mayhem and murder committed by noblemen and rulers against each other, subject to retribution through revenge, feud, or warfare" (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1381). It was thought that the lower class were the main audience of true crime stories, but most upper-class members of society purchased publications and helped form the viewpoint of sensationalized true crime (Wiltenburg, 2004). The crime reports that came out in the Middle Ages tried to captivate readers with the graphic descriptions of the crimes. "Such features as emphasis on familial relationships, graphic descriptions of violence, and the inclusion of direct dialogue worked along with emotive language to enhance visceral effect" (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1382). The main difficulty with these reports was the

public knowing whether the information was factual or not. There is a similar problem with true crime media today because not every media outlet cares about the absolute truth especially when embellishments might make for a more entertaining story. True crime media started as crime reports and paper pamphlets, but it has evolved into much more in the modern era. Extending into the 1600s and 1700s, true crime depiction can be seen as a fear tactic to scare the public into obedient behavior and to humiliate criminals that may or may not have acted in a wrongful way.

### 1600s-1700s

Nothing begins the story of true crime depictions like public punishments that began one of the first forms of live true crime and emphasizes the public's infatuation for morbid entertainment. In the 1600s to 1700s, "Means of chastising an offender in public included branding, cutting off an ear, exposure in the pillory, sitting in the gallows with a rope around the neck, or standing in a public place with a sign proclaiming the offense" (Kealey, 1986, p. 163). According to a museum placard, "A letter representing the crime would either be pinned to the offender's clothing or burned onto their hand, cheek, or forehead with a hot iron" (Alcatraz East Crime Museum, 2016). People wanted to see wrongdoers punished, but it was not enough to just know that there would be justice, they had to see it for themselves.

Also in the 1600s was the Salem Witch Trials, specifically from 1692 to 1693, in which women and men were wrongfully killed for denying the use of witchcraft. According to Wallenfeldt, a writer for Britannica, "The number of trials and executions varied according to time and place, but it is generally believed that some 110,000 persons in total were tried for witchcraft and between 40,000 to 60,000 executed" (2024). They were hung in public, so the whole town could see what happened to those that mixed themselves up in witchery. These early

forms of watching people get punished for their actions have shaped our mindset as human beings as we have evolved to different forms of true crime representation today.

#### 1800s-1900s

In the West in 1882, an outlaw named Jesse James was shot in the back and betrayed by one of his own associates, Bob Ford (Keating). According to a museum placard, months later, his brother Frank allowed people to tour their family's farm and made them pay thirty cents to see Jesse James' grave (Alcatraz East Crime Museum, 2016). People were willing to pay money to see a person's grave, which makes the motivations of human beings even more interesting. The information about Frank giving tours for thirty cents could not be backed up by a scholarly source though, which shows that the museum may have embellished the history of Frank James to make for a more interesting story. Based on this fact, many people will believe many of the placards they see at museums even if they are untrue or exaggerated, which contributes to the negative perception of some true crime representation. Jesse James was a famous outlaw that some people only just heard of, so it is possible that they wanted to feel as though they were a part of his story. Whether a museum influences a person's perspective on historical representations of true crime or not, people still pay to see replicas or read the narrative that a museum tells. Seeing a grave is one thing, but wanting to treasure pieces of a gruesome murder to cherish as souvenirs is an entirely different story.

Fast forward to Bonnie and Clyde in 1934 when they were ambushed by getting 130 rounds shot at them according to a museum placard at the Alcatraz East Crime Museum (2016). The placard also said that "The ambush scene was immediately overrun by gawkers and souvenir hunters, taking anything they could, including cutting bits of hair and blood-soaked cloth" (Alcatraz East Crime Museum, 2016). According to FBI records, there was a crowd surrounding

the "bullet-riden" sedan (2016). Onlookers could not help but snatch up everything they could from the crime scene regardless of the horror that had just happened. There is even a replica of the shot-up car in the Alcatraz East Crime Museum in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, for true crime fanatics to awe over. The origins of true crime infatuation continue with these stories and can be connected to one fact—human beings are drawn to murder in more than one way and in more than one country.

The encapsulating effects of true crime were not only felt by those in America, but even more so in London. Numerous plays in London contained storylines of real murders that had happened, and people flocked to pay for them to entertain themselves. Whitehead states that people take "pleasure in murderers' villainy and victims' misfortune, a tendency easily exploited for profit" (2023, p. 62). Most true crime murder plays were put on by less regulated venues so they could display more gruesome stories. While these types of plays were not put on often, a few bigger homicide cases inspired larger productions later. In 1823, John Thurtell murdered William Weare and everyone became fascinated by this case especially since Thurtell was from a reputable family (Whitehead, 2023, p. 64). He killed Weare because he needed money and since Weare was a solicitor/gamester, he could get people to assist him in his murder plan. William ended up brutally murdered with Thurtell being sent to the gallows, while the news covered the whole story in detail as it played out (Whitehead, 2023, p. 64).

In addition to news coverage, as a souvenir after seeing Thurtell get hung, the 40,000 onlookers could get a commemorative mug with John Thurtell's face on it (Worsley, 2014). Due to all the coverage and popularity of the case, a playwright decided to write a play about it called *The Gamblers*. This play "revealed that theatre could achieve what newspapers, broadsides, and other print sources simply never could: an effective re-enactment of a sensational homicide,

complete with accurate scenography and real props connected with the crime" (Whitehead, 2023, p. 64). Although this play only lasted two days due to a court order to close, it set off a true crime popularity phase that continues to hold everyone's attention today. These examples only increase the mystery behind the true crime enigma because although some motivations such as pure entertainment purposes can be seen, the full story has yet to be told.

### 1900s-2000s

In the 1930s, true crime novels were becoming the most popular in Britain and Edmund Wilson, an American critic, suggested that "people who read true crime (specifically Agatha Christie novels) feel slightly better about living in an ever more dangerous world" (Worsley, 2014). Wilson described how the world was full of fear and hopelessness at the time with feelings of being unsafe, so reading about catching a killer felt exhilarating (Worsley, 2014). "The 'Golden Age' of detective fiction saw murder treated rather like a crossword puzzle" (Worsley, 2014). During this time, little kits were being sold in stores that included clues, matchsticks, and other pieces of evidence. Murder did not seem gruesome to people in this age because they had too much fun trying to solve puzzles in novels and 'Murder Dossiers' that were for sale. The hunger for true crime extended into the creation of 'The Detection Club' (Worsley, 2014). It can be perceived that murder stories at the time were viewed as fun and enticing as shown by the public actively getting involved in true crime whenever they could.

One of the most infamous cases in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was the case of Ted Bundy, especially when it came to the fascination that many young women had with him, even though women were his victims. His publicized trial and excessive media coverage led the public to be enamored by him regarding his mind and for women—his looks. In the Alcatraz East Crime Museum in Pigeon Forge, Tennessee, Ted Bundy's dental cast is displayed along with his typewriter. The fascination

behind the dental cast comes from it being the main contributor of his conviction due to matching it with a bite mark on one of his victims. The placard on the Ted Bundy artifact display stated that "the chips, alignment, and size of the teeth, were then able to be matched using this cast for comparison against a scale transparency of the photos taken of the bite mark" (Alcatraz East Crime Museum, 2016). A human dental cast cannot be that interesting to look at, unless it is from one of the most famous sets of teeth—Ted Bundy's. As human beings, there is a tendency to want to be a part of history whether it is morbid or happy. One of those parts of history is notorious serial killers that terrorize society. There is a sense of involvement when someone sees real artifacts from criminals. Another example of modern true crime depiction is the case of Jeffrey Dahmer, another infamous serial killer that preved on boys while also practicing cannibalism.

In 2022, the *Dahmer* series was premiered on Netflix and captivated America with the intense details displayed onscreen "surpassing the billion-hour mark in viewing time, making it one of the most watched series on Netflix" (Cohen, 2022). The realistic nature of the series stemmed from showing "actual 911 calls and sets designed to look exactly like Dahmer's apartment in crime scene photos" (Barr et al. 2023). The realistic nature of the series is what made it eerie and more interesting to viewers. This type of true crime media is one that has been criticized but also praised due to high viewership numbers which have increased profit for companies like Netflix. Dahmer has also been sensationalized by the Alcatraz East Crime Museum with their display of the handcuffs he wore and his signature on property receipts he sent out while in prison.

Just like with Bundy, the obsession with serial killers due to publicization extended to people that did not even know Dahmer. According to the museum placard, "while in prison, Dahmer received an enormous amount of mail and money, mostly from females who never knew him" (Alcatraz East Crime Museum, 2016). As true crime representation has evolved over time,

so has the impact that it has on people, particularly when it comes to their mindset. There are positive and negative psychological effects that true crime has on human beings, but it has only been analyzed in the modern era due to the abundance of resources available.

### **Psychological Effects of Overconsuming True Crime**

"Crime, and particularly violent crime, therefore, serves as one of the key 'selling' items for different media outlets in their competition for readers and viewers" (Nasi et al., 2020). Whether the media outlet is in film, podcast, or news broadcasting form, all of them try to outcompete each other for viewership. One must wonder how depictions of crime affect a person's mindset when they think about crime (Nasi et al., 2020). When people read, watch, or listen to true crime, something happens to the brain in a way that makes them think about the world differently. The world becomes a lot less innocent when stories of murder and gore enter the depths of a human's brain. Based on many studies, women tend to be more drawn to these true crime stories and are the most affected by them. "Although 57% of general podcast listeners are men, the listeners of true crime podcasts are more likely to be women, including 80% of the *My Favorite Murderer* podcast fan base" (McDonald et al., 2021). For women, it seems as though the drive to consume an abundance of true crime comes from fear of violent attacks against them, so they use true crime podcasts as a tool for information they can use as a weapon in a compromising situation (McDonald et al., 2021).

Fear is one of the main psychological contributions of true crime consumption, which can be seen as a negative and a positive side effect. On one side, fear helps people stay vigilant of their surroundings, which can keep them safer overall. On the other side, fear keeps people constantly on the lookout and can even make them paranoid, which is not the best way to live. Not only does fear overcome some true crime fanatics, but also the desire to commit a crime for

themselves to see what it would feel like. This is true for a 23-year-old true crime addict named Jung Yoo-Jung in South Korea who decided to kill a woman "out of curiosity" that stemmed from her obsession with murder depicted in books and movies (Zitser, 2023). Overconsuming true crime media gave Jung dangerous ideas in her mind that lead her to committing a heinous crime. This is not the case for all people who consume true crime media content, but in some cases, people cannot separate their reality from true crime stories, especially those in the true crime fandom.

An article written by Judith Fathallah "defines dark fandoms as 'communities of fans who identify with or otherwise celebrate those who have committed heinous acts, such as mass or serial murderers" (2022, p. 2). Some true crime fanatics take part in this sort of fandom online, while others tread lightly as to not empathize with or agree with murderers' actions. While many true crime fanatics act on their obsession only online, that was not the case back during the Ted Bundy trial when an abundance of female fans would show up just to see him. Some people in the true crime community on sites like Reddit and Tumblr "theorize that 'a lot of those "fangirls" and even those befriending vile murderers or rapists in prison have that complex of "I can fix him" (Fathallah, 2022, p. 8). With these kinds of issues being brought up within online sites, there is bound to be an effect on one's psyche or mental health. There are many threads of true crime fans that incessantly talk about loving serial killers, become fascinated by someone's complex mind, or even some that criticize the so called "Bad Fandom" as Fathallah puts it (2022, p. 4). Psychologically, these people that are a part of online true crime communities appear to have a different mindset about criminals than most people do. One person within a true crime community thread on Reddit made an observation about people that post extremely outrageous comments about killers. This person states that they "think part of it has to

do with being an outlier. People inherently want to belong, but they also want to be unique and different. Being a Bundy or Manson fan means you get to be part of something, but its not mainstream" (Fathallah, 2022, p. 10). Some true crime consumers believe that their mind works differently than others, so their perspective is unique and worth sharing. There is a good side to the true crime fandoms online that include those that have serious discussions about true crime cases, but do not fawn over serial killers in a way that is psychologically detrimental to one's mental health.

Consuming true crime content is not horrible for one's health if a person does not get addicted to it in a way that shadows their rational way of thinking. True crime media can instill fear in mostly women that makes them more aware of their surroundings, but also leaves them with feelings of paranoia (McDonald et al., 2021). One person can enjoy true crime content for entertainment with zero lasting psychological effects, while another person can kill someone under the influence of too many true crime stories. Overall, overconsuming true crime media has psychological effects on some people, but it is difficult to categorize or generalize the effects to a certain type of person. Along with these effects comes the ethical boundaries that true crime media should maintain to protect the public's best interests.

### **Ethical Boundaries in True Crime Media**

When true crime is depicted in the media, there are certain factors that should be taken into consideration such as the victim's family, the accuracy of the information, and the profit being gained for exploiting someone's personal story. Ethical boundaries have been crossed in the true crime genre many times, especially regarding docuseries or documentaries. In 2022, Netflix came out with *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* and many of the victim's families were not happy about it (Barr et al., 2023). "Shirley Hughes – the mother of murder

victim Tony Hughes – expressed her disbelief and anger at the production's use of her family's real name and details of her son's murder without "explicit permission" (Barr et al., 2023). This Netflix docuseries was able to exploit victims' families and gain incredible profits due to the popularity of true crime series. The team behind the show claimed to have reached out to the victim's families and got no response (Barr et al., 2023) but the team never asked if they could use their real names or how the families would feel about their sons' murder being shown on Netflix forever. There is an ethical concern when it comes to true crime media like this docuseries because legally, Netflix did not do anything wrong, but from an ethical standpoint, they can be attributed to wrongdoing. Documentaries/docuseries are one of the main true crime media outlets that raise ethical questions especially when it comes to case facts that screens do not always depict accurately.

True crime documentaries are not only popular today in the early 2020s, but they were just as popular back in the early 2000s. The documentary film from 2002, *Our Father the Serial Killer*, details a family accusing their father of heinous crimes and the investigation that results from it (Biressi, 2004). Biressi describes that "The documentary presents the pathology of its subjects (the harm they suffered and the case history of that harm) in a form that lurches between horrific, damaging or intense recollected events and representational strategies that elide such intimate confession with broader popular cultural myths of trauma - the bogeyman in the woods, the killer under the stairs, the mobile serial killer" (2004, p. 402). The journalist and the police that follow the siblings' stories about their father use intense investigative techniques to get the siblings to be vulnerable enough to drudge up the horrible memories of their past. This example of a documentary is a little different because it is the people in the documentary that are going through trauma rather than people on the outside reliving the horror of their case on the big

screen. There are many ethical concerns with this documentary because although it was made to find the truth behind the siblings' accusations, it became a film filled with photography and sound editing to make the overall story more suspenseful. "Personalized documentaries, together with other vehicles for confession, autobiography, the display of psychic and corporeal trauma, and so on, are arguably symptomatic of the ongoing transformation in public culture; of the erosion of distinction between private and public, inside and outside, personal suffering and public anxiety" (Biressi, 2004, p. 412). Documentaries dive deep into a person's trauma and can be emotionally invasive, which can be seen as problematic. The legality of true crime documentaries and podcasts is also a cause for concern because platforming someone's personal life on a screen or through audio without consent can and sometimes is perceived as an invasion of privacy. Invasion of privacy in the context of true crime media is technically only an ethical crime, but the boundaries are thin.

One of many questions regarding true crime content is "whether the right of publicity is implicated in true crime content and, if so, to what extent the crime victims, their families, the officials involved in the case, and the perpetrators themselves should receive protections" (Callihan, 2022, p. 5). Victims and their families do not normally choose to have their stories publicized, unless it is a cold case investigation that needs public and police attention. The publicity of true crime stories has increased in recent years with the expansion of media platforms, so the morals of the content creators are being tested. In the show *Mindhunter*, real stories are dramatized with the use of real victims' names, actors and actresses resembling real family members, and real killers' names (Williams, 2020). One of the cases included the depiction of two mothers, "yet neither of these real-life women were ever contacted by anyone connected with production of the show. The two women's valiant efforts to find justice for their

sons are utilized without ever giving consent to the show's use of their likeness" (Williams, 2020, p. 306). TV shows have the means to publicize a person's trauma without them even knowing it and there are no consequences. Movies and television shows that do not attempt to obtain the consent of the people that are being portrayed are not concerned with the ethics of their production if they have a good story to put out.

Another example like *Mindhunter* and *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* is a docuseries on Netflix called I am a Killer in which its second season had sixty million Netflix subscribers tune in (Chan, 2020). Mindy Pendleton's "stomach churned in the days leading up to the debut of the show, which Pendleton worried would glorify the killer who strangled 25-year-old Robert Mast in 2015 as he sat in a car in a Walmart parking lot" (Chan, 2020). Pendleton's stepson was Robert Mast, whose murder became featured on the show, I am a Killer. The producers contacted the family about putting this story into the show, but even when the family pleaded with them, they would not listen (Chan, 2020). People closest to Robert said that "it was inhumane to sell a documentary at the emotional expense of a grieving family" (Chan, 2020). In the docuseries, the killer is interviewed and is painted "in a relatively sympathetic light" (Chan, 2020) instead of the brutal killer that she was when she took Robert's life. The producer's decision to exploit a person's story with no regard for the family's best interest is a cruel and intentional way to put money in their pockets. Ethical boundaries were crossed in all three docuseries' examples in ways that put the true crime genre to shame. While these docuseries shed light on some cases that might have been forgotten, especially if it is a cold case, the way they are depicted causes victims' families to be continually

retraumatized. With the rise of new media platforms like Netflix, true crime has spread like wildfire and has impacted the genre in a variety of ways.

### **New Media Platforms**

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, new forms of media have become overpopularized making it impossible to go anywhere without hearing or seeing stories about crime. Podcasts are one of the most popular forms of media that generate a large audience to the true crime genre. The podcast Serial "became the fastest podcast at the time to reach five million downloads" in 2014 (Sherrill, 2022, p. 1473). It was also downloaded 1.2 million times and for over 1,000 days, the podcast stayed in the iTunes Top 100 (Sherrill, 2022). Serial sparked a true crime craze that led to the development of more podcasts like it and docuseries that detailed in-depth cases. Podcasts that have been released after Serial have developed more traction because they "provide a platform for voiceless victims and have been described as more "legitimate," less tawdry portrayals of crime storytelling than earlier true crime narratives" (Sherrill, 2022, p. 1474). Many true crime podcasts have gained the trust of their audiences with the use of credible source material while other podcasts pre-Serial debut have been criticized for portraying minorities as criminals more often than victims (Sherrill, 2022). The credibility of true crime podcasts relies on supplementary information they provide on their websites, such as court documents, case files, and photos of evidence and real people involved in the case (Boling and Hull, 2018). The rise of podcasts has revolutionized the public's involvement in true crime stories due to the speed that podcast creators possess as they publish new content every few days. Unlike regular news stations that relay crime stories in a short blip without all the details, podcasts talk at length about the days leading up to a crime and the entire investigation that follows. The mystery and the intrigue are

what keeps the public involved in these true crime stories, with podcasts ultimately contributing positively to the true crime genre.

Another form of media depicting true crime more frequently is documentaries, specifically those that are released on Netflix. Netflix has increased in popularity over the years especially when it comes to people watching true crime documentaries and docuseries. One of the most popular docuseries at the time of release was *Making a Murderer*, which became comparable to Serial in terms of audience involvement (Bruzzi, 2016). Both true crime media styles can be directly compared to see whether podcasts and docuseries are perceived the same. Bruzzi compares the two when she states that "The sense that the television audience is once more being 'jurified' is especially strong, but not in the same way as Serial's listeners are, in large measure because *Making a Murderer* much more definitively takes sides" (2016, p. 275). The docuseries strongly frames the case as a "miscarriage of justice" (Bruzzi, 2016, p. 276) while the podcast stays unbiased by stating the facts to allow listeners to produce their own opinions instead of shaping a narrative for someone to agree with. It is more difficult to remain unbiased with the making of a docuseries or documentary especially if it is a reenactment of a true crime story as opposed to real interviews from people involved in the case. The way that a docuseries or documentary is framed sheds light on how credible the information really is depending on the narrator of the story. According to Dosser, "The credibility of the narrator influences the credibility of the entire narrative, and the idea that there can be no narrative without a narrator helps to fill gaps in the narrative paradigm" (2023, p. 48). Depending on the narrator's take, the true crime story being portrayed onscreen may or may not suggest ideas to the audience that are not entirely accurate.

Other than Making a Murderer, Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story premiered on Netflix, which also influenced the perception of the true crime genre. As discussed previously in terms of ethics, some of the victims' families were outraged at the graphic imagery and use of real names without consent (Barr et al., 2023). The reenactment of such heinous crimes can cause backlash that most podcasts do not have to deal with. Comparatively, even though billions of people have watched the Dahmer series along with other true crime documentaries via streaming services, documentaries negatively impact the true crime genre. Onscreen true crime depictions are more open to interpretation than audio discussions because to make good documentary, there are certain elements that storytellers embellish to make for a more interesting or surprising story instead of sticking to the original narrative just like how Dosser said that the narrator has to fill in the gaps. The wrong conclusion to draw from this is that all true crime documentaries are bad and all true crime podcasts are bad. That is not the case because there are many documentaries out there that stick to the cold hard facts while some podcasts embellish the story to gain a bigger audience. Whether it is through a podcast or a documentary, the depiction of true crime stories affects the way law enforcement investigates cases by helping them and hurting them.

### Law Enforcement vs. The Media

As discussed in the previous section, documentaries and podcasts have a diverse effect on the true crime genre. Due to the popularity of these media platforms, billions of people can weigh in on criminal investigations. In some cases, media exposure can help law enforcement finally close a cold case. Cold case homicides shown on Netflix helped with a resolution to the 30-year-old murder case of Violet Filkins from 1994 (Eagle, 2023). Someone close to Violet started to remember conversations with a person named Jeremiah after she watched the story

unfold on Netflix. Jermiah ended up being the killer and the extra media attention can be credited towards the case's successful ending.

In a similar fashion, "The 2007 disappearance of Jaliek Rainwalker, a 12-year-old boy from Greenwich, captured national attention in February 2021 after his disappearance was covered in the Crime Junkies podcast" (Eagle, 2023). Numerous tips about the case started flooding in between 2020 and 2021 with many of them being worthy of looking into (Eagle, 2023). The danger of these tips though is that people get it in their head that they can really help with the case by doing their own investigative work. This can become highly problematic for law enforcement as Frankie Bailey, a professor of Criminal Justice at the University of Albany, says that they "lose a lot of time following up on those clues and they have to follow up on all of those even if they think they're far-fetched" (Eagle, 2023). While media attention might uncover new leads about a case, not all leads are good leads, which can delay investigations even further. Legislation comes into play with regard to how much information law enforcement can disclose to the media about a case.

As stated by the U.S. Department of Justice, the 1-7.400 – Disclosure of Information

Concerning Ongoing Criminal, Civil, or Administrative Investigations section of the 1-7.000 –

Confidentiality and Media Contacts Policy states that "An investigating agency may not disclose to a member of the news media or general public its recommended charging decisions in a criminal case without the approval of the appropriate United States Attorney or Assistant

Attorney General overseeing the prosecution of the case, or their designee" (2024). To break it down, law enforcement cannot talk about who they might charge for a crime without going through the proper channels. Even then, it is not wise to openly talk about an investigation in many cases because it can cause public fear, speculation, and potentially scare off the suspects.

The policies put in place regarding statements to the media can be critical for law enforcement to maintain the confidentiality of an investigation to avoid public input. In contrast to that, another section of the policy details that under certain circumstances, law enforcement may need to release information about ongoing investigations for the public's safety (United States Department of Justice, 2024). Depending on the specifics of an investigation, like in the case of a serial killer, law enforcement may find it necessary to warn the public and give out more information to the media than they might want to. Law enforcement works hand in hand with the media for certain cases, so they can get information out as quickly as possible, but the media does not always lend a helping hand.

Bill S.Con.Res.15 that was introduced to the senate on July 18, 2023 "Calls on the media to voluntarily adopt certain practices to prevent further harm from its coverage of mass public murders. Specifically, it calls for coverage that (1) denies murderers a public platform; (2) minimizes the potential for media reporting to increase the likelihood of future mass public murders (i.e., the media contagion effect); and (3) prioritizes the victims of, and heroism in the response to, mass public murders" (Library of Congress, 2023). This bill deals specifically with media reporting, but the point of it can be extended to documentaries and podcasts in the way they affect criminal investigations. Media reporting tends to sensationalize the acts of murderers by giving them too much media attention, which is what many media outlets desire. Giving murderers a platform can derail a criminal investigation and make it even harder to solve the case. While news, documentaries, and podcasts have the potential to burden law enforcement, there are also ways in which new technology and social media have assisted in criminal investigations.

According to Finklea, "social media is one tool in agencies' investigative toolkit to help establish investigative leads and assemble evidence on potential suspects" (2022). Law enforcement utilize social media to post wanted ads and maintain tip lines (Finklea, 2022). Social media enables the public to be informed about criminal investigations while also being a tool that law enforcement can use to their advantage. "Over 70% of U.S. adults are estimated to have used social media in 2021, a substantial increase over the 5% of adults who were believed to use some form of social media in 2005" (Finklea, 2022). Given its popularity, social media is the ideal way to get out information as quickly as possible. When used by law enforcement, social media develops a positive perception by the public due to the control they have over what is posted and when accessing certain information. "Police departments have continued to use different technologies to enhance their work, depending on their goals, resources, and culture" (Dewald, 2023). Social media can assist detectives in a variety of ways, which enables investigations to go smoother.

### Conclusion

True crime depictions have changed over the years due to the advancement of technology and growing interest in the true crime genre. It is no secret that human beings tend to enjoy gruesome stories about betrayal and murder, especially for entertainment purposes. From the 1500s to today, true crime media has taken on many forms including public punishment by hanging all the way to podcasts and documentaries. Some of the earlier forms were more brutal, but the same fact still holds true today—people cannot help but get involved in true crime media in one way or another. A few people even go as far as admiring serial killers within online communities by professing their love for them or trying to better understand their mindset (Fathallah, 2022). Thus, true crime media can psychologically affect a person in many ways.

Other than empathizing with serial killers, true crime media causes women to fear the world (McDonald et al., 2021), which protects them and makes them paranoid. The psychological effects and crossed ethical boundaries in documentaries can give true crime media a bad reputation.

Many documentaries have stepped over the line when it comes to using people's real names without permission and depicting gruesome murder scenes as discussed with many examples earlier. Documentaries also tend to display bias within the narrative while podcasts stick closer to the hard facts. The rise of new podcasts and documentaries on media platforms has contributed to the popularity of the true crime genre while also contributing to its criticism in various ways. A specific audience that true crime media has affected in a significant manner would be law enforcement. Criminal investigations have been negatively and positively impacted by overly publicized crime stories and it has influenced the way law enforcement conducts their investigations.

Each of the research questions analyzed gave insight into the effects of true crime media, but some of them led down different paths. For the historical depictions of true crime, the information gathered was expected for the most part. The number of true crime plays in London along with the gruesome pamphlets handed out were the most surprising. The extent to which murder was acted out and displayed was unknown, which emphasizes how important the research question really is. Many historical true crime examples were highlighted to show how human beings had the same obsession with true crime in the 1500s as they do today. More historical examples of true crime representation can be found, but for the purposes of this research study, not all of them could be included. Regarding the psychological effects of overconsuming true crime, there were fewer positive effects found than originally anticipated.

When researching the psychological effects of true crime media, there was a lack of information about the positive effects. Negative effects like empathizing with killers and killing people for fun were analyzed, which shows that overconsuming true crime media can be a problem for some. Even taking into consideration the effects that were found, there is not enough research done on the psychological effects of true crime media to gain a clear understanding. For future research, it would be beneficial to find information about the brain chemistry of someone who listens to and watches an abundance of true crime to see how true crime physiologically affects the body. Other than psychological effects, the ethical implications of true crime media were analyzed, and the results are not surprising.

Ethical factors to consider in true crime media are the victim's family, the accuracy of the information being presented, and the profit gained from the exploitation of a person's story. A plethora of examples of how ethical lines were crossed in true crime documentary making were analyzed to show how some true crime depictions cannot be trusted. Overall, the ethical effects of true crime media were researched to the full extent with very promising results that suggest that more regulation needs to be put on documentaries to protect victims' families and stop embellished storylines. Newer media platforms like Netflix have impacted the true crime genre in equally positive and negative ways according to the research.

According to Boling and Hull, the court documents, and cases files that podcasts have on their websites support their credibility (2018). Documentaries also gain credibility from sources, but directors tend to embellish ideas to make stories more interesting due to the narrator trying to fill in gaps (Dosser, 2023). Both podcasts and documentaries contribute to the perception of the true crime genre whether it is positive or negative. Docuseries like *Dahmer-Monster* have negatively impacted victims' families and popularized true crime stories have led to false leads

in criminal investigations. On the contrary, true crime stories displayed in the media have allowed for new leads to be followed and cold case investigations to be resurfaced. Overall, true crime media has equally contributed to and negatively impacted the true crime genre. The media has also affected the ability for law enforcement to conduct investigations.

Law enforcement and the media have a long and complicated history, which can be explained by certain legislation. The two examples of legislation detailed in this research were extremely helpful when looking at how law enforcement deals with the media during active investigations. There is certain information that police are allowed to disclose to the media and some information that the media can obtain regardless of permission. In some cases, like the Violet Filkins case, media exposure assisted with the investigation while in the Rainwalker case, media exposure prolonged the investigation (Eagle, 2023). In a similar way, social media assists law enforcement with investigations because it adds a tool to their investigative toolkit in a way that other resources do not (Finklea, 2022). With the research conducted based on the law enforcement versus the media question, legislation that protects law enforcement and the ways that the media has helped and hurt criminal investigations is more understood.

Within this research study, the peer-reviewed material came from criminology, psychology, media, history, film, and policing journals. The true crime obsession via media portrayal is a topic that spans multiple disciplines due to its widespread impact on today's society. True crime media affects the criminal investigation process, psychological health, and ethical values. Further research into true crime media could lead to investigating legal journals and mental health journals to gain a better understanding of the legality behind telling true crime stories along with the impact on those with mental health issues. While true crime media has

evolved over the years, the strong infatuation that people have for true crime stories remains the same today and will stay that way for many more centuries.

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