Capitalizing on Capital Crime

True crime is a genre rapidly gaining popularity. From podcasts such as *Serial* and *Crime Junkie* to the Netflix TV show *DAHMER - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story,* people are tuning in to watch real life crime stories. Because of their growing popularity, questions are being raised about the morality of true crime stories being presented as a form of entertainment.

True crime media has various positive effects. It provides entertainment to many people and lucrative opportunities for producers. It also makes viewers more aware of personal safety, familiarizes them with the social justice system, and potentially helps them become more empathic. Some true crime documentaries have caused verdicts to be overturned. This indicates that these programs can effect real change, as well as draw attention to and combat injustice. Certain viewers become interested in ongoing cases and try to help resolve them. Some viewers share DNA with databases searchable by law enforcement, and even provide their own theories. Supporters of the genre claim that these stories have a right to be told based on free speech principles.

However, there are also downsides to the genre. It normalizes violence and dehumanizes victims, who are often already marginalized members of society. People claim true crime media succeeds in giving killers the attention they crave and inspiring "copycat killers." Multiple true crime series have been produced without the knowledge or consent of the victims' families. This occurred, notably, with the *DAHMER* series on Netflix, which the families called "harsh and careless." There are also claims that true crime perpetuates the stigma against certain mental disorders, especially when these are described as "warning signs" that someone may become a killer. Viewers can also suffer long-lasting psychological effects such as anxiety and overactive nervous systems. Some viewers who become overly interested in ongoing cases develop their own incorrect theories about culprits and target innocent members of the public online.

Discussion Questions

1. Is the marketing and production of true crime media as entertainment ethical?
2. Who has the right to tell a story? Can telling a story be disrespectful?
3. Do the dead have a right to respect and privacy? Why or why not?
4. In evaluating the ethics of the true crime genre, does the medium matter?

Written by Claire Cherrill, age 15
Kent Place School, Summit, New Jersey