Is It More Than Morbid Fascination? The Empowering Effect of True Crime Podcasts

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Shawna Sheperd explores true crime as an activity system and true crime podcasts as a subgenre, addressing issues of ethical communication, civic engagement, and discourse communities. Sheperd asks, how do true crime podcasts interact with the real world? What do we gain from listening to sometimes horrific tales? Is it more than just morbid fascination?

Podcasts as a Genre

When I first was introduced to podcasts, I immediately became attached. In a matter of twenty minutes to an hour of listening, I would be thrown into a whirlwind of stories that emphasized innovation, drama, research, or survival. Inherently, podcasts are designed to be listened to "on the go." Through my cell phone, computer, tablet, and car radio I can stream a podcast whenever and wherever I please.

Podcasts can be considered a **genre** because they "are recognizable responses to recurring situations that accomplish specific social action in the world" ("Genre Research Terms"). They follow genre conventions (which I'll talk about later), such as being serialized audio files that are downloadable or streamed from the internet. Under the umbrella term podcasts, many subgenres exist. For instance, subgenres of podcasts can include shows that focus specifically on different kinds of goals (entertainment, news, education), topics (sports, history, storytelling, true crime), and audiences (kids, adults, people interested in fashion, etc.). No matter what subgenre you are thinking of, podcasts have become an accessible multimodal genre that allows listeners

to cherry-pick what information they receive about the topics that interest them. Podcasts are **multimodal** because they combine written research (which uses an alphabetical mode) and spoken information (which uses an oral mode), and then convey that information to listeners via an aural mode ("Multimodality Terms"). Besides being multimodal (combining text, audio, and images), podcasts are distributed through many **media** ("Multimodality Terms") using social media pages to create a final **multimedia** product.

True Crime Podcasts as an Activity System

In this article, I explore how true crime functions as an activity system, of which true crime podcasts are a part. I then explore the true crime podcast subgenre more closely to see how their socialization has generated intercultural communities. **Activity systems** are networks of people, tools, activities, and genres ("Literate Activity Terms"). They usually involve one or more people trying to achieve a goal in the world (to change something, to create something, to communicate something, to share something). In some cases, activity systems can work on a really large scale to shape the way **discourse communities** function. That is, large groups of people who are working on similar goals, or interested in similar things, all acting within particular activity systems that are interrelated, and that use similar genres ("Genre Research Terms").

A true crime discourse community would be a group of people who share the common goal of researching, listening, and retelling real-life crime stories. Often, people taking part in a true crime discourse community would use similar genres for their research such as nonfiction books, documentaries, websites, news articles, police reports, court proceedings, magazines, and podcasts. A small-scale example of a true crime discourse community I am a part of is my podcast book club. We are a group of ten women who were previously strangers until one mutual friend of ours on Facebook connected us. We meet biweekly to discuss a predecided podcast episode, centered on true crime. We share the common goal of confronting our own fears and anxieties while we discuss real cases. Often, group members will bring outside researched information into our meetings if the podcast episode didn't satisfy their questions.

When considering true crime as an activity system, levels of participation from the discourse community will vary. For instance, a person who is avidly engaged in this activity system would use multiple genres, tools, and interactions to better research certain cases (listening to a podcast episode,

reading a book on that case, or browsing the internet for more information). Similarly, a person who is moderately engaged can be satisfied with choosing only one or two genres or tools to investigate a particular case (listening to only one podcast episode). Regardless of a person's level of interest in the true crime activity system, looking at true crime podcasts becomes an interesting case study for how strangers in a discourse community can interact and inspire change.

Are There Any Genre Conventions Specific to a True Crime Podcast?

True crime podcasts will have **genre conventions** that will appear across any subgenre of podcasts. Beyond being a genre that is an audio file that is downloadable or streamed from the internet, any podcast might have intro music, ads scattered throughout, or announcements and updates targeted to loyal listeners on relevant information such as podcast changes, live tour dates, or any personal anecdotes. When it comes to true crime, two specific subgenre conventions that stick out to me are the subject material and commentary that refers to mental health, self-care, or justice groups.

Genre conventions are the characteristics of texts that make it recognizable as participating in a specific genre. This includes genre features that might be visible (like modes in use, language use, tone, and content) and social goals that we have to infer (why these elements, valued by whom, toward what purposes) ("Genre Research Terms").

When considering subject material, true crime podcasts report details of real-life crimes and examine the actions of perpetrators. Often, crimes analyzed through podcasts focus on murder, assault, missing persons, or conspiracies. There are many true crime podcasts that exist within the United States and abroad that use storytelling, dialogues, or panel discussions to dive deeper into cases. Often, the format, style, and tone of each podcast changes to fit the personality of the host. The personality of the podcast will often inform how discussions of mental health, self-care, or advocacy for related justice groups occur. In some true crime podcasts, the hosts may take on a personal tone—speaking directly to their listeners about their own struggles with mental health and how they encourage therapy. Other podcasts will refer to nonprofit organizations that are doing important justice-oriented work to bring public awareness to the forefront of their episodes. Some podcasts will have self-care resources available to their listeners advertised at the beginning or end of their episodes and on their websites.

True Crime Podcasts and Ethics

For me, I choose to listen to certain true crime podcasts due to their practice of **ethics** and **ethical communication**. Ethics are moral principles that guide a person's behavior. Ethical communication is the way a person engages with others by being honest, clear, accurate, and open-minded. Listening to true crime can be tough because you are listening to terrible tragedies individuals have faced and looking into the perpetrators that represent the most depraved parts of humanity. When I choose a podcast, I look for hosts and production teams sensitive to victims' legacies and families, and that handle the complexities of trauma and mental health with care.

Figure 1: QR code to "My Favorite Murder" (MFM) podcast.

Figure 2: QR code to "Casefile" podcast.

Figure 3: QR code to "Crime Junkie" podcast.

The first true crime podcast I listened to is "My Favorite Murder" (MFM). MFM (Figure 1) is a self-declared true-crime comedy podcast. The hosts, former comedian Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark, clarify that the "comedy" portion of their podcast isn't intended to be insensitive to any victim or the victims' families, but rather the jokes made often target the perpetrators and are used to make processing heavy case details easier. Not only does the MFM team clarify their comedic intentions at each live show, they hold a "corrections corner" at the beginning of their recorded episodes where they address previous inaccurate facts or statements they may have expressed in past episodes. Since MFM was my first experience with true crime podcasts, I felt relieved and encouraged by how they spoke about the cases.

There are many ethical true crime podcasts that exist with different stylistic approaches. For instance, an Australian true crime podcast called "Casefile" (Figure 2) is dramatically different from MFM because instead of having a dialogic storytelling conversation, this podcast relies on a scripted narrative by one host. "Casefile" takes on a more serious tone by focusing on narrative reports and facts found within original public or police documents and excludes any personal information or anecdotes about the host. "Crime Junkie" (Figure 3) is another podcast that exists between MFM and "Casefile's" stylistic extremes. The host, Ashley Flowers, reports facts on cases while

having her cohost, Brit Prawat, act as a commentator on those cases. "Crime Junkie" includes personal anecdotes and has a dialogic and improvised feel like MFM, but also follows a closely scripted narrative that isn't necessarily comedic. No matter what style a true crime podcast uses, the subject discussed moves beyond entertainment by interacting with the real-world crimes.

P-CHAT and True Crime Podcasts

To better understand how true crime podcasts interact within the real world, I will break down the subgenre using terms from an analytical theory called **CHAT**, or cultural-historical activity theory. Illinois State University's Writing Program uses a version of this theory framework, pedagogical CHAT or **P-CHAT**, to think critically about literate activities, such as listening to a podcast ("Literate Activity Terms"). The fascinating thing about using P-CHAT is that its terms provide a flexible and interactive way to investigate a new genre. That being said, every time you investigate a new genre or new writing situation, you don't always have to use each of the seven P-CHAT terms to generate or complicate your ideas.

For the purpose of investigating true crime podcasts, I focused on five P-CHAT terms: production, distribution, reception, socialization, and ecology. I chose these elements of P-CHAT because I am interested in the inherent multimodal research and nature of true crime podcasts and how they generate intercultural communities. Intercultural communities are generated when two (or more) culturally different groups come together to mutually exchange ideas, cultural norms, and develop connections among each other (González). To begin, it is important to discuss how true crime podcasts are produced.

Production encompasses the tools and practices that go into creating a text ("Literate Activity Terms"). In every podcast I listen to, the hosts mention where they have gotten their source material from. For instance, MFM often jokes about their use of Murderpedia (Figure 4). The interactive site allows users to research particular cases and perpetrators to often find pictures and case details. The website, great for initial case exploration, is just the tip of the iceberg for the research that goes into compiling and producing an informative podcast episode. Often, hosts will mention documentaries, movies, books, and news articles that they pull from as source

Figure 4: QR code to "Murderpedia" website.

Figure 5: QR code to "INFAMOUS: The Dexter Killer" from "Crime Junkie."

material. For instance, the episode "INFAMOUS: The Dexter Killer" (Figure 5) pulls from the nonfiction book, "The Devil's Cinema: The Untold Story Behind Mark Twitchell's Kill Room," CBC News articles, the Edmonton Journal, various YouTube videos, and primary documents. Not only are these informative podcasts multimodal production pieces, but sometimes, cases covered in a true crime podcast can inspire further multimodal trajectories after its aired, such as a docuseries or an art exhibit. The podcast "Serial" (Figure 6) gained so much attention and introduced so much new undiscovered evidence, that HBO created a docuseries based on it entitled "The Case Against Adnan Syed" (Figure 7). Not only do true crime podcasts inspire journalistic genres about the case, but they also can inspire creative genres and mediums. For example, Kathryn Andrews's art exhibit in the David Kordansky Gallery in Frieze Los Angeles centers on the 1947 murder of Elizabeth Short (popularly known as the Black Dahlia), pulling from various source material including popular podcast coverage (Figure 8).

Although paying attention to the production and multimodal source material for a true crime podcast is important, it wouldn't matter without special attention to the distribution tactics. **Distribution** considers how a true crime podcast will get their message out and through what means ("Literate Activity Terms"). Something that a podcast production team may consider is: How will people hear my episodes?

I get most of my true crime podcasts through apps such as Spotify or Apple Podcasts. However, the same podcasts I listen to are available through iHeartRadio, iTunes, Google Podcasts, or even free online streaming through their websites. There is a wide variety of streaming services that

Figure 6: QR code to the latest season of the podcast "Serial" ("Serial Season 4").

Figure 7: QR code to "The Case Against Adnan Syed" on HBO.

Figure 8: QR code to the David Kordansky Gallery (Andrews).

most popular true crime podcasts have access to. One of the major reasons I became so attached to podcasts was the fact I can listen whenever, wherever, and most episodes are free or inexpensive. MFM, "Crime Junkie," "Casefile," and other popular podcasts like "Morbid" (Figure 9) all have home-base websites where they upload each week's episode and announcements.

Figure 9: QR code to "Morbid" podcast on Wondery.

Other distribution questions are: Who will hear my episodes? How do I expand my audience base? Some popular ways podcasts have advertised their material is through social media accounts including X (formally known as Twitter), Instagram, and Facebook. MFM has a very active X (formally known as Twitter) account and "Morbid" is active on Instagram. Social media is a popular way to advertise a podcasts' content material and give their listeners a "sneak peek" into the upcoming week's episodes. Given the structure of social media, episodes or podcast information can be easily shared. The way I discovered the less popular podcasts that I love has been through seeing a shared post or review online.

Once a true crime podcast is distributed, it is helpful to look into its reception. **Reception** is how the podcast is taken up and used by listeners ("Literate Activity Terms"). Reception is not just about how a listener will respond to a podcast—even though that element is important—it is also how the listeners might repurpose the podcasts' episodes. For instance, in the true crime discourse community, artistic renderings of true crime podcast hosts are common. Found publicly on MFM, "Morbid," and "Crime Junkie's" Instagram accounts, loyal listeners of each of these podcasts have created fan art and merchandise, repurposing a common phrase or quote that was said in each respective podcast to inspire the creation of their artwork and merch (Figures 10–15).

Figure 10: MFM fan art on Instagram by @Maddiewiththeglasses.

In Figure 10, MFM's quote, "Luminol never lies," has become a popular reference to the substance that forensic investigators use to detect trace amounts of blood at crime scenes. Not only has this particular quote been used in fan art, but there is MFM merchandise sold online that includes mugs with a reference to luminol as well. The mug

Figure 11: MFM "This might be luminol" mugs found on the "Exactly Right Official Podcast Merchandise" website.

Figure 12: "Morbid" fan art on Instagram by @Emilyrae2015.

Figure 13: Fresh Air Is for Dead People blanket found on the "Morbid" shop on Wondery ("Wondery Shop").

being sold in the "Exactly Right Official Podcast Merchandise" online store shown in Figure 11 says, "This might be luminol." Therefore, "Luminol never lies," has been repurposed in ways that Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark hadn't anticipated. Similarly, quotes from "Morbid" have been repurposed for both artwork on Instagram (Figure 12) and merchandise on Wonder (Figure 13).

Not only has the reception of many true crime podcasts' quotes moved beyond the original intention of reporting on a case, but the way these podcasts become repurposed facilitates interactions between strangers. The interactions between strangers as true crime podcasts are listened to and engaged with nationally, internationally, and interculturally are known as **socialization**, or what happens when people engage with a text and both consciously and unconsciously represent and transform different kinds of social or cultural practices ("Literate Activity Terms"). In Figure 14, an

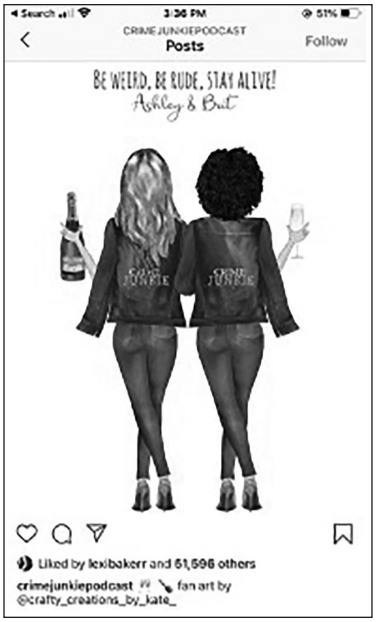

Figure 14: "Crime Junkie" fan art on Instagram by @Crafty_creations_by_kate_.

Figure 15: Trending hashtag #BeWeirdBeRudeStayAlive on Instagram.

artistic rendering of hosts Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat of "Crime Junkie" includes their popular saying, "Be Weird, Be Rude, Stay Alive!" This saying, often repeated in episodes, has become a trending hashtag that deconstructs the notion a person must be polite even when feeling uncomfortable. Flowers and Prawat repeatedly claim that it is safer to be weird (like asking the security guard to walk you to your car) and to be rude (like confronting someone who is making you uncomfortable) than to remain silent and adhere to socially constructed politeness. Therefore, their trending hashtag has become an empowering statement for many of their podcast listeners across cultures, especially female identifying persons, to become active defenders of their safety, to stand up for themselves, and to tell others what is making them uncomfortable.

MFM also has a trending hashtag, #StaySexyandDon'tGetMurdered. For many listeners, podcasts have connected strangers to virtual support groups through these hashtags and other purposefully created fan pages, whether that be on Instagram as shown in Figure 15, or the many Facebook groups that have been created. In the article "How a True-Crime Podcast Became a Mental-Health Support Group" in the Atlantic, Andrea Marks comments on the fan pages that have been created from MFM. She suggests that since Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark are not shy to discuss

their own mental health struggles, their largely female audience, who often refer to themselves as "murderinos," are exposed to empowering, practical advice about survival and self-care. Listeners like me are empowered by hearing about prominent figures' day-to-day struggles because it normalizes finding professional help and deconstructs culturally ingrained stereotypes surrounding the statement, "I'm going to see my therapist." Therefore, listening to a true crime podcast has become more than an individualized, morbid activity. Instead, listening to true crime podcasts has connected me to intercultural communities (like my podcast book club) where we are all empowered by each other to find support and confront and talk about our anxieties and fears through a healthy outlet.

Not only have virtual support groups appeared using various true crime podcasts as the common denominator, but in-person interactions with strangers occur through live shows and conferences. There is an annual True Crime Podcast Festival that gives listeners the opportunity to meet and interact with various podcast production teams and hosts through something called a Podcast Gallery ("Podcasts"). At the festival, exclusive episodes, panel discussions, and crossover collaborations are shared. Overall, true crime is socialized quite a bit. Through artistic renderings of podcast material, social media interaction, support groups, and in-person activities, listening to a true crime podcast becomes only one element of being part of a true crime discourse community, like MFM Fan Club. Furthermore, discourse community members who create artwork or comment and post about the podcasts' material are given opportunities to use social media platforms to interact with and give feedback to the podcasts' hosts. The open communication between hosts and listeners—seen in the above figures—strengthen the identities of those particular true crime discourse communities because listeners often feel their wishes, fears, and concerns are being addressed. Secondly, merchandise sold can also work to validate and cultivate feelings of belonging to a true crime discourse community through tangible means, especially if that community is spread across the globe. The cool thing about true crime discourse communities is that true crime is used as a means to have productive conversations with others regardless of race, culture, or background.

Now that we've discussed true crime podcasts, seeing that there is a large consumer base, a few questions remain. Why listen to true crime? What do we gain from listening to horrific tales? Ecology from the P-CHAT framework becomes one of the most important factors to consider when thinking of the greater picture of literate activity. **Ecology** is how environmental, social, or political factors shape our interaction with a text ("Literate Activity Terms"). True crime podcasts get into intense details of solved, unsolved, and wrongful conviction cases. A few true crime podcasts even work closely with local law

enforcement, such as "Crime Junkie," who works with the nonprofit, Indiana Crime Stoppers. Podcast audiences have become a tangible avenue for police departments across the world to ask for tips, witnesses, or any information for various cases.

Not only is there often a direct call to justice targeted toward listeners, but true crime podcasts have brought to light through their coverage previously misunderstood mental illnesses and disorders. When discussing these details, podcasts act as a tool that often sheds light on inequalities within the United States and abroad, bringing issues of race, religion, disability, and socioeconomic class to the forefront. Therefore, true crime podcasts have gained traction in making substantial change by critically examining past cases and bringing attention to discrepancies within those investigations. For example, a true crime podcast can call attention to questions of bias, prosecutorial misconduct, circumstantial evidence, or the criminal justice process.

These types of conversations started within a podcast are a form of civic engagement, which is how individuals or a group can address issues of public concern to change existing social or political policy. True crime podcasts can function as a tool that deepens their listeners' awareness of oppressive systems at work within our societies. For example, episodes can cover current or past cases that didn't receive the media coverage they deserved because of race, class, or disability status. The disproportionate amount of national and local media coverage of cases dealing with white upper-middle-class persons is known as white privilege journalism.

A prominent example of aboriginal families not receiving the media coverage they deserved because of their ethnic background would be the disappearances and murders of mostly Indigenous women or girls that have occurred along Highway 16, otherwise known as the Highway of Tears. According to Canadian statistics, aboriginal women and girls make up only 4% of the total female population; however, aboriginal women and girls account for around 16% of all female homicides (Levin). To this day, most of these cases remain unsolved. Indigenous families cite racial bias and frustrating encounters with law enforcement that didn't take their pleas seriously about their loved ones (Levin).

I, for one, would have never heard of these cases if not for the "Crime Junkie" episodes detailing them (Figure 16). The attention garnered for the Highway of Tears through familial efforts and podcasts has created enough public outcry in multiple cultures and communities for the provincial government to improve

Figure 16: QR code to the "SERIAL KILLER: Highway of Tears" episode of "Crime Junkie."

safety along the highway, such as funding traffic cameras and vehicles for Indigenous communities.

Concluding Thoughts

There is more to true crime than morbid fascination. The storytelling used within true crime podcasts is an empowering tool that makes audiences more aware of their surroundings, gives them permission to not be polite when uncomfortable, and helps them not be afraid to seek professional help when needed. Moreover, true crime podcasts have this empowering effect across cultures, allowing people from all walks of life to connect and share their anxieties, hopes, and fears in order to dismantle stereotypes and deconstruct social or political barriers. Although a lot of work still needs to be done to help ethnic minority groups, such as Indigenous communities in British Columbia, activism spurred through public awareness is an encouraging first step to address disproportionate access to resources and media coverage for persons of color, persons with disabilities, or persons of lower socioeconomic status nationally and internationally. Listening and telling tough stories can also be an effective and healing practice for listeners to cope with fears and anxieties that stem from real-world situations. The podcast genre may have begun as mere entertainment; however, as time has gone on, this genre has become a way for intercultural communities to voice their concerns in a productive way.

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