Ripped-From-Headlines: The Success of Fictional Crime Dramas through True Crime

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

by

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Abstract

Fictional crime dramas have been a staple in the entertainment industry for many years. These programs captivate the viewers and have them waiting for the next episode. The utilization of true crime elements might be the answer to their long lasting popularity. Many shows have taken inspiration from crimes that have occurred to real people to incorporate into the program. The plots with true crime elements entice people and can allure them for many different reasons. Those different reasons are explored though my research as I analyze the success behind this "ripped-from-headlines" tactic being employed to attract the audience in the fictional crime drama genre.

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The Process Analysis Statement

True crime elements are important ingredients for the recipe of a successful, fictional crime program. Crime dramas are not new, but there is a newfound popularity of consuming true crime content. Due to this late start to stardom, there is not an abundance of research that has been conducted on the effects of true crime inspiration within crime dramas.

When beginning my research, I was looking for hard statistics. Yet, this idea delved into more psychological themes that I had not initially expected. I saw myself in those themes, and I thought that many others could possibly see themselves, too. From this, I learned that I could look far deeper into topics. Numbers never related to me, but learning the reason behind those numbers led me to a greater understanding. I was taught by this project that there is a reason behind everything, even the obscure things that people might not think about.

Overall, I was challenged to look beyond the surface, beyond the numbers. Though this is a fairly new idea, I was able to think creatively to fill in all the blank spaces and was not stopped when I hit a roadblock. There is more to research that just purely numbers and this project demonstrates that concept. Though this project was difficult to construct, I believe that I was able to successfully challenge myself.

Introduction

For decades, society has consumed fictional crime programing. The unwavering interest in these programs has contributed to their sustainability throughout time. Viewers religiously tune in to watch the newest episode of their favorite programs, some even gaining a cult following. The questions is what sparks the interest that keeps these programs alive and thriving. There is a correlation between true, real world events referenced in a plot line of a fictional crime program and the popularity of that program.

The History of Crime Dramas

The genre of "crime drama" has been producing programs since the late 1940s ("Barney Blake", 2017). Since its inception in the 40s, crime dramas have steadily been produced. National Broadcasting Company (NBC) credits themselves with airing the first crime drama, *Barney Blake, Police Reporter*. It ran from April 22, 1948 to July 8, 1948. After this thirteen week run, it was cancelled by its sponsor, American Tobacco Company ("Barney Blake", 2017).

Though *Barney Blake, Police Reporter* aired in 1948, it did not begin to gain popularity until the 1950s and 1960s ("Barney Blake", 2017). In 1951, the popular radio drama, *Dragnet*, by Jack Webb transferred to television. It used real-life crimes from the records of the Los Angeles Police Department to form its content. It started the "stolen from headlines" phenomenon. The show did not go into detail about the crime, but rather shed light on the effects that the crimes had on the victims and the victims' family members. The program was not an immediate hit, but soon began to gain viewers ("Crime Dramas," n.d.).

After *Dragnet*, another crime program by the name of *I Spy* debuted in 1965 ("Crime Dramas," n.d.). *I Spy* starred Robert Culp and Bill Cosby. This program made a big impact because it casted the first African American actor, Cosby, as a lead role. This program began right at the climax of the Civil Rights Movement in the United States. Though in reality, racial tensions were at an all-time high, the program showcased a fictional reality where race was not addressed at all. Robert Culp recalls Cosby stating to him, "Listen, our television series is a statement about being a non-statement," ("Crime Dramas," n.d.). Cosby later went on to earn three Emmy Awards for his performance on the program ("Crime Dramas," n.d.).

Later in 1974, *Police Woman* first premiered. It starred Angie Dickinson as the first woman in a lead role. It was an immediate success as it was produced on the heels of the Women's Liberation Movement. It was a reflection of the changing of societal views toward women in a position of power. Its success made an impact on later programs that would start to employ women in lead roles ("Crime Dramas,"n.d.).

Cases

The history of crime dramas show a pattern of real events and societal changes influencing the program. After the earlier programs built the foundation for a successful crime drama, new programs began to emerge and gain popularity. As the genre grew, the use of true crime and true events within episodes was expanded. In 1990, the first episode of *Law & Order* premiered (Yasharoff, 2019). Since the debut of the first episode, writers for the show have repeatedly drawn inspiration from true events. Many of the plot lines portrayed in the show came directly from news headlines (Barnes, 2014).

Law & Order has modeled many of their episodes from true events (Barnes). In the first season, episode three is modeled after Dr. Jack Kevorkian who was found guilty of second degree murder after in the death of Thomas Youk. Youk was a fifty-two year old man suffering from amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. Dr. Kevorkian videotaped himself giving Youk a lethal injection of chemicals which ended Youk's life. Dr. Kevorkian then proceeded to give the tape to Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) so it could be aired on their program, 60 Minutes (Bhanoo, 2011).

This was the fifth time Dr. Kevorkian was prosecuted for the death of an ill person. Dr. Kevorkian was never convicted of the previous charges. Three ended with an acquittal and the fourth case resulted in a mistrial. In the first four cases he assisted people that were giving themselves a lethal injection, but in Youk's case, Dr. Kevorkian administered the injection as Youk was too ill to do it himself (Bhanoo, 2011). This case was a benchmark in the controversial topic of assisted suicide. Dr. Kevorkian did many televised appearances, like talking with Anderson Cooper of Cable New Network (CNN) in 2011. There was also a Home Box Office (HBO) movie called *You Don't Know Jack* with Al Pacino playing Dr. Jack Kevorkian (Bhanoo, 2011).

In the episoded modeled after Dr. Kervorkian titled "The Reaper's Helper," a homosexual man was helping other homosexual men suffering from Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS) end their lives. The prosecution gets backlash on their decision to prosecute this man and their attempts are seen as an attack on the homosexual community. Unlike Dr. Kervorkian who was found guilty of second degree murder by a jury in Michigan,

this man was found not guilty of all the charges brought against him with the exception of reckless endangerment in the second degree (Barnes, 2014).

Continuing through the first season, episode nine "Indifference" is also inspired by a real life crime that was committed against Lisa Steinberg (Barnes, 2014). Joel Steinberg was an attorney in New York. Steinberg was convicted of manslaughter for the death of Lisa Steinberg, whom he claimed he had adopted, but the adoption was never finalized. Lisa Steinberg died from a brain injury that resulted from the physical abuse of Joel Steinberg. Steinburg's partner, Hedda Nussbaum, the proclaimed mother of Lisa, also suffered abuse at the hands of Steinberg. Nussbaum was given immunity in exchange for her testimony (CNN, 2003).

The depiction by *Law & Order* is eerily similar. Though the girl in the episode is not an adopted child, she was abused by her father. The abuse is noticed by the teacher and before long, the girl is taken to the hospital where she will ultimately pass away from a brain injury. The actress playing the mother looks very similar to Hedda Nussbaum. The woman also falls prey to her husband who was brainwashing her with drugs, specifically cocaine (Barnes, 2014). Joel Steinberg and Hedda Nussbaum smoked cocaine together throughout their relationship, but Nussbaum claims Steinberg's use increased during the week Lisa Steinberg was murdered (CNN, 2003). The woman has to testify against her husband, but unlike, Nussbaum, she enters a plea deal and also goes to prison (Barnes, 2014).

The episode is a clear fictional representation of the real case and even offers a disclaimer by the narrator at the end of the show. It states that this episode may remind the viewer of the Lisa Steinburg case, but to understand that the episode to not meant to be a perfect depiction of the case. The Lisa Steinberg story was highly publicized. Nussbaum did an interview with Larry

King in 2003 promoting her book, *Surviving Intimate Terrorism*, that outlines her life with Joel Steinberg. In the interview, Nussbaum and King acknowledge the *Law & Order* episode (CNN, 2003).

Law & Order championed the "ripped-from-headlines" brand. Nearly every episode of the first season was a fictional portrayal of a true crime that had occurred. *Law & Order* then began to create many spin-offs. Once those spin-offs gained more popularity than the original show, many of those true crime plots were reserved to be showcased in spin-offs like *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* (Barnes, 2014).

Law & Order is not the only show to follow this use of a true crime model. *Criminal Minds* first aired in September of 2005. The show follows agents in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Behavioral Analysis Unit. *Criminal Minds* also has referenced true crime. Though unlike *Law & Order*, *Criminal Minds* does not create an almost exact replication of the true crime, but rather utilizes some elements of the true crime ("About Criminal Minds").

For example, the episode "Natural Born Killer" drew inspiration from Richard Kuklinski (D, 2017). Richard Kuklinski was a murderer that seemingly took the lives of others for his own enjoyment. The antagonist in this episode shares the same idea of finding enjoyment as Richard Kuklinski. Also, the antagonist and Kuklinski have similar backgrounds. Their backgrounds were littered by abuse at the hands of their own fathers (D, 2017).

Further, *Criminal Minds* often makes direct reference to the true crime from which the episode's inspiration comes. In the episode "Blood Hungry," the antagonist was a loose interpretation of Richard Trenton Chase. The actors specifically mention Richard Trenton Chase's name during the episode. As the seasons progress, more true crime criminals and cases

are referenced. "The Tribe" is the sixteenth episode in the first season that makes reference to

Charles Manson and his crimes three times throughout the episode (D, 2017).

NCIS is another crime drama that first aired in September of 2003. NCIS follows Naval

Criminal Investigative Service agents as they solve crimes within the Navy and Marine Corps.

Though NCIS is said to have used true crimes as ideas for episodes, those particular episodes are

not disclosed to the audience to protect the rights of the victims (Shen, 2012).

These crime dramas have had immense success throughout their runs on television. All of

the shows have incorporated elements of true crime within their episodes. Some shows employ

more elements than others, but all choose to apply this element to their respective shows. By

taking advantage of the material that reality provides, these shows have propelled their success.

True crime is an integral part of the shows' popularity. Though true crime can be dark, it is

interesting and alluring. The true crime element collelates to the magnitude of viewers. True

crime has fascinated and captivated the audience.

True Crime Popularity

True crime has captivated viewers since before the first creation of crime drama on

television. Floyd Gibbons, a well-known newspaper correspondent, was the announcer for Red

Network of NBC radio that had its first program on February 24, 1930 (Van Wagenen).

Following Gibbons, Lowell Thomas hosted CBS radio's first daily news program, "Lowell

Thomas and the News" (Shedden, 2014). During Thomas's broadcast, the United States was

suffering from the Great Depression, therefore news reported was rarely uplifting and positive.

To combat this negativity in the news, Thomas would end the show with a light-hearted story. By 1939, Thomas had started the first televised nightly newscasts. When commenting on the reach of this work, Thomas stated, "The voice of Lowell Thomas probably has been heard by more people than any other voice in history..." and he continues with, "His total radio audience on the air has been estimated at seventy billions," (Shedden, 2014).

The popularity of Lowell Thomas's radio news program set the groundwork for others in the journalism field. In the United States, there are approximately 31,445 news broadcasting platforms ("National Association of Broadcasters"). Not only does traditional broadcasting of true crime, such as radio or television, have a large consumer base, dramatized depiction of true crimes have garnered popularity as well.

Not only has true crime been consumed by viewers of the news, but now by people watching cable television shows. Investigation Discovery, commonly referred to as the ID Channel, plays hosts to an assortment of programs that retell true crime stories. These shows frequently combine the real victims or family members narrating the scenes as actors are reenacting the crime that took place. The ID Channel is home to programs such as *Evil Lives Here*, *Fear Thy Neighbor*, and *Murder Comes to Town* (Battaglio, 2016).

The ID Channel has had tremendous success with their programs. Many celebrities such as Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Serena Williams have voiced their preference for the channel's style of true crime re-creations (Battaglio, 2016). These celebrities are not the only ones watching these shows. In fact, the ID Channel was "the most watched ad-supported cable network among women ages 25 to 54" in the fourth quarter of 2015 (Battaglio, 2016). There are

even Facebook groups created by fans of the shows to communicate their thoughts and opinions with other viewers.

Cable channels are not the only platforms benefiting from the interest in true crime. True crime podcasts are on the surge as well as true crime docu-series. The docu-series, *Making a Murder* premiered on the online streaming platform, Netflix, on December 18, 2015 (France, 2016). It follows the life of Steven Avery, a Wisconsin man making his claim of innocence of the murder of young woman named Teresa Halbach. Avery had been wrongly convicted of sexual assault prior to being put behind bars for the murder of Halbach (France, 2016).

Netflix has not released how many people have watched *Making a Murder*, but is popularity was clearly shown by the action of the public. After the release of the first season, a petition was made to the president to free Steven Avery. The petition was even responded to by the White House thanking people for the interest in the case as well as explaining that the president cannot pardon state offenders such as Steven Avery (France, 2016).

Why is True Crime Popular?

True crime has played a role in the popularity of many different viewing platforms, from radio to cable to online streaming services. In all avenues, true crime has been met with a large audience. There are many different pieces to how true crime works it charm on an audience.

Firstly, adrenaline is addictive. Viewers are aware of what elements might possibly be in a crime. They are aware it could be disturbing or repulsive, but they continue to watch it. Criminologist Scott Bonn contributed this faithfulness to the shows to the adrenaline the audience feels while watching making it hard to turn away. The adrenaline rush is almost seen as

a reward for watching. Bonn states, "If you doubt the addictive power of adrenaline, think of the thrill-seeking child who will ride a roller coaster over and over until he or she becomes physically ill" (Bonn, 2016).

The crime often depicted in many shows, whether it be true crime or a fictional crime drama, is murder. People view murder as one of the most gruesome crimes that can be committed. By taking advantage of this mindset, murder gives the viewer the biggest thrill. The thrill comes from the spectacle. The more heinous the crime the more adrenaline the viewer feels rewarding he or she for watching. This type of adrenaline feeling is often compared to procrastination by a student at school. A student may wait until the last minute to complete an assignment. When they finally start the assignment right before it is due, they may feel a sense of adrenaline that pushes them to complete the work. If the assignment is returned with a passing grade, the student feels a sense of satisfaction from their adrenaline rush (Nemko, 2016).

Also, true crime is most commonly viewed by women. For example, the celebrities who said they love watching the ID Channel, Lady Gaga, Nicki Minaj, and Serena Williams, are all women (Battaglio, 2016). In many instances, true crime shows depict women as the victims (Sehgal, 2019). In contrast from wanting to get an adrenaline rush, women see true crime as a learning tool. They use the information presented as a way to prevent becoming a victim themselves. It is used to garner and perfect their survival instinct (Sehgal, 2019). This sentiment has led to the resurgence of the popularity of true crime (Smith, 2018).

Not only do women watch true crime for a form of victim prevention, it is also watched by those who have already fallen victim to that crime being shown. According to Christie Tcharkhoutian, "The psychological reason that we are attracted to watching true crime shows is

for the purpose of re-experiencing traumatic situations in safe environments" (Stinson, 2018).

People use watching true crime as a form of therapy. They watch the crimes that have happened

to them to get a sense of closure from the real life events they have experienced without feeling

personally threatened or in danger (Stinson, 2018).

The question is, if true crime is the only reason for crime drama popularity, why do

viewers not just watch the news or other outlets that report on crime. The explanation lies in the

way that *Law & Order* and *Criminal Minds* present the true crime elements to the audience.

People appreciate storytelling. The culmination of using true crime elements and telling the story

in a fashion that is appealing makes these crime dramas seemingly irresistible.

Storytelling has been a custom of many cultures for many eras. Storytelling has been

present in all parts of the world (Kluger, 2017). There is a power behind a well constructed story.

Many businesses employ storytelling as a marketing strategy. A case study conducted by Jill

Avery showed that character-driven stories often cause the oxytocin synthesis. Oxytocin is

produced when a person exhibits frustration or is shown kindness. It causes a person to be

motivated to cooperate with others. In all, ideas presented in a story format cause better recall for

the listener or viewer as well as a better overall understanding (Zak, 2014).

Conclusion

The crime drama genre is very popular. Overtime the formula for a successful show has

been perfected. There is an element that all successful crime dramas include. That element is true

crime. True crime attracts viewers in many different ways. It allows them to feel an adrenaline

rush that leaves them to have a sense of satisfaction. Also, it serves as a survival instinct tool for

women and allows people who have suffered from trauma relive their experience in a safe

environment. Further, delivering true crime through storytelling keeps viewers' attention.

Overall, as long as there are crimes being committed in real life, crime dramas will have a

copious amount of material to have a successful show.

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