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From Serial to Subreddit: An Analysis of Modern True Crime and Web Sleuths

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FROM SERIAL TO SUBREDDIT

AN ANALYSIS OF MODERN TRUE CRIME AND WEB SLEUTHS

by
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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

FROM SERIAL TO SUBREDDIT:
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In this dissertation, I assert that the rise of the internet and social media has exacerbated the ethical concerns already present in true crime media.

This dissertation argues that true crime web sleuths operate as an effective public, shaping the true crime archive and the genre itself. The aim of this project is to explore the lack of borders between the role of consumers, content creators, web sleuths, and media outlets.

Via communication, affect, and archival theory I propose that modern true crime is dependent upon consumers ability to easily slip into the role of producer and vice versa. In the dissertation, I offer analysis of recent events related to true crime as well as various podcast, documentaries, and books. Finally, I discuss how current issues such as political radicalization and AI are currently shaping the true crime landscape. I use these examples as a starting point for conversation on where true crime currently is and how the genre might develop in the future.

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DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to my friends and family who have always believed in me. Thank you so much for your unwavering support. I love you each one of you bigger than the whole sky.

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Introduction

In December 2019, Netflix premiered *Don't F*ck With Cats*, a documentary miniseries that initially appeared to follow the standard format of true crime media. The series delves into the disturbing crimes committed by Luka Magnotta, a Canadian man infamous for his involvement in the violent killing of university student Jun Lin, documented in a series of gruesome internet videos. Magnotta first gained attention on Facebook after posting a video depicting the killing of a kitten, a disturbing act that earned him the ire of cat lovers and web sleuths alike. These online investigators, united by their passion for justice and the protection of animals, embarked on a mission to uncover Magnotta's identity and assist law enforcement in his apprehension. However, Magnotta, aware of their pursuit, engaged in a game of cat-and-mouse with the web sleuths, taunting them through increasingly violent YouTube videos. This escalating conflict between the Facebook group and Magnotta ultimately culminated in his arrest, revealing the complexities and challenges of online vigilantism in the digital age.

The first two episodes of the series give background on the case and cover the investigation. Interviewees were members of law enforcement, friends of the victim, and the web sleuths who led investigation efforts. The last episode takes a turn from a standard documentary to posing larger ethical questions. Deanna Thompson, one of the web sleuths and a main interviewee in the documentary, recounts with her co-investigator, John Green, the personal impact the investigation had on her life. She explains that the push to catch Magnotta was meaningful and formative for her. She even mentions that every year when a related Facebook post comes up in her "On this Day" feed she reshares it. Amidst the wistful recollections, Thompson begins to question the harm that might have come from her own actions. Thompson relays that she has concern about what level the online sleuth Facebook group contributed to

Magnotta's need for attention stating in the documentary, "Were we complicit in Luka's crimes?" While these questions provide a reflection on what transpired during the mini-series, the analysis from Thompson is short lived. Abruptly, after Thompson's wistful and nostalgic trip down memory lane, she turns directly to the camera and begins to question the audience's motives for watching *Don't F*ck with Cats*. Thompson asks if the audience members are the ones to blame for the problem. While staring directly into the camera Thompson chastises the audience stating, "And you, you at home watching a whole f*cking documentary about Luka Magnotta, are you complicit? Perhaps it's time we turned off the machine." What Thompson is saying is that true crime fans, or even casual viewers, are just as responsible for feeding Magnotta's desire for infamy as the web sleuths were. This ending is vastly different in tone than the normal conventions of the true crime genre, which in part adds to its shock value. There is not a wistful reflection on an unsolved case, or solemn reflection on the idea of justice – just one documentary participant questioning why anyone is watching in the first place. While the end is jarring and might leave viewers feeling a sense of guilt laden responsibility for what they have just watched, I think the question raised by Thompson might not be the right one to ask. Or it is simply one question in the larger picture. While Thompson, and by extension the team behind the documentary, might want viewers to take on a sense of guilty responsibility, I think that there are larger issues that the documentary raises about true crime at large.

In asking if the viewer is complicit in the media attention associated with the international manhunt to catch Magnotta and fueled his desire for attention and infamy, film writer and popular culture critic Kayleigh Donaldson critiques the documentary's shocking ending in her article, "Netflix's Don't F**k With Cats Documentary Does So Much Wrong." Donaldson puts forward the assertion that maybe the documentary is at fault stating, "Whatever intentions they had and however noble they were, *Don't F**k With Cats* ends up embodying the worst of true crime's more voyeuristic and complicit elements, even as it tries to point the finger at the audience it so desperately wanted to entertain" (Donaldson). As Donaldson highlights–who really is to blame here? The documentary cannot shirk all responsibility. It is fair to say that the documentary contains many of the infotainment pitfalls that true crime is often accused of. For example, the documentary largely forgets about the victim Jun Lin in favor of a deep dive into the murderer's life and actions. Nods to the value of the victim's life are only made at the end of the documentary, with one of the victim's own friends stating that Lin has been lost in Magnotta's memory. At the end of *Don't F*ck with Cats,* we are still left with the mess of true crime and left to wonder whose fault it is that people turn again and again to stories of murder.

It seems hypocritical, if not reductionist, to blame viewers for watching the documentary when it is the actions of Thompson and fellow web sleuths that created the content the documentary is even based on in the first place. Yes, viewers, including myself, pressed play, but what about all the people who funded and greenlighted the project at Netflix? What about Thompson herself who agreed to be interviewed for the documentary? What about her fellow web sleuths who continued their online crusade without pausing to reflect? While she acknowledges the harm her sleuthing actions might have caused, she does not seem to extend the same feelings toward her own participation in the show. For Thompson to identify a singular party who is at fault for the ethical mess that is the cycle of true crime production and consumption is to ignore the complicated nature of the online ecosystem.

The documentary underscores one crucial aspect: the blurred boundaries among consumer, producer, and participant within the true crime community. It prompts reflection on the community's role in the cycle of media consumption and creation. Consumer attention emerges as one of the most prized commodities, offering true crime enthusiasts a plethora of options. They can choose to watch new documentaries on various streaming platforms, listen to podcasts, or watch adaptations of podcast stories. Alternatively, they might tune into YouTube for commentary from channels dissecting high-profile investigations, or engage in discussions on Reddit, sharing their own web sleuthing discoveries with fellow enthusiasts. True crime fandom offers diverse avenues for participation, ranging from passive consumption to active engagement, which has drawn scrutiny from both scholars and the news media in recent years. Since the advent of Web 2.0, the internet has become a platform where everyone seemingly has a voice and can participate in various activities. Even if opinions are deemed too extreme or invasive for mainstream platforms, there are niche forums on the internet that welcome such discussions and conspiracy theories with open arms.

Defining True Crime

True crime often blurs the lines of genre; this is potentially the reason that scholars have had such different definitions of what constitutes true crime. The progression from print to television to social media over the last 50 years has vastly expanded the kind of media labeled as true crime. Defining true crime has never been an easy task. In the following section, I use multiple authors to build a definition for this project.

Separating true crime from other genres is one of the key issues in defining true crime. Where the hard boundary should be drawn between true crime and other types of media is a common issue. What makes true crime different from genres like news media and crime dramas? Some might argue that since all of these types of media cover crime, it might seem like the differences matter all that much. However, true crime is not just a genre, it is an entire discourse community that operates with its own rules and controversies that I explore in this project. As a result, it is important to look at how true crime's definition has varied between scholars. True crime scholarship often involves defining what true crime is not, rather than what it is. As a starting point, we can look to Durham, Elrod, and Kincade's widely cited article "Images of Crime and Justice: Murder and the 'True Crime' Genre." In their 1995 study, Durham et al. give the following definition of true crime:

> This genre presents accounts of actual crime cases, often in narrative form. The appeal of the genre is that it purports to be about the real world, not merely the fictional world of the novel. Although true crime magazines, such as *True Detective*, have long captivated large readerships with the gruesome details of real crime cases, other media forms have recently become more heavily involved in portraying such cases. Movies, such as Goodfellas, and television miniseries, such as *To Catch a Killer*, have brought actual criminal cases to life before millions of viewers. (144)

What Durham and coauthors suggest here is that true crime depicts real life events, related to crime, in an organized narrative style. I also think it is important to note that part of the above definition points to the appeal of the genre. This is important to note because the lure the genre provides for consumers is a reoccurring theme in defining true crime. Durham and coauthors emphasize, the requirement that true crime depicts real life events has been held up as the main defining characteristic as can be seen from scholars mentioned later in this section. However, it is important to note that one of the key contradictions in Durham et al.'s definition is the reference to media such as *Goodfellas*. The issue with this element of their definition is that while meeting all three of the previously mentioned criteria for true crime, the 1990 film is played by a cast of actors, adding a layer of fictionalization to the story. Additionally, Mark Fishman and Gray Cavendar (1998) also present a definition of crime show that bleeds also into the realms of reality tv with programs like *America's Most Wanted* factoring into their definition of what they call "television reality crime programs" (13). In Chapter 4 of this project, I explore the way that fictionalization of documentaries are an important component of the true crime genre, but for the purposes of this project, films that are adaptations of true stories will be excluded from the definition of true crime.

This is not to say that there is not anything valuable to glean from definitions of true crime that bleed into the fictional. For example, in her 2018 book Alice Bolin notably put forward her definition of the "dead girl show," a genre of media that is concerned on a superficial level with the deaths of young white women. While Bolin writes about true crime, she also factors in crime dramas/mysteries such as *True Detective* and *Twin Peaks*. While these shows depict crime, they lack a core element of what separates true crime from other media. I want to be clear, Bolin's definition of the "dead girl show" offers an invaluable framework for raising many of the ethical issues within true crime. Bolin builds upon and credits Gwen Ifill with the creation of the term "white woman missing syndrome." Like the definition put forward by Durham et al., Bolin's argument clearly identifies a major problem in the genre while not settling on a satisfying set of boundaries for what exactly the genre is, particularly, with consideration to the true crime offerings available on streaming platforms such as Netflix. There is a difference between documentaries such as *Making a Murderer* and fictionalized shows based on true events like *Mindhunter*. The use of footage and interviews from real people as opposed to actors adds a component to true crime media that needs to be considered in its definition.

Where the line is between truth and fictionalization, as well as what impact that distinction has on storytelling, has been addressed by other major scholars in the field. Noted true crime scholar, Laura Browder, tackles the issue of detective stories vs. true crime by illuminating how the two genres handle the issue of reality. Browder proposed the following distinction, “The label of “true” crime gives the material in these books the aura of fact – an air of authority enhanced by the journalistic, “non-literary” style in which they are written, by the thick description of events, and by the inclusion of supporting photographic and other documentary evidence. This perceived factuality removes the responsibility for aestheticizing violence from both the writer and the reader of such works” (125). Where Durham and Bolin blur nonfiction and fictional stories into the same category, Browder aims to separate the two. Browder brings into the conversation the concern of aesthetics and responsibility. She highlights that nonfiction or documentary style is a style of storytelling. It still takes artistic license but hides behind the guise of being completely factual. Browder is not just drawing the line for true crime at media that is nonfiction, but also pointing out that nonfiction does not get a pass for “aestheticizing violence” (125). Browder’s definition echoes the research of communication scholars (Thussu, Savolainen, Surette) who focus on the combination of information and entertainment, coined as the term infotainment. What is most important to glean from Browder’s definition is the emphasis on the element of aestheticizing violence. Her definition argues that the journalistic nature of true crime seems to create an illusion that the way violence is portrayed was not a matter of artistic choice, but a matter of fact. This is where we see Browder’s definition link to more vague parameters of true crime such as Bolin’s dead girl show, which I mentioned earlier.

With the boundaries set forward by other scholars in mind, I define true crime as media content aligned with the definitions of infotainment, and nonfiction in nature. While shows like *Law and Order* and *CSI* have had a notable impact on popular culture, because they largely are marketed and presented as fictional stories inspired by real events, I have opted to leave them out of this body of research. I aim to explore the problems that come from a genre that proports to be true and factual, rather than media that is in fact fictional.

Definitions of true crime continue to evolve to factor in changes in communication and technology. In his book *Toward a Theory of True Crime,* Ian Case Punnet opens his argument with an exploration of the complicated nature of pinning down the boundaries of true crime as a genre. One of the concrete observations he offers is critical for the parameters of this project, specifically that the genre is “multi- platform” (16). This means that true crime shows up in books, on TV, streaming platforms, and social media. The expansive number of forms that true crime media can take is important to this project. Social media platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, and YouTube have changed the landscape of the genre and inevitably another platform or media type will arise, shifting the landscape again. Tanya Horeck also places a similar emphasis on the multimodality of the genre in the introduction to her book *Justice on Demand*. Horeck argues that true crime includes the following variety of media types, “TV shows, websites, GIFs, and apps—in a media convergence culture” (3). The multimodal component of her definition might seem obvious, but often research on true crime focuses on just one format in isolation (Yardley, Boling). Addressing that different media formats interact with one another is an important factor to consider when defining the genre.

For the purposes of this research, I define true crime as media that claims a documentary or nonfiction style. The media must be directly about real life events and cannot contain fictionalized characters, settings, or events. I view the problem of shifting mediums as a “yes...and...” dynamic. While TikTok and YouTube are not books, the observations made about those forms of true crime can act as base for understanding rather than being viewed as outdated or inapplicable. As a result, I did not put a limitation on the kinds of mediums true crime comes in or this research will cover. I adopt Horeck's view that there is a participatory element to consuming true crime, as well as Zizi Papacharissi's concept of affective publics. When it comes to examining the actions of armchair sleuths on platforms like YouTube and TikTok, participation is central to what defines true crime in this decade.

History of True Crime

While true crime might seem like a recent phenomenon, it has a long history dating back hundreds of years. From the sixteenth to the eighteenth centuries, crime pamphlets were popular among the masses. Violent and sensational media was circulated mostly among the upper and middle classes who were literate or semi-literate as opposed to the lower or working class (Burger, Wiltenburg, Sacco). Moving forward in time, the next defining moment for true crime as a genre occurred with the publication of Truman Capote's 1965 novel *In Cold Blood*. True crime as we know it now emerged from the mass success and subsequent controversy of the book (Punnett, Browder, Boorsma, Stoler). After Capote's, the next popular prolific and controversial true crime author was Anne Rule. Most known for her 1980 book *The Stranger Beside Me*, recognized as a defining text in true crime history (Browder, Horeck). Rule's novel focused on her personal relationship with serial killer Ted Bundy. Rule famously referred to Bundy, and later the killers she wrote about in her later work as "anti-heroes" (Moyer). Rule's writing set the stage for continued national obsession with sensationalized violence and death. After Rule, the next defining moment in true crime's history was the rise of podcasts set off by the 2014 release of *Serial* (Horeck, Boling and Hull, Yardley). *Serial*, hosted by Sarah Koenig, focuses on the murder of Hae Min Lee and the conviction of her ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed. As of September 2022, a judge has vacated Syed's conviction, Koenig's investigative work is, in part, credited with the legal advancements in the case (Levenson). The success of *Serial* launched true crime to the forefront of popular culture. It is the first podcast to win a Peabody award and is estimated to have been downloaded 300 million times.[1]

True crime has always been a controversial genre, captivating and horrifying its audiences. However, since the genre's recent renaissance, true crime has received renewed popularity and criticism (Weinman). The question then arises, where has true crime progressed in the almost decade since *Serial* began the 21st century wave of true crime? For this we need to turn to social media, where true crime is thriving and reaching a large audience. Within the past year there have been two incidents on TikTok that have raised questions about the ethics of true crime.

*Don't F*ck with Cats*, although distinctive in its accusations directed at viewers, does not stand out in terms of its content or narrative style. While previous crime stories have been disseminated on the internet, the new issue arises from the fact that these stories, due to their absence, are evolving and emerging online as they take shape. In an era where nearly everything can be transformed into digital content, it is crucial to grapple with the blurred interplay among participants, producers, and consumers. Is every true crime consumer, as implied in the conclusion of *Don't F*ck with Cats*, complicit in the true crime dilemma? While I concur that the documentary both generates and deflects blame onto the viewer, I also believe that, as a true crime artifact, the series offers valuable insights (Donaldson). Rather than solely attributing blame to one party, a more productive approach would involve zooming out and considering all the involved parties. Viewers are not only invited to engage in these complex narratives but are frequently prompted to cross ethical boundaries. Content creators and social media platforms

[1] https://www.forbes.com/sites/marisadellatto/2022/09/21/serial-leads-apple-and-spotify-podcast-charts-after-adnan-syed-freed-from-prison/?sh=44fae1b45554

have incentives to publish copious amounts of sensational content, driven by ad revenue and income from subscription-based models. Viewers are not merely succumbing to a basic human impulse to consume; they are encouraged to cross that threshold, not just by the provocative documentary itself but also by the landscape of both the documentary and their community.

Methodology

I have chosen to implement affect as a theoretical framework for this project because true crime is a highly emotional and community-based genre. Primarily, I utilize the work of communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi from her book *Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. She outlines the concept of an affective public and puts forward the following five criteria:

1. Affective publics materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints.
2. Publics support connective yet not necessarily collective action.
3. Affective Publics are powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, which in turn produce ambient, always-on feeds that further connect and pluralize in regimes democratic and otherwise.
4. Affective publics typically produce disruptions/interruptions of dominant political narratives by presenting underrepresented viewpoints.
5. Ambient streams sustain publics convened around affective commonalities: impact is symbolic, agency claimed is semantic, power is liminal. (127)

Because true crime has an active, large, and participatory fan base, examining the genre via Papacharissi's framework will help dissect the complicated relationship between media, producers, and consumers. While true crime is not a political movement, such as the examples that Papacharissi includes in her research, the criteria are still helpful for looking at the true crime community. The group is just as active online as many of the social movements that

Papacharissi documents in her work. While the five criteria might not fit exactly to all aspects of true crime, I still anticipate that it will be a helpful framework in examining what is happening online.

Papacharissi's thoughts on the impact of technology on communication are useful to my research. She explains how technology links us together when she writes, "Technologies network us but it is narratives that connect us to each other, making us feel close to some and distancing us from others. As our developing sensibilities of the world surrounding us turn into stories that we tell, share, and add to, the platforms we use afford these evolving narratives their own distinct texture, or mediality" (5). While Papacharissi is specifically discussing Twitter in her book, the sentiments that she expresses can be applied to TikTok in this project. Platforms themselves do not bring about social change or controversial social movements; however, they do enable the communities that then bring about collective action. Papacharissi in this quote presents a framework to understand social media not as a force but as a place that has its own landscape that then grows and houses online communities. This is key for understanding what is currently happening in the true crime online space.

In addition to Papacharissi's writing on publics, I also implement the work of Whitney Phillips. She addresses some of the internet's most troubling behaviors, such as those exhibited by trolls and incels. While I am not suggesting that true crime fans are identical to these groups, Phillips' insights shed light on how true crime enthusiasts might engage in extreme online actions. In her examination of 4chan, she observes that trolls are primarily focused on creating spectacles. Phillips articulates the core of what is happening with extreme behavior online when she writes in her book *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, "trolls and sensationalist corporate media outlets are in fact locked in a cybernetic feedback loop predicated on spectacle;

each camp amplifies and builds upon the other's reactions, resulting in a relationship that can only be described as symbiotic" (52). Because true crime is influenced both by fan actions as well as corporate media, I find Phillips explanation to be useful for my work. By using the framework, she puts forward for understanding the inner workings of such extreme communities, I believe that we can come to a more robust understanding of true crime.

I also utilize Sara Ahmed's influential book on affect, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion.* Ahmed covers a wide range of the impacts that emotional responses have on social and political life. Her work is relevant to this project as she discusses the impact of fear on human relationships. She explores this idea in the introduction of the book, noting that, "Fear shapes the surfaces of bodies in relation to objects. Emotions are relational: they involve (re)actions or relations of 'towardness' or 'awayness' in relation to such objects" (8). I integrate Ahmed's work on fear to intertwine an understanding of power dynamics with issues of race and gender. My argument posits a correlation between the surveillance and control exerted by the state over certain bodies and the dynamics within the true crime online space. This environment is characterized by volatility, and Ahmed's framework offers insights into how fear may influence both the production and consumption of content.

My methodology for this project is largely based in the concept of affective publics. I also have incorporated scholarship that issues the adjacent idea of Actor Network Theory (ANT). Papacharissi's work focuses mostly on political protest and anti-regime movements in online spaces. Her work provides a strong backing for this project because it accounts for the complicated way that social media users interact and disseminate information. In addition to Papacharissi's work, I have incorporated Whitney Phillips' concepts about internet trolls. While not all true crime fans can be categorized as trolls, it is important. I implement Phillips' ideas around how communities create controversy and conspiracy as well as how trolls have been highly successful in their doxing practices. Beyond the immediate action of internet users, I use Phillips' work to discuss how these movements continue to thrive online despite various changes in popular platforms and regulations.

In addition, in Chapter 3, I implement archival theory from Carolyn Steedman. I am proposing the use of archival theory to understand the current state of true crime discourse. I believe that archival theory, in combination with the work of communication scholars, can offer true crime scholars a way of addressing the ethical issues raised in the genre. The kinds of questions raised in archival theory such as "what information gets saved?" and "who is in charge of deeming information as valuable?" The work of Carolyn Steedman will provide the basis upon which I build my methodology for Chapter 3.

Comparable Works

There are several notable books related to my research. The published works that are the closest in topic and scope to my projects are *Justice on Demand* by Tanya Horeck, *Fear, Justice, and Modern True Crime* by Dawn K. Cecil, and *Awful Archives* by Jenny Rice. Horeck's book is the first scholarly book on true crime to consider the specific implications of streaming platforms on the ethical issues of the genre, such as privacy and gender-based violence. My work is a departure or offshoot from Horeck's because she mostly focuses on the production of Netflix programs, and I would like to incorporate social media platforms such as TikTok. The internet is ever changing, thus including new and popular social media platforms is key. Social media platforms are the places where true crime fans converge and create content. Additionally, beyond being a place to gather, the internet also serves as an archive for the true crime genre. Every relevant moment is captured and saved to be reused and called upon by fans.

Horeck draws a clear distinction between producers and consumers, a topic that I find to be somewhat ambiguous and deserving of further investigation in my research. Although Rice's book *Awful Archives* doesn't directly address true crime, it provides insightful analysis on related topics such as the function of law enforcement archives and the internet's role in storing and structuring information. I aim to extend Rice's discourse specifically to the domain of true crime, particularly concerning ongoing debates involving armchair sleuths—citizens who engage in online criminal investigations. I explore the connection between prosumers and archives. A common refrain I have heard over the course of researching true crime media is "What are we supposed to do? Stop watching it?" What I hope to examine in this project goes beyond the basic ethical dilemma of whether to click play on a documentary or YouTube video, as social media platforms grow and the distinction between true crime viewer, investigator, and content creator evolves. I want to unpack complicated intersections of financial gain, fandom, and content creation to create a more nuanced answer to this question. What has become evident to me is that within the genre there are layers of participation. The role of a passive consumer is vastly different from that of a "web sleuth" or podcast host. I am interested in examining this avenue of research because it departs from the common research questions in true crime regarding sexualization of women's bodies.

Ethical Concerns

While many genres have controversial fan bases, the reason it is so important to consider ethics in true crime is due to the sensitive nature of the subject matter. To understand why this project is necessary, it is important to first recognize the current ethical dilemmas/landscape of the genre. A recent incident on TikTok highlights the convergence of fans, media, and personal gain. TikTok, a social media platform launched in 2016, has quickly become one of the main homes for the true crime fan community. It has become such an influential platform; even news media outlets now pay attention to what is happening on the app.

In the wake of the death of four University of Idaho students, TikToker and self-proclaimed psychic Ashley Galard began posting conspiracy theory videos about the case with little or no consideration for the validity of her claims.[2] Specifically, she targeted professor Rebecca Schofield, accusing her of the murder of the four university students. The question arises, what does Garland have to gain from these actions? One idea would be the social or financial capital she gains from being famous on TikTok. In the same vein of misinformation, the online harassment of Sabrina Prater also raises questions about the ethics of true crime in the digital age. Prater, a trans woman, posted a video on TikTok of herself dancing to a remix of Shania Twain's song "Any Man of Mine," on November 11, 2021 (Dickson). What ensued was a horrifying wave of conspiracy theories and anti-trans sentiment. TikTok "armchair sleuths" began to make up theories that Prater was a murderer. Users dug into Prater's TikTok posts, pulling any detail they felt backed up their conspiracy theories.

With these two events in mind, researchers are left to ask, what is happening on the internet in relation to true crime? Clearly there has been a large shift from reading a true crime novel for pleasure in the 1980s to harassing individuals and engaging in misinformation in the twenty-first century. It may seem that conspiracy in true crime is inconsequential. After all, it is something people watch or listen to for fun; however, conspiracy and misinformation are dangerous. We have culturally come to reckon with this truth in the political arena over the last few years. With some of our country's leaders actively participating in or having allegiances to

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[2] https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDqrLJ-N6LU

groups like QAnon and watching a group of radical emboldened domestic terrorist attack the U.S. capital – the danger of conspiracy has played out on a large stage. Our favorite social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and Facebook are prime sources for misinformation and conspiracies.

Literature Review

Because the genre has been viewed in specific silos, mass media, criminal justice, journalism – the frameworks applied to analyzing true crime have often been limited in scope and have not considered the complicated relationship between consumers and producers. In this portion of the literature review, I cover past work to build a base understanding of where past scholarship on the genre has been.

There are three major avenues of focus in true crime scholarship: 1) The role true crime media has on audience perceptions of crime rates, 2) The contributions of true crime media to social causes and movements, 3) How true crime impacts audience perceptions of law enforcement. In the following literature review, I cover these categories to paint a detailed picture of what scholarship has come before my work.

Media Influence

Communication scholarship helps to support and inform why studying true crime matters at all. It would be easy to view it as a low-brow genre consumed by the masses and move on. However, communication scholars provide a framework for understanding how media shapes our perception of the world. This is a critical line of scholarship when it comes to true crime as the genre deals with real world issues such as the legal/prison systems and gender-based violence.

The work of communication scholars examines the impact of crime media on viewers' perceptions of crime. While most research does not differentiate between true crime and news media, the findings are valuable in understanding how media shapes consumer attitudes. The foundation of this approach to discussing crime media comes from the work of George Gerbner. Gerbner established part of the foundation of cultivation theory in his 1970 article "Cultural Indicators: The Case of Violence in Television Drama." In this article, Gerbner explains his concept of the cultural indicator. He identifies a gap in communication research at the time when he writes, "Consequently, much of our high-powered research on how people respond and behave in specific situations is unenlightened by insight into the common cultural context in which and to which they respond" (70). The core claim of Gerbner's theory was that television has a strong influence on how consumers view the real world. He was clear to state that his theory does not provide direct answers for what people think or do. Instead, these indicators will help find commonalities in what people think and offer reasons as to why. His data collection shows that depictions of violence on television "mirror, rather than illuminate our society's prejudices" (80). What Gerbner means here is that there is no larger statement being made about violence in our society, it is simply being reproduced and fed back to us in media.

With Gerbner's theory acting as the foundation for much of the work in communication scholarship, the focus has stayed in line with Gerbner's original framework to show commonalities rather than specific behavior. For example, Colleen M. Ray and Lisa A. Kort Butler in their article "What you See Is What You Get? Investigating how Survey Context Shapes the Association between Media Consumption and Attitudes about Crime," aimed to make the data about crime and media more detailed and nuanced than it previously has been. According to the coauthors, the following was their main intention for the project: "In this project, we asked how news and other media trends might tacitly influence survey data in such a way to intensify (or weaken) the relationship between media consumption and attitudes about crime" (916). They spread their study out over the course of several years to mitigate the impacts of singular news events. The research specifically was focused on adult Nebraskans in 2011, 2015, and 2016. Ray and Butler found that local news had the most impact on people's perceptions of crime and its prevalence. Like much of the research before it, one of the limitations of Ray and Bulter's work is that they did not account for the impact of social media. While their intense look at one location for an extended period is helpful for proving the impact of media, I do believe that their findings can be expanded to a larger scale.

For my hypothesis, I see their work as helpful because true crime fans often are part of the community for years and have long term exposure to media that potentially shapes their actions and world view. What I find most useful about Ray and Butler's work is the way it can support the affective public element of my work. Often, the national attention online sleuthing cases garner start at the local level.[3] It is important for my work to consider national news and viral content online, but also how those stories start as local news. I feel that my research could add nuance to this discussion as media consumption and knowledge exchange continues to drastically change. True crime has shifted from books, cable television, podcasts, streaming platforms, and now to social media platforms. What researchers after Gerbner have acknowledged is perceptions change as media platforms change. I would like to continue to contribute to this conversation, as in an era of instant and viral media it is important to reconsider how media exposure is shaping audience perceptions.

[3] https://www.texasmonthly.com/true-crime/glen-mccurley-carla-walker-murder/

Bridging the communication and true crime perspectives, one of the most notable studies that has defined true crime scholarship and discourse is the 2010 paper published by researchers Amanda M. Vicary and Chris Fraley, "Captured by True Crime: Why Are Women Drawn to Tales of Rape, Murder, and Serial Killers?" The study, focused on true crime books, seeks to answer the question of why women are drawn to stories where they are the victims (Vicary and Fraley 81). Though the study was performed before the boom in digital true crime content, such as the surge in podcast popularity or the rise in streaming service exclusive specials, it still proves to be a widely cited and useful study for examining true crime media. What Vicary and Fraley do that transcends the focus on print media, is they interrogate the relationship between consumer and content, asking, as I am in the dissertation, what it is about a particular type of material that audiences find engaging over other options. Vicary and Fraley are widely cited as the main study that examined consumer motivations around true crime consumption. While their research focused on true crime books, their work is still applicable because while the most popular medium for true crime has changed, the concern surrounding why consumers would pick one piece of media over another is still of concern.

Justice Potential

One avenue that researchers have taken is digging into the questions about the genre's social justice potential. This has posed such a major issue for scholars because of the real-world impact of a select few podcasts, such the previously mentioned impacts of *Serial*. The question of whether or not podcasts like *Serial* are a one-off fluke, or the norm, has opened an avenue of discussion for academics. There is a prominent debate about how much influence true crime podcasts have on the judicial and legal systems. As I present in this section, there are a variety of opinions and perspectives on the issue of social justice and true crime. In one of the first major scholarly books on true crime Mark Seltzer (2006) presents the argument that true crime might in fact make viewers blind to social justice issues that need work because within the narratives issues of incarceration are normalized and expected (Seltzer 41). This is a crucial viewpoint This issue is mirrored by Buist, Slakoff, and Goldberg (2023) in their argument that because true crime ignores the realities of queer people's lives and their struggles with the criminal justice system. What is important to note here is that there is a body of literature that points to the ways that true crime does not allow for positive social justice outcomes. Instead, the genre acts as an antagonist to these goals.

In contrast for some researchers, the genre holds the opportunity to be a powerful force for justice. In her essay, "True Crime Podcasting: Journalism, justice, or entertainment?" Kelli S. Boling identifies a major gap in communication research on true crime. She notes that there is almost no work that involves interviewing or surveying podcasters on their perceptions of the genre (161). Boling explains that she selected podcasters as her interviewing pool because they are a largely unexplored group in true crime research and have complex perspectives on the genre. Boling found were that podcasters feel that they are educating the public on issues of criminal justice. None of the interviewees felt that they were manipulating the audience and they all expressed that they put an extensive amount of work into their research. Overall, the article presents true crime podcasts as a force for good, focusing on a very small portion of the genre's ecosystem. Boling is not alone in her stance on the social justice potential of the genre. Boling also argued for the healing potential of true crime media in her 2023 article "'It's that 'There but for the Grace of God Go I' Piece of It': Domestic Violence Survivors in True Crime Podcast Audiences." In this piece Boling turns her focus to survivors of domestic violence and their relationship to the true crime genre. She argues that survivors view the medium as a way to both process their own trauma and educate others on the realities of domestic violence. While I appreciate that Boling's argument for centering survivors, where I feel scholarship in this area could be expanded is considering the depictions of families of victims. It is also important to consider the ways that true crime might create an inaccurate perception of domestic violence via its sensational narrative style.

Scholar Michael Buozi presents a similar argument in his 2017 article, "Giving Voice to the Accused: Serial and the Critical Potential of True Crime." Using Foucault's writings as his theoretical framework, Buozi rhetorically analyzes the depiction of Adnan Syed in the podcast *Serial*. Buozi claims that the podcast gives Syed a voice that he was denied in traditional media or in the criminal justice system. What I find controversial about Buozi's stance on the genre's potential for justice is that in privileging the voices of the accused, the voices of victims are further marginalized and decentered in true crime narratives. The focus on the accused over the victim complicates Buozi's claim for podcasts to be a revolutionary tool. Buozi's argument is important because it helps to contextualize the podcast boom of the 2010s as an important source of social change. This same logic appears also Stella Bruzzi's 2016 work where she focuses on the relationship between social justice and the narrative structure. Bruzzi presents the conclusion that despite the elements of documentaries that seem similar (i.e. editing and music choices) that documentaries hold the power the create social change. Bruzzi concludes her article with the following statement "Documentary can clearly serve justice, just as the law can provide riveting entertainment; it is important, perhaps, to remember not to blur the two" (280). Where Buozi focuses on the potential of podcasts, Bruzzi's work helps to contextualize true crime podcasts within the conversation of justice.

While Buozi and Boling present compelling research for their stances, there are scholars who view the genre as doing more harm than good. For researchers Elizabeth Yardley, Emma Kelly, and Shone Robinson-Edwards, the harm the genre causes are a result of its status as a consumable product under capitalism. In their article "Forever Trapped in the Imaginary of Late Capitalism? The Serialized True Crime Podcast as a Wake-up Call in Times of Criminological Slumber," they explain that criminology has long explored crime representation in media but has not looked at the impact of capitalism on the genre. Their conclusion is that podcasts "pay lip service" to topics of social justice but fail to articulate those messages fully. Though their research is specifically focused on the economic set-up of podcast creators and their income, I see the outcomes of their research as potentially applicable to exclusive streaming content. What is not directly stated in any of these articles is that power is at the core of true crime's justice potential or lack thereof. The reality that some are afforded the resources and credit to have their story told or tell their own stories is an underlying theme that emerges from these sources. While both of Boling and Buozi make valuable contributions, they both lack a consideration for the implications of race on the social justice potential of the true crime podcasts; Boling fails to consider the race of both the podcast's hosts and the victims. In failing to do so, we are not given a look into how that might impact the media that hosts are producing. What these researchers did not account for in their research that I would like to tackle in my project is how the presence of conspiracy theories complicates the genre's relationship to the criminal justice system and justice reform. This project fills in that gap in research.

Law Enforcement Perception

Because law enforcement is always a key player in true crime narratives, the discussion about how consumers view law enforcement has also played a critical role in shaping true crime discourse. This branch of inquiry has largely come from criminal justice researchers. While the scholarship I discussed in the previous section focuses on perception of crime, there is research that has shifted the focus of the conversation to the perception of law enforcement. This is a key difference because the previous sections touched on issues such as a general fear of crime rates or the likelihood of victimization. The discussion of law enforcement by criminal justice scholars touches on factors such as race and personal interactions with police.

Alexis Durham, H. Preston Elrod, and Patrick Kinkade argue that true crime has major sway over its viewer's thoughts on criminal justice. Their work in "Images of crime and justice: Murder and the "true crime" genre" found that true crime media is a major influential factor in Americans' understanding of the criminal justice system" (146). This article is important for understanding the relationship between true crime and criminal justice Scholarship following Durham et al. has asserted their stances on true crime and crime media having an impact on its viewers understanding of law enforcement (Kort-Butler and Hartshorn, Intravia). Notably, however, what the previous research I have discussed has not considered is that true crime media is the main source of information about law enforcement for some Americans. To see how powerful media is in the face of lived experience, researchers Valeria Callanan and Jarded Rosenberger explore the impact race might have on police perception. Their article "Media and Public Perceptions of the Police: Examining the Impact of Race and Personal Experience" explores whether those who had firsthand experience with law enforcement would be impacted by media representations of law enforcement. Researchers found in their data participants' personal experiences with law enforcement are far more influential than participants who only consumed media about law enforcement with no personal experience. The researchers explain that the level of violence is the key determiner in influence, with in-person experience being the most traumatic and violent.

While work on media perception has provided valuable knowledge for the field thus far, the work cited here always revolves around the same questions: Does media impact people's belief that crime will happen to them or that where they live have a high rate of crime? It is helpful that scholarship is expanding to include variables other than media exposure alone, but largely remains tethered to Gerbner's original framework. The hypothesis that media does impact viewer's perception of crime rates, as seen in the cited literature, has been proven across a wide range of communication scholarship. What these studies do not bring into context are the other behavior that might emerge from watching news or crime media. It is critical to consider not only how someone's perceptions might be altered but the actions that they take because of those perceptions. It is also important to note that when coming into contact with news or crime media there are other important factors such as race, class, gender, and location that impact a person's actions. This is where I will offer my conception of the role of conspiracy theory in the true crime space.

Argument

I propose that no one party is responsible for the state of true crime today. It does true crime a disservice to only look at consumers, streaming platforms, or podcast hosts as the driving force behind the landscape of the true crime community. The problems within the genre are too complex for one group to be fully responsible. Rather, I adopt an approach that factors in the morphing nature of the internet with the convergence of the producer and what Phillips calls prosumers. Prosumer is a term that dissolves the boundary between production and consumption. The term acknowledges that in consuming content, consumers will turn around and create their own content. This contrasts with how we might typically think of producers and consumers and firm categories with no overlap.

For this dissertation, I explore how contemporary true crime can be understood by examining the genre as an affective public where producers and consumers are one in the same, rather than series of isolated pieces or types of media. I explore the ways true crime media paired with social media and the internet led us to this era of internet sleuths. Unlike before the internet era, fans now have social and monetary gain when producing content and interacting in the community. Being a true crime fan has gone beyond enjoyment and has moved into the realm of personal gain. True crime has moved from a genre to a public; people have always exhibited extreme behavior they are just engaging in those acts in a different way now.

True crime media and fan actions are based on a collective and performative response to the genre. In the digital age the line between who is a fan and who is a content producer is more blended than ever. The cycle of true crime content creation can be understood as the introduction of new content, followed by a highly emotional response by fans, subsequent content creation of content by fans, and then the cycle returns to initial content creation by producers such as Netflix and major podcast networks. By understanding true crime as an ongoing collection of media as well as actions and reactions of prosumers collected and stored on the internet, I hope to provide a more comprehensive understanding of what is happening in true crime right now. I argue that what defines true crime is the internet convergence of a controversial genre and social justice issues to create complex ethical questions about activism online and storytelling.

Chapter Overviews

Chapter 1 – Web Sleuths

In Chapter 1, I provide a definition of web sleuths and explore their functioning within online spaces. The chapter delves into the blurred boundaries between research and entertainment inherent in the true crime genre. I examine the emergence of web sleuths and analyze how their behavior has been depicted in various documentaries over the past five years. Moreover, I aim to establish a direct correlation between the surveillance and control exerted by the state over certain bodies and the activities of the true crime community. I investigate whether the true crime community operates as an affective public and, if so, how this influences online interactions. To frame my analysis, I employ the concepts of affective publics and prosumers. I argue that there exists a cyclical pattern in contemporary true crime media, wherein content creation by major platforms like Netflix inspires viewers to become web sleuths, who then transition into prosumers generating their own content. However, a significant issue within this cycle is the prevalence of misrepresentation and misinformation at every stage, contributing to the toxic subculture of web sleuths depicted in the media examined in this chapter. Relevant true crime media discussed in this chapter includes the Netflix documentaries *Why Did You Kill Me?* and *Crime Scene: Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*.

Chapter 2 – Podcasts and Intimacy

In this chapter, I utilize Sara Ahmed's book "Cultural Politics of Emotion," alongside insights from other affect scholars, to delve into the role of intimacy in podcasting and its intersection with power dynamics. I aim to explore the boundaries and intersections between news media, content creators, and consumers, blending concepts of prosumers and affect theory to elucidate the desire among true crime fans to feel close to podcast hosts. Specifically, I analyze the podcasts *Serial* and *My Favorite Murder*, both of which gained widespread popularity during the podcast boom of the 2010s. Additionally, I examine the emergence of

CrimeCon and its provision of an in-person platform for the intimate experiences listeners seek when engaging with podcasting content. The central focus of this chapter is to investigate how true crime media has cultivated a dynamic relationship with its audience amid the podcasting boom.

Chapter 3 – Reflections on Media and Art

Since true crime media continues to steadily maintain popularity there have been many parodies or mimicries of the genre. In this chapter I reflect on what these pieces of media add to the true crime archive. How these pieces of art offer larger overarching commentary on their issues raised in the rest of the dissertation. I examine the show *Only Murders in the Building* as well as the young adult novel *Sadie* by Courtney Summers and *Jane* by Maggie Nelson. I draw parallels between the three texts exploring the ways in which they offer counter narratives to the predominant messages in the true crime space. What do true crime parodies and mimicry teach us about the way true crime fans operate? In this chapter, I utilize an archival lens by implementing Carolyn Steedman's concepts of dust and the rag rug. The aim of this chapter is to offer commentary on what pieces of media are providing counternarratives in contrast to the homogeny of true crime media.

Chapter 4 - Ethical True Crime

In Chapter 4, I delve into the ongoing discourse surrounding ethical considerations in true crime media. Drawing on Banet-Weiser's insights on branding, I analyze true crime as a media product often characterized by a distinct brand image. Central to this discussion is the ethical and moral responsibility of both true crime enthusiasts and content creators regarding their engagement with true crime media. The structure of true crime narratives often prompts viewers to assume roles associated with complex power structures such as judges, juries, and law enforcement officers. This chapter delves into the concept of "jurification" among the audience, as identified by scholars, and further explores how the framework of true crime media fosters extreme online behaviors. To enrich this exploration, I incorporate the perspectives of scholars like Phillips and Horeck, who shed light on how true crime media facilitates and encourages sleuth-like behavior among consumers. I also examine the expectations ingrained in true crime viewers and discuss the challenges inherent in striving for ethical true crime content, including factors such as narrative structure and consumer demand. The analysis encompasses various media forms, including podcasts like *Something Was Wrong* and *What Came Next*, documentaries such as *The Staircase*, and the TikTok phenomenon Who the F*ck Did I Marry. Throughout this chapter, my primary objective is to scrutinize the discord between victims' voices and the capitalistic nature of the true crime genre.

Chapter 5 - Conclusion

I conclude the project by reflecting on up-and-coming issues in the true crime space such as AI, connections to the alt-right, and live streamed trials. In this chapter, I explore how the issues presented in the project as a whole have the potential to evolve and morph. I draw parallels between current ethical issues in the true crime space and how what we know about those issues might be illuminating for the emerging concerns in the true crime space.

Chapter 1: Web Sleuths

Introduction

In 2020, the documentary *American Murder: The Family Next Door* captivated audiences with its portrayal of one of the most shocking murder cases in recent US history. The film delves into the tragic killing of Shannan Watts and her three children by her husband, Chris Watts, shedding light on their financial struggles and Chris's secret affair. Online forums play a crucial role in the speculation surrounding Shannan's death. However, discussions about Shannan's death extend far beyond the boundaries of the documentary. Years later, there is still intense interest in the case, particularly on Reddit's subreddit R/ShannanWatts. These discussions delve into invasive details, from Chris's daily life in prison to the family's financial woes leading up to the tragedy. Each of Watts' Facebook posts provides web sleuths with fodder to speculate if there is some angle or clue in the case they have missed. This curiosity reflects the community's relentless quest for information, fueled by easy access to digital data. Sadly, this often reduces Shannan's life to mere fodder for online speculation, exploiting her memory for the thrill of amateur sleuths. The ongoing focus on Chris's life post-conviction and the spread of speculative theories highlight the power of online forums like Reddit as modern-day courts of public opinion. It raises the question: what draws people to the world of amateur sleuthing?

True crime fans are actively involved in shaping news narratives on social media by highlighting aspects of cases they find compelling and repeatedly sharing them. However, this flurry of activity can sometimes result in the dissemination of decontextualized and inaccurate information. What is intriguing about true crime's relationship with the internet is its ability to spur real action among its followers. While some merely watch true crime content passively, others transform into amateur investigators using platform like Reddit and Facebook as the hub for their investigations. When fans take justice into their own hands, a complex interplay of pros and cons emerges. While some actions yield positive outcomes, there are valid concerns about privacy implications when amateur sleuths overstep boundaries from well-intentioned to invasive behaviors. These enthusiasts, lacking the training of professional investigators, often accumulate vast amounts of information on individuals who may not even be suspects or pursue leads that ultimately go nowhere. For web sleuths, the perceived potential of a clue often outweighs its actual viability in solving a case.

In the subsequent section, I will delve into the communication and community dynamics of web sleuths conducting surveillance activities outside the realm of police investigations. Crime and media production on the internet present a complex landscape. I argue that these instances exist on a spectrum of ethicality, with varying degrees of harm or assistance and proximity to misinformation or factual accuracy. This chapter explores not only the structure of online fan communities but also how this structure influences the trajectory of crime cases. The impact of viral web sleuth cases prompts us to question the consequences of decontextualized misinformation when true crime enthusiasts engage in more extreme actions. This examination underscores the convergence of true crime entertainment and the vast research potential afforded by the internet, shedding light on some of the most troubling aspects of American surveillance and sleuthing engagement.

Defining Web Sleuths

It is imperative to begin with a comprehensive understanding of the term *web sleuth*. Sleuths are recurring characters in popular culture; books and games that aim to engage consumers in interactive mystery narratives continue to see financial success. Iconic figures such as *Nancy Drew*, the works of Agatha Christie, classics like *Clue*, and the adventures of the *Hardy Boys* and the *X-Files* exemplify positive depictions of sleuths and the act of sleuthing. All the examples I listed above are fictional and are relatively harmless; issues arise when the love of mystery spills into reality. For example, commercial entities such as Barnes and Noble have introduced a board game franchise titled *Hunt a Killer*, wherein participants are furnished with an evidence packet, tasked with unraveling a fictitious crime, thus exemplifying the pervasive appeal of solving mysteries for recreational purposes, as underscored by popular media. There is minimal harm in playing a game like *Hunt a Killer* during a night with friends; however, in reality, investigating actual crime cases can impact people's lives. What may appear to be a harmless product mirrors consumers' desire to take control of a criminal investigation. While most people may simply be able to play the board game and move on, for others, the desire to be an amateur sleuth is all too real. For web sleuths, the act of investigating serves as a hobby and a community they regularly engage with for entertainment.

The terminology chosen to describe this collective group of online amateur sleuths holds significance, as it not only defines their actions but also avoids assigning them undue authority or expertise. I opt to use the term web sleuth because it implies an amateur status, unaffiliated with any formal group or investigatory body. One of the defining characteristics of web sleuthing is that individuals conduct their own investigative work while frequently sharing their findings with an online community through social media. It is crucial to comprehend the factors that unite web sleuths, as these communal bonds shape their actions and values. To gain a deeper understanding, I posit that web sleuths form an affective public. Communication scholar Zizi Papacharissi explores this interconnection of technology and online activity in her book *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politics*. Papacharissi defines an affective public: "Drawing from research presented in the previous chapters, I suggest that crowds become mobilized via online networks of support in ways that discursively render *affective publics.* I define affective publics as networked public formations that are mobilized and connected or disconnected through expressions of sentiment" (125). She then goes on to include "Importantly, however, the architecture that enables networked publics to attain discursive materiality is an architecture that thrives on, invites, and rewards sharing" (126). The key factors of her definition that I want to emphasize in this chapter are *resharing* and *sentiment*. Publics continue to exist because resharing is a key component of how they determine community values. To reshare a post is to endorse the values in that post, whether it is a reputable news article or a video filled with conspiracy theory.

The community of web sleuths creates an atmosphere in which they could create a conspiracy that has potential to become a nuisance or harmful to investigators. This is not always the case, and some communities exist without interrupting reality. However, I am interested in the interruptions. Thus, first, I want to explore what joins web sleuths together as a community, and then outline how the community breaks down and falls into the realm of conspiracy. Affective publics, according to Papacharissi have five defining characteristics:

1. Affective publics materialize uniquely and leave distinct digital footprints
2. Affective Publics support connective yet not necessarily collective action.
3. Affective publics are powered by affective statements of opinion, fact, or a blend of both, which in turn produce ambient, always on feeds that further connect and pluralize expression in regimes democratic and otherwise.
4. Affective Publics typically produce disruption/interruptions of dominant political narratives by presenting underrepresented viewpoints.
5. Ambient streams sustain publics convened around affective commonalities impact is symbolic, agency claimed is semantic, power is limited. (Papacharissi)

Communities are easily connected online in the age of social media platforms such as X (formerly Twitter) and TikTok. Anyone can log on at any time and interact with content about their favorite shows, music, or podcasts. It is easy to contribute to discourse on any given topic. The internet's arrival has given rise to an intriguing phenomenon: online fan communities can now generate content that seamlessly integrates into their unique community's domain. This makes discourse complicated because fans can turn back around and make content themselves about the very things, they are interested in. Gone are the days when fan and producer are two separate categories. With this blurring of categories comes a host of issues regarding ethics. The concerns about the state of digital communities have not missed the attention of researchers. Papacharissi refers to this blending of roles by referencing Axel Brun's definition of produsage as "a collaborative creation and extension of information that blurs the line between audiences and journalists (34). She goes on to explain produced content has several implications such as offering alternatives to mainstream news controlled by an oppressive government. Or, where news organizations are shut down due to financial constraints or there is a lack of trust with the news available. The line between who makes content and who consumes it is more of a blur than a hard line. As Papacharissi and Brun point out, there is good that comes from a prosumer or produsage system. When mainstream news networks are engaging in information control a citizen produced information network can be a major help in keeping dissenting discourses going. Prosumers are, as the name would suggest, a blend of producer and consumers, in the age of the internet there is no longer a fan who only consumes content and that is the extent of their participation in a community. Part of this practice is turning around and producing content, in this example, to feed the true crime online archive. Where web sleuths get complicated is that they aren't just posting their thoughts and opinions, these thoughts and opinions turn into doxing, violations of people's privacy, and misinformation. It is not just the act of producing any content, it is producing content that will feed the speculation and conspiracy that many true crime fans love most.

It is also critical to note the term vigilante also comes up in academic discussions of web sleuthing. I opted to not include the term vigilante into my parameters around web sleuthing for a host of reasons. In their article on digital vigilantism authors Gilles Favarel-Garrigues, Samuel Tanner, and Daniel Trottiernote explain the term "vigilante" is "politically loaded, invoking a particular light, with repercussions in terms of their perceived legitimacy" (191). "Vigilante" is often coopted by right wing groups that leverage cyber activities against marginalized communities (191). The subject positions of a sleuth vs. a vigilante are very different. The former term implies information gathering or investigative practices with the latter implies an actor deciding on a course of action they view as an alternative form of justice. There is certainly an overlap with the term vigilantism. I will be arguing that while web sleuths are highly organized, they should not be granted the kind of legitimacy that leads to political power. In other words, web sleuthing is very different from community policing which can be defined as "a collaboration between the police and the community, where the two can identify and solve community issues together" (Pumphrey). To implement terms such as vigilante or community policing would give web sleuthing a sense of social and political legitimacy. My goal with this chapter is, rather, to prove how entertainment intersects with an affective public resulting in extreme online behavior. It is important to reinforce the amateur nature of web sleuths in contrast with law enforcement and the judicial system. In short, I am interested in outlining the internal workings of web sleuths as an affective public, not justifying their existence in relation to the criminal justice system.

Extreme Behavior in Web Sleuthing

The interactions that unite web sleuths as a collective are further solidified when they delve into conspiracy theories. Engaging in the collective dissemination of misinformation not only distances web sleuths from reality but also tightens the bond among them. This dynamic results in a fragmentation of motives and outcomes, leading to potentially unethical behavior. Even endeavors aimed at challenging oppressive power structures carry the risk of devolving into practices like doxing (Favarel-Garrigues et al). The act of sharing, responding to, and generating online content related to a case, especially when it's rooted in group-generated realities rather than facts, marks the threshold where web sleuthing actions become concerning.

Public awareness about web sleuthing can largely be traced back to the Boston Marathon bombing and the Reddit community response to it. On April 13, 2013, athletes lined up to race the Boston Marathon, one of the largest racing events in the world. The event proceeded as it had every year before, until 1:49 pm when two bombs went off near the finish line. Three people died and close to 200 were injured (ADL). What followed was arguably the beginning of web sleuthing as we know it today. As the FBI scrambled to catch those responsible, civilians took to Reddit, spreading misinformation that ultimately resulted in harm to the FBI investigation and pain to the families of those falsely accused. The Boston Marathon Bombing brought into clear view a phenomenon that did not exist during other attacks in US history – a web presence ready to act as investigators. It cannot be ignored how close web sleuths operate to conspiracy theorists. Part of the Boston Marathon bombing conspiracy was antisemitic conspiracy (ADL). Before diving into the bombing, I want to give context to discuss the roots of forum discussions and how easily they turn toxic. When discussing media about murder and violence, which is already sensational, I would like to show where fan behavior becomes extreme. To dox someone means to reveal their sensitive personal information with ill intention (Nguyen). There have been a growing number of doxing incidents in the true crime space.

To understand doxing's prevalence in the true crime public, it is important to understand the roots of extreme online behavior. Whitney Phillips, a communications scholar examines trolls online and how they cause controversy. Web sleuth behavior runs a spectrum of severity, and so does the extreme online behavior.[4] Phillips explains in her 2015 book *This is Why We Can't Have Nice Things* that online behavior can run the spectrum from appearing to be sociopathic to politically motivated (49). Phillips dives into the inner workings of the infamous forum 4chan, a platform known for misogyny, racism, and xenophobia. She highlights how content on 4chan works its way into the mainstream, becoming part of everyday discourse. She uses the example of Anonymous, a hacktivist group that started as part of 4chans /b/ board (57). Anonymous was heavily featured in the true crime documentary *Roll Red Roll.* In the documentary about a sexual assault case in Steubenville, Ohio, a subsect of the group hacked into the local high school football team's web page to post information about sexual assault cases involving members of the team. While the actions in *Roll Red Roll* were helpful to the victims of sexual assault, Anonymous roots are problematic. At first Anonymous was a community moniker for everyone participating in the creation of derogatory meme on the site. The group slogan reflects the original intentions of the group "none of us is as cruel as all of us" (57). The group's original mass hacking efforts were not justice oriented, but rather focused on trolling and cyberbullying. Now, Anonymous is known for being a global hacktivist collective, mostly divorced from its 4chan past. What may start as fringe internet communities can become mainstream with ease.

[4] Phillips references that sometimes trolling online can have feminist intentions, for example, witches planning to hex political figures or people donating to Planned Parenthood in the name of anti-abortion politicians ("Anti-Fans").

This raises the concern of distinguishing between actions associated with web sleuths, who may appear mainstream but have connections to fringe groups. The prevalence of web sleuths in documentaries and in new media illustrates the creep of extreme parts of the web into our daily lives. Phillips explains what this merging of the extreme and the mundane means, “Specifically, they unearth the biases, hypocrisies, and deep inconsistencies that compose mainstream culture – and in the process handily blur the boundary between where the troll mess ends, and the mainstream mess begins” (136). I find Phillips’ comments here to be true of web sleuths. It is often hard to delineate where the mess of surveillance, doxing, and posting ends and where the systemic issues with the U.S. criminal justice system begins. It is hard to see where someone digging into an unsolved case might mirror the established behavior patterns of hate groups online.

The Boston Marathon Bombing, as I mentioned earlier, is one of the main events in the history of web sleuthing. After the attack, the FBI scrambled to figure out who had committed such a heinous crime. Much of what happened online regarding the case reflects Phillip’s comments on internet discourse. Reddit played a massive role in creating sensational content rather than useful information around the case. In their 2018 article “Armchair Detectives and the Social Construction of Falsehoods” author Penn Pantumsinchai writes about the misinformation and online harassment that followed the Boston Marathon bombing.

> Reddit was a major source of information for those interested in Updates [sic] were continuously posted in live-update threads housed within the r/news and r/inthenews subreddits. 2 r/findbostonbombers was soon created, partly fueled by the FBI’s call for information, photos, and videos from the public. Whether or not it meant to, r/findbostonbombers became part of a vigilante witch-hunt to find the bombers. As

> Redditors combed through photos and videos, innocent people were named, shamed, and harassed. This doxxing3 and dissemination of private information led to criticism of r/findbostonbombers. Despite the thousands of people involved, Reddit failed to identify the correct suspects, exemplifying a catastrophic failure in collective intelligence efforts. (762)

In the wake of the FBI releasing the suspect's photos, Reddit was a massive source of misinformation. As misinformation was posted and reposted, the group's emotional responses and push for "justice" became more important on the forums than finding the actual suspects. For example, Brown University students Sunil Tripathi was accused of the bombing when in reality he had gone missing prior to the bombing and was struggling with his mental health. The onslaught of hate from the public delayed the search for Tripathi (Kelto). Reddit failed to prioritize facts over the ease of engaging in misinformation; promoting engagement is the platform's first priority, namely via its up and down voting system. Pantumsinchai goes on to explain how the misinformation became part of mainstream news on the bombing "Receiving confirmation from the media and the police was enough to validate Reddit's original claim. For Reddit, the stability of the network seemed widespread across various actants, yet, in reality, the network was an illusion. Instead of a robust network, the network was a loop, feeding into itself." (773). Reddit sleuths, in retrospect, seem more interested in feeding the established narrative the web sleuthing public set up. The feedback loop around conspiracy theory became the core of the web sleuth interactions on Reddit rather than any attempt at truly aiding the FBI in their manhunt. The harassment of Tripathi's family alongside countless misidentification on the Reddit threads caused confusion and strained investigation resources. The misuse of information on Reddit highlights the issues around web sleuth's priorities – namely the need to feel in control of information above all else. One of the ways that web sleuth behavior crosses the line from passive consumer into harmful antagonist is in the prevalence of conspiracy theories. The Boston Marathon Bombing investigation illustrates the thrill of playing investigator and its consequences. The actions of web sleuths led to false accusations, and ultimately slowed down the FBI's investigation. It is difficult to label sleuthing actions as purely vigilante justice, because often those who have done nothing wrong are harmed in the pursuit of justice.

Viral Web Content

Virality is what opens the door for true crime fans to dive into the depths of web sleuthing and create a narrative that suits their personal goals. The more information is recirculated online, the more important it becomes. One important component of how web sleuths operate is the sheer amount of interest they aim to attract to a case: virality is the vehicle for this. The more eyes that are on the case the more valid the web sleuth's stances, and even their conspiracy theories, are. Papacharissi explains what virality does online in terms of emotional impact, writing, "Virally circulated YouTube videos or images rendered into memes as they are shared from person-to-person present structures of feeling. They are organized enough to facilitate sharing, yet open enough to permit differentiated classes of people to locate meaning in them and further infuse them with meaning. They are loosely demonstrative of the mood of the time, or *kairos*, and as such, are *socially solvent*" (Papacharissi 116) So then, what does it mean for things to be as Papacharissi terms "socially solvent?" When things are socially solvent, meaning having social capital, they hold more weight in the online space than things that are not granted to have social capital. In terms of web sleuthing and true crime online virality, this means that some stories hold more emotion and meaning. These are the stories that get circulated. For web sleuths to gather around a story and imbue it with this level of meaning, there must be an opportunity for interjection.

Often, viral content is not just determined by the quantity of interactions it receives, but rather by the type of interactions it generates. Social media platforms like Reddit play a significant role in creating viral content through their upvote and downvote system. Within forum threads, users can choose to support a post, boosting its visibility, or downvote it, relegating it to obscurity. This mechanism is particularly relevant in true crime forums, where certain cases or perspectives can garner more attention while others fade into the background. Web sleuths assign social capital to stories that allow them to engage in detective work or investigation. The virality of content also hinges on its ability to evoke outrage. Whiteney Phillips discusses how trolls prioritize content that generates outrage for posting and reposting. While Reddit relies on upvotes and downvotes, 4chan operates differently, placing emphasis on controversy and outrage as key drivers of content success. Phillips writes of this dynamic that "They will also, and just as damningly, implicate those who pick and choose when to affect outrage and when to shrug noncommittally. Or worse, when to sit back and chuckle cynically" (159). Virality does not always mean popularity because of enjoyment or fascination. In the case of some platforms, the content is offensive or harmful, resulting in virality from public anger toward the content. As a result, it is critical to take note of what kind of media goes viral on the internet and the accompanying values that becoming socially solvent.

Community Engagement vs. Web Sleuthing

The crucial point to recognize when web sleuths propel a story to go viral is that the primary focus is on generating a widespread emotional response rather than preserving factual accuracy. Often, in the process of posting and resharing, misinformation aids in the process of injecting social meaning into crime news. In 2017, Twitter was inundated with tweets of outrage over what seemed to be a sudden rash of missing Black girls in Washington, DC. For example, user @DeeTwoCents tweeted a screen grab from an online article with photos of the girls and wrote “Can someone explain to me how 14 black girls go missing in 24 hours in DC and it’s not a goddamn news story?!?” The news article she posted shared a similar title. #BringBackOurGirls and #MissingDCgirls circulated the news online. The story was not as simple as Twitter made it seem. While all the cases were posted at the same time, the girls did not all go missing at the same time. Twitter users were unaware the police department made a push to share open missing persons cases online in a hope to resolve cases that had no current leads (Reinstein). The DC police department provided a statement confirming they closed 99% of their missing person cases from 2016, and the cases posted to social media reflected a small percentage that were still open and needing investigation. It is, on one hand, a good thing that these cases got so much exposure on social media. Sheryl Gay Stolberg explains in her article on the incident “Missing Girls in Washington DC Widen the City’s Racial Divide” the level of attention brought to these cases is something that is infrequent in news media coverage. The uproar did something important: regardless of if it began fueled by misinformation, it brought racial inequality in Washington DC into the national spotlight. Often missing Black girls get far less media attention than cases involving white girls, as noted by Gwen Ifill who coined the term white woman missing syndrome. The narrative presented on social media lacked the necessary context to properly understand what was really happening with these cases. I want to make clear that simply responding to the DC Girls story does not inherently make someone a true crime fan. However, responding and resharing does make one part of an affective public. By engaging in the acts of sharing emotional responses and resharing information, users align themselves with an organic collective. It stands as an example of what happens when a public comes together and creates content about crime. Additionally, when delving into the world of web sleuthing, the distinction between where news about crime concludes and the realm of true crime as a form of entertainment commences becomes remarkably blurred. A perpetual, never-ending cycle ensues, as news takes on an entertaining quality and, conversely, true crime melds seamlessly with narratives of information. News becomes entertainment and vice versa in a never-ending cycle.

Part of why the #MissingDCgirls movement exemplifies how news and internet produsage can become complicated is because there was good intention behind resharing all of these posts. Community care is different than the way web sleuths indulge in investigations as a hobby. The internet saw what seemed to be a concerning uptick in missing black girls and took action. Information was recirculated, allowing for, as Papacharissi explains above, the infusion of meaning. When something in the web sleuthing space goes viral reaffirms community values on a mass scale. What is important to note here is that meaning can exist separate from factual reality. In 2017, social factors aligned so that when presented with a story, slightly marred with misinformation, the internet took it and ran with it. What it did was create an important uproar about who is forgotten and what resources law enforcement allocate to certain cases, which despite the misinformation are important conversations. It is important to note that the #MissingDCGirls is not the same as cases I will mention later that involve harassment and doxing. This case and its online movement best exemplify the produsage and prosumer dynamics that can arise on social platforms in response to crime cases. The driving force behind the social media push was community frustration with a lack of police action rather than the hobbyist approach taken by most web sleuths.

While not applicable in the case of the Missing DC girls' story, virality also comes with a component of financial benefit. As an article put out by the Harvard Business review bluntly puts it "A viral video is every marketer's dream" ("Why Some Videos Go Viral"). There is money to be had when things explode on the internet. The practice of controversial popularity on social media platforms is inherently linked to the potential for financial gain. Not only does virality allow for an insertion of meaning, but it also allows for the making of money. This is one of the key reasons it is difficult to view the internet as a purely neutral forum for discussion. There is always money to be made and search engine optimization to be had. What appears at the top of someone's personalized feed as well as how often a topic appears is dependent on an algorithm wanting to drive profit for the app and its advertisers. There are two main determiners of viral success how the content makes consumers feel and a user motivation to share the content ("Why Some Videos Go Viral"). We can connect the mechanisms behind virality to Papacharissi's point that resharing content allows for the insertion of meaning. Part of something becoming viral in the first place is because of emotion, first the emotion that motivates the sharer, and then the motivation that becomes attached with the news story. Affective publics are based on social interaction around emotion, and how that emotion is valued and communicated. It only makes sense that a space like true crime, with its sensational nature, would line up perfectly with virality and emotional response. This is a widespread issue exacerbated by true crime, but the internet fosters a culture where such moments can easily catch on and spread rapidly.

Media Case Studies

As I mentioned above, sleuthing and advocating behavior exists on an ethical spectrum. In the two examples I am going to explore below, the documentaries present different ends of the spectrum. In *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* web sleuths harass suspects while spreading wild misinformation online. In *Why Did You Kill Me*, bereaved family members take an investigation into their own hands when they are ignored by police. Through these documentaries, I aim to investigate the elements influencing web sleuth behavior. I aspire to draw a distinction between web sleuths and people from marginalized communities. Web sleuths engage in investigations as a hobby while marginalized communities are often ignored by the police forcing them to advocate for their loved ones themselves.

Armchair sleuthing is an inseparable aspect of true crime and occupies an ethical gray area as seen in the 2021 docuseries *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*. The goals of the documentary are two-fold: first, to explore the various tragedies that occurred at LA's famous Cecil Hotel, and second, to take a microfocus on the Elisa Lam murder. Lam, a twenty-two-year-old college student from Canada disappeared in 2013 during her stay at the iconic Cecil Hotel in Downtown Los Angeles (Baggs). Lam suffered from bipolar disorder and took medication regularly. During her stay at the Cecil Hotel, police theorize Lam ran out of her medication and as a result entered an altered state of mind. She disappeared and her family became concerned after not hearing from her. Police were called to the Cecil Hotel but could not initially locate Lam. Days after her disappearance, and after an unsuccessful search of the hotel premises by the LAPD, Lam's body was found floating in a water supply tank on the roof of the hotel. The documentary covers the circumstances around Lam's disappearance as well as the actions taken by LAPD and true crime fans dubbed armchair sleuths. One of the defining elements of the internet's response to Lam was a fascination with all available digital remnants of her life. In particular, the last footage of Lam alive, where she is riding in the Cecil Hotel elevator. What made this footage sensational was Lam's erratic behavior in the elevator. She appears to be lost or trying to hide from someone as she gets off and back on the elevator several times with little pattern to her behavior. Web sleuths poured over this footage of Lam, thinking it held the key to finding her.

The amateur investigators' actions in investigating Lam's death mirror the surveillance techniques employed by the police. In the introduction to her book *Justice on Demand*, Tanya Horeck explains how public interaction with crime cases has shifted in the internet age. She notes that usually surveillance behaviors from true crime fans are met with a positive perception within the community, being viewed much like a community run "Neighborhood Watch" (6). Horeck points to examples such as circulation of CCTV footage and mugshots online, sometimes leading to arrests (6). The idea of a neighborhood watch might suggest the idea of community taking care of itself, looking out for each other without interference from police. One of the ways that surveillance technology is used to replicate and perpetuate police surveillance practices is via the use of CCTV footage in true crime media. She argues that the footage gives uncontextualized access to violent moments that are not meant for public view. Videos like it create a sense in viewers that they are viewing genuine violence (88). *Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* is particularly intriguing for its exploration of the uncertainty surrounding CCTV footage, as it includes security footage from the night Elisa Lam went missing. The documentary places a spotlight on the public's reaction to the footage. When given access to the footage, online amateur investigators initiated a digital quest to uncover Lam's potential assailant. This compelling image from the footage served as a trigger for individuals to commence their own surveillance activities, distinct from the formal police inquiry. As several interviewees in the documentary recall, the footage itself is deeply unsettling. The footage shows Elisa jumping in and out of the hotel elevator appearing to be frightened that someone is following her. Lam had a history of mental illness, and according to experts brought in to consult on both the investigation and the documentary, in the footage she is likely experiencing psychosis. When the last moments of Lam's life were captured on video and shared with the world via YouTube, there was no recourse for Lam's own privacy. To date, the footage has 33 million views on YouTube. Violating Lam's privacy was the first act in a series of actions by web sleuths including creating conspiracy theories and doxing victims. In doing so, web sleuths potentially delayed or harmed the investigation by bogging down police with false leads. It is important to understand how the collective obsession and resharing of the video plays into how web sleuths operate as a community. The accessibility and popularity of these videos online, Horeck argues, has led to a decrease in popularity of programs such as *America's Most Wanted.* When evidence materials like CCTV footage are posted to platforms like YouTube, there is no need to wait on cable television to air intimate access to violence when consumers can stream it at will (58). With Horeck's connection of the role of CCTV footage in mind, we can factor in the true crime sleuth. The footage was never intended to be a publicly consumed source of entertainment. Private moments get disseminated for thousands of people to view, devoid of context. It is important to think about the impact of the accessibility and use of this contextless footage in true crime. Not only are we watched by the cameras on public buildings, private businesses, and our neighbors' homes, because of the ease of access and popularity of the genre, some of the worst moments of people's lives are viewed online thousands of times over.

According to Papacharissi, the act of resharing is liminal. It takes place between the beginning and end of something, and I will add places true crime sleuths in a precarious place. In her own words, Papacharissi states: "Engaged in various stages of produsage, storytelling audiences occupy a liminal space, a space of transition, as they contribute to turning an event into a story" (125). Before web sleuths took interest in Lam's death it was an event rather than a story. The act of a community taking collective interest and researching, posting, and resharing the case is what creates the story. When sleuths refer to the Lam Murder, they are not referring to an event. They are referring to the narrative sleuths built around Lam. The documentary makes clear that the linkage of Lam's death to the lore of the Cecil Hotel is constructed; there is no actual paranormal linkage. What the documentary fumbles in line with true crime sensationalism is this: the Cecil Hotel exists on the border of tourism and extreme poverty. Located adjacent to Skid Row in Los Angeles, the long history of violence in the building can be attributed to its location and zoning changes over the years. However, the story that the haunting of violence in the building somehow drove Lam to her death is a story built by the sleuths. I want to note here it is not that any one person sat down and directly wrote this as the narrative, rather it was the act of the collective finding and placing meaning in Lam's death that created the story. I view the sort of movement from event to story as similar to the creation of folklore. An event becomes a story via the reception of its sharing, via societal ideals being placed upon the story. Meaning making happens repeatedly leading to a community's firm foundation for what the story is and how it functions within the public. The entire documentary falls into this trap that the web sleuths created. The documentary is not solely about Lam's death, but also intertwines the controversial history of the Cecil Hotel as a character in the story. In this vein Papacharissi continues, "But liminality is a temporary state, defined as the midpoint between beginning and end. It is set into motion as an initiated action attempts to undo social structures or conventions, and it ends as the initiated action is (re)integrated into social structure" (125). The event, as it originally stands in police reports, is not in alignment with web sleuths' values as a community. As a result, they have to morph it into a story, and this allows it to be integrated into their social structure. A story is of no use to web sleuths if they cannot endlessly dig into it, finding new conspiracy and theories about the story. With a story, new material can always emerge, an event is final. That is why web sleuths have to make this transition with Lam's case and all other murders they discuss online, it is critical that the potential for further discussion be available. Web sleuthing occurs within the preset bounds of true crime, which are based in sensationalism and exploitation. While there are discussions of what ethical true crime is, which I will discuss in a later chapter, the core of the genre is stories of pain and suffering are presented for entertainment and exchanged for money. While there is a liminal moment in the transition from event to story that web sleuths have the opportunity to write a new narrative, they are unable to get away from true crime genre conventions.

How information is shared, in part, contributes to the quality and accurate of the information itself. Social platforms create a fraught relationship around how information moves online, placing everyday people in charge of what is proliferated. When everyone can be a gatekeeper of information, what happens in the dynamic between information and social media platforms becomes a vital part of the true crime web sleuth landscape. Papacharissi continues to explain how repetition in sharing impacts the function of meaning, noting that:

> The ambient, hybrid, and prodused practices of liking, retweeting, liveblogging, endorsing, and opining that are frequently blended into social reactions to news events are also liminal. They present personal and temporary content injections that play their own in part in turning a news event into a story. As such, they are inspired by the potential of what the prodused story might look like, however temporary the lasting effect of these subjective content interpolations may be. (125)

I want to highlight that even though there are police and coroner reports to counter misinformation, it does not matter. If the produced story creates engagement within the community, even for a minute, it helps uphold the community values. Web sleuths likely felt what is described above, when they shared their thoughts about the controversial video of Lam, they were interjecting their own reality, thoughts, and theories about the case. Papacharissi recognizes that these contributions are fleeting. By resharing and rewatching the footage sleuths were occupying a liminal space, not contributing anything lasting to the progression of the case. The goal of web sleuths is to make an event into a story, and then to reproduce that story repeatedly to justify the existence of the community.

To illustrate the concept of story interpolation and produsage, we can look at a disturbing aspect of the Lam case covered in the documentary, specifically the notable repercussions on musician Morbid, who emerged as a prominent victim of web sleuth actions. He became connected to Lam's murder by the amateur sleuths because he posted a YouTube video of his stay at the same LA hotel one year before Lam went missing. Though he had an alibi and was not in the U.S. at the time of Lam's death, his previous trip to the hotel and his goth online persona provided the sleuths with enough reason to harass him. In an exclusive interview with entertainment tonight, Morbid revealed more about how he felt during the doxing. At first, he wrote off the posts as internet rumors and ignored them. Then, he began to get locked out of his social media accounts as sleuths reported his accounts in mass. Often, even if a social media user is not in violation of platform guidelines, a sudden onslaught of users reporting account can trigger site safety measures and take the account down. Morbid then explains there was no way for him to defend himself against the web sleuths, even when he would reach out and reason with individual people, there were still many others who still believed the conspiracy theories. Web sleuths act as a network, making misinformation hard to stop. Once falsehoods, like the ones about Morbid are in the ecosystem of the web sleuth public, it is impossible to course correct.

During his interview in the docuseries, Morbid reveals that he was doxed so intensely that he contemplated suicide. Web sleuths revealed his real name as well as the location of his home. He spiraled into a mental health crisis, seeking patient care as a result. This action falls toward the harmful end of the web sleuthing spectrum. No social good arises from harassing someone to the point that they consider self-harm. In passionately pursuing information without consideration for the truth web sleuths pushed someone to consider ending their own life. The act of pursuing and disseminating information is a web sleuth's ultimate motivation; the implication of fulfilling that goal is a secondary concern. If pursuing truth in Lam's case is about justice for her, then the documentary highlights how the web sleuths come up short of that goal. The potential death of an innocent person is not based in a need for justice, but rather in the ongoing desire for community members to have new content to discuss and ergo more content to produce. Instead of pursuing justice they reified problematic power structures and ignored the portions of US law meant to protect innocent people in criminal investigations.

While it would be easy to look at Morbid's experience as an outlier, his experience exhibits strong similarities to the tactics used by the LAPD. Web sleuths take their cues from some of the worst elements of how established authorities proceed in investigations. Within the documentary, the LAPD spends a substantial amount of the series vilifying the residents of Skid Row, located next to the hotel where Lam stayed. While the rate of murder and assault is high on Skid Row, it is not LA tourists who are the victims of violent crime, statistically it is those who live in the area (Dowd). It is no secret that police have abused power and used controversial tactics with Skid Row residents in the past (Mather), and the actions and attitudes presented in the docuseries are no different. The police detail questioning people whose only connection to Lam's death was that they were experiencing homelessness in the area around the hotel. The police proceed to paint people experiencing mental illness, housing insecurity, and substance abuse as potential the villains in the story. As the documentary proceeds, it becomes evident that those who lived on Skid Row had nothing to do with Lam's death. The overly surveilled and underserved residents are degraded and made to be the focus of a death that was in the end ruled an accident. I bring up the way the LAPD discuss the residents of Skid Row to draw a parallel to how web sleuths behave. The one key difference is that after LAPD back off when they have evidence that the Skid Row residents are not involved. The web sleuths, however, continued to harass Morbid even after there was evidence, he was innocent. The sleuths repeat the same sort of villainization that the police do, allowing them to feel that they are fully participating in the case.

I aim to elucidate that the actions of web sleuths can be *as* detrimental as those of law enforcement. One might reasonably question why attention should be directed towards the activities of web sleuths when the police engage in similar behaviors. The significance lies in the harm inflicted on vulnerable individuals. It is concerning to witness everyday individuals replicating problematic biases akin to those found within police forces. Although armchair sleuths justify their actions as responses to perceived incompetence within the LAPD, they employ a similar approach in their decision to dox artist Morbid. Morbid, a Mexican man participating in a niche online music community, became the target of conspiracy theories and subsequent threats to his life. These factors enabled the sleuths to construct a narrative reminiscent of the LAPD's portrayal of Skid Row residents. By branding Morbid as dangerous and murderous, the sleuths exercised social power akin to that of the LAPD. While armchair sleuths may frame their actions as sousveillance against Mann's plane, asserting resistance to LAPD actions, their actions, as depicted in the documentary, indicate surveillance. They orchestrated and pursued situations where they wielded power to monitor and harass individuals who could not or did not consent.

There is an element of this case that poses another ethical dilemma in terms of Lam's Tumblr account. Lam ran a Tumblr blog where she detailed her struggles with mental health and relationships. The documentary makes a point to frame Lam's level of disclosure on her blog as an oddity. The investigators mentioned several times that they were surprised how much she was willing to share online. However, if we look to Sarah Igo's work in The Known Citizen, Lam's level of disclosure was not abnormal for a young woman in 2013. Igo explains that while confessional writing has existed for centuries, there was a wave of this mode of communication in the 80s and 90s (215). The memoir boom of the 90s led to a major issue of consent and privacy; if an author had already divulged so much to a readership, why was that same public not entitled to unlimited access to the author´s life? Igo provides the sentiments of Susanna Kaysen, the memoirist behind Girl, Interrupted, who when asked why she would not disclose further information about her sex life after being so open in her memoir. Kaysen responded to the question by explaining the world did not have a right to know everything about her. The experience of Kaysen, and many other memoirists is applicable when considering the privacy issues raised using Lam's Tumblr account. I turn to Igo's work here because it is important to note that Lam's disclosure on the internet does align with Igo argument that the privacy that used to come with daily life in America is gone. Whether by choice or by government decision, information about us is readily accessible. It is understandable, logically, that if Lam's blog remained viewable online people would dissect it for answers. Death, especially the tragic death of a young person, is disturbing and calls for closure. The point I want to make here in connection to memoirists is that Lam did share her feelings for an intended audience. She wanted to connect with other young adults online, struggling with mental health as she did. The Tumblr account is reflective of what most young people were posting at the time. The way that the police pathologize her disclosure makes her blog a site of interest. Again, the axis of internet and problematic police methods creates the frenzy surrounding the Tumblr account. The blog is still visible today (Soen) allowing morbid true crime fans to poke around in Lam's thoughts and life. This isn't up to any one entity. Likely, her family has chosen to or is unaware of the process of gaining access to her account and deactivating it. Whatever the reason is for the blog still being available, it acts as a shrine to the kind of information web sleuths utilize. Her blog allows web sleuths to make Lam's life into a story, further dehumanizing her.

By 2021, the blog of a deceased young woman becomes the fodder for conspiracy theories and amateur investigations (Blackett). The armchair sleuths featured in the documentary expressed that because they read Lam's Tumblr, they felt a connection to her, like she was a friend or that they knew her personally. More horrifying than the questions memoir authors were berated with in the 90s was the access to Lam's Tumblr. Lam's openness made people feel as if they had an obligation to investigate her death. The ability to have access to Lam's innermost thoughts prompted sleuths to create a narrative where they held the most power in the search for justice. If the sleuths' actions ultimately hurt the Lam investigation, in turn harming Lam's family, where do their actions in relation to entertainment? One clear theme that seems to emerge across all of their actions is the sleuths have more power than they realize, and in turn exercise that power against others, whether factual justifiable or not. (44) In the end, police ruled Lam's death "accidental drowning with bipolar listed as a significant factor" (Kranc). She likely, in a psychotic state induced by not taking her medications, climbed on to the roof, fell or jumped into one of the water tanks, and drowned. There are no ghosts, no murder, no haunted history. Just the tragic death of one young woman who lost touch with reality.

Looking at the actions taken in the Lam case, we must ask ourselves: what are the costs of true crime as a genre? Elisa Lam was a young woman who died tragically because of her mental illness. Her death resulted in a complex situation that prompts us to re-examine justice's place in the genre. If true crime exists as entertainment, then it is important to note that entertainment can breed conspiracy theories such as those that diminished Lam's humanity as well the individuals who were unfairly connected to her death. This goes far beyond the singular case that I have outlined here. The complicated spectrum of surveillance and sleuthing is present in numerous other true crime series.

Furthermore, it is important to consider intent versus impact. Though true crime research has argued intent can be positive (Boling), impact can vary. The impact that amateur investigation has in both limited series discussed here goes far beyond a binary of positive and negative impacts. What is often lost in true crime and a discussion of its pitfalls is that the people involved are not characters, they are people. Negative interactions with amateur investigators, have lasting impacts on individuals who fall into their crossfire (Callanan and Rosenberger). What the entire Lam case and its documentary series comes down to is a question of power (Durham et al.). True crime is a powerful genre that can influence an audience's perceptions of reality. The analysis I have presented here hopefully shows that the next step after perception is action. It is not enough to say that the genre creates harmful perceptions, true crime researchers must take the discussion a step forward and acknowledge that harmful consequences are born from perception.

What separates the web sleuthing in this documentary from the sleuthing I discussed in the last section has everything to do with the relationship between personal intimacy and web sleuthing. For Theobald's family, the loss and suffering were unbearable. Their sole desire was closure, and to ensure that the individual responsible for taking someone incredibly important to them was held accountable. For them the emotional response was intimate and painful. Their emotions and resulting responses were real. This separates them from the web sleuths who act as an affective public because they organize around a discourse, whereas the family organized around the loss of someone important to them. The closeness to the case impacted the trajectory of their web sleuthing, positioning them in a different context than the examples I mentioned previously. Looking back on *Crime Scene: The Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel*, the web sleuths did not have this immediate connection with Lam. Papacharissi discusses how contextual factors play a role in affective publics, "sociocultural context informs the conditions under which people utilize the affordances of technologies to lay claim to agency and potentially to power. What may function as a digitally enabled path to agency in one sociocultural context may produce radically different results under a different set of social circumstances" (122). Web sleuths in Lam's case are not only looking for the truth, arguably they are dipping into real pain for entertainment. The humanity of a case can be lost when the objective is evidence collection. The humanity of the victim and their family takes a back seat to the value given to information gathering.

Why Did You Kill Me?

The 2021 documentary film *Why Did You Kill Me?* like the previous documentary, also follows the death of a young women, but under very different circumstances. In this documentary, the web sleuths have a personal connection with the victim, which fundamentally changes the dynamics of online sleuthing and the digital landscape. While the actions of those involved in the previous documentary clearly breach privacy boundaries, web sleuthing takes on a different form when the individuals involved are not strangers, but rather the victim's own family members. *Why Did You Kill Me?* recounts the death of Crystal Theobald, who was killed in a gang-related shooting in Riverside, California in 2006. Theobald was 24 years old and had no association with the gang that murdered her. Because her death seemed senseless and random, her mother Belinda Lane, took it upon herself to both solve and avenge her daughter's death. Police offered little to the family in terms of closure or updates about the investigation, opening the door for web sleuth-based justice. The documentary chronicles Lane's attempt to get justice for her daughter via the use of a fake profile on Myspace. To catfish members of the local 5150 gang, suspected of being involved in the murder, Theobald's cousin Jamie McIntyre started a Myspace profile using the name Angel (Nyguen). The Angel profile used photos of Theobald and McIntyre mimicked parts of her cousin's personality. The account was used to flirt with and gain the trust of local gang members, to conclude if any of them could have been Theobald's murderer. The family would use the Angel profile to obtains photos of gang members' vehicles to see if any of them matched the car from the shooting. They also tried to convince the men to talk about gang activity they were proud of, hoping they would accidentally rat on someone on brag about Theobald's shooting.

At the end of the family's time using the profile, they pose one heart-wrenching question to one of the gang members before relinquishing it and turning over their findings to the police: "Why did you kill me?" In that moment the investigation that Lane built to insulate her grief falls away and all that is left is the pain of a mother's loss. While Lam's family was mostly absent from her documentary, *Why Did You Kill Me?* focuses on what happens when police ignore a victim, leaving the family with few resources. Lam's death gained national attention along with police resources. Theobald's murder, without the efforts of her family, likely would have been left as a cold case, unsolved and forgotten. The crux of the issue seems to be this, true crime is linked to two disciplines that depend on onlooking, surveilling, and intruding as part of their foundation – criminal justice and documentary film/TV production. I am not saying that all documentarians have unethical or malicious intent; rather, I am suggesting true crime's proximity to the criminal justice system complicates its ends. It is difficult when the genre is situated at the corner of profit/entertainment and real people's suffering.

What is interesting here is the directionality of the power that emerges from the family's use of web sleuthing tactics. The New York Times review of the limited series, authored by critic Calum Marsh, took issue with the focus of the documentary on the Myspace element rather than the issue of race. The review expresses that the documentary focuses on the bygone novelty of social media and not a deep dive into the causes of gang violence and shootings in Riverside. Marsh writes the following about the director "Munk avoids grappling with anything serious or difficult — for instance, the socio-economic factors that produce these kinds of killings in the first place. Instead, the movie fixates on the case's one novelty, its tangential connection to an outdated social media site. Just because a crime is true doesn't mean it's interesting. And as "Why Did You Kill Me?" makes clear, without substance, a dash of style won't do" (Marsh). While I do agree with the reviewer, there is not a direct discussion of race, it is still incredibly evident on screen based on the interviews with the family about their pain. While there is not a direct critique of race presented by the documentarian, the implications of race and socioeconomic status are still on display through an examination of the surveillance methods featured in the series. The mother clearly states during one of her interviews that she has been to jail before, and as a result felt that her family was being treated unfairly by investigators. Initially one of the victims' brothers was viewed as a suspect in her death, despite strong evidence that he was not involved. Upon initially looking at the family's actions we see a family hurt by criminal justice trying to ensure justice on their own. Where the power dynamics change are the actions taken using the Myspace page. It is not up to the police if Theobald gets justice, for the family it does not matter if they are being ignored because of the neighborhood they live in, the crime will be solved one way or another. The information collected via the Myspace account countered the lack of effort by the police investigation. When the mom escalates into actions such as trying to get gang members deported and start fights between rival gangs her actions begin to mirror those in the Lam documentary. The victim is given less priority than using the infinite possibilities the internet provides to act on precarious motives. The actions are only helpful to the mother's sense of justice and actively harm both the gang and the police investigation, while harming her daughter's chance at justice. The family of Crystal Theobald endeavored to imbue her death with significance through their web sleuthing efforts, particularly when law enforcement failed to do so. Unlike the fabrication of an identity that never existed, the Theobald family had a profound understanding of who Crystal was. Through their web sleuthing activities, they sought to garner attention and empathy for her case, emphasizing not only the quest for answers but also affirming the value of Crystal's life.

Theobald's death could be any unsolved cold case across America, but unconventional actions resulted in more information for the investigation. Police negligence and prejudice impacted the length of the case. When Theobald's mother takes the extreme action, she exhibits in the documentary she comes from a place of pain and emotion that is specific to her. It is the loss of her child that drives her actions. I'm not arguing that what she did was right, however I want to point out how she is situated differently than the true crime sleuths online but still fall into the same patterns of repeating police violence. Her positioning to the subject is different, but she is enabled by the internet the way that the web sleuths in the Elisa Lam case are. The ability to connect endlessly is appealing to someone like Theobald's mother who felt ignored and typecasted by law enforcement. The good cop vs. bad cop binary is one of the hallmarks of true crime. In reality, the criminal justice system is far more complex than the narratives of most true crime documentaries would like audiences to believe. What the documentary implies but does not make explicit is that part of why Theobold's family had to take up the role of web sleuths is because the police were disinterested in the case.

Conclusion

This kind of sleuthing dynamic is not limited to two Netflix specials. There are clear ethical quandaries with the true crime genre that scholars will likely continue to hash out in the future. I am not denying that cold cases get solved, and that justice is served, but for many Americans justice does not come from the hands of law enforcement or true crime fans. We must ask ourselves if reckoning with the realities of web sleuthing and law enforcement is possible within true crime or if the genre will always inspire behaviors that are a mirror of corrupt power structures. The web part is key because this behavior occurs online, in a context that is isolated from any of the real suffering of the situations these sleuths insert themselves into. When human existence is reduced to case facts it is easy to forget the humanity associated with horrific crimes.

While it might be easy to write off the genre as entertainment and not a serious concern, it is connected to larger important social issues. We need to examine the way that even our popular culture informs the fight for justice. The state of police violence in the U.S. is a matter of life and death and any understanding we can collectively gain about police brutality is vital. As long as the justice system fails people and cold cases remain unsolved there won't be an end to web sleuthing. Web sleuthing will remain because the opportunity is all there. True crime fans are a public organized around emotions. Content is shared and assigned meaning in context to emotion. There is no way to cut off people from feeling an intense set of emotions about a highly sensationalized genre, and as a result acting. Citizen surveillance, as I pointed out above does serve communities. Sleuthing and taking part in countersurveillance has rendered good in some online spaces.

All the examples presented in this chapter show that proximity and emotional connection to the subject matter seems to be a major factor in deciding where an event lands on the spectrum of ethical responsibility. For these cases where sleuthing was helpful, people had a personal connection to the people or place involved in the case. The further away from the story we get the more there is room. One of the key takeaways from this discussion of web sleuthing is that it allows for the creation of possibility. In the opportunities that Papacharissi points out, sleuths come in and interject their meaning. Because prosumers/web sleuths produce free content, there isn’t much incentive to stop them. They bring traffic to social media sites and provide content that will later be used in true crime documentaries. Web sleuths are not responding to true crime, they are part of the fabric of the genre. There is no incentive on the internet to stop content production. This is why so much harmful content is left online because it drives traffic, engagement, and views. When it comes down to it this is how I position web sleuths in the landscape of the internet. They are mass producing true crime content for free, and that only benefits the continuation of the genre. Ethical concerns may matter to law enforcement, as they are the ones who must deal with investigation interference, but otherwise no entity with power has any incentive to stop web sleuths from what they are doing. Their actions make news stories, TikToks, and whole documentaries. In conclusion, the striking resemblance between conspiracy theorists and web sleuths cannot be dismissed. It can be argued that, in many instances, a web sleuth is merely a conspiracy theorist assuming a different identity. What I aim to emphasize through the numerous examples presented in this chapter is that people exhibit discernible online behavior patterns that demand our attention and cannot be disregarded. It is not isolated instances of misinformation propagated by a couple of web sleuths; rather, we confront a vast digital ecosystem where web sleuths interact and respond to one another. This complex interplay underscores the need for a deeper examination of the dynamics at play in this online subculture.

Chapter 2: Intimacy and Podcasting

To study intimacy is to study power (Euritt 18). / "That the same story feels different when told in person versus on a podcast is not an inherent part of podcasting's technologies, but an ongoing process that involves people and things working together to create and define this difference" (Euritt 9).

According to 2022 data from the Pew Research Center, 34% of US podcast consumers listen to podcasts about true crime (Pew Research Center). Of that percentage, the majority are women, specifically women with no or limited college education. The study also found that 24% of all podcasts available for streaming are true crime. True crime researcher Lindsey Sherrill's findings back this up: as of April 2022, there were nearly 5,000 true crime podcasts available for streaming ("Are You and Ethical True Crime Fan?"). In October 2023, the true crime genre label classified more than half of the Apple podcast top 20 podcasts, continuing the trend in podcasting (Barker). True crime podcasts are more prevalent than they have ever been. With a massive backlog of content and new offerings added weekly, listeners are not short for options. While many digital and physical mediums comprise true crime, podcasting is by far one of the most popular.

The notion that true crime podcasts are merely entertainment is a perspective that warrants closer examination, particularly given the significant public attention they command. Beyond the surface allure of gripping narratives, it becomes imperative to delve into the potential impact these podcasts have on societal discourse. A deceptive aspect of podcasting is the illusion it creates, making it seem like one is engaging in casual conversations with friends while swapping harrowing stories and discussing the associated anxieties. The host's ability to shape and guide these discussions, often infused with gruesome narratives, highlights a unique form of influence.

Understanding and scrutinizing this specific power is crucial for unraveling the complexities surrounding the role of true crime podcasts in shaping public perceptions and fostering discourse.

I aim to explore the pivotal role of emotion and intimacy in comprehending the present state of true crime media. The opening quote encapsulates a dynamic prevalent in today's true crime landscape. The previous chapter delved into the true crime fan community's interactions with information and the internet. An aspect worth investigating is the emotional dimension—how podcasts evoke responses and how fans reciprocate within the prosumer dynamic. True crime, as highlighted by scholars mentioned in the introduction to this dissertation, is a highly sensationalized genre. The preceding chapter emphasized the significance of affect on community discussions of true crime. This chapter introduces and explores the concept of intimacy, contending that the fusion of the internet and audio media fosters a sense of closeness ultimately shaping the current landscape of true crime media. Without this closeness, the ethical issues confronting true crime would not be where they are now, such as the presence of invasive web sleuthing that I outlined in Chapter One. The true crime community responses are a network; with every piece of media there is an accompanying set of reactions and actions from other media platforms and fans. Within this intricate interconnection of consumers, content creators, and media outlets, a pivotal element emerges—one that, I contend, unites the network: a shared sense of closeness.

However, with this shared sense of closeness, there is a danger in perceiving podcast hosts as friends. The sense of intimacy listeners develop with their favorite hosts could reduce the listener's level of potential criticism. The ethos associated with this form of intimacy is distinct. One might assume maintaining a more distant and researched tone would enhance credibility. However, in the realm of true crime podcasts, this is not the case. Opportunities for interaction in

Facebook groups and attendance at live shows intensify the sense of closeness to the media. An audience member's feeling of proximity and expertise on a subject arises from the belief that the host has shared and entrusted them with this knowledge. I argue that the combination of intimacy in true crime podcasts, along with the affective public context of the genre, gives rise to a varied manifestation of intimacy, spanning from unassuming to profoundly problematic. The strong connection listeners establish within the podcast medium, accentuated by the inherently sensational nature of the content, prompts robust fan responses, ultimately resulting in the behaviors scrutinized in the previous chapter.

In this chapter, I will address two key pieces of media: *Serial* and *My Favorite Murder* (*MFM*). I selected these podcasts specifically because of both their immense popularity and their long enduring fanbases. Even if someone is not a frequent true crime listener, they have likely heard of *Serial*. Additionally, when I have encountered true crime fans, *MFM* is always one of the first podcasts they mention as a favorite or the podcast that got them in to true crime. I also selected these two shows because, while comparable in popularity, they vary in style and the qualifications of their hosts. *Serial*'s host is a journalist while comedians and television personalities Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark host *MFM*. The focus of this chapter is podcasting and its related media, such as podcast specific social media accounts and live shows. As I have stated previously, I am not passing moral judgement on any of the hosts or podcasts I am mentioning in this chapter. Reducing the complexities of what is happening in the true crime space, including the concerning prosumer dynamics pointed out in Chapter 1, would be an oversimplification. The primary aim of this chapter is to assert that, because of the collaborative nature of the internet, the structure of audio true crime media has played a pivotal role in fostering intimacy and giving rise to extreme fan behavior. It is the convergence of intimacy and interactivity that grants podcasts a distinctive position in the prosumer true crime landscape. The podcast format presents a unique opportunity; the widespread appeal once held by radio, combined with expansive online social communities, paved the way for a new mode of engaging with and taking part in narratives not seen before. I contend that *Serial*, the podcast that set off the true crime renaissance, illuminated the potential of the format. Podcasts not only invite but also facilitate active participation. The internet introduces a level of intimacy and fan engagement previously unparalleled in the realm of true crime. Fans no longer navigate true crime in isolation; in podcast listening, there is a host that becomes the focal point of the fandom's attention. In my perspective, this intimacy erodes the taboo associations with crime narratives, further cultivating a sense of community around the medium.

In true crime podcasting, the emphasis on evoking emotions from the audience takes precedence over factual details. Intimacy serves as the conduit through which true crime podcasting persuades audiences to engage in the monetization of pain. This focus on emotional connection and the commodification of suffering has tangible repercussions that extend beyond the virtual realm of podcasts, manifesting in real-world consequences that adversely impact victims and their families.

Intimacy Theory

Considering these ideas of emotional connection, it is imperative to turn to ideas of intimacy. Establishing the connection between podcasting and intimacy feels intuitively appropriate, as you consistently hear a person's voice in your ears, often on a weekly basis, sharing their intricate thoughts on a particular subject matter. In her book *Podcasting as an Intimate Medium*, Alyn Euritt sets up parameters for what intimacy is in relation to podcasting. Like Papacharissi, Euritt recognizes that communication happens as part of a network; actors interact with media and technology creating responses that then in turn inform new media (2). As she notes, "Podcasting's discourse on intimacy, although deeply connected to liveness, is much more pronounced. Based on my research into podcasting's self-descriptions, I define intimacy as a cultural code for communicating a feeling of relational closeness in time and/or space" (16). There is not a link or even prerequisite with physical closeness. Instead, intimacy is created through perceived relationship. Euritt does not specifically focus on true crime podcasts in depth. With only a brief mention to *Serial*, I believe that there is room to expand and apply her work here in the realm of true crime media.

Affect is at the core of how podcasts create a relationship with their listeners. Before diving into the specifics of podcasting, I want to zoom out to how intimacy and affect intersect. In her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Sara Ahmed explores affect and what fuels people's intense feelings about themselves and others. Though she does not directly use the word intimacy like other scholars in this chapter, her work is a strong complement to other scholars' work on intimacy. One of the major themes Ahmed tackles in her book is fear, specifically, where it comes from and who it is directed at (Ahmed 62). Part of how true crime podcasts create a sense of closeness with the audiences is by creating unity around common fears. In a story that feels ubiquitous with the current state of true crime journalism, Hope Corrigan writes about Paige, a young woman who lives alone and is obsessed with true crime podcasts, regularly listening to *Crime Junkie* while doing household tasks. While she enjoys the podcasts, she is negatively affected; her listening habits make her jumpy and she is often nervous about being alone. She even once believed that her neighbors had been murdered when they were just on vacation (Corrigan). Paige is just one example of the general landscape of podcast listeners; this behavior has become such a notable pattern in the true crime space that the Cleveland Clinic has published two articles in the past three years urging true crime listeners to reduce their listening time if they are feeling anxious. This produces a chicken versus egg situation; what came first the fear or the podcast listening? Regardless of which phenomenon emerged first, it is crucial to emphasize that podcast hosts deliberately position themselves as surrogate friends, offering a shared understanding of the anxieties induced by the harrowing narratives featured in these podcasts.

I will return to this concept later while discussing the *MFM* podcast and how the creators bridge their audience together using a feeling of fear. This aligns with what Ahmed writes of anxiety as a companion to fear, “Anxiety arises from the lack of presence of the feared body” (Ahmed 65). Part of what makes the statements made by podcast hosts so powerful is that the actual threat is not in the room with the listener. It is displaced. Ahmed writes “Fear in its very relationship to an object, in the very intensity of its directedness towards that object, is intensified by the loss of its object. We could characterize this absence as about being not quite present rather than, as with anxiety, being nowhere at all” (65). The concepts of fear and anxiety drive people to seek someone within a narrative they can identify with. If there is a constant present fear of the other, then listeners need to identify with someone who they can relate to, which in true crime podcasting is the podcast host. Listeners feel a sense of closeness with whoever is creating and driving the fear and anxiety because the creators are the ones with answers and are in control of the narrative. While presenting listeners with unsettling images of the world, podcast hosts assume the role of a reassuring figure, adept at navigating the unknown. Ahmed explains how anxiety attaches to certain objects:

> We could consider how anxiety becomes attached to particular objects, which come to life not as the cause of anxiety, but as an effect of its travels. In anxiety, one’s thoughts often

> move quickly between different objects, a movement which works to intensify the sense of anxiety. One thinks of more and more 'things' to be anxious about; the detachment from a given object allows anxiety to accumulate through gathering more and more objects, until it overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world. One becomes anxious as a mode of attachment to objects. In other words, anxiety tends to stick to objects, even when the objects pass by. (Ahmed 66)

Though Ahmed is writing about marginalized bodies in this portion of her book, I think that when discussing true crime, the ideas presented here can be extended. In lieu of bodies, anxiety could be understood via the presence or lack of information in a podcast. In the realm of true crime podcasts, creators wield considerable power as they determine who becomes the object of fear and dictate the intensity of that fear. Moreover, they have the authority to shape whose body becomes the focal point of sympathy, fear, or pity within their narratives. This strategic control over emotions, particularly fear, forms the foundation of the relationship these podcasts cultivate with their audience. Understanding the pivotal role fear plays in this dynamic unveils the manipulation of these emotions for capitalist purposes. The creators leverage fear as a tool to engage listeners, ultimately contributing to the podcast's success as a capitalist enterprise.

The structure of social media platforms helps to create an environment where fans of podcasts can engage in affective responses with each other. Fans and podcast creators need a place to congregate and share in collective experiences together, and social media helps to fulfill this need. Zizi Papacharissi tackles the ways social media creates a sense of intimacy with readers; in her case she is primarily discussing Twitter:

> The improvisational character of Twitter, which thrives on impromptu form, invites such affective statements. At the same time, the condensed nature of expression may require

> redaction on the author's end, presenting performances that are potentially deliberately improvised. This can also be understood as a form of deliberate spontaneity meant to produce an "episode noteworthy enough to be incorporated into [a] repository of lively narratives. (Papacharissi 111)

Spontaneity plays a major role in how podcasting comes to feel intimate to listeners. Podcasts hosts can reuse many of the same stories without audiences getting bored. If we step back and think about the plethora of true crime podcasts there are many about the same notorious serial killers, for example Ted Bundy. What keeps listeners engaged (even though a different podcast they love might have already covered the case) is the hosts, unique contributions to the topic. Their affective statements, unique to them and their podcast, are what keep listeners' desire to hear the same gruesome tale. Each host makes the experience of consuming these repetitive stories unique and exciting via the closeness they have created with their audience. It is the impromptu insertion of a podcast hosts opinions, coupled with the ability to engage as a community around those insertions that make podcasts feel intimate without becoming monotonous.

According to the edited collection *Affective Intimacies* edited by Marjo Kolehmainen, Annukka Lahti, and Kinnert Lahad, intimacy should be rethought to include all of its vast possibilities: "Finally, intimacy does not require physical proximity nor is it limited to the material presence of (at least) bodies, objects or things…Thus, intimacy should not be understood solely through physical proximity and, in addition to material intimacies, immaterial intimacies provide one way to re-imagine affective intimacies" (5). Intimacy, as the editors of the collection later point out, is not solely about the physical (7). Instead, intimacy can exist in immaterial ways that are independent of physicality. This is where true crime podcasting shines in the realm of intimacy. Where I think that true crime media is different from other mediums arises from the combination of sensationalism and nonfiction that true crime possess. In true crime narratives the consumer is let in on the worst events of someone's life. These highly emotionally charged situations elicit an emotional response in the consumer, which I argue is then heightened by both the intimacy present in podcasting as a form as well as the expansive access afforded prosumers on the internet, discussed in the last chapter. Euritt backs this up in her argument by explaining that part of what makes podcasting so intimate is that it is in our ears (62). Podcasts can be a part of the listener's life independent of space or physical proximity.

In order to understand what makes true crime podcasts intimate, I want to discuss what makes the genre, podcast or not, predisposed to a feeling of closeness with the audience. From there it will be easier to understand what role the figure of the podcast host plays in the dynamics of intimacy. There are facets of true crime that persist, despite the medium, that play a role in the intimate connection between consumer, creator, and creation. Scholar Laura Browder makes an argument that true crime novels have a similar emotional impact on women as romance novels. Browder, in her widely cited article "Dystopian Romance: True Crime and the Female Reader" explains how true crime lures its readers into what should be repelling and gut-wrenching stories of violence and death. Browder was one of the first scholars to wonder why women are so drawn to the genre. Though her work focuses on books, as the article was written before the advent of podcasting, I still believe that Browder's argument offers valuable insights for this chapter. Browder suggests that there is something pornographic/sexual about true crime narratives, and that the stories are just as illicit and stimulating as books about affairs and passion. In doing this, Browder proposes, books allow for readers to dual identify with both perpetrator and victim (Browder 935). This assertion from Browder is one of the proposed answers to the enduring question of why women consume true crime. Beyond the often-explored argument of gender and media consumption, I think what Browder's article offers is a statement on engagement. Because there are two parties in true crime books that listeners can identify with victim and killer, it leads to an engaging reading experience. Identification within the victim/killer dynamic is present across popular culture; in her work, Carol Clover notes that horror narratives elicit a similar affective response. Clover asserts that horror and pornography are the two genres that are "devoted to the arousal of bodily sensation" (Clover 7). Fear, violence, and intimacy are all intertwined within true crime. The embodied emotional experience that comes with true crime draws consumers in, making them feel even more connected.

While this remains accurate for many true crime narratives today, there is a new site of identification within true crime podcasts. Podcasting creates a kind of engagement, and by extension, intimacy with listeners not found in books. Podcasting adds in a third identification element into the narrative, that of the host. The host of a podcast, as we will see in the examples presented later in the chapter, is a multifaceted role that spans from investigator, journalist, and commentator. In the article "Intimacy and Emotions in Podcast Journalism: A Study of Award-Winning Australian and British Podcasts" Mia Lindgren touches on the idea of the host as part of the narrative. Lindgren claims that in podcast narratives that implement the host's emotional responses and thought process as part of the narrative, the host becomes one of the characters in the story (Lindgren 713).

It is important to note that when Browder wrote her article, books were the most popular form of true crime consumption with television playing a secondary role. Books are a stagnant product of their authors. Consumers buy a single true crime book, read it then wait months or years for the author to put out another work. With a podcast, specifically ones that come out weekly, listeners can form an intimate relationship with the host. In a book, readers are presented the final findings of an author's research into a case, whereas podcasts allow listeners to be privy to the host's mental processes or even investigatory journey. Where books were stagnant, with one story written and then published, podcasts present a remedy to this issue, helping to explain the intimacy we see within them. There is always the looming potential that new or more information could come out about a case, and the host that you have come to like and trust will be the one to deliver that information to you. Euritt points out in her book that the friendliness felt between listeners and podcast hosts plays an important role in the dynamics of consumption: "This accessibility and friendliness close the distance between listener and host and promote an aesthetics of friendliness based, in part, on the conversational temporalities of liveness. When reviews of the podcast point to these temporalities as intimate, they are drawing on intimacy's association with friendship and temporal closeness to interpret podcasting's medial quality" (70). The podcast host is the ideal person to identify with; they are investigator, all-knowing researcher, and a best friend figure. Who better to align yourself with and feel a manufactured sense of closeness with? Browder also speaks to the repetitive nature of true crime narratives, "Yet true crime seems to limit the possibility for its readers to move on. Its formulaic nature means that it will not offer readers new insights, but simply allow them to move through the cycle of crime and punishment over and over" (941). I would like to expand on what Browder offers here in light of Euritt's writing. I think that the podcast hosts adds an element of variability not present in the era of true crime books. As I presented in the last chapter, true crime operates on a cycle of produsage, where fans consume and then become content creators, proliferating the genre. I think the cyclical nature of prosumer content creation helps create to a sense of intimacy.

If the relationship between true crime and its consumers is a cycle, then intimacy is the fuel perpetuating that cycle. It is cyclical in nature. Where books might have put a delay in this process, only creating romance and intimacy at a slower pace set by book publishers, podcasters can create content and respond much faster. In addition to the cycle of the repetitive plots of true crime narratives, there is the repetitive nature of tuning into your favorite true crime podcasts. However, you favorite podcast host, while familiar, adds an exciting and engaging human factor to the listening experience. The host's own reflections as well as their reasoning processes add an element of intrigue to every episode. You are not just listening to a retelling of a case beat for beat, but rather following along with someone you grow to trust and identify with as they try to make sense of the facts presented.

With these concepts in mind, I now want to examine two of true crime's most influential podcasts. While varying in their form and content – both podcasts offer insightful examples of what it means when true crime, affect, and intimacy intersect to create massively successful pieces of media.

Serial

Now that I've defined intimacy and its interaction with affect, let's examine one of the most notable podcasts of all time. Among the myriad of true crime content released over the past decade, *Serial* stands out as unparalleled. No other piece of media has garnered as much attention, both in terms of literary exploration and scholarly citation. Consistently, this singular narrative resurfaces at the forefront of discussions. This podcast played a pivotal role in catalyzing what is commonly referred to as the true crime renaissance—a surge in the genre's popularity over the last decade (Flanagin, Hennessy, Paquet). Serving as a foundational text for the nascent true crime podcast format, *Serial* played a crucial role during the genre's early emergence in the true crime space.[5] Over the past decade, *Serial* has been the standout podcast, capturing the attention of audiences in both the podcast and true crime realms. Undoubtedly, it made a significant impact, being the first podcast to receive the esteemed Peabody Award. Listeners were captivated by its unfolding narrative, eagerly pressing play each week to delve deeper into the mystery.

The inaugural episode of *Serial* premiered on October 3rd, 2014, focusing on the murder of Hae Min Lee, a high school student who disappeared in January 1999. After school, Lee was supposed to pick her cousin up from daycare, when she never arrived her family became worried. After her body was found in Leakin Park, a month later, the immediate suspect was her then ex-boyfriend Adnan Syed. One of the last people who allegedly saw her at school, he was immediately pinned as the suspect with a motive and questionable alibi. What proceed was a legal battle that would span decades. Syed was convicted of her death in 2000 but consistently maintained his innocence (*Serial*). The podcast picks up Syed's story after he has already spent over a decade in prison, and tries to establish his innocence, pointing to holes in evidence and where the criminal trial went wrong. Much of Koenig's reporting focuses on trying to create an accurate timeline of events. Syed's lawyers credit *Serial* with helping keep the case alive. They point to Koenig's conversations with Asia McClain as a major help; McClain was a key witness to Syed's whereabouts during the alleged timeframe of Lee's murder. She originally would not respond to requests to talk to the lawyers. After Koenig was able to track her down, Syed's legal team was then able to approach McClain, get a statement from her, and then proceed with their

[5] Preceding *Serial*, influential works such as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* and Anne Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* dominated the true crime landscape, setting significant trends. These earlier texts, celebrated in their respective eras, brought to the forefront captivating true stories that thoroughly engrossed their readership.

push for a new trial (Davies and Daniels). Without Koenig's work to bring both awareness and key figures to the forefront of public attention, Syed might not have ever gotten a new trial. *Serial*, more than any other podcast in the true crime space has publicly advocated for a positive legal outcome for its subject.

One of the issues that has long haunted *Serial* is the way Lee and her family are positioned in the story. *Serial* is more so a story about whether Syed is innocent or guilty, and not an exploration into who could have actually killed Lee. In the media circus around the new trials and exonerations, she is often forgotten, leaving her family in a complicated position. In 2023, Syed's conviction was overturned, and he was released from prison. Alongside the news of Syed's newfound freedom, concerns about a court system error have emerged. Reporter Brian Witte provides an update on Syed's case, noting that attorneys for Young Lee have submitted a petition to the state Supreme Court. The petition raises issues with the appellate court ruling, contending that it inadequately represents the Lee family's perspective. Witte also relays the Lee family's stance, as articulated in a news release. The family remains neutral on Syed's guilt or innocence but underscores the importance of ensuring Syed's procedural rights are upheld and calls for transparency in the circuit court proceedings. This marks the conclusion of another chapter in the ongoing saga of Lee's murder but offers a moment for reflection on *Serial*'s long-term impact on podcasting.

Beyond the history of the Syed case, *Serial* has its excelled in capturing both audience's attention and trust. The public reception to the podcast was unlike anything that had come before it and set the precedent for what a successful true crime podcast should look like even today. The existence and popularity of any genre hinge on the presence of a dedicated group of consumers. Without a niche or underground following, a genre is at risk of fading into obscurity. True crime, with its substantial fan base, serves as a prime example of this phenomenon. Consequently, it becomes crucial to thoroughly analyze and comprehend the audience's response to *Serial*. I want to offer an analysis of the way form and genre converge. We have now come to the end of a major chapter in the *Serial* saga, which offers an opportune moment to reflect on everything that has led up to this moment in Syed's case. I aim to explore how scholarship has provided context for the podcast and how news outlets have oscillated in their evaluations of Koenig's reporting in *Serial*. Specifically, I want to interrogate the role of intimacy in *Serial* and how it has shaped subsequent developments within the true crime community influenced by *Serial*. Through this investigation, I seek to understand the impact of *Serial* on fostering intimacy in true crime narratives and the resulting dynamics within the genre. I am interested in the ways *Serial* opened the floodgates for the current ethical issues that I discussed in the previous chapter.

What is important about *Serial* is broader than the podcast. It reflects messier, more complicated feelings about what true crime should be, what it is capable of, and what aspects of the genre are held in high regard or ignored. In my opinion, *Serial* is not really about its impact on the justice system per se, but more so about the feelings it creates within the affective public as in their role and relationship to it. The podcast created a new category of interaction, a listening participant who is tasked with synthesizing highly emotional content. In their book *Podcasting: The Audio Media Revolution*, Martin Spinelli and Lance Dann explore the role of journalistic standards during the first season of *Serial*. The authors explain that in traditional journalist ethics, there is an emphasis to strive toward impartiality (Spinelli and Dann 186). They go on to explain *Serial* denoted a complicated moment in audio media history. It was the precipice upon which journalist values had to morph and adapt for the podcasting age. I argue that from this complicated relationship with the new frontier of journalist morals the audience is led to feel connected to Koenig via her struggle to form a narrative from Syed's case. Spinelli and Dann summarize Koenig's approach to journalist ethics as an attempt to prioritize human connection (187). What comes from Koenig's prioritization of the human element of the *Serial* story is a connection with listeners via Syed's pain. As I mentioned with the work of Laura Browder, in the age of book based true crime readers were kept at some distance from the author, mostly connecting with the killer and victims in the story. What happens in *Serial* is there is now a third active category of character to identify with: the host. As we are taken on her journey of making sense of Syed's conviction and the Lee's unsolved death, listeners are given a point of common ground with Koenig. As opposed to book authors who have removed any uncertainty or thought process that went into the creation of their narrative, this moment allows readers a point of connection with Koenig that creates a far deeper intimacy than with previous true crime media. Spinelli and Dann explain "In these moments of crisis, reflection, and intense questioning the human narrator of Koenig bonds with her listeners" (190).

Part of what made *Serial* so compelling to listeners was the community interactivity that came with the experience of everyone listening to the story week by week. Fans took to forums and even started their own podcasts to discuss their theories of what may happen in the next episode. *Serial* stands out, in part, because of the community involvement in the podcast's reception. Berry mentions that in addition to the massive popularity of the podcast there was a content produced that was also widely popular: "*Serial* became a hotly debated topic in social settings, on traditional media, and perhaps most, significantly in a slew of podcasts about the podcast. These meta podcasts offered their own views and responses to each episode in a way not previously seen (to this extent) in the medium" (Berry 171). This collective speculation and conversation encouraged national media coverage of *Serial* and created an experience that would be repeated with other massive true crime hits such as the first season of *Dr. Death* or *Crime Junkie*. It was not just that everyone could listen to this case together, Koenig invited the audience to go on the journey with her. Listeners were not just becoming friends with Koenig, they were invited to be in community with other podcast fans, which I argue strengthened their original relationship to Koenig. If listeners enjoyed the podcast in isolation of podcast networks or other fans the narratives might be less compelling, but the web of interaction *Serial* presents set the tone for what other podcasts would aim for in the coming years.

Serial was clearly successful in its aims of both drawing in an audience and helping support Adnan's legal battle. Then the question arises, how does a podcast develop an intimate relationship with its audience? The two components of establishing intimacy with an audience is first finding a niche and second riding on an established media's ethos. True crime has a long reputation for being sensational. As I mentioned at the start of the chapter, the listening numbers for true crime are substantial. *Serial*, whether podcast producers realized it or not, offered a financially fruitful formula for the format of true crime podcasts. Lindsey A. Sherrill, one of the notable voices in true crime research,[6] writes in her article "The '*Serial* Effect' and the True Crime Podcast Ecosystem" that the podcast community as best viewed as a dynamic ecosystem, "This group or 'population' of true crime podcasts is an exemplar of a media genre operating as an ecological system; that is, in sociological terms, the podcasts within this genre exist in a "niche" which shapes the evolution of their organizational form and the way they are perceived by their creators, fans, and other media outlets" (Sherrill 1). Sherrill takes the approach of examining true crime fans via the lens of ecology. In her view, true crime fans are a niche, which

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[6] In her 2022 TED Talk she opens by explaining that after she listened to *Serial* for the first time she was hooked on true crime podcasts ("Are You an Ethical True Crime Fan?"). She self-identifies as a true crime fan.

is supported by the work of both Euritt and Spinelli who see podcast subgenres as their own unique communities. Sherrill goes on to point out that while not every listener is the same, there are shared characteristics among the niche's members: "While population members may have some dissimilarities, organizations within a population niche will share characteristics, such as resource dependence, collective identity, core technologies, market strategies, or organizational structure" (Sherrill 3). The normalization of podcasts heightens the intimacy listeners feel, as the content is no longer considered taboo or niche.[7]

While the inherently disturbing nature of true crime might have limited its audience, *Serial* was able to position itself higher as a result of its relation to *This American Life*. As highlighted earlier in this chapter through the insights of Laura Browder, true crime thrives on the sensational. *Serial*, for instance, established its ethos by drawing on influences from other media, contributing to its reputation. *Serial*'s release, contextualized within a largely uncharted territory for true crime podcasts at the time, set a normative standard, shaping the landscape for subsequent podcasts in the genre. *Serial* released in partnership with the well-established and hit podcast *This American Life*, an NPR production. Networks and the process of how podcasts are distributed plays a key role in the legitimization of true crime podcasts. Richard Berry addresses

[7] Media becomes mainstream when it has worked its way into the public consciousness. One indicator could be when it becomes part of the common practice for how AP Language teachers in high schools across the country use the podcast as part of their exam pre curriculum. In an article from 2015 documenting the beginning of the use of *Serial* in the classroom one teacher shares their experience teaching the podcast in class (Flanagan). The teacher explains that students would skip their other classes to come back to his classroom to listen to the episodes again. Students who were not engaged before were suddenly interested in class. The use of *Serial* in the classroom has continued, as evidenced by the lessons available on sites like Teacher Pay Teachers and via Amazon in eBook form. For *Serial* to have made it into public education as a tool for studying for a high stakes exam it has cemented its position in American popular culture sphere. If there is any indicator that *Serial* was able to capture listeners and build trust, it is its presence in classrooms.

this point in his article "A Golden Age of Podcasting? Evaluating *Serial* in Context of Podcast Histories." Berry explains what about *This American Life* gave *Serial* an ethos boost "As a podcast, *Serial* enjoyed a significant advantage from its association with *This American Life*, a program well aware of the importance of doing new things (cf. Edmond, 2014). It is a well-known, much loved, and highly respected brand. The co-founder and current presenter Ira Glass is equally known and respected and appeared on the Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon (NBC, 6/10/14) to promote the new project" (174). The ethos that came with *Serial*'s associations was potentially one of the first factors that opened audiences to trusting the show, then leading to the formation of intimacy. Why discuss the public reception of a podcast? Because according to Euritt, all components of how a podcast is distributed and received matter, "Podcasting includes audio files, technological practices, and production practices, but it is not limited to them. It also encompasses how people talk about podcasting, about what shows are good and what shows are not, not to mention how creators talk on podcasts and gear content to specifically fit the medium" (Euritt 9). I bring in this point to connect this argument back to the idea of a network of prosumer actions. Everything said about a podcast forms the genre just as much as what is said on the podcast. I argue that the hype that formed around *Serial* was just as impactful for its ability to connect with its audience as the content of the podcast itself. *Serial* used the listener relationship formed by *This American Life* to lay the groundwork for its connection with listeners. NPR has a far better reputation for journalist integrity than the entirety of the true crime genre. I want to re-emphasize here one of the most important components of the sense of intimacy is listener participation combined with podcast distribution networks. Berry further elaborates that the popularity of *Serial* cannot be attributed solely to one factor, "while *Serial* might represent an identifiable landmark, the reasons behind this notability may be a combination of factors, in which technologies, brands, social sharing, and engaging content all play a part" (Berry 171). I want to take this concept a step further and argue that this confluence of factors not only led to popularity but made way for other podcasts to take advantage of a model that *Serial* used so effectively. I find Berry's point here to lend well to Papacharissi's writing on affective publics. A large part of what makes *Serial* notable in the history of true crime is not the content itself, but because it is like other true crime podcasts.

Because podcasting is an auditory medium, *how* and *what* Koenig says are just as important as the fact of Syed's case. It is in the delivery of her message that she is able to convey both a desire to solve the mystery and paints herself as a reliable and compelling narrator. The audience is given access to the interplay between the core of the message and how she delivers it in a way that print media could not give readers. What makes Koenig particularly intriguing is her refusal to present a polished rendition of the story she reports:

> *Serial*'s Sarah Koenig establishes intimacy with the audience, speaking colloquially and almost confessionally. She assures listeners that a phone call is incredibly important and that she will talk about it in another episode, "I swear," orienting herself in an authentic yet parasocial relationship with the audience. Here, she is speaking to the audience much like a friend, promising that something she has mentioned in brief will become important. In doing so, she asks the audience to trust her that the narrative arc will be concluded and breaks the proverbial fourth wall to interact with the audience more directly. She plays portions of her interviews with Syed that seem primarily aimed at displaying her own difficulty in framing Syed's account of events, thereby guiding the listener through her thought process, and bringing them to a similar level of understanding. (Albrecht and Filip 50)

As evident in the quoted passage above, she engages with the audience in a way that suggests a communion, striving to convey that she is akin to them, questioning and theorizing at every juncture. This approach is noteworthy because when the host positions themselves as a conversational friend, it introduces a nuanced dynamic to the podcast's ethos. Koenig doesn't place herself apart from the audience as a conventional reporter who meticulously researches and prepares a story for presentation on the internet. Instead, she assumes the role of a curious sleuth, delving into the narrative in a manner that resonates with the audience's fervor for investigation. Albrecht and Filip further highlight a pivotal element of the podcast, one that significantly influences the entire narrative—the focus on Syed's guilt or innocence serves as the narrative's core (51).

In many ways, Koenig set the rules for the true crime podcasting form and by extension the true crime public. She painted a world where her logic was the correct logic and allowed listeners to join her on that journey. As a result, the audience can be led to think and engage in the same way as Koenig. Redriving routes that Jay and Syed allegedly drove the day of the murder in Episode 5 create a sense of precarity in the narrative. It is as if Koenig is running out of evidence to make and is the audience engaged. She even leaves in an odd moment where while exploring the route realizes she has come to no solid conclusion, looks up and sees a sale sign on a local business and proclaims, "There is a shrimp sale at the Crab Crib!" It is an odd lighthearted moment placed in the middle of trying to find pieces of truth. It is as if the listener is put in the car with Koenig as she drives to locations related to the case as she pieces together evidence. The audience was invited to interrogate every little detail and because of the ambiguity, people devoured the story. The ambiguity that arises as Koenig works through her thoughts offers room for the audience to join her; since we are invited to be in the car with her she isn't the holder of hard and fast answers. The joke in this episode of *Serial* gained traction among fans and is still referred to and was the basis for fan made merchandise. On a 2015 panel hosted by journalist David Carr, Koenig talks about her relationship to the audience. Carr brings up the chronological nature of the podcast. He highlights that people hearing Sarah's name and voice every week made them feel close to her – like they knew her ("*Serial* and the Podcast Explosion"). Carr references the unexpected humor of the shrimp sale comment. This is significant because it is important to understand *Serial* as not objective truth about crime or the criminal justice system. It is an edited narrative meant to engage an audience and keep them listening. While Koenig dug deeply into the case, she reveals herself to be a storyteller above all else. Author Sarah Larson examines the storytelling power of the podcast when she writes:

> Facts can only tell you so much; laws are meant to protect us all from the misapplication of facts, power, and force. "*Serial*" gave millions of people what felt like a personal connection to the realities of criminal prosecution, and it happened to come at a moment of heightened cultural awareness of the many injustices of that system. (Larson)

Larson taps into something critical here that hits on one of the cores of building a community around *Serial*. The podcast cannot get around the state of American criminal justice. Stories that involve incarceration are never happy ones. Someone's life is stolen as they wait in the painfully slow legal system. It is the presence of the human element via Koenig as the host that allowed listeners to feel connected with the story. Syed's freedom now stands as a shiny example of justice, thanks to *Serial*. There are people who have complicated lives entangled with the criminal justice system, and listeners dip in and out of that story, following its exciting plot points, without stepping back to think of the people the public defender references. *Serial* is not unique, but its outcome, a man walking free is a rare occurrence. The issue I take here with

Serial and its reputation is that it is a silo. As a podcast, there is no room in its narrative of justice to consider all the work left to do in the criminal justice system. *Serial's* power lies in the audience's deep connection to the story, leading to an inflated perception of the true crime genre when outcomes are positive. This implies that other true crime podcasts engaging in intimate crime discussions are similarly impactful. The idea that witnessing the criminal justice process intimately creates a misleading sense of listener participation adds complexity to this dynamic.

Public knowledge, court records, and private thought all converge to play a major role in how *Serial* created a narrative audiences found compelling. Papacharissi explains the tension between the public and the private that is at the center of the relationship between public speech and an audience, "Autobiographical statements include the presentation of private thoughts to a public setting as a way of creating a bond of intimacy with an imagined audience and simultaneously affirming the authenticity of the performance" (Papacharissi 109). In this quote Papacharissi is specifically referring to political speech on the platform formerly known as Twitter, but does apply to what happened with the journalist tensions in *Serial*. Koenig is not creating a one-way relationship where listeners feel close to her. She is making herself part of the listening community in a way that breaks down the barriers between content creator and consumer. This relaxing of boundaries is what allows for the to feel close to her, but it is still crucial to understand what Koenig is doing as performance. That does not mean she is intentionally performing, putting on a disingenuous façade. Koenig is not only letting the audience in on her own thought process, she is letting them in on what feels like exclusive information. The original jury at Syed's trial is not even offered as much access to the messy details that the audience of *Serial* is offered. The difference between what the jury saw and what Koenig presents is a matter of what makes a good story vs. what is allowed in court. In their article “The *Serial* Effect” by Kat Albrecht and Kaitlyn Filip address this tension between audience knowledge and jury knowledge. They make it a point to explain that there is a difference in how Koenig tries to rationalize events on the podcast versus how a jury would have rationalized information:

> We note that evidence that did and did not make it into trial — and evidence that could or could not make it into trial—are woven interchangeably throughout the show. Things that could have mattered to a juror, and things that may not have mattered, are all part of the same evidentiary narrative, despite this fracturing. The distinction between juror and human being is not held as a central tension throughout the show. This is noteworthy, we argue, because her hypothetical acquittal as a juror at the end of the final episode is made only after hearing evidence and digging into evidence that she might not have encountered as an actual juror. (Albrecht and Filip 53)

While the tension between juror and human being may not be a tension explicitly in the show’s text, it is one element that helps bond the audience. At various points in the podcast, Koenig brings up the issue that if the jury knew what she did, things would be different. As she continues to question the legal proceedings, listeners are presented with the legal system as characters. The jurors are misinformed, the legal system corrupt, and the prosecutors misguided. To return to Browder’s notions of characters and identification Koenig is the most logical character presented to us, resulting in the audience feeling even more connected to her, because no logical person would want to identify with the legal system characters who made unjust decisions. As a storytelling technique, the choice to create a binary division between reporter and legal system and reporter makes sense. It allows the audience to have someone to root for and a party to disdain, furthering the sense of intimacy the podcast garners.

Community Centered Podcasting

While *Serial* uses a season to do a long form investigation into a single case, after its massive popularity, more podcasts popped up that favored a shorter format with less of a focus on investigative journalism. Instead, entertainment value and community building became the focus of true crime's most popular podcasts in the post-*Serial* era. *My Favorite Murder* (*MFM*) stands out as a popular true crime comedy podcast hosted by comedians Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. In this podcast, they explore a wide range of true crime cases, covering both famous *serial* killers and lesser-known cases. What makes this podcast unique is the hosts' engaging storytelling approach, weaving humor, personal stories, and clever commentary into their discussions of true crime narratives. *MFM*, as a podcast, adopts a notably conversational format that distinguishes it from other true crime shows. Unlike podcasts with consistent season-long stories or structured interviews, *MFM* opts for a diverse array of topics in each episode. Maintaining strict impartiality is not the primary objective; instead, the hosts engage in commentary and casual banter, creating an enjoyable experience for listeners. The conversational dynamic between the hosts, Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, serves as the driving force behind the podcast's appeal. Adding to its charm is the occasional interruption by Hardstark's vocal Siamese cat, Elvis, who was a fan favorite from the podcast's premier until his death in 2020. The podcast's popularity has led to various side ventures, including live shows and a bestselling book. Episodes of *MFM* follow different formats. In most episodes, either Hardstark or Kilgariff research a specific topic, presenting and discussing their findings with each other. They provide commentary and engage in conversations sparked by the chosen subject.

My Favorite Murder is not the only true crime comedy podcast on the market. Other examples of true crime comedy podcasts include *Crime Junkie, Wine and Crime, True Crime*

Obsessed, Morbid, and *Last Podcast on the Left*. The hallmark of these other podcasts is they are not investigative, but rather conversational with humor interspersed.[8] This distinctive style has played a significant role in the podcast's widespread appeal, fostering a sense of community among its extensive listener base. The hosts do not identify as journalists and, therefore, do not grapple with the same issues of journalistic ethics; instead, I argue that these hosts are best described as commentators. They often market themselves as ordinary individuals, lacking specialized credentials, who simply want to discuss death and murder. I'm not contending that discussing violent acts is what makes *MFM* controversial. There is a long-documented history of humans being fascinated by the morbid aspects of existence (Burger). The reality is that humans love to talk about death. As I proposed in the previous chapter, web sleuthing exists on an ethical spectrum, with some sleuthing behaviors proving to be more harmful than others. The issue here is not that average people turned on a microphone and wanted to recount murders; rather, it is often the lack of thought or reflection on how they, as hosts, are engaging with their community.

The monetization of true crime, notably in the case of *MFM*, is intricately linked to the fear and anxiety inherent in true crime narratives. This fear becomes a driving force for the podcast's profitability. While it's not inherently problematic for a podcast to cultivate a large fan community, the history of racism and exclusion within *MFM*'s community complicates the inclusivity of its membership. This raises questions about who is granted access to the community and who may feel excluded from participating. The creation of intimacy in *MFM* is rooted in the shared experiences of anxiety and fear engendered by true crime narratives. This

[8] These other murder comedy podcasts have not been without their own controversies. Last Podcast on the Left host Ben Kissel departed the show in October of 2023 after allegations of sexual assault surfaced against him. Crime Junkie host Ashley Flowers was accused of plagiarism in 2019, which will be important in my discussion of labor and content creation in true crime podcasting.

shared emotional response serves as a bonding agent, connecting both the listeners with each other and with the hosts. However, it is essential to recognize that this intimacy is not devoid of complexity, as it is intricately tied to the unsettling emotions evoked by the podcast's content. Moreover, as a capitalist enterprise, *MFM* benefits from the collective labor of its listeners and the exploitation of the pain endured by victims and their families, adding a layer of ethical scrutiny to the podcast's commercial success.[9]

One of the most notable characteristics of the *MFM* podcast is its incorporation of feminist language and themes, a point that sparks considerable debate. First, I'd like to examine the perceived feminist elements within the community and discourse, followed by addressing the criticisms the hosts have faced. *MFM*, featuring two women as hosts, is often hailed as a podcast that champions female empowerment, with blog posts excitedly proclaiming titles such as "10 Times My Favorite Murder Was Super Feminist And We Loved It." The podcast employs unique turns of phrase, such as referring to victims of violent crime as "sweet baby angels," which functions as a term of endearment expressing respect for the victims within the hosts' affections. Another recurring theme often praised as a feminist hallmark is the mantra "f*ck politeness." The hosts use this phrase to explore the notion that women should not be socially obligated to be polite, especially in situations where their safety is at risk. Looking beyond individual phrases, the collective impact of these elements on the podcast's feminism is significant. In her article titled "'F*cking politeness' and 'staying sexy' while doing it: intimacy, interactivity and the

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[9] I think user floralpancake on Reddit explained it best on a thread where people were discussing controversies about the *MFM* podcast "I find a lot of these "true crime/comedy" podcasts have lost their appeal. It all feels like a greedy money grab by using victims of real horrific events to entertain nowadays." https://www.reddit.com/r/TrueCrimePodcasts/comments/10hg2hz/not_liking_my_favorite_murder_anymore/

feminist politics of true crime podcasts," Kathleen Rodgers delves into the community aspect of *MFM* and its feminist politics. She notes, "The intimate narrative affordances of podcasts connect women to a community of women who share these experiences, and the intersection with a social media community fosters a feminist understanding of these experiences. The interactivity provided by this intersection also allows women to 'speak back,' to reform traditional concepts of true crime, and to question the discourses about women and victimization that have surfaced through the podcast" (3060). The ability for listeners to come together and form a collective feminist discourse around violence and oppression has been one of the main factors that endears the hosts to the fan community. This opportunity to have a space that allows women to feel like they are speaking out against the mainstream discourse on gendered violence is a powerful source of connection. This ability to feel connected on such a major issue may provide listeners with a sense of type intimacy they may experience in any other space. The brand of feminism in *MFM* provides a unique form of intimacy that listeners might not find elsewhere in their lives. Launched in a pre #MeToo movement era, when the discourse on gender-based violence differed significantly from today, having a space that fosters a sense of connection offers a powerful opportunity for the *MFM* hosts to establish intimacy with their audience.

However, the argument that *MFM* offers a feminist discourse community is not without major criticisms. Most infamously, *MFM'*s social media presence has been a major source of controversy since the podcasts launch. While *Serial* had a web presence, with *MFM* the online fan community is part of the podcast narrative, not supplemental to it. A notable aspect of the podcast is the intense online presence of its fanbase. Unlike *Serial* fans, who had to seek additional engagement on external platforms like Reddit, *MFM* integrates fan interaction directly into the show's structure. *MFM* introduced avenues for engagement, such as Facebook groups and a paid fan club, surpassing the engagement opportunities provided by *Serial*. While *Serial* fans may have created merchandise around the Crab Crib joke, the *MFM* hosts take this connection a step further. Official podcast merch and branding is another example of the monetization of the listener intimacy. I want to make clear that having merch for a podcast is not the problem here. What complicates this topic is that the *MFM* podcast is about crime; they often make jokes about death with little or no remorse. In short, *Serial* was reporting a story and created closeness with its audience, *MFM* moved on to monetizing people's interest in both murder and having a parasocial relationship with podcast hosts. The hosts' recurring catchphrases, utilized for commentary or farewells at the end of each episode, have become iconic within the fan community. Examining catchphrases like "stay sexy, don't get murdered" provides a pertinent illustration of how *MFM* manipulates emotion for financial gain. What is not immediately evident to listeners, is that the sense of closeness a podcast gives them might be the basis for potential commodification of their values.

When scrutinized through the lens of intimacy, these catchphrases unveil a discourse that subtly implies to women that violence is an unavoidable and ingrained in societal norms. Ahmed writes on the dynamics of fear "Fear's relation to the object has an important temporal dimension: we fear an object that approaches us…Fear involves an anticipation of hurt or injury. Fear projects us from the present into a future" (Ahmed 65). Because the hosts feel like friends, any fear mongering is subtle. When Hardstark and Kilgariff deliver these messages of potential bodily harm the parasocial relationship listeners feel adds to the legitimacy of fear. Instead of interpreting the creation of merchandise featuring these catchphrases as an expression of female empowerment by fans, I posit that these items unintentionally serve as tangible manifestations of the profound connection *MFM* listeners share, not just with the hosts but also among themselves. The prevalence of these items, both in the online sphere and the physical realm, further solidifies the narrative that women bear primary responsibility for their safety, fostering a shared sense of obligation among women to safeguard each other. By having fans by into a basic and commercial conception of feminism, it is easy to reinforce a feeling of empowerment that when upon further examination is built on unexamined prejudice. *MFM* success lies in its ability to use fear to draw in and maintain their fanbase. Intimacy in true crime podcasting is highly dependent on intense emotional experiences. Fear sells, and if listeners are given a common source of their fear, it is easier to create a large-scale fan base.

One of the other notable elements of *MFM* that draws true crime fans to the show is the passion the hosts have for the subject matter. In 2016 when the podcast launched, it was not affiliated with any major podcasting network, it was the product of two friends in their homes, the sounds of their pets occasionally interrupting the audio. In their article documenting the rise of true crime podcasting Line Siestrup Clausen and Stine Asum Sikjær point out their perceived difference in the credentials of the *MFM* team versus *Serial*,

> Kilgariff, and Hardstark present themselves as fangirls with motivations that can be compared to those that drive any type of online hobby community. The difference in roles and motivations create a dissimilar creator-listener relationship from what is found in *Serial*. Since the hosts of *MFM* present themselves as fans instead of professionals, they automatically position themselves at eye level with the listeners. As previously mentioned, subjective involvement from the creator is quintessential of the true crime genre, however, most true crime creators manage to preserve a professional distance to the audience. (185-186)

I respectfully disagree with Clausen and Sikjær's perspective on the distinctions between *Serial* and *My Favorite Murder*. They characterize Koenig's role as a journalist as creating more distance between her and the audience, in contrast to the "fangirl" label. Additionally, I challenge the assertion that Koenig maintains "professional distance." While the two shows exhibit narrative differences, their impact remains comparable. I introduce the tension between Hardstark/Kilgariff and Koenig's credentials because I don't believe Koenig's journalistic role impedes her ability to establish intimacy with listeners. Given that Koenig has previously demonstrated the capacity to connect with her audience, I contest the idea that professional distance is a hallmark of true crime narratives, as suggested by Clausen and Sikjær. Importantly, I am not arguing for the journalist integrity of Hardstark and Kilgariff either. Rather than viewing *MFM* and *Serial* as belonging to distinct camps, I propose a more productive approach: understanding both podcasts as integral to the true crime discourse, each informing our perception of the other, rather than being in opposition. The believability of the performances of emotion in a podcast is crucial for building intimacy with listeners. "Performances are only convincing when they fuse restored actions into fluid presentations so that 'audiences do not, in fact, see actions as if they are performed" and "endow them with verisimilitude, so that scripted actions seem spontaneous and real' (Alexander, 2011, p. 81). A successful performance is convincing because it appears authentic" (Papacharissi 111). I would argue that the appearance of an authentic performance is what makes the "fangirl" status of the *MFM* hosts a benefit to the podcast rather than a hinderance. Because their performance of loving and discussing true crime is as authentic as Koenig's mental processing, the audience is sold that these women are indeed like their friends.

When the podcast originally aired there was a Facebook group run by the hosts. The group shut down after one of the moderators allowed racist discourse on the page, prompting the deletion of the group, however, you can still be part of the *MFM* community via their paid subscription option. The perks of the named “Fan Cult” include even more access to Hardstark and Kilgariff, at the price of 39.99 per year.[10] While Koenig created a sense of community as a secondary effect of her journalist work, the *MFM* team sought to create community and has successfully monetized the connections they have with fans. For some smaller podcasts, fan support on platforms like Patreon are the only way they can afford to continue the podcast. Not surprisingly, in alignment with their massive popularity, *MFM* is not in need of fan-based support. It was reported that in 2022 Amazon paid over 100 million dollars for exclusive rights for distribution and advertisement of the *MFM* podcast (Mather). This is further complicated by the prevalence of user submitted stories on the podcast. In her book *Killer Fandom*, Judith May Fathhallah explains the importance of fan labor in the true crime space. She points to the fact that fans are a key part of raising killers up to a celebrity status (13). She then goes on to explain the ways fan labor is an integral part of true crime culture, how fans communicate and what they are saying is a crucial part of true crime discourse. Fathhallah describes fan contribution to the genre as a sort of play: “Fears of the unruly fan, the over-invested fan, are still very much the dominant narrative outside of the community—though, as I observed, the performance of excess can earn subcultural capital. Moreover, a great deal of the actual material of killer fandom is playful, at least as playful as other fandoms, if not more so (174). MFM does not shy away from the contributions that come from zealous fans; rather they embraced the contributions right from the start. *MFM* allows their fans to be part of the show via the user submitted stories episodes. The

[10] https://fancult.supercast.com/

"Hometown Murders" episodes draw listeners to the show in a way that *Serial* could not. It is important to distinguish the difference between the regular episodes and the "Hometown Murder" episodes. In a typical episode, Hardstark and Kilgariff research a case, in the early days of the show these usually were notable serial killers. The "Hometown Murder" episodes are different because Kilgariff and Hardstark directly read emails sent in from listeners. The stories included in listener emails typically follow one of the following patterns. First, they are about a murder case that is not nationally known but was locally infamous. The listener usually includes interpersonal details such as how they felt when the case happened or how old they were, weaving the narrative of the case into the context of their life. Second, listeners usually try to present their proximity to a case whether nationally known or local. For example, a listener might provide their experience living next door to a killer or tangentially knowing a victim's family. Regardless of the type of submission, the hosts read the story out loud and give their own commentary. Multiple email submissions are usually included in a "Hometown Murder" episode. The segment arose organically from fan interactions online with the hosts. After hearing stories of gruesome crimes from around the country, the *MFM* team decided to start dedicating episodes to reading fan submitted stories. On the first episode where they featured a user submission, they start the segment without even having properly named what they are going to call the episode, listeners hear them joke about potential names before getting started.[11] Because they are discussing what to name the segment, in the context of an already interactive episode, it allows the audience to feel like they are having a conversation with the hosts. According to Euritt, one of the key elements that makes a podcast feel intimate is how conversational the show feels, she explains "A conversation is intimate because it is close in time: in order to be in a conversation,

[11] https://podtail.com/en/podcast/my-favorite-murder-with-karen-kilgariff-and-g/*mfm*-minisode-1/

people need to interact to what each other say and correspond through time together" (Euritt 66). What makes this interaction capitalistic and an exploitation of intimacy, is that in using these stories, the *MFM* team does not need to do any of their own research. Clausen and Sikjær address the potential issues with user submitted stories when they explain: "By completely eradicating the boundaries that most creators maintain between themselves and their audiences, Kilgariff and Hardstark build an intimate in-group feel in which audiences can feel empowered and a sense of belonging. An environment in which audience participation can spur that the hosts take advantage of by using listener contributions as content for their podcast" (199). The issue with the user submitted content is that it indicates a power imbalance between the hosts and the listeners. The hosts make a substantial amount of money from the podcast, while frequently using stories they did not research or fact check. The inclusion of fan voices in the show serves to commodify listener labor to the benefit of the podcast.

Though these podcast hosts create emotional bonds with their listeners, not everyone feels welcome in these podcasting communities. There is a great amount of gatekeeping that goes into maintaining this status order around who is allowed to be part of the in crowd created by intimacy. In an article addressing true crime fan culture, Ashley Duchemin discusses that true crime is a predominately white space that does not value the lives of People of Color (POC) or bring to light the harsh traumas and violence that constantly threaten POC. Duchemin explains the landscape of the fan community for My Favorite Murder is dominated by white women and is highly exclusionary. She writes that the type of privilege present amongst white fans is all too familiar for POC in the following quotation: "But while the podcast and Facebook group proved safe spaces for some of the *MFM* community, others were faced with navigating the same systems of oppression they casually discuss that render murder victims of color and the queer and trans community invisible" (Duchemin). Intimacy is a fraught concept when it comes paired with prejudicial language. If discriminatory language is part of the community, then only white women get to participate in the sense of closeness the hosts create. *MFM* is not alone in this transgression as *Serial* also did not handle race appropriately; "Not surprisingly, this thread most often flags up what it sees as an absence of a discourse around race in *Serial*, or an unwillingness to deal with it in a meaningful way. Race is, at best, a subtext in *Serial*, something that Koenig does not or cannot speak about well" (Spinelli and Dann 177). Intimacy becomes fraught here because the niche audience that is true crime fans becomes restrictive. The *MFM* podcast, and other true crime podcasts, often unconsciously operate on racist or sexist frameworks, an issue that is reflected in the true crime space at large.[12] If certain listeners are left out of the podcast community based on race, then it brings into question what the motives of these podcasts are. The presence of white feminism is insidious within the podcasting community is a major issue and led to the disbanding of the original *MFM* group. What is interesting about the issues of racism and white feminism within the community is that with the disbanding of the Facebook group came the monetary opportunity to out their fan community behind a paywall. In their article "White feminism ruins the party again": a case study of the rise and fall of the My Favorite Murder Facebook fan group" Billinson and Orr explore the collapse of the *MFM* Facebook group and the ways racism and white feminism played a role its collapse: "While social and digital media offers spaces to congregate and form community for marginalized groups, it is still abundantly clear that the problems of "white feminism" permeate these "inclusive" feminist spaces. The *My Favorite Murder* Facebook group is not unique in this way,

[12] https://www.npr.org/2022/11/08/1134550280/stories-about-crime-are-rife-with-misinformation-and-racism-critics-say

but rather indicative of a much larger problem in feminist spaces digital and physical alike. When challenged by members of the group who don't feel the inclusivity promised, the spaces crumble rather than rising to the occasion more often than not" (Billinson and Orr 13). The crumbling of the Facebook community highlights one of the pitfalls of feminism and intimacy when it comes to *MFM*. The parameters of inclusion are not inclusive for everyone when the foundation of the podcast's activism comes from an unconscious white framework. Since the basis of the hosts feminism is exclusionary, it is then no surprise that a facet of their community imploded. Intimacy for some listeners is not a foundation upon which genuine feminism and inclusion can thrive.

Live Shows and True Crime

True crime live shows are synonymous with the largest gathering of true crime fans in the country, CrimeCon. Founded in 2017 as an offspring of the Oxygen television network, CrimeCon has served as the event of the year for true crime enthusiasts (Russell). Attendees can attend podcaster live shows and meet investigators from some of the year's most popular true crime documentaries. While the event is a place of excitement and community for so many true crime fans, the existence of such an event has given others pause. CrimeCon is an event that brings together podcast hosts and true crime enthusiasts for a series of mixers and panels, all centered around their shared love for true crime. However, this gathering has sparked both praise and criticism online, with questions arising about its purpose. Given the complex history of true crime, it is understandable that a dedicated convention for the genre could invite scrutiny and critique. The allure of such events lies in the promise of meeting your favorite podcaster – the friend you've listened to in your car every week.

The definitions of intimacy I referred to at the beginning of the chapter clarify that intimacy extends beyond the physical, yet it still holds significance in podcasting, especially during live show events hosted by podcasters. Live shows are not unique to true crime podcasts specifically; however, they help exemplify some of the ethical issues I have discussed so far in this chapter. In the words of Euritt: “But while liveness and intimacy are similar in many ways, and podcasting sometimes uses intimacy to talk about qualities other media think of as live, podcasting defines intimacy through interpersonal closeness and tends to reserve liveness for events that involve physical co-presence in a theater or streaming online” (4). The potential of liveness within podcast fan communities enhances the sense of intimacy; live shows offer the chance for a type of one-on-one interaction that is appealing. Returning to *MFM*, the hosts have regularly toured around the US and done live shows, recording them, and then posting them on their podcast feed. Considering other media that people regularly consume, like TV and film, it is often unrealistic to imagine being in the room with one’s favorite movie star, but with podcasting live shows, the wall between host and fan erodes. It is much easier for fans to feel like they are close both physically and emotionally. The allure of podcast live shows is that the feelings of familiarity you get from turning on your favorite podcast are attainable in real life. From my perspective, CrimeCon serves as the tangible representation of the issues I’ve outlined in the realm of true crime podcasting and the cultivation of intimacy. It’s crucial to note that live shows and CrimeCon are not free; entry-level tickets for CrimeCon 2023 were priced at $349. The event thrives on the relationship between the fervor of true crime enthusiasts and their willingness to financially invest in access. This intersection serves as a testament to the intricate dynamics between the intimate connection fans seek and the financial mechanisms that sustain events like CrimeCon.

True crime fans are not the sole attendees at Crime Con. Stacy Chapin attended CrimeCon 2023 and was taken aback by her experience. She is the mother of Ethan Chapin, a college student murdered on November 18, 2023, while staying at his girlfriend's home. There was everything from ravenous fans eager to hear gory details from famous prosecutors to true crime themed coffee beans for sale in the vendor hall (Barker). Chapin, without informing the panel presenter, attended a session dedicated to the murder of her son and his friends. The session, led by podcast host and professor Joseph Scott Morgan, was packed. Chapin was taken aback by the misinformation presented about her son's murder during the presentation. When Chapin raised her concerns about the panel to CrimeCon founder Kevin Balfe, he explained Morgan was selected because he would not "indulge in sensationalism," despite the fact he was actively spreading misinformation during his panel (Barker). This incident sheds light on the complex dynamics and challenges that can arise within an event like CrimeCon, where the balance between fan enthusiasm and responsible content presentation becomes a delicate concern.

The year journalist Nicholas Russell attended CrimeCon he also found the event to be abrasive in many the same ways Chapin did. Russell recalls his experience at the event, noting how podcasters seemed to diminish the ethos of the event, "This year, the pool of male and female crime experts (the same names tend to appear from year to year) had been diluted by an army of podcasters, internet sleuths, and token members of marginalized groups trying to make lurid stories of violence and tragedy more inclusive; the program listed a podcast recording on the subject of "*Serial* Killers of Color," an embarrassment to people of color everywhere (Russell). CrimeCon has evolved with a primary focus on podcasters and fostering fan interactions with them. Over time, there has been a noticeable shift in emphasis – the initial focus on investigators has diminished while the prominence of content creators has grown. This transformation in CrimeCon's dynamics is evident in Russell's experience, which encapsulates both the intense desire to be in proximity to podcast hosts and the problematic handling of race issues previously discussed in the context of *Serial* and *MFM*. Russell's encounter serves as a reflection of the evolving nature of CrimeCon, where the dynamics between fans and podcast hosts take center stage, and the issues of race intersect with the fervor surrounding these interactions. CrimeCon stands as a multifaceted event, embodying the tangible intersection of monetary interests within the podcasting sphere. The live show panels, which bring podcast hosts to a physical stage, unveil issues like misinformation and challenges to journalistic integrity that may be easier to overlook in the audio-only realm. The transition to a live setting prompts a heightened scrutiny of content creators and their impact on the audience. Rather than viewing these panels as a mere extension of the podcast experience, a more insightful perspective recognizes them as significant byproducts of the podcasting phenomenon. These live events not only offer a platform for hosts to engage with their loyal audience but also underscore the dynamic relationship between content creators and their dedicated community, adding depth to the evolving landscape of podcasting.

Among the surreal elements of CrimeCon is the presence of family members of victims like Chapin and the Petito family. These individuals seek community and aim to raise awareness for charities established in memory of their lost loved ones (Barker). Using Chapin as an example, the need to question who exists outside the realm of podcaster intimacy becomes highly evident. While true crime fans may feel a sense of closeness with their favorite hosts, it's essential to recognize those on the periphery of this intimacy. For individuals like Chapin, the desire for community or a morbid fascination motivates fans to attend events like CrimeCon.

However, people like Chapin do not have the luxury of opting in or out of participating in true crime culture; the tragic murder of her son thrust her into the spotlight in a way that she cannot escape.

Negative emotions are not the only force at play in the dynamics between podcast hosts and their listeners. As well as fear and anxiety, Ahmed also writes about what happens in expressions of love. If fans, of any genre, do one thing above all, it is express love for the media they have taken an interest in. Ahmed's theory on love and affect is extremely useful because it sheds light on the reason why fans might feel drawn to such a controversial event. Ahmed explains her stance as, "I do not want to suggest a one-way relation of transference (when love for a particular other comes to 'stand for' the collective, or when love for a collective 'stands in' for the particular other). Rather, I want to examine how love moves us 'towards' something in the very delineation of the object of love, and how the direction of 'towardness' is sustained through the 'failure' of love to be returned" (124 Ahmed). True crime fans attend CrimeCon out of a love for the genre. There is a sense of "towardness" in how fans respond to panels at CrimeCon, cheering and fawning over hosts as if they were major celebrities, because to these consumers - they are. Building on the exploration of love and "towardness" within the context of CrimeCon attendance, it is essential to extend analysis to the broader behaviors and interactions exhibited by true crime fans. Beyond the confines of events like CrimeCon, the manifestations of love for the genre become evident in the thriving online communities that true crime listeners create and participate in. These communities serve as spaces where fans can express their passion, share insights, and collectively engage in the ongoing dialogue surrounding true crime narratives. In doing so, they reinforce their connection to the genre and the shared experiences it entails. The very act of participating in these discussions becomes an expression of love, a way for fans to further immerse themselves in the true crime world. Furthermore, the influence of love can be traced in the consumption patterns of true crime enthusiasts. The loyalty and emotional investment fans hold for certain podcasts or hosts shape their preferences and guide their choices in selecting new content to explore. The “towardness” identified by Ahmed plays a pivotal role here, directing fans toward specific creators that align with their affection for the genre. In essence, the analysis of love in the realm of true crime extends beyond individual events like CrimeCon. It permeates online communities, influences consumption habits, shapes ethical considerations, and collectively contributes to the dynamic and evolving landscape of true crime fandom. Understanding the multifaceted role of love provides valuable insights into the motivations and actions of true crime enthusiasts, enriching our comprehension of the genre’s cultural impact.

Conclusion

When I suggest that true crime fans perceive podcast hosts as friends, I am specifically addressing the emotional connection. Reflecting on a conversation with a friend during the COVID-19 lockdown, she shared how, in those isolated times, she spent hours watching *Star Trek*, finding solace in the characters who felt like companions. Similarly, true crime fans experience a comparable sense of connection through podcasting. They recognize that the host of their favorite show is not an actual best friend, yet there exists a compelling and familiar atmosphere that continues to draw them back. In summary, true crime podcast hosts assume a role akin to main characters, creating a unique connection with listeners. While this engagement fosters enthusiasm, it also gives rise to potential issues when fans exhibit problematic behaviors, such as online fanaticism or excessive web sleuthing, posing ethical challenges in both virtual and real-world spheres. *Serial*’s significance goes beyond triggering the true crime podcast renaissance; it lays down a foundational framework for hosts to establish interactive relationships with their audience. This blueprint, initiated by *Serial*, continues to shape the genre, with shows like *My Favorite Murder* carrying the legacy forward, underscoring the enduring impact of podcasts on storytelling and audience participation. The form of the podcast offered a new opportunity, because as these hosts engage with the form in this way it sets the expectations of what a true crime podcast is and what it can do. The boundaries of acceptable content and behavior are decided with the popularity of each podcast. It is important to consider the impact of intimacy because it is this sense of closeness that encourages listeners to let their guard down and can make them less analytical to the messages that true crime narratives push.

Advertisements present a significant reason why our engagement warrants concern. Podcast audiences, characterized by trust and a niche focus, are prime targets for marketing. The use of intimacy to promote other podcasts within this network adds another layer of concern. Networks distributing these podcasts often cross-promote in each other's feeds, ensuring a continuous flow of content. The constant availability of new media makes it less likely for individuals to disengage from the prosumer economy. In a landscape where there is always something new to consume, the incentive for pausing and reflecting is minimal, while the reward for continuous consumption remains high. Delving deeper into true crime reveals a complex interconnection of various aspects—a vast spiderweb were exploring one mode of distribution, fan community, or ethical issue inevitably leads to numerous other interconnected concerns.

In conclusion, the prioritization of eliciting emotions from the audience, rather than delving into the intricacies of the crimes discussed, underscores the significant role of intimacy in podcasting. This intimacy not only facilitates the commercialization of others' pain but also extends its impact into the physical world, leading to tangible consequences for victims and their families. The complex interplay between emotional engagement, monetization, and real-world ramifications highlights the multifaceted nature of true crime podcasting’s influence and raises critical questions about the ethical boundaries within this evolving landscape.

Chapter 3: Art, Archives, and Narrative Disruption

The 2018 film *Halloween* directed by David Gordon Green features a true crime podcasting duo, desperate to get as close as possible to Michael Myers. In a follow up to the 1978 film by the same name, the film follows an adult Laurie Strode (played by Jamie Lee Curtis) as Myers escapes from jail and comes to exact revenge against her. Podcasters Aaron Jospeh-Korey (played by Jefferson Hall) and Dana Haines (played by Rhian Rees) are new characters in the 2018 film, attempting to make a podcast about Strode's battle with Myers that fated night in the 70s. In the article "Are the Podcasters in 'Halloween' Good at Podcasting?", Miles Surrey details how the two podcasters are terrible at their jobs; for example, paying people off for interviews and recording in windy and loud locations. He claims the podcasters in *Halloween* are a terrible portrayal of podcasters:

> Aaron and Dana are a negative representation of true-crime podcasters who consistently skirted ethical and audio considerations without much in the way of logic. Their monologuing was pretentious; they didn't ask hard-hitting questions; they tossed a mask at Michael Myers; they filled their podcast with the sweet sounds of asylum alarms. (Surrey)

Surrey goes on to rate the podcasters one out of five stars, deeming them terrible at their job. In my analysis, this is the point of the two characters. They represent everything that is ethically questionable about true crime media. If they were good at their jobs, their deaths would not serve, arguably, as a jab at the core of true crime. One of the podcasters' greatest transgressions is paying Laurie Strode $3,000 for an interview, a journalistic no-go, and then in a brazen assertion, the duo asks if Laurie would sit down and talk with Myers. This is a confronting image of two podcasters who are only driven by money and do not care about victims of violent crime. It is an understood trope in horror films that characters that transgress ethical or moral boundaries are killed (i.e. the common scene of teenagers having pre-marital sex being the victims of murder). Surrey's article misses the point of the film—*Halloween* is not portraying them as good or ideal podcasters—they are bad, corrupt, and greedy, part of why they make excellent victims in the film. The two podcasters die a rather humiliating death; they are murdered in a disgusting gas station bathroom. Maybe the larger point is that the brutal murder of the two podcasters reveals a larger set of cultural feelings about the role of true crime in culture.

In the fall of 2022, I taught a sophomore-level literature course that delved into novels, poetry, and television offering commentary on true crime and violence, as opposed to traditional true crime books. The goal of this course, aligning with the aims of this chapter, was to prompt students to question the nature of the true crime genre. By introducing counternarratives and moments within art where consumers could reflect on true crime from different perspectives—like the thought-provoking exploration in the *Halloween* film—the curriculum aimed to foster critical thinking. Through these alternative viewpoints, the course sought to provide meaningful opportunities for students to reassess their perceptions of true crime and challenge the prevailing status quo in the genre. True crime media presents victims of violence as one-dimensional characters, and I wanted to explore alongside my students works that offered a counter-narrative. I wanted to offer a point of archival disruption; in other words, I wanted to explore works that offer moments of reflection as well as counternarratives to the types of stories that dominant the true crime genre. I had no preconceived notions about what conclusions my students would draw from the materials, but I wanted to present them with counternarratives that would facilitate robust class discussion. From this course experience arose my inspiration for the analysis presented in this chapter.

Within the current landscape of true crime media, a notable issue arises–a prioritization of a select few narratives with minimal representation. What I mean here is true crime tells the same story over and over, and these stories tend to be limited in their representations of race and sexuality. This trend leads to the reduction of actual individuals to mere characters, transforming acts of violence into plot devices and commodifying pain. In this chapter, I plan to employ archive theory to explore how art (i.e. poetry, novels, and television), particularly parody, disrupts mainstream true crime narratives. These artistic expressions serve as counter-narratives, compelling consumers to critically examine the inherent messages in traditional true crime media. The central question becomes whether introducing alternative media forms acts as a disruptive force within the overarching narrative structure of the true crime genre. This argument posits that art and parodies related to true crime intentionally disrupt the archival structure of the genre. In this chapter, I will analyze three works: *Sadie* by Courtney Summers, *Jane: A Murder* by Maggie Nelson, and *Only Murders in the Building*. By investigating the interactions of these media pieces with the true crime archive, this chapter aims to reveal reflective moments that spotlight enduring issues within the genre. This exploration seeks to unravel the intricate relationship between mainstream true crime narratives and disruptive artistic expressions, aiming to provide a clearer understanding of how these disruptions contribute to a nuanced perspective on the genre's impact.

Archive Theory and True Crime

Jacques Derrida, in *Archive Fever*, delves into the intricate nature of archives, describing them as self-perpetuating entities. Drawing a metaphorical parallel between the Devil challenging God's sovereignty, he finds an insightful comparison to the functioning of modern archives (15). Humans are averse to being reminded of an evil contradicting God's goodness.

Derrida highlights how the existence of the Devil can serve as an excuse for God (15). That the Devil acts as a justification of God is powerful when considering the connections between true crime and the archive. Archives, conventionally regarded as guardians of history and essential artifacts, are disrupted when questions are raised about what they are doing or why they exist. Derrida's exploration of the God and Devil binary, suggests a self-sustaining cycle in which the Devil simultaneously challenges and validates the goodness of God. When confronted with the metaphorical Devil in conjunction with the notion of an all-knowing stream of history and knowledge, how is our understanding of true crime archives reshaped? Much like those who chronicle and perpetuate the narratives around God, the true crime archive assumes the role of a custodian of the past, guaranteeing its perpetual existence. There is always information about crimes, nicely preserved lying in wait to become a documentary or podcast. The archive is always there to receive new content. We are often reminded of the Devil, of all the things that have not made it into the archive and have been, in Freudian terms, repressed. This reminder that the Devil is present, and we have repressed knowledge, prompts us to turn back to the archive to believe in it as a tool of preservation. In part, Derrida seems to argue that the function of an archive is to respond to fears about the loss of knowledge and culture. *Archive Fever* asks readers to consider whether the knowledge and history of culture belong to those who enjoyed it or to the entities that created it, and if the existence of the archive changes that relationship. The function of an archive seems to be self-fulfilling; its existence necessitates that it continues existing.

Genre labels serve the function of organizing similar content, facilitating discourse about what is happening within that label. Therefore, I argue that archive theory applies well to true crime, because it gives researchers more tools to understand the power dynamics within the genre. Sometimes, archives do not exist for purposes greater than sustaining their own existence.

If true crime was just about bringing awareness to cases and crimes, there are already nonprofits and advocacy groups doing that work; true crime is not needed for public good. While often archives are thought of as a place to hold culturally significant material or to protect important information, sometimes it is important to step back and ask why this information needs to be saved at all. In her book *Awful Archives*, Jenny Rice demonstrates that bureaucracy is often at the heart of archives rather than the purpose they might seem to serve. If they did not exist for their own sake, they would serve no other purpose or function. Rice uses the procedures for keeping evidence in storage for criminal investigation as a prime example of an archive being self-serving:

> Police evidence rooms are important for several different reasons, most obviously in the way that the rooms preserve artifacts that can help to solve cold cases or connect crimes that might otherwise go unsolved. Yet, the evidence room also endows the police bureaucracy with a certain kind of credibility. The preserved archives of evidence testify to a legality, or the insurance of authority. All of these examples vividly reflect how archives boost things…They boost bureaucracy to a state of authority. Archives wedge otherwise unstable structures into a kind of stability that allows us to keep going. Their boosting power comes not so much from the contents as from the way they consolidate and coalesce into something stable—physically and epistemically. The contents thicken into a new form altogether. (Rice 20)

True crime operates similarly to police evidence archives, perpetuating itself for the sake of sustaining the genre. It often uses the poor excuse of claiming to share victims' stories, despite its sensational and historically troubled methods of storytelling.[13] It is also important to note that in

[13] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/08/opinion/movies-books-true-crime.html

her example, Rice uses the example of police evidence archives, which justify the bureaucracy of the criminal justice system, a key feature and component of true crime's content. The financial success of true crime narratives reinforces the genre, leading to the creation of more narratives driven by commercial viability. There is not an original of inherent good in the existence of true crime narratives, but they continue to exist to perpetuate themselves. The repetitive nature of storytelling within the genre solidifies the true crime archive into a stable entity. Taking note of artistic works that help bring the circular logic around why certain genre norms are present is key to deconstructing their power. In this chapter, I argue that art plays a crucial role in destabilizing the predominant narratives of true crime, centering the problems that Rice mentions above. Without artistic interventions and critique, the genre risks reinforcing bureaucracy and the status quo, as highlighted by Rice. The danger lies in the "thickness" of the new form that emerges when bureaucratic norms are strengthened. The more normalcy is perpetuated, the less likely consumers are to notice when problematic elements, such as conspiracy theories, become normalized within the genre's structure. Much of true crime exists simply as new content to consume, contributing to the proliferation of stories, especially those centered on serial killers, told repeatedly for the sake of selling consumable products.

When reflecting on part of her relationship to books and archival materials in her own professional life, Rice ponders the meanings of memory and use. She reflects on a moment where she, in a moment of frustration about her office set up, had to use a stack of her books and notes to prop up her laptop, "In that moment, my archives were severed from their memory function and became useful as laptop support. Archives as prop…The memories and contents housed in that particular archival mass mattered very little. Instead, they became useful in a way that is not defined through memory, but through their use" (Rice 19). Rice de-emphasizes the information contained in an archive and instead moves attention to archival objects. It does not matter what is within the pages of the book, but rather what function that book serves. As I have pointed out in previous chapters, podcasts and other true crime media function beyond the stories they contain, and often that is precisely the problem. Podcasts serve to make money, foster intimacy, and get listeners to consume more podcasts. The same is true of specials on streaming services such as Netflix; they continue to pump out true crime narratives because they are profitable, and each one sustains enough interest to warrant making the next one. In true crime, the content of the stories is often of little importance, the emphasis is on selling a product that has the same expected elements of a true crime narrative. Rather, it is the use of the stories, as commercial products that sell the same narratives that is true crime's main goal. On and on, each piece of the true crime archive serves as an object. Art about true crime disrupts this cycle, it acts as a sort of Trojan Horse. The fictional works I mention in this chapter are able to subvert true crime's messages because they cleverly use hallmark elements of the genre to make their point. Because these stories on the surface feel familiar, they are able to manipulate consumer expectations, creating room for new meaning. The content of art does matter, characters and plots are crafted to make consumers critically reflect on whatever themes an author wishes to explore, this acts as a mirror to the formulaic nature of true crime media.

When we think about legal records or evidence, there is a sense of finality. Those archival materials have a specific purpose and should only be used within the criminal justice system. This is where art is key in revealing the inner workings of true crime. The use of legal materials solely for their original purpose is far from the reality in true crime. Any legal archival material related to a case is fair game when a podcast host gets ahold of it. Rice explains that use and purpose are two completely different concepts, noting, "This distinction between use and purpose suggests that contents of records are not the only active parts of archives. The purpose of archives (what goes beyond their immediate use) is not necessarily embedded within the contents or information of those records" (Rice 37). Rice delves deeper into her distinction between archive content and function, highlighting a major issue within true crime narratives. From a global perspective, the information comprising true crime largely originates from police investigations and court proceedings, serving a function within the U.S. legal system. However, as detailed in the previous chapter, what begins as evidence for criminal prosecution transforms into material for online forums, podcasts, and conspiracy theories. Subsequently, these actions attract major news outlets, resulting in news coverage and sometimes even documentaries about the extreme behaviors of true crime fans. The specific content of the stories – the crime itself – becomes arguably inconsequential. Here, I do not mean that the essence of a true crime story is irrelevant; as a genre, the stories must revolve around crime. What becomes rendered unimportant in true crime are the real people at the center of these stories. Preserving their legacy or their family's voice does not align with the consumer-driven goals of true crime. There exists a constant tension in true crime between the use and purpose of the archive. It all circles back to use; narratives serve a purpose, and the constant retelling of stories keeps consumers interested and engaged, leading to the prosumer dynamics explored in Chapter 1.

Navigating the true crime archive proves challenging due to its vast and intricate nature, differing significantly from the simplicity of a library section. The complexity arises from its extensive overlap with various forms and genres, making it akin to a multifaceted digital network involving information and prosumers. Despite this intricate structure, it is crucial to explore how this network faces challenges and disruptions. The true crime archive, as a hybrid collection, incorporates materials from the legal system (police evidence records, court transcripts), entertainment media (podcasts, streaming service exclusives), and fan-generated content (Reddit posts, TikToks). To effectively introduce counternarratives, diverse responses become imperative in engaging with this intricate amalgamation. Previous true crime research often treats consumers, podcasters, law enforcement, and production companies as distinct entities with firm boundaries between these categories. While I will discuss singular pieces of media, I do so not to focus solely on one artifact but to help establish a picture of what kinds of media can help provide counternarratives. I have elaborated on my vision of true crime as an archive, and how archive theory, in this context, allows for nuanced meanings and borders. We can both theorize about the archive and actively engage with it, a concept that aligns well with true crime's dual nature. Most importantly, in this chapter, I aim to explore how art can directly contradict the goals of true crime as a genre. I argue that researchers can gain valuable insights by examining true crime through the lens of archival theory. The methodologies presented in archival studies facilitate the exploration of complex connections that have been lacking in much previous research. I do not propose this method to suggest that past work on true crime and its cultural impact is incomplete. Instead, I offer this framework to address the ongoing shifts in the community, which are continually fueled by the emergence of new social media platforms or streaming services.

Sadie

Sadie by Courtney Summers, published in 2018, is a young adult thriller novel. The novel follows the troubled life of Sadie, a teenager from rural Colorado. The novel begins with the discovery of Sadie's younger sister, Mattie, dead in a field outside of town. When Sadie leaves on a revenge mission to find her sister's killer, she is quickly dismissed by police as a runaway. The lack of police action both in Mattie's murder and Sadie's disappearance prompts surrogate grandmother May Beth Foster to seek the help of investigative journalist and podcast host West McCray. With no one left to turn to, May Beth writes to West hoping he could find out what happened to her girls. As the story progresses, West delves into the investigation of Sadie's disappearance and Mattie's murder. The plot takes shape through the framework of West's podcast, "The Girls," which documents his quest to locate Sadie. When the narrative is not focused on West's perspective as he hosts the podcast, the narrative switches to Sadie's perspective as she embarks on her own journey to track down Keith, her sister's killer and her abuser. The narrative builds tension as Sadie confronts Keith, and the story leaves readers in suspense about Sadie's fate during their confrontation. West's perspective is delivered through a transcription of his podcast, which takes place months after Sadie's disappearance as he tries to piece together what happened to both sisters.

Unlike a standard audiobook with a single narrator, *Sadie* uses its audiobook format to mimic the elements of a podcast. The production elements are highly elevated, turning the audio from simple narration into an immersive experience. As soon as listeners press play to listen to *Sadie* the lines between audiobook and podcast begin to blur. The podcast portions of the audiobook have the characteristics of a typical podcast – introduction, production details, transition music, etc. One of the interesting points where reality and fiction collide begins with the book's publisher. The novel, *Sadie*, is published by MacMillan, and at the start of each of the podcast perspective chapters the listener hears a music transition, and the podcast host West McCray says, "[this podcast] is brought to you by MacMillan Audio" (Summers). The hybrid audiobook/podcast form blurs the listener's sense of reality; MacMillan is both the fictional production company behind the podcast chapters in *Sadie* and the real publisher and producer of the audiobook. Readers are lulled into suspending their disbelief and the lines between reality and fiction seem arbitrary. Because the audiobook sounds so much like a real podcast the characters feel more like real people than if the book did not include these specific podcast details. The form of the audiobook helps to emphasize the real-world nature of what Summers is writing about; the more real it sounds, the easier it is for the hard-hitting subject matter of the novel to resonate with the reader. What is most fascinating about *Sadie* are layers of meaning the audiobook brings to the story. Though a work of fiction, *Sadie* mimics the structure of current true crime podcasts. West, a male podcast host recounts the lives of two women he never met, often inaccurately telling their stories. The difference between real life podcasts and the novel is that Sadie is allowed to have a voice in the narrative, and as a result, speaks for both her and her sister. Via the character West, Summers brings into question the motives of the true crime podcast and its tendency to turn loss and violence into a site of entertainment. Summers highlights the impact violence has on its victims and brings the form of true crime podcasts into direct conflict with each other. The novel, through its unique form, offers a chance to question who is afforded the privilege of being heard. *Sadie* helps to bring this disparity to light by allowing women and girls to have a voice, while highlighting the absence of victim's voices in the podcast form.

In order to understand why the blending of genres is so important to the disruptive impact of Sadie, it is first important to understand how the archive ties into what Summers achieves with her novel. The evolving nature of the true crime genre is best conceptualized as a dynamic network. In this complicated landscape, web sleuths insist on access to files and items beyond their legitimate claim. Carolyn Steedman presents an archeology of the phrase archive fever, a term that I argue helps to explain one of the major underlying issues in true crime. The term comes from Jacques Derrida and refers to the maddened state that comes from working with the ever-changing nature of the archive. Dust, the key term in Steedman's book is "the immutable, obdurate set of beliefs about the material world, past, and present" (ix). From their dust becomes the cause of archive fever, the knowledge that "you know you will not finish, that there will be something left unread, unnoted, transcribed" (Steedman 18). From her explanation it is possible to conceive that the items in the archive are not just producing "dust," but the documents and objects are also "dust." For example, we can read true crime narratives as "dust." They are a byproduct of another entity. They are the residue, or the remains left behind by people. Often the people involved originally in a case are to some degree unable to participate or left out of the production of true crime narratives. "Dust" is also devoid of its original organism, while something produces it, "dust" becomes its own object. This is part of what induces some of the madness that both Steedman and Derrida discuss. As Steedman puts it, we need to consider the relationship between the researcher and "dust." Steedman explains that what is in archive was not written for the original purpose of a historical researcher reading it, "the historian as reader of what is never intended for his or her eyes" (30). True crime podcasts in many ways are a container of dust. Reporters gain information and clues devoid of their original contexts and present them to an audience, pushing the information even further away from its original context. The key elements present in true crime podcasts were never meant for entertainment. Elements such as police interviews, courtroom transcripts, and crime scene evidence were part of an investigation and legal proceeding – not an audio documentary where people would give their opinions online. So, as we dive into art about true crime, the idea of dust offers a way to understand why certain components of the discourse have prevailed and what constitutes a counternarrative.

Summers uses the podcast within her book to explore the process of how victims of violence become pieces of information, stripped of their original origin and reused for a new purpose. The combined form of the podcast and audiobook allows for a multitude of genres in the novel. In one sense the listener is presented with the genre of an audiobook and the language of a podcast simultaneously. The listener is offered a framework for understanding the violence of true crime. After hearing the hybrid form of the audiobook, a listener is left to question what they have heard and what constitutes both genres. The hybrid audiobook/podcast allows consumers to be active in the meaning of the text in a way that simply reading the novel would not allow. Listeners of the audiobook take on the same subject position that they might if they were listening to a real true crime podcast, a passive consuming audience ready for the next shocking revelation. But these moments are disrupted by Sadie's perspective; for example, there are scenes in the novel where she is confronted with memories of her sister and feels profound grief over her loss. This kind of disruption is not possible when listening to a real true crime podcast. This narrative choice puts the listener in dialogue with Sadie as a character, upending the traditional true crime listening experience. Reading a book is often a solitary activity, but the podcast segments in Sadie disrupt this conventional reading structure. It is not merely a narrator addressing the reader; instead, a host taking on a more conversational style commonly found in podcasts rather than traditional audiobooks. The progression of chapters simulates the experience of "tuning back in" each week for a new podcast episode. Summers's choice of this format creates a sense of dialogism between the reader and the podcast host within the novel. Although not engaged in a literal conversation, readers interact with their own thoughts and those presented by the podcast host. Furthermore, this format enables readers to engage in a conversation with Sadie, a perspective often absent from true crime podcasts due to the typical inclusion of deceased crime victims. After each podcast chapter, Sadie shares her feelings of anger, grief, and plans for avenging her sister. Sadie's narrative, portraying the violence inflicted upon her and her sister, offers a unique perspective rarely found in the true crime genre. Allowing listeners to hear Sadie's voice encourages them to derive meaning from her comments, shaping their understanding of crime narratives. This blend of perspectives prompts readers to question the intentions of both the embedded podcast in the novel and true crime podcasts in general.

Once the reader has been introduced to the hybrid form of the audiobook, the next element of the novel that becomes apparent is the arrangement of the perspectives in the book. The audiobook has a full cast of voice actors. Each character who is interviewed has a different distinct voice. The novel does not start with Sadie's perspective and voice, but rather the introduction to the first episode of "The Girls" done by fictional WNRK producer Danny Gilchrist. Summers chooses not to start the novel in Sadie's perspective. As readers and listeners, our initial introduction to Sadie is filtered through the lens of podcast producers, shaping how they want people to perceive her rather than hearing her own voice. This mirrors the typical consumer experience with real true crime podcasts, where listeners gain access to intimate details of victims' lives but seldom hear directly from them. Despite being provided with abundant relevant information such as times, dates, locations, family members, injuries, charges, and suspects, the absence of arguably the most crucial piece of information— the voice of the victim—is a notable gap in true crime podcasts. In Summers's representation of a podcast within the novel, this absence is accentuated, emphasizing the significance of the victim's voice, which is often silenced in the true crime genre, necessitating others to speak on their behalf.

Once readers are engrossed in the first episode of "The Girls" they are shocked in a stark transition to Sadie's perspective. The reader is reminded of the hybrid nature of the audiobook. They are taken back to Sadie's perspective in the moment she was orchestrating her disappearance from Cold Creek, Sadie is painted by the podcast to be a missing girl—someone for the listener to worry about—but when given her perspective, we meet her as she is committing a mature act. She is buying a used car in cash to use in her plan to run away. Sadie is not the girl that she is portrayed to be by West McCray, but is in fact someone who has agency and is enacting her plan with exacting precision. Sadie states in her first chapter that she is utterly unconcerned if she dies because of trying to avenge her sister (Summers 11). The novel's form allows the reader to question their experience with other podcasts, particularly true crime podcasts. From the start of the novel, listeners are asked to consider whose voices they are accustomed to hearing and whose are missing. Sadie is vengeful and has agency and this is highlighted by the absence of her presence in the first episode of "The Girls."

The last chapter of the audiobook that circles back to the beginning of the novel by addressing the name of the podcast. The title of the podcast, "The Girls," gives readers another window into how Summers plays with form to reveal issues with true crime podcasts. West explains to May Beth that he wants to name the podcast Sadie and Mattie. May Beth suggests that the podcast should be called "The Girls" in honor of all of the girls that Sadie saved from being Keith's victims (Summers 205). The book plays with the idea that Sadie is both just one girl, but also representative of abusive survivors at large. For May Beth, Sadie and Mattie were her girls and the idea that Keith would have harmed other young women deeply upsets her. For West McCray, Sadie and Mattie are just two girls who are symptoms of larger societal problems. The novel mimics this with the play on the phrase "dead girl" throughout the novel. The phrase "dead girl" means different things to each of the characters, and by extent the phrase also means different things to the reader. Just as the book points out to us, there is no one unified definition of what "dead girl" means. It is important to consider the use of the word "girl" as fraught. The words Robin Lakoff wrote in her 1975 book *Language and Women's Place* still holds true, "[the word] girl brings to mind irresponsibility" (25). Summers implements the repetitions of the phrase dead girl to highlight the variety of images and connotations associated with the phrase. Essayist Alice Bolin argues that we are so inundated with dead girls in American culture that we are numb to grotesque exploitation of the death of young women. "Girl" is a sign that men, and in the case of the audiobook, West, fill up with their own meaning to mirror their worth. At the end of the novel, West is confronted about his desire to play hero in Sadie's story. For him it is a way for him to make the narrative about himself rather than about Sadie. As listeners hearing from both Sadie and West we are offered the opportunity to question what the word girl means to both of these character, and by extension what the word means to us. "The Girls" are Sadie and Mattie, all of the girls Keith molested, all of the girls Sadie saved, all of the dead girls in podcasts, and all of the girls who go missing every day in America. Sadie's story, as the podcast producer points out, is common, one of thousands. However, Summers's novel makes us hear Sadie, hear her voice, her family, and come to our own conclusions about the systems that have taken advantage of her and manipulated her. While "The Girls" often lumps her in with the multitude missing girls who haunt the American psyche, Summers provides a counternarrative to humanize not just Sadie but victims of violence.

The conclusion of the novel provides insightful commentary on the nature and motives of the true crime genre. West, haunted by his inability to find Sadie, encounters a turning point in the last chapter narrated from Sadie's perspective. In this chapter, Sadie confronts Keith, her sister's killer, and is attacked. The narrative leaves her fate uncertain, as it remains unclear whether she survives the assault or succumbs to it. While the reader learns of Keith's demise due to injuries sustained during the altercation, Sadie's fate and whereabouts become unknowable. The novel's concluding chapters adopt a podcast format, with Sadie's disappearance left unresolved. Listeners are left with an open-ended conclusion, as Sadie's fate remains a mystery. The only resolution offered is the identification of Mattie's killer. The novel's use of this form, particularly in its conclusion, leaves readers and listeners unsettled, emphasizing the unresolved nature of Sadie's disappearance. Summer's choice to leave the end of her novel unresolved, but on Sadie's terms instead of West's allows for a transition in power not present in most true crime narratives. In her article "Forever Trapped in the Imagery of Late Capitalism?" Elizabeth Yardley gives a scathing critique of the motives behind true crime podcasts:

> The popular criminology of the serialized true crime podcast is characterized by complex threads, bobbing and weaving between micro experiences and wider macro structures but not quite landing the punch. The podcasts pay lip service to the idea of action and change by revealing inequalities and injustices to the listenership. They offer glimpses of traumatic and distressing social realities – symptoms of the Real – through exposing us to the misery of others and encouraging us to feel their pain through a stylized Imaginary. However, this soon disappears in the rear-view mirror as the podcast ends without resolution, unfinished and incomplete. Producers and presenters move on to Series Two, securing lucrative sponsorship deals as the marketing industry of the Imaginary seizes this opportunity to access listeners. (517)

The novel concludes with West McCray's voice, leaving us in suspense about Sadie's fate and whether she decides to return home. Summers mirrors the reality of the commercial nature of podcasts, emphasizing that, as compelling as Sadie and Mattie's story is, the world will inevitably move on. While the trauma deeply affects the supporting characters in the audiobook, Summers forces us to confront the harsh reality that, to a podcast, it is just another narrative about a "dead girl." Women, or in this case, girls, are treated as interchangeable commodities, valued solely for the revenue their stories generate. Sadie and Mattie's stories, despite their profound impact on supporting characters, are ultimately reduced to sellable goods—mere entertainment. The podcast, unfortunately, does not bring resolution to Mattie's murder or halt a serial predator. Instead, it is Sadie's agency and actions that lead to the positive outcomes presented in the narrative. Through Sadie's voice, Summers reminds us of her ability to shape her own destiny.

The dead body is not traditionally treated with respect in true crime media. Alice Bolin, a vocal critique of the true crime genre and the fetishization of death in popular culture. In her book *Dead Girls: Essays on Surviving an American Obsession* Bolin critiques what she refers to as the "Dead Girl Show" (Bolin 14). This is any form of media that has the death of a young women as the inciting event for the plot of the story. Typically, dead girl shows are focused on the growth of the male characters and the woman is secondary to her own story. Bolin's work is particularly relevant because it is so applicable not to the true crime discourse at large, but particularly to what Summers is doing in her novel. Summers' work seems to be aware of the "Dead Girl Show" and tries to make light of it via form and language. Both Bolin and Summers' work provide readers with a language to understand the dynamics of violence within true crime narrative. One of the merits of Summers' writing lies in its ability to disrupt the established norms within the true crime space. This genre inherently adheres to certain conventions, and

Summers introduces characters that counteract the prevailing narratives employed in true crime narratives.

Sadie is an important text, both in its audiobook and print form because it comments on an important moment in American culture. True crime fans need to consider what they are really consuming when turning on a podcast. Summers' novels ask us to question how we think about violence, death, and gender. Young adult literature is often discredited as low-brow or not having significant value. I think that Sadie should be taken seriously as it offers insightful and meaningful commentary. Though Sadie is a fictional character the form of her story seems all too real, and maybe how easy it is to reproduce should be of great concern to readers.

Jane

Jane: A Murder by Maggie Nelson, published in 2016, is a memoir told in verse about the death of Nelson's aunt. The book weaves together portions of Jane's diary, Nelson's creative imaginings of what her aunt's life was like, and stylized descriptions of news materials to add nuance to her aunt's story. Jane was murdered while attending law school in Michigan in 1969. Nelson, having never known her aunt, tries to reconstruct who she might have been. Nelson published a follow up nonfiction work called *The Red Parts*, a deep dive into the experience of Nelson and her family as, shortly after the publication of *Jane*, the serial killer was caught after decades. In this chapter I will only focus on the contents of *Jane* as *The Red Parts* is more so about Nelson's personal experience with the legal system. One of the most important things to note is that life and loss are at the center of the novel, while in traditional true crime narratives the brutalized and sexualized body, as well as sensational displays of pain (both physical and emotional) take center stage, Nelson aims for something different. The killer is the least important character in the collection. He is the harbinger of pain for the family, but beyond that he is not given any kind of treatment. True crime is notorious for building mythos around killers – centering them as the main character in the story. Nelson does not want to engage in contemplating who the killer was, and instead she focuses on dissecting how her aunt was treated as a character in a killer's story.

Steedman's framework for understanding misremembrance in context of the archive is helpful for understanding what Nelson does in *Jane*. Steedman refers to an error she made in her own work where she misremembered that there was a rag rug in Elizabeth Gaskell's 1884 novel *Mary Barton* (112). Steedman also plays with the irony that it was the rug itself that she misremembered. She points out that the object itself is a combination of scraps, bits of fabric devoid of their original context woven together into a single object (116). This is an apt metaphor for true crime as a genre. While what is presented in podcasts seems to be one cohesive narrative, really it is a lot like the rug, a mix of bits and pieces that are years removed from their original origin. But as they are woven together, those scraps become their own object, with all the separate parts becoming part of a whole. Steedman goes on to explain why the scrappy nature of the rag rug is significant: "But what went into the rag that makes the rag rug, its own history of production, ownership and consumption, of wearing and tearing, deflects the use of this aesthetic, as we shall see" (116). While those individual pieces of the rug are subsumed into a whole, making a singular object, they do not do so without first adding their meaning into the project. With every scrap comes information and context that builds what the rug is and a basis for what it means. The larger point Steedman is making here is that the point of the misremembering is what it means that we placed some value or information we view as important into a place where it does not belong. There is meaning in the act of creating the mythos of an object just as much as the mythos itself. True crime is littered with rag rugs, misplaced memories, the thing true crime wants to be there but isn't, so the gaps are filled in with half-truths and skewed information.

Nelson's writing oscillates between realism to poems that are more conceptual in nature, focused on evoking feelings of loss. The point of the collection is that Nelson is trying to write her aunt "back to life" in a sense. Within the collection, Nelson acknowledges that this is a task even she cannot accomplish. In the front matter of the book, Nelson opens with the following disclaimer of the archival material she used:

> Some of the writing that appears here is Jane's own, either from her childhood diary dated 1960-1961 or a loose sheaf of journal pages from her college years. The later fragments are mostly undated; here I place them around 1966, but that date is by no means a certainty. I have taken the liberty of altering the appearance of Jane's writing on the page and correcting spelling and grammar when necessary. Also, although this is a 'true story,' I make no claim for the factual accuracy of its representations of events or individuals. (Nelson 8)

The tension between Nelson and her family about the creative endeavor is a palpable part of the collection. In the poem "Figment" Nelson opens with her grandfather's reaction to her desire to write about Jane in the first place the poem starts "When I tell my grandfather I am writing about Jane, he says, / What will it be, a figment of your imagination?" (Nelson 15). She goes on to give a history of the word figment and its various meanings in history before landing on the following feelings about what she is doing with the creative endeavor "We must not conceive that this logical figment ever had a real existence. / I invent her, then, as a woman emerging from the sea. A tall man meets her on the black sand. You've come back, he says. Can barely see her in the sealight. They make love there, and become horses. As night grows black they become weeds"

(16). In the way that the rag rug was never really there, Nelson acknowledges that anything she imagines or writes about Jane is a figment, a misremembrance, something that is made of truths woven together but is not the truth itself. What is revolutionary about what Nelson is doing here is the acknowledgment that she has to consider truth as part of the artwork itself. She not only mentions the issue of truth in the forward, it is actively part of the poetry. True crime media does not actively deal with this issue of truth. As I mentioned earlier, there is a difference between the information in an archive and the use of that information. For Nelson, these two issues cannot be separated and in fact need to be dealt with in tandem. She cannot embark on the project of writing about Jane without recognizing the information available to her as well as how she is limited in the ways she can use that information. Truth, and its inability to be complete is one of the core themes in Jane and directly points to the issue that true crime has always had a tenuous relationship with factual accuracy.[14] This also harkens to the end of Sadie, where the truth of her story dies with her. Nelson and Summers both make it a point in their books that center women's voices to push to the forefront how truth is precarious in true crime.

The idea of romanticization also comes into play here with Nelson's internal processes about Jane and how to depict her. Steedman proposes the following understanding of the relationship between romance and the rag rug:

> Nearly all our knowledge of the rag rug comes framed by a romance. Romance frames knowledge about the period that oral, labor and social history of the 1860s and 1870s located as the origin of the 'traditional working class,' that is, the end of the nineteenth century. In this terrain of the historical imagination, the rug is connected with flat-caps, pigeon-fancying, fish and chips, the kind of domestic interior that Hoggart described in

[14] https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/15/opinion/true-crime-crisis.html

> *The Uses of Literacy*, and the great monolithic industries (coal, steel, textiles) that give birth to such a culture. (131-32)

Steedman's argument elucidates what we can know about the production of the rag rug is framed by other factors that might not be entirely factually accurate. Rather, the information is influenced by the larger romantic notions about the time period surrounding the rag rug. The culture surrounding Jane's death acts as a character within the novel. By making the skewed information into a character, Nelson isolates it from bleeding into all of Jane's story or existence.

I mentioned above Jenny Rice views archives as self-sustaining, existing to justify their own function. Nelson tackles the idea of self-perpetuating narratives through her use of archival materials within her poems. According to Diana Filar in her article "Finding Jane: Lyric Individualism, True Crime, and Maggie Nelson's Multiplicity," Nelson pushes back against the pipeline of death to entertainment content. Filar writes, "The nature of true crime as a genre, though, relies on a continued return to old cases, whether solved or not, as a perpetual warning to protect oneself. In order to combat the danger of a truth that derives problematically from personal experience, Nelson aims to collect facts about her aunt's murder from a variety of sources. By imbuing the text with the voices of others who knew Jane alongside diverse archival material, Nelson seeks to circumvent individual desire and emotional management through the establishment of contextualizing networks" (Filar 383). By returning to Jane's diaries as her main source of information, Nelson works to take away the power of narratives the news media made about her aunt. This is the closest a victim can get to speaking for herself and Nelson uses Jane's voice to starkly contrast the use of crime evidence and news to perpetuate stories about victims.

One of the key elements of the novel is how Nelson deals with tensions around what information should be included or excluded. This is such an important aspect of the story that it is part of the narrative. Nelson includes poems about her family questioning if she should really be writing this collection at all – asking what this work is going to be. This inclusion of the tension around Nelson's family and her own desires adds a metacommentary to the pervasive way true crime presents horrific information without making any of these considerations. Many scholars have debated the social implications of true crime in American culture. Some scholars have focused on America's fascination with death that has led to the true crime phenomenon. Foltyn argues that we are currently witnessing a significant cultural moment for the corpse, as she notes in her article "The Corpse in Contemporary Culture": "Whether flesh, fantasy, or some hybridized version of the two, this is the corpse's cultural moment" (155). Foltyn's comment succinctly summarizes the state of the relationship between popular culture and death. She explains in her article that with the destigmatization of sex after WWII something had to become the new American taboo. As sex became more present and life expectancy increased death became America's new cultural obsession (160). If death is America's obsession, then it is no surprise that Nelson directly tackles this topic. Part of what helps Nelson counter the American fascination with the corpse is reclaiming Jane's image beyond that of dead a brutalized body. The corpse is no longer a spectacle, instead Nelson takes care to position the violence of news media's sensationalism in opposition to her aunt's humanity. Within the collection, the poems about Jane reveal her to be a complicated young woman. She is no different than any other girl of her era. She fights with her sister, wants to succeed in her academic endeavors. She is not the one-dimensional brutalized body worthy of pity that true crime tries to make women out to be. On of the ways that the book is the most forward in its rejection of the prevalence of corpse imagery is in the way that Nelson deals with the news coverage about Jane's murder. There is a distinct tone shift once Jane dies, and Nelson incorporates poems about the derogatory way the news talked about her aunt. It is as if Nelson, in framing the collection this way is pushing back against the true crime archive, saying that the beautiful remembrance she created of Jane in the first portion of the collection cannot be taken away, the news could have their media and their opinions, but they cannot have her aunt, not again.

Only Murders in the Building

Books are not the only forms of entertainment tackling the subject of true crime and its myriad of ethical issues. Season 1 of *Only Murders in the Building* (*OMITB*) premiered on Hulu in August of 2021. The show revolves around three main characters Charles Haden Savage, (played by Steve Martin), a retired actor haunted by the memories of both his career and his last major romantic relationship. His neighbor and eventual friend Oliver Putnam (played by Martin Short) is a failed Broadway producer who is trying to not lose his apartment amidst his financial ruin. Finally, Mabel Mora (played by Selena Gomez), a young woman living in a relative's apartment and avoiding her past. The trio is joined together when Tim Kono, a resident in the apartment building, is murdered. The main characters join in an effort to figure out who the murderer is and start a podcast about their experience. As the show progresses, the viewers learn more about each of the three main characters as well as the suspicious events in their apartment building, The Arconia. The show uses a blend of humor and suspense to engage audiences as the mystery of Kono's death plays out over the course of Season 1. There is extremely limited scholarship on *OMITB*. Much of what I am going to argue in this section comes from my own observations in combination with other true crime scholars. The exaggerated portrayal of the prosumer cycle within *OMITB* serves several pivotal purposes in terms of understanding its potential for disrupting the true crime archive. Firstly, it shines a spotlight on the often-overlooked dynamics within archives, offering a stark contrast to their conventional role in preserving and maintaining the status quo. The hyperbolic nature of this cycle serves to amplify the disruptive potential inherent in the true crime genre, encouraging a reassessment of existing structures, power dynamics, and narrative paradigms. By stretching the boundaries of the prosumer cycle, the show prompts audiences to contemplate the evolving nature of true crime narratives and their impact on the broader media landscape.

Humor serves as a vital and disarming element in *OMITB* prompting viewers to engage with true crime from a fresh perspective through laughter. Beyond the comedic relief, humor provides a release of tension, offering audiences a low-stakes moment to reflect on their position within the true crime landscape. While the previous fictional works discussed are impactful, they are often dark in tone. *OMITB* contributes to the true crime art space by allowing for a reevaluation of controversial or irksome aspects inherent in the genre via comedy. By exaggerating and magnifying certain elements, the show brings attention to mundane or insidious features, reawakening the audience to the realities embedded in the discourse. Through humor, *OMITB* invites viewers to reconsider and question their relationship with true crime narratives in a lighthearted yet thought-provoking manner. On of the ways the show is disruptive is via its use of profanity. In their article "Everybody Swears on *Only Murders in the Building*: The Interpersonal Functions of Scripted Television Swearing" researchers Kristy Beers Fagersten and Karyn Stapelton explore the function of profanity on the show. They note that the show has a much higher use of profanity than other shows, in part due to its premiere on a streaming platform, which is not beholden to the same regulations as network television (95). The impact, the coauthors suggest of the high use of profanity performed by a diverse cast "allows the series to appeal to an equally diverse audience" (104). The show deliberately includes a diverse cast, portraying characters who feel like genuine individuals by using everyday language, including swearing. This authenticity establishes a unique connection between the audience and the characters, a connection often absent in typical true crime narratives. Traditional true crime productions have historically focused on predominantly white subjects, resulting in a limited and skewed representation of the world. The introduction of a diverse cast in this show challenges this homogeneity, offering a more realistic portrayal of society. For example, there is a large age gap between Short and Martin and their costar Gomez. In addition to age, the show displays characters from a variety of ethnicities and sexualities (i.e. Detective Donna Williams is both a black woman in law enforcement and in a same sex relationship, a combination not often seen in true crime media). By incorporating varied perspectives, backgrounds, and voices, the show breaks away from the monolithic narratives prevalent in traditional true crime. Consequently, it becomes a more inclusive and relatable representation of human experience, providing viewers with a departure from the predominantly white world often depicted in conventional true crime storytelling. The actors in *OMITB* also offer a moment that disrupts the status quo of true crime. The actors who play the main trio are all beloved and massively famous. Short and Martin are both established actors in the comedy space for decades and Gomez brings with her a massive fan base from her Disney Channel and music careers. These loveable and compelling actors offer a sense of connection. This harkens back to the argument I make in Chapter Two about intimacy between listeners and podcast hosts.

In the show, the three main characters exhibit a fascination with a podcast titled *All is Not OK in Oklahoma*, drawing clear parallels to the real-life podcast *Serial*. This fictional podcast, mirroring its real-world counterpart, incorporates absurdity by featuring advertisers such as Royal Crown Cruises and the Royal Crown Prince of Dubai. This humorous moment related to advertising shows points out how absurd it is to hear a product placement between descriptions of someone's death. When the trio meets Cinda Canning, the host of *All is Not Okay in Oklahoma*, for the first time, she mentions they might be bought out for a multimillion-dollar amount, a parallel to the New York Times acquiring *Serial* and its team (Lerner). One of the ways that the podcast makes the pitfalls of *Serial* and true crime at large to the forefront is via a comment about "All is Not Okay in Oklahoma." After listening to episode six together "I almost forgot who went missing" – Oliver Putnam (first time the trio sits down to talk about the podcast). (on episode 6) – Victims become the least important part of a story; their lives shoved into the background in favor of sensationalism. This is one of the greatest criticisms of Serial, that Hae Min Lee is not the center of the podcast. The question of "Is Adnan innocent?" looms far larger in the narrative than "Who killed Hae Min Lee?" This sentiment has long been reflected by Lee's family who have never been supportive of the podcast or its massive popularity. In a now famous Reddit post, Lee's brother expresses disdain that people were listening to the story of his sister's death for entertainment.[15]

The host of *All is Not OK in Oklahoma* serves as a parody of the *Serial* host, adopting a similar name and having actress Tina Fey emulate the vocal patterns of Sarah Koenig. Additionally, the show cleverly portrays an outsider attempting to extract a narrative from a community to which they do not belong, reflecting the theme of the original *Serial* podcast. The character Canning, representing the host, is portrayed as visibly out of place within the small Oklahoma community she is reporting on, providing a nuanced commentary on the challenges of navigating cultural differences in storytelling. One moment that might seem small in the scope of the show is when Canning mispronounces Chickasha, the name of the town where she is conducting her investigation. The proper pronunciation of the name is chi·kuh·shay, while

[15] https://www.businessinsider.com/brother-of-hae-min-lee-responds-to-serial-podcast-2014-11

Canning pronounces the town's name chi·kuh·shaw. When *Serial* originally launched in 2014, the article "White Reporter Privilege" by Jay Caspian Kang set off a long discourse on Koenig's errors in discussing racial and ethnic groups she is not a part of. Kang writes of Koenig, "But if *Serial* is not so much a story of a murder, but rather, the story of how a journalist goes about reporting a story that has grabbed her; and if Koenig is a flawed, unreliable narrator, we should add "cultural tourist" to the list of flaws" (Kang). While mispronouncing a towns name might seem to some viewers of the show like a small error, I do find connection to the critique of Koenig's lack of cultural awareness in her reporting. The name Chickasha is derived from the Choctaw language, making the mispronunciation a nod to a lack of cultural awareness rather than a simple error.[16] By putting this small detail into the show, it suddenly turns Canning into the same kind of cultural tourist that Koenig is in her podcast.

The audience, in part, is compelled to go along with the plot that oscillates between grim and wacky because the main characters feel familiar and relatable. In creating this sense of familiarity, the show is able to make commentary about how true crime fans interact with the genre. For example, the *OMITB* trio stands out as a fascinating exemplification of the prosumer cycle expounded upon in Chapter One, providing a nuanced depiction of the intricate relationships existing among various participants in the true crime economy. This show significantly enriches the ongoing discourse by explicitly addressing the multifaceted connections between stakeholders in this complex landscape. The narrative unfolds organically as a viral podcast captures the collective fascination of ardent fans within the storyline. These fans, in turn, find themselves inspired to venture into podcast creation, drawing from both their profound enthusiasm for the original content and the impactful events unfolding in their own

[16] https://www.britannica.com/place/Chickasha

lives. The resultant wave of new podcasts becomes a source of inspiration for yet more fans, perpetuating the cycle. As I mentioned in the previous chapter, there are true crime fans who are made incredibly anxious by their own true crime consumption. The first time the audience meets Mabel as a character, she explains that New York City is the kind of place where "you binge *Dateline* to find out how not to end up on *Dateline*" (*Only Murders in the Building*). She then explains when she cannot sleep, she images how she would kill a potential attacker with a knitting needle, and then falls blissfully to sleep. In this depiction she is much like the other main characters I have mentioned: Sadie and Jane. Mabel is a morally grey character throughout the series; she feels real because she shares common anxieties and refuses to give up her secrets, keeping her own best interest as her priority. In this way she is a complicated character, not a stereotype that would fit neatly within a true crime narrative. For example, in the first episode of the show, after Kono's death, Mabel sits in her apartment reflecting on the information the trio has gathered about their case so far. Her laptop screensaver filters through several images before showing a group photo of Mabel and "the Hardy Boys," her group of friends from childhood. Kono is in the photo with Mabe, revealing that she is potentially lying to Charles and Oliver. By depicting Mabel from the start of the show as simultaneously a protagonist, and potentially and an antagonist, she is far more complicated than one dimensional portrayals of women in true crime. Mabel's complicated past also reflects the realities of the prosumer dynamics of the true crime genre. Though web sleuths usually do not have a personal connection to cases they work on, Mabel's simultaneous status as potential witness, true crime fan, and amateur sleuth acts as a mirror for the blurred boundaries around true crime consumption. The tension created by this initial reveal of Mabel's secret is in part created by the audience's inability to place her in one clearly defined role, much like the women in the two other works I mentioned above.

The intersection of memory and expectations also plays a crucial role in how *OMITB* disrupts dominate narratives around victims in true crime. Steedman ponders that the misassigning of meaning is not an intentional act, but rather is something that just happens. This accidental misremembrance does, however, say something about culture. In other words, why would information be inserted where it does not belong if that information did not have some kind of importance to the culture that put it there? The insertion of false information happens so smoothly we might not even notice how it got there. I argue that the humor in *OMITB* shocks the audience in such a way that they then become aware of these insidious issues in true crime narratives. Through her analysis of a seemingly trivial grammatical error, Steedman invites readers to reconsider the profound implications of a rag rug's existence. "This started out as an error of transposition. However, the tense of the title -'means' rather than 'meant' - was always correct. It is about what a rag rug means, rather than what a rag rug meant (though it is about that too); about the rag rug as an obscure object of desire, fashioned in some place between Memory and History, for all those who read the past, in their various ways, but particularly about historians as the readers in question. (Steedman 112) Meaning is continuous, what something meant in its original context or an isolated moment in history is not the entirety of its story. What something means, as the passage points out, is an ongoing morphing organism that in part reflects the moment. Just because an object, such as the rag rug, held a certain connotation in its original context, what it means now and how that meaning developed is an important part of its story. An object gains new meaning in being misplaced where is does not belong. I argue that the way *OMITB* uses humor juxtaposed against dark helps to remove true crime from its original context and allow viewers to consider both what it means and what is has meant. In the show, the main trio breaks into the building after the fire alarm signals, they should evacuate. After sneaking onto the floor where Tim Kono's body is, both the trio and the show's audience are confronted with the gruesome image of Kono's corpse. This brutal image directly interrupts the lighthearted tone of the show. This moment asks the viewer to consider what brutal imagery has meant in true crime as well as what it means within *OMITB*. This shock of this moment allows viewers who may have become numb to the repeated imagery of brutalized bodies in true crime to think about how disturbing it might be confronted with that imagery in person, as is the case for the main characters.

The show, additionally, utilizes interactions between characters to elicit questions about true crime. As viewers watch the show, they are prompted to ask themselves: has true crime done justice, is it wildly problematic? Consumers, if they do get a sense that there are problematic issues with the genre, are left wondering what they are supposed to make of those issues. Throughout OMITB, the way characters are positioned as foils to one another allows for a moment to pause and reflect on what the audience might have expected to happen, rather than what occurred. The answer comes from Steedman's reflection of why a rug ended up in her memory of a book where a rug never was. Steedman explains the importance of a misremembered object: "And there is a coda for this cannot be left alone. Why isn't there a rag rug in the Barton parlour? There ought to be one, laid before the fire" (129). Potentially why people are so obsessed with true crime archive providing public good, is that like the rug – it should be there, it should perform that function. This is where *OMITB* comes in to disrupt true crime's status quo. In true crime narratives there "ought to be" a clear good and bad guy. The show starts by presenting the main trio as true crime enthusiast, as they try to unravel the mystery of Tim Kono's death. The image of the main trio is starkly contrasted by the introduction of the fan groupies for the podcast investigating Kono's murder. While the imagery used to introduce these characters to us initially makes them seem like extreme fans, and even a little bit odd, the viewer is presented with a disruption around assumptions regarding investigators as heroic figures in true crime. The fans that show up outside of The Arconia apartments are not all that different than the main characters in episode one, gathered around a map of Oklahoma arguing about their favorite podcast. The show gets its viewers to consider that the idea that there should a clear and present good guy in a true crime narrative might be a construct. The similarities between the main trio and their fan club are not all that different than the subject positioning the audience of *OMITB* takes on in their own true crime viewing. Because both our main characters and the super-fans of their in-show podcast exist at the same time, it erodes the idea that one group is somehow better than the other. It also takes the sense of expertise that the trio crafts around their own investigation and brings into question how different they really are from laypeople.

Via its humor about the uncomfortable aspects of true crime to true crime in the first place is because the idea is that it ought to be able to create change. A prevailing conversation in the true crime space is: if people hear about injustice, enough research is done, that the criminal justice system can change, and massive systemic injustice can be overcome. This is the rug that the true crime archive lays out—a rug that seems to be there because it logically should be. The intricate problems of the criminal justice system still cast a significant shadow over true crime. Despite the multitude of podcasts shedding light on wrongful convictions, America has not witnessed a massive overhaul of its legal and court processes. I am not attempting to diminish the power of journalism, as investigative efforts often lead to substantial change. Instead, I am questioning the prevalent argument that merely incorporating a more diverse array of victims will inherently make true crime more socially justice oriented. It is imperative to scrutinize how the rug found its way into the room and what significance it holds as it rests there. What does the presence of this metaphorical rug convey about true crime, considering the ongoing debates about its impact and status?

Conclusion

How should we navigate the abundance of conjectures, parodies, and commentaries that coexist with the overwhelming presence of exploitative true crime content? These creative expressions not only indicate a growing dissatisfaction with traditional true crime narratives but also challenge the perception that true crime is inconsequential, particularly when artists incorporate it into thought-provoking art. I contend that, within the realm of jabs, parodies, and insightful commentaries, there is a collective effort to prompt consumers to pause and reconsider their consumption of archival dust. Acting as a mirror, art reflects the glaring shortcomings of the genre, leaving it to consumers to discern how to instigate change. The strength of art as a counternarrative tool lies in its tendency not to provide a ready-made solution; instead, it empowers consumers to engage in self-reflection and proactively drive change. Disruption is a necessary part of questioning the status quo of the true crime archive.

These artistic creations offer a crucial solution to one of the longstanding dilemmas surrounding true crime: how to curtail excessive consumption. By employing decontextualization and destabilization, these works provide consumers with a moment to pause, eliciting reactions that range from laughter to shock or empathy. In this pause, individuals can reflect on the narratives presented, disrupting the continuous and often sensational consumption of true crime. Notably, all three works present nuanced depictions of women, challenging the conventional portrayal of victims in true crime media. Rather than perpetuating sexist stereotypes that reduce women to perfect yet sexualized victims, these artworks present women as multifaceted individuals with lives extending beyond the confines of true crime's exploitative narratives. The complexity introduced in these depictions encourages a reevaluation of the role of women in true crime and disrupts the harmful patterns of objectification and simplification that have persisted in the genre.

Chapter 4: Ethical True Crime

"This success means that filmmakers have a more pressing burden to be transparent about subjectivity in their documentaries, so as to not manipulate their audiences and consequently the criminal justice system. By being transparent about their subjectivity, filmmakers can reformulate the concept of documentary as subjective and challengeable, rather than objective and taken as substantive truth."

-Phoebe Morton

Podcast networks and streaming services have a steady flow of content for true crime enthusiasts to consume. It seems as soon as one project launches, a trailer comes out for another. With the massive popularity of the true crime genre, I don't foresee the massive output of content or the fervor of online fans slowing down soon. An estimated half of Americans consumed true crime, with 13% of Americans claiming that it is their favorite type of content (Cheng and Flynn). I am frequently asked about various documentaries, cases, or killers that people have seen recently in the news. These conversations make it evident that there is so much true crime content on the market that it often feels like it is blurring together. I also encounter interjections when discussing my research, with people mentioning podcasts that attempt to blend true crime and social justice. These interjections come in the form of well-meaning questions, mostly centered on redeeming the genre from its sensationist reputation.

In response to the continuing onslaught of true crime content, there is some discussion online about what responsible, true crime content could look like. Because true crime is so popular, it is understandable that there is a push for the idea that there can be ethical true crime. My approach to ethical true crime underscores the importance of prioritizing the voices of victims within the narrative. Their experiences and viewpoints must be given the utmost prominence and treated with respect. Moreover, it is essential to avoid glorifying or centering perpetrators of harm in the storytelling. Instead, the focus should be on comprehending the impact of their actions and seeking justice for those affected. Ethical true crime, as I envision it, is grounded in the principle of minimizing harm. First, this involves refraining from disseminating harmful messages about violence through the media. Second, ethical true crime endeavors to ensure that participants, subjects, and their families are shielded from harm. While obtaining consent for documentary production can be challenging, it is disheartening that family members often express dismay over the lack of consultation or disregard for their wishes. In essence, my conception of ethical true crime goes beyond mere entertainment, striving to advocate for justice and uphold dignity.

First, I want to establish what ethical true crime is. One difficulty in discussing this issue is the lack of a clear definition. When confronted with a small handful of examples of "ethical" true crime, I often find that the overwhelming sea of unethical content becomes even more apparent. Holding up the few programs that strive to be different only magnifies how similar everything truly is. The occasional piece proclaiming to be different contributes to a narrative that suggests change is occurring in the true crime space, offering fans something new to expect. However, I disagree and simply do not believe this to be true. When contemplating the conflict between true crime and ethical media, the Gabi Petito case readily springs to mind. Petito's case vividly illustrates the fervent appetite among consumers for interactive true crime content, often without regard for the consequences. The rapid and intense engagement of the true crime fandom with Petito's case in real-time highlights how easily fans are drawn to unethical behavior when consuming content, often without pausing to consider the implications. In 2021, Petito was documenting her cross-country road trip with boyfriend Brian Laundrie, living in a van, and visiting various national parks. After Laundrie returned home without Petito, her family filed a missing person's report. Writer and comedian Paris Campbell used her TikTok platform to raise awareness about Petito's case, as she had only come across one article about it on her own news feed (Rosman). What began as a missing person's case quickly escalated into a viral national sensation.

While Petito's death may be recent, the media response it garnered is not new. The cultural fixation on manipulating the narrative surrounding the death of a white girl or woman has existed for decades. Journalist Gwen Ifill is credited with coining the term "white woman missing syndrome," which describes the media's obsession with the disappearances and murders of young white women[17]. Petito's case, falling within Ifill's definition, sparked various discussions on ethical issues in true crime. In a BuzzFeed News interview, Tanya Chen referred to the internet's reaction as a "chaotic experiment," expressing her hope that the aftermath of the case prompts true crime fans to reflect on their actions and media consumption. What Petito's case ultimately does is repackage an age-old problem—true crime's persistent issues—in a new form for a new generation. In reality, there is no distinction between how this case was handled and the national media coverage of cases like Natalie Holloway and Elizabeth Smart. However, what may feel different to consumers is the level of interaction they have with the story, leading them to believe they are integral to the narrative. The difference lies in the emphasis on interactivity and the desire for what appears to be an authentic experience, prioritizing these aspects over any boundaries that could foster ethical media practices, as I will explore further in this chapter.

Ethical true crime grapples with inherent challenges due to the substantial benefits the genre reaps from an unethical and participatory culture. Despite individual projects asserting ethical

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[17] https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4666788/user-clip-gwen-ifill-coins-term-missing-white-woman-syndrome

intent, they cannot completely evade the intrinsic nature of the genre, rooted in sensationalism and exploitation. The broader issue within true crime lies in the powerful incentives, both social and monetary, that drive the persistence of unethical content creation. The narrative structures of true crime create a system were producing more of the same content, such as media reactions surrounding the "white woman missing syndrome," is not only normalized but also advantageous within the genre. This dynamic poses a significant barrier to the emergence and sustainability of ethical practices within the true crime landscape. It is evident that there is a major financial benefit to creating true crime content, as detailed in previous chapters where I explored how true crime is currently one of the most popular forms of media in pop culture. This intersection of capitalism with stories rooted in pain raises significant ethical concerns. The major issue here appears to be a conflict of interest between authenticity, sensationalism, and capitalism. True crime narratives, highly crafted and curated, for profit are in direct conflict with the voices of survivors, who often would tell their own stories very differently. As discussed in a previous chapter, podcasts offer an engaging experience that retains viewers, adding another layer to the complexities of these ethical dilemmas.

While the constant tension regarding the need for more ethical true crime shows that egregiously show their lack of ethical concern often catches national attention. The Netflix limited series *Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story* (2022), chronicles the infamous serial killer's ability to prey upon black and queer young men in a community where the police turn a blind eye. This show, along with others like it, follows a troubling pattern observed in films about serial killers, where the lead actor often assumes a heartthrob persona.[18] In addition

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[18] Evan Peters, who portrays Dahmer, is a fan-favorite actor on the anthology series *American Horror Story*, where he has played the romantic lead in multiple seasons. This is not an isolated

to an attractive and beloved actor playing a serial killer, one significant controversy surrounding the Dahmer series is the lack of consultation with the families of the victims, raising ethical concerns regarding the portrayal of sensitive and traumatic events. Additionally, within the realm of true crime dramas, there exists a subgenre where a podcast or documentary is adapted into a dramatized show, closely adhering to the narrative structure of the original source material. This practice introduces another layer of ethical complexity as it navigates the boundary between factual representation and dramatization in the retelling of true crime narratives. The Dahmer series received a barrage of criticism from the families of Dahmer's victims, who were neither consulted nor informed about the show's release. Dahmer's crimes are gruesome regarding true crime narratives. Jeffrey Dahmer's crimes encompass sexual violence, cannibalism, murder, and abuse of a corpse, making his story one of the most notorious in the realm of true crime. Laden with the most salacious material, it captivates audiences with a blend of disgust and intrigue. As mentioned above, true crime narratives often shy away from discussing major controversies within the criminal justice system. Dahmer's case is that he preyed on black and gay victims, individuals whom the police did not prioritize when they went missing. Despite all the controversy surrounding the show, it was highly popular. What is notable about these dramatizations is they are even more removed from victims and their families, adding another layer of dehumanization to true crime narratives, as outlined in previous chapters.[19]

In a genre landscape where media like *Dahmer – Monster* gain massive amounts of media attention, other projects that do center victims voices do not stand a chance to break through the

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occurrence; other beloved male actors such as Zac Efron and Ross Lynch have also portrayed serial killers.

[19] Niecy Nash won the Emmy for Outstanding Supporting Actress in A Limited Series Or Anthology Series for her role in the series. Nash's win further gives ethos and legitimacy to the series.

focus on exploitative content. One of the most common podcasts people often reference as an example of ethical true crime is *Atlanta Monster*, which follows a controversial case involving a string of murders from 1979 to 1981, targeting all black children and teens, raising significant questions about racism within the Atlanta police. While I acknowledge that *Atlanta Monster* covers an important story and brings to light essential points that need discussion, citing one or two examples of "ethical" true crime does not act as a solution to the large-scale issues facing the genre. *Atlanta Monster* preceded *Dahmer – Monster* by three years, and yet despite its popularity could not overcome the issue in true crime that victims, and often victims of color go unheard.

Habits around Consumption

To comprehend why ethical true crime is not as popular as traditional true crime, it is crucial to grasp how audiences have been primed to expect and prefer unethical content. Understanding true crime fans' consumption as a series of habitual responses shaped and perpetuated by the genre is essential. To view consumption of media in a silo would obscure the reasons ethical true crime has not gained popularity. Not only can the pieces of media themselves not be viewed as separate and unrelated, neither can those who consume the content. In this case, general passive consumer of true crime all the way to true crime fanatics needs to be analyzed as one cohesive public. By collapsing true crime viewership into a singular category, a more nuanced understanding of what the genre primes is audience to expect is possible. For example, when we sit down to watch a horror film, there is an expectation that we might feel frightened or experience other emotional discomfort, that is what the genre has primed its viewers to anticipate. With true crime, because the network of community interaction with the media is so complicated – it is critical to understand what elements of those responses can be linked back to how the media makes viewers feel.

If consumers are primed to behave in specific ways around true crime media, then it is crucial to observe the mechanisms by which that content is reified. In her analysis of social media dynamics, Papacharissi highlights the significance of hashtags, observing how they "function as affective mechanisms that amplify the awareness of a particular feeling, the intensity with which it is felt" (118). Ethical true crime does not warrant the same intense reaction from fans as traditional true crime media does. Platforms like TikTok and Reddit benefit from the tagging system to organize and recommend content to their users. True crime that is labeled in terms of #UnsolvedMysteries might elicit a stronger set of feelings than content labeled as #News. This is because the #UnsolvedMysteries content allows for more consumer participation than other markers that would denote that users should interact with the media in a more responsible way. When consumers become accustomed to interacting with media in an unchecked way, that becomes the set norm.

I additionally argue, part of why ethical true crime has not caused widespread change within the community is because at this point, the expectation of unethical media and the ability to interact with it is expected. Exploring the intricacies of habitus, Papacharissi observes that it encompasses "all tendencies and tensions deriving from articulated practices that affirm and seek to negate structure," thereby providing online streams of expression with their distinct digital identity (123). There is a distinct tension in the true crime community regarding the complicated power structures surrounding media ethics. As I explored in the introductory chapter, among true crime scholars there has been widespread debate about if true crime can be ethical, and if so in what ways. Papacharissi goes on to explain "Moreover, the affordances of the technology itself are the product of a habitus, that is, a prevailing understanding of habituated practices that are part new and part habitual. The construct of the habitus is meaningful because it historicizes the new by drawing attention to the practices that connect it to the present" (123). The main concern with the push for ethical true crime is that it will be subsumed back into the problematic power structures that are already present in true crime. To clarify, this means that every step forward in the true crime community toward ethical content is informed by the media that came before. I argue that it is highly unrealistic to expect ethical true crime to take hold in the community when its predecessor is already incredibly popular. This means that if something is ethical true crime, as opposed to investigative journalism, then it still contains vestiges of problematic media. The concern is also reflected in consumer appetites. True crime fans engage with each new piece of true crime content in the way that they have been trained to by the media that came before. The issue of media consumption exists in the core of the true crime community. The entire public has formed around sensational media. The rules of engagement for fans are well established, as I have outlined in previous chapters. True crime fans anticipate that they will be able to speculate on or investigate a case if they choose.

At this moment true crime media's unethical practices are codified into consumer expectations. Largely, the way that the public interacts with media and each other exists within this framework of sensationalism. For example, the racist interactions on the *MFM* Facebook group platforms in the 2010s I referenced in Chapter 2. Ethical true crime is up against a long tradition, and its ability to shift that precedent does not seem promising. This is not an issue limited to true crime consumption, Phillips notes a similar set of behaviors among internet troll stating, "In addition to replicating the behavioral patterns of "legitimate" users, the Facebook trolls I worked with eagerly harnessed existing on-site sensitivities" (Phillips 79). While trolls copied the behaviors of regular internet users in an attempt to harass, true crime fans copy the established status quo of the genre because alternative paths of behavior and consumption would not be in alignment with what true crime fan communities.

The Role of Juries

If consumers exist in a habitual cycle, then I want to propose what sits at the core of that interaction. While not all true crime fans fall into the web sleuth label, there is a common experience among true crime fans and casual viewers alike that needs to be examined. Part of the expected norm of interacting with media is largely, assuming the role of the juror. Above, when I mentioned that for this argument it is important to collapse every true crime consumer into a singular category, it is because the subject position as juror is one that true crime places on all viewers. Despite levels of fandom or enjoyment, the narrative structure of true crime media asks its viewership to draw conclusions about the case presented. These conclusions are not limited to guilt or innocence, rather, the assumptions that audiences are asked to make deal with aspects of the case that lay people distinctly lack the insight to form a cohesive opinion on. For example, a reoccurring narrative thread in true crime media is the botched investigation. The documentary will show its viewers how and where an investigator made mistakes, often affecting the trial outcome. Consumers, generally, have no credentials to assess an issue such as police negligence. In place of those credentials, via the presentation of a compelling narrative, viewers are made to feel they are the most credentialed person to assess the issue. It is understandable why viewers might feel this way, given that this is not an issue with a handful of pieces of true crime media, but is often a widespread issue. In chapter 2, where I explored the connection between podcasting and intimacy, the same issue arises. If for example, a podcast host speaks to their audience in a way that makes them feel like an equal there is a certain degree of ethos transfer that occurs between the host and the listener.

The origins of the role of juror precede the role of web sleuth. This consumer's treatment did not depend on the internet's affordances to share opinions or research a case; instead, the consumer could hold this role simply in the space between their consumption and the media itself. While I have discussed the role of the sleuth extensively, there is another character type prevalent among listeners. Web sleuths actively seek out additional information beyond what is presented in documentaries or podcasts. However, what is even more common is the consumer as juror. These individuals rely solely on the information provided within the media and make judgments based on what is presented. I argue that this approach can feel less problematic because it does not involve the potentially harmful investigative behaviors discussed earlier. Opting not to seek external information may seem like a more ethical stance, as it avoids the risks associated with amateur sleuthing.

The presence of a jury is a constant theme in true crime media, evident in both imagery and narrative structure.[20] In media covering court proceedings, the jury is often depicted collectively as a single character—a cohesive unit tasked with deciding the outcome of a case. Sometimes, the jury serves as the antagonist to the narrative, overshadowing even the accused on trial. The true crime narrative hinges upon the jury's decision. Moreover, beyond its portrayal in media, there is the phenomenon of the jurification of audience members—the positioning of viewers to make definitive conclusions about guilt or innocence (Bruzzi). This aspect presents a

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[20] The jury is frequently depicted as the ultimate arbiter of right and wrong. It is key to note here that when discussing juries, I am specifically speaking about true crime that depicts the United States legal system. In true crime that depicts other nation's legal proceedings the jury does not hold the same subject position. Researchers Albrecht and Filip underscore the importance of the jury in an American legal context: "Compared to other legal systems, like those in Canada and the United Kingdom, American juries have substantially more power to make important constitutional and criminal law decisions that undergird Precedents. In this way, juries serve as bridges between the American people and the American justice system, making the decisions and perceptions of juries vital for the functioning of the system itself" (Albrecht and Filip 32).

significant challenge to ethical consumption, if not rendering it impossible. Throughout previous chapters, I have explored the role of the web sleuth, which may prompt some true crime fans to push back against my argument, asserting that they do not engage in investigatory behaviors.

While not all fans fit the label of web sleuths, they all assume the role of jurors in their consumption of true crime narratives. When a consumer views or listens to true crime the content automatically positions them in a role to judge and be convinced by the narrative and evidence. Because it is an inherent element to the genre, there is not an option to opt-out. Tanya Horeck refers to the portrayal of juries in true crime as a rhetorical mode she calls "jury box audience address" (93). She argues that the function of this address is that: "viewers are invited to weigh in on questions of guilt and innocence" (93). While one can choose to not engage in sleuthing, it is not possible to avoid the act of judging. Given the significant role juries play in the legal system, it is unsurprising that they are prominently featured in true crime media. Juries hold the fate of the accused in their hands, making decisions that can alter lives. Particularly in America, juries play a critical function in the legal system. Consequently, I argue that both web sleuths and true crime enthusiasts are inclined to assume the role of the juror, in addition to the sleuth role outlined in Chapter 1. The combination of these roles—juror and investigator—renders ethical true crime practically impossible.

The jurification of the audience is both an issue for the criminal justice system as well as true crime. While in this project I have excluded crime dramas, the issue of juries is one topic in true crime where it is within the scope of the genre to factor in the influence of crime dramas. *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation* for its impact in exposing the public to a portrayal of forensic science role in court proceedings. The show has been on air since 2000 and has remained incredibly popular over time, even leading to an increase in students enrolling in courses in forensic sciences (McManus 1). *CSI* has significantly impacted how jurors interpret the role, availability, and validity of forensic evidence in a trial (Shelton). While *CSI* is a crime drama, and not specifically a piece of true crime media, I do want to include it in this discussion of juries and the ethics of true crime. The show has been studied and is a central part of crime media. The shows portrayal of forensics has been so notable it has set up much of the precedent that true crime consumers have when A 2008 article published on the US National Department of Justice (NIJ) website titled "The 'CSI Effect': Does it Really Exist?" by the honorable Donald E. Shelton, provides a comprehensive look at the issue. He makes an interesting differentiation between the levels of reality obstruction in crime television. He notes shows like *Dateline* and *48 Hours Mystery* depict real cases, often with courtroom footage. Shows like *Law & Order* rip their plotlines from the headlines and "weave a story around it." Then Donaldson turns his attention to CSI: Crime Scene Investigation. Noting that the show's ratings have been so high, 30 million viewers in one night as of 2006, that it has prompted other similar shows such as *Cold Case*, *Bones*, and *Numb3rs*. The crux of Donaldson's argument emerges when he presents the following query: "But is this the genuine expectation of present-day jurors? And if it is, should CSI and its counterparts shoulder the responsibility?" The NIJ conducted a study to see if shows like *CSI* and *Law and Order* really did impact juror's decisions in court cases due to limited existing data on the topic. The study determined that there was not sufficient evidence to say that CSI made jurors more or less likely to convict or acquit defendants. The significance of viewer expectations regarding scientific evidence in the criminal justice system is underscored by Donaldson's research. He notes, "Although CSI viewers had higher expectations for scientific evidence than non-CSI viewers, these expectations had little, if any, bearing on the respondents' propensity to convict." The results of the research did note however that CSI had created a desire for forensic evidence specifically (Donaldson). Juries' perceptions of forensic evidence are well documented elsewhere in the true crime space. The documentary *Exhibit A* covers cases where people were convicted on junk science or loosely interpreted forensics because juries have developed such strong feelings about the validity of such arguments. The documentary shows the way that public perceptions of forensics in connection with their role as jurors has the potential to cause major problems in the fairness of a trial. The study can best be boiled down that *CSI* has had impact on some areas of crime perception but has not entirely rewritten the story of the criminal justice system. Though the article was written several years before true crime podcasts would gain national attention, it still provides us with foundational insights to the world of true crime media. I want to note that this project does not dive extensively into the world of shows like Law and Order, CSI, or other fictionalized crime dramas. There is a place to acknowledge them as part of a larger ecosystem.

The prosumer cycle is just that cycle, in the ways depictions of juries in documentaries impact what happens on social media, what happens on social media then impacts how juries' function. Juries make decisions about a person's guilt or innocence, which is not a task to be taken lightly. What influences a jury is a major concern to the US legal system. It is becoming increasingly evident that social media is playing a significant role in how the US creates rules and regulations for jurors. In October of 2020, The United States Courts updated their website to include a new model of jury instructions, building upon an update they issued in 2012. The purpose of the update is to prevent social media influence upon jury members. The update references when the original instructions came out in 2012 when "...fewer social media platforms existed, and when social media was less universally present in most jurors' lives" (USCOURTS). The parameters regarding social media are two-fold, jurors are not allowed to share information with anyone via social media platforms nor are they allowed to seek out information online regarding the case they are involved with. This applies to all phases of the trial from when the juror is up for selection all the way till after the trial has concluded. In a word where everyone thinks they are a juror it is more important than ever to create a line between the legal system and the sphere of social media. The role of the juror matters in the debate about ethical true crime because, I argue, it has become part of the foundation of an authentic true crime experience. Some level of interactivity is expected in true crime narratives, placing fans in a subject position where they feel a sense of expertise and power. This role is an illusion, fully crafted by the narrative devices of the genre, complicating making an ethical relationship with true crime media an oxymoron.

Ethical Audiences

There are two distinct ethical issues within the true crime space: Can one be an ethical fan? And can true crime media itself be ethical? These two questions are deeply interconnected, and resolving one requires addressing the other. First, I will tackle the issue of the role fans and consumers play in defining what ethical true crime would look like. The prosumer dynamic relies on both the media and the network of consumers, so it seems logical that part of this controversy hinges on habitual consumption patterns among fans. To understand what ethical true crime entails and whether it is attainable, it is crucial to address this connection. As outlined in earlier chapters, the ethics of true crime exist on a spectrum. Numerous factors must be considered for each piece of media, including factual accuracy, the involvement of victims and their families, and who benefits financially from the production. When it comes to addressing fans and their role in the true crime space, there is a push to make consumers the first line of defense against exploitative media. However, I find placing consumers as curators of what is and is not ethical content to be a highly problematic approach. This approach ignores the sensational nature of true crime narratives, which inherently warps consumers' baseline expectations.

Maybe the efforts to create an ethical true crime fan base come from creating lists and parameters for consumer behavior. By giving these heuristics for fans to use during their media consumption, groups like the National Center for Victims of Crime (NCVC) try to create a shift in the landscape of web sleuthing. At CrimeCon 2023, the NCVC circulated a flyer containing eight "simple" rules for ethical true crime fandom in conjunction with a panel presentation. During the panel, they further elaborated on the following list outlined on their flyer:

1. There is no victimless true crime
2. There is no timeline for trauma
3. Investigate, investigate, investigate
4. Require the presence of victims' voices
5. Do no harm
6. Respect boundaries
7. Don't fall victim to true crime
8. Turn your interest into impact

At first glance, the vague advice seems well-intentioned; it should be straightforward for true crime enthusiasts to adhere to these guidelines and alter their consumption habits. However, the reality of the true crime media landscape is much more intricate than this list acknowledges. While it's crucial to ask true crime fans to show respect for victims and their families, discerning which content meets this criterion before hitting play is a daunting task. Often, all true crime content is marketed in a comparable manner regardless of the level of sensitivity employed in its production. Tanya Horeck delves into this issue in her examination of true crime in the streaming era, asserting that trailers for true crime documentaries tantalize viewers with the promise of interactivity. This underscores the problem that consumers are consistently positioned to assume problematic roles such as sleuth or juror, rather than ethical consumers. Ethical true crime appears to be the less enticing choice when more attractive options for true crime enthusiasts involve indulging in content riddled with misinformation rather than prioritizing ethical considerations. This list urges individuals to be ethical fans of a genre while highlighting all the ways in which it is inherently unethical. What complicates matters further is that the list is fraught with contradictions, which may appear acceptable on the surface but reveal themselves to be highly problematic upon closer examination.

In connection with this list, I want to refer to a similar list from true crime researcher Lindsey Sherrill. Offering similar contradictory advice, the list from her Ted Talk puts the burden of ethical true crime media on the consumers. According to Sherrill, she wants true crime fans to ask the following questions to make sure they are being an ethical fan:

1. Why am I interested in this?
2. How does this make me feel?
3. How might the people involved in the story feel?
4. Am I motivated to act?

Sherrill expresses what aspects of true crime leave her feeling unnerved. The unethical true crime leaves her feeling "helpless and afraid," and she explains "it focuses too much on the horror or the injustices and not enough on healing or solutions" (Sherrill). I explored the feelings of fear that often come with true crime in Chapter 2 in connection with intimacy and podcast listening. The cycle of fear in true crime serves as an effective mechanism to keep consumers continuously ingesting content without engaging in critical reflection. In response to the uncertainty and discomfort caused by unethical true crime, Sherrill expresses her sentiments towards ethical creators "They will remind their listeners that looking through court transcripts could be helpful, but harassing victims, family members or suspects online is not." She reminds the audience that victim and social justice-centered narratives are important to combating sensational and exploitative media. I do give Sherrill credit for offering a framework for true crime listeners to consider their media consumption. What I find concerning about both frameworks is they leave the sense of what is right and wrong in terms of advocacy in the hands of the consumers, which has been the route of much of the problem in the true crime space to date. Defining what crosses the line and what doesn't is challenging when there are both monetary incentives and a sense of community involved throughout the true crime consumption and creation journey. This task is fraught with difficulty for both consumers and creators alike. When fans are asked if they feel they've crossed a line, considering that this involves media consumption largely for leisure, the matter feels inherently complex. On the other side of this equation, it is unclear if the people creating true crime media have any sort of remorse for the kind of content they are creating. Maybe the reason that these lists feel inadequate is because what it would mean to be an ethical true crime fan is far more complicated than a simple list can account for. Maybe there are factors beyond personal choice that loom even if one is being reflective. I do not want to say that ethical media consumption is solely a true crime problem. There are forms of all media that are controversial or contain concerning elements. The reason this issue is so important in the true crime space is because the fan base and the media itself is so intertwined in controversy.

When it comes to the consumption of true crime, the responsibility for changing the genre's problems feels shifted back to the consumer. The fourth point that Sherrill brings up is what really needs further exploration, "am I motivated to act?" is a complicated question. Motivated to act in what ways? Because consumption of more true crime content can then feel like a social justice-oriented action rather than a capitalist one. One of my major concerns regarding the emphasis on ethical fans is that web sleuths often perceive their actions as beneficial or helpful for a case. This framework for attempting to create an ethical true crime experience allows for self-justification. Sherrill pushes the impact of individual consumption habits to the forefront of her argument of what will change true crime culture. The ethicalness of any one true crime fan's consumption is subjective. Often true crime content does not do the work of explaining what steps consumers could take to really rectify the problem. It offers points for interaction, or sometimes calls for people to contribute evidence if they know anything about an unsolved case, but true crime is not educational in the sense of what sorts of activism viewers could engage in to rectify the issues presented in the documentary. I don't believe it's possible to be an ethical listener due to the audience's role, whether they engage as sleuths or are positioned as jurors. True crime media inherently asks consumers to consider how they feel about the innocence or guilt of a criminal. Via the way a story is told, a narrative is crafted about the victims, their families – audiences are set up to feel a certain way about those people. Watching true crime is an act of constant judgment. How do you feel about the investigators, lawyers, suspects, and victims?

The audience is consistently presented with messages dictating who to accuse and who to perceive as guilty. Documentary media, like any other form of media, has its own rhetorical objectives and biases. The challenge arises in true crime documentaries where the aim to capture audience attention directly contradicts the dignity owed to crime victims. Phoebe Morton, in her article "Stylistic Choices in True-Crime Documentaries: The Duty of Responsibility Between Filmmaker and Audience," examines how documentarians may manipulate their audiences. Morton places emphasis on truth as the foundation of documentary content:

> Honesty and transparency in production is the base level that is expected by audiences, yet too many times it is deemed acceptable to reject this in favour of entertainment or is considered by filmmakers to be irrelevant to the audience's evaluation of the documentary's content. This should not be encouraged. Documentaries, either internally or during promotion, should be honest with their audiences about the production environment surrounding the documentary. (Morton 250)

True crime enthusiasts have grown accustomed to media creators prioritizing sensationalism over honesty. Marketing strategies for true crime documentaries often rely on sensationalized elements to attract audiences. These documentaries are typically promoted with dramatic trailers featuring intense music and rapid jump cuts, creating a sense of urgency among viewers. Horeck discusses the manipulative nature of such trailers, referring to the imagery as the "promise of interactivity" (91). Trailers serve as viewers' initial introduction to a true crime production, setting their expectations for an engaging and urgent viewing experience. While trailers for other genres may aim to make a film or series appear exciting or entertaining, true crime trailers tantalize viewers with the promise of an elevated and immersive experience beyond mere consumption.

Ethical vs. Unethical True Crime Media

If the ethics of being an ethical listener are fraught, then the media itself is just as complicated. Nothing quite exemplifies the issues of the role of true crime fans as jurors than the recent trend of adapting podcasts and documentaries into drama series. Exploring the ethical terrain of true crime media becomes especially intricate when examining dramatized portrayals of real-life cases. For example, the 2022 show *The Staircase* is based on the 2004 documentary series by the same name. The 2004 version of *The Staircase* gained attention in the true crime space when it became available for streaming on Netflix in 2018. *The Staircase* follows the investigation into the death of Kathleen Peterson. Kathleen was found dead at the bottom of the stairs in the home she shared with her husband Michael Peterson. The documentary series follows Michael as he is accused of Kathleen's death, put on trial, convicted, and then released from prison. The documentary spurred online debate, particularly about the "Owl Theory," which was the popular notion online that Kathleen was attacked by an owl in her backyard leading to the injuries on the back of her head.[21] The documentary was controversial, sparking debate about the trustworthiness of its perspective and participants. Then in 2022, the documentary was adapted into a television drama. The marketing of the show proposed that viewers could interpret who killed Kathleen and make their own interpretation, turning her death into a who done it mystery. This allowed for a new entry point for the audience to play jury. The use of actors even further removes the humanity of Kathleen for she is not just a character in a documentary, being filtered through the documentary's goals and lens. She is even less human; she is reduced to a character rather than a real person. It is easy to forget that she is a person, or that this is a real story and people experienced pain because of her loss. In an interview on *60 Minutes Australia*, the Peterson family outlined the ways the dramatized adaptation of their story was harmful to them. Peterson's daughters express how the show is triggering for them, taking them back to the worst time in their lives. Michael Peterson states in the interview that he refuses to watch the show and wishes to live his life in peace. The same treatment has been given to a variety of podcast from the Wondery podcast network such as *Dr. Death* and *Dirty John*. The stories of both podcasts were adapted for streaming specials on Peacock, and follow the podcasts beat for beat in terms of plot. In recreating the Peterson family's greatest loss, the dramatized version of

[21] https://www.vulture.com/2018/06/the-staircase-netflix-owl-theory-explained.html

The Staircase further reinforces a problem that arose with the original documentary. Fans are prompted to speculate how they think Kathleen died, acting as experts on the case. In addition to the subject positioning consumers as jurors, the dramatized show acts as a response to the online discourse that has already occurred around the Peterson case. The director and script writers are able to put emphasis on certain "plot points" that have been debated online as a means of drawing fans further into the story. Because audiences have long held the role of final judge on a case, dramatized television series versions of documentaries exaggerate the ethical issues that come with true crime discourse.

In the pursuit of creating "authentic" content that feels real, dramatized true crime allows the audience to further indulge in the role of juror at the cost of victims. Recreating these cases as dramas allows for the intersection of interpretation and opinion into the narrative of real people's lives. The creation of the appearance of authenticity can be a precarious process that lacks any rooting in what is actually genuine. In her book *Authentic: The Politics of Ambivalence in a Brand Culture* Sarah Banet-Weiser explores the connections between brand image and reality. A key point of her argument is the reduction of lived experiences to a consumable good:

> Commodification is a marketing strategy, a monetization of different spheres of life, a transformation of social and cultural life into something that can be bought and sold. In contrast, the process of branding impacts the way we understand who we are, how we organize ourselves in the world, what stories we tell ourselves about ourselves. (Banet-Weiser 4-5)

This highlights one of the fundamental issues with the model through which true crime obtains its content. For true crime to function as a genre, it must transform some of the most agonizing aspects of human experience into consumable products. True crime media often strips away individuals' humanity, making it easier for consumers to enjoy and for avid fans to assume the role of web sleuths. When people are reduced to characters or puzzles to be solved, it becomes increasingly simple to invade their privacy. True crime, regardless of its perceived ethicality, cannot escape the influence of capitalism. Monetization perpetuates the cycle of issues outlined in this dissertation. When there is profited to be made, the primary concern becomes creating content that captures attention and retains an audience. Consequently, what often becomes more important than the victims and their families is how well a piece of true crime media fits into the genre's landscape. Whether or not a specific piece of true crime is labeled or markets itself as ethical, it remains a product derived from someone's pain, repurposed as entertainment.

Ethical Media

The interaction between content and distribution is inseparable. When considering the branding of true crime as ethical, these two issues are always intertwined. One argument for what constitutes ethical true crime is the incorporation of a feminist element into the production, which aims to make true crime more equitable for all involved. In her book *Justice on Demand*, Tanya Horeck explores the intersection of true crime and feminism. She references the reporting work of Connie Walker, a Canadian journalist focusing on issues such as residential schools and missing and murdered Indigenous women. Walker has produced multiple podcasts detailing the generational trauma resulting from the Canadian government's oppression of First Nations people. Horeck argues that Walker's work contains a feminist element, making it stand out from other true crime media. "In keeping its intersectional analysis of crime and violence in the foreground, *Missing and Murdered* shows the possibilities for a form of true crime that urgently attends to the raced, classed, and gendered dimensions of violence. Instead of encouraging an aimless internet "sleuthing"—of chasing down "clues" and endlessly debating questions of guilt and innocence—Walker invites a form of critical listening that "connects the dots" of systemic institutionally sanctioned violence" (178). If unethical media is about reducing human experiences to a commodity, then what does ethical true crime have to offer to the genre? This is a difficult question to answer because it seems to be a matter of: you know it when you see it. I see many reasons why ethical true crime is difficult to define. The content of a piece of media alongside how that media is marketed/distributed plays a significant role in the perception of how ethical a piece of media is.

I'm not seeking to diminish the impact of Walker's work. Her podcasts are compelling, emotional, and meticulously researched. However, the challenge lies in the fact that Walker's work isn't particularly popular within the broader true crime community. While podcast enthusiasts within the true crime realm, who are always on the lookout for new content, may stumble upon Walker's work, she lacks the name recognition of other media pieces I've discussed in earlier chapters. It is interesting that Walker has not gained the same listener numbers as other podcasts despite having won a Pulitzer and a Peabody for her 2023 podcast *Stolen: Surviving St. Michael's*. According to Apple's top podcast data from 2023, *Stolen: Surviving St. Michaels* did not breach the top 10 ranking in its top new podcasts category, while eight of the top 10 podcasts were true crime (Spangler). What is powerful here is what Horeck says about the way that Walker's work pushes back against the nature of true crime, she is writing about her own community and bringing voice to those who need to be heard. Walker's hard-hitting journalism doesn't lend itself to the typical monetization methods often associated with true crime. While this resistance to the true crime content machine shields it from exploitation, it may also explain why it hasn't reached the viral levels of popularity seen in some podcasts. The question then arises, because Walker's work centers major social issues and the voices of survivors, is it less marketable? With all of what I have presented about true crime in mind, I do not think that the ethical true crime satisfies consumer desires and demands. True crime could produce more content similar to Walker's work, delving deeply into issues harming marginalized communities. However, at its core, that isn't the essence of true crime as a genre. For decades, true crime has delivered engaging and sensational material, catering to consumers' preferences. Offering more ethical and thoughtful media would directly contradict what true crime has traditionally offered and what current tastes demand. The notion of the majority of true crime media shifting in this direction doesn't align with how prosumers and mainstream media producers typically engage with the genre. It's important to note that while some true crime overlaps with investigative journalism, not all investigative journalism falls under the true crime category.

In addition to Walker's work, the main examples of ethical true crime in the true crime podcasting space of what ethical true crime media can look like are two podcasts from Broken Cycle Media: *Something was Wrong* (*SWW*) and *What Came Next*. Created by host Tiffany Reese, *Something was Wrong* was launched in 2018. A mutual friend connected Reese with Sara, a young woman who was manipulated and emotionally abused by the man she was going to marry. At first, he seemed like the perfect guy for her, sharing her faith and lavishing her with gifts and trips. As the relationship progressed, Sara experienced emotional abuse from her partner, and also later learned he had physically abused her pets. She broke off her engagement with him right before their wedding, unraveling the lies he told her about who he was. Reese gave Sara a platform to tell her story. Reese won an Iris Award for her work on the season 1 show. Reese continued producing *Something Was Wrong* and eventually launched Broken Cycle media and a second podcast, *What Came Next*. According to Reese's biography on her website her vison for Broken Cycle Media is "a survivor-led, victim-centered, multimedia company focusing its time and resources advocating for crime survivors and change within our systems, lives, and laws" ("Something Was Wrong"). The set up of Reese's show would suggest that was she is doing is ethical storytelling. I argue any media that is part of the true crime umbrella struggles to maintain independence. While Reese began the project entirely independently, after several seasons she joined the Crime Junkie's podcasting network Audio Chuck, and then ultimately signed a contract with Wondery Media. There is a distinct difference between the seasons before Reese was part of a podcasting network and the episodes that came after. Starting with season nine of the podcast, there is a distinct change in the format. The editing of the trailer for season nine has dramatic music not present in any of the other seasons. The trailer shows a distinct alliance with the style of mainstream true crime, which is about catching audience attention rather than centering victims voices. Even in recent seasons that *Something Was Wrong* is affiliated with Wondery, the interviews with crime survivors are now interspersed with ads for products and services, showing that capitalism is the issues always underscoring the tension between ethical and unethical true crime. In season sixteen where Reese discusses her own experiences with abuse, she reveals that making the seasons of the podcast before sponsorship from major podcasting networks was incredibly difficult for her financially. The difficulty here is that Reese deserves to be compensated for her labor, but within the true crime space that kind of compensation comes with interjections into the content itself in the form of advertisements rather than being a solely behind the scenes.

While a content creator deserving financial compensation is fair, there then arises the issues of what becomes of their content after commercialization has taken place. As I discussed in connection with the feminist branding of *MFM* when it comes to intimacy when the commodification of podcast content becomes involved. It is important to note that since these cases are not large nationally reported cases, Part of what makes the Broken Cycle Media podcast family precarious is that when further examined Ethical true crime can be manipulated to be used is a branding/marketing tactic rather than an accurate label. When projects like *Something was Wrong* join a larger distribution network, originally well-intentioned content exists at the mercy of capitalism. Banet-Weiser points to how feminism becomes part of a brands identity:

> A corollary dynamic is found in advertising's deployment of commodity feminism. Like the commodification of race, transforming the politics of feminism into a product to be sold means to reify feminism (and, through feminism, women)—to make identity into a kind of thing. Concepts of empowerment and choice are threaded through the commercial address, making it more complicated to tease out differences between and within women (let alone make the determination that these differences do, in fact, make a difference). (Banet-Weiser 36)

Reese continues to carry out important work by providing victims with a platform to share their stories. However, as the project evolved into Broken Cycle Media, it transitioned into a capitalized enterprise, bringing along certain concerns. Reese now grapples with factors like advertizer revenue, affiliate codes, and audience retention, which were not significant considerations when she initially started the podcast to narrate a mutual friend's harrowing experience.

It's challenging to envision a place for Broken Cycle Media in a landscape where the audience is positioned as an inquisitive and judgmental jury. Given that Something Was Wrong's branding aims to be an ethical and feminist piece of true crime, audiences not only engage with the question of who is guilty within the story but also integrate the podcast's overarching messaging. The concern is that the voices of victims and Reese's efforts to provide a safe space for them to share their experiences publicly may be reduced to a consumable product open to critique. For instance, fans often turn to Reddit to critique the validity of the guests on the show or even to criticize Reese for sharing her own story of surviving abuse during her childhood. Audiences desire to assume the ultimate position of moral authority when consuming true crime content. This is where the commodification of Reese's feminist aspirations clashes with the commercial nature of her podcast's distribution network. The feminism that Reese infuses into *Something Was Wrong* does not manifest in its originally intended form. Instead, fans interact with Reese's interviews as a commercialized feminist product that is expected to be easy to digest, surface-level, and not challenging any of their internalized biases.

I am not attempting to assert myself as the authority to establish ethical standards for true crime media. Rather, I am highlighting the reality that even with Reese's initial intentions for the project, there remains a need for it to generate financial returns to ensure its sustainability. There is nothing inherently wrong with this approach; however, it's crucial to recognize the impact of the capitalist nature of podcast networks and production on the content itself. The partnership between Broken Cycle Media and Wondery Media, as well as its previous association with the Crime Junkie podcasting network, places the podcast within a broader context of unethical true crime media. While these partnerships may offer increased exposure and advertisement opportunities, they also come at the cost of promoting sensationalized stories on feeds for podcasts like *Something Was Wrong* and *What Came Next*.

As a true crime fan, it's tempting to disregard the standards set by Sherrill in the list I shared above and instead opt for the media that's being marketed to us. I mentioned that Walker's reporting isn't nearly as popular as other true crime media in North America. Why is it that the gross and easily available stuff tends to be more appealing when consuming true crime media? Banet-Weiser delves into how facets of our identities or personalities are marketed and sold to us. If any genre deals with the issue of authenticity, it's true crime. The real-life connection with every story brings up authenticity, it is an inescapable part of the genre. In short, engaging with true crime media in an ethical manner isn't as enjoyable. Often, the nonfiction nature of the genre gets conflated with true crime being an educational genre, which simply isn't true. True crime media is a capitalist product meant to be consumed. If the product isn't enjoyable, consumers won't come back, investing their time, attention, and money into other products. It's important to note here that fans are not a monolith. The point I want to make here is that because the structure of crime narratives at large in United States culture, far beyond true crime, has primed listeners to expect an interactive experience as part of the baseline experience of consuming crime media. Other media only asks for consumption and then acknowledges that consumers will move on to the next piece of media. True crime media invites users to watch, rewatch, theorize, and finally become some degree of obsessed with the products of the genre.

If true crime as a genre were to make a massive shift toward ethical content, it wouldn't be financially beneficial. My argument for this stems from the reality that true crime relies on a corrupt criminal justice system to play a central role in its media. There has to be the presence of cops that can be slotted into archetypes such as the fumbling investigator who messed up the case or the sheriff who won't quit. This simplistic narrative often glosses over the realities of issues in the US like defunding the police or major incarceration reform. One of the major concerns I want to raise about ethical true crime is that it represents such a small subsection of true crime, highlighting the inherent unethical nature of the genre at large. In short, it feels like a massive ask to have people carefully navigate a genre that, at every turn, is full of controversial material.

Who The F*ck Did I Marry

Among the variety of content that has gone viral on TikTok, no one could have predicted that one woman's story of surviving a marriage to a con artist would captivate tens of millions of viewers. In February 2024, a woman using the username Reesa Teesa, shared a 52-part series documenting her harrowing experience surviving domestic abuse with a man she describes as "a pathological liar." In her TikTok playlist, she meticulously recounts the entire timeline, starting from her initial encounter with her ex-partner, whom she refers to as Legion (McNeal). Teesa begins by setting the stage of her life, expressing her readiness for marriage and children. Consequently, she admits to overlooking warning signs in the relationship in her eagerness for companionship, unaware that her partner was deceiving her in nearly every aspect of his identity. Among the notable deceptions and harassment tactics perpetrated by Legion were providing a fake social security number, lying about his role at work, and concealing a criminal record from her. With a runtime of just under 8 hours, Teesa's account serves as a poignant illustration of the intersection between survivor-led narratives and TikTok's algorithm and culture.

Teesa's decision to share her own story on her personal account exemplifies what many advocate for in ethical true crime. She chose to narrate her experiences voluntarily, aiming to overcome her past, educate, and empower others facing similar toxic situations. Throughout the series, Teesa maintains a victim-centered approach. Notably, she takes precautions to anonymize minors, as well as Legion's family and ex-wives, in order to preserve their privacy. Her intention is not to subject anyone to public scrutiny but rather to honestly recount her own ordeal. Teesa's narrative focuses solely on relevant individuals, emphasizing her desire to express her story without causing unnecessary harm. Unfortunately, survivors of intimate partner abuse often lack opportunities to share their experiences, but Teesa seized control of her platform to make herself heard. What is tricky about using Teesa's experience as a model for ethical true crime is the unpredictability of the nature of virality. It is impossible to have predicted that Teesa's story would have reached such a larger audience, particularly when the series is so long on a platform that prioritizes short form content. What the Who the F*ck Did I Marry series offered viewers was a kind of affective connection that Teesa explained on her account that she utilized the TikTok playlist function to compile the series. This allowed users to listen to the episodes in a manner similar to a podcast, enhancing accessibility for her audience. Unlike traditional podcasts that are released over weeks or months, Teesa chose to post all of her content over a few days. She clarified in the series that she had no intention of prolonging the storytelling process to maintain audience engagement. This decision contributed to the compelling nature of her story, as it diverged from the typical format of quick-hit content commonly found on TikTok. However, Teesa encountered criticism regarding the length and detail of her story. Some listeners commented on the perceived slowness of Teesa's delivery, prompting her to address the controversy. In response, she explained that she was intentionally going slow, choosing to be detailed and methodical to ensure the authenticity of her narrative and prevent accusations of dishonesty.

Teesa's narrative challenges the notion of a perfect victim by candidly admitting her flaws and mistakes throughout her story. She emphasizes her commitment to honesty, even when it casts her in a negative light. In the series, she refers to her story as the "United Nation of red flags." Many victims hesitate to share their experiences due to fear of being judged for their perceived complicity or mistakes, which can overshadow the harm inflicted by their abuser. However, Teesa's motivation for sharing her story was not about conforming to a specific narrative or pleasing a particular audience. In an interview with *Good Morning America,* Teesa explains that the most painful aspect of the experience was miscarrying her child with Legion. As she documents in the TikTok series, she had to have surgery because of the miscarriage. Legion said he could not be at the hospital with Teesa due to a meeting at work. He told her to text his executive assistant David her medical updates. Teesa later found out David was not a real person. Legion made David up and was really the person on the other side of the text messages Teesa was sending from the hospital. Miscarriage is an incredibly painful subject for many people to talk about, and Teesa opened up publicly about her experience, allowing people to connect with her. In doing this Teesa goes beyond true crime's image of the perfect victim and instead an authentic person that viewers can relate to. Her authenticity resonated with viewers, possibly contributing to her viral success. In the realm of traditional true crime narratives, as discussed earlier, platforms continually compete for attention. Teesa's ability to captivate a large audience, without intentionally trying to, sets her apart from others who attempt to do the same.

One of the important pieces of this story is considering that both the benefits and the downfalls of Teesa posting her almost eight hours of content lie in consumer's relationship to social media platforms. Papacharissi explains the role of social media platforms in relation to social change. She writes:

> The premise is simple. To understand the civic import of such technologies, we need to interpret them not as forces that bring about change, do activism, or enact impact. They are networked infrastructures that present people with environments of a social nature, supporting interactions that are aligned with the particular cultural ethos deriving from historical or geographic context. As socioculturally shaped architectures, they sustain activities that are organized around information sharing and learning, creativity and innovation, and discourse—or more specifically in the case of the latter, specific varieties of storytelling. (121)

Understanding TikTok, and platforms like it, as storytelling tools rather than just platforms for sharing information is crucial. The structure of TikTok significantly influences the way stories are conveyed. Information on the site is organized around popular hashtags, and the most popular content gets reshared, even if it's harmful. The central issue I want to address regarding the Teesa case is the intersection of storytelling and social media. While Teesa used TikTok to narrate her story, the unethical behavior of fans reveals that we cannot rely solely on a single social media platform to drive social change. The concern is that the true crime community might perceive Teesa's viral story as the ideal model for engaging with cases of domestic violence. I worry that there's an expectation for domestic violence survivors to be more believable if their story garners widespread sharing. I see the *Who The F**k Did I Marry* case as a new frontier in the true crime TikTok space. Once the TikTok community realized they could potentially gain fame and wealth by sharing stories of pain, there's concern about what people may post to emulate Teesa's recent fame. TikTok isn't inherently a platform for fostering significant social change; it relies on users to engage in that manner. However, in the true crime fan community, this type of engagement is not prevalent.

Ressa Teesa had no intention of her story going viral. It's important to acknowledge that predicting virality on the internet is nearly impossible; often, it's the most unexpected content that resonates with audiences, propelled by unpredictable algorithms. It's essential to differentiate Teesa's approach from traditional true crime media, which typically aims for financial success upon release. In an interview with Tamra Hall, Teesa opened up that she didn't think anyone would watch, but she "hoped someone would" ("Viral TikToker"). She discloses in the interview that she has not made any money off her story but instead shared the story as an act of catharsis. The WTFDIM saga offers a lens through which to examine the complex interplay between consumer behavior and ethical considerations within the realm of true crime media. This analysis delves into various facets of consumer engagement and their ethical implications, shedding light on the intricate dynamics at play. One of the most notable aspects of Teesa's virality is the way that her story has brought consumers together. People post online about how they have watched the series in community spaces such as beauty salons. Clearly, there is something about WTFDIM beyond the dramatic twists and turns that have kept people engaged. Banet-Weiser explores the way consumers interact with platforms like TikTok when she writes:

> The contemporary era is one that focuses on the individual entrepreneur, "free" to be an activist, a consumer, or both. This newly imagined entrepreneur is not defined in the traditional sense of being a business owner or investor, but rather is an entrepreneur of the self, a category that has exclusive hints to it but also gains traction as something that ostensibly can apply to anyone. At the same time, digital technologies and other media have also facilitated the emergence of "networked publics," where networks between individuals help form collective communities, such as those revolving around feminist, gay, or environmental issues, to name but a few (Banet-Weiser 37).

What is tricky about the TikTok community is that a networked public has emerged on the platform. The community, rather than gathering around positive issues like gay rights, has clustered around enjoying and sharing salacious stories. What is so powerful about Teesa's story comes from her honest delivery about incredibly difficult subject matter. The power of TikTok is that anyone can be a consumer or a producer, free of some of the traditional barriers that come with getting a story national attention such as traditional news media. As Teesa had hoped, people have found community around issues of fraud, infidelity, and domestic abuse. This was the most positive part of Teesa's story. However, Teesa's story is at odds with the ways that true crime has already shaped the way affective and networked publics engage online. Though her story is well intentioned, a networked public is not structured around ethical behavior. The flip side of the possibilities that are presented by the honesty Teesa's story is the way that the networked public is not interested in the hopeful promise of a domestic violence survivor sharing her story. The glue that holds the collective true crime community's attention around Teesa's story isn't a sense of goodwill, rather it is an interest in how much entertainment they can gain from her content.

One component of the phenomenon is made up of a community that respects and relates to Teesa, engaging in harmless activities such as sharing anecdotes of watching Teesa's videos during daily routines, such as at beauty salons or while doing household chores. However, concerns arise when individuals attempt to capitalize on Teesa's story for personal gain. Some users seek to build a following or make money from her narrative, blurring ethical boundaries in the pursuit of profit. The online sleuthing surrounding Teesa's ex-husband, referred to as "Legion," raises significant privacy concerns. Despite Teesa's use of a pseudonym for him, individuals have uncovered his identity, prompting safety worries and unwarranted attention not only on him but also on associated individuals. Furthermore, this investigative fervor extends to finding Legion's other ex-wives, exposing them to potential harassment. This discrepancy between the producer's intentions and the consumer's actions underscores the complexities of consumer-brand dynamics and their repercussions.

Legion's newfound online fanbase has enabled him to harass Teesa with false accusations, exacerbating the distressing situation. This escalation highlights the risks associated with giving undue attention to individuals who may exploit their platform for harmful purposes. Alarmingly, fans of WTFDIM now engage with Legion on his TikTok account, inadvertently legitimizing his presence and actions. This troubling development raises concerns about empowering abusers through social media engagement. These actions cannot be overlooked as they shape the function of TikTok within the true crime space. Papacharissi emphasizes the importance of examining this dynamic: "The ambience, homophily, and strengthening of bonds between those sharing a geolocal connection are essential in understanding the sociotechnical texture of Twitter, especially in situations that call for individuals to mobilize and show solidarity. They inform the *storytelling infrastructure* of the platform" (Papacharissi 37). With every interaction that prioritizes Legion's narrative, the ability for survivors to use TikTok to tell their stories diminishes. Teesa's acknowledgment of Legion's mental health issues complicates fan responses, underscoring the need for mental health support rather than online engagement. Moreover, centering Legion in the Teesa narrative undermines its intended message. While Teesa's story sheds light on the dangers of online dating and predatory behavior, giving Legion attention perpetuates his harmful actions. TikTok's algorithm further blurs the distinction between perpetrators and victims, normalizing abusive behavior within the online sphere.

The WTFDIM saga serves as a poignant case study of the intricate interactions between consumers, content creators, and ethical considerations in the true crime genre. It underscores the importance of responsible consumption and the potential consequences of online engagement in sensitive narratives. As consumers navigate the complexities of true crime media, it is imperative to uphold ethical standards and prioritize the well-being of all individuals involved.

Conclusion

One crucial aspect of this chapter to highlight is that much of the media discussed here does not involve murder. True crime covers a wide array of criminal activities, and the pieces of media that spotlight domestic violence in this chapter help illustrate the complex relationship between ethical true crime and the victims it portrays. As true crime evolves, I observe a tug-of-war between the push for more ethical media and a preference for the status quo to persist. The controversies and issues presented here are messy and by no means have simple answers. As questions continue to surface about the role of true crime fans, I am confident in stating that the demand for ethical true crime media will rise. However, I do not believe this demand will overshadow the desire for media that aligns with the traditional true crime mold. Instead, it will provide an option for true crime fans who wish to feel somewhat different or superior to others. With a plethora of media options available, it will be beneficial for those who may feel uneasy about the genre to have alternatives that, on the surface, appear to be better choices but may still pose similar problems as other true crime media. It's important to clarify that the level of harm caused by a piece of true crime media can vary, but I maintain that we should remain skeptical of any labels that attempt to reassure fans that what they are consuming is morally superior to other options.

The complexity of fan behavior in the realm of true crime is worth emphasizing. Ethical engagement in true crime is often unrewarding, with online communities frequently disregarding boundaries. Many true crime enthusiasts find more satisfaction in consuming misinformation on platforms like TikTok than in disconnecting altogether. This engagement perpetuates a losing cycle, fueled by the monetary aspect of the genre and the nature of its stories. As exemplified by Walker's investigative journalism projects, endeavors aiming to spotlight injustices often shift away from the true crime label, resulting in reduced popularity within the genre. Consumer appetites have been conditioned to crave sensational and gruesome content, but only in familiar formats. This reliance on profitability further narrows the range of options for ethical consumption.

In conclusion, ethical true crime does not appeal to the bulk of audience appetites on true crime. The problem is clear: there's an underlying discomfort associated with true crime. Numerous opinion pieces highlight concerns regarding the behavior of web sleuths and the potential negative effects of consuming extensive media on humanity's darkest facets. Ethical true crime seems more like a branding strategy—an attempt to label a subset of the genre to provide consumers with a false sense of choice and authenticity. The issue, fundamentally, lies in the authenticity of the entire experience. The debate surrounding true crime is complex, intertwining truth, and genre conventions. Ultimately, the true crime viewer's desire can be summarized as, "I want to feel like I'm part of this."

Conclusion

Fan behavior within the true crime genre is not just a reflection of the platform and its conventions; rather, it exacerbates the existing dynamics. The genre itself establishes certain expectations for its audience, priming them for a particular type of response. While it reminds viewers of the real victims involved, it often overlooks the secondary victims of trauma. This creates an intricate entanglement between producers, consumers, and victims within the true crime community. Once consumers have been primed for a certain response (i.e. to play the role of web sleuth), they recreate their experiences within their own fan interactions. Thus, the genre perpetuates its own cycle of behavior. This cycle is further perpetuated by documentaries, many of which cover the extreme actions of fans. Moving forward, an intersectional approach to true crime is imperative. While much of the existing scholarship focuses solely on select aspects of the genre, particularly the media itself, it is crucial to consider all of the factors that contribute to true crime. Simply viewing it through one lens is insufficient to fully understand its complexities and implications.

One of the greatest challenges in examining true crime in the digital age is the intricate interplay between content creators and consumers on media platforms. Zizi Papacharissi elucidates this dynamic, highlighting the circular nature of prosumer interaction. She says of agency that is "Simultaneously reproduced by and reproductive of structure" (123). True crime narratives inherently carry a power structure, wherein viewers often assume roles such as web sleuths or jurors. Law enforcement is typically portrayed as heroic, while victims are often portrayed in a sympathetic light, focusing on surface-level traits. When content adhering to these problematic conventions is liked, reposted, and shared, it creates little incentive for change within the genre or among its consumers. However, the prosumer is not the sole influential factor; social media platforms also play a significant role in shaping this cyclical relationship. It is crucial to acknowledge the secondary trauma associated with consuming true crime media, as exemplified by the Peterson family's experience in Chapter 4. Papacharissi also observes that within the framework of technological convergence, the characteristics of online media enable a heightened reflexivity of the duality of structure and agency (124). This suggests a continuous flux in the consumer's relationship with posting and consuming content on social media platforms (124). Notably, social media platforms often reinforce the problematic aspects of true crime, perpetuating its sensational nature. As true crime content garners positive interactions and sometimes financial rewards, there is little impetus for change. In short, what gets likes also makes money, which then informs what kinds of content will get made in the future.

Let us revisit the starting point of this project, the ethical dilemma presented in the *Don't F*ck with Cats* documentary. My hope is that the binary presented at the end of the documentary now appears more nuanced. The questions posed in the documentary demand binary answers – who is at fault, who is the problem? However, the reality is that true crime is rife with complex issues that defy simple solutions. Addressing the myriad ethical concerns within the genre requires a multifaceted approach. I introduced this project with the question of complicity – are web sleuths complicit in the ethical issues of true crime? Through the course of this analysis, it becomes evident that the answer is yes, but they are not the sole participants. The complexities within true crime stem from the convergence of numerous factors. While web sleuths may contribute to these issues, they are not solely responsible. True crime as a genre invites them to participate, blurring the lines of responsibility. Additionally, a documentary cannot be held accountable for the actions of its viewers once they have consumed its content.

I included Deanna Thompson's burning question at the start of this project: "And you, you at home watching a whole f*cking documentary about Luka Magnotta, are you complicit? Perhaps it's time we turned off the machine." What this project has revealed is that this binary is a myth, and the idea that machine is easy to opt out of or turn off is not realistic. It is easy to fall into the logical trap of Thompson's accusatory question: that it is the fault of consumers solely, they after all are the ones who choose to consume true crime. However, I do not think that the dynamics of true crime media and its controversies are that simple. Reflecting on one of true crime's most famous canonical works, In Cold Blood, a publisher deemed Capote's work worthy of public consumption. College and high school classes still include In Cold Blood as required reading, indicating that consumers are not solely responsible for the proliferation of true crime. Recalling Thompson's assertions, she actively decided to participate in the machine on multiple levels. Not only did she choose to participate in the "machine" as a web sleuth, but she also then made the conscious choice afterward to be in a documentary, when she already had reflected and realized she had doubts about her actions. The Magnotta case is also highly sensational, and Netflix capitalized on that to make a piece of media that would appeal to true crime consumers expectations. As we navigate an age where digital media encompasses all aspects of our lives, it becomes imperative to confront the intricate dynamics involving participants, producers, and consumers in the true crime phenomenon. The documentary prompts a critical question: are all true crime consumers, as suggested by the documentary, implicated in the challenges surrounding true crime narratives? While acknowledging the documentary's role in both constructing and redirecting blame onto the viewer, it is equally important to recognize the series as a true crime artifact that offers valuable lessons (Donaldson). Rather than singling out one party for blame, a holistic perspective that encompasses all stakeholders is essential. Viewers are not only invited to immerse themselves in complex narratives but are actively encouraged to traverse ethical boundaries. The symbiotic relationship between content creators, social media platforms, and viewers underscores the need for a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted issues at play within the true crime landscape.

There are no easy answers for the issues caused by and within true crime. These issues all depend on a complex network of content creators and consumers. Because the issues are so cyclical, it seems difficult to pinpoint a single place where intervention might make sense or have a meaningful impact on the genre. As I pointed out in Chapter 4, placing the pressure for ethical standards solely on one side or the other feels futile. The web sleuthing problem, as outlined in Chapter 1 is complex. The core of what I want readers to understand and take away from this project is that we need to rethink how we talk about violence and death. When I first became interested in true crime as a topic of scholarly research almost seven years ago it started with one simple question: how do we talk about women when they die? This question arose for me after listening to an episode of a now defunct podcast *Call Your Girlfriend*, talking about bias in women's obituaries. From there my research questions evolved over the years to the ones that I presented in the introduction. What I want to emphasize as the most important part of this project is that it is the intersection of the internet and the true crime community that has created the prosumer and affective public present in the community today. The ability for true crime fans to interact more than ever is directly connected to the unprecedented access they have to other fans, content, and means to produce their own content.

Research Questions

In navigating the complexities of the true crime landscape, this dissertation sought to address a series of interconnected questions that unravel the ethical and social dimensions inherent in the interaction between true crime fans, content creators, and the evolving true crime archive. Delving into the moral responsibility of both enthusiasts and creators in relation to the true crime archive, the research illuminated the intricate dynamics surrounding the curation and consumption of such content. Exploring the borders and overlaps between news media, content creators, and consumers, the study provided insights into the nuanced relationships shaping the narrative construction and dissemination of true crime stories. Investigating the true crime community as an affective public, particularly in the web sleuth chapter, shed light on the transformative impact of collective emotional responses on online interactions. Lastly, the examination of true crime parodies and mimicry offered a unique lens through which to understand the operational patterns of true crime enthusiasts. Together, these inquiries facilitated a comprehensive exploration of the multifaceted nature of true crime engagement, laying the groundwork for future research endeavors in this continually evolving domain.

Limitations

The present research, while contributing valuable insights into the dynamics of true crime in the digital age, is not without its limitations. Firstly, the nature of true crime itself is constantly evolving due to rapid changes in digital platforms. The dynamic and fluid landscape of online content means that new cases and narratives emerge regularly. The scope of this project is constrained by the limited number of documentaries and podcasts I was able to cover. The number of true crime documentaries is vast. Efforts were made to select representative examples; it is essential to acknowledge that the exclusion of certain cases and documentaries may limit the generalizability of the findings. This limitation opens the door for future research to delve into a broader range of cases, providing a more comprehensive understanding of the true crime phenomenon. Thirdly, this research focuses specifically on true crime and excludes adjacent media, such as crime dramas. The exclusion of these related forms of crime related media is a limitation, as they likely play a role in some of the dynamics explored in this dissertation.

However, I opted to not include these because overall, crime dramas do not contribute to issues such as the prosumer dynamics within true crime fandom. Future investigations could broaden the scope to include these adjacent genres, offering a different perspective on the influence of true crime across various media platforms. Despite these limitations, the current study provides a foundation for further research in this evolving and multifaceted field.

One of the main issues within the true crime research space is a lack of solid data to work with. Studies are starting to emerge that prioritize data collection on true crime fan consumption habits, but this work is still limited and needs to be expanded. It is often difficult when data from streaming services is considered proprietary. For the first time ever in December of 2023, Netflix released a large amount of data to the public in what they named "What We Watched: A Netflix Engagement Report." The report, according to Netflix, will be released twice a year and contain the following:

Hours viewed for every title — original and licensed — watched for over 50,000 hours;

The premiere date for any Netflix TV series or film; and

Whether a title was available globally. (Netflix)

This is a huge step forward for researchers to monitor the popularity of true crime media over time. While the report does not include backdated data, it is important that those who follow what is happening with the genre in the streaming space take note. It will be easier to track which new releases are popular with audiences and if so which subgenres of true crime are more popular than others. The data, however, does not bring a full degree of transparency to Netflix's content creation choices. They included the following disclaimer to the website when realizing the report:

- Success on Netflix comes in all shapes and sizes, and is not determined by hours viewed alone. We have enormously successful movies and TV shows with both lower and higher hours viewed. It's all about whether a movie or TV show thrilled its audience — and the size of that audience relative to the economics of the title; and
- To compare between titles it's best to use our weekly Top 10 and Most Popular lists, which take into account run times and premiere dates. (Netflix)

It is important that this is the data Netflix feels comfortable releasing to the public and might not reflect the entirety of the kinds of data that drive their decisions. I believe that true crime will benefit from more quantitative data. However, it is important to note that the data is just one piece of the picture, and it is important to continue to have a nuanced understanding. As I have illustrated in this project, there are a confluence of factors that create what true crime is.

Future Research

Looking forward, true crime research needs to take a more data driven turn. While this seems to be a necessary first step, the need for it is complicated. It would be helpful for academics to continue to look into how streaming platforms shape the true crime genre. I think of Vicary and Fraley, who in 2010 attempted to answer the question of why there is a gender divide in true crime. TikTok would not launch as an app for another six years. The app has proven to be a major factor in true crime discourse. I cannot predict what the next piece of technology will be that will unsettle the true crime space. What I do know is that the desire to consume violent stories around pain and suffering will not diminish.

At the start of this project, almost 6 years ago, I often was faced with a simplistic but loaded question, "is any given piece of true crime media ethical or unethical?" Now, many years later, I still do not have an answer to that question. I have turned from chasing the ever-elusive question of a singular piece of media's ethical responsibility to the values and practices that underpin the entire genre. While some pieces of true crime media have been popular culture phenomena in their own rights and garnered scholarship and public attention (*Making a Murder* and *Serial*), much of what makes up the genre is created en mass and always has been. Mass market paper backs, countless *Dateline* episodes, and now the thousands of true crime Tik Toks populate the viral social media app.

AI and Deep Fakes

It is hard to log on to social media these days without confronting the reality that AI is shaping every aspect of daily life. There is no shortage of concern about the role that computer-generated images and language will play in our lives. Deep fake imagery is a major issue, most notably Taylor Swift was recently the victim of deep fake non-consensual pornography. The images circulated on X before the platform restricted any search queries for Swift's name. On a regular basis, 4chan users try to break the safety measures built into AI image generators, not only creating violent images of celebrities like Swift but also children (Gibson). The impact of AI deep fake imagery is wide sweeping, and it seems no one is safe from its uses. According to the University of Virginia there are two of major concerns for AI deepfake usage, "On a small scale, deepfakers can, for example, create personalized videos that appear to show a relative asking for a large sum of money to help them out of an emergency and send them to unsuspecting victims, thereby scamming innocents at an unprecedented level. On a large scale, fake videos of important world leaders stating made-up claims could incite violence and even war" (University of Virginia). AI is clearly not an issue that should be taken lightly. It is a technology that helps to spread misinformation along with abusive imagery. It is entangled in everything from our daily lives, popular culture, to politics.

True crime is not exempt from the challenges posed by AI. While one might assume that AI usage would merely serve as subject matter for a true crime documentary, the issue extends far beyond that realm. Within the sphere of true crime media, there are content creators actively utilizing and profiting from AI-generated images. I believe AI represents the next significant challenge and frontier in the genre, and while we cannot fully anticipate its role, several incidents offer glimpses into what the next era of true crime media might entail. One troubling trend is the emergence of accounts using images of murdered children to produce videos wherein a talking portrait of the child, utilizing AI voice technology, recounts the circumstances of their death. These videos are deeply unsettling, with the AI-generated talking children appearing highly stylized, resembling more of an animation or digital art portrait than a human being. Moreover, these videos often incorporate disturbing crime scene photos alongside the AI-generated images. I believe that AI's impact on true crime is particularly insidious, especially in its treatment of stories involving murdered children. These narratives are often emotionally challenging to address. Hence, it is understandable why content creators would turn to AI, as it enables the creation of true crime content on the most sensitive subject matter in an impersonal manner. Recognizing the gravity of this issue, platforms like YouTube have taken steps to adapt their policies to curb the use of deepfake imagery. YouTube, for instance, updated its policies to explicitly prohibit the use of deepfake imagery depicting minors or victims of crime. Additionally, the platform banned the use of AI-generated voiceovers, impacting content creation well beyond the true crime community (Sato). Penalties for violations range from restricted upload abilities to permanent account bans. The appeal of such content to channel owners was amplified by YouTube's algorithm, as AI-generated content requires less labor to produce.

While YouTube has taken a firm stance on this type of content, as of the writing of this chapter, TikTok has not enforced its policy regarding AI images of children, effectively turning its platform into an algorithmic paradise for AI-driven true crime content. TikTok's official position on AI content stipulates that users must utilize the platform's tagging system to indicate if content was AI-generated or AI-altered. The policy explicitly prohibits certain types of AI-generated content, including those depicting real figures such as young people, adult private figures, and adult public figures when used for political or commercial endorsements, or any other violations of TikTok's policies ("AI Generated Content Label"). Despite this policy, AI-driven true crime content proliferates on the app. One prominent account producing such content, in direct violation of TikTok's policy, is Hidden Stories AI, boasting 163.3 thousand followers and 4.1 million likes as of March 2024. Their account features AI-generated content depicting both adults and children. It is evident that TikTok, as a platform, has not taken proactive steps to remove AI-driven true crime content. While some may question why a platform would permit such a glaring oversight in policy enforcement, it is more advantageous for TikTok to refrain from enforcing the removal of AI-driven true crime content. Hidden Stories AI is just one of many successful accounts on the platform, and increased user engagement with such content leads to greater time spent on the app. This, in turn, enhances TikTok's profitability by providing more opportunities for users to view ads and access the TikTok Shop, the app's ecommerce feature. Consequently, it is more lucrative for both content creators posting AI-generated content and TikTok itself to overlook these infractions.

The scary thing about AI's presence in true crime is it makes all the issues presented in this project worse. Web sleuths and content creators can do more with less, further removing humans from the equation of true crime. I also posit that this rising issue of AI in true crime speaks to the sensationalism of the genre. My main worry with AI for the future of true crime is that it will make worse the problems that I have already presented in this project, specifically the revictimization of. AI dehumanizes people, and true crime already has a long history of doing that, making the two a disturbingly good match. I think that as AI available to the public becomes more sophisticated, so will the deep fakes and the content these content creators are putting out. I do not think the current model of disturbing talking photographs is enough to completely shift the true crime landscape. However, if AI becomes more realistic, then it will be easier to potentially create that sense of intimacy that I mentioned with podcasting in Chapter 2. AI is not part of a larger trend of wanting impersonal and dehumanizing content. The success of Ressa Tessa's TikTok videos shows that people are still interested in content that feels personal and connected to the content creator. Of all the examples I have given in this dissertation of how true crime dehumanizes its victims, turning pain into a commodity is likely the most horrifying trend of all. The use of AI to alter images of children shows a distinct lack of care for the humanity of murder victims and instead shows a major emphasis on producing content and gaining views. I believe that in the wake of AI issues in the true crime space, the argument that true crime can be ethical will become even more polarizing and controversial. It is difficult to argue for the redeemable points of a genre when children's likeness is used for such callous purposes. I also have concerns that AI, as it becomes more accessible to the public, will become a tool that web sleuths use to further the doxing practices that I outlined in Chapter 1. If sleuthing can be made more automated, then the ethical concerns and human factors in the act will become even more distant. The more digital true crime becomes, the more, I argue, people will continue to be dehumanized. The quicker that true crime fans can search online, create content, and engage with other fans the worse ethical issues around media consumption and creation will become.

AI has already become a part of the true crime landscape and is likely here to stay. It's important to understand the role of AI-generated content in this context. Currently, AI-generated content may not gain viral traction like other media in this project, but it does contribute to the algorithm's need for a constant flow of new posts. Scholars should closely monitor AI's evolution in true crime and consider its potential to mimic human speech and storytelling convincingly. This raises questions about the appeal of true crime if it shifts from human to machine-generated content. Concerningly, not all platforms have banned this type of content, echoing other problematic aspects of true crime like sensationalism.

The Alt Right

The influence of web sleuthing extends far beyond the boundaries of true crime, as demonstrated in cases involving radical hate groups. Following the events of the January 6th insurrection, women have utilized dating apps to identify potential insurrectionists and report them to the FBI (Reilly). Reflecting on the connections between web sleuthing and the insurrection, I've considered other areas where the alt-right movement and true crime intersect. What deeply concerns me in this project is the increasing proximity between true crime and white nationalism and other movements, with conspiracy theories serving as the common thread linking them. There are various avenues through which true crime intersects with alt-right and extremist movements. One notable example is the surge of documentaries produced in response to events like the Charlottesville "Unite the Right" rally and the January 6th insurrection. These documentaries often grapple with issues of sensationalism, similar to other true crime media focused on murder, domestic violence, and fraud.

I believe the issue of representation in true crime connects back to the ethical discussion I initiated in Chapter 4. It's crucial to recognize that the political discourse surrounding police reform and violence is just as integral to true crime as discussions of serial killers. For example, in Chapter 2 I explored the ethical pitfalls of events like CrimeCon. The events intersection with political issues warrants attention as Nicholas Russell has observed. "The paternalism inherent in most things related to law enforcement wasn't as palpable, though. The attendees of this conference were all firm supporters of the police, but their approval manifested through the worship of detectives and cold case investigators rather than the more obvious flying of a Blue Lives Matter flag" (Russell). Issues concerning police violence cannot be divorced from the realm of true crime media. The primary concern I identify is that the endorsement of police power structures often takes a more nuanced form than overt displays of Blue Lives Matter imagery. True crime narratives thrive on simplified portrayals of the criminal justice system and law enforcement, consequently overlooking the pressing need for criminal justice reform in the United States. Moreover, the current functioning of true crime narratives raises concerns that viewers may perceive the legal system as effective for everyone, especially when these narratives depict murders and serial killers being brought to justice. By presenting simplistic narratives that portray investigators as unequivocal heroes, true crime inadvertently provides a platform for sentiments aligned with Blue Lives Matter to subtly permeate, disguising themselves as less harmful and more digestible forms of expression. What might seem initially to be basic hero worship of detectives could prove to be a connection to more conservative or extreme ideologies.

From my exploration of various documentaries, it became apparent that conservative news platforms are leveraging the popularity of true crime to propagate their own messages. Specifically, conservative outlets have produced true crime documentaries that serve as vehicles for spreading conspiracy theories. A notable example is a recent documentary released by DailyWire; a conservative news platform founded by political commentator Ben Shapiro (DailyWire). While DailyWire is associated with right-wing politics rather than the alt-right specifically, it serves as a pertinent example due to its fusion of political ideologies with true crime narratives. Of concern is the deceptive advertising of such documentaries, which may mislead unsuspecting viewers about their source. *Convicting a Murderer* (2023), a docuseries touted as a response to Netflix's *Making a Murderer* (2015), epitomizes this trend. *Making a Murderer* chronicles the story of Steven Avery, falsely convicted of attempted murder in 1985 and later exonerated, only to be convicted of another murder in 2007. Avery maintains his innocence, and the Netflix series sparked widespread interest, prompting a second season. *Convicting a Murderer*, however, takes a different stance, suggesting that both Avery's legal team and Netflix deceived audiences, with host Candace Owens promising to uncover the "real truth" (Convicting a Murderer). Critics have questioned the timing of DailyWire's response, given the eight-year gap since the original documentary's release (Hummel). This convergence of true crime and conservative politics is driven by the genre's popularity, which draws viewers to platforms like DailyWire's streaming service. By capitalizing on Shapiro's political following, DailyWire seeks to generate revenue and cultivate a loyal audience (Bernstein). The trailer for "Convicting a Murderer" employs familiar tropes and techniques of true crime documentaries, potentially misleading viewers lacking critical thinking skills. This intersection underscores the broader concern about the overlap between conservative politics and true crime, highlighting a longstanding relationship between narrative genres.

I feel that one of the important things to note are the similarities between those who are sucked into both alt-right and true crime. Conspiracy theory, no matter what forms it comes in, appeals to people for many of the same reasons. Researchers Karen Douglas, Robbie Sutton, and Aleksandra Cichocka found three main criteria for making people believe in conspiracy theories. The researchers proposed that, "Belief in conspiracy theories appears to be driven by motives that can be characterized as epistemic (understanding one's environment), existential (being safe and in control of one's environment), and social (maintaining a positive image of the self and the social group)" (538). The need for understanding and belonging is such a basic human need it is so easily exploited by algorithms that value profit over factual information. True crime and alt-right conspiracy theories share a commonality in exploiting fundamental human fears. True crime conspiracies aim to provide explanations for unresolved cases and the unsettling uncertainty surrounding them, while the alt-right capitalizes on societal anxieties about cultural change. Both sets of theories attempt to make sense of the overwhelming and intimidating aspects of the world, particularly as portrayed on social media platforms. Social media itself contributes to this atmosphere of fear by perpetuating a constant stream of news stories with fear-inducing headlines. Consequently, the mechanisms of conspiracy theories unite true crime enthusiasts and the alt-right, a convergence that warrants scholarly concern.

Beyond the exploitation of fears, both movements share similarities in how their followers online interact. One of the major issues with the connection between the alt right and true crime, is the similarity between how social media platforms operate in the two spaces. Another significant link I've observed between true crime and the alt-right is their shared attraction to conspiracy theories and extreme behaviors. Many of the sources I consulted for this project weren't originally centered on true crime web sleuths; I had to broaden my research beyond this field to form the foundation of my dissertation. Throughout my exploration of various communities, both online and offline, scholars consistently cited examples of hate groups, ranging from incels on 4Chan to white supremacists involved in the US Capitol insurrection. The close proximity of true crime to these communities, while still maintaining a distance, is concerning to me. I believe that the next phase of research for this project should delve deeper into the connection between the alt-right and true crime spaces, as I anticipate that the boundaries between them will continue to blur over time. I'm wary that as true crime evolves towards increased prosumer engagement, its alignment with the alt-right may strengthen. Conspiracy theories represent a slippery slope, often merging with seemingly innocuous online communities. Given the echo chamber effect of platforms like Reddit, it's crucial for scholars to acknowledge that these communities are more closely intertwined than may initially seem comfortable. Phillips explains that over time the way that trolls have congregated on the internet has shifted from a centralized to a more dispersed model. Phillips explains this shift:

> Unlike the troll space in previous years, however, particularly in the pre-mainstreaming period of 2006–2010, contemporary trolling no longer emanates from a single hotspot, and no longer necessarily falls under the same highly distinctive subcultural mantle. In 2014, one is as likely to encounter trollish behavior on Tumblr or reddit or Twitter as on 4chan, some of which flags itself as such via subtle memetic references and some of which does not. Some self-identifying trolls don't even bother trolling anonymously. The subcultural well may not be as deep, in other words, but the water now covers a much wider area. (Phillips 152)

What Phillips refers to as a "wider area" is exactly the problem with unethical media and behavior in true crime today. In previous decades true crime had one, maybe two predominant modes of distribution. There were eras where pamphlets, books, or even cable true crime series (i.e., Dateline) reigned supreme. The combination of the podcast boom, the rise in streaming platforms, and the omnipresence of social media has made the singular dominance of one medium of true crime obsolete. True crime content, and by extension concerning fan behavior is coming from every platform constantly. For example, the Netflix documentary I opened the introduction with documents actions that happened on Facebook. There are podcasts that cover controversies that happen on TikTok, everything is so blended it is impossible to separate one platform and its conventions from the other. This expansive spread of controversial content online, particularly in the true crime space, is even more predominant than what Phillips is referencing in 2014. As Phillips discusses how dispersed trolls are in their actions, the same can be said of true crime fans and sleuths. There is no singular "hotspot" that acts as a hub for their activities.

True crime, inherently violent in nature, often prompts the emergence of conspiracy theories as a means for fans to rationalize seemingly senseless acts of violence. This desire to find meaning in chaos reflects a fundamental human need for understanding. Similarly, individuals susceptible to conspiracy theories propagated by the alt-right are also driven by a quest for belonging, safety, and control. Consequently, the connection between alt-right ideologies and true crime conspiracy theories cannot be overlooked. Both phenomena capitalize on the same platforms and mechanisms, exploiting common human needs to garner support. Misinformation, often subtly disguised, facilitates the transition into these ideologies, blurring the lines between truth and fabrication.[22]

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[22] The erosion of journalism and news outlets should be of major concern to anyone studying true crime, but particularly in connection with the issue of the alt right and true crime's connections. Because the genre is full of amateurs trying to gain audience attention, it is important that there are journalist reporting on these issues are able to report and provide commentary. One of the major news sources I have often turned to on issues such as internet controversies and true crime

Media Circus: Depp v. Heard

In 2022 it felt almost impossible to not fall into a discussion about the defamation trial between Johnny Depp and Amber Heard. The stars fell into a very public media circus when going to court over Heard's domestic violence allegations against Depp. Prior to the trail, Heard discussed her experience briefly in a single interview which led to a cascade of events. After Heard alleged domestic abuse Depp's career plummeted with companies like Disney dropping affiliation with him. Famously Dior was the only company that did not end their relationship with Depp, keeping him as a celebrity spokesperson. This led to Depp bringing a civil defamation suit against Heard. What would follow is arguably the most talked about trial of the 21st century.

When the Depp v. Heard trial commenced, it quickly escalated into a public spectacle, with daily live streams allowing the public to closely follow the proceedings. Conversations about the trial became ubiquitous, spanning cable news, online forums, and personal interactions. It seemed as though a significant portion of the American population was captivated by the ongoing courtroom saga. Each day, YouTubers meticulously dissected trial details while offering their commentary. Moreover, the trial garnered substantial attention on TikTok, where videos using #JusticeForJohnnyDepp amassed millions of likes (St. Martin). Bot Sentinel, a non-partisan site tracking trends on social media platforms, observed in their report on the trial's

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related content is Vice, who has recently massively laid off its staff. There is now a major gap in who is reporting on issues pertaining to popular culture and fringe communities. One of the main issues that I explored in this project was the line between amateur sleuths, podcasters, and journalists. Moves like the ones at Vice to lay off a massive amount of its staff proves to be a concerning issue for the true crime space. https://apnews.com/article/vice-media-layoffs-bruce-dixon-3439e54142c88530a5825642a81aeec5 social media coverage that the cyberbullying directed at Heard was among the most severe they had encountered (Dellatto). Interestingly, women expressing support for Heard on Twitter also faced harassment and doxing (Dellatto). The harassment extended beyond Twitter, as depicted in the Netflix documentary *Depp v. Heard* (2023), where TikTok users utilized clips from the live-streamed courtroom footage to create meme content targeting Heard. These memes, often set to popular songs or comedic soundbites, trivialized her testimony, reducing it to easily consumable and shareable jokes. Whitney Phillips writes about the role of meme content in online spaces, noting that memes offer a site of vicarious enjoyment for a user not there to experience the original event (32). This meme content provided TikTok users with a sense of participation in the trial narrative, despite not being physically present. The online responses to the trial clearly showcased a high level of polarization, with users aligning themselves with either party or simply treating the case as entertainment fodder through jokes and meme content.

It is important to note that the reason the trial became a media sensation was because of how much access the public was given to the courtroom. There is contentious history of allowing cameras in the courtroom. There is not a national standard in the United States regulating the presence of cameras in courts. Federal courts have largely resisted the presence of cameras in trials, while the regulations from state to state vary greatly. The Supreme Court ruled in Chandler v. Florida (1981) that the potential influence the presence of cameras could have on jurors was not a strong enough justification to not broadcast trials ("Cameras in the Courtroom"). The following is the guidance for judges who do allow cameras in their courtrooms:

> When broadcasting, televising, recording, or photographing in the courtroom or adjacent areas is permitted, a judge should ensure that it is done in a manner that will:
>
> 1) be consistent with the rights of the parties,

2) not unduly distract participants in the proceeding, and

3) not otherwise interfere with the administration of justice. (US Courts)

The issue when it comes to the Depp v. Heard trial, or any televised trial for that matter is these rules are only for what immediately transpires in the courtroom. There are no regulations regarding what happens with this footage once it is available to the public. In previous decades, trial footage was not available for the public to consume whenever they pleased, with the advent of YouTube, live broadcasts on the platform are saved, and anyone can return to the videos at any time. The issue that seems most pressing for me is what happens when we consider that massive cultural impact that having cameras in the Depp v. Heard trial has had culturally. Does the omnipresent disdain for Heard as a domestic abuse survivor impact future survivor's ability to receive a fair trial? This is another aspect of true crime where the intersectional nature of its issues is hard to disentangle. Identifying a single factor that could mitigate the ethical concerns underscored by this trial is challenging. The decision to allow cameras in courtrooms is influenced by factors beyond the control of media consumers, and the dissemination of trial footage extends far beyond a single channel. Instead, countless accounts are involved in reposting and sharing the content. The trial highlights the role of cameras in satisfying consumer desires to feel involved in proceedings to which they have no legitimate connection.

In my view, one of the significant harms stemming from the presence of cameras in the trial was the subsequent lack of nuance in online discourse surrounding domestic violence. Amidst the media frenzy, individuals' opinions about Heard and Depp became proxies for their attitudes towards all domestic violence survivors. It was common to encounter discussions that oversimplified a complex issue into mere hot takes and simplistic narratives. Assuming there exists, a perfect victim is a reductionist perspective. However, this tendency is inherent to what drives true crime—a penchant for archetypes that oversimplify intricate situations into easily consumable content. This reduction of nuanced topics into clickbait is among the most detrimental aspects of true crime. Amidst the social media frenzy surrounding the case, the issue of domestic violence was largely sidelined in the narrative. Engaging in nuanced discussions became challenging as both Depp and Heard were portrayed as villainous characters. In her article, "The Amber Heard-Johnny Depp Trial Was an Orgy of Misogyny" Moria Donegan frames the trial as a backlash to the #MeToo movement. Donegan writes of the online conspiracy theories:

> A broad consensus has emerged online that Heard must be lying about her abuse. She has been accused of faking the photos of her injuries from Depp's alleged beatings, painting bruises on with makeup. She's been accused of convincing the multiple witnesses who say Depp abused her to lie – repeatedly and under oath – for years. These conspiracy theories are unsupported by the facts of the case, but that has not stopped them from spreading. Online, the case has taken on a heady mythology, and belief in Depp's righteousness persists independent of the evidence. In the service of this myth, any cruelty can be justified. (Donegan)

Within true crime narratives, the fabrication of conspiracy theories often takes precedence over truth, serving as both entertainment and content generation. What should raise alarm among true crime scholars is the treatment of Heard's testimony online, signaling a new era of conspiracy theory within the true crime realm. While I have discussed various examples of conspiracy theories in previous chapters, the real-time nature of the conspiracy surrounding Heard's testimony is particularly concerning. The sentiment expressed by Donegan, "any cruelty can be justified," resonates with the content created about Heard. Her accounts of domestic violence were transformed into memes to satisfy the demand for sensational content in the online true crime community, where a constant stream of captivating material is required. Heard was dehumanized, as is often the case in true crime media, to fit into a narrative. What makes this case especially disturbing is that we witnessed it unfold in real-time, every day, on the internet. I find this case significant because it reveals that public sentiment for ethical true crime may be lacking. By this, I mean that the general public shows little interest in victim-centered narratives. This also highlights a cultural bias in determining the ideal victim, as seen in Depp's case, where he was portrayed as a god-like figure, a heroic victim. It appeared that Depp's illustrious career was enough for many to side with him as a beloved figure.

The implications of the conspiracy around the trial have far reaching consequences. In addition to the cultural impact on domestic violence survivors, there are also practical concerns for survivors in the digital streaming age. Michelle Simpson Tuegel, a lawyer known for representing victims of sexual offenses in well-known legal cases, expressed concern that her clients frequently prefer not to have their actual names disclosed in public court documents. She now fears that they may also have to contend with the prospect of being featured in live stream broadcasts (Maddaus). While one could argue that the Depp v. Heard trial is a special circumstance because it was two celebrities, and other domestic violence survivors might not need to worry about being exposed, I would beg to differ. Heard's testimony is the first time a victim alleged sexual assault in full vision in a U.S. courtroom (Depp v. Heard). Previously, victims who alleged sexual assault on televised court cases faces were not shown and/or their identities were kept anonymous. Heard has to recount sexual violence in front of millions of viewers, which raises fears for other survivors. This brings up the issue of revictimization, which is already a massive problem in the true crime space. Not only was it difficult for Heard to give her testimony, but now footage of it is available on the internet for TikTok users to reuse for their own entertainment. A case can become high profile just because the public decides to take interest in it, it is not something that a victim and their legal team has control over. Also, people who are themselves high profile or are going up against a high-profile person in court deserve the same anonymity as anyone else. The trial and the public response revealed to be paradoxical It is important for true crime scholars moving forward to note the ways that the #MeToo movement will intersect with some of the genre's biggest controversies. Particularly in the discussion I offered on ethical true crime, the #MeToo movement needs to be factored in as part of the driving forces behind trends in the true crime space.

I would be remiss if I did not mention the element of money that permeates almost every true crime controversy. There is a financial incentive for YouTubers to create content about the case. What sets this apart from previous true crime cases is that now there is space for everyday people with no other credentials to contribute. I believe that the Depp v. Heard trial reflects the direction in which true crime is headed in the future. The entire trial felt like an interactive public event, reminiscent of some major public trials, yet entirely novel. One comparable televised trial that remains central to true crime discourse is the OJ Simpson trial, which still looms large in public memory and has even been adapted into a dramatized show, *The People v. OJ Simpson* (2016). Similar to the intense and polarizing opinions the public held about the OJ Simpson case, the same can be said for the Depp v. Heard trial. My concern regarding media circus trials is that it is now easier than ever to act as a juror without boundaries or limitations. Reflecting on the OJ Simpson trial, law professor Gerald F. Uelmen observed the dynamic between the jury and public opinion:

> In a courtroom, we can deal with this tendency head-on by making jurors take an oath that they will keep an open mind until they've heard all the evidence and by constantly reminding them of their obligation to do so. We all heard the admonitions that Judge Ito delivered on a daily basis. Frankly, it did not surprise me at all that the verdict of public opinion was different from the verdict of our jury. The public didn't take the oath the jurors took and didn't have to follow the admonitions. (Uelmen)

In the age of TikTok the court of public opinion can be louder, often feeling like the singular correct take on a case. What is notably different between the OJ Simpson trial, and the Depp v. Heard trial is that there is not only a platform upon which everyone gets to share and have an opinion. There is a monetary benefit to creating noise around a high-profile case. There is a subdivision of YouTube content creators referred to as "lawtubers." The channel Law and Crime livestreamed the entire trial, breaking their viewership record with 3.5 million people watching their livestream of the trail at once. In addition to Law and Crime, one of the most popular during the Depp. v. Heard trial was Emily Baker. A former D.A., she offered commentary on every part of the trail attracting millions of people to her channel. Where exactly do Baker, and other lawtubers like her make their money from? Like many YouTubers she takes advantage of several of the monetization options the platform offers. Baker financially benefits from ads that run on her videos as well as the channel membership feature. This allows her followers, for a set monthly fee, to gain access to exclusive content. Finally, she also benefits from super-chat messages, a YouTube feature where viewers can give money to a channel and in exchange their messages appear at the top of a livestream chat feed. Baker revealed in an interview to the LA Times that a follower once paid $400 for a super chat (Sakoui). Emily disclosed in a separate interview to Business Insider that she makes more from her legal commentary videos than she did as a trail lawyer (Chen and Weiss). Baker isn't alone in her profiting off the Depp v. Heard trial, channels LegalBytes and Rekieta Law also made thousands of dollars off their trial content (Chen and Weiss). All of this content and with all the money on the table to be made, it especially feels like Uelmen's comment that the public did not take the oath the jury took, is more present than ever in the realm of lawtuber content. If a case has entertainment value and is publicly accessible, then it appears that it is a free game for commentary content creators. Again, it is hard to disentangle the intersectional issues present in true crime. There is not one singular party that can be blamed for the media circus that resulted from the Depp v. Heard trial. What is clear cut, however, is that there is an economy for this kind of commentary.

What should be taken away from the Depp v. Heard trial is that the convergence of the internet with sensational stories is on a path, that I argue, we may not be able to get off. With platforms like TikTok, the constant flow of content speaks to Papacharissi's quote I referenced above about the reflexive nature of social media platforms. TikTok, arguably, is made to be reflexive. My concern is that this one trial is not a singular one-off event. Rather, the Depp. v. Heard trial acts as the canary in the coal mine of true crime. The case provides a trove of examples of many of true crime's most concerning issues and trends.

Final Thoughts

The future of true crime seems uncertain. I have no doubt that the genre will continue to evolve into new forms. With Congress's recent push to ban TikTok in the US, I am intrigued to see what will emerge as the next major hub for the true crime community if the ban is implemented. I believe that because the true crime community uses multiple social media platforms, the disappearance of one platform will not spell the end of the genre but rather a shift. Even if a new platform emerges, part of TikTok's success within the true crime space lies in its lax enforcement of policies, something that a new platform may not replicate. Regardless of the fate of major social media and streaming platforms, the ethical issues of true crime will likely persist and evolve. The landscape of true crime feels deeply interconnected; separating one component from another seems practically impossible. The influence of technology is pervasive and challenging to escape. Looking ahead, the predominant trend in the true crime space appears to be “more is more.” Given the demand for constant content creation, the focus often lies on producing new material for consumers. It’s worth noting that while I’ve covered various examples in this project, there is a wealth of podcasts, documentaries, and controversies that I have not addressed.

My aspiration for this project is to reshape our understanding of the impact of true crime media. The notion that it’s merely entertainment and devoid of cultural significance is flawed. The choices made by media consumers profoundly influence the content that production companies invest in. Additionally, I aim to illustrate that there is no single entity to blame for the state of true crime or the controversies it generates. The complex network of individuals engaged with the genre forms an intricate and multifaceted public sphere, and any solution that fails to recognize this complexity will fall short of effecting meaningful change. I believe this research merits academic recognition because it not only builds upon existing studies of true crime but also offers insights into examining emerging issues and trends within the genre. By combining academic research with internet artifacts like TikTok and Reddit threads, this project presents a comprehensive view of the true crime genre’s online presence.

The goal for this project was to provide insight into the inner workings of the current true crime landscape. I know that from my own experience researching true crime, I often have felt discouraged about the state of humanity. Feeling as if the world is a terrible place and that little can be done to redeem it. I do not want the controversial subject matter I have included in this dissertation to discourage scholars; instead, I wish for it to function as a roadmap for where we have been and where we might go in the future. True crime's lurid history endures, but I also believe people's desire to be informed and see media change will as well. I cannot say what will become of web sleuths, only time will tell how their role will morph to match true crime's next internation. Until then, there is an abundance of issues to tackle within the genre. There is currently not a strong body of literature that focuses exclusively on the way social media shapes true crime content. I hope that this work adds to the existing literature. Social media exclusive content is widely popular and offers researchers the opportunity to examine the latest iteration of the true crime genre. Platforms like TikTok and YouTube offer new controversies that are important to examine. Podcasts and books, while sharing many similarities to streaming content, lack the visual element of the format I examined in this paper. I hope that my exploration of platforms like TikTok and YouTube helps to further discussion on true crime within the discipline.

Social media has played a significant role in shaping today's true crime landscape by fostering an expectation of intimacy with consumers. It's no longer sufficient to merely hear a true crime story; audiences now crave a deeper connection. Looking ahead, I believe that art will continue to be a potent catalyst for change within the genre. Engaging in discussions about the troubling aspects of true crime offers a more effective solution than simply labeling media as ethical or unethical. Art has the power to explore the deeper meanings of life and violence, challenging the limitations of traditional true crime narratives and representation. Through parody, humor, and mimicry, art can push back against these constraints and promote critical conversations. The examples highlighted in Chapter 3 illustrate how such media can spark dialogue and reshape perceptions. In sum, this project aims to provide a comprehensive examination of true crime in the social media age, contributing to a deeper understanding of the genre's complexities. As new platforms emerge and reshape the landscape of true crime, this work will serve as a snapshot of the genre's evolution and provide a valuable point of reference for future analysis. Ultimately, understanding true crime as a multifaceted public sphere with fluid roles is essential. This project seeks to contribute to the field by offering a nuanced understanding of the genre within the context of a predominantly social media-driven content ecosystem.

In conclusion, it is evident that the landscape of true crime today cannot be attributed solely to any single entity. Rather, it is the intricate interplay between consumers, streaming platforms, podcast hosts, and the evolving nature of the internet that shapes the true crime community. The oversimplification of assigning blame to one party overlooks the complex web of factors contributing to the genre's current state. Throughout this dissertation, I have delved into the complexities of contemporary true crime, emphasizing the convergence of producers and consumers in an ever-changing digital landscape. By adopting a nuanced perspective that acknowledges the dynamic relationship between creators and consumers, we gain a deeper understanding of the multifaceted issues within the genre. From the rise of internet sleuths to the blurring of lines between fan and content producer, true crime has transitioned from a mere genre to the hub of a complicated affective public. This evolution brings to light profound questions about ethics, activism, and storytelling in the digital age. Moving forward, it is essential to recognize that true crime is not just a collection of media but a reflection of broader societal dynamics. By embracing this perspective, we can continue to explore the complex intersections of true crime, the internet, and social justice, paving the way for informed discourse and critical engagement in the field.

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