

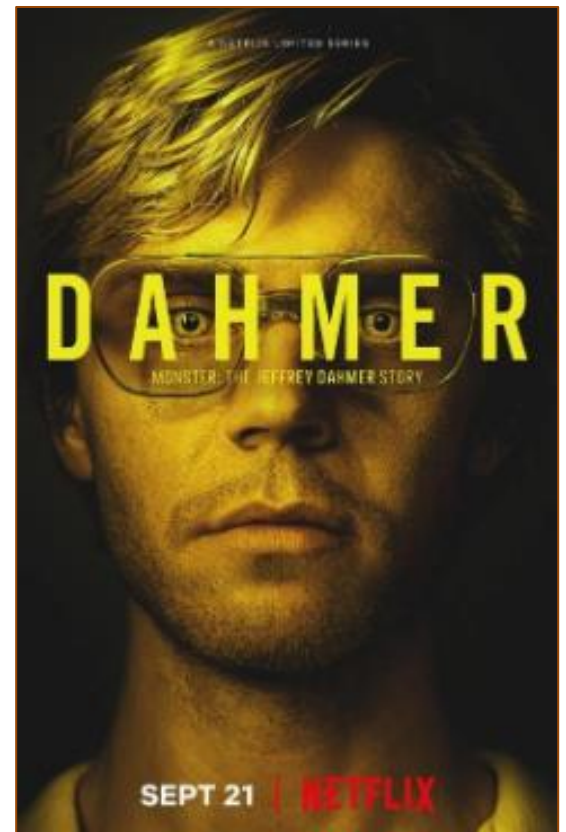
MY MURDER, YOUR ENTERTAINMENT

THE ETHICS OF TRUE CRIME MEDIA

It's no secret that true crime media, whether in podcast or film format, has skyrocketed in popularity in recent years. True crime is popular for reasons other than entertainment, as this genre has led to solving cold cases, bringing ignored issues to light, and educating audiences on how to avoid and prevent tragic situations. Additionally, many are enthralled with true crime media because it reveals a dark side of human nature that a majority of people will never experience. However, the extent to which crime scene details are shared and whether the consent of survivors and family members was obtained in the creation of true crime content raises ethical concerns. For example, in the fall of 2022, Netflix released a controversial docu-series titled "Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story." The series, starring Evan Peters as Jeffrey Dahmer, portrays a dramatized and incredibly detailed retelling of the American serial killer's crimes.

The creators of "Dahmer-Monster" went to great lengths to recreate even the smallest details. Indeed, the series even includes actual 911 calls and sets designed to look exactly like Dahmer's apartment in crime photos. Because of this, Ryan Murphy –one of the writers for the show– has been the focus of backlash from the public. In particular, family members of Dahmer's victims claim they were not properly consulted regarding the making of the series. For example, Shirley Hughes –the mother of murder victim Tony Hughes– expressed her disbelief and anger at the production's use of her family's real name and details of her son's murder without "explicit permission" (Hughes quoted in Vargas, 2022). Sadly, many families of Dahmer's victims have expressed that the series' extensive details have retraumatized them, as they feel they are experiencing the murders all over again (Vargas, 2022).

In response to the backlash, Peters and Murphy have claimed that they created the show with the trauma of the victims and victims' families in mind (Vargas, 2022). In an interview with *Hollywood Reporter*, Murphy explained that in the years leading up to the release of the show, his team reached out to dozens of the victims' families. Yet, despite this effort, they never got a response (Verhoeven, 2022). Because of the lack of responses, Murphy says the series relied on a team of researchers to collect intensive detail in an attempt to "uncover the truth" (Meara, 2022). Nevertheless, many are of the opinion that no response should have been taken as a sign that the families were not comfortable with the idea in the first place, and therefore the creators lacked consent (Meara, 2022). Furthermore, Hughes and other family members of victims claim that the way the series portrays the killings is not only inaccurate, but lacking sensitivity in many ways. For example, one of the episodes ends with "Dahmer" graphically cooking and eating the liver of Hughes, a real



victim of the murders. Hughes' mother responded to these graphic scenes by saying “I shed tears... The tears [are] tears of hurt,” from re-watching the enactment of her son’s murder (Hughes quoted from Vargas, 2022).

Moreover, the backlash against “Dahmer-Monster” goes even further beyond the graphic portrayal and questionable-at-best consent practices into critiques about the effects the shows has had on the public. Since the Netflix drama remained in the top ten shows on Netflix for seven weeks following its release, many hoped to capitalize on its popularity through insensitive acts and commentary, such as dressing like Dahmer for Halloween and using scenes from the series to make jokes on social media (Burton, 2022). These public reactions signal to some that the series is part of a larger cultural shift towards a society desensitized to violence.

However, larger socio-cultural concerns were *also* cited by Murphy in an attempt to explain the purpose of the series. Here, Murphy defended the project by stating the show was not intended to dramatize the heinous actions, but to explore the institutional problems that create serial killers like Dahmer as well as fail to bring them to justice sooner (Verhoeven, 2022). Some have agreed with Murphy’s reasoning, arguing that it is important to explore the deeply-rooted cultural issues that enable tragedy, especially since understanding the past may help prevent tragedies today and in the future (Burton, 2022).

While the creators of “Dahmer-Monster” have expressed remorse for the emotional damage that resulted from the production of their show, they have also defended their actions by explaining their intentions and good-faith efforts to consult those closest to the murders. Indeed, Murphy has even gone so far as to offer to pay for a memorial in honor of Dahmer’s victims (Verhoeven, 2022). However, the popularity and graphic content of the show nonetheless raise questions concerning which interest took precedence in the making of the series: entertainment or ethics. As the rise of true crime content continues to grow on various platforms –and especially as Murphy has already entered into a new contract with Netflix to make another two seasons of the series exploring other serial killers— it is imperative that media consumers be critical of their engagement with this genre (Burton, 2022).

Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical conflicts are raised by docu-drama films on violent criminals like the one in question on Dahmer?
2. Do families need to give consent for such projects to go forward? If so, would you maintain this same standard in reporting on the same crimes? Why or why not?
3. How might the artistic urge to make these true crime films captivating for viewers infringe on the concern that they be maximally truthful or accurate?
4. To what extent, if any, are true crime media creators responsible for audience reactions?
5. What are some ethical principles that should be followed by true crime content creators? Write a short code of conduct for those that want to create these sorts of media products.

Further Information:

Burton, J., Davidson, D., Hammer, J., Tobin, J., & Davis, M. (2022, November 8). "Dahmer Series Renewal Sparks Netflix Backlash: 'Terrorizing Victims.'" *Newsweek*. Available at: <https://www.newsweek.com/dahmer-series-monster-renewal-sparks-netflix-backlash-1757734>

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Vargas, R. A. (2022, October 10). "Mother of Dahmer victim condemns Netflix series: 'I don't see how they can do that.'" *The Guardian*. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/oct/10/dahmer-victim-tony-hughes-mother-condemns-netflix-series>

Verhoeven, B. (2022, October 27). "Ryan Murphy Says He Reached Out to '20 of the Victims' Family and Friends' for 'Dahmer Series: 'Not a Single Person Responded to Us.'" *The Hollywood Reporter*. Available at: <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/ryan-murphy-says-he-reached-out-to-20-of-the-victims-family-and-friends-for-dahmer-series-not-a-single-person-responded-to-us-1235250610/>

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Image: Netflix promotional poster from [Wikipedia](#)

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