

Televised Tragedy: The Morality of True Crime

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It is no secret that true crime content has become one of the biggest media genres in recent years. In 2022, more than a quarter of the top 451 podcasts were true crime, and popular streaming services like Netflix have a vast array of true crime documentaries from which viewers can choose. Though there is clear demand for true crime content, should audiences be so quick to consume this material? Is it morally permissible to watch or produce true crime media? By analyzing arguments both for and against true crime, I will attempt to determine the moral status of this content.

A potential argument for true crime documentaries being a net positive is that they can educate the public on criminal justice issues. Wrongful convictions, racial bias, and investigative flaws are often highlighted in the stories shown in true crime programming. By watching these programs and learning about real-world examples of these problems, viewers can gain more palpable empathy and become increasingly invested in resolving these systemic issues.

A counter to this, however, is that this education could be achieved without consuming the sensationalized versions of the crimes in the form of documentaries or podcasts. A viewer shouldn't have to watch a version of a criminal act presented with the intention of entertainment to feel empathy for those affected by systemic challenges. While learning about real-world examples of these issues

occurring is helpful, a person could gain this same knowledge by volunteering at a local prison or homeless shelter. They could hear these stories from the mouth of the person who was affected, with no third party attempting to make money from the situation.

Another counter is that true crime documentaries can glamorize killers and desensitize audiences to gruesome death. There have been many serial killers who have amassed large fan bases after their story was shared with the public. For example, Ted Bundy famously had a crowd of young girls show up at his trial who were "in love with him." These symptoms of obsession with killers have been present since before true crime media existed, but this new platform is only contributing to the issue. Biographical series on both Bundy and Jeffery Dahmer on Netflix gained incredible popularity in 2019 and 2022, respectively. Though both teams for the shows shared that the series were going to focus on the victims, the casting choices of attractive and famous young men to play the murderers (Zach Efron as Bundy and Evan Peters as Dahmer) tell a different story. Now the public associates the face of the killers with these men instead of their true likenesses, which romanticizes the murderers and leads to an increase in acceptance of these crimes. The attractiveness of the actors trivializes the crimes, as reflected in comments like one made by a Twitter user who asks, "why am I so turned on by Zac Efron

as Ted Bundy?”

A possible reply to this is that a truly thoughtfully made documentary could honor the victims and inspire empathy in viewers. For example, the documentary series *Jeffery Epstein: Filthy Rich* gathers heartbreaking testimonies from victims and successfully conveys how horrible the perpetrator was. The documentary does an exceptional job exhibiting evidence and displaying the corruption that allowed Epstein to take advantage of the young girls in his community. There seems to be no way someone could view him as anything but a monster after educating themselves on the atrocities he committed shown in this meaningful documentary series. However, with a quick Google search of “Jeffrey Epstein Fan Club,” there are numerous communities that appear to view him positively, with users comparing his looks to an attractive

John Travolta and commenting on his photogenicity. With this example in mind, even well-made documentaries can be conducive to a rise in the desensitization and romanticization of criminals.

A second argument in favor of true crime documentaries is that sharing these crimes on wide platforms such as TV or radio can lead to cold cases being solved. Listeners to true crime are often dedicated fans who become detectives. The audience can put pieces together and help solve cases that would be left cold otherwise. There are numerous online forums dedicated to solving cases that the police have given up on years ago, such as a Reddit forum dedicated to uncovering the truth about what happened to JonBenét Ramsey. Police don't have the resources to continue the search on all unsolved cases, but the true crime community does. There have been numerous documented cases of true crime media leading to the conviction of a criminal, such as Chris Lambrant's podcast, *Your Own Backyard*. Without Lambrant's investigation into a twenty-five-year-old cold case, the murderer

would never have been convicted. The additional publicity cases get from being featured in a true crime documentary can benefit families of victims in this way, potentially helping them gain closure on an atrocity left unsolved.

However, are there no clear negatives of audiences attempting to solve crimes? Crowdsourced investigations can lead to harm, such as falsely accusing individuals or impeding real investigations by authorities. Most consumers of true crime media are not trained criminal investigators. These dedicated fans then have no real place to attempt to solve real criminal cases. It would not be far-fetched for listeners to think someone is guilty based on false evidence they discover, which could ruin that person's reputation. Additionally, most true crime fans commune online, posting their findings on blogs and websites. This can cloud authorities' investigation of a criminal, as internet searches of a name are likely to pull up a blog with false information about the person rather than real records about them.

Finally, an obvious case against true crime is that commodifying someone's death is immoral. True crime documentaries do this by using victims' stories for profit, solidifying their immorality. No matter how pure the intentions of a person making true crime content, the bottom line is they are trying to make money. Numerous documentaries that state an intention of educating the public and honoring victims still fail to contribute any profits made to the families. This is simply exploitation of the victims. Netflix, for example, has over 300 true crime documentaries and docuseries available for streaming. Each one brings in thousands of dollars in profit, which all returns to Netflix. Ultimately, this commodification prioritizes a corporation's monetary gain over respect for victims and their families. This undermines the intrinsic worth of victims and their experiences and is blatantly unethical.

While true crime content has the potential to do good in its education of the public and potential service to families of victims, its current consumerist nature undermines its moral integrity. There are possible positive arguments in favor of true crime media, however, the implicit moral principle of it being wrong to exploit victims of crime stands out amongst these contradictions. This principle is an essential aspect of ethical media production. Victims have been through enough already without companies using their stories to make a profit and wide audiences watching re-tellings of their trauma for entertainment. These acts both lack empathy in

a scenario that deserves a great amount of it. From this, it can be concluded that true crime media is morally impermissible to consume or produce in its current form.

This conversation is far from over, as the morality of true crime continues to shift with the popularity and evolution of the content itself. Largely, the fate of this genre lies in the viewers, as it is their responsibility to hold fast to their ideals and choose ethically made media over tempting sensationalist ones. It is this decision-making that influences the market of content produced and will determine the future path of true crime.