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WRT 181

November 2021

<center>The True Crime of True Crime: The Damaging Tendencies Behind the Popular Genre</center>

True crime as a storytelling genre has been around, in one form or another, for centuries. Many credit one of the first major emergences of this genre to Truman Capote's 1965 non-fiction novel, *In Cold Blood*, though some scholars believe accounts of true crime can be found as far back as the 1600s (Webb, "True Crime and Danger Narratives".) Throughout the entirety of its existence as a genre, true crime has seen rises and dips in popularity. However, it has especially seen a sizable amount of growth in the past decade. This is due to a variety of causes, including a general increase in the availability of all media types, increased connectivity, the growing popularity of podcasts, and demand for new types of entertainment (Hernandez, "True Injustice".) Additionally, the popularity of podcasts like 2014's *Serial* (Boling, "True Crime Podcasting",) and shows like Netflix's *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, and HBO's *The Jinx,* have taken what was once an obscure genre and brought true crime into a mainstream audience's purview. These examples also had a real impact on the crimes that they were covering, further increasing the audience that they reached (Walters, "Netflix Originals".)

With true crime becoming a legitimate genre of media, scholars and casual media consumers alike have begun to analyze what constitutes true crime at all. True crime is any media that discusses real-life crimes. That is, it is a genre that explores real crimes that have happened to real people. It is most popularly consumed in the form of podcasts, television shows, or documentaries. True crime content also often follows a standard format: a victim is

introduced, along with enough details about their life to make the listener feel sympathetic towards them, the crime is described, the details of the investigative process are gone over, and the resolution is given, most often in the form of an arrest or a trial. True crime favors stories that follow these guiding steps, and generally covers crimes with simple endings and tidy convictions.

Looking at the statistics of true crime podcast's ad revenue, it is apparent how much the genre has grown in the past few years. In 2018, these podcast's boasted an ad revenue of 479 million dollars, a staggering 53% increase from the revenue made in 2017 (Chan, "The Living Victims".) This growth of true crime media shows no signs of stopping soon, either. As of June 2019, nearly a quarter of the top 100 podcasts on iTunes were true crime based (Boling, "True Crime Podcating".) Netflix, currently one of the most well-known streaming services, releases dozens of original true crime series and documentaries every year, further demonstrating just how mainstream and in-demand true crime content has become.

In addition to studying the definition of true crime as a media genre, journalists have been studying the purpose of it. Kelli Boling, a researcher at the University of South Carolina, conducted one such study by interviewing the hosts of four popular true crime podcasts. These podcasters all came to the same consensus about the main purpose of the genre. They stated that their primary goal is to educate the public on the workings of the criminal justice system. Additionally, these podcasters asserted that they did not want to manipulate the facts of the case that they were discussing, but that they wanted to simply present the facts of the situation and then allow the audience to draw their own conclusions (Boling, "True Crime Podcasting".)

Consumers of true crime media have their own definitions of the purpose of this genre. One of the most widely cited causes for engaging with true crime media is that listeners want to

educate themselves on what can happen, as well as to learn how to avoid becoming a victim themselves (Boling, "True Crime Podcasting".) This is a belief especially held by women, who make up 75% of the viewer and listenership of true crime content (Chan, "The Living Victims".) These viewers believe that by consuming true crime content, they will be better equipped to deal with harmful situations and that they will be less afraid of the possibility of a violent crime happening to them. In a way, true crime is used as a method of exposure therapy for these women. Additionally, for many, true crime media has also become a method of voyeurism and escapism (Boling, "True Crime Podcasting".)

While many producers and consumers of true crime content are quick to describe its merits, they often overstate many of its positive attributes, such as when listeners state that consuming true crime media helps with their fears of crime. In actuality, many of the positives attributed to true crime are not true. They also ignore the negatives of true crime, such as how it spreads misinformation and how it contributes to certain discriminatory themes that are already prolific throughout the country, such as racism and homophobia.

Consumers of true crime content, specifically women, state that they use true crime as a way of helping themselves to cope with the violent crimes of the world in a safe and contained manner (Princing, "Why Do We Love True Crime?") The assumption is that, by processing these emotions and fears in a self-driven, comfortable way, these fears will not be as prevalent while they are out in the world. However, studies have shown that these beliefs are misguided and that the opposite is often true. In fact, true crime content is contributing to viewer's fears, and giving them a false sense of the criminal tendencies of the world that they live in (Jamieson, "Violence in Popular U.S. Prime Time".)

A 2014 study out of the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania compared Americans' fear of crime with the rate of the portrayal of crime on television. This study showed that Americans' fears have increased at a similar rate as the number of violent crimes portrayed in the media (Jamieson, "Violence in Popular U.S. Prime Time".) After further analysis of their data, the researchers concluded that consuming media with violent crime in it has contributed to viewer's fears of crime in the real world (Jamieson, "Violence in Popular U.S. Prime Time".) This study disrupts the true crime community's belief that, by consuming true crime content, they will be able to better control their fear of crime. It shows that, instead, the opposite is true. By continuing to watch true crime television shows, or by listening to true crime podcasts, they are increasing their fear of violent crimes.

This sense of fear is further confirmed by other misinformation that is purported by true crime content. In addition to increasing fear of crime through violent depictions, true crime media is giving its consumers the sense that the overall rate of crime is higher than it actually is, as well as that it is rising. In actuality, this is not the case. The crime rate in America has been on a general steady decrease (Lett, "Is Our True Crime Obsession Doing More Harm Than Good".) According to data published by the Federal Bureau of Investigations, there has been a 49% decrease in the rate of violent crimes from 1993 to 2019 (Gramlich, "What the Data Says".) By making consumers think that the rate of violent crimes is increasing, true crime media is again falsely adding to viewers' fear of crime.

True crime is not only spreading misinformation about the rate and probability of crimes being committed, but also about who is most likely to become a victim. Such misperception is created by who true crime stories are being told about, who is telling these stories, and who is listening and watching. A large majority of true crime media focuses on crimes where the

victims are straight, white women. Viewers are thus given a false sense of the state of the world, specifically about who is most at risk to become a victim. While true crime media makes it seem that the group of individuals most at risk for being victimized are heterosexual, white women, this is not the case. Black women in America are killed at a higher rate than any other race of women. Black men have an even higher chance of becoming victims (Webb, "True Crime and Danger Narratives"). As far as sexuality goes, people belonging to the LGBTQIA+ community are much more likely to be victims of violent crimes than heterosexual individuals (Webb, "True Crime and Danger Narratives").

It is obviously important to highlight every type of victim, and to raise awareness to the fact that it is possible for anyone to face danger. However, by focusing solely on one group of individuals being the victims of violent crimes, every other type of victim is in threat of being erased. Skewing almost all stories of true crime to focus on white women as the victim gives the impression that victims who fall within this category are of the most importance, and thus are the ones who deserve to be highlighted in the media. All significance is removed from victims belonging to any marginalized race or sexuality. This removal of significance then causes victims from marginalized groups to be even further erased in the media, creating a very dangerous cycle. It tells the public that a white woman being victimized is more of a crime than when a person of a minority group is victimized (Green, "The Enduring, Pernicious Whiteness of True Crime").

As noted above, research has shown that white, female victims are not the group most likely to become victims, so this cannot be cited as the reason for true crime media continually choosing to focus on their stories. Thus, it is important to discuss why this is the choice that producers are making. Lindsey Webb, an associate professor at University of Denver's Sturm

College of Law, postulates that the reason is based upon true crimes media's main source of viewership, which is also primarily white women (Webb, *True Crime and Danger Narrative*). Elon Green, a writer for the New York Times and author of *Last Call*, puts this in a more direct manner, stating that white women being consistently used as the victims in true crime narratives shows what viewers consider to be a sympathetic victim (Green, "The Enduring, Pernicious Whiteness*"*).

In addition to this being the race of the majority of the victims that true crime discusses, the large majority of people who contribute to popular installations of true crime media are also white. For example, Mystery Writers of America sponsors a yearly award for Best Fact Crime. A nonwhite author has never been granted this award, and barely any have ever been nominated (Green, "The Enduring, Pernicious Whiteness*"*). The whiteness of the producers of true crime media causes there to be little diversity in the perspectives being given in the genre. This is important because crime is steeped in racial history as well as modern racial connotations. These stories being told, effectively, exclusively by white people, gives only one perspective of events and does not allow a wide amount of room for other conversations.

This singular perspective of events has widespread consequences for the genre. One of these consequences relates back to the preferred structure of true crime content. Many of the most popular installations of true crime follow the same format: a victim is introduced and details of their life leading up to the crime are given, the crime is described, the main investigators are introduced, the mystery of the crime is solved, and the resolution of the story comes with the perpetrator being sent to prison. The police and other members of the justice system are heralded as heroes for putting the 'bad guy' behind bars. In many cases, true crime consumers and creators alike celebrate long prison sentences and death penalties (Webb, "True

Crime and Danger Narratives*"*). No one pushes for a different narrative. No one discusses the overly-simplistic way that this portrays crime and justice.

As often as true crime media discusses the workings of the justice system, and with as much as podcasters promote the genre as a means of education, it is rare to come across a story that discusses the racial implications of such conversation. It is often taken for granted in these stories that the police and prosecutors are being fair and just in their convictions. There is rarely ever any talk of police brutality or bias; there is no room for questions about how the justice system treats any minorities involved in the case. Additionally, true crime does not strive to cover crimes committed by the police themselves, specifically police perpetrated crimes against people of minority status (Webb, "True Crime and Danger Narratives*"*). By ignoring this entire section of crime, true crime as a genre ignores these people's stories and dismisses the imperfections of the justice system. It paints a false picture and convinces listeners that there are no faults to be found within this system. Rarely does it ask listeners to think more deeply about the stories being told, nor about the institutions discussed throughout them.

Despite its faults, true crime is not a hopeless genre. In its most simplistic form, true crime is a discussion about real-life crime. While it currently chooses to focus on crime that only opens up a conversation about one type of problem, it is possible for the genre to expand its views by covering a wider variety of events that affect a more diverse group of people. By abandoning the problematic tropes that it often relies on for entertainment value, and instead focusing on these widespread problems, it is possible that true crime could transition into being a source of social justice (Hernandez, "True Injustice*"*.)

There are already some instances of true crime being used in this way. For example, the podcast *Serial* (2014) focused on the trial of Adnan Syed. It was widely suspected that Syed,

convicted of murdering his ex-girlfriend, was a victim of wrongful conviction. *Serial* attempted to bring this into mainstream attention. By doing this, the podcast helped Syed to be granted another trial (Hernandez, "True Injustice*".*) As important as *Serial* is as an example of the power that true crime could wield, it is vital to recognize that it is not a perfect model to follow. The podcast has been accused of not grappling with the main issues at the heart of the case. Sarah Weinman, a frequent author and editor of true crime media, says that the podcast does not delve enough into the racial tensions that were present at Syed's initial trial. Syed is a Muslim-American, and, according to Weiman, anti-Muslim prejudice was widely on display at his trial (Weiman, "The Future of True Crime*"*). Even with these problems, *Serial* provides a good starting point to creators and consumers alike of where true crime could go as a genre.

With the obvious growth of the genre, both in popularity and in the amount of money that it brings in, it is apparent that true crime will not be leaving mainstream attention anytime soon. Thus, it is important that the genre be forced to acknowledge its current limitations in terms of what stories it is telling and who is telling these stories. It is up to the people who produce true crime content, as well as the people who consume it, to ensure that the genre expands its coverage and focuses on the stories that so far have been ignored.

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