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Monsters in Media: A Textual Analysis of True Crime in Narrative Journalism

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Ouachita Baptist University

Arkadelphia, Arkansas

Carl Goodson Honors Program

Monsters in Media: A Textual Analysis of True Crime in Narrative Journalism

Senior Thesis

By

Rachel Sansano

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Intro

True crime podcasts are a favorite among listeners everywhere. Their dramatic, intriguing, real-world stories have a way of pulling in people. Once you have been sucked into this community there is no escaping. For armchair detectives everywhere, true crime podcasts are an entertainment staple. These podcasts tell us stories of the worst criminals known to man. But is there more to these episodes than just a surface level story? What are the deeper messages that these podcasts are sending?

This paper will look at the use of new journalism styles in new media formats. More specifically, this article looks at narrative journalism and the role it plays in true crime podcasting. Many aspects of this journalism form and genre will be discussed. Very little research has been done regarding narrative journalism in online media, multimedia, films, documentaries, or broadcasted mass media (van Krieken and Sanders). This study is an attempt to begin to fill this gap in research. Because the majority of media that Americans consume falls into this multimedia category, it is important to understand the journalistic format of this media. Another gap in this area of research is textual analysis of the podcasts themselves. (Boling). This study will not be able to completely bridge this gap, but it does contain qualitative textual analysis of five podcast episodes.

Lit Review/Topic Review

Defining Traditional Journalism

Traditional journalism is considered to be giving the public hard and fast facts as soon as possible. Journalistic writings consist of the 5 W's in the inverted pyramid format (Kuehn and Lingwall). While this is great for quick news, it does not keep consumers' interest for very long. In fact, that is the whole point.

Journalists know that people do not spend a lot of time reading news articles. In order to get all of the necessary facts of each story to the public, the inverted pyramid puts the most important information in the first few sentences of the article. After these beginning sentences, audience interest fades.

In today's world, the public treats some news formats as entertainment. Documentaries, feature stories and podcasts are a few genres that contain news, but present information in ways that lend itself to entertainment. To do this, these genres use narrative journalism.

Defining Narrative Journalism

At its core, any style of journalism is about telling stories. We may not perceive it this way because journalism deals with news, but even news reporting is, in a sense, storytelling. Narrative journalism then, is where the storytelling aspect of news is the main focus.

Narrative journalism gives writers creative freedom. Instead of forcing journalists to simply pass along facts, it uses tactics from fictional writing to add flair to facts. These fictional techniques include character development, detailed descriptions, scene setting and time reconstruction (Johnston and Graham).

Other studies give more specific definitions of narrative journalism. They describe it as “a genre that employs the narrative storytelling techniques of voice, point of view, character, setting, plot, and/or chronology to report on reality through a subjective filter” (van Krieken and Sanders). In this definition, the “subjective filter” is the journalist. Narrative journalism gives the author a chance to express how and what the story made them feel, and it also gives them the opportunity to pass along these emotions to the reader.

Another way to define narrative journalism is this – “narrative: began with a non-summary or feature lead, tended to set a scene, time-line or introduce a character at the start,

employed either conversational or informal storytelling approaches and descriptive word choices, used storytelling writing devices such as description, scene-setting, place or time reconstruction, character development” (Johnston and Graham). Narrative journalism wants to stay as far away as possible from the inverted pyramid. This genre allows for more suspense and drama because it is not required to give all of the facts in the first paragraph of the article.

Journalists have the freedom to add their distinct flair and style to stories that are already exciting. This creates a finished product that is perceived as being more personal and genuine. Narrative journalism is considered by writers to be the holy grail. It is “framed as a form of art” which gives the impression that it is an incredibly creative endeavor (van Krieken and Sanders). If a writer can survive in this genre, it is solely because of their own talents and abilities.

People believe that “there is a false dichotomy of information and narrative,” but in reality, they go a long way in complementing each other (Clark). In fact, research suggests that audiences are actually able to better understand narrative form journalism. Narrative journalism gives more information about the social reality of the situation than traditional journalism does (van Krieken and Sanders). Narrative journalism appeals to us because it involves us in a story that we would otherwise be distant from. It is easier for audiences to connect to and engage with (van Krieken, and Sanders).

Because we establish a connection with the story and the characters, we remember the facts of the narrative better. Research has proven that narrative articles have higher comprehension, retention and recognition of the information explained in the piece (van Krieken and Sanders). Stories are easier to remember than lists of random facts (van Krieken and Sanders).

When writers want to play on audiences' imaginations, stories are the preferred format. They are entertaining and suspenseful. Research shows that narrative formats are more engaging and give the readers a sense of being present at the scene being described (van Krieken and Sanders). Readers even go as far as to identify with and empathize with the characters. This is much less likely to happen in a typical inverted pyramid, who, what, why, when, where and how story.

People mistakenly look at narrative journalism as fiction. But this is not the case. All journalists understand that “reporting with civic clarity is their primary duty, which leaves plenty of room for the telling of ‘real’ stories. Narrative strategies are tried and true: setting scenes, developing characters, effectively using dialogue, and establishing point of view. To create vicarious experiences for readers or viewers, writers transform the famous five W’s and the H. ‘Who’ becomes character. ‘What’ becomes plot. ‘Where’ becomes setting. ‘When’ becomes chronology. ‘Why’ becomes motive. And ‘how’ becomes narrative” (Clark).

That being said, there are still rules when it comes to journalism in narrative form. Writers cannot add fiction or any false elements for dramatic effect because once they cross this line, it is no longer considered journalism. By straying from the facts, they are creating stories of their own imagination rather than telling the true narrative. With narrative journalism, both the writer and the reader expect the story to be told honestly. Reality is explained with care (Clark).

All things considered, narrative journalism is on the rise. It is changing the way that news is presented. This genre is saving the dying profession of print journalism. It takes specific skills and transfers them into a more modern format. There are specific times and places where it is most effective. One of these forms is the podcast medium.

Narrative Journalism and Podcasts

In the last 20 years, journalism has been forced to transition into the world of technology and continues to evolve. This has caused structural changes to the job (Splendore and Brambilla). Because newspapers are a thing of the past, journalists have found new avenues to use when they present stories to the public. Recently, journalism has transferred onto social media platforms and is now expanding to podcasts.

The name podcast was created by combining the words “iPod” and “broadcast.” They were developed in 2004 when technology gave listeners the opportunity to download audio files onto computers on portable devices (Pâquet). Podcasts can be accessed from many different places, including YouTube, Spotify, and Apple Podcasts. When they were first created, podcasts were not an immediate success. Now however as of 2021, according to Podcastinsights.com, in the United States, “16 million people are ‘devoted podcast fans’, and 68 million people listen to podcasts weekly. These numbers are up 2% from 2019.”

Podcasts as a media format

Podcasts are a relatively new form of media that have become increasingly popular as of late. Podcasting differs from other media in many ways. Without the restrictions of live broadcasts, podcasts are very convenient and portable. Because podcasts have more freedom, they are capable of bringing in larger and more diverse audiences (Yardley, et al). You can take a podcast anywhere and listen to it no matter what you are doing. Audiences can consume media without having to sacrifice productivity (Hibbett).

This is a huge reason why podcasts have been so successful as a new form of media. Podcasts do not take the commitment that TV shows do. To consume podcasts listeners do not

have to interrupt their daily routines. Rather, podcasts are great additions to work commutes, household chores, or other mundane tasks.

When compared to other popular media formats, podcasts tend to be much longer. Most shows have episodes that run for more than an hour. With other multimedia news outlets, their goal is to get out the most information possible while taking up minimal space. In the world of 24-hour news cycles, there is less time to stretch out stories. Keeping things short and to the point makes it easier for both the reporters and the readers. However, with podcasts, there is more room to tell the whole story. In a podcast, there is no need for the inverted pyramid. In fact, putting all of the important information at the beginning of a podcast episode would be incredibly detrimental to the quality and engagement of your podcasts. This is where narrative journalism and podcasts begin to connect. The storytelling aspect of podcasts makes them a refreshing change of pace. Both the host and the listener can slow down and take the time to fully enjoy the details of a story.

Because podcasters are able to tell stories in longer formats, there is no reason for writers to stick with the typical journalistic inverted pyramid format. By breaking away from this format, journalists have much more creative freedom with podcasts than they do with other news formats. This allows them to create intriguing, suspenseful stories that keep the audience entertained throughout the entire episode. A perk to audio is that you get to visualize the story in your head. It pulls you into a world that is half imagination, half reality. Audiences are pulled into the lives of others and can completely immerse themselves in a story (Boling).

Because the audience becomes so invested in these longer formatted stories, they become invested in the podcast itself. Podcasts host take advantage of this by encouraging audience interaction. Hosts can do this in many different ways, but one of the most popular ways is having

a supporting website for the podcast. On their website, hosts can add things to episodes that enhance but are not necessary, to the story. This could include things like informational sources for listeners who want to do their own digging, photos from the event that was discussed, links to other supporting articles, or even additional information that did not quite fit into the podcast script.

When journalism uses new technology, it does not replace the existing technologies. Instead, it interacts with them (Splendore and Brambilla). Podcasts are a great example of technologies interacting. If the audience only wants to listen to the podcast, great. If the audience is so intrigued by the story and wants more information, then there are other resources located on various media outlets that they can take advantage of. Listeners can be as involved as they want to be.

Another aspect that elevates podcast storytelling and quality is including interview clips from the actual people that the podcast is discussing. For example, if a podcast is telling the story of a mass murder, it would benefit the script to include actual interview clips from the police department in that area, or even from the criminal. Allowing listeners to actually hear the voices of people who were involved in the real-life events adds a human element to the story and creates a more real, raw sense of understanding and empathy. This is something that short, inverted pyramid formatted newspaper articles are not able to do.

An added reason that podcasts are a consumer favorite is the endless array of options. With podcasts, the listener can choose from a wide variety of genres. One of the most successful genres of podcasts is true crime.

Crime Media

People love crime media. We aren't exactly sure what creates this intrigue, but a few speculations have been made. The genre is a safe thriller. Audiences can get the adrenaline rush they are after while never leaving the safety of their own home. It creates a community of sorts. A morbid fanclub if you will. The killers discussed in the media are put on a pedestal of sorts. They are looked at with awe and wonder. Some would go as far as to consider them celebrities. Not because of the great things they have accomplished, rather, the general public finds it hard to believe the things they hear about these larger-than-life killers. Their stories are listened to with fascination and amazement, much like the tall tales that are heard from grandparents. Except this time there is an added thrill factor. These crime stories happened to real people in the real world. There is no denying factual events.

True crime is by no means a new genre, but in recent years it has started transitioning from "from paperback to podcast" (Pâquet). The first major true crime podcast, *Serial*, aired in 2014 and was immediately a huge success. It "reached five million downloads from Apple's iTunes' store faster than any other podcast in history" (Pâquet). From this starting point, true crime has become one of the most popular genres of podcasts. As of 2019, it was estimated that 169 true crime podcasts are available (Boling).

Crime is usually produced in an informative way, and always will be considered news. However, in North American culture, it has also become a staple genre in the entertainment world (Dowler, et. al.). Crime media has this appeal because these true stories could have happened to anyone. Knowing that these stories are real and not just something that was created in someone's imagination increases the shock and scare factor. Some people enjoy consuming

crime media, and some do not, but all are intrigued by it. Wanting to know how people could do such awful things to other humans creates a gruesome appeal.

True Crime vs Crime News

This research deals exclusively with the genre of true crime, which is different from crime news. While these two classifications may seem similar at first glance, there is a way to distinguish between them. A simple way to think about it is this - true crime content is for entertainment and crime news is published with the intent of informing the public (Hibbett).

For the purpose of this study, based on previous literature, true crime will be defined as a genre of entertainment that can also be used to bring awareness to victims of heinous crimes and give a platform to those who have been treated questionably by police decisions. In today's world, the genre of true crime is a product that the media sells to the public.

Because this genre is meant to sell, authors want to emotionally involve the audience in a way that attaches them to the story and its victims. By "connecting facts from the real world with a fictional style narrative format, true crime stories naturally blur the line between news and entertainment" (Boling).

In podcasts specifically, when the host gives their perspective and talks about the investigative work they have done, they are creating a conversation with the listener. The hosts' goal is to promote the audience from observers to co-investigators (Boling). In newspapers, crime news is read but rarely does the audience immerse themselves in the story. By using narrative journalism in this genre, true crime content producers are able to take advantage of creative freedom while still giving the public undeniable facts. Podcasts can do this because of their long, narrative form. If these stories were regular newspaper articles, readers would have a hard time becoming emotionally involved in the case, instead, they would observe from afar.

Narrative journalism is great for true crime stories because there is so much detail. The stories told are so wild that if one did not know better they would say that the whole scenario is conjured up from someone's sick imagination. It teeters on the line of fact and fiction. The stories are outrageous enough to pass as fiction, but the horrifying intrigue is that it is a real story that happened to real people. Narrative journalism and true crime are a match made in heaven.

Based on the current state of literature and the popularity of true crime podcasts, more research in this area is warranted. This study looks to provide descriptive insights that explore the world of true crime podcasting, narrative journalism and representation. To guide this work, the following research question is proposed.

Research Question = How are podcasts and narrative journalism portraying crime?

Method – Podcast Analysis

All of the podcasts analyzed for this study were Crime Junkie episodes. According to their website, Crime Junkie is a podcast that has been airing since 2019. Crime Junkie ranks within the top three podcasts on both Apple Podcasts and Spotify. In fact, Edison Research stated that out of all United States podcasts and genres, Crime Junkie was the third most listened to podcast of 2021 (2021). It is hosted by Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat.

To have consistency throughout analysis, all episodes discussed in this study are episodes that tell the stories of solved serial killer cases in the United States. Any episodes that did not fall into this category were excluded from the study. A total of five episodes were analyzed. Serial killer episodes were chosen for this study because the narrative journalism in these episodes is very prevalent. The hosts needed narrative journalism in order to be able to best explain complex storylines and multiple characters. The 5 killers talked about in this story are Ed Kemper, Herb Baumeister, Robert Hansen, Israel Keyes and Gary Ridgeway.

Pan and Kosicki's (1993) qualitative framing analysis guided this study. Framing analysis allows the researcher to examine all four dimensions of news frames in depth: script, thematic, syntactic and rhetorical structures (Morin).

Grounded Theory

This study relied heavily on grounded theory. GT starts with general questions rather than hypotheses. This allows the researchers to follow any interesting trends they see in their data (Qureshi and Ünlü). In simpler words, grounded theorists make meaning from the data they find instead of using the data to make meaning. This does not mean that GTs can construe data to fit desired meaning, it only means that grounded theorists do not limit themselves to one specific hypothesis. Rather, they can refine their initial idea as they work through the research. GT does not have to follow statistical verification from random sampling (Qureshi and Ünlü). Researchers have much more freedom with this method than with other research approaches. This freedom was one of the reasons why grounded theory fits this study so well.

Textual analysis was also used in this study. This method of research is a way for us to decipher how other humans make sense of the world (Mckee). At its core, textual analysis is speculating what others think of situations by looking at what they say about it. The beauty of textual analysis is that there is nothing that everyone interprets in the same way. This frees everyone to follow their own meaning. Because there is no "right" answer, you are free to follow your feelings. Everyone's culture gives them different lenses to see the world. Because everyone is looking at a different reflection, no one is seeing the same thing.

When you start to understand someone else's point of view, you are free to adjust your hypothesis about their actions. This is where GT ties into textual analysis. While everyone makes sense of situations differently, this does not mean that anything goes or that one way of thinking

makes more sense than another. Instead, we analyze text in an attempt to decipher how that specific culture makes sense of the world. This creates clarity and prevents us from relying solely on our interpretation. Because everyone approaches life differently, no one has the same sense-making processes. Textual analysis is an attempt to understand other cultures' points of view. (Mckee).

This study interpreted meaning by listening to each individual podcast multiple times. The first time listening to the podcast was to familiarize the researcher with the characters and the part they played in the storyline of the episode. The next time the episode was listened to, specific aspects of the podcast that stuck out to listeners were noted. Finally, specific quotes from the hosts were typed out so that the researchers could refer back to them later in the process. These quotes were the basis of many arguments in this study.

Variables

This study's findings will be explained by looking at the four categories, script, thematic, syntactic and rhetorical, and discuss how they relate to the five podcasts as a whole. This will show what is consistent across all podcasts. Then I will take a deeper dive into each individual podcast and look at the message that the singular podcast is trying to get across.

Script structures

Script structures refer to the narrative structure of the news story (Morin). This is crucial because it is what sets narrative journalism apart from typical news reporting. The choices made in this category are what keeps audiences engaged.

Thematic structures

Thematic structures are arguably the most impactful part of these podcasts. These structures were the specific issues and topics that the news story addressed (Morin). This is

where creators can educate audiences and convince them to take action. It is also what influences culture and changes thought processes.

Syntactic structures

Syntactic structures look at the word choices that reporters make throughout their stories (Morin). The words authors use to describe people, places and things are what bring the stories to life. This is especially important in true crime media because ample descriptions are required if the audience is going to fully understand the horror of the story.

Rhetorical structures

The last category used to analyze these podcasts was rhetorical structures. This category focuses on the style that reporters decide to use when creating their arguments (Morin).

Findings/Results

Script Structures

The five podcasts that were analyzed had many script structure elements in common that impacted the narrative structure of the story. Two very prevalent and specific design techniques in these podcasts were commercials and background music. Commercials created built in cliffhangers for the podcast. The hosts would have a dramatic buildup and then pause for an advertisement to play. This created an extra feeling of suspense and increased intrigue.

The other blatant design technique was ominous background music. The same tune played throughout the entirety of each episode and gave every story an ominous undertone. Research has proven that background music goes a long way when it comes to affecting perception. Background music plays many roles in media. It conveys mood, communicates meaning, and symbolizes emotion (Nosal, Andrew P., et al.).

Previous research has looked specifically at the impact of haunting music on videos. The study found that background music heavily influences perception. Depending on the music selection it can even go as far as to negatively influence listeners' attitudes toward the characters (Nosal, Andrew P., et al.). Music impacts our subconscious and the way we perceive stories and characters. To relate this back to podcasting, the background music used in Crime Junkie gave listeners a heightened sense of danger and adrenaline which immersed them even deeper into the story. To sum, research has proven that music intensifies the audience's level of entertainment, adds a dramatic effect and gives audiences' insight into the character's emotions (Herget and Albrecht).

In each episode, the hosts never went into detail about the crimes that they were discussing. The episodes analyzed for this study were all about American serial killers, so there was no lack of gore and guts. However, the Crime Junkie hosts opted to give a brief overview of the criminal acts rather than giving the gruesome details. This was interesting because these serial killers were committing some of the worst acts that the United States has ever seen, but it was almost as if the hosts were quick to brush past what these criminals' victims endured.

In lieu of the heinous crime details, the podcast hosts spent most of their time discussing the killers' backgrounds. Flowers and Prawat dove into the why. They gave their audience an in-depth explanation of the killers' childhoods and mental health issues. This seemed to be one of the main focuses of all of the episodes. These podcasts seemed to be more of explaining how the killer became who he was rather than what they did.

For example, Ed Kemper killed at least 10 people, including his mother and grandparents. He committed horrible murders, but in the episode, there is almost no description of his actions. The podcast script acknowledges his crimes, but there is no detail. They pass over what one

would think to be the most newsworthy part of Kemper's story. Instead, the script focuses on Kemper's background.

After murdering his grandparents, Kemper was admitted to a mental institution. In the institution for the criminally insane, Kemper was given many psychiatric tests. In fact, he was given so many that he eventually mastered these evaluations. Because of his manipulative nature, the hospital authorities let him look at test results and would even allow him to administer these tests to other inmates. Flowers and Prawat expressed disbelief and indignation when they talk about what Kemper was allowed to get away with at the psychiatric hospital.

Flowers stated, "like this guy is literally giving psychological assessments to adult male sex offenders – him – this like disturbed teenage boy. To me, that just seems so out of line." The host added, "he gamed the system." Kemper was so good at talking his way out of things that he was able to get his record expunged after murdering two of his family members. The episode focuses on Kemper's background and his release from the psychiatric hospital more than the murders. This plays a big role in the way they present the story. They keep coming back to the fact that Kemper was not fully rehabilitated when he left the hospital. They continually refer to this flaw in America's rehabilitation system and question if this was the cause for Kemper's following murders.

Crime Junkie took a similar approach with the story of Herb Baumeister. This episode also involved a lot of background and storytelling. It talked about many characters, starting with the story of a victim and what happened to him and then it transitioned into the killer's childhood and background. Finally, it tells the story from the perspective of Baumeister's wife. Overall, this episode goes into much more depth than any inverted pyramid newspaper article ever could. This is important to audiences and media producers because it is an example of narrative journalism

telling an involved, complicated story as news from the perspectives of multiple people. This is a foundational aspect of narrative journalism.

With Robert Hansen, the hosts describe and explain his psyche. They use storytelling to talk about his childhood and the underlying issues that led him to do what he did. For example, the episode quotes Hansen when he explains that he was rejected by women multiple times in his life. Flowers and Prawat describe Hansen as a scrawny kid with acne and a stutter, who is trying to compensate for his insecurities. The hosts say that this is the root reason for his killings. They speculate that he wanted to feel in control, and this is why he committed sexual assault and eventually murder. Again, they attempt to answer the audience's burning question of why.

An outlier in the script structure of these episodes was the story of Israel Keyes. He was a serial killer who operated all over the United States. Before his death, Keyes requested that the majority of his actions and the details of his crimes be kept out of the media. Because of this, there is not much information on this killer. Since Flowers and Prawat do not have the same concrete, foundational background information that they do in the other episodes, the hosts are forced to speculate. At some points in the episode, they even devise their own theories. They "spiral" over what Keyes might have or might not have done. This invited the audience to use their imagination as well. The hosts end the episode with speculation about how many victims Keyes really had. This leaves the audience with a spooky feeling. It has the dramatic effect of an unfinished story.

At the other end of the spectrum is the Gary Ridgeway episode. Flowers and Prawat have a lot to unpack when it comes to this story. Instead of trying to explain everything to the listeners, they chose a few specific examples from Ridgeway's life that helped explain who he was and why he was motivated to become a killer. This was a great way to give the audience

enough information to be able to understand the full depth of the story, but not too much where it would bore them.

Most of the hosts' examples come from Ridgeway's childhood and early adult years. They use an example with his mother to show the audience where Ridgeway's hatred for women started. Then they build on that with a story about him in the Navy. Ridgeway started connecting with sex workers during his time in the Service, and eventually ended up with an STI. The hosts use this example to show listeners "where experts think that his hatred for women became focused as a hatred for sex workers." This helps the audience follow the story because all of Ridgeway's victims were sex workers.

The episode ends by telling listeners where Ridgeway is imprisoned now. Flowers and Prawat say that they have family in the same town as the prison and even add that they have gone on a wine tour there. There is clear excitement in their voices when they talk about how they were only 20 minutes away from Ridgeway. Prawat clarifies that they are not fangirling, but it definitely comes across like they are.

Thematic Structures

While every episode was about a different serial killer, each had a common, underlying theme. Crime Junkie hosts continually questioned law enforcement. Flowers and Prawat question police decisions, their overlooking of victims, and even their commitment to cases.

In the majority of the analyzed episodes, the victims were either sex workers or homosexual males. Crime Junkie pushed the narrative that these serial killers were able to be active for so long because their victims were continually overlooked. They claimed that these victims were ignored due to their occupation or sexuality. This is something that stands out in the true crime community. Research shows that most media in this genre shy away from these kinds

of victims. By ignoring stories that have to do with atypical victims, the true crime community is failing to accomplish its goal of educating the public and bringing awareness to stories that have been previously passed over. Specifically, research notes that true crime stories are not just “about what is portrayed, but also what is obscured. Scholars have argued that issues like male rape and domestic abuse are notably absent from the true crime genre and that victims from minority groups are not represented in ways commensurate with their actual victimization” (Yardley, et al). Crime Junkie does a great job of avoiding this downfall. In fact, they focus on bringing obscure stories to light.

Arguably the most prevalent topic that continually surfaces throughout every analyzed episode is the repeated questioning of the American justice system. The true crime genre as a whole considers it their responsibility to hold law enforcement accountable. Podcasts are a great place for true crime journalists to be public watchdogs – they can explore and expose wrongdoings (Boling). That being said, it does go both ways. When law enforcement does something good, Crime Junkie praises them and does not diminish their accomplishments. Both ends of the spectrum, praising and questioning, are important to note. The way that the media presents law enforcement is crucial to our attitudes toward them. The stylistic choices that the media makes when talking about police actions, “inform, mirror and transform cultural attitudes towards the law”(Pâquet).

Because the true crime genre is for entertainment, producers “must emphasize the factual elements that make the story most compelling for audiences” (Hibbett). This might mean that producers have to focus on things that put law enforcement in a negative light. If the police made a mistake that created a serious turning point in the case, the media will be quick to jump on it because it increases interest. The narratives that true crime media portray can be good or bad

depending on the way the producers choose to present information. They can push the wrong narrative, or they can give the public facts that they will not get from the police or other news outlets (Hibbett).

True crime creates a community. This genre has fostered an environment that invites learning and encourages comradery. The content that true crime gives the public also urges listeners to act. Building an active community and bringing audiences into case conversations is something that true crime podcasts are good at doing. They are doing more than simply telling a story, they are asking their listeners to take specific actions to help others (Boling).

This is evident throughout the episodes when the hosts take time to publicize nonprofit organizations, urge the audience to call tip lines with any information that relates to unsolved cases, sign petitions, or even when the hosts spend a few minutes explaining a legal procedure to the audience so that they can have a better understanding of the case's situation. By using the community that they have created, they can bring attention to cases that have slipped under the radar or brushed under the rug. Podcasts can even take it a step further and act as informal justice (Pâquet). True crime media uses its platform to educate audiences on legal processes and our justice system (Boling).

The most obvious example of this in the research done for this study was in the podcast about Robert Hansen. The Hansen episode focused on the topic of law enforcement decisions and victim treatment. Flowers and Prawat speculate how many women could have been saved if police did their job correctly from the beginning. Flowers said, "3 of the 4 murders he pled guilty to took place during a time when he should have been in jail on other charges." Prawat responded, "so what you're saying is, if they [police] had done what they were supposed to do, 3 women would still be alive."

The other salient issue in Hansen's episode was ignoring crimes committed against sex workers. At one point in the story, a rape victim was accused of making up her story. Flowers' response was, "f*** that." She went on to say, "it wasn't uncommon for people to think that it can't even be rape if the woman is a sex worker [...] absolutely bananas. It is a he said she said, and he [Hansen] is a respectable businessman and she [the victim] is a sex worker."

They brought up the same issue again later in the episode. In the story, the police had multiple reports from another girl who Hansen had kidnapped, but he was let off the hook. "Nothing happened," Flowers said. Her co-host, Prawat, said, "WAIT, are you kidding me? That is so frustrating and infuriating. It only brings me to the question of, were these victims all sex workers? And is that the reason that maybe the DA didn't want to pursue charges?". Flowers responds, "yeah it's a big part of it."

They drilled home their point about sex workers being ignored by police with two final quotes. Flowers read an excerpt from a book about the situation. "Police were not alarmed when dancers went missing from 4th avenue, vanished girls could either be good news or bad news depending on where they went and how." Flowers added her own thoughts to this by saying, "it seemed like these girls [sex workers] were disposable in this community." To sum Crime Junkie's argument in one sentence, one would say what Flowers did at the beginning of the episode. "Today's story is about police and politicians who look the other way."

The running theme of questioning police in all analyzed Crime Junkie podcasts continues in the Gary Ridgeway episode. Flowers and Prawat talk with indignation about how police were in Ridgeway's home but did not arrest him. Prawat was appalled when she said, "I know that he is responsible for a minimum of 49 deaths, but you're telling me that police were at this door after victim number 23?" Police were at Ridgeway's home after victim number 23 because they

had an eyewitness who said they had seen the victim get into Ridgeway's car the night she was murdered. Even with this eyewitness, police claimed that they had nothing on Ridgeway. The hosts sarcastically commented that they let Ridgeway slip through their fingers. Further along in the story, as listeners learn more about Ridgeway and his victim count, the hosts have more to say about police decisions. Prawat spitefully says, "it took them over 3 dozen missing or murdered women to create a task force." Flowers responds, "I know, this is a broken system."

The hosts also focus on what a child's environment and caregiver does to their mental state. They speculate that Ridgeway's relationship with his mom is what started his violent tendencies. Flowers goes into detail about Ridgeway's mom and the inappropriate things she did and said to him. The episode tells us that Ridgeway "fantasized about his mother." This brings up the famous Oedipus complex. Flowers and Prawat call it a "controversial theory," but they use it to explain Ridgeway's behavior. While they do confess that this is just speculation, they spend a lot of time talking about it in the episode. They are trying their best to give a reason why these things happened.

The last few episodes analyzed contain different, but still significant themes. With Ed Kemper, Flowers and Prawat address him in pop culture. They stated, "Ed was one of the first people used as the poster child for what a serial killer could be. Ed's grim legacy and references to the horror that he caused can still be found in modern pop culture. He was a part of Thomas Harris' inspiration for Buffalo Bill in *Silence of the Lamb*, clips of his interviews have been mixed into songs by bands, and he was recently a character in Netflix's hit show *Mindhunter*." Kemper has made his mark on society and *Crime Junkie* is aware of this. He is almost a household name, on the same scale as Manson or Bundy, and as the episode says, "fascination with his terrible crimes [will] continue."

In Herb Baumeister's story, the main topic was mental health. The episode emphasized the killer's mental illness and how he showed disturbing signs in childhood. Baumeister's family saw the signs and did not get him the help that he needed. The script read, "Herb was diagnosed with schizophrenia and multiple personalities, but was never treated or put in therapy." They circled back to this point again later on saying, "his dad knew that there was something wrong with him and didn't attempt to get him help." The hosts reiterate multiple times throughout the story the importance of mental health and getting the help that you need.

Another prevalent issue in the Baumeister episode matched the themes of other analyzed episodes like Ridgeway and Hansen. Crime Junkie was very against it and even seemed surprised by it. Flowers said, "apparently there was this crazy rule that there was a 30 day waiting period before police could do an investigation into a missing person case." The co-host, Prawat, responded with, "30 days?!" Flowers answers, "[yes], 30 days." "I'd never heard of this before," she says, when referring to the rule, "maybe people in the gay community weren't getting the kind of attention. I was shocked [when I heard it]." Baumeister's victims were in the gay community, and the hosts recognized that in these times, that specific community did not get the same treatment from law enforcement as the general population.

In the Israel Keyes script, no significant issues or topics were addressed. The story itself was so compelling that there was no need to add anything else. It is hard to attach any theme, with the exception of fear and disbelief, onto Keyes' actions. Another possible explanation for the omission of issues is that this episode was one of Crime Junkie's earlier works. Crime Junkie had not fully developed into who they are today and were still attempting to find a format that was most effective for them.

Syntactic Structures

Each episode used its own unique descriptive adjectives so this category will discuss every episode individually, starting with Ed Kemper. When describing Kemper and his actions, the script used words like: “unthinkable,” “tragedy,” “shocking,” “horror,” “nightmare,” “shaken up,” “incomprehensive,” “prey,” “creepy,” “unnerving,” “fascinating,” “terrible” and “terrorizing.”

This extreme language changes audience perception. For example, words like “prey” changes the impression of Kemper from that of a murder, to an animal. Using “incomprehensive” and “unthinkable” show that no one is able to completely wrap their minds around what Kemper was doing. “Horror,” “nightmare,” “fascinating,” “terrorizing” and “unnerving” are polarizing words chosen by writers to make Kemper’s story seem almost like a horror film.

Keyes' script contains no gory or graphic language. It lets the story speak for itself. The descriptive phrases and words used were: “oh my god,” *gasps*, “creepy,” “full-body chills,” “are you kidding me!,” “tragic,” “terrifying,” “no one was safe,” “animal,” “cocky” and “hunted.” The gasps and emotional exclamations from Flowers and Prawat show their intent to transfer their disbelief to listeners.

The Ridgeway Crime Junkie episode used these descriptive words and phrases: “stalk”, “preying”, “playing with their bodies after death,” “messed up,” “super good at blending in” and “[Ridgeway was] smart in how he killed.” The words “stalk” and “preying” match the animalistic language used with Kemper and Keyes. The difference in Ridgeway’s adjectives is when the script refers to him as being “good” and “smart.” These words are typically positive, and are not normally linked to the actions of serial murderers. By using these words, it seems as

though the script is admiring Ridgeway. The juxtaposition between smart and evil is interesting to note, and also gives audiences a reason to be captivated by Ridgeway's mind.

In Baumiester's story, no significant descriptive words were used. Often, omission of language in certain sections, points the audience to other topics in the story. This is true in Baumiseter's episode. More time was spent on issues like Baumisester's mental health and childhood than on describing him as a criminal.

Hansen's episode is similar to Baumister's in that both scripts use little descriptive language when talking about the crimes and criminals. However, Hansen's episode does use many words and phrases to discuss police decisions. The episode used words and phrases like, "blows my mind," "frustrating," "upsetting," "infuriating," "what?!", "I can't quite get it to add up." There were also comments made with sarcastic undertones such as, "right under police's noses" and "snuck under the radar."

These comments added an aspect of personalization to the hosts. There is obvious bias in these descriptions, but this allows audiences to have an insight into what Flowers and Prawat are thinking. The choices made when picking descriptors could also show that there is someone else to blame other than the killer. Hansen was obviously the direct cause of these victims' deaths, but the hosts seem to believe that other systemic issues are also at fault.

Rhetorical Structures

Some commonalities in the rhetorical structures of these podcasts included calling the killers by their first names, having the co-host play the part of the audience, and playing actual interview clips from the killer.

In each podcast, the hosts referred to the killers only by their first names. In newspapers or any other media format, the norm is to call people by their last names. Crime Junkie ignored

this model. Using their first names humanized the killers and made it feel as though the hosts were referring to them in a more informal manner. The way the hosts referred to these killers made them seem almost like a friend rather than a convicted serial murderer.

Another rhetorical structure finding was that the co-host, Prawat, plays the part of the audience. Instead of telling the stories, she reacted to them. She showed surprise, asked questions, and even theorized scenarios when the case facts were unclear. It seemed as though she was playing a strategic role. Where Prawat vocalized surprise or rage was where the hosts wanted the audience to feel the same emotions. Another benefit to having a co-host was the ability to have dialogue. These conversations gave each episode a more personal feel while also allowing the hosts to hammer home their points. In their dialogue, they could bounce theories off of each other, speculate about law enforcement thought processes, and even fangirl over these serial killer celebrities.

The last commonality in the rhetorical structure category was previously recorded interview clips. In every episode analyzed, the hosts played an interview clip from each killer. The audience heard their voices and their explanations for their motive. This greatly added to the episodes because it made these killers feel more like real people. Hearing them explain why they killed made them feel less like a figment of your imagination and more of a reality.

Now to dive into the rhetorical structures of each individual podcast. The first one discussed is Ed Kemper's episode. The underlying tone of this episode was rushed. The hosts talked in excited tones. It was almost as if they were trying to transfer their emotions to the audience. This transfer of emotions is something that sets podcasts apart from traditional newspapers. When a newspaper is read, it is up to each individual reader to decipher the tone that the author originally intended. In podcasts, and in this episode specifically, the hosts use voice

inflection and tone to put the audience in a specific mood of the producer's choice. The listeners are on a rollercoaster ride and have no control. The hosts are completely in control of how the audience feels the emotions of the story. This pulls the audience in even more. Compare it to when you listen to someone tell a story in person that they are very excited about. When they are animated, you can't help but be pulled in. It is the same with podcasts.

Another obvious style technique was the dramatic ending. The episode closes with these words, "Kemper remains behind bars where he belongs and where he'll stay for the rest of his life." This is a prime example of narrative journalism and how it can impact the story in powerful ways. If this was a newspaper article it would have ended with a sentence like, "Kemper was sentenced to life in prison and is now being held in the California Medical Facility." The stark differences between these two style choices are proof of the drama that narrative form can add to stories.

Another component of narrative form is the need to please the audience. Unlike news reporting, you are not simply giving information, you are selling a product. This was evident in the Herb Baumeister episode, which was specifically requested by fans. This shows audience interaction. Crime Junkie, at the end of the day, is selling a product. They are trying to keep their customers happy. Their intent is to create content that will satisfy the listeners and keep them coming back. This explains their rhetorical structure approach to this episode.

The third analyzed episode tells the story of Robert Hansen. In this story, the hosts explain things in a way that makes it seem as though the police are not doing their job correctly. Their tones come across as dramatic and shocked. Flowers and Prawat use inflections and attempt to pull the audience into the emotions they are feeling. It is almost as if the hosts are acting and putting on a performance. Parts of the episode sound forced, which makes their

message come across as less genuine. This gives the audience the perception that the hosts are pushing an agenda and trying to over-dramatize their content, which might lower their credibility for some listeners.

This perception of lowered credibility, while evident in Hansen's episode, was not a running theme in these podcasts. The Israel Keyes episode is a great example of how podcasts can interact with other forms of media in order to convey their message and increase reliability. This specific episode reinforced their audio message with security footage from the scene of a few of Keyes' crimes. These videos were on the Crime Junkie website as additional content for their audience.

This reinforced to the audience that Keyes really was a monster who was capable of ominous, unthinkable things. The hosts knew that seeing the killer in action would add to their story. This was a specific style technique. The whole episode was based on speculation, but these videos were a contrast because they did not allow for any speculation. It was like the hosts kept themselves grounded by using video footage to show the facts that they did know.

Ending this discussion of rhetorical structures is the Gary Ridgeway episode. His episode was focused solely on his upbringing. The argument that was being pushed in this story was that Ridgeway had reasons for his actions. The only important stylistic decision of the hosts was their decision to focus on Ridgeway's childhood and background instead of his victims. The decision affected the listeners' views of Ridgeway. Instead of being appalled by what he did, by the end of the episode, it seems as though you are able to understand and explain why he acted the way he did. Whether this was the hosts' intention or not is unclear, but the way that they told the story created this feeling.

Conclusion/Discussion

To conclude, this study found that the genre of true crime personalizes killers to engage audiences and create added intrigue. They do this by only referring to killers by their first name, giving explanations for their actions, and using the killers' own words to give them the opportunity to explain why they did what they did. This genre is also quick to question if law enforcement is doing their job to the best of their ability.

These findings matter to society because it is important to understand the messages that the media is sending. We consume media on a daily basis, and it impacts us in many ways, both consciously and subconsciously. While this media is not all in the true crime genre, we need to learn to take a closer look at the messages we are consuming.

These findings matter to the media because true crime podcasts, like Crime Junkie, have the potential to reach audiences in ways that no media has before (Yardley, et al). These podcasts evoke emotion and action from its listeners. What Crime Junkie is doing to engage audiences is working very well. If other podcasts follow in their footsteps the medium of podcasts will be able to grow even more. This growth will create more communities that, like the Crime Junkie community, are ready to advocate for change when needed.

Limitation/New areas of research

This study did have limitations. It was not able to compare narrative journalism in podcast episodes directly to newspaper articles from the time of the crimes. Comparing these two very different journalism styles about the same event would tell us more about narrative journalism and its effects on perceptions and attention spans. It would also tell us how far, if at all, these narrative podcasts are straying from the truth.

Another area of research that this study could not explore is the effect of calling killers by their first names. What does this mean for audience relation? Does it make the killer seem less threatening? Why do podcasts use a killer's first name when newspapers only use last names? Answering these questions would enable us to be able to better understand the effects that these narrative true crime stories have on audiences.

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