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JOU 4380

November 30, 2022

The Ethics of Dramatizing Serial Killers for Entertainment

For the past few decades or so, it seems that popular culture has latched onto a fascination of the repulsive and strange character of the serial killer. Whether it be the charming personality of Ted Bundy or the gruesome nature of Jeffery Dahmer, society always seems to find a way to elevate the figure of these men who commit such heinous crimes. But it is the very gore and cruel nature of these crimes that seem to attract people's attention. Especially with the rise of the Internet and social media, those who are fascinated with serial killers and their crimes now have a place to discuss and meet with others who share their same interests in these cases. It is when these serial killers lose their subjectivity and are elevated to celebrity status by the media that the ethical dilemma of whether their stories should be dramatized in TV and film arises.

The story of Jeffery Dahmer is one that popular culture and the media have particularly taken an interest in. In July of 1991, Dahmer was arrested after one of his victims escaped from his apartment and alerted police that Dahmer had handcuffed him and threatened him with a knife. When police arrived at his apartment, they were greeted by a foul stench that he claimed came from some meat that had gone bad. As they searched for the key to the handcuffs, the officers discovered Polaroids of several young men whose naked bodies had been posed post-mortem. Further investigation led to the discovery of a human head and other body parts in Dahmer's fridge and a human torso being dissolved in a vat of hydrochloric acid, which was the source of the foul smell. Dahmer was then arrested and charged with 15 counts of murder, to

which he plead guilty but insane, though the court would later find him sane (O'Meara, 2009, p. 99). It is believed that he had 17 victims, but he was not charged with the attempted murder of his last victim nor with that of Steve Tuomi, who went missing in 1987 but could not be tied to Dahmer due to insufficient evidence. Dahmer's youngest victims were 14-year-old boys.

It was not just the number of victims, but what Dahmer did with the bodies after he had killed them that caught the attention of the media. Reports of crude lobotomies, necrophilia and dismemberment led to the media giving Dahmer the nickname "the Milwaukee Monster." During his trial and imprisonment, several major networks conducted interviews with Dahmer himself. His father even wrote a book about his side of Jeffery's story. Very little airtime was given, if at all, to the families of his victims. Though they were given the opportunity to read impact statements during the trial, the families were virtually forgotten in the public eye. From a legal standpoint, these events are in the public record, so there are very few legal hoops to jump through. But from a people perspective, these events were traumatic and took away their loved ones. So, what is it about this man and his horrific actions that have led to a public enthralled with his story even decades later, and is it ethical to give a platform to the stories of serial killers, whether as a documentary or fictionalized?

To analyze the ethical nature of this documentary and others like it, the Potter Box method and Bok's model offer comparative perspectives that allow one to examine the different factors of ethical decision making. When going through both decision-making processes, it is important to acknowledge that there are two perspectives to look from. One is from the perspective of Netflix as a company and the factors that go into promoting a show like this on their platform. The other perspective is from that of a viewer because they have the agency to choose whether to watch a show.

Looking at the Potter Box Method, the first step is to review the facts of the case. In this situation, there are two ways to take this. One is to simply look at the content of the show *DAHMER: Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. In the show, the gruesome nature of Dahmer's crimes is also shown alongside his childhood and the experiences of others adjacent to his life – his parents, his neighbors, his victims and their families. Not only is the viewer encouraged to sympathize with those who were affected by Dahmer's actions, but they can begin to have feelings of sympathy toward Dahmer and his experience as well. The other perspective to take on this show is related to the audience and Netflix itself. It is important to look at how promoting a show with content like this reflects back on a company and its overall goal. On their website, Netflix discusses their approach when it comes to artistic expression and the content of the shows on their platform.

“While every title is different, we approach them based on the same set of principles: we support the artistic expression of the creators we choose to work with; we program for a diversity of audiences and tastes; and we let viewers decide what's appropriate for them, versus having Netflix censor specific artists or voices” (*Netflix Culture - Seeking Excellence*).

This statement gives Netflix the ability to hand off content responsibility to creators. But they are still responsible for their promotion of these shows on their platform and the money they put into advertisements outside of their company. This raises a comparison between profit versus content. It is important to look at whether a company values what they're putting out or if money plays a more essential role in their business. In this case, it seems that one of the main motivations is profit and the ability to capitalize on popular culture's fascination with serial killers and their crimes. In her dissertation, Mallorie Latora talks about how,

“People find themselves craving more information about the latest serial murder, and, because of this, journalists and other media platforms continue to create more content under this genre. The cycle of audiences wanting to know more about this type of violence and media creators giving them more media content to consume have generated an even greater spectacle” (Latora, 2020, p. 23).

Netflix is a site that continues to function and profit off how well they can keep their subscribers. The true crime genre is one that has continued to increase in popularity and appeal to a wide audience. For the viewer themselves, this leads into the values that society as a whole possesses and finds important. When looking at the values of popular culture, Latora brings up this idea of uses and gratifications of mass media, specifically film and TV, and how viewers use the media to gather information on different subjects and gratify their desire to be entertained (Latora, 2020, p. 28). It is interesting to consider that “consumers may choose to consume true crime to gratify both needs at the same time through television shows and films” (Latora, 2020, p. 28).

This is interesting to consider in relation to virtue ethics, which refers to both the nature of the act itself and the moral character of the person who acts. In this case, the nature of the act itself can refer to the content of the show itself and the moral character to be examined are the motivations of Netflix for funding and promoting a show. In the case of the viewer, the nature of the act itself can be the act of choosing to watch *Dahmer* and the implications of choosing to do that. The moral character of the viewer is harder to decipher because one can choose to watch a show like this for any number of reasons ranging from a morbid fascination with serial killers to a simple curiosity to learn more about the story of Jeffery Dahmer.

Immanuel Kant's Categorical Imperative seems to be the most relevant philosophical principle to apply to this situation. His philosophical principle focuses on how choices could become a universal law. Again, this provides two interesting perspectives to look at in comparison. One is the choice to create and promote a show with content like this. The other looks at the choice viewers make to watch this show. This show features murder, sexual assault to living and dead people, gore, physical and emotional trauma, drinking, drugs and a lot of other heavy topics. To examine the first perspective, there follows the argument of whether shows like this should continue to be made when the morality of society seems to be becoming less clear. Mass media and its audience have a two-way relationship. Mass media produces content that the audience interacts with. The audience then has the opportunity to tell the mass media what kind of content they want to see more of (Jenkins, 2013, p.2). True crime has risen in popularity on many different mass media outlets, whether it's in film and TV, social media or even the news. From this true crime genre comes the subgenre of serial killers. In her essay, Louis Wattis (2016) talks about how "Haggerty (2009) notes parallels between modernity's defining features and the rise of serial murder, arguing that they enable serial murder in a situational sense and shape and legitimate it at the level of the subjective. This claim is borne out by increases in this type of killing since the onset of modernity" (p. 383). Audiences have also played a part in encouraging the creation of these kinds of show. For Netflix's *Dahmer*, in the first week it was on the streaming platform, it was the number one watched TV show for three weeks in a row (*Global top 10*). By the time it came out of the top ten shows after seven weeks, it had been viewed for a total of almost one billion hours.

From these numbers, it is clear to see why Netflix and other streaming platforms continue to churn out films, TV shows and docuseries with these focuses. Though these shows have dark

and heavy content, viewers still continue to watch them. As discussed earlier, the viewer might simply want to gain more information about this particular story. In the case of both the viewer and the creator of the show, there does not seem to be much thought toward the victims. In his article, Martin Lefebvre (2005) discusses how the seriality of the killings tends to lessen the effect each death should have on the consumer (p. 50). He points out that “the phenomenon is perhaps best illustrated by the countless faceless and nameless actors and actresses who play these roles in the slasher-gore variation of serial killer movies” (Lefebvre, 2005, p. 50-51). But these victims were not nameless or faceless. They were real people who had lives and dreams and people who loved them. As a viewer, it is important to not get caught up in the drama of the show and acknowledge the reality of these tragic deaths.

This leads into the final step of the Potter Box Method, which is to examine all of the loyalties that can be involved in a case like this. There are several ethical stakeholders in this case. The biggest one is the families of the victims. The trauma and tragedy of stories like these are real life situations that people have experienced firsthand. While the show does a good job of showing both the victims and their families, it also frames it in a way that draws sympathy for Jeffrey Dahmer and his experience. Ryan Murphy, the creator of *Dahmer*, said that himself and others on his creative team did try and reach out to family members of the victims, but no one responded (Vargas, 2022). These family members have a different story. Rita Isbell, sister to one of Dahmer’s victims, said that their family was not contacted, and the show only brings back memories of those traumatic moments in their lives (Strause, 2022). These contrasting statements present the dilemma in creating shows like these and raises the question of whether shows like these honor the victims and their families or glorify the serial killers.

Another ethical stakeholder is Netflix. The company is responsible for a large amount of content with a variety of genres represented. But because they have so many shows, they are able to withstand any bad press or consumer dissatisfaction that may arise regarding one show. Ultimately, profit is most likely to be the motivation. Viewers also have an ethical stake in shows like this. By watching these shows at such rapid rates, they tell streaming platforms that these are shows they like to watch and find compelling enough to watch in short amounts of time. Another interesting stakeholder to consider is law enforcement. This series showed the times where law enforcement failed to listen to witnesses or investigate claims further. It would be important to consider how the show reflects back on them as it is being written and then promoted. Through the Potter Box Method, the role that both the creator and the viewer play in a show like this have been examined.

Bok's Model is another process by which to make ethical decisions. The first step is to consult one's conscience about the rightness of an action. When I look at this whole situation, I can understand both sides. From a business perspective, I can understand that true crime stories are very profitable, and sadly, there always seem to be new ones popping up. I can also relate as a viewer because I myself find these stories interesting. I like to learn about these stories so that, one, I can become more aware of my surroundings and what my potential risks are, and two, I am interested in the factors of both the serial killers and victims that led them to cross paths. The area that I have a problem with in regard to *Dahmer* is that does try to make the viewer sympathize with Dahmer. I do think that some of his childhood and upbringing were factors out of his control, but the show spent a lot of time focused on how Dahmer managed to fly under the radar for so long. While it did show the victims' stories and their families, it was still a stark reminder of how these minority groups were not protected by the police for so long and served as

a reminder of painful memories to these families, who had no say in how they were portrayed. Overall, for myself, I do not agree that this story needed to be told again and from the angle that it took. I can appreciate the artistry that went into this show and also the interest with a character like this, but it only served to make me more aware and anxious of strangers that I interact with.

The next step in Bok's model is to seek expert advice. I talked with Karissa Beauvais, a Paid Media Specialist for the PR firm, Jackson Spalding, in Dallas. I asked her about how she as a PR professional would feel about promoting a show like *Dahmer*. In my interview with her, she acknowledged the complexity of such a situation because "a lot of lives and families were impacted by what happened with Dahmer." We also talked about how as viewers, we have the agency to choose what we want to watch and what our feelings toward it are. "People's reactions are their own choices," she said. "You can choose to consume content like that. But it's also a gray area of what do you consider to be glamourizing murder and glamourizing sexual assault and serial killers." How one feels about a show or specific content is something that each person deals with when they watch a show of any kind for entertainment. But as a PR professional, one does not always get to choose their work. While there are some instances in which one could choose to remove themselves from a project, that may not always be the smartest option. Beauvais talked about how it is important to realize that "you hold yourself to certain ethical standards, but large corporations don't necessarily reflect that same ethical bar." Since going into entertainment PR is something that I am interested in, I enjoyed talking with Beauvais about how she might approach a project like this and getting her input as someone who has studied ethics alongside seeing it played out in the workplace.

The last step of Bok's model is to conduct a public dialogue with the parties involved. This has already played out in the press and on social media. As discussed earlier, both the

creator of the show and the families of the victims tell conflicting accounts about whether they were contacted before the show. While all of these events are public record, in order to portray these people, it would seem most appropriate to have a conversation with them and gain some kind of approval, or at the very least provide compensation to the families. Again, law enforcement might also have a place in this conversation. They are not portrayed in the best light and might have liked to be included in the conversation about this show. Netflix would also be in this conversation, but their response would probably fall back on their statement about promoting artistic expression and how viewers have the right to choose what to watch. Viewers themselves are involved because there will be some who strongly agree that a show like this does not need to be made, and others will argue from the side of saying these stories are important to tell. Overall, a public dialogue about this show and what it promotes would bring up a lot of different but passionate arguments about whether it is ethical to create and promote a show like this.

When looking at this ethical dilemma as a whole, it is easy to see that there are two sides: entertainment and reality. The entertainment side focuses on the profits and praise that come with portraying a story like this because of the popularity of the serial killer genre in mass media. The reality side includes the people who actually lived this story. They must still live with the trauma and loss they suffered at the hands of Jeffery Dahmer. While I do think it is important to tell these stories, I think that it is more important to look at how one tells the story. I do not think that these stories should be dramatized because it takes away the realness of the events. There is a way to honor the victims and their families and tell others about their stories in order to spread awareness. Though this ethical dilemma is complex, there is a clear way to navigate through this situation.

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