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A Media History of True Crime: The Genre is the Message

by

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A thesis

submitted in partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts in the Department of Communication, Media, and Persuasion

Idaho State University

Fall 2021

To the Graduate Faculty:

To members of the committee appointed to examine the thesis of TAYLOR L. MEEKS  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract .....	iv
Introduction .....	1
Review of Media History .....	6
Early Print .....	14
Nineteenth Century Print .....	24
Twentieth Century Print .....	31
Television .....	54
Digital Media .....	68
Conclusion .....	83
References .....	88

## A Media History of True Crime: The Genre is the Message

Thesis Abstract—Idaho State University (2021)

True crime is a vibrant strand of popular culture that has been long-established in media practices. While typically understood as a niche genre that satisfies the public's appetite for sensationalism, true crime has demonstrated a consistent readiness to change media method, seamlessly navigating changes in both format and focus. This paper will examine the evolution of media and true crime in tandem, starting in the sixteenth century and concluding with the twenty-first century. I will trace the changes to mass communications technologies from each era and connect them with high-profile crime cases that attracted journalistic attention. True crime, my examples show, is not a niche genre of media content. Its history has proven remarkably durable, evident through an ability to adapt to shifts and trends that emerge in media to shape culture.

Key Words: true crime, history, popular culture, mass communications

## Introduction

There is something about the unfathomable and horrific that infatuates people. The thrill of vivid and gruesome descriptions of violence, amateur as well as official sleuthing efforts, and (often) female victims are all hallmarks of the true crime genre (Cruz, 2015). Its popularity, as a form of content, has been attributed to sensationalism, which Wiltenburg (2004) defines as “the purveyance of emotionally charged content, mainly focused on violent crime, to a broad public” (p. 1377). Audiences also grow obsessed with the criminals themselves, fascinated by their motivations and pathologies. From religious sins that led individuals on a wayward path to murder in the sixteenth century to rummaging through every inch of a killer’s past in the contemporary age, crime reports draw consumers into something dark about the human psyche. As these nonfiction stories dive into crime scene technicalities, popular experts emerge who are knowledgeable in forensics, profiling, and other intricate aspects of criminology. Audiences can vicariously experience themselves as killers, victims, or investigators. We devour crime stories for our own personal reasons, whether it is to better protect and prepare ourselves for the worst possible scenario or simply a desire to understand the mindset of deviant criminals. True crime flourishes as a global phenomenon today, witnessed by the rise of streaming documentaries and podcasts, prompting us to ask whether this popularity owes simply to the characteristics of mediated content?

Before the documentaries and podcasts of the twenty-first century, there existed a host of television programming devoted to true crime, and before that a great number of books and magazine features on the subject in the twentieth century. In the nineteenth century, true crime was a staple of the first daily newspapers. Early print culture, meanwhile, was characterized by

pamphlets and ballads obsessed with the genre. So, while any examination of true crime must acknowledge the appealing sensationalism inherent to the genre, this study explores how it has evolved in tandem with changes to mass media. True crime's popularity has been sustained, I'll argue, by the genre's ability to adapt to the considerable upheavals in communications technologies and journalistic style over time. True crime may be seen as a niche genre of media content, but its history has proven remarkably durable and enduring.

That is because true crime continually follows Marshall McLuhan's famous saying, "the medium is the message." McLuhan (1964), a media ecologist, posited that "the medium shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action...it is only too typical that the 'content' of any medium blinds us to the character of the medium" (p. 24). True crime's popularity as a genre reflects this responsiveness to media change. In the early print cultures of the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries, Western societies were heavily influenced by religion as printing of the Bible in vernacular languages led the Protestant Reformation to challenge the Catholic Church. True crime stories were told at the time with a religious focus; most stories reported on the "early vices" or sins of the criminals. These reports warned people of the dangers of straying away from God and encouraged repentance. As the nineteenth century began with a democratic public sphere and daily newspapers for a mass audience, true crime focused on stories with more speculation, sensationalism, and shock value. Popular print media in the twentieth century introduced objective journalism, and as a result true crime grew more exacting and detailed. As the role of television increased with twenty-four-hour news, so did the images and rhythms of that medium for crime stories, including daily coverage of OJ Simpson's trial. The digital age of social media in our present century combines all the preceding, but podcasts

and documentaries allowed for everyday citizens to create and share their own investigations, opinions, and obsessions in true crime. All this suggests that the evolution of the true crime genre doubles as a history of mass media since the invention of the printing press.

Media ecologist Neil Postman in *Amusing Ourselves to Death* explores what he deems as the corrosive effects of electronic media on society. In his first chapter “The Medium is the Metaphor” he defines what constitutes a “medium.” Postman (1985) works up to the definition stating, “It is an argument that fixes its attention on the forms of human conversation, and postulates that how we are obliged to conduct such conversations will have the strongest possible influence on what ideas we can conveniently express. And what ideas are convenient to express inevitably become the important content of a culture” (p. 6). He clarifies that “conversation” is used as a metaphor to encapsulate not only speech but all techniques and technologies that are used to exchange messages. Postman (1985) defines a medium as, “The information, the content, or, if you will, the ‘stuff’ that makes up what is called ‘the news of the day’ did not exist—could not exist—in a world that lacked the media to give it expression...lacking a technology to advertise them, people could not attend to them” (p. 7). Simply, a medium is a platform or a form that allows information, content, or “news of the day” to be transferred to consumers or an audience. This study will draw from Postman’s definition of a medium by showcasing how each medium—that is early print, newspapers, magazines, non-fiction books, television, and digital media forms—helped propel the true crime genre into our societal and cultural spheres by providing a platform for the stories to be communicated across. Without these mediums, true crime would not exist as a form of highly consumed content. This reaffirms McLuhan’s idea that the medium is the message.



According to Daniel Chandler (1977), genres can be “seen as ‘fuzzy’ categories which cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient conditions...how we define a genre depends on our purposes” (p. 3). Genres can be overwhelmingly massive and include numerous sub-genres upon sub-genres such as the thriller genre which can be broken down into crime thrillers, spy thrillers, mystery thrillers, etc. For this study, a genre, specifically true crime, will be defined as, “a distinctive *type* of ‘text’...the division of the world of literature into types and the naming of those types—much as the botanist divides the realm of flora into varieties of plants” (Chandler, 1977, p. 1). The true crime genre is a distinctive type of content that portrays non-fiction stories about real crimes and people through various forms including books, films, television, podcasts, and more. This study will elaborate on true crime as a genre and how it functions successfully across many mediums through its centuries-long evolution. The study will also demonstrate how unique true crime is as a genre considering how massive the genre is and how it doesn’t claim any sub-genres.

Postman is credited for developing media ecology. He laid the fundamental groundwork of media ecology by drawing from McLuhan’s concepts and ideas. While media ecology is a vast and changing realm with many definitions, the following definition is what will be used in this study:

“It is the study of media environments, the idea that technology and techniques, modes of information and codes of communication play a leading role in human affairs...It is technological determinism, hard and soft, and technological evolution. It is media logic, medium theory, mediology...It is grammar and rhetoric, semiotics, and systems theory,

the history and the philosophy of technology. It is the postindustrial and the postmodern, and the preliterate and prehistoric” (p. 240).

Another important point to mention that further aids this study is that media ecology, derived from McLuhan’s intuition, studies the contexts in which communication is processed. Each new medium, according to McLuhan, perceptibly changes the overall picture, more or less (Gamaleri, 2019). This study will draw from this definition of media ecology by showcasing how media environments shifted and evolved since the invention of the printing press. Additionally, the study will prove that with each new medium introduced in each century (i.e., early print forms to newspapers to magazines to non-fiction books, etc.) the way that the true crime genre was delivered to the public and how the genre was perceived and processed evolved as well.

The popularity of true crime must be contextualized with the absence and then rise of journalism ethics. The complete lack of ethical reporting practices with regard to accuracy in the nineteenth century, for instance, simultaneously fueled interest in true crime and compromised its trust. Newspapers during the penny press of the 1830s and the yellow press of the 1890s would riddle stories with convoluted, inconsistent, and melodramatic prose. Not only was the reporting exaggerated but the editors even went as far as forming their own vigilante groups who would run around to crime scenes, collecting evidence and information, and digging for clues with which to peddle the next hot headline. Even as mainstream journalism developed ethical norms in the twentieth century, questions of bias and fabrication persisted—not just over politics but regarding true crime itself. Anxieties over fake news, new media platforms, and who is considered a journalist characterize the twenty-first century, and this is apparent in true crime as citizens create and share their own true crime content.

Media evolve, and the true crime genre adapts. Though scholars have studied the evolution of true crime and media individually, they have yet to be intertwined. This study calls, then, for a historical timeline of true crime beginning in the sixteenth century and carrying through to today. To demonstrate how mass media and the true crime genre have changed in tandem, I will begin with the emergence of the printing press and the start of mass communication by tracing true crime pamphlets from the late 1500s through the 1700s. I will then shift to look at the rise of the daily penny press in the 1830s as well as the yellow press in the 1890s. My attention for the twentieth century will include nonfiction book publishing and magazines and, later, television. The timeline will conclude by looking at the documentaries and podcasts driving true crime popularity in today's world. Throughout, I will examine high-profile cases and the media coverage they generated from each period. In doing so, this study shows how true crime's continued popularity reflects the ability of the genre to actualize the medium as the message.

### **Review of Media History**

Despite woodblock printing and printing with moveable metal type dating back to the ninth century in China and Korea, Johannes Gutenberg is credited with inventing the printing press in the fifteenth century. The impeccable genius of Gutenberg's invention ignited the creation of mass communication. The advent of the printing press and the impact on its era was profound in both breadth and depth, providing one-to-many communication capabilities. From Gutenberg's first press in Mainz, Germany, the innovative invention spread quickly throughout the rest of Europe over the next few decades. Broadsheets, pamphlets, ballads, and other

mediums emerged to provide the public with written word. The reproduction of written materials began to move from the copyist's desk to the printer's workshop by the late fifteenth century, and this shift revolutionized all forms of learning, indebted society to Gutenberg's creation. The domineering presence of both the Catholic faith and the Protestant Reformation in Europe influenced the written word, with most texts printed relaying some form of a religious message. Additionally, hierarchy and politics in Europe paralleled religion, dictating the content just as equally. By the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, royal courts were the centers of high culture as writers turned to royal and aristocratic patrons for material support and prestige.

Despite the novelty of the printing press, the sheer underdevelopment of communications impeded the flow of information. News and other information were circulated by word of mouth through private letters, scribal publications, ballads on current events, or the occasional pamphlet amongst other printed works. Additionally, manuscript literature, by nature, was more expensive than print and therefore limited to the public with only merchants, bankers, diplomats, and nobles positioned at the top. By the sixteenth century, "pamphlets and books served as the primary means of carrying on political and religious argument...[it] also saw the appearance of printed newsbooks and broadsides reporting single events of major importance" (Starr, 2004, pp. 31–32). At the turn of the seventeenth century, Europe experienced its first "newspapers," with public reports on recent events being printed regularly on at least a weekly basis. Expanding markets fostered the desire for new information around the globe while simultaneously developing channels for the flow of news and different ways to disseminate it. While little changes existed between the 1500s to 1700s, the change was "...the introduction of regular, publicly available postal service; the first newspapers, scientific journals, and other periodicals appeared and along with them, journalism emerged in its earliest form" (Starr, 2004, p. 23). The

appearance of newspapers demonstrated how connected economic and communication networks were; books and newspapers were related to capitalism. Among this, other consequences and obstacles followed. Costs of printing and circulation, lack of transportation systems and delays in delivery, censorship and freedom of speech, and numerous other issues posed a hindrance to media. In fact, newspapers were banned between 1632 and 1637 to protect Parliament with fears of sensitive information or unflattering political news being published.

States sought control of public information through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, but a public sphere emerged, nevertheless. Consequently, the beginnings of independent journalism emerged. Mid-eighteenth century brought continued growth in printing, postal services, and newspapers. Newspapers became more common in America than anywhere else, even the small-town and village periodicals. Additionally, the rise of common schools resulted in more literate people. Increased literacy rates led to a higher demand for books and periodicals, which made printed information more prevalent and gave incentive for literacy. Increased newspaper markets were a result of these developments, and newspapers campaigned for greater literacy and more schooling which contributed to new investments in printing technology. The development of the press in America played a crucial part in the building of a nation with newspapers acting as an indispensable tool of and for democracy.

In the 1830s, the penny press allowed for the production of cheap, tabloid-style newspapers to be mass produced in the United States. The shift from hand-crafted to steam-powered printing provided flexibility for inexpensive newspapers, which cost a single penny compared to the sixpenny papers that cost six cents. These papers were revolutionary in the dissemination of news to the middle-class citizen. Benjamin Day founded the *New York Sun*, credited as the first penny press newspaper, in 1833. Others quickly emerged with James Gordon

Bennett's the *New York Herald*, and Horace Greeley's the *New York Tribune*. Staunch competition between the editors ignited the war for circulation. Appealing to a wider audience, a simpler and more direct style of prose with vivid language and human-interest stories unfolded. William Randolph Hearst and Joseph Pulitzer introduced what is known as "yellow journalism" in the late 1890s with their competitiveness for New York City readership. Their success in achieving daily circulation, which surpassed one million, inspired other publications to adopt their innovations including sensationalism. Hearst and Pulitzer helped the United States news industry transform from a limited "class" press to a "mass" medium. The rise of several mass newspapers saw varying proportions of sensationalism, populism, and socialism that addressed the interests of the flux of new, urban, working-class immigrant readers. Pulitzer bought the *New York World*, which boasted 15,000 readers, in 1883. Experimenting with new techniques, such as expanding "headlines from one-column stacked decks to full-page banners, splashed illustrations and photos across one page...comic strips, and added pages for women and sports," Pulitzer brought the *World* 130,000 readers (Kaplan, 2008, pp. 5369–5370). This circulation surpassed its competitor, the *New York Sun* owned and edited by Benjamin Day, and by 1887 the *World* hit 250,000 in distribution. Hearst owned the *New York Morning Journal*, and the two editors each amassed a circulation of 1.2 million. The term "yellow journalism" was coined to describe how journalists handled news content. Pulitzer, "and in his footsteps the competitive acolyte Hearst, emphasized reporting on crime and scandal and launched populist crusades against governmental corruption and corporate power" (Kaplan, 2008, p. 5370). Hearst and Pulitzer were condemned for focusing on crime, scandal, and reform, accused of pandering to the taste of the masses. In 1897, yellow journalism was associated with the sensationalist coloring of the news, and from this emerged conflicts over the correct conduct of journalism and proper public discourse.

Journalism practices of this era are considered unethical in the twenty-first century. Low standards of journalism reinforced the sensationalism of the news, and nineteenth century newspapers often published padded, altered, and even fabricated stories to boost circulation and popularity. Eventually, the combination of genteel critics and Pulitzer's decision to end the gutter race with Hearst led to the vanquish of yellow journalism.

The nineteenth and twentieth centuries transformed newspapers into "prosperous businesses in their own right as vehicles of entertainment, gossip, and commercial appeals and purveyors of sensationalized reports of the seamier side of human nature" (Wallace, 2005, p. 1). The medium became a change agent in the construction and maintenance of communities across the nation, and influenced policy making, supported development, the building of neighborhoods, and the general modifying of the physical and built environment. By the 1920s, newspaper penetration was at its highest it had ever been and, unfortunately, ever would be again. Every American household across the nation went from receiving an average of at least one newspaper to only half of all households in the nation receiving one. Many changes in the industry posed a continual threat to the viability of the press as a primary source of information. However, this came later in the twentieth century, and at the beginning, the burgeoning city of New York teeming with new immigrants, produced more newspapers than anyone could read. New mediums developed, such as radio and eventually television, and these developments prompted newspapers to change style, first with more comprehensive and analytical information and then with shorter, faster paced, and more colorful news (Wallace, 2005). Newspapers were founded to pander to all living styles of the citizens, including urban and rural residents. With most of the population living in cities, the shift toward urbanization was the central focus of an emerging new form of media, the big-city tabloid newspaper, with the *New York Daily News*, the

*New York Daily Mirror*, and the *New York Evening Graphic* being amongst the first. Hearst, one of the legacy yellow press barons, was the editor of the *Mirror*, though he shed the tawdry and scandalous experiments of yellow journalism newsmaking. New camera technology, the German camera Leica, provided graphics for news stories, and soon images of events rather than written descriptions determined newsworthiness. Hearst was a major media mogul, owning not only several newspapers but dabbling in the magazine industry with *Cosmopolitan*, *Good Housekeeping*, and *Harper's Bazaar*, as well as radio stations, newsreel companies, and wire services. He was also an early proponent of "checkbook journalism," paying for stories of various types such as inside stories of Rudolph Valentino, Jack Dempsey, Gene Tunney, and others, and, in addition, he would publish "letters by politicians and heads of state, and he offered money to famous people from all walks of life to write for his newspapers, including, among others, Adolf Hitler and Benito Mussolini" (Wallace, 2005, p. 20).

Newspapers proved to be instrumental for rural parts of the nation, including the *Des Moines Register* of Iowa, the *Emporia Gazette* of Kansas, and the *Anniston Star* of Alabama. Additionally, the Black Press, which was over 100 years old by the start of World War II, provided a powerful voice for African Americans. Led by the *Baltimore Afro-American*, the *Chicago Defender*, and the *Pittsburgh Courier*, circulation of black newspapers had surpassed one million in circulation, a small yet impactful force for the black community. These newspapers were influential in the advocacy for the black community, the reformation of neighborhoods, raising consciousness of race issues, and elevating the profiles of blacks and their accomplishments which were largely ignored by the mainstream press (Wallace, 2005). Newspapers continued to spread alongside suburbanization and land development, with the *Los Angeles Times*, the *Miami Herald*, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Wall Street*



*Journal* being most notable. Though these cities exist as metropolises in the twenty-first century, these newspapers proved powerful in the construction of suburbia. Suburbanization and land development increased as the population spread out, and new technologies were developed to reach even the most remote parts of the country. These new technologies inspired change amongst older mediums, as was witnessed with newspapers and television, but also sparked the “Information Age” of the late twentieth century into the twenty-first century.

The invention and rise of the Internet proved to be as spectacular and dramatic as the printing press with the broad and profound effects it cultivated in its age that we are still experiencing today. The networking of computers allowed for the first true many-to-many communications capability and is perhaps the defining characteristic of the information age. Other information technologies, such as faxes, cellular phones, non-networked computer applications, intranets, and so forth are also encompassed in the information age but aren’t as impactful as the Internet. The Internet provided faster, more efficient, and more comprehensive mass sharing of information, knowledge, and communication across the globe. The growth of this new technology was also exponential, often doubling every year. Additionally, the cost of connecting to the Internet is little or nothing. Although computers pack a hefty price, they have “enjoyed the longest stretch of uninterrupted exponential growth of any technology known to man” (Dewar, 1998, p. 6). Since its inception in 1983, the Internet has paved the way for a plethora of new and innovative mediums such as streaming services and podcasts that we enjoy today. Just as Gutenberg’s printing press sparked the creation of the media, the Internet harbors an unfathomable capacity for continual growth for years to come, inspiring new technologies and fundamental developments.

While media has a long and rich history of being predominantly political and religious, as has been laid out, other topics or genres basked in the limelight for a period of time. Amongst these topics is true crime. According to Starr (2004), “Political news was generally from abroad; domestic news consisted primarily of lurid, strange, or miraculous reports” (p. 33). True crime thrived in the lurid and strange reports that were so often published. Stories of sensational scandals, murder or organized crime, lust and debates about sexual morality fueled circulation numbers more so than the journalistic objectivity and blandness of politics. The 1927 Snyder-Gray case carried sensational potential, unprecedented attention on the front pages, and riveted readers that were glued to their papers. The story of Albert Snyder, who was murdered in a plot by his wife, Ruth, and her lover Judd Gray, attracted the masses due to the fact that Ruth was the first woman to be sentenced to death by electric chair in 1928. Though cameras were barred from the execution, that didn’t prohibit the *Daily* from hiring an out-of-town photographer to sneak in with a rigged hidden camera to snap a photo right as the charge was sent through Ruth’s body. Photos packed a punch in crime stories with grotesque images of suicide victims, bloody corpses, bodies in the morgue, and grief-stricken bystanders. The true crime cases continued to be sensationalized in the media. For example, the Lindbergh baby kidnapping story attracted more than 200 journalists to cover the trial alongside newsreels that played in major theaters, radio reports updating the nation on the latest details, and photographers flooding the courtroom. Wallace (2005) states, “The convention of ‘true crime’ stories written by victims, suspects, perpetrators, and bystanders had become one of the central features of New York’s competing tabloids” (p. 17). True crime, especially big murder trials such as the Snyder-Gray scandal, the Lindbergh flight, and the innocuous Hall-Mills case, reaped as much popularity and as many newspapermen as a heavyweight championship fight or a world’s series.

Each case that kept cities sated with juicy details possessed some form of unethical journalism practice or scandalmongering. For example, Bernarr Macfadden, the editor of the short-lived *New York Evening Graphic*, disregarded ethical journalism practices, often fabricating photos and stories as far as staging a fake hanging to produce an appetizing headliner story. His paper even coined the nicknames of “the *Pornographic*” and “the *Fornographic*” by critics at one point. However, these low-brow sensationalistic characteristics phased out in the mid- to late-twentieth century, and presently true crime boasts a prestigious reputation. Shedding negative connotations that it once possessed, true crime content across all mediums provides the public with superb education of judicial proceedings, forensic analytics, profiling techniques, and police investigations through the highly technical retelling of criminal cases. The ecological timeline of media and the true crime genre parallel each other in a most peculiar way.

### **Early Print**

True crime can be traced back as early as the fifteenth century. However, it wasn't until the mid-sixteenth century that authors and printers began producing an unprecedented number of publications on crime in Great Britain. During this era, “the increasingly efficient pursuit of criminal justice to secure public order, combined with the new means of communication offered by printing, created the conditions necessary for the development of journalistic accounts of crime” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1381). Broadsheets, pamphlets, and ballads typically written in rhyme, set to music, and accompanied by woodcuts were used to recount and depict crimes and executions. Broadsheets were large, single pieces of paper printed on only one side with information. Pamphlets were loosely bound or unbound booklets of roughly six to 24 pages, usually detailing the most horrific murders. The one-off pamphlet was the desired medium with

hundreds of crime pamphlets being circulated (Burger, 2016). Ballads were comparable to poems, consisting of narrative verses recounting the most cynical of crimes that were printed and posted around cities and towns. Alongside these literary forms were woodcuts that vividly depicted the crimes, mirroring the textual account and oftentimes surpassing it. Clergymen, specifically from the Catholic Church and the Protestant Reformation, were prominent among the authors and printers of these publications, and scrupulous artists showcased the precise weapons used as well as the number of wounds sustained by the victim on the woodcuts, often stenciling the images in red to depict blood (Wiltenburg, 2004).

Originating in European countries, with Germany being the epicenter of early printing, sixteenth- and seventeenth-century crime reports were characterized by a religious focus. Western Civilization was dominated by religion, namely Catholicism and Protestantism, which was born as a challenger to the predominant faith. Writers cautioned their audiences of sinful habits and acts that steered the criminal towards a dark and murderous life. The accounts outlined the dastardly deeds of the offender and then rounded off as a cautionary tale. Some reports went as far as being set to the tune of hymns, such as “Come unto me, says the Son of God,” and “Eternal Father in heaven” (Wiltenburg, 2004). There was no interest in the psyche of the killer, but rather an intense focus on the early conceptions of sin and on the forbidden and punishable acts, both by human authority but especially by God’s damnation.

Authors from Christian, Protestant, and Lutheran denominations emerged to heed warning of the consequences of sin. One such example is that of a Protestant cleric named Johannes Füglin who published an account of a dual murder in 1565. Utilizing techniques to enhance the emotional impact and relay important religious messages, Füglin recounted how a godson murdered a Basel burgher and his granddaughter. The story honed in on the “early vices”

that led to the godson's criminality, such as how he had "neglected his family, had run into debt, and had taken to drink—sins that set him on the path to murder" (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1384).

Akin to other authors of his time, Füglin used the tragic deaths to purvey the church's religious message. Using claims about entry-level sins such as disobeying parents, cursing, drinking, gambling, and giving way to lust warned the public to raise pious and moral children under the rigorous Law of God to avoid unleashing such monstrous killers. Modern day dissociation between feeling and reportage was not respected in sixteenth century writing as is evident in Füglin's pamphlet. He asserted his opinion that God only allowed these dreadful crimes, just as He allowed supernatural signs or animal mutations or monstrous births, to induce fear in people and instill in them the need for repentance and reform. Füglin, in his account of the familial murder, warned that the general moral decay and lack of governmental action against sinners would feed into the already growing trend towards such crimes. He states:

In the shedding of human blood, such shocking and horrifying cases have sometimes also occurred in the past, but more and more in the present day. So that not only those who are somewhat related (although in truth we are all brothers and sisters) have dipped their hands in each other's blood, but also the very nearest relations ... A few years ago, a father stabbed his own son to death over a single pin. Just a few years later a son hardheartedly hacked his father to death, only because of his faithful admonition (p. 1395).

Perhaps a more distinct work of sixteenth century crime reporting is that of the accomplished author and Lutheran minister Burkard Waldis, a man who played a huge role in the religious, political, and cultural transformations of his day. His most notable work was *The Prodigal Son*, which dramatized a biblical parable to exaggerate the Lutheran message on the

priority of faith. A lesser-known pamphlet that was published in 1551 gave a striking and horrifying account on a mother tyrannically murdering her four children before attempting suicide herself. Waldis effectively utilized literary techniques to magnify the emotional impact of the crime and provided a graphic woodcut that illustrated the mother's dismembering of her children to accompany the pamphlet. In his writing, he didn't spare any grisly detail including the pursuits of each individual child with "direct speeches" of them pleading for their lives. He wrote:

She first went for the eldest son  
 Attempting to cut off his head;  
 He quickly to the window sped  
 To try if he could creep outside;  
 By the leg she pulled him back inside  
 And threw him down onto the ground;  
 He got up and away did bound (p. 1386).

According to Waldis, the mother continued following her son into the cellar, cornering him, hatchet in hand, with no remorse. Waldis lures the audience further in with a heart-wrenching speech from the first victim:

He said, "O dearest mother mine,  
 Spare me, I'll do whate'er you say:  
 I'll carry for you from today  
 The water the whole winter through.  
 O please don't kill me! Spare me, do!"  
 But no plea helped, it was in vain;  
 The Devil did her will maintain.  
 She struck him with the self-same dread  
 As if it were a cabbage head" (p. 1387).

Waldis continues to describe how the mother butchered the son until he was dead, then hunted and murdered the other three just as brutally. His recounting of the crime evoked emotion within his readers with his mode of storytelling, evocative language, and demand of the audience's imagination. Similar to the mood of a horror movie, the reader is left rooting for the victim's

feeble attempts at escape, despite knowing the inevitable outcome of the victim's life. The horrifying effect and baffling reality that the mother relentlessly and mercilessly stalked her children until each of their deaths amazes both the author and the readers. Waldis even interjected his own shock at the cold-blooded nature of the mother in the slayings of her own flesh and blood. The emotionally charged pamphlet not only forces the audience to vicariously relive the children's terror, but they are also forced to read Waldis's religious message. The crime story "reminded readers of the ever-present, prowling devil, warning that all are vulnerable to constant temptation. Only God's grace offered escape from sin" (Wiltburg, 2004, p. 1387). Waldis's Lutheran message also claimed that salvation wasn't lost for sinners, even for the most heartless killers like a mother who would butcher her own children. According to Waldis, after the mother failed at suicide, she turned to the Lutheran church for repentance:

Th'eternal God then lent his grace,  
That by God's word improved was she,  
So she converted blessedly,  
And earnestly did yield her soul to God (p. 1387).

Waldis, like Füglin, took advantage of a tragedy to spread a religious message to a vulnerable audience. Additionally, Waldis showcases how journalism ethics weren't adhered to. Incorporating "direct dialogue" from the victims was complete fabrication. The inclusion of the authors themselves, which Füglin and Waldis frequently did, also disregarded modern day journalism standards. The mediums and absence of professional journalism in this era allowed authors the liberty to write so haphazardly. The simultaneity of sensationalism and the heavy influence of religious messages characterized true crime as a genre in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Additionally, akin to modern true crime, the majority of crimes that were told were domestic or sex-related murders, women's criminal activities, and especially bloody assaults. With his literary capabilities, Waldis was unique among the other crime authors, yet he

encompassed the genre's most salient feature—utilizing sensationalism to rouse an emotional response from his audience.

More than half of the accounts published in the pamphlets were the inherently shocking tales of murder within the family where a parent figure would turn against their spouse and/or children. In order to understand what went amiss in the social and familial order, conceptions of sin, religious morals and values were present in these pamphlets that reported on crime. Most of the reports on familial killings honed in on the merciless murder of children, which rarely stopped at one. In 1585, a father killed his son and continued on to a nine-murder killing spree. Family, blood, and household relations were heavily emphasized by the authors of these types of stories, even in nonfamilial killings. In two 1573 editions, a ballad recounted how a foster son raped, murdered, and mutilated his adoptive sister. Though the two weren't blood related, an overzealous printer titled the ballad with "Blood brother and sister." Even if the prose was fabricated and riddled with false direct quotes from victims, these were common features of sixteenth century true crime reporting. Writers utilized these dishonest practices in order to foster vivid reimagining of the horrific crimes and compel the audience to feel as if they were there themselves. However, these ethical dilemmas didn't prevent authors from utilizing this literary technique. In another 1573 ballad, a young man and his friend slaughtered a family for its inheritance, and the three young daughters were said to have "pleaded with sweet words from their lovely mouths, that they would spare their lives" (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1389). Another example of this direct personification is a 1565 ballad giving the account of the last words and thoughts of a young female victim who attempted to dissuade her killer:

O God, now must I die?  
Then thought the pious maid;  
Is there no one on earth  
Who will come to my aid?



Then I Lord Jesus' mercy pray,  
 Who for us lowly sinners  
 On the cross his life did lay (p. 1389).

Woodcuts were utilized to vividly depict the grisly details of crime scenes, as is evident in another 1573 case of rape, murder, and mutilation. The story was published in at least four publications with two of them depicting the murderer “hacking up the victim’s body into sixteen pieces, a sort of parts diagram showing the body reconstructed like a jigsaw puzzle” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1390-1391). Broad­sides commonly included painted pictures with its short textual accounts of the crimes which served just as well as the woodcuts. One broadside was said to have given “a graphic rendition of the victim’s disfigured head (mutilated to the point that, as explained in the text, authorities actually did reassemble the body in order to identify the victim)” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1391). These woodcuts and paintings along with the highly emotive language authors so often used acts as a precursor to nineteenth century sensationalism. In her analysis, Wiltenburg (2004) attributes sensationalism as the genre’s most salient feature, stating that “...significant cultural dynamics, emotional techniques, and social contexts shaped sensationalism into a cultural agent” (p. 1379). Though this may be true and there’s evidence that suggests the sixteenth century anticipated sensationalism, the prominent feature that carried the genre through was the emphasis on religion in the crime reports.

The seventeenth century carried the same features and tones as the sixteenth century. A strong emphasis on sensationalism, an invigorating religious message or warning, a focus on shocking familial slayings, and using the same mediums, the seventeenth century brought little-to-no changes. Pamphlets published by the Catholic or Protestant Reformation still used accounts of crime to drive home an edifying Christian message that you must confess and repent for your sins otherwise face the wrath of God and punishment. One Catholic pamphlet used a tragic story

of a father who murdered his family “to emphasize the inevitable punishment of sin: ‘no one will be spared / as he sows so shall he reap / no one can escape this’” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1385). Carrying over from the sixteenth century, woodcuts and images were still being used to portray dismemberment in crime reports. While there are stark similarities between the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, new trends were born that illustrate the strength of the genre’s appeal. Decades-old crime accounts were resurrected and retold in the seventeenth century, something that has carried over into the modern era. In 1650, the story of a deranged daughter named Magdalena who murdered her entire family was reported in a town called Flanders. The same story was retold in a town called Moravia more than 20 years later in 1673. Not only the fact that multiple editions of the same crime story were being published, but the fact that old crime stories were being revived years later “bespeaks popularity, with a receptive audience particularly for the emotive features emphasized in these depictions of household mayhem” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1393). While cheap broadsides and one-off pamphlets still existed, the first publications that could be called “newspapers” were introduced. In 1609 in Strasbourg and Wolfenbüttel, periodicals, distinguishable from other mediums, started being published regularly (Nelson, 1998). The papers reported on a variety of events, and within a few decades, could be found all across Europe. Due to several articles revealing unflattering truths about the church as well as the reputation of print to foment trouble, the Roman Catholic church saw an end to its long religious supremacy. This “fall” sparked a slow, but distinct change in the genre and how authors depicted crime.

Towards the end of the seventeenth century and on the cusp of the eighteenth century, crime accounts shifted their gaze slightly to the criminals who committed the act rather than primarily focusing on the victim. Still utilizing emotion-enhancing features, the prose described

the most violent and bloody of crimes but now included looks into the mind of the murderer. Stories were given from the first-person narrative that superimposed the audience in a temporary imagining of the culprit. The development of the distinctive sensationalist subtype, the “last good-night” ballad, effectively represents this new focus. One such ballad titled “The Lamentation of Master Page’s Wife” and written by Thomas Deloney illustrates “the complex combination of empathy and condemnation this form could offer” (Wiltenburg, 2004, p. 1400). The story explains how a young woman named Eulalia Glandfield was forced by her parents to marry against her will, even after pleading and stressing that she was in love with a man named George Strangwidge. After the arranged marriage, Eulalia conspired with her lover to kill her new husband, and shortly after being caught she began repenting for her crime and asking forgiveness. An excerpt from the ballad reads:

My chosen eyes could not his sight abide;  
 My tender youth did scorn his aged side;  
 Scant could I taste the meat whereon he fed;  
 My legs did lothe to lodge within his bed.  
 Cause knew I none I should despise him so,  
 That such disdain within my hart should grow,  
 Save only this, that fancie did me move,  
 And told me still, George Strangwidge was my love (p. 1400).

Deloney’s ballad attempts to lend sympathy to the young Eulalia by including her own words. Even though she isn’t the “real” victim here, the audience can’t help but feel a pang of emotion for the woman who was forced into an unwanted marriage and forbidden to be with her one true love. The lines provided in this ballad show a glimpse into the mind of the killer, sharply recreating the varied emotions she was going through, from anger to lust to greed. The young woman in Deloney’s story admits to succumbing to her strong emotions, a moment of

weakness, yet she demonstrated her physical revulsion at the act she committed. Though she felt remorseful and deserving of death, she also blamed her coercive parents for the crime.

Similar ballads of men who killed their wives were being published in the late seventeenth century. William Terry laments his murder of “my kind and loving Wife,” Edmund Allen cried “Was I not crueld to my Dear / ... I weep to think I sought the Life, / of her that lov’d me so,” and George Feast killed “my dear and Loving Wife” (Wiltenburg, 2004). All of these accounts were taken directly from the murderers themselves and were published in a way that put the emphasis on the mind of the killer, specifically the guilt they felt, rather than on the tragic ending of the victim’s life. Another account came from Anne Wallen, a woman who killed her husband, but endowed him with adoring adjectives and a deep regret of losing him. The readers of these “last good-nights” enjoyed a fresh, new perspective that allowed them “to dabble in the dangerous feelings that led to crime, from within the safe retreat of the orderly and conventional emotional life to which the penitent returns” (Wiltenburg, 2004, 1401). Still yet, authors continued to dish out admonitory messages about humankind's inadequacy to curb sinfulness, falling to the devil’s temptation, rather than exploring the uniqueness and individual psyches of the killers. Clergymen would urge culprits to “make good” or “good end” with God days, or even hours, before execution. But, just as the sixteenth century hinted at future sensationalism, this shift in emphasis set the genre up for the evolution that was to transpire. The true crime genre in the late seventeenth century introduced a trend that we still see in modern crime accounts—a deviation from strong religious assumptions and toward human depravity, specifically the intricacies of the killer mind. Yet, despite a shift in emphasis, the basic religious framework of sin and punishment continued to underlay crime narratives.

The eighteenth century, and into the nineteenth century, focused on continual themes and interest in familial violence, but sharply turned towards an intrigue into the criminal minds. Although introduced in the seventeenth century, “newspapers” became a popular medium of choice and quickly spread throughout Great Britain. The fragility of the police force pawned off the responsibility of capturing and prosecuting criminals onto the victims, in which newspapers played a pivotal role in assisting them (Crone, 2007). The early, underdeveloped newspaper form upgraded pamphlets, broadsides, and ballads, providing a more complete and accurate view on crime. Recent crime, business of criminal courts, and even up-to-date information on criminals facing execution were amongst the topics provided. The decrease in usage and popularity of earlier mediums allowed the genre to fully adapt to the new medium and anticipate changes to come. Additionally, sensationalism became a prominent characteristic of late-eighteenth century crime reports. With this shift, a change in audience was also seen. While illiteracy played a significant part in the breadth of audience earlier on, readers now encompassed more than the artisan classes of the high nobility classes.

### **Nineteenth Century Print**

The birth of the penny press in nineteenth-century America gave rise to true crime journalism, owing particularly to the fact that what we recognize today as news reporting began. The emergence of this cheap, feisty, tabloid-style newspaper covered topics such as crime, tragedy, adventure, and gossip. Most importantly, the penny press produced daily periodicals, rendering the singular pamphlet or ballad nearly useless. By the late nineteenth century, the newspaper both incorporated and replaced early forms of popular print altogether, becoming the predominant and almost sole location for the dissemination of crime news. The tone in which

these crime narratives were written ranged from “sensationalist to spiritual to didactic,” echoing the tones of the sixteenth and seventeenth century pamphlets (Burger, 2016). The anticipation of sensationalism in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries came to fruition as this characteristic defined the genre in this era. The fledgling public sphere allowed certain tales to serve as state propaganda while others existed with similar tones of sixteenth-century moralizing tales and divine justice. Ultimately, though, the genre experienced a shift in focus that can be attributed to changes that media brought. Crime was an important theme in the nineteenth-century newspaper. As the physical size of the new medium grew and costs of printing decreased, not only did crime coverage increase, but newspaper sales did, too, as the genre was marketed as a source for entertainment (Crone, 2007). In this century, a sensationalism focus on shock and emotion was prevalent in the reporting as well as some reports offering a sympathetic exploration into the early life of the deviant.

Before the nineteenth century, there wasn’t any one prominent and dominating author, with a majority of the stories written by clergymen or scholars. Newspaper editors such as James Gordon Bennett, Benjamin Day, and Horace Greeley then rose to fame with the creation of their publications—the *New York Herald*, the *New York Sun*, and the *New York Daily Tribune*, respectively—as the most circulated newspapers during the early nineteenth century. As literacy rates increased and with the cheap cost of penny papers, the audience shifted more towards a lower-class appeal rather than the affluent high-nobility class as was seen in prior centuries. Critics of the nineteenth century deemed sensationalistic content as a commercial product that pandered to the uneducated, lower-class citizens with their depraved human taste for blood and gore (Wiltenburg, 2004). The infamous cases of Helen Jewett in 1836 and Samuel Adams in 1842 portrayed the aforementioned characteristics of both the medium and the genre, specifically

showcasing the wide range of the penny press as well as how far journalists and editors were willing to go to snag crime stories.

Bennett, an influential publisher, and Day, an opposite of Bennett in temperament, engaged in a battle over the coverage of the Jewett case. Jewett, a prostitute at a home overseen by Rosina Townsend, was savagely murdered in her bedroom on the night of April 10, 1836. The penny press editors quickly realized that true crime was a “vast and unserved market” for them to target. As Jewett’s murder became public, “the juicy story galvanized the penny papers. For the first time ever, a popular press aiming for large circulation was competing for a hot local story loaded with moral and meaning, full of sex, gore, intrigue, and sin” (Tucher, 1994, p. 24). A battle between Bennett and Day quickly emerged and the editors began writing “...page after page of baroque prose, luridly melodramatic scenes, dark innuendos, blatant partisanship, obvious inconsistencies, vicious personal attacks on other editors as well as suspects in the crime, and accusations of blackmail against virtually everyone involved” (Tucher, 1994, p. 25). The reporting was exaggerated, inconsistent, illogical, speculative, and biased, but it served its purpose of stirring up the public’s opinions. In addition, the war between the editors and the articles they produced laid bare the deficiency in journalism ethics, especially from the pinnacle medium that birthed the concept of journalism.

The 1842 murder trial of John C. Colt, who bludgeoned a man named Samuel Adams to death and then shoved his body into a crate that was later discovered on the deck of a ship, possessed the same immoral style of reporting. The trial of Colt was far more straightforward than the Jewett case because the killer was charged rather than let loose. Colt confessed to the murder, a trial was set in motion to determine the charge, and the man was convicted and

sentenced to death. The trial started slow and calm but became “the rowdiest, most startling, and most bizarre the city had yet seen” (Tucher, 1994, p. 103). The fresh face of Horace Greeley of the *New York Daily Tribune* introduced more competition and ramped up the editor wars as he produced his own style of reporting. Greeley immediately blasted Bennett, amongst other editors, for being eager to “...poison the fountains of public intelligence, and fan into destroying flames the hellish passions which now slumber in the bosom of Society” (Tucher, 1994, p. 108). Greeley appeared on the journalistic scene as a new brand of editor to guide the penny press and genre, in hopes of curbing a growing dissatisfaction with content amongst some of the reading community.

Bennett and Greeley’s rivalry differed from that of Bennett and Day’s in the sense that Greeley was after the same audience as Bennett. However, their perceived journalistic duties were completely opposite. It was “...between sensationalism and moralism, amusement and education, voyeurism and verdict making, celebration of the city and fear of it, glorification of crime and condemnation of it” (Tucher, 1994, p. 113). Greeley, amongst others, set out to expose Bennett for who he truly was based on how he reported and behaved during the Jewett murder. However, Bennett claimed to be a new man, a new editor. The Jewett and Colt cases differed for Bennett because he was able to easily manipulate the Jewett case to fit the melodramatic headlines and articles he desired to write, whereas with the Colt case it was harder to filter in exaggerations or fabrications that fostered the popular characteristics of the genre. In relation to Colt’s case, “...it was petty and sordid, a crime more of petulance than of passion, with overtones of penury rather than privilege” (Tucher, 1994, p. 163). Additionally, Colt didn’t carry the reputation that Jewett did as an exotic, female victim. Rather, he was an ordinary tradesman



guilty of murderous rage. Due to these differences, Bennett was able to produce a factual recounting of the crime, ending with gratifying resolve that was free of “all ambiguity, responsibility, and guilt and encompassed the death of Samuel Adams and the trial of his murderer into the ongoing morality play that the penny press made of daily life in New York” (Tucher, 1994, p. 184). Though Greeley harbored his own unethical journalism practices with his blatant criticisms, attacks, and defamation, he prompted change amongst his fellow editors, as was seen with Bennett. Bennett maintained his exposé but cleaned up the speculation, sensationalism, and extraneous information in order to maintain his readership without complicating and compromising their understanding of the content. Both Bennett and Greeley worked to replace humbug with authority within the medium and genre.

Yellow journalism emerged in the mid-1890s, showcasing a style of journalism that was associated with little-to-no legitimate, well-researched news and was still characterized by exaggerations, sensationalism, and unprofessionalism. Many people attribute the circulation war between Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst to this style of journalism that was disputed as illegitimate, castigating it as “yellow.” Articles fluctuated between factual, emotionless, and informative accounts to sensationalized reports steeped with frequent references to “bloody hatchets and crushed skulls” (Burger, 2016). The momentum of the yellow press brought an influx in readership, transforming into a more universal and inclusive audience. With their focus on crime, scandal, and shock, Pulitzer and Hearst indulged the masses. The two editors’ role in the murder mystery of William Guldensuppe sparked the tabloid wars and shifted true crime reporting. Moreover, their crime content and its presentation shaped popular perceptions of crime. The rate at which Pulitzer and Hearst published articles and the air

that they carried influenced readers to believe that the city was extraordinarily violent. The nineteenth-century murder saw New York police detectives and journalists alike plunge into uncovering the culprit behind the crime.

The discovery of the torso of a man in the East River by a group of young boys was the start of the fanatical and unhinged investigation into the elusive criminal behind the “Murder of the Century.” The grisly find wasn’t a shock to the police officers nor the coroner nor the media. According to Collins (2011), “The Bellevue morgue was the haunt of the dead and the deadlined; newsmen were always around, because with about twenty unclaimed bodies a day thudding in—more during a good cold snap or a heat wave—you were always guaranteed some column inches for the late edition” (p. 6). Though corpses from the medical school close to the East River would often show up by some mishap or accident in the waters, another oilcloth wrapped bundle containing the missing bottom portion of the torso—yet to be positively identified—deemed this case as an intentional slaughtering. Day after day, citizens poured into the morgue claiming they knew the man on the table, however, nearly every time the claims were proven false. As the investigation kicked off, it wasn’t solely detectives and officers digging around for answers, but journalists from nearly every newspaper were secretly seeking out evidence, information and clues on their own. Pulitzer of the *New York World* and Hearst of the *New York Journal* sent out bands of reporters known as “The Wrecking Crew” or “The Murder Squad” to run rampant in the streets, peddling out the latest edition of their respective newspapers. However, despite the numerous placards hanging on the walls of most newsrooms stating, “ACCURACY, ACCURACY, ACCURACY!” and “WHO? WHAT? WHERE? WHEN? HOW?” and “THE FACTS—THE COLOR—THE FACTS,” the stories that were published were inflated with

fabrications, misinformation, and tall tales that only reached for higher circulation numbers (Collins, 2011, p. 17).

Not only were there mixed headlines and stories being pushed out to the public, but the editors were publishing new information on the case in such gruesome, explicit detail without solidified verification from the police. The *World* published an article titled “HAND OF THE HEADLESS MURDERED MAN—EXACT SIZE” with a life-sized hand reaching out to the readers, taunting them with a still obscure identity and pleading for justice. Then, in response to the captivating publication, the *Herald* was announcing, ““CANNIBALISM SUGGESTED,” and a *Times* reporter even suggested, “Weren’t butchers in the habit of scalding stuck pigs to loosen up their skin?” (Collins, 2011, p. 25). It was a whirlwind of an investigation that continued on even after the suspects, Augusta Nack and Martin Thorn, confessed to the crime. Journalists of this era conducted their own investigations, focused on finding their truth and telling their truth, and published unfounded, kitschy, and ghastly articles that guaranteed them circulation. Journalists were running around with badges, taking evidence from crime scenes before police even had the chance to and doing their own renegade suspect hunting. Guldensuppe was allegedly Nack's ex-lover, and when Nack started dating Thorn, Guldensuppe was enraged and was said to have beaten Thorn on multiple occasions. Guldensuppe’s undying obsession with Nack spurred the motive for the murderous duo’s plot against him. After the arrest of Thorn and Nack, contradicting headlines from Pulitzer and Hearst were peddled to the public. The *Journal* headlined, “MURDER MYSTERY SOLVED BY THE JOURNAL: *Mrs. Nack, Murderess!*” and to rebuttal that, the *World* said, “THE MURDER MYSTERY IS A MYSTERY STILL: *Not sure*

*of Identification...Police Losing Faith*” (Collins, 2011, p. 59-61). The tabloid wars transpired in the murder trial and post-conviction.

The evolution of media in the nineteenth century provided cheaper and faster printing which led to a multitude of new periodicals capable of publishing an unprecedented number of articles. Additionally, journalism was essentially born from the introduction of the newspaper. The true crime genre successfully navigated this shift in format and focus, clutching onto the public’s continual need for consumption. With the novelty of the police force and the investigative capabilities they lacked paired with editor greediness for circulation, adherence to journalism ethics and practices were practically nonexistent. However, with Greeley publicly reprimanding his fellow editors—his own immorality and hypocrisy aside—and the prodigious capital case surrounding a sensational love triangle contextualized by the media circus, the improvement of journalism ethics was seen at the end of the nineteenth century. True crime and nineteenth-century print shaped the future of journalism, as is evident with modern day journalists valuing objectivity and quality reporting more than ever before. Pulitzer, Hearst, Bennett, Day, Greeley, and so many other journalists, while not entirely ethical, sparked the rise of modern-day journalism.

### **Twentieth Century Print**

While magazines made their appearance during the mid-nineteenth century, the emergence of the special-interest magazine in the twentieth century was “both a product of and contributor to major sociocultural and economic changes in postwar America” (Abrahamson, 1996, p. 3). The 1960s introduced a major transformation to magazines as general-interest mass-

market publications took a back seat to more specialized and focused magazines. True crime was amongst one of the types of special-interest magazines, and the genre quickly adapted to the new medium. Magazines developed a new narrative formula that provided a more-informative comprehension of murder (Murley, 2008). Initiating the true crime magazine genre was the *True Detective* publication, an American true crime magazine published from 1924 to 1995. Bernarr McFadden was behind the publication, which first published mystery fiction with a mix of non-fiction crime stories and even featured works from notable authors such as Dashiell Hammett, Jim Thompson, and Ann Rule. The publication “helped pave the way for the literary genre of true crime and its writers” and became a guiding force for quality and standard for other magazines (Rhodes, 2014, para. 1).

By the 1930s, the publication gradually phased out fiction due to the popularity the nonfiction stories were receiving. Most stories covered actual murders, but kidnappings and robberies were sprinkled in. Writers typically described recent crimes that occurred within the past two years, allowing the report to end with the conviction and sentencing of the suspect, a defining and essential characteristic that would continue to flourish and foster popularity of the true crime genre in decades to come (Randall, 1980). In rare cases, the suspect had been found not guilty and worse yet still to be apprehended. However, detective magazine editors were reluctant to publish these types of stories in fear of leading their readers through long and tortuous investigations that ultimately concluded with complicated trials and eventual acquittals. In the rare case that the suspect was still at large, the stories served as cautionary tales and warned readers “to be on the lookout for the suspect and to report any leads to the appropriate law enforcement agency” (Randall, 1980, p. 27). Additionally, an infamous criminal case from the past would appear in at least one article of these detective magazines alongside the seven to

ten accounts of recent crime activity. Not only this, but articles “presenting general treatment of a crime-related topic such as self-defense techniques or plea-bargaining” could be found in true crime magazines (Randall, 1980, p. 27).

Splashy illustrations and photographs contributed to the success of magazines. Even though the photos were either drawings or reenactments, both in black and white and color, the readers still rapidly devoured and were drawn in by the accompaniment of these photographs. More specifically, the colorful and sensational covers littered with bold headlines enthralled consumers. The illustrations routinely depicted the female victim—helpless, petrified, and bound—being preyed on by an unidentifiable assailant. The covers eventually shifted from detailed sketches to real-life people photographed in an obviously staged attack. Inside the covers, however, were “copious black and white photos that illustrated the stories; scenes of neglected urban back streets and seedy small-town America, Weegee-esque views of a country that never made the history books” (Marr, 2015, para. 8). The writing style of these true crime stories also proved to have an enduring appeal to the audience despite the initial fictitious tone or small fabrications. While the facts came from sources like the police or court records or the occasional interview with persons involved in the case, writers related factual events through a fictional narrative. Writers for these detective magazines would take the facts presented by the sources, fashion a story including action and fabricated dialog, and the product became a progression from the discovery of the crime through the entirety of the police investigation, “culminating in the arrest, trial, and conviction of the criminal” (Randall, 1980, p. 27).

The stories typically adhered to the formula of “a narrative following the police step-by-step through their investigation of the crime and climaxing with the apprehension of the suspect” (Marr, 2015, para. 8). One defining characteristic of detective magazines was their ability to

present facts in an enthralling story format that previous mediums couldn't do. The length of magazines provided more flexibility to include more extensive and detailed accounts that couldn't function in the newspaper medium. At its height, *True Detective* claimed to have sold around two million copies a month in the 1930s and 1940s. Around 200 other true crime magazines emerged by the 1960s, but *True Detective* remained the standard for quality and reliability. This is owed, in part, to the magazine's avoidance of publishing sexualized content—even in the most vicious rape murders, though this practice was only for a brief period of time. According to Abrahamson (1996), "...competition from television, mismanagement by publishing companies, and, as a less obvious but important undercurrent, an inability on the part of some of the publications to respond to fundamental sociocultural changes" initiated the decline of the magazine industry (p. 19). Eventually, television and cheap paperbacks pushed the industry to publish sensational and sexualized content in order to match competition and stay afloat which resulted in the decline of the once pristine quality of the magazine. Types of stories varied as time went on with the 1960s giving way to more reporting on sex crimes. Not only the type of content but how photos were depicted—the hapless female victim displayed in compromised positions, overly revealing clothing, "eyes wide, bosoms heaving, arms (or legs or necks) tied, red lips open, mouths screaming"—influenced this decline and major publishers abandoned the field, killing their magazines outright or selling the survivors to bottom-feeding outfits (Fraser, 2021). Television became the "bigger and tougher kid on the block" and advertisers flocked to it, leaving magazines threatened, and, by the 1970s, six of the most prominent early 1900 magazines ceased publication (Abrahamson, 1996). As the status of magazines dropped from the presence of sexualized content, publications began to pass between several publishers.

*Vanity Fair* is another magazine with a rich and interesting history that survived through competition and exists in modern day media. The magazine began selling copies in the United States from 1913-1936, reviving in 1983 through present day. Since its founding, sociocultural influences forced the publication to undergo several different iterations, yet each time the magazine emerged triumphant. Frank Crowninshield took the reins of *Vanity Fair* in 1914 and was considered “one of the major cultural arbiters of his time and an ideal choice for editor” (Vaughn, 2008, p. 563). A plethora of topics were covered, including but not limited to art, sports, drama, humor, etc., and the magazine set the publishing standard for these matters. However, the Great Depression forced the publication to merge with *Vogue* in 1936, disappearing for nearly 50 years. In 1983, *Vanity Fair* was reborn under the new direction of Condé Nast Publishing as a “somewhat pretentious upscale society monthly” (Vaughn, 2008, p. 563). Circulation took off for the publication as the magazine repositioned itself to cover the American obsession with celebrities, wealth, and scandal. Adhering to the guidelines of most magazines, photographs accompanied most stories, one of the most salient characteristics of the genre within this medium in the twentieth century. *Vanity Fair* enlisted efforts from “well-known writers such as Gail Sheehy, Christopher Hitchens, David Halberstam, and Marie Brenner, and by pursuing an eclectic editorial mix of articles on high and low culture, celebrities, politics, travel, and entertainment,” it became rooted in the industry (Vaughn, 2008, p. 563).

Amongst the most prominent of scandal stories ever published in *Vanity Fair* was the Lyle and Eric Menendez trial. The two were brothers who were arrested after the brutal slaying of their parents in their \$5 million mansion in Beverly Hills, California in 1989. The story was published in numerous magazines and newspapers, such as *People* and *The Wall Street Journal*, and *Vanity Fair* produced several different stories across multiple issues following the trial and



post-trial for over four years. The story was of patricide and matricide, or the slaying of one's own parents collectively known as parricide. These types of murders were "not altogether new crime in the second echelon of Southland society" (Dunne, 1990). The son, twenty-year-old Michael Miller, of President Ronald Reagan's personal lawyer, Roy Miller, was found guilty of first-degree murder after he raped and clubbed to death his mother, Marguerite, in 1983. Miller was acquitted of the rape charge due to the fact that the rape occurred after his mother was dead and was diagnosed with schizophrenia. In July of the same year, twenty-year-old Ricky Kyle shot and killed his father, millionaire Henry Harrison Kyle, who had allegedly abused his son both physically and mentally. Kyle was only sentenced to five years, an extraordinary leniency of the Southern California courts for first-time murders (Dunne, 1990). Another notable case, lower on the social spectrum but one that received international recognition, was that of the Salvatierra family. The father of seventeen-year-old Arnel Salvatierra was murdered after receiving a death threat by mail. Later, Arnel came forward confessing to both the murder and the death threat letter but defending himself saying he was a victim of physical and psychological abuse (Dunne, 1990). Lawyer Leslie Abramson, the same defense lawyer that represented the Menendez brothers and who was also revered as the best defense lawyer for death-row cases in Los Angeles, was able to get Arnel a voluntary manslaughter charge rather than a first-degree murder charge. These cases, like the Menendez brothers' case, were few amongst many to occur and be written on. However, the Menendez case received extraordinary media coverage from the moment the murders were announced to the end of the trial. Abramson represented Erik Menendez, the younger brother, and worked alongside Gerald Chaleff, who primarily represented Lyle Menendez.

Dominick Dunne was the main journalist covering the Menendez case. From the day of the murders to the moment of the arrests to the end of the trial, Dunne followed the story closely and produced long, intricate, highly detailed articles for *Vanity Fair*. Seven months after Jose Enrique Menendez and Mary Louise Andersen, known as Kitty, were murdered, the two sons were arrested and charged for the murders. Jose worked in the entertainment industry, bouncing from one company to the next before finally settling at Live Entertainment, which doubled its earnings to about \$16 million in 1988 a year after Jose was hired on (Dunne, 1990). They were the ideal family with close-knit relations to one another, the big, expensive house, a son going to Princeton University, and their youngest soon behind. The idyllic world that Jose had built for his family, after migrating to the United States in 1960 and working hard to earn a living, came to a screeching halt on August 20, 1989, when both Jose and Kitty were slaughtered in their own home. Jose had six wounds and Kitty had 10, all inflicted by a 12-gauge shotgun. Dunne described the murders in vivid detail in one of his articles published in *Vanity Fair*. The damage inflicted was so brutal that you couldn't recognize Jose or Kitty anymore. According to the autopsy report, one of the blasts caused "'explosive decapitation with evisceration of the brain' and 'deformity of the face' to Jose Menendez, and the first round of shots "apparently struck Kitty in her chest, right arm, left hip, and left leg" (Dunne, 1990). The crime scene was of blood, flesh, and skulls, both Jose and Kitty's faces nothing but unrecognizable pulp. After the Menendez brothers were arrested, they hired defense teams and the case became one of abuse, psychological, emotional, physical, and sexual. The brothers claimed that they committed the murders in fear of their father, who was the sole abuser. The two threatened to expose Jose after a lifetime of abuse but could not escape their father or run away from home. While Jose was a

cruel pedophile, Kitty was an enabler, a selfish and mentally unstable alcoholic who turned a blind eye to her husband's acts.

Dunne outlined much of the abuse, sparing no explicit detail, in his articles. While outlining the facts of the case and the trial, Dunne also inserted his own opinion, anecdotes, and experiences. He never actually believed that the brothers suffered such severe abuse, making it known from the first article, and thought the motive behind the murder was greed and lust for fortune, a popular opinion held by the majority of the public. Akin to the religious advancements by authors of early print and the slandering of fellow editors by newspaper tycoons of the nineteenth century, Dunne committed the same style in a sense. The articles he published in *Vanity Fair* were heavily laden with harsh and unrestrained opinion, attacks at opposing parties, controversial statements and questions, and startling prose with no shyness toward interjecting "I" statements. It was up the alley of investigative journalism, an old but improved way of reporting, however controversial and corrupt. Familial murders, as was the same in earlier centuries, were more intriguing and shocking, especially the types where children turn on parents or vice versa. Questions such as "What were the motives?" and "How could two sons (in the Menendez case) do such a thing to their parents, the two people that are supposed to love unconditionally?" were frequently asked. The articles, specifically the ones Dunne wrote in the 90s in relation to the Menendez brothers' case, varied drastically from that of the *True Detective* articles. Although the crime stories shared the same medium, the formula was constantly changing to appease the audience. *True Detective* articles, though not initially with the original crime fiction stories, were purely factual with little-to-no opinion inserted. Despite the formula being a factual account through a fictional narrative, magazine authors strived to write dry, straight-forward stories with no hint of controversy, opinion, defamation or attack or satire, or

anything of the like. However, with the revival of *Vanity Fair* and Dunne at the helm of the Menendez brothers' story, it was quite the opposite. Perhaps it was a sign of the times, as approval of varying opinions and speculation grew in cases where only the suspects knew the truth. Perhaps it was a time where argument and differing voices were praised and accepted rather than shunned and ridiculed. Regardless of the reason, the garish Menendez brothers case nurtured an environment for unethical journalism practices of unobjective and biased writing.

Nonfiction book publishing and magazines emerged in the mid-twentieth century as Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* became one of the most notable literary works of the true crime genre. During this time, objective journalism pushed true crime reporting to be more exacting and detailed, marking a turning point for the genre as a more serious, novelistic, and extensive treatment of murder was ushered in (Franks, 2016). An increase in professionalism and proficiency from judicial personnel, including policemen, detectives, and prosecutors, and from authors alongside advances in crime scene investigation components introduced new elements that proved essential to nonfiction crime narratives. These new conventions in narrative techniques brought a greater level of respectability to the genre. True crime was characterized within the medium by more biographical approaches to both victims and killers, but more specifically an interest in who the killer was, their personality, experiences, motivations, and behaviors. Nonfiction crime novels were formulaic and universally consisted of overly thick paperbacks—typically 400 to 800 pages in length—with the inevitable photo insert generally depicting dramatic, shocking, or chilling photographs of the subjects involved. Authors wrote remarkably detailed descriptions that laid out a linear analysis of cases, incorporating psychological approaches and conjecture into the uncharted territory of the criminal mind.

Additionally, personal relationships between the writer and the killer, the victim, or both developed through the nonfiction crime novel. The crime writer-crime content correspondence initially added excitement but became an expectation due to the intimacy with the crime it fostered. A more voyeuristic experience through every aspect of the case for the consumer was offered.

Twentieth-century journalism and reportage were forced to “yield a serious new art form: the ‘nonfiction novel,’” which provided a broader scope on crime narratives than could be covered in other mediums, and transformed the genre in a way that wouldn’t darken or “yellow” over time as was witnessed with early century print (Browder, 2010, p. 121). The rise of standardized journalism ethics and practices and generic assumptions about audience created an environment for the chronicling of real murder and posited a consistent way to understanding it. Capote’s *In Cold Blood* is considered to be the first true crime novel written and to have cemented the American crime genre in the twentieth century. The story was first published in four separate parts in *The New Yorker* in 1965, a testament of the genre’s responsiveness to changing mediums. Capote took six years to research and write the story, interviewing people of Holcomb, Kansas where the crime took place. The nonfiction novel details the true story of the Clutter family murder in 1959 consisting of Herbert, the father, Bonnie, the mother, and their two youngest children, Nancy and Kenyon. Longform magazine reporting and nonfiction books allowed authors to dive deep into crime stories and share even the most miniscule details of a case, including the intricacies of both the victims and killers lives, opinions from the community, events leading up to the crime, and details of the hunt and detainment of the criminals. No detail was too small as was seen with Capote’s “labored descriptions about the weather” that

showcased how extensive the crime account became (Franks, 2016, p. 249). Capote brought these new characteristics to life in this crime account.

The book starts off by introducing the Clutter family through eyewitness accounts of friends and neighbors who had spent time with the Clutters before they met their fates. We learn that the family was a tight-knit, all-American family unit, with Herb running a successful wheat farm, Bonnie being a stay-at-home mother who suffered from postpartum depression, Nancy the “golden child” or “town darling,” and Kenyon spending his time constructing, deconstructing, and rebuilding electronics and gadgets. Capote gives us specifics about each of the Clutters like how Nancy dated a boy named Bobby Rupp, taught younger girls how to sew and bake, and practically ran the household in place of Bonnie, who was bedridden most of the time. Herb was considered a good employer who gave his employees good wages and only hired people who didn’t drink or keep alcohol. Kenyon was a loner who’s only friend ended up with a new girlfriend, a waste of time in Kenyon’s opinion because he couldn’t “conceive of ever wanting to waste an hour on any girl that might be spent with guns, tools, horses, machinery, even a book” (Capote, 1965, p. 39). The portrayal of “cherry-pie-baking, 4-H club-attending, churchgoing characters” exemplified the characteristic of the biographical account (Browder, 2010, p. 122).

Capote also breathes humanity into the criminals by juxtaposing the narratives of the Clutter family with that of Dick Hickock and Perry Smith, two former inmates who were granted parole. Transitioning between the idyllic country life of the four Clutters and the journey of Hickock and Smith to Holcomb, Capote devotes the entire first chapter to establishing each personality, allowing the reader an intimate examination into the lives of those involved. Capote speculates on the psychological deviations that controlled the murderous pair. Hickock was

motivated by carnal impulses, including lust, greed, a thirst for blood, and indulgence of any kind, making the journey and the murders entirely his idea. He was an uneducated but streetwise and charming man who befriended Smith after hearing that he killed a man with only a bike chain. Hickock was determined to arouse the murderous nature out of Smith again. Smith, on the other hand, was quite the opposite of Hickock. He was a small man with a large, muscular upper body and a deformed lower body that was the consequence of a motorcycle accident. Unlike Hickock, Smith had a thirst for knowledge and literature. He hauled around an old guitar and a giant box of his belongings that included books, maps, and letters from his prison friend Willie-Jay. Smith's main motivation for partaking in the journey was the promise to flee to Mexico afterward and hunt for a rumored treasure as well as reunite with his former cellmate and his one "real and true friend" Willie-Jay (Capote, 1965). Catering to the genre's most prominent characteristic in this century, Smith's childhood is explored, revealing abuse and abandonment. He experienced bizarre dreams where a type of bird saved him from despair and took him into heaven.

Forming full-scale biographies of his subjects attests to the primary characteristics of the twentieth century true crime genre: an extensive detailing of a crime account that provides consumers a vicarious participation revolving around the victim(s) and killer(s). It's also important to note the crucial role that the crime writer-crime event relationship played in the medium. Seeking out these personal relationships gave Capote the privilege to write about these intricacies, especially in regard to the obscure lives of Hickock and Smith. Without the close-ties knitting Capote to the case, the novel may not have been a pinnacle of twentieth-century true crime. The description of the crime scene and murders was written with dry, neutral prose.

Capote even went as far as designating several overly long quotations from Larry Hendricks, a twenty-seven-year-old English teacher who walked through the house with the sheriff, to solely explain the Clutter home crime. Objectivity replaced sensationalism, and, in turn, provided indisputable factuality that removed “the responsibility for aestheticizing violence from both the writer and the reader of such works” (Browder, 2010, p. 125). Capote proceeds to take us through the investigation and search for the killers after this. He continues to juxtapose the narratives, switching between what happened in Holcomb and the journey of Hickock and Smith. Capote’s literary techniques clinically deliver a step-by-step dissection of the Clutter family murder case.

The last half of the novel describes how Hickock and Smith were finally tracked down and arrested as well as the trial and sentencing. Police proceedings, lengthy interviews, psychological evaluations, and various other technicalities are well laid out. The people of Holcomb were almost disappointed that the murderer was not acquainted with the Clutters nor were they walking amongst them. The novel, a slow, methodically detailed narrative from the beginning, leaves nothing out. Capote brings the dual narratives to a head during the interrogation. His journalistic voice and commitment to detail paired with his prose style bring a full portrait of what creates evil and what it looks like. Capote concludes the book by describing the ultimate justice being served with Hickock and Smith hanging at the gallows, a key component that determines the success of the true crime novel. Without the utilization of defining components of the twentieth-century genre that conclude with an unambiguous resolution, Capote’s novel wouldn’t have functioned nor rose to fame. Capote hones in on



humanizing the victims and killers, through biographical accounts, and effectively employed the narrative techniques considered foundational to the genre and its credibility.

*The Executioner's Song* by Norman Mailer, following in Capote's literary footsteps, implemented many of the genre's characteristics. The 1979 true crime novel told the story of a man named Gary Gilmore—the first person to be executed in the United States since the Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty—who murdered a gas station attendant and a motel manager over the course of two days. In the massive 1,136 pager, Mailer delves into so many lives in this crime account, including Gilmore's, his cousin Brenda's, Brenda's parents, his lover Nicole's, Nicole's sister, and even, however brief, into the victims' lives. The novelized life of Gilmore told by Mailer is different from what the true crime genre has presented in the past. Each section takes the readers through a different person's life via the biographical account that dives into their childhood, their personalities, their experiences, how they think, and more. The appeal of the nonfiction novel stems from the opportunity the audience has to vicariously live through every miniscule aspect of all those involved or affected by the crime. This intimacy adorns the audience with intrigue, suspense, sympathy, curiosity, shock, and so on. Mailer drags out the story as long as possible before arriving at the actual murders, and bordering on Capote's literary techniques, Mailer doesn't hide the fact that Gilmore committed the crimes. After establishing each person surrounding the crime account, the audience is taken through the events that led up to Gilmore killing the two men, the police chase that ensued once Gilmore was labeled the culprit, and every inch of the police proceedings after his capture. Ending with Gilmore's death gives the audience gratifying reprieve from the tedious retelling. This key trait signifies the end of their journey and determines the success of the true crime story in this era.

While this particular story seems drawn out and could potentially be told in the typical 400-to-800-page length crime narrative formula related to the medium, learning about every aspect of Gilmore's life and those he was involved with in such great detail is perhaps the most intriguing characteristic of the genre in nonfiction book form. Consumers of the genre didn't receive this kind of satisfaction from any other medium except the novel form, denoting a preference for the novelization of true crime. The author's ability to tell the readers an immensely detailed crime account allows for an intimate experience and grants knowledge of things unknown. The photo insert that Mailer included halfway through the book amplified this effect. This notion plays into the changing societal and cultural trends of the century as well as reaffirming the genre's capacity to anticipate and reflect changes to media with accounts turning markedly towards exploring the psyche of a killer. Mailer does an exceptional job of this by starting the book off with Gilmore's journey from Marion State Penitentiary in Illinois to Utah.

Mirroring Capote's writing, the account is all about the journey, including everything, no matter how small, and ultimately arriving at the crime with the promise of justice to follow. The focus is primarily on Gilmore and Nicole's lives, both separate and together. Mailer takes us back to each of their childhoods and traumatic events that molded them into who they were as adults. Nicole is considered to be Gilmore's undoing and a part of the reason why he ended up committing murder. Already predisposed to aggression and violence, once Nicole left Gilmore, he snapped. Mailer even asserts that Gilmore stuck the barrel of the gun to the gas station employee's head and said, "This one's for me," firing a fatal shot, and then, "For Nicole," unnecessarily shooting the young man twice (Mailer, 1979). Mailer does well by employing key features that characterize the true crime genre within the nonfiction book form in the twentieth

century. These characteristics are the staple to the nonfiction book form of the true crime genre. Deviating from the spiritual and didactic tales of the eighteenth century and the often manufactured and sensational scandals of the nineteenth century, the twentieth century true crime genre undeniably adapted. The seamless transition from one medium to the next and the ability to address societal and cultural changes entrenched the genre in American popular culture.

Mailer is considered a creative genius, blurring the bounds of fiction and journalism. Inspired by 1956 author and journalist Meyer Levin, specifically after his *Compulsion* novel, Mailer utilized “New Journalism” techniques, “openly blending fact and fiction in order to explore the moral and psychological dimensions of a true crime” (Rindsberg, 2017, para. 6). Mailer reigned as one of the greatest novelists in the second half of the twentieth century, and he earned himself a reputation of being grandiose, enormously talented, and egotistical. Mailer’s career contributed to the slow decline in value of journalism, figuring that “no writer could compete with the carnival of contemporary American history except by holding up to it the funhouse mirror of fictionality distorted nonfiction known as the New Journalism” (Packer, 2008, para. 3). *The Executioner’s Song* went on to win a Pulitzer Prize—named after yellow journalism icon Joseph Pulitzer—which can also be attributed to the decline Mailer fueled.

Journalist Joe McGinniss contributed to the true crime realm in a much different way than Capote and Mailer with his book *Fatal Vision*, published in 1983. While the previously analyzed authors recounted the murders based on interviews and testimonies given by others, McGinniss was given the privilege of an inside scoop on Jeffrey MacDonald, a Green Beret doctor convicted of the 1970 murders of his wife and two daughters. McGinniss was hired by MacDonald to write a story of his innocence. Agreeing to the contract, McGinniss proceeded to

live with MacDonald during the murder trial. McGinniss copies Capote's narrative techniques by juxtaposing his overview of the murders and MacDonald's first-hand version of what happened. The two viewpoints work alongside each other to give a complete, well-rounded story of the murder, the events leading up to the murder, the trial and conviction, and concludes with McGinniss' opinion. McGinniss describes the events surrounding the murder, the actual murders and crime scene, and the proceedings after the murders while MacDonald gives his personal account of the entirety of him and his wife's relationship, his military experience, his children, and their life before and during Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

McGinniss' commitment to a comprehensive and exhaustive account showcases many characteristics inherent to the genre in the twentieth century. McGinniss and MacDonald's close relationship epitomized the crime writer-crime event correspondence, more so than Capote. Despite adhering to nearly every focal point essential to the genre—a formulaic linear analysis providing an exacting and detailed retelling of a true crime—*Fatal Vision* attracted a lot of controversy due to McGinniss' unethical and immoral journalism practices. Hinted at first with Mailer's Pulitzer Prize, the breakdown of objectivity, trust, and questions of bias and fabrication in journalism reached its height with McGinniss. He strained to write dry, neutral prose. His bias and speculation trickled in as the story progressed culminating with his journalistic-esque opinion column at the end. Rather than a testament of MacDonald's innocence, McGinniss roused suspicion and uncertainty among his audience, fully convinced that MacDonald was guilty of killing his family in a spur-of-the-moment, psychotic rage. McGinniss was later sued for fraud and breach of contract after he published his crime novel and became the center subject in Janet Malcolm's 1990 "The Journalist and the Murderer," a study which examines the ethics

and morals that underpin journalism drawing from nonfiction works. Malcolm concludes, using the McGinniss-MacDonald situation as proof, that journalism inevitably conflicts with morality, stating that “every journalist who is not too stupid or full of himself to notice what is going on knows that what he does is morally indefensible” (Malcolm, 1989).

In the early morning hours of February 17, 1970, MacDonald was injured, and his pregnant wife and two young daughters were murdered. MacDonald told the investigators that four intruders broke into his house and attacked his family. While MacDonald only suffered a small chest wound that partially collapsed one of his lungs, bruising on the left side of his forehead, and superficial stab wounds on his abdomen and upper left arm, his wife and children were far worse. Colette, the wife, had been stabbed a total of 37 times—nine in the neck and seven in the chest with a knife, and 21 more in the chest with an icepick. In addition, she had been bludgeoned in the head at least six times with a club causing severe lacerations and fractures. Both of her arms were broken in multiple places as defensive wounds. The daughters, Kimberly, five, and Kristen, two, didn’t receive any mercy either with their killings being just as sadistic. Kimberly was struck at least twice in the head with such extreme force to have caused multiple skull fractures, the largest fracture line extending almost the entire length of the right side of her skull. Although the blows were considered to have caused death, Kimberly suffered numerous stab wounds to the neck, so deep to have cut clear through her windpipe and blows to the face resulting in compound fractures of her cheekbone and nose. Kristen’s body had 33 separate incisions—12 in the back, four in the chest, one in the neck, and roughly 15 shallow wounds to her chest. Two of the wounds were deep enough to have punctured her heart. She also

exhibited defensive wounds as her hands had a number of cuts about them, one going all the way to the bone (McGinniss, 1983).

MacDonald testified that four, drenched, and drug-crazed hippies consisting of “a black man wearing an Army fatigue jacket with sergeant’s stripes on the sleeve, two white men, one of whom had a mustache and wore a red-hooded sweatshirt, and the blond woman in the floppy hat, holding a candle in front of her face” broke into his house (McGinniss, 1983, p. 46). He claimed the woman was chanting, “Acid is groovy...Kill the pigs...Acid and rain” (McGinniss, 1983, p. 46). MacDonald’s story was that the four assailants attempted to murder the entire family, but by some luck he made it out alive with barely any wounds. After the longest pre-court martial hearing in military history, the Army had cleared him of all charges just nine months after the crimes. However, Colette’s dad, who at one point was MacDonald’s staunchest supporter, had the case reinvestigated and a trial that lasted several years emerged. MacDonald was put through several tests on his psychological state and had to retell the story of that night repeatedly. Inconsistencies surfaced in his story, and, based upon the evidence the investigators collected, MacDonald was convicted of all three murders and sentenced to three consecutive life terms.

The writing techniques that McGinniss used in *Fatal Vision* weren’t revolutionary or new. He juxtaposed a dual narrative to retell the crime account through the utilization of vivid, stringent prose, however biased. He breathed life into the victims and depicted MacDonald as a deceptive, selfish creature who hid his psychopathology behind the carefully curated mask of a warm, caring doctor. Crime novels of the 1960s typically presented external threats as responsible for violence rather than from within, illustrated with Hickock and Smith in *In Cold Blood* and Gilmore in *The Executioner’s Song*. McGinniss brought a different air to his novel as

he presented the horrendous murders, a “threat from within,” from MacDonald, the should be respectable pillar of society. Though MacDonald tried to convince the jurors that the assailants were “deviant, crazed outsiders committing senseless murder,” he was found guilty, embodying the threatening “super-masculine patriarchal figure in the family” (Browder, 2010, p. 131).

Additionally, with Mailer acting as an antecedent, *Fatal Vision* differed by how frequently McGinniss inserted his personal doubts, speculations, and bias, especially with his conclusion of the book. McGinniss had the rare opportunity of being so close to a murder suspect but took advantage of it. He included personal letters between him and MacDonald that were sent back and forth after MacDonald’s incarceration. After discovering what McGinniss had done, MacDonald took to exposing the author for his corrupt and deceitful actions, painting him as an unfaithful, conniving, unfit journalist. The whole ordeal was a pivotal example of how the journalist was no better than the murderer (Browder, 2010).

Though these crime accounts told by Capote, Mailer, and McGinniss were standalone cases of a singular act of violence, the American people grew obsessed with serial killers. A characteristic of the true crime genre during the twentieth century that gained momentum on the cusp of the twenty-first century, a feature present in the books previously discussed, was the unraveling of a killer's mind. Capote, Mailer, and McGinniss explored the motivations and early lives of these killers to uncover what could have possibly driven the individuals to such atrocious crimes. This characteristic is enhanced when it comes to the most notorious killers amongst us, including Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, Jeffrey Dahmer, and the like. How could Ted Bundy, a seemingly ordinary man with insatiable looks and a charming personality, kidnap, rape and murder all those young women? How could an outgoing, sociable family man like John Wayne

Gacy torture, defile and strangle so many young boys? These men fell outside the parameters of the stereotypical killer, and there wasn't anything obviously "criminal" that could point to why they committed the heinous acts that they did.

Ann Rule, a former Seattle police officer, *True Detective* magazine writer, and a bestselling author, explored all these questions and more in her novel *The Stranger Beside Me*—originally published in 1980 but revised in 1986, 1989, 2000, and 2008. The crime account tells the story of the serial killer Ted Bundy, with whom Rule worked with and whom she considered a dear friend. Rule used different literary techniques than Capote, Mailer, and McGinniss to give this crime account. Instead of transitioning between multiple points of view, Rule gave an inside view of Ted Bundy's life from her perspective as a close friend. The crime novel, as Rule states in the preface, was supposed to be "a crime reporter's chronicling of a series of inexplicable murders of beautiful young women." (Rule, 1980, p. XXXV). However, instead of a detached retelling of some of the worst homicides in history, it was an intensely personal story of a unique friendship. Rule states that, "To write a book about an anonymous murder suspect is one thing. To write such a book about someone you have known and cared for ten years is quite another" (Rule, 1980, p. XXXV). The book gives a highly detailed account of every aspect of Ted Bundy's life, including his childhood, his time in college, his friendship with Rule, the romantic relationships he held, the murders, the investigation, and the inevitable chase and detainment of him in Florida.

An interesting characteristic of the crime narrative is that, though we know it is Ted Bundy committing the murders the entire time, Rule doesn't divulge this information until she becomes certain it is him. Even then, Rule is skeptical that Ted Bundy could possibly be behind



the horrific homicides. She battled internally with the question of his innocence for many years, not able to accept that her dear friend could be this monstrous serial killer. Rule gives the reader personal details of Ted Bundy's earlier life, details not well-known by the public, before he became a suspect and was convicted of the murders, specifically diving into his childhood, his political career, and various jobs he worked such as at the Crisis Clinic or the medical supply facility. Rule includes both the inevitable photo insert—containing both infamous and unfamiliar photographs—and letters that she and Bundy sent back and forth while he was in jail. These features, specifically the photocopied handwritten letters paired with Rule's first-hand experience with Ted Bundy as an "ordinary" person, encased the book in intimacy. Rule even gave Bundy money from time to time for things such as cigarettes. The letter friendship lasted for many years, even after he was named the main suspect in the homicides, though there was a gap where he stopped writing, a tribute to her faithfulness in the friendship. Rule provides the audience with an interesting perspective to this narrative, seeing as she worked with the police force as well as writing as a journalist, placing her objectivity and trust in a compromising position. Despite her consistent and constant loyalty to Ted Bundy, Rule did an exceptional job of limiting her bias and keeping her speculation holstered, except for when necessary.

The narrative is unique to the true crime genre as it gives a first-hand account of a serial killer, a relationship that is oddly sought after by authors and consumers alike. McGinniss' *Fatal Vision* worked to do this, but since it carried an air of a business relationship rather than genuine friendship that Rule fostered, it didn't work as effectively. McGinniss worked to tell a killer's story by living with MacDonald via an agreed upon contract, but Rule was close friends with Ted Bundy and lacked any prior knowledge of his transgressions. The shock value of *The*

*Stranger Beside Me* stems from this friendship, that a cold-blooded serial killer as cynical as Ted Bundy could hold such a relationship with a female, and that Rule was so naively blind to his guilt and believed he was innocent. The account satiates the true crime consumer's appetite through the effective utilization of the biographical detailing, the crime writer-crime event relationship, and the revealing of new, highly sought-after information on the elusive Ted Bundy.

These nonfiction books work to demonstrate the adaptability of the true crime genre. The genre fluidly evolved with the new mediums that were introduced during the twentieth century. Expanding with and capitalizing on both societal and cultural changes elevated the genre to a respectable, widely consumed strand in popular culture. True crime stories were characterized by a religious focus that functioned as a cautionary tale to readers across early print platforms available in the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries. By the late eighteenth to early nineteenth century, the rise of a new and preferred medium—the newspaper—signified a shift in societies and cultures alike, and so with it the genre seamlessly transformed, then characterized by speculation, sensationalism, and shock value. The interest in exploring the lives and psyche of the killer ushered in revolutionary features, including an exacting, detailed, and extensive profiling of victims, killers, and any other pertinent subjects through arid and objective language. Close relationships provided authors the ability to publish formulaic, linear analyses of criminal cases that ended in the satisfying demise of the suspect. The nonfiction book rose as the necessary platform for the defining characteristics of the twentieth century true crime genre. This acts as an undeniable testament to how media and the genre worked in tandem to effect change in one another from century-to-century and eventually decade-to-decade.

## Television

Television reality crime programs and channels, which started in the 1980s and flourished in the 1990s, showcased true stories about crime, criminals, and victims. They are viewed as a hybrid form of programming in the sense that “they resemble aspects of the news, but, like entertainment programs, they often air in primetime; some even show reruns” (Fishman & Cavendar, 1998, pp. 3-4). Some programs even mimic crime fiction with the entertainment aspects designed to excite and increase ratings. These programs and channels copied much of their programming style from radio, fell within the scope of news, and diverged from the traditions of journalism (Fishman & Cavendar, 1998). Amongst the most popular of the programs and channels are *Dateline*, *48 Hours*, *Investigation Discovery*, *America’s Most Wanted*, and *Unsolved Mysteries*. The programs use two primary formats with vignettes or a television camera riding along with the police, filming a story that unfolds. Vignettes are reenactments of actual crimes, and feature interviews with the victims, their family and friends, the police, and film and photos of suspects. They also provide updates about previous broadcasts, if needed. The other format speaks for itself, meaning that the programs that use this format, such as *Cops*, showcase actual footage of action, “the real thing,” even though hundreds of hours of footage is heavily edited. Television reality crime programs exist all over the world, including England, France, Germany, the Netherlands, Australia, Mexico, Brazil, the U.S., and more (Fishman & Cavendar, 1998).

The way the true crime genre functions within this medium is a long way from the ethical norms of journalism with program producers repeatedly stepping outside the bounds of accepted journalistic practices that are controversial, debase the professional standards, and even grossly violate journalistic objectivity. Media texts are “saturated with geographical meanings and

messages. Rather than simply “reporting” on cities, regions, and countries, the television news industry communicates powerful and highly selective images about the nature of places and the relationship between people and their surroundings” (Alderman, 1997, pp. 83-84). The tendency to spin information as entertainment dates back as far as yellow journalism and tabloid newspapers of the nineteenth century, making television reality crime programs a resurgence of tabloid newspapers. True crime, in particular, “mix[es] interviews of real victims and investigators with reconstructions of events using actors...they film reconstructions from subjective camera angles...they use music to heighten tension, and so on” (Alderman, 1997, p. 11)

*Dateline* is an American television newsmagazine that premiered on NBC primetime on Friday and some Saturday nights starting in 1992. The reality legal show featured narrated true crime stories with voice over, actual footage of victims, suspects, and their families including pictures, home videos, 911 calls, interviews and more, and some dramatization or reenactment footage. The stories mainly focused on murders with a sprinkling of kidnappings, stalkings, and the ever-favorite “unexplained disappearances.” The occasional “special series” would air where the anchors or hosts would go undercover to reveal illegal or unethical activity such as sex trafficking, hitmen, or online advertisements for human body parts. *Dateline* has long focused on true crime and reliably delivered anticipated stories of “...a young woman who disappears after a Halloween party, [or] a luxury-car dealer murdered in his bed” (Larson, 2021). The show is a transformation of newspaper and magazine articles to the screen—hence the name television newsmagazine—effectively utilizing cliffhangers with commercial breaks leaving viewers on the edge of their seats, waiting and wanting more. *Dateline* is the staple of television newsmagazines

and, although it does many of the things that other popular true crime series do, is known for its longevity and adhering to its old-fashioned style with its 30th season airing September of 2021.

Perhaps the most iconic face of *Dateline* is that of Keith Morrison, one of the five correspondents on the show alongside Natalie Morales and Dennis Murphy. The show is hosted by Lester Holt, but the correspondents are the ones that take the audience through the stories with Morrison particularly standing out. Morrison is “...tall, white-haired, genteel, and abundantly expressive, with a manner at once entirely showbiz and entirely sincere,” reveling in the form of true crime, and, in turn, making his audience revel in him (Larson, 2021). *Dateline*, akin to a genre novel, is all about the story, taking the audience through cases and valuing narrative convention. Morrison’s introductions, characterized with a particular cinematic quality, “...often guide us to scenic American communities with danger lurking in the shadows” and gives the audience “...a chance to float around in the warm bath of his voice” (Larson, 2021). The correspondents are the reason why *Dateline* rose so far above other true crime series; people fell in love with the unique style of storytelling that each correspondent possessed. Murphy is credited with founding this style of storytelling after taking a script and narrating it from his perspective. Murphy brought a “just-the-facts-ma’am snappiness to his stories, and the others followed suit,” with Mankiewicz becoming a skeptic “who sounds like a tough-guy character in a film noir feature when he delivers snarky questions,” and Canning being the “empathetic interrogator whether she talks with victims or suspects” (Battaglio, 2019). Verité true crime and murder dramas abound on television, but what sets *Dateline* apart from the others are its characteristics that it maintained throughout the years. The true crime series, while delivering disturbing cases, “...takes care to respect the viewer, and also the subjects...its format seems to

wrap the hard stuff in several layers of bubble wrap,” a comforting and gentle quality that is rare to find within this genre (Larson, 2021).

The structure of *Dateline* starts with a sturdy NBC anchor introduction, specifically, “I’m Lester Holt,” followed by another introduction from one of the correspondents. Wistful scene-setting whisks the audience off to the crime destination, usually once a peaceful, wholesome, relatively crime-free town filled with friendly neighbors. Once the viewer is brought into the world of the subjects, the tragedy strikes and is luridly explained with in-depth introductions of the victim accompanied by images and remembrances from loved ones. The correspondents often describe the victim as both an individual and a type, such as what unique traits set them apart or the type of personality they had or extracurricular activities they participated in (e.g., the jock or the academic). The format alternates between the interviewer and the interviewee, emphasizing empathetic connection among viewers. Though correspondents are already in a deeply seated position in the case by their on-screen narration through the lens of their perspective, they are good listeners intent on delivering the viewers the story via the case subjects. *Dateline* also follows the standard mystery format in some episodes with “...seeds of detail, gathering evidence, a potential suspect, a twist— “a dark suspicion wafted through the corridors of that old chocolate factory—and so on, until we arrive at a graceful coda of life carrying on for those left behind” (Larson, 2021). The cases cover mostly middle-class, mostly white worlds, and hints at older genre characteristics such as murderous family members (a husband pushing his wife off a cliff) and cautionary religious messages (a wayward Christian who murdered a spouse to avoid the shame of divorce).

*Dateline* is also steeped in incredulity with language, both from the subjects and correspondents, describing out-of-the-ordinary behavior that hinted something was wrong, such

as absence at events or mysterious texts, themes, beats, and emotions recurring with only differing details. The true crime series provides a strange combination of discomfort and solace with every episode, and effectively utilizes characteristics from newer and critically acclaimed series such as *Serial* and *Making a Murderer*: exposing injustices caused by coerced false confessions, following and investigating cold cases and leads for years, and focusing more on the victims than the perpetrators (Larson, 2021). The popularity that *Dateline* reaps comes from the effective cohesion of all these elements spanning over many years. The show, while adapting to changing conditions in the media realm here and there, remains true to its roots of old-fashioned styling and folksy aesthetic. *Dateline*'s precise storytelling that cohesively blends narrator and central characters to the case without inappropriately spotlighting the correspondents denotes authority. The show has effectively adapted to media and societal changes, and today takes many great forms, including primetime, gratuitous syndication, streaming, and recently podcasts (Weprin, 2021).

According to Alderman (1997), “no other cultural event captured (and held captive) the American public’s attention so intently as O.J. Simpson’s low-speed chase through Los Angeles in June 1994 and the ensuing double-murder trial, which ended in his acquittal in October 1995” (p. 83). Simpson was a college football star, playing as a running back for the University of Southern California in the 1960s. In 1968, he received the most prestigious football award, the Heisman Trophy and went on to play for the Buffalo Bills in the NFL where his success continued there. Simpson hung up the jersey in 1979, and later was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 1985. He ventured into the film industry after his football career and starred in popular Hertz commercials and even played roles in movies, such as *Capricorn One* and *The Naked Gun* in the 80s and 90s. Simpson, after divorcing his ex-wife Marguerite Whitley,

went on to marry Nicole Brown in 1985. After having two children together, the pair divorced in 1992.

Two years after the divorce, on June 12, 1994, Nicole and her family went to dinner at a Los Angeles restaurant where waiter Ron Goldman worked. Goldman visited Nicole's house later that evening to return her mother's glasses that were left behind, and around midnight, the two were found brutally stabbed to death in Nicole's home (Shapiro, 2021). Simpson was in Los Angeles that night, but took a late flight to Chicago, only to return to Los Angeles the next day. He was interviewed by the police but wasn't immediately arrested. A few days later, on June 17, Simpson was ordered to surrender by the prosecutors but refused. Instead, Simpson, along with his friend Al Cowlings, fled in a white Ford Bronco which led to the infamous 75-mile, slow-speed chase by the police, bringing Southern California freeways to a standstill and drawing media attention. The chase was broadcast live and attracted an audience of 95 million Americans with news helicopters flying overhead, documenting every move of the chase and even interrupting the NBA finals. Eventually, Simpson surrendered and was arrested (Shapiro, 2021).

The trial—often called “The Trial of the Century”—began in 1995, and was heavily publicized, specifically by the CNN and Court TV networks which broadcast daily coverage of the trial. CNN covered the entire 134-day trial, which kicked off the 24-hour news cycle. The media's coverage of the trial strongly affected the public's opinion and transfixed the nation. The initial trial only lasted a few months, ending on October 3, 1995, with Simpson's acquittal of all criminal charges, a verdict that was influenced by the involvement of national media. The television news industry “constructed and sustained a window of saturating hyper-coverage,” and CNN alone “devoted seventy correspondents, approximately 900 hours of airtime, and around three million dollars to covering Simpson” (Alderman, 1997, p. 83). During the trial, the defense



attorney's claimed Simpson was being wrongly accused while the prosecution argued that Simpson was a controlling and abusive husband to Nicole. Evidence, such as blood from the crime scene found in Simpson's car and home, leather gloves believed to be worn by the killer, and the fact that he was unaccounted for the night of the murders, were all brought forth in the courtroom (Shapiro, 2021). One of the most memorable moments of the trial was when Simpson was asked to try the leather gloves on. They didn't appear to fit properly, to which the defense attorney Johnnie Cochran famously told the jury during his closing argument, "If it doesn't fit, you must acquit" (Shapiro, 2021).

The trial had a significant impact on how the public viewed criminal cases, both negative and positive. The media coverage of the trial provided education on justice and court systems, DNA evidence and contamination, cross-examination, and more. The Simpson case provided a springboard for multiple issues of discussion such as race, gender, class, domestic violence, and the judicial system, with the latter being the most impactful. In addition, an audience that is knowledgeable about legal evidence, trial procedure, and the legal system continued to develop. The complex nature of the case blurred the lines between news and entertainment, specifically the television industry. The televised hearings of Simpson's preliminary trial "heighten[ed] concern about the grotesquely distorting influence of television on preliminary and even quasi-judicial fact-finding hearings" (Alderman, 1997, p. 112). During the preliminary hearing, a shopkeeper who had sold Simpson a knife sold his story to a tabloid television show before testifying. The shopkeeper spoke with conviction about Simpson's purchase of the knife, which ultimately landed him a \$12,000 television contract with one of the tabloid newsmagazines. Had he expressed any doubt about the month-old purchase prior to testifying, he might not have gotten the contract, attesting to the fact that television plays what pays. The television show

“would pay for the ‘truth,’ if and only if the ‘truth’ was sensational and solid enough to justify a television show” (Alderman, 1997, pp. 113-114). In 1997, Simpson was brought before a civil jury who found him liable for wrongful death in the double murder, and he “was ordered to pay \$33.5 million in damages to the Brown and Goldman families” (Shapiro, 2021). In September 2007, after holding a Las Vegas hotel and casino at gunpoint with a group of men, Simpson was arrested and charged with several felony counts, including kidnapping and armed robbery. He was found guilty and sentenced to up to 33 years in prison (Shapiro, 2021). On October 1, 2017, Simpson was released from the Lovelock Correctional Institute in Nevada on parole at the age of 70.

The Simpson case is a prime example of what Alderman (1997) calls hyper-coverage, “an important dimension of contemporary American television journalism ... [whereby the] news often constructs a window of saturating (seemingly never-ending) coverage that takes up large amounts of airtime and production resources” (p. 86). It is a response to an increasingly competitive media market and a way for television programs or networks to increase ratings, which the Simpson case substantiates this belief. Maintaining one of early true crime’s foundational characteristics as a genre, the Simpson case was highly sensationalized. While other cable television shows I have analyzed have made their best efforts to keep sensationalism out of its reporting on true crime, the Simpson case made quite the shift for television due to the immense coverage that it demanded. CNN’s viewership jumped up by 700 percent during the case and trial, and the case blocked out or eclipsed coverage from other matters. The sensationalist nature of the coverage of the case comes from the fact that whatever information that was being delivered to America’s homes was fresh, new, shocking, and was spun however the television networks decided to tell it. The cultural power of hyper-coverage “lies not only in

the amount or longevity of coverage but in the television news industry's ability to situate or frame the meaning and value of other news stories in relation to the hyper-covered story" (Alderman, 1997, p. 91).

*Investigation Discovery*, commonly known as *ID*, is a multinational television channel entirely devoted to the true crime genre of programming. It began its life in 1996, and at first was dedicated to programs that showcased content related to ancient history. However, after Discovery, Inc. bought the channel, *ID* became a 24/7 true crime channel. *ID* has supported a passionate and loyal following and is "the most-watched-ad-supported cable network among women ages 25 to 54...the only cable network launched in the last 10 years to land among 20 top-rated-channels" (Battaglio, 2016). This popularity derives from its well-defined niche of true crime content, running 24 hours a day, seven days a week. The most iconic show on the channel, *Homicide Hunter: Lieutenant Joe Kenda* which brought in an average of 1.6 million viewers, featured case files from former homicide detective Joe Kenda, who solved nearly 400 murders in his career, and ran for nine seasons and released 144 episodes (Battaglio, 2016). Along with its original programs, such as *Deadly Women*, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, *Web of Lies*, and *Evil Lives Here*, the channel aired reruns of popular true crime shows from other networks like NBC's *Dateline* and CBS's *48 Hours*. The channel featured similar characteristics as *Dateline* but became more of a true crime documentary channel. This era of television kicked off true crime in the twenty-first century, in the sense of enhancing audiences' education, due to the nature of the shows.

*ID* keeps its content simple with "criminal investigations boiled down to just-the-facts-ma'am essence and mixed with a generous helping of emotional recollections of the victims" (Battaglio, 2016). A theme that has grounded the true crime genre within the television realm is

the genre's programs' ability to stick to its roots and maintain the "old-fashioned" reporting. *ID* isn't the first channel to do so, but effectively taps into "the public's growing fascination with crime stories while defying the current trend toward complex serialized storytelling popularized in many critically acclaimed dramas" (Battaglio, 2016). Most of the stories covered on *ID*, or any true crime television program for that matter, almost always involves exotic, bizarre, and especially grisly or disturbing incidents of murder (Bonn, 2016). Like most shows and channels on television, *ID* depicts cases that last an hour long and always end with resolution so that when one investigation ends, another begins. The television true crime audience wants predictability when they turn on their favorite show or channel, and *ID* provides that. When its viewers turn on the channel, they leave it on with the average watch time being 54 continuous minutes a day (Battaglio, 2016). The trend may also be attributed to violent crime declining in the U.S. since the 1980s. Crime stories, grounded in law and order, ease the doubts and anxieties of viewers who have grown weary of the world around them.

While the channel runs updated editions of *Dateline* and other true crime newsmagazines, *ID* also has original investigative shows such as *Deadline: Crime*, hosted by NBC News anchor Tamron Hall, *On the Case with Paula Zahn*, and *Killer Instinct*, where a former *Dateline* correspondent, Chris Hansen, profiles serial killers. Serial killers are the most popular topic within the true crime genre with gruesome and notorious exploits of serial killers such as Jeffrey Dahmer, Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy (The Killer Clown), Richard Ramirez (The Night Stalker), or David Berkowitz (Son of Sam) (Bonn, 2016). Much of *ID*'s original programming used actors doing scripted reenactments of criminal cases but threw in some participation from people personally connected to the victims (Battaglio, 2016). *ID* has made a significant impact on the television industry and the true crime genre as it is one of the last channels still currently

thriving. The channel premieres roughly 650 hours of programming a year, and “with crime being a renewable resource, there is no shortage of material for new shows” (Battaglio, 2016). Unlike other networks, like NBC and CBS, *ID* is solely dedicated to true crime content. Drawing in millions of viewers and continuing popularity, the *ID* channel speaks volumes for the endurance that the genre has.

The case and trial of Jeffrey Dahmer was similar to that of the OJ Simpson trial in terms of how publicized it was in the media. Dahmer was an American serial killer and sex offender who committed murder and dismemberment of 15 men and boys between 1978 and 1991 in the Milwaukee, Wisconsin area. Dahmer was “a case study of a criminal soul in torment, languid one moment, frantic the next—and always deadly” (Mathews & Springen, 1992, p. 44). He became known as the Milwaukee Cannibal or the Milwaukee Monster due to the gruesome nature of his crimes and the fact he was a cannibal, eating parts of his victims. Dahmer was said to have sought out men from gay bars, bathhouses, malls, and bus stops and then lure them to his house with promises of money or sex. The gruesome nature of his crimes with “...the way he killed Ernest Miller, removing the flesh from his bones and bleaching his skeleton; the time he took Matt Turner home after a Gay parade, drugged him with sleeping pills, strangled him, and threw his body into the blue barrel [of acid]; the occasion he had sex with Oliver Lacy’s corpse” and the fact he kept a heart in his freezer and a head in his fridge are what made Dahmer one of the most notorious serial killers of all time (Mathews & Springen, 1992). Like most serial killers, Dahmer had a routine or process with picking and killing his victims. More often than not, after giving them alcohol laced with drugs, he would strangle them to death and proceed to engage in sexual acts with the corpses, known as necrophilia, before dismembering and disposing of the bodies. He often kept the skulls or genitals of his victims as souvenirs as well as taking photos at

various stages of the murder process to recollect each act afterward and relive the experience. According to Deputy Chief Robert Due of the West Allis Police Department in suburban Milwaukee, “He talk[ed] about killing people just as if it’s like pouring a glass of water. He shows no emotion whatsoever” (Mathews & Springen, 1992).

While Dahmer killed a significant number of people, he didn’t always get his man. At least five of his potential victims, who have come forth, escaped to share the tale of Dahmer. One such case was that of a man named Bobby Duane Simpson. Dahmer sought him out at a rough-trade bar in Walker’s Point called The Phoenix in February 1988. Dahmer convinced Simpson to come home with him for a cup of coffee, and after two sips, Simpson passed out. He recalls waking the next morning in Dahmer’s grandma’s basement, groggy and confused, with Dahmer standing over him in the nude. Instead of murdering him, Dahmer let Simpson go, who later found out from another guy at the same bar that Dahmer drugged him too. Another case of a victim getting away alive was that of Ronald Flowers in the spring of 1988. Dahmer invited Flowers over to his grandma’s house for cups of coffee, and after finishing his cup Flowers proceeded to pass out and wake up in the hospital the next day. These two, as well as others, were used as experiments for Dahmer to test his routine out. While targeting older, gay men, Dahmer would also prey on boys as young as 13-years-old. His youngest victim was said to have been Konerak Sinthasomphone, a 14-year-old from Laos, a tragic and macabre case. A neighbor phoned the police after seeing the young boy running down an alley naked. The police arrived, chalked the scenario up to “only a gay lovers’ spat” and returned the boy to Dahmer, who proceeded to kill and dismember him (Mathews & Springen, 1992). Dahmer was almost captured in 1989 after being arrested for the molestation of a 13-year-old boy. However, after serving a one-year-work-release program at the Milwaukee Community Correctional Center, he

was released and continued killing, first with the strangling of Raymond Smith, 32, followed by the dismemberment of Edward Smith, 27.

In the '90s, "with law agencies overworked and understaffed, detecting, tracking, and busting these murderers [had] become more difficult than ever," so "with victims plentiful, the police sluggish, and no one in the gay community sending up an alarm over a murder wave, Dahmer, like other serial killers, may have grown smug" and allowed more victims to get away (Mathews & Springen, 1992). Before he was arrested, Dahmer lured a black hustler home with the promise of \$200 for a late-night photo session. Once in his slaying den, Dahmer put on gay videos, wrapped a bandanna around the man's mouth, took out a polaroid, and proceeded to photograph the man in nude. The man remembers Dahmer hitting him in the neck with a hammer, and after three hours of violent horseplay, Dahmer let him go. The man went to the police, which ultimately led to the demise of Dahmer's reign of terror. He committed 10 murders in the span of September 1990 to July 1991. In 1991, Dahmer was captured, and a televised sanity trial began. Dahmer didn't seem "to have been a creature of explosive impulses," and according to psychiatrist Dr. David Abrahamsen, "'He knew what he was doing, and he knew it was wrong'" (Mathews, Springen, 1992). In the trial, the mutilation, necrophilia, and cannibalism were spotlighted, which were unusual and uncommon details to discuss on television. Newspapers and magazines covered the case and trial alongside television. The live trial coverage was available to roughly six million of the nation's cable television homes.

Dahmer's trial rekindled the popular controversy of having cameras in the courtroom, which inevitably brought the unthinkable into society's living rooms. Cameras and media coverage created a circus-like atmosphere surrounding serious cases, as was seen with the OJ Simpson trial. Though there is controversy about televised trials, it still exists today as we are

seeing with the trial coverage of the Lori Vallow and Chad Daybell case. Publicized or televised trials give the public insight into court proceedings and educates true crime consumers of the justice system and all its intricate pieces. The history of courtroom cameras began “crudely in a New Jersey trial room in 1935” (Lassiter, 1994, p. 111). The Lindbergh baby kidnapping case by perpetrator Bruno Richard Hauptmann was the trial being televised, and, like the O.J. Simpson and Dahmer trials, had received intense media attention. The judge in the case ultimately barred cameras in the courtroom due to the chaos that ensued. Court TV is perhaps the most popular network to consistently air quality coverage of trials, covering over 250 cases. This network provided “hope that television can permit the American public to see the inner workings of a trial courtroom with only minimal interference to the dignity and decorum required of the judicial process” (Lassiter, 1994, p. 112). However, there has been pushback in regard to allowing cameras into the courtroom. Such pushback was seen in the Dahmer trial. A mother of one of the victims “learned that the judge had authorized a screenplay based on the judge’s own accounts” and she went on to ask, “the Wisconsin Judicial Commission to investigate a possible conflict of interest fearing that the judge might have issued prejudiced rulings, such as ordering exclusive confessions from Dahmer, knowing that he was later to capitalize on his experiences” (Mathews & Springen, 1992, p. 114). Another criticism of televised trials is the sensational aspect the reporting reaps, although sensationalism is a key characteristic of the genre’s longevity.

Additionally, there is major controversy with cameras in courtrooms because of the effect that television can have on juries. Due to the possibility of television coverage fixing or hanging juries, there was concern for a hung jury in the Dahmer trial. Television can create bias amongst the population in which the jury is culled as well as have a chilling effect on witnesses and other participants. Cameras in the courtroom have posed an issue with the factuality and fairness of



cases due to the lack of time to present a full, comprehensive account of the case being tried. For these reasons, and many more, the televising of courtroom trials has faced opposition. On the flip side, television reporting on trials has acted as an educator on important topics, such as the inner workings of justice, the decision-making process, and the matter being discussed to the public, especially in serial cases like that of Dahmer. These types of cases that deal with serial killers or horrific crimes terrify the public but are also the most popular cases amongst the true crime audience. The audience devours this type of content, so although certain legality issues arise with cameras being in the courtroom, it has satiated the audience's desires. Print media adequately satisfies the public's fascination, but television offers more intimate participation with cases. The visual aspect that television brings with live footage allows the audience to feel like they are somehow a part of the process, of the trial, of the case.

## **Digital Media**

The rise of the Internet exploded true crime as a genre with a host of streaming services offering blogs, documentaries, and podcasts. The invention of the Internet facilitated the genre to spread globally, transforming it into something more than a "low-brow, late night indulgence" (Norton, 2020). The introduction of several new mediums enabled the genre to shed any negative connotations it once had and legitimized true crime in this day and age. While other mediums still maintain popularity, documentaries from *Netflix* and podcasts such as *My Favorite Murder*, *Serial*, and *Crime Junkie* exude popularity and have taken control of the genre. While the televising of trials on television provided education to the public, documentaries and podcasts gave greater familiarity with legal processes creating self-proclaimed experts amongst the genre's audience. Accumulated over the years of early true crime consumption, consumers are

now well-versed in forensics, profiling, criminology—such as blood-spatter patterns, various levels of serial killers like organized versus disorganized—and the psyche of these killers. With a multitude of documentaries and podcasts comes a plethora of crime stories, from some of the most notorious cases to lesser-known stories which can have a longer shelf life than headline news stories. Documentaries usually retell infamous criminal cases while podcasts have the liberty of covering more unknown crimes and stories. True crime ignited the golden age of podcasting and boosted the medium into the stratosphere. On the other hand, streaming services pumped out chilling documentary after chilling documentary that could be accessed at any time, creating a battle for viewership. These mediums are what truly cemented the genre in the twenty-first century.

Podcasts have a multitude of categories to choose from including standalone long-form series, anthologies, buddy chat and commentary, investigations, criminal justice or wrongful convictions, and so many more. *Serial* is one of these podcasts, and it's considered the gold standard for true crime and podcast journalism. It “didn't just help the podcast industry, it also propelled a torrent of true crime audio shows” (Hill et al., 2021). Hosted by Sarah Koenig, *Serial* releases long-form audio stories with deeper narratives about flawed investigations and potential miscarriages of justice. A product of Serial Productions, a New York Times company, the podcast “unfolds one story—a true story—over the course of a whole season,” and follows the plot and characters wherever they may lead (Koenig, 2014a). Koenig narrates the episodes, taking her audience through every surprising twist and turn. Allegedly, Koenig doesn't know the outcome of the cases she covers until the end, not long before listeners get there with her. *Serial* releases episodes on Thursday, and currently is in the process of a fourth season. Akin to prior mediums such as television and true crime networks, *Serial* includes audio clips from actual

interrogations or interviews and 911 calls. Additionally, episodes typically run between 30 minutes to an hour long, sometimes more or less depending on the material being covered during that week. While television reality crime shows functioned by uncovering the killer or divulging a resolution at the end of each episode, podcasts either leave audiences on a cliffhanger (like *Serial*) or it's a cold case yet to be solved.

The first season of *Serial* is about the 1999 murder case of Hae Min Lee, an 18-year-old student at Woodlawn High School in Baltimore (Koenig, 2014b). Koenig narrates the case over 12 episodes, revealing every intricate detail. After Hae's body was found and identified in Leakin Park on February 9, the investigation was immediately treated as a homicide. Adnan Syed, a classmate and ex-boyfriend of Hae's, was arrested for murder six weeks later even though he claimed innocence. He couldn't recall his exact whereabouts on the day that Hae went missing, but another classmate admitted she knew where he was. The only issue was she couldn't be tracked down. Koenig speaks about the case in a matter-of-fact way, almost monotone, limiting emotional tones or responses, keeping her personal opinions to a minimum, and reporting in an objective manner. *Serial* episodes take on many of the true crime genre's components, including details about the victim(s), family and friends, the area the crime was committed in and more, but also provides newer components such as audio clips from police interrogations or personal interviews that Koenig conducted herself, documents and police reports, and phone calls. *Serial* also includes background instrumental music during key moments, such as breaks between scripts or when important information is revealed. The case became internationally famous after Koenig's reporting of it on *Serial*, showcasing how a podcast can take a lesser-known criminal case and bestow popularity on it. Additionally, as is hinted at throughout each episode of the first season, Koenig is diligent in uncovering

miscarriages of justice. Adnan was convicted of the crime and given a life sentence plus 30 years. Koenig dives into this with speculation, including other people's speculations in episodes as well. She states, "This is the very obvious problem with speculation, especially of the emotional variety. You can't prove it, so you have to drop it" (Koenig, 2014b). Though Koenig keeps her opinions to a minimum, she, like other podcast hosts, will insert her own speculations or doubts about the case being covered. In the last episode of the first season, Koenig dives into certain conjectures in relation to evidence of Adnan's case and testimonies that were given, stating at the end that, "If we took a magnifying glass to any murder case, would we find similar questions, similar holes, similar inconsistencies?...This [case] is a mess, the holes are bigger than they should be...this case is a mess" (Koenig, 2014b).

*Serial* continued its unique format of covering one case per season over multiple episodes while other true crime podcasts emerged, giving the audience a plethora of new and exciting hosts, cases, and formats. *My Favorite Murder* is another popular true crime podcast for people who are obsessed with real crime. Hosted by American comedians Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, new episodes are released bi-weekly, and it has quickly risen to the top of the charts. The podcast offers a unique spin, bringing the long-established comedian chat show to the grim world of true crime. *My Favorite Murder* features quirky, funny music and commentary at the beginning of each episode with titles to match, such as "My Firstest Murder," "My Second-Best Murder," "Our Favorite Thirder," and so on. Kilgariff and Hardstark take turns discussing their favorite murder cases from their point of view through unscripted conversation. The two banter back and forth, keeping the mood lighthearted—as best as one can when it comes to murder cases—slipping in jokes either about certain aspects of cases or about everyday activities that come up. Straying away from *Serial*, the two don't filter out unnecessary foul language in their

conversations, which comes from the cross-categorization of comedian chat shows with true crime. The episodes run anywhere from 30 minutes to over an hour with a mass majority of episodes running well over an hour. Another unique feature of *My Favorite Murder* is the intentional lack of editing of conversation. For example, in one episode, one of the hosts pauses the discussion on the criminal case to make a comment about her “screaming cat,” and how it’s the reason she can’t sleep at night.

Rather than following the typical podcast format—or really the genre’s format—of providing a fact-by-fact layout of cases through a pre-written script, *My Favorite Murder* takes a while to dive into the “favorite murder(s),” and even then, the delivery is sporadic, and the hosts get lost in “inside gossip.” However, since its inception in early 2016, the podcast “has broken download records and sparked an enthusiastic, interactive ‘Murderino’ fan base who come out in droves for their sold-out shows worldwide” (Kilgariff & Hardstark, 2016). The popularity that *My Favorite Murder* exudes is likely due, in part, to the relatability of Kilgariff and Hardstark. The two hosts share a true crime obsession together and turned that into a talking show to share with the world. Consumers of this podcast feel connected, share excitement and interests, and can even share a laugh or two or find that one of their favorite murders is being discussed by the hosts. *My Favorite Murder* also uniquely fits into the podcast scene in the sense that it doesn’t advertise itself as an exercise in empathy, but rather its premise and episode summaries emphasize the humor. Additionally, since the two have differing “favorite murders,” the podcast presents a couple of criminal cases in one episode. In the first episode, for example, the two discuss tragic car accidents, JonBenét Ramsey, and Sacramento's East Area Rapist. In another episode, the two dive into killers Jesse Pomeroy and Issei Sagawa, and in another they cover the Lipstick Killer and the Lindbergh Baby kidnapping. While the podcast carries distinctive

qualities of its own, it does what other podcasts do in terms of covering lesser-known cases and shedding light on them.

*Crime Junkie* is another top-chart true crime podcast hosted by two females in Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat, though they go by just Ashley and Brit during episodes. Flowers is the Founder and CEO of audiochuck, a female-focused podcast network that is home to both scripted and unscripted podcasts, including *Crime Junkie*. The two, like Kilgariff and Hardstark, share an obsession of true crime, hence the title of the podcast. On their website, under “About the Hosts,” there is a reassuring line that states, “Don’t worry; we’re crime junkies, too” (Flowers & Prawat, 2021). Since its debut in December of 2017, the podcast has enjoyed major success, remaining at the top of the charts with over 500 million downloads, 630 stories, and \$643,000 donated to charity. Each episode presents a different criminal case, including infamous killers like Scott Peterson who murdered his pregnant wife, Shawn Grate who kidnapped and murdered a multitude of women from 2005 to 2016, and The Golden State Killer who was captured in 2018 or, again, lesser-known cases of missing, murdered, or wanted persons and serial killers. The variety of cases and themes range from serial killers to unexplained disappearances to odd controversies. The episodes range in time from just under 30 minutes to over an hour with some even reaching 2 hours. Proceeds from the show are donated to organizations that track criminals or given as financial support to victims and their families.

*Crime Junkie* takes on a scripted and unscripted format. The facts of the case, the events leading up to the crimes, and what happens afterward are delivered from a well-curated script which Ashley, and on rare occasions Brit, read to their listeners. During certain times, the hosts will pause the script to insert their thoughts about certain aspects of the case, or if something shocking comes up, unscripted reactions can be heard from either one. *Crime Junkie* possesses

many of the characteristics of other true crime podcasts with the delivering of facts, incorporation of police interrogations or personal interviews conducted by Ashley, 911 calls, suspenseful background music, and speculations or doubts. The podcast even has special features specific to it, such as “Pruppet” segments, a term coined by Ashley. According to their website, the word can be used “in reference to a dog or puppy of utmost adorability. A pruppet is a furry version of one’s soulmate” (Flowers, 2020). Also, *Crime Junkie* even coined its own slogan that says, “Be Weird. Be Rude. Stay Alive” (Moskowitz, 2020, p. 58). It’s one of many “life rules” that Ashley and Brit came up with that they slip in here and there when discussing cases. The podcast boasts a large fan club with three levels of memberships that offer exclusive bonus episodes, exclusive access to the merch store and event tickets, and even interactive episode features. The audience of *Crime Junkie*, like any other true crime audience, is obsessed with all things crime-related, a general interest which flowered into a “true-crime-shaped-hole” that no amount of radio segments, podcasts, or documentaries could fill (Flowers & Prawat, 2021).

Most true crime podcasts share many of the same features and characteristics as one another with some adorning unique segments, such as *Serial* focusing on one case per season, *My Favorite Murder* taking on a comedic persona, and *Crime Junkie* providing scripted and unscripted dialogue with the occasional lighthearted dog feature at the end to leave you slightly less grim. Although the podcasts provide factual accounts of cases, many of the hosts discuss speculation or scrutiny related to the case or how matters were handled. Unlike magazines, books, and television, the cases covered on podcasts could end without a resolution, allowing the discussion of various cold cases, disappearances, missing persons, and more. Consumers of podcasts, in a sense, evolved as well in terms of how they reacted to cliffhangers. While ratings would drop for television programs and channels if cases didn't provide closure and come to a

head, podcast listeners could be left with something along the lines of, “And the suspect is still out there,” and be completely content. This could be attributed to the reason why people consume true crime content: “We like it because it confirms that the world is dangerous and bad” and we learn qualities that can potentially prevent us—mainly females—from being murdered, such as “sticking up for yourself, getting comfortable with being rude to men, not being a follower” and so on (Moskowitz, 2020, p. 58). An overwhelming percentage of the true crime podcast audience is female, with 73 percent of listeners being women. Podcasts have helped the genre find a sweet spot in American popular culture, “offering catharsis without making any political or moral demands of its audience” (Moskowitz, 2020, p. 60).

*Netflix* is the primary platform for true crime documentaries and is responsible for the popularity they reap. Dozens upon dozens of documentaries exist nowadays, and they function in close proximity to podcasts. True crime documentaries offer exceptionally in-depth telling or retelling of criminal cases with a majority stemming from infamous cases and killers. Documentaries tend to follow in suit of television programs and channels in the sense that they typically cover cases that reach an end with the suspect(s) being identified, miscarriages of justice being unveiled, and ultimately, justice being served with the detainment or demise of the killer(s). Adhering to the characteristics that have permitted true crime to bask in popularity, documentaries feature various detailed aspects including early life, motives, the crime itself, psyche of the killer(s), interviews with the killer(s), victim(s), family members, and friends, police interrogations, police documents, judicial proceedings, and so many more. However, documentaries divulge this information over the course of multiple episodes that usually run at least an hour long each. While the seasons come to a head, the episodes are known for leaving viewers with unanswered questions or cliffhangers to encourage binge watching. It’s a slow,



methodical progression that takes the audience from the beginning all the way to the climax, covering every possible inch of the case and providing lesser-known or unknown facts to the public.

*Conversations with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes* premiered on *Netflix* in 2019 as a limited series with only four episodes running from 50 minutes to an hour and 15 minutes long. The premise of the documentary was two journalists who set out to retrieve the definitive story of infamous serial killer Ted Bundy as told by the man himself. It draws on over 100 hours of conversations with the serial killer, but the more sensationalistic feature is his victims, “30-odd young women (that is an estimate) whose photos—all school-yearbook glamour shots in funeral black and white—flit across the screen as a tangle of grim voices intone the grimmest possible words” (Harvilla, 2019). Phrases such as “Beaten and strangled,” or “Bludgeoned, raped,” or “Sexually mutilated, by mouth, by teeth,” are used to describe the gruesome nature that the corpses were found in. Journalist Stephen Michaud is the man with the tapes, the one who chose to come in close quarters with the devil and stare him right in the eyes. Bundy agreed to the interviews in exchange for the reopening of his case, to somehow prove his innocence. However, after recording more than 100 hours of audio, Bundy only proved to be “an evasive, soliloquizing blowhard” (Harvilla, 2019). Nonetheless, the conversations between the journalist and the murderer turned into an important strand of popular culture. Most of the facts presented in the documentary are already well-known to the public, but the draw of *The Ted Bundy Tapes* comes from the intimacy provided by a first-hand experience. The audience is drawn in by the exhilarating factor that an “ordinary” person could come into such close contact with one of the most shocking, vile, and evil persons to ever exist.

*The Ted Bundy Tapes* includes everyone relevant to the case with Bundy maintaining “a presence throughout, whether through news segments or the titular tapes,” and appearances from his mother, his ex-wife Carole Ann Boone, and his long-term girlfriend Liz Kloepper through both archival footage and recorded interviews. Additionally, several on-camera interviews are shown from those involved in the investigations such as former friends, detectives, prosecutors, psychologists, Michaud, Hugh Aynesworth—amongst other journalists—and even a near-victim. According to Rao (2019), the title is “a bit of a misnomer because the tapes mainly consist of Bundy delivering monologues about his life and personality.” Bundy, as per Michaud’s request, speaks about himself in the third person in an attempt to get a confession or acknowledgement of the killings. Rather, the conversations are largely one-sided and deliver egotistical recounts of how Bundy’s life was and his personality. Being a known narcissist, Bundy would revel in this renewed attention that the twenty-first century documentary brings. Overall, the documentary was successful and drew in the true crime audience. The four-part limited series delivered a complete, crisp, bingeable, curated timeline of Bundy’s life, the investigation, the murders, the media attention during the height of his reign, and, like *Ann Rule*, introduced an up-close, personal look at one of the most notorious serial killers through the taped interviews.

Another sought-after docuseries is *Making a Murderer*. It was filmed over 13 years and showcases the real-life thriller of an “unprecedented story of two men accused of a grisly crime they may not have committed” (Netflix, 2016). The docuseries presents the case in two parts, each having 10 episodes running at least an hour each. There is even talk about a potential third season with fans chomping at the bit for the latest updates on the hit crime documentary. The complicated and lengthy case of Steven Avery is discussed over 20 episodes. He was accused and convicted for the 1985 rape and assault of one Penny Beerntsen in Manitowoc County,

Wisconsin. After spending nearly two decades behind bars, Avery was exonerated when newly surfaced DNA proved his innocence, which he has always maintained. As is seen in the opening scene of *Making a Murderer*, Avery was welcomed home with full attention from media and state politicians. Avery and his family kept to themselves in Manitowoc County, all living in close-quarters or on their family property. Although they ran an auto-salvage yard, the family was impoverished and were known to have frequent run-ins with the law. Avery, with an IQ of 70, wasn't what you would call clean, and had a record of a few burglaries and cruelty to animals—he had doused a cat in gasoline before lighting it aflame (Nededog, 2016). Avery eventually grew up, got his life together, and settled down in marriage with a few kids. However, after being accused of running a local woman off the road and pulling a gun on her and admitting to it—his motive being that she filed a report on his harassment and lewd gestures—he attracted police attention yet again.

Beerntsen was brutally attacked and raped while jogging and survived. She later identified Avery as her assailant, and he was faced with sexual assault and attempted murder charges. *Making a Murderer* focuses on the injustice that Avery faced and how flawed the justice system really is. Avery had an alibi, and another police department identified a different possible suspect, yet Avery was still convicted of the crimes and sentenced to 32 years in prison without a chance for parole. Gregory Allen, the other identified suspect, was the true assailant and had attacked two other women while Avery was incarcerated. After his release, he decided to file a \$36 million lawsuit against Manitowoc County for the egregious wrongful conviction. Avery had lost his wife, any rights to his children, 18 years of his life, and any money his family had had went to his appeals. The investigation found no wrongdoing on the part of Manitowoc County, and as the civil case progressed, the murder of Teresa Halbach occurred. She was reportedly last

seen on the Avery salvage yard, there on “an appointment with Avery to photograph a car” (Nededog, 2016). He quickly became a suspect, and after her charred remains and blood stains were found, Avery was arrested. He was extensively interrogated without his attorney present, but didn’t confess, claiming he was with his 16-year-old nephew, Brendan Dassey, for part of the night. The alibi wasn’t solid enough, and police jumped to bring Dassey in, to which they interrogated him without an adult or attorney present. Following the docuseries theme of uncovering miscarriages of the law, the police were shown coercing Dassey into the story they wanted to tell in order to take down Avery. Dassey ended up incriminating himself in the process, and the two, now 58 and 31, still remain in prison.

*Making a Murderer* maintains the characteristics of other docuseries, the characteristics that appeal to the true crime audience. Featuring actual footage of interrogations, interviews, photographs of family, friends, suspects, and victims alike, voice recordings, vignettes, and more are part of the reason why true crime viewers are drawn in. A major part of why the documentary about the Avery case became such a big hit is the shocking miscarriages of justice. Wrongful convictions and imprisonment, mishandling of evidence, dismissal of evidence, shady police officers and investigators, and overall fundamental flaws in the judicial system are the basic premise of the documentary. The true crime community somehow invests more in these cases, and droves of supporters flock to the case in hopes of finding something that could provide justice for the wrongfully accused and convicted. Avery’s case isn’t the first, nor will it be the last, to be handled in such an atrocious manner that results in an innocent person in jail. Exoneration work is constantly happening to help restore justice and bring those people home. According to the *LA Times*, bad police work, prosecutorial misconduct, false confessions, faulty eyewitness identification, jailhouse snitches, bad lawyering, sleeping judges, and/or junk science

lead to an estimated two to 10 percent of the population being wrongfully convicted in the United States (Grisham, 2018). While *Making a Murderer* subsidizes our need to consume true crime content and functions as true crime entertainment, it also works to educate the public about cases like Avery's, the judicial system and processes, investigations, convictions, the appeal process, and so much more.

*Don't F\*\*\* With Cats: Hunting an Internet Killer* aired on Netflix in 2019 as another limited series with just three episodes running an hour or more each. The documentary is unique in that it follows a group of amateur online sleuths through a risky manhunt. After one twisted criminal posts gruesome and shocking videos online of animal torture and eventually murder, a widespread internet group of animal lovers launches their own investigation to uncover the anonymity of the person. The true crime story, which ultimately gets to the murder of Lin Jun, is one of Canada's most infamous cases. The manhunt mounted an international investigation, and the internet group even instilled the help of *Rescue Ink*, a reality-television program that helps rescue animals. Most of the interview footage featured on the show comes from two members of a Facebook group that was formed in order to catch the sadistic killer behind the videos. Deanna Thompson—a Las Vegas native who used an online alias by the name of “Baudi Moovan”—and John Green—who's “name appears in quotation marks throughout the three-episode series, suggesting that it may be a pseudonym”—paired together through Facebook to decipher clues, and both were far ahead of the case before the police even became involved (Kirkland, 2019). The documentary provides short clips of the heinous and heartbreaking videos of the crimes, clips of television news stations covering the case, shots of the Facebook groups and messages, interviews, security camera footage, and more. Eventually, over the course of two years, Thompson and Green drastically helped identify and catch Luka Magnotta, the animal torturer

and murderer. From tiny, miniscule details picked out from watching clips of the original video of Magnotta vacuum-sealing two kittens in a bag to help from others online, the duo digitally chased Magnotta across three different international hub cities until he reached his demise.

*Don't F\*\*\* With Cats* depicts just how committed true crime consumers can be. While Green and Thompson weren't initially a part of the true crime universe, after Magnotta broke the Internet's most sacred rule, "rule zero," of messing with cats, they became dedicated to tracking him down. Like other true crime junkies, if a cold case hasn't been solved, a missing person yet to be found, a wrongful conviction, or, plainly, if justice hasn't been served and the case closed, bands of true crime consumers do everything in their power to help. Many podcast hosts provide websites or other places for listeners to drop tips or any helpful information. The genre's audience, feeling as if they are experts that can crack the case before the police do, become so obsessed with the idea of being involved in some way or another that they spend months—or even years in this case—dedicated to the case. The breakout *Netflix* documentary sparked a new hope amongst the true crime audience that, due to Thompson and Green playing a key role, this dream may one day come true for them.

*Netflix* continues to pump out "gripping true crime documentaries like there's no tomorrow" (Kirkland, 2019). From the few aforementioned to others like *Abducted in Plain Sight*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, *American Murder: The Family Next Door*, *Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer*, and numerous others, there is no shortage of content when it comes to true crime documentaries. Documentaries, like podcasts, offer a wide variety of cases covered, from notorious serial killers such as Ted Bundy or Richard Ramirez (the "Night Stalker"), to unconventional cases like *Don't F\*\*\* With Cats*, and even devastating cases like the Watts family murder or the abduction of 12-year-old Jan Broberg. Despite the nefarious, heart-

wrenching, shocking and vile nature of most of the crime cases discussed, the genre's audience absolutely devours the content shortly after it is released. These revivals and retellings as well as new and unknown cases reaffirms the popularity of the true crime genre. The digital era created new mediums for the genre to adapt to, and with it came even more pliability. While print media—namely early print, newspapers, and magazines—and even sometimes television, were restrained from delving deep into cases, the Internet unleashed the genre with a whole new set of features that provided further intimacy with the cases. Podcasts and documentaries alike often go into the ins and outs of legal processes, dive into skepticism of the current law and order system—such as botched investigations, incompetent 911 operators, lack of evidence preservation, etc.—and provides a cohesive culmination of the most salient features of the genre. A greater, more comprehensive education to the public through content of the digital age was offered which in turn led to more people being adept in forensics, DNA evidence, profiling, sleuthing, and more. With the evolution of media coupled with the genre's immense capacity to acclimate harbors an indisputable longevity. Attesting to this is the cross-platform convergence that is occurring as older television programs create their own podcasts, such as *Dateline*, to remain afloat. This was also seen, despite its failure, in *True Detective*'s content shift to compete with television. With traditional media collapsing, magazines, books, and television programs are still pumping out content to keep up to speed with the digital era's offerings. True crime as a genre has demonstrated its responsiveness to changing societal and cultural concerns as well as changing mediums.

## Conclusion

This paper has set out to thoroughly examine the extensive history of mass communication, from upheavals in communications technologies to fundamental changes in journalistic style over time. Intertwined with media ecology is the evolution of true crime as a genre into popular literature that was, and still is, highly consumed. Historical roots of media are traced back as far as ninth-century China, but the advent of Gutenberg's printing press in the fifteenth century was crucial to mass communication development. True crime has also been deeply embedded in history appearing as early as the sixteenth century in England. Media and true crime evolved in tandem and influenced one another. Though research into the history of crime has expanded over the last twenty-five years, and media history has been surveyed at length, investigations into both simultaneously have been lacking. The goal of this study was to provide a timeline of media, beginning with early print mediums such as pamphlets, broadsides, and ballads, concluding with the media conglomeration experienced in modern day, to showcase how the genre's responsiveness to cultural and societal influences has acted as a catalyst for journalistic changes.

Early print was defined by one-off pamphlets, single-page broadsides, and ballads set to the tune of religious hymns and often accompanied by graphic woodcuts and striking paintings. The majority of the authors to these mediums were clergymen from the Catholic Church, Protestant Reformation, or Lutheran denomination. Due to the religious background these writers possessed, the reports that were published portrayed some form of religious context. Crime narratives retold gruesome crime scenes, often including false quotations from dead victims, and concluded with religious warnings about the consequences of sin. The early era linked the shocking crimes to the devil, urging moral reform. Additionally, reports on crime focused on the



most bloody and horrifying familial murders, particularly intergenerational ties. The authors presented certain “early vices” or sins that cast the criminal down a wayward path and sent powerful messages about perceived threats to the social and familial order (Wiltenburg, 2004). The tone of crime narratives carried a religious focus, particularly on the dangers of straying from God and the importance of repentance, from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century. However, the early era saw signs of sensationalism and an interest in criminal psyches, acting as a precursor to changes in the genre and mediums to come.

The nineteenth century was characterized by the democratic public sphere and the rise of daily newspapers, shifting true crime reports to carry speculation, sensationalism, and shock value. Newspapers incorporated and replaced old forms of popular print, becoming the predominant medium for the dissemination of crime news. The penny press in America in the 1830s brought the development of several weekly or daily periodicals, with Bennett, Day, and Greeley at the helm, followed by yellow journalism in the 1890s with media barons Pulitzer and Hearst sparking the tabloid wars. This era marked the height of unethical journalism practices as editors would riddle their articles in convolution, inconsistency, and melodramatic prose. Media evolved, and so did true crime as a genre. Splashy headlines saturated in exaggerated, sensationalist language followed by reports filled with bias and fabrications characterized the true crime genre. The war between the newspaper editors even saw renegade groups that would pilfer crime scenes, snatch evidence before police arrived, and dig up clues in order to produce the next hot headline. Media moguls engaged in one-upmanship, lacking ethical reporting practices and care for accuracy despite the numerous placards hanging in their newsrooms, which in turn fueled interest in true crime but also compromised its trust. The evolution of media

in this era was essentially the beginning of journalism as reporting in newspapers, and true crime as a genre responded and sustained popularity.

The fresh start of the twentieth century brought new changes to mediums and true crime. Objective journalism and adherence to moral practices pushed the genre to become more exacting and detailed. Various forms of media emerged, and the height of a new killer, the serial killer, manifested itself, too. Magazines, specifically *True Detective* and *Vanity Fair*, developed a new way of narrating and understanding murder. Non-fiction book publishing birthed iconic authors, like Truman Capote, that cemented the American crime genre in the twentieth century, and the role of television provided the audience with a twenty-four-hour news cycle. The scope of crime accounts covered ranged from small-town murders, like that of Holcomb, Kansas, to the most notorious of killers, such as Ted Bundy. With lengthier, more dignified and moral forms of media, true crime reports had the liberty to delve into highly technical aspects of murder. These nonfiction stories provided insight into judicial proceedings, every detail of crime scene investigations, forensics, profiling, and other intricate aspects of criminology. From this, a nation of popular, knowledgeable experts arose, and with it a renewed focus on objective reporting and high public trust. The genre shed its negative connotations of sensationalism and evolved into dry, neutral prose.

The digital age of the twenty-first century, ushered in by the Internet, combined all the preceding characteristics together. True crime is now witnessed most popularly through streaming documentaries and podcasts. The host of new mediums allowed everyday citizens to dabble in the genre, creating and sharing their own investigations, opinions, and obsessions of crime cases. More deliberative and nuanced investigations provided further education on enhanced forensic technology, profiling tactics, DNA evidence, and more to the public. Also,

these new mediums provided flexibility in the types of cases covered, ranging from the most notorious to the lesser known. Streaming documentaries and podcasts aren't bound by time constraints, allowing for a deep dive into various aspects of criminal cases, including the early life of victims and killers and, specifically, the psychological deviations of murderers. These mediums often divulge skepticism of current law and order systems, from botched investigations, incompetent 911 operators, miscarriages of justice leading to the imprisonment of innocent lives, and more. Media convergence, as witnessed with the television show *Dateline* developing its own podcast, has occurred in the twenty-first century, bespeaking popularity of the genre and simultaneously showcasing the interchangeable ability for the genre and media to evolve together. The twenty-first century introduced an overhaul in media changes, and the genre responded accordingly, exploding it from a lower-class, late-night indulgence to a high-brow international sensation.

While true crime as a genre owes its popularity, in part, to the sensationalistic features it carries, the genre runs deeper than that. Sensationalism—content heavily sated in emotion—is inescapable when it comes to crime, especially the most gruesome, bloody, sadistic, and horrifying of murders. Consumers of the genre inevitably are wrought with emotion, sympathizing with victims, killers, and investigators alike. However, as I have demonstrated in this paper, true crime as a genre has boasted longevity, durability, and a remarkable ability to consistently adapt to cultural, societal, and mass communication changes. Although examination of the genre must acknowledge the inherent nature of sensationalism, the popularity of true crime is sustained by numerous other characteristics and reflects the ability of the genre to actualize the medium as the message. A majority of true crime scholarship only examines how sensational the genre is, but I have proven, historically, how changes in media, journalism, and true crime

coincide with one another, showcasing different characteristics that define the genre within each era. True crime flourishes as a global phenomenon today, functioning within various mediums. While it has been viewed as a niche genre of media content, pandering to the depraved human taste for gore, the genre has risen to an esteemed strand of popular literature with the evolution of media.

Though the future of media and true crime are unknown, we can make conjectures about what it could hold and mean for both. As witnessed in this paper, a centuries-long obsession with true crime has entrenched the genre within the sphere of popular culture, functioning as informative and a form of entertainment. Whether it is the desire to see justice done, the satisfaction of solving mysteries, or the need to allay fear through the examination of crime, true crime has always appealed to the masses, becoming a literary outlier (Fraser, 2021).

Developments in mass communications technologies will inevitably transpire in the future. Given the capacity of true crime to reinvent itself, the genre possesses a readiness to take advantage of any change to media form or structure. This proves that true crime is the most durable of media genres because, along with this, it has captured and held the public imagination, quenched an unquenchable thirst for the macabre, and successfully navigated shifts across format and focus, always primed to reinvent its formula. While other genres have fizzled out, true crime has maintained an irreplaceable spot in our society, setting it up to capitalize on these future changes. It is the most resilient, sophisticated, adaptable, and widely consumed media genre, ensuring that there will always be a market for murder.

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