

ENGL 3130

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Is It Ethical?: A Discussion of Ethics, True Crime Podcasts, and the Case of JonBenet Ramsey

In its most simple form, the true crime podcast serves as a mechanism to make a profit out of the suffering and tragic deaths of countless people. From that perspective, the answer to the titular question seems to be a resounding no, but the true crime scene is far from that simple. The true crime genre, and subsequently the podcast scene, is a deeply complicated and nuanced topic thus in order to come to a definitive conclusion on the ethics of it the content as well as its effects on society at large.

Humanity has always had a morbid interest in death and violence. From the ancient practice of gladiators to the modern sensationalization of serial killers. Without fail, there will be people seeking out shows of horrific events, and where there is a demand there will be those willing to supply it. Within a capitalist society, anything that can be used to turn a profit will be sensationalized and made a spectacle for anyone willing to consume the product.

Following a significant spike in January 2020, interest in true crime has been steadily increasing. The newfound popularity of true crime has spurred widespread scrutiny of the genre inside and outside the community. Most discussions of true crime will enviably come to the question: Is true crime ethical? The rise of true crime podcasts is just another side effect of the dramatic increase in the popularity of True crime podcasts, shows, books, and movies.

What Does it Mean to Create Ethical Content?

Before we can cast any definitive judgment on the ethics of true crime podcasts, we must establish what is considered ethical. Merriam-Webster defines Ethical as, “conforming to accepted standards of conduct.” Ethics are incredibly relative and individualized so finding a standard at which we can judge true crime within this article is paramount. For the purposes of this article, ethical will be defined as something that does not exploit the pain and trauma of others or cause undue physical or emotional harm to innocent persons. This definition creates a clear, understandable reason for something to be judged negatively.

The Case of “America’s Sweetheart”

A prime example of the exploitative nature of true crime podcasts can be seen in the infamy of the unsolved murder of JonBenet Ramsey. Born August 6, 1990, JonBenet Ramsey was a moderately successful beauty pageant whose life would be marred by the tragedy of her death. On December 26, 1996, JonBenet Ramsey was found dead in the basement of her home in Boulder, Colorado after 8 hours of police and adults searching for and investigating the disappearance of the six-year-old. In the early morning of the 26th, Patsy Ramsey, JonBenet’s mother, called the police to report she had found

a lengthy ransom letter claiming to have taken her daughter hostage but could be returned to the family alive if the ransom was paid. This ransom letter would ultimately be found to be untruthful as it was discovered JonBenet had never left the house rather, she was found hidden in the basement bludgeoned and strangled to death mere hours later.

If you are in the true crime community, you have heard of the mysterious death of the 6-year-old pageant girl. Following her death, she was given the mantle “America’s Sweetheart,” a testament to the obsession America had with the girl. This case is rife with contradictions and impossible claims. The especially complicated nature of this case allows plenty of room for speculation. Additionally, JonBenet fits into three specific groups: young, well-off, and white. In December 2022, Mike Boudet, host of the popular true-crime podcast “Sword and Scale”, put out a poll asking, ‘When listening to a true-crime podcast, what race do you prefer the murder victim to be?’ The results showed that 67% of voters preferred for the victims to be white. The American public, and subsequently true crime fans, love to latch on to stories of young white victims. This fact was true when Ramsey’s life was taken and has been shown to remain true as cases such as Gabby Petito grabbed and held the attention of America for months. A simple Google search of the phrase ‘JonBenet Ramsey Podcast’ will result in hundreds of podcasts that repeatedly rehash this tragedy so they can garner the attention of those willing to hear about the brutal death of a child once again.

A major defense of true crime is its ability to raise awareness for unsolved cases so they can hopefully be solved, but frequently we see cases that are so well known there would be no need to raise awareness. Additionally, true crime podcasters often make no attempt to even imply they are making

this podcast to help the investigation in any capacity. These podcasters are only here to theorize and point fingers at who they believe is responsible for Ramsey's death.

Podcasts featuring the Ramsey case do not aid the investigation, rather they distract from reality and lead to the harassment and traumatization of all people close to the case. JonBenet's mother and father (Patsy Ramsey and John Bennett Ramsey) were identified as prime suspects by the Boulder police department. This would inevitably lead to a slew of armchair detectives making devastating accusations. These accusations would continue long after 2008 when both parents would be cleared of any wrongdoing. Even after the discovery of new DNA evidence found under the fingernails of Jonbenet did not match any of the family members, the blame would continue being cast on the parents. When the armchair detectives could not be satisfied with just speculating the actions of the parents, JonBenet's 9-year-old brother would be brought into scrutiny, facing a barrage of insults and claims with every public appearance. It is incredibly unlikely that the constant ridicule from the public at such an early age would not result in potentially irreversible trauma that would follow him into adulthood. To this day, John Ramsey has been unrelenting in his attempts to fund research that will lead to solving the murder of his daughter. This is another element that is frequently ignored by podcasters since it does not fit their theories for which family members could be at fault.

Although every true crime podcaster may not be engaging in the same practices described above, the prevalence of these practices reflects a larger issue in the true crime community. The community at large does not push back against the production of podcasts about cases like JonBenet.

This is because community members are active participants in this unethical behavior or at least passive to the potential harm caused by other members.

Where Do We Go from Here?

In its current state, the true-crime podcast scene cultivates and encourages the production of podcasts that engage in unethical behavior. The podcast community is in desperate need of a strong cultural shift to incline them towards more ethical practices. The best way to achieve this is to support podcasts that are already engaging in ethical practices.

Ashley Flowers and Brit Prawat are two creators who are making active, positive strides in ethical true crime podcasts. Flowers and Prawat host 3 podcasts (Crime Junkie, The Deck, and The Deck Investigates) dedicated to unsolved murders and missing cases. What makes them stand out is how they frame their coverage of crimes. In each episode, they take the time to acknowledge the personhood of the victim and to give a spotlight to the families of the victims. Frequently the cases they cover are brought to them by the victim's family as a way of bringing more attention to the cases. Families who felt unsatisfied with how their loved one's case was covered in the media or investigated feel safe coming to these women to bring justice to their family members. It should also be mentioned that they spotlight the various organizations that are dedicated to the progressing research of unsolved crimes and organizations that work toward harm reduction linked to the causes of many victims' deaths.

The over the top salacious coverage of other true crime podcasts is fully absent, in its place tangible positive change. Calls to action are frequently made to sign petitions made by the families or

pressure police departments to reopen cold cases. The most recent instance of this can be seen in 'The Deck Investigates', Flower's newest podcast, where she covers the kidnapping and murder of Darlene Hulse. This coverage was heavily supported by the daughters of Hulse. The daughters make frequent appearances on the podcast to discuss the case and simply talk about their mother. They had people on the ground investigating this case for months in conjunction with the family to get a more connected relationship with the case and the people involved.