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The Relationship Between the Media and Serial Killers

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Abstract

This research paper sets out to investigate the relationship between media coverage of serial murderers and their behavior. With the use of past research on a few well-known serial killers and news reports related to these killers, this paper attempts to determine if media has any effect on a serial killer's behavior, particularly before their apprehension. After a review of the history of serial murder, as well as background on the history of the media and the role it plays in our society, this study will look closely at the media coverage and behavior of three of the most well-known serial killers. These include Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer; the Zodiac Killer; and Ted Kaczynski, the Unabomber. It is undoubtedly true that these three cases received attention from the media and evolved to include communication between the perpetrator and the media. The research's following findings will contribute to our understanding of the conduct of serial killers in connection to news media coverage, making news media a potentially useful tool for law enforcement in controlling and anticipating serial killer behavior and assisting in their arrest.

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Introduction to Serial Killers

Jack the Ripper. The Zodiac Killer. John Wayne Gacy. Ted Bundy. Jeffrey Dahmer. The BTK Killer. Names and pseudonyms of these killers are ingrained into the minds and consciousness of people all over America. This is due to the immense media coverage they received, whether it was in newspapers, books, movies, or TV shows. These people all seem like relatively normal members of their communities until their crimes are revealed.

Serial killers and serial murder are not new phenomena and have been documented for centuries, however, the term "serial killer" is relatively new. Robert K. Ressler, an FBI agent and author, who was the former director of the FBI's Violent Criminal Apprehension Program first coined the term in the 1970s with the Son of Sam case. (Freeman, 2007) "Serial" was chosen because at the time the police in England were referring to these types of murders as "crimes in a series". Up until the 1970s these killers were mostly referred to as mass murderers in both the criminal justice system and the media in the U.S. (Bonn, 2014) However, today, an apparent distinction is made between the two.

Mass Murder v. Serial Murder

The FBI defines serial murder as the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events. (Morton, 2010) Meanwhile, mass murder is one event that involves the killing of multiple people in one location without a cooling-off period. Victims of a mass murder may be randomly selected or targeted for a specific reason. This is often true for victims of serial killers as well.

Oftentimes, although not always, the perpetrator of a mass murder is killed at the scene of the crime. Sometimes they are killed by law enforcement, or they commit suicide. This aspect is

very unlike serial killers. Serial murderers work to make sure the police do not catch them. They love killing way too much and have no desire to be stopped. During their cooling-off periods, the killer will return to normal day-to-day activities so as to not arouse suspicion. (Bonn, 2014) This cooling-off period can last anywhere from weeks, to months, to even years.

The MacDonald Triad

Often, serial killers are said to exhibit three behaviors during their childhood which is known as the MacDonald Triad and is associated with children who are at considerable risk for violence. These three characteristics are enuresis (chronic bed-wetting), arson, and cruelty to animals. (Hickey, 2003) Troubled childhoods are often pointed to as why people become serial killers. Based on this reasoning it can also be concluded that the perpetrators of serial murders are likely to come from a broken home and to have been abused or neglected during their upbringing.

The MacDonald Triad is often seen as controversial and is said to lack strong empirical support. Any one of the behaviors mentioned in this triad is not an infallible diagnostic of violent behavior as an adult, and even if all three are present there is no guarantee the youth will grow up to live a life of violence. However, it cannot be ignored that such behaviors are more commonly found in the population of violent adult offenders when compared to nonoffenders. (Hickey, 2003) So while there is some research suggesting a connection between the behaviors mentioned above present in the MacDonald Triad, it is far from a foolproof predictor of future violence or murder.

Psychopathy and Serial Murder

In 2005 there was a Serial Murder Symposium held by the FBI. During the Symposium, the FBI's working definition of serial murder, mentioned previously, was created. Also, during this meeting of the minds, they discussed psychopathy and how it is related to serial killers. Attendees at the Serial Murder Symposium agreed that there was no generic profile of a serial murderer. This was because they differed in many ways, including their motivations for killing, modus operandi (MO), signature, etc. After reaching this conclusion, however, they did identify certain common traits that are shared by some serial murderers. These include sensation seeking, a lack of remorse or guilt, impulsivity, the need for control, and predatory behavior. (Morton, 2010) These traits and behaviors are consistent with those of psychopathic personality disorder.

"Psychopathy is a personality disorder manifested in people who use a mixture of charm, manipulation, intimidation, and occasionally violence to control others, in order to satisfy their own selfish needs. Although the concept of psychopathy has been known for centuries, Dr. Robert Hare led the modern research effort to develop a series of assessment tools, to evaluate the personality traits and behaviors attributable to psychopaths. Dr. Hare and his associates developed the Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R) and its derivatives, which provide a clinical assessment of the degree of psychopathy an individual possesses. These instruments measure the distinct cluster of personality traits and socially deviant behaviors of an individual, which fall into four factors: interpersonal, affective, lifestyle, and anti-social." (Morton, 2010)

Just like with the Macdonald Triad, not all serial killers are psychopaths, and not all psychopaths are serial killers. However, when offenders are psychopaths they can assault, rape, and murder their victims without any concern for legal, moral, or social consequences that may

arise. Law enforcement needs to know how to approach a psychopath when it comes to interrogations. Methods that try to invoke feelings of sympathy for their victims or remorse over their crimes will not work, instead, law enforcement can learn to exploit their other traits like narcissism, selfishness, and vanity. Past methods used by law enforcement include praising the offender's intelligence, cleverness, and skill in evading capture. (Morton, 2010)

Figure 1. The Psychopathy Checklist-Revised (PCL-R)

Factor 1	Factor 2
Facet 1: Interpersonal	Facet 3: Lifestyle
1. Glibness/superficial charm 2. Grandiose sense of self-worth 4. Pathological lying 5. Conning/manipulative	3. Need of stimulation/proneness to boredom 9. Parasitic lifestyle 13. Lack of realistic, long-term goals 14. Impulsivity 15. Irresponsibility
Facet 2: Affective	Facet 4: Antisocial
6. Lack of remorse or guilt 7. Emotionally shallow 8. Callous / lack of empathy 16. Failure to accept responsibility for own actions	10. Poor behavioural control 12. Early behavioural problems 18. Juvenile delinquency 19. Revocation of conditional release 20. Criminal versatility
Items that did not saturate any factor	
11. Promiscuous sexual behaviour 17. Many short-term marital relationships	

https://qph.fs.quoracdn.net/main-qimg-79c3608fcdfc19f24f1bf574f6271838

The Psychological Phases of Serial Killers

In 1988 Joel Norris, a psychologist and author, had a theory that violence was a disease that should be treated rather than punished. In order to prove this theory, he conducted research which mostly consisted of interviews. He conducted hundreds of interviews with the most prolific serial killers at the time, which included Henry Lee Lucas, Carlton Gary, and Ted Bundy. (Zimmerman, 2021) During this time he concluded that there is a cycle that takes a perpetrator through an "intricate and complex journey, mentally, and then manifests outwardly through their heinous acts of murder." (Lampley, 2020) This cycle consists of 7 phases: the Aura phase, the Trolling phase, the Wooing phase, the Capture phase, the Murder phase, and the Totem phase, before finally reaching the Depression phase. There is no set time that each phase will last as it varies considerably from killer to killer. However, this cycle will repeat indefinitely until one of three things happens: retirement (as was the case with the BTK Killer), they are caught, or they are killed.

Most serial killers will fantasize about their crimes before they act on them. This is the phase that Dr. Norris called the Aura phase. During this phase, the killer may become more isolated and withdrawn from reality as he becomes more engrossed in his fantasies. Eventually, people around him may start to notice personality changes. The fantasies can range from acts of violence to sadistic sexual thoughts. (Lampley, 2020) While in this phase the serial killer builds up the nerve to act out what is in his mind in the real world. This can take anywhere from a few minutes up to a year or more.

Once in the Trolling phase, he has reached the point where fantasies no longer satisfy his urges, and he starts to formulate his plan to kill. There are two main goals that the serial killer hopes to accomplish during this phase (1) selecting a victim and (2) choosing a location to dump

the body post-murder (if he's an organized serial killer). (Zimmerman, 2021) When it comes to choosing a victim, the killer will normally have a profile they are looking for. For instance, they may target victims that have physical characteristics of someone specific like their mother, in the case of Ed Kemper, the Co-Ed Killer, or an ex-girlfriend. This usually indicates who they were fantasizing about during the Aura phase. Some killers have a broader victim profile like college-age women or prostitutes like The Yorkshire Ripper, Peter Sutcliffe.

When the potential victim has been selected, there typically is a period of stalking and planning. They will learn about their victim's routine and schedules, lifestyle, and vulnerabilities. (Lampley, 2020) If a home invasion is part of the plan, they may check for the location of windows and other security features ahead of the commission of the crime. This again is more common for those that fit into the classification of organized. One example of this is Joseph DeAngelo, the Golden State Killer, who would break into the home before the murder and plant ligatures for binding and strangling his victims. He would also make taunting phone calls to his victims before he would murder them. (Zimmerman, 2021)

The third phase is the Wooing phase, where he attempts to gain the intended victim's trust. This process can consist of having pleasant and engaging conversations, compliments, gifts, promises, etc. Investigators often find that victims of serial killers show a lack of struggle. This would often make law enforcement believe that the victims must have known their attacker, when in most cases that was not true. (Zimmerman, 2021) It was just that they gained the trust of their victims through charm and other trust-building methods. Rodney Alcala, for example, would claim to be a headshot photographer and would lure aspiring models back to his home to photograph them before savagely killing them.

The Capture phase is fairly simple and straightforward. During this time, the superficial charm that was once displayed disappears and his true intentions start to show. Again, this can be a slow gradual revelation or a fast one. Once captured and defenseless, the victim is now entering into the Murder phase with the killer.

In contrast to the name, this phase is about more than just taking the life of the victim, it is about acting out the fantasies from the Aura phase. Again, the length of this phase depends on the classification of the killer. The disorganized killer will murder the victim almost immediately. Once they are dead that is when the murderer will usually start to engage in necrophilia and will depersonalize the victim through mutilation. (Lampley, 2020) In contrast, the organized killer will draw out the process for as long as he feels he safely can or until all of his desires and fantasies have been satisfied. Torture is oftentimes involved as the organized killer is not exclusively interested in the killing, but also in the control and pain he can inflict on the victim. Once satisfied he will then kill.

It is almost guaranteed that the serial killer will take some kind of trophy from the victims. This happens during the Totem phase. The killer will take a memento to help them relive the crime. Some commonly taken items include shoes, clothes, jewelry, photos, and body parts. Looking back at Rodney Alcala he would take photographs of his victims and then he would also take their earrings, sometimes even wearing them himself. (Zimmerman, 2021) It is also commonly known that Jeffrey Dahmer kept the body parts of his victims and ate them to feel that they were a part of him.

Finally, the seventh phase is the Depression phase, which often starts while still in the Totem phase. When the adrenaline high wears off he will begin to reflect on the experience. Some become disgusted by their crimes, and some will realize that the crime did not result in a

feeling of resolution, but rather one of emptiness. Serial killers sometimes fall into a deep

depression and end up committing suicide and others have confessed to the police. Joseph

DeAngelo called a mental health crisis line asking for help to stop killing. (Zimmerman, 2021)

This phase may last days, weeks, or months before they inevitably enter back into the Aura phase

and the cycle starts all over again.

Figure 2: The Seven Psychological Phases of Serial Killers

https://stephenzimmerman.com/psychological-phases-of-a-serial-killer
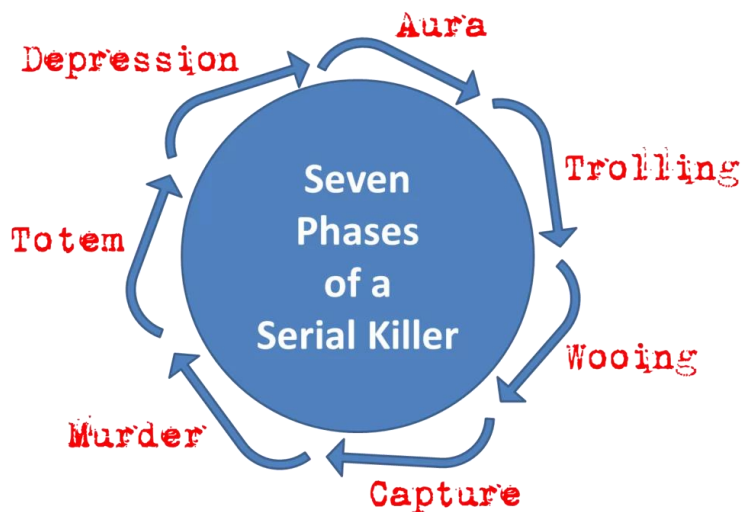
Typologies of Serial Killers

As is the case with any type of human behavior, different people may have the same

motivation but behave dissimilarly. This is no different when it comes to the behavior of serial

killers. (Holmes and DeBurger, 1985) In an attempt to better understand serial murderers and

their motivations and behavior, various typologies have been identified throughout the years.

These can be based on psychological motivations or behaviors presented during the attacks. Typologies may be useful in discerning numerous motivations and the different developmental. aspects that may have contributed to the serial killer's mindset. (White et al., 2010)

Holmes and DeBurger's Four Broad Categories

Ronald M. Holmes and James E. DeBurger created categories to classify serial killers based on psychological or more intrinsic motivations. They believe that serial murderers generally benefit more psychologically from their actions rather than materially even when there are some material benefits. They have divided serial murderers into four categories: visionary, mission-oriented, hedonistic, and power/control-oriented. It is important to remember that these are not definitive and often many serial killers may fall into multiple categories.

First is the visionary type, where the killer is out of touch with reality due to some mental illness. They hear voices that tell them to murder a certain person or a category of people. After hearing these voices, they suffer a psychotic break before they start to kill. (Holmes and DeBurger, 1985) They believe that they are ordered to kill by a demon or that God himself has spoken to them. This is the one classification that Holmes and DeBurger have attributed to mental illness.

The next category is the mission-oriented killer. They are similar to the visionary type in which the serial killer has a life mission to kill certain kinds of people, for example, prostitutes or homosexuals. (Holmes and DeBurger, 1985) The difference is that the mission-oriented serial killer is not psychotic. This means that he does not hear voices, and his mission is self-imposed not "ordered" by a higher power. Holmes and DeBurger (1985), state that this is the type of killer

that when arrested, his neighbors cannot believe that he would be responsible for so many deaths.

Hedonistic type killers derive some sort of satisfaction from murdering, which motivates them to kill. Originally Holmes and DeBurger had divided these hedonists into two subtypes: the lust killer and the comfort-oriented killer. (White et al., 2010) Lust killers will murder for sexual gratification. With lust-driven killers rape, cannibalism, necrophilia, insertion of objects into the body, and posing the victims in inherently sexual positions are common. In contrast, comfort-oriented killers murder for personal gain or profit. Thrill killer, a third subcategory, was later added to the hedonistic type of killers. These killers, as the name suggests, receive a thrill out of murdering people. Pleasure can be obtained, for instance, by seeing the fear in a victim's eyes or by hurting their victims. Since thrill killers obtain pleasure from seeing other people suffering, sadism can become a recurring aspect of the murderer's signature.

Lastly, Holmes and DeBurger described power/control-oriented killers. In this category, the killer receives the most gratification from having complete control over their victims. "Holding the power of life or death over a victim is symbolically the ultimate control that one person can exert over another." (Holmes and DeBurger, 1985 pg.33) Unlike lust killers, sex is not the driving source of pleasure for these killers. Having the power over another person who is rendered helpless and at the killer's mercy is the ultimate driver for their acts of violence. This category of killer typically has a character disorder like psychopathy or sociopathy and has a self-inflated sense of importance and control. (Holmes and DeBurger, 1985)

As stated above, these categories are not definitive, and some overlap can occur. There are many instances where the power/control-oriented type killers overlap with the hedonistic type killers. It is a well-known fact that humans are complex creatures who oftentimes have a

tough time deciphering why we do things. As a result of this, it is difficult to categorize serial killers into these typologies.

Organized vs. Disorganized Killers

The organized/disorganized dichotomy is the most well-known and widely cited classification of serial killers. These categories were introduced by the FBI in the 1980s after a study examining lust and sexual sadistic murders. Ressler and his colleagues made the distinction between these two types of offenders by criteria determined by analyzing the crime scene, the victim, and forensic reports. (Canter et al., 2004) They proposed that the offender's characteristics in their personal life are also reflected in how they commit their crimes.

To point out a few proposed characteristics of the organized offender, he is claimed to be of average to high intelligence, follows the news and media as they report on the crime, and have a controlled mood during the crime. When analyzing the crime scene, there will be some indication of planning and premeditation on the part of the killer. It is also more likely that restraints will be used, and that the offender will bring a weapon to commit the murder and then take it away from the crime scene when he leaves. (Canter et al., 2004) All of this can be used to support that they usually have a higher intelligence than the disorganized killer.

In contrast, the disorganized killer is said to have below-average intelligence, minimal interest in following their crime in the news, and be anxious while committing the crime. The crime scene will reflect this. Canter and his colleagues (2004) suggest that there will be an overall sense of disorder and little evidence of any pre-planning of the murder. Crucial evidence may be left behind including blood, semen, fingerprints, and the murder weapon. Unlike the organized killer, there will be minimal use of restraints, and the body is often left in open view.

There is a third, less common, type of offender which is known as the mixed offender. This is the category where perpetrators do not fit into one of the previously mentioned categories. This lack of conformity with either the organized or disorganized grouping could be for numerous reasons. The reasons could include, but are not limited to, the attack may involve more than one offender, unanticipated events the offender did/could not plan for, or the offender may escalate or change into a different pattern of behavior during the crime or over a series of offenses. (Canter et al., 2004) Nobody can plan exactly what will happen and when so if something unexpected or unplanned happens during the crime then changes may need to be made to the game plan. These changes can affect the way that investigators see the crime. Serial offenders may not be linked to some of their crimes if the modus operandi (MO) is inconsistent.

Figure 3. Profile Characteristics of Organized and Disorganized Killers

Profile Characteristics of Organized and Disorganized Murders

ORGANIZED	DISORGANIZED
Average to above-average intelligence	Below-average intelligence
Socially competent	Socially inadequate
Skilled work preferred	Unskilled work
Sexually competent	Sexually incompetent
High birth order status	Low birth order status
Father's work stable	Father's work unstable
Inconsistent childhood discipline	Harsh discipline as child
Controlled mood during crime	Anxious mood during crime
Use of alcohol with crime	Minimal use of alcohol
Precipitating situational stress	Minimal situational stress
Living with partner	Living alone
Mobility with car in good condition	Lives/works near crime scene
Follows crime in news media	Minimal interest in news media
May change jobs or leave town	Significant behavior change (drug/ alcohol abuse, religiosity, etc.)

https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/99114-99117NCJRS.pdf pg. 21

Figure 4. Crime Scene Differences Between Organized and Disorganized Murderers

Crime Scene Differences Between Organized and Disorganized Murderers

ORGANIZED

Planned offense
Victim a targeted stranger
Personalizes victim
Controlled conversation
Crime scene reflects overall control
Demands submissive victim
Restraints used
Aggressive acts prior to death
Body hidden
Weapon/evidence absent
Transports victim or body

DISORGANIZED

Spontaneous offense
Victim/location known
Depersonalizes victim
Minimal conversation
Crime scene random and sloppy
Sudden violence to victim
Minimal use of restraints
Sexual acts after death
Body left in view
Evidence/weapon often present
Body left at death scene

https://www.ojp.gov/pdffiles1/Digitization/99114-99117NCJRS.pdf pg. 21

Crime and Media Coverage

Today, the media has the potential to cover all aspects of crime and the criminal justice system. We can keep up with an offender and a case from investigation to arrest to the trial and the sentencing. Many people think the media and the news are terrible and corrupt our minds. While it can be beneficial and help share valuable information, various media sources have downfalls. Watching media often creates fear for consumers that may be out of proportion to the reality of the situation. Most of the population is interested in witnessing crime and punishment and will tune into the news and other media sources to keep up with local and national news despite the produced fear.

Media Cultivating Fear and a Distorted Perception of Crime

The news and other sources reporting crimes create an image that we live in a dangerous and unforgiving world. While this is true, the reality of situations often becomes blurred. Media plays a significant role in the public's perceptions of crime and how the criminal justice system works. The media can provide an estimation of how much crime there is, the most common types of crime, trends in crime rates, and the daily operations of the criminal justice system. (Sanchez, 2019) However, often, the media does not provide an accurate representation of these things.

Media sources will report on what will get people's attention, which is often not good news. Due to this, negative events are reported more frequently, which is what people remember; oftentimes, when things do get better, it is not reported. This leads to an overall negative impression of the world and leads to fear and increased stress in the public. Research has been conducted to examine the impact of media consumption on the fear of crime, punitive attitudes, and perceived police effectiveness. The result was that the more crime-related media an individual consumes is directly related to how fearful of crime they are. (Sanchez, 2019)

As a society, we are fascinated with crime and justice. People easily spend hours watching movies and TV shows, reading books, newspapers, and magazines talking about true crime. News reporters are aware of our preferences and use them to get viewers. "The more shocking, upsetting, gruesome, and dramatic the case the better." (Sanchez, 2019) As mentioned though this is not without its problems.

The media and news can end up misleading people because of what they report on. Many times, reporters will show stories where the perpetrator and the victim are strangers because it adds to the shock and disgust felt by the viewers. So, while women, in reality, are more likely to be victimized by people that they know, the media makes it seem like strangers are the most

likely to attack. The media also creates a distorted view of who is committing crimes. Minorities are portrayed more frequently as criminals than Whites, and minority misrepresentation is out of proportion to crime statistics. Whites are more likely to be portrayed as victims than other minority groups like African Americans or Latinos. The disparities play a significant role in how others view these groups of people. The representation of certain demographic groups in media coverage of crime can reinforce stereotypes and biases, perpetuating stigmatization, and discrimination. (Klein & Naccarato, 2003)

Crime rates are also distorted. Americans have long been under the impression that crime is on the rise in the U.S., even in years when it was sharply in decline. Media reports about high-profile crimes might contribute to this, even if changes in actual crime rates have not always supported that idea. (Swift, 2016) One survey found that around 96% of respondents cited they get their information from the news media. (Gebotys et al., 1988) All of these people who rely on the media to gain an understanding of types of crimes and their perpetrators will have a distorted view of what's actually going on.

With the mention of perceived crime rates being more than the actual crime rate, there is the question of how that affects people. The way that the general public views crime and victimization can have an impact on an individual's subjective well-being. However, there hasn't been much research on how victimization and crime fears affect an individual's subjective well-being, especially when it comes to how much a person's self-reported life satisfaction is influenced by perceived versus actual crime. There was one study however that was conducted by Christopher Ambrey, Christopher Flaming, and Matthew Manning in 2013. The results of this study indicate that: (1) individuals' perceptions of crime in their local area are far greater than actual levels of crime; (2) the gap between perceived and real crime is widening as real crime

rates fall faster than the perceived rate of crime; (3) real crime rates detract more from an individual's self-reported life satisfaction than perceived rates of crime; however, (4) perceived rates of crime have an adverse impact on life satisfaction beyond those associated with real crime; and (5) there is significant heterogeneity in the life satisfaction effects of real and perceived crime among groups of individuals. (Ambrey et al., 2013)

Sensitivity from the Media

Coverage and crime have drastically changed concerning what is shown on the news. In 1985, footage of things such as bodies and/or body bags would have been unusual and elicited public outcries, especially from victim advocates. (Seymour, 2000) However, today, such footage is common, and people even have a sense that they deserve to see it. The media has a complex role when it comes to reporting crimes, as there is a duty to inform the public but also to respect the victim and their right to privacy. As a result, there has been an increase in media professionals who undergo sensitivity training. This allows them to learn the best way to accurately report crimes while lessening the trauma experienced by the victim. (Seymour, 2000)

Public Information Officers and Their Role in News Coverage

As mentioned there has been an increase in the news coverage of crimes, which has led to increased communications between law enforcement, the community, and the media. This role is filled by Public Information Officers (PIOs), who speak on behalf of the investigating agency on the investigation. The PIOs create a media plan which should provide timely information regularly, without compromising the integrity of the investigative efforts. (Morton, 2010) This helps keep the public informed with accurate information while ensuring that sensitive case facts

are not released. If critical information is released too early, it can hinder the investigation, and the police can lose their edge over the criminal. A lot of times, and especially in murder investigations, the police will keep some information private. This could include things like how the body was positioned, how the victim was killed, or other facts that would only be known by the killer.

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<u>Communicating with the Media/Police</u>

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Many serial killers want to gain the recognition and fame that they believe they deserve. This is why oftentimes they reach out and start communicating with the media and/or law enforcement as seen in the cases of people like the Zodiac Killer, the BTK Killer, and the Son of Sam. As media attention grows with each murder the self-esteem of the serial killer is bolstered. (Villalon, 2020) These offenders use the media to get the attention they so desperately crave in numerous ways which can include communicating directly with the newspapers, the police, the victim's family, or even just by keeping up with the news.

Psycholinguistic Analysis

One of the most common ways that the media and serial killers communicate is through letters written by the perpetrator. However, sometimes it can be tough to discern if the offenders themselves wrote it or if it was written by someone pretending to be the killer. There are methods, however, that can help to make that distinction. One method includes looking at and analyzing the language used in these letters.

In a book by John Douglas and Mark Olshaker (2000), they explain how language can be analyzed concerning written and oral communications. The process used to evaluate

communications such as ransom notes and letters to the police is known as psycholinguistic

analysis. It is not a handwriting analysis, although that too can be done, it "rather stresses the

actual use of language, the style, and of course, the underlying message." (Douglas and

Olshaker, 2000 pg.50) It is important to be able to look at behavioral clues gained through crime

scenes and by creating a criminal profile to see if the communications are likely to be valid or if

the police need to focus their attention elsewhere.

Graphology

As mentioned previously, handwriting analysis can also be done, which is called

graphology. Graphology, or handwriting analysis, is believed to have originated because of the

idea that personality could be ascertained through handwriting. It is even stated that whether

you're introverted or extroverted can be determined by the size of your letters. (Taylor, 2021) It

could be easily guessed that introverted people tend to have smaller handwriting, while

extroverted people tend to write larger. More personality traits are also said to be easily

determined by handwriting.

"A light touch when penning indicates empathy. Moderate pressure signifies a willingness

to commit and heavy pressure showcases anger and tension. Graphology suggests that most

doctors are private because of their illegible signatures and that the wider your lowercase

"l" is, the more likely you are to be spontaneous. Moreover, if you write the capital letter

"I" larger than every other letter, especially in reference to yourself, you're supposedly self-

important." (Taylor, 2021)

When it comes to forensic investigations involving serial killers, handwriting analysis is

important. By analyzing the unique features, patterns, and nuances in an individual's

handwriting, insights can be gained about mental state, emotional stability, and social tendencies. (Serial Kilz. 2023) Law enforcement agencies can then use these analyses to identify potential suspects. It is important to remember that neurological conditions, cultural influences, and personal habits can affect handwriting.

All serial killers have distinctive sets of characteristics; however, certain traits have been commonly observed in their handwriting. Some frequently observed traits of serial killer handwriting include inconsistent letter sizes, irregular slant, excessive pressure, crossed or illegible words, and peculiar line spacing. Significant differences in the handwriting of different serial killers can also be present. These variations show how unique and different each offender's psychological profile is. Investigators can distinguish between different serial killers and get insight into their motivations, methods of operation, and mental processes by examining and interpreting these distinctions. (Serial Kilz, 2023)

Perhaps one of the most common uses of graphology is to compare the handwriting of new samples to those of old ones. This can help determine if the same person wrote different letters. There will be signs if a person tries to purposely change their handwriting style. This is useful when the killer's handwriting has already been published because copycats want their writing to look the same. Graphologists can see unusual hesitations in a person's writing that indicate when they're writing lies or emulating someone else's writing style. (Taylor, 2021)

Communication in Organized v. Disorganized Serial Killers

As mentioned previously, organized serial killers enjoy reading and hearing about their crimes in the news/media. So, it is not surprising to learn that it is not unusual for them to be in contact with the media or the police. For organized serial killers their "...goals in writing to

authorities [are] narcissistic and self-gratifying—that is, to create terror, gain notoriety, and demonstrate intellectual superiority." (Bonn, 2018) Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, and David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, were so consumed by the notoriety that they coined their pseudonyms themselves.

Their higher levels of intelligence are often demonstrated in these communications, the Zodiac Killer is a notorious example. In 1969 a three-part message, which explained the motivation behind his killings, was sent to a local newspaper. The issue was that the messages had to be deciphered to be read. One particular letter sent to *The San Francisco Chronicle* newspaper became known as the 340 cipher (it had 340 characters). (Coggan, 2020) This letter stumped law enforcement and the public for many years. Only recently, in early 2020, a three-man team was able to reveal the message more than 50 years after the first murder occurred.

On the other hand, disorganized killers typically have no interest in contacting the media or even watching what is going on with the case. They are described as having poor communication skills, which could contribute to the lack of communication with the media/police. While it is extremely uncharacteristic of disorganized killers, it is not an impossibility. With having a lower intelligence level than the organized killer, if they do choose to speak to the media the letters will be much less complex.

Does the Media Help or Hinder Serial Murder Investigations?

Serial murder cases are inherently newsworthy and are followed closely by the media. These reports can be found in newspaper or magazine articles, internet media content, radio and television news reports, and articles. Sensationalized events concerning serial killings usually garner the most attention, which sparks debates regarding the ethics of reporting major crimes in

the media. There are several ways that the media can be helpful when it comes to serial murder investigations, but they can also be harmful.

The Media Helping Investigators

While there are some negative effects of the media being involved during serial murder investigations there are also some positives. The biggest of these is when the media can help investigators look into these crimes. Social media can help provide law enforcement with information they might have not otherwise discovered. Henderson Cooper, a former Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) and CIA officer and current security expert, told Teen Vogue, "It means more eyes and ears to support an investigation — when used properly." (Webster, 2017)

Law enforcement may use the media, and more specifically social media, to combat criminal behavior at distinct phases, prevent crime, and involve the community. In relation to criminal behavior, an online survey analyzing law enforcement's usage of social media revealed that 81 percent of law enforcement personnel utilized the platform for investigative purposes, with 25 percent claiming to use it every day. Identifying witnesses, tracking down criminals and their networks, gathering information to establish probable cause for a search warrant, and locating criminals were some of the ways that the police officers surveyed used social media. Furthermore, survey participants utilized social media to predict unlawful behavior and discourage it before its occurrence. (Rice & Parkin, 2016)

The media can also help investigators gather information about victims of homicides. One example of this happening was in the case of Moinee Wade, who was shot to death in 2016. Unable to identify the victim, police released photos of Wade's tattoos to the public in hopes that someone would recognize who they belonged to, which was successful. (Forest & Clerkin, 2016)

Similarly, Rita Roberts, previously known as the "woman with the flower tattoo", was also identified by her tattoo. A family member in Britain recognized the unique tattoo on her left forearm: a black flower with green leaves and the words "R'Nick" underneath. (Pannett, 2023) Although unlike the quick identification in the case of Moinee Wade, Rita Roberts was not identified until 31 years after her death in 1992.

Inaccurate Information

While it is shown that the media did help in those cases, as they do in many others, it can also hinder an investigation. This particularly happens in high-profile cases, which include those that are committed by a serial killer. When police are investigating crimes, they have a responsibility to follow up on leads, which include those from social media posts. While usually, this is not a problem, in highly publicized cases there can be an overwhelming amount of information that law enforcement has to sort through. (Webster, 2017) Even large police departments can find this task daunting,

This is especially true when much of the information they may receive through these internet detectives may or may not be helpful, much less accurate. "Nothing that is fed via social media can be deemed factual until it is vetted and confirmed," Henderson Cooper says. (Webster, 2017) There is a question of reliability when the information comes from sources that have not been vetted or tested. For example, when given a video it may or may not have been edited. Trying to determine the dependability of sources can lead to a lot of misinformation and wasted time tracking down leads and then determining they won't go anywhere. This can cause investigators who are already stretched thin to become overwhelmed and overworked.

Cooper also claims that "far too often, what is said in the media and on social media is perceived to be true and factual." This can be dangerous. Law enforcement officers can be led down the wrong path and suspects can be, as a result, inaccurately identified. (Webster, 2017) Once that happens their name is often smeared, and their families are harassed. This can lead to those wrongfully accused to commit suicide. This is exactly what happened to Sunil Tripathi who was erroneously identified as one of the Boston Marathon Bombers. Once an innocent person is accused of a serious crime it is hard to reverse public opinion.

Talking Heads in the Media

As mentioned previously, serial killings are an appealing storyline for the media due to the public's interest in true crime. To grab the audience's attention the media utilizes people who are inclined to speak as experts when it comes to serial murder. These commentators are often referred to as talking heads. "Often when we find "talking heads" in TV, film, or social media, we tend to be more engaged with their message simply due to the intimate camera set-up." (Mayfield, 2024) The problem is that this can lead to misinformation.

These talking heads include both experts and pseudo-experts. Under the category of experts falls academics, researchers, retired law enforcement officials, and mental health professionals who all have developed specific knowledge and experiences in serial murder investigations. On the other hand, pseudo-experts are self-proclaimed profilers and other people who profess to have expertise in serial murder, when, in fact, their experience is limited or non-existent. (Morton, 2010) Talking heads, real experts or not, will be enlisted by the media to share their thoughts on ongoing cases, even if they are not involved in the investigation or have access to any of the case's privileged information.

When people talk about ongoing cases in the media, they have a great chance of sabotaging investigations and possibly causing irreparable harm. They frequently make assumptions about the killer's potential traits and motivation for the killings. Such claims have the potential to incite panic in a community and mislead the people. They could contaminate prospective jurors and, more crucially, add to distrust and low faith in law enforcement. Since it is doubtful that an offender would distinguish between a talking head and a law enforcement officer directly involved in the investigation, these words may also affect the serial killer's behavior. Offenders may destroy evidence or, in more tragic cases, retaliate violently when confronted with assertions or disparaging remarks aired in media outlets. (Morton, 2010)

Sensationalism and Glorification of Serial Killers

Serial killer coloring books, murder films on *Netflix*, and Halloween costumes, like the ones of Freddy Kruger, are just a few examples of the culture and industry that honors serial killers as if they were famous Hollywood actors. Many convicted serial killers have become figureheads in popular culture and have amassed both fear and a fanbase that lives on even after they are dead. Why does society give so much attention to serial killers who have committed the worst acts imaginable?

"The socially constructed identity of serial killers does not distinguish between real-life predators such as Ed Kemper or Jeffrey Dahmer and fictional killers such as Hannibal Lecter or John Doe in the movie *Se7en*. This is problematic because sensationalized, stereotypical depictions obscure the distinction between reality and fiction in the minds of the public." (Bonn, 2020)

In an article written in 2020 by Scott Bonn, he explores this idea further by looking at the case of Ed Gein which took place in the 1950s. Gein, also known as the Butcher of Plainfield or

the Plainfield Ghoul, garnered widespread notoriety after it was uncovered by authorities that he would exhume corpses from graveyards and preserve bones and skin to make trophies and keepsakes out of. When law enforcement searched his home, they found where Gein had created masks from human faces and made clothing from human skin that he would wear. (Bonn, 2020)

After the news of his arrest, the media sensationalized the crimes and made a mentally ill man into "a cartoonish vampire and grave robber." (Bonn, 2020) His actions were later sensationalized even more with him inspiring the characters of multiple notorious horror films, including "Norman Bates" of the movie *Psycho* (1960), "Leatherface" of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (1974), and "Buffalo Bill" from the film *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991).

There are many other examples as other killers like Jeffrey Dahmer, Richard Ramirez, Ted Bundy, David Berkowitz, Richard Cottingham, and so many more are the focus of popular *Netflix* documentaries. The media can change the narrative of these serial killers and make them pop culture icons, and this causes society to lose focus on what these people did and to whom they did it. There is more evidence to support this conclusion as a former neighbor of Jeffrey Dahmer, a cannibal who killed 17 men, claimed that people were willing to pay $50 each to sit on a couch that the serial killer gave her and was also willing to pay just to hold a glass that he once drank water from. (Bonn, 2020)

Murderabilia

On top of the notoriety, they get from inspiring movies or just the retelling of their crimes, serial killers can also profit monetarily. There are of course stores, both brick-and-mortar and online, that sell things like shirts, mugs, and other merchandise that display popular icons, which sometimes include serial killers. (Irons, 2021) This alone appears to glorify and validate
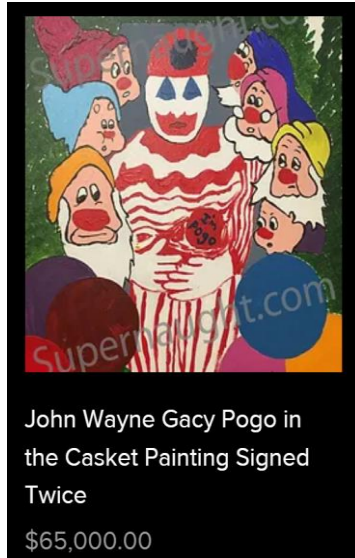
the awful crimes that these people perpetrate, however, it has also been taken a step further with murderabilia.

Murderabilia is a term that is used to identify collectibles related to murders and the perpetrators. This can range from clothing, artwork, letters, autographs, hair, and other personal effects belonging to the serial killer. While there are many different websites where this murderabilia can be found, one in particular called Supernaught True Crime Gallery lists paintings, sketches, or signed notecards for sale from 40 to 50 well-known killers. (Rangel, 2019) Some paintings for sale on this website by the killer clown, John Wayne Gacy, range from a couple of hundred dollars to about $65,000.

"Are we not conveying the message that this is something to be sought after if we treat our serial killers in this way—with fame, attention, infamy, and even business? We assign the same characteristics to killers as to famous people." (Rangel, 2019) Not only does the sensationalism and glorification of serial killers affect the killers themselves but it also affects the victims and their loved ones. Many times, the victims of serial killers just become a number towards a kill count for the perpetrators. Often the victim's names are not even used when it comes to media reports and little details are known about them. Innocent human beings are not given the attention that they deserve, instead, the focus is given to the killer, and the victims are frequently forgotten about. (Irons, 2021)

Figure 5. Painting by John Wayne Gacy Being Sold on Supernaught for $65,000.00

John Wayne Gacy Pogo in
the Casket Painting Signed
Twice
$65,000.00

https://www.supernaught.com/product-page/john-wayne-gacy-pogo-in-the-casket-painting-
signed-twice

Copycat Killers

The concept of sensationalism may even be expanded to the point where media coverage
of serial murderers may persuade others to commit murder in order to gain the same level of
attention that the killers do. These second perpetrators are then known as copycat killers. (Irons,
2021) There are times when crimes can look like they have been influenced but in reality, there
were just some similarities by coincidence. However, there have also been times when a criminal
has admitted to being inspired.

One example is Michael Madison who is known to have committed the murders of at
least three women over a nine-month period. The first body was found on Friday, July 19, 2013,
after searching his garage due to reports of a foul smell. It was the body of Shirellda Helen Terry.
The following day, the remains of two more women, Angela Deskins and Shetisha Sheeley, were

recovered nearby, in a basement and a field. (Conti, 2015) After being questioned Madison told police that he was heavily influenced by Anthony Sowell, who was dubbed the Cleveland Strangler, and who was already on death row for the murder of 11 women.

In another example, a movie was said to be the source that influenced the crime. Natural Born Killers, released in 1994, tells the story of two lovers who both had traumatic childhoods. Later they become mass murderers, killing 52 people, and are glorified by the media. There has been at least a dozen verified copycat mass killings inspired by this movie, the most notorious of which resulted in the Columbine High School massacre in 1999. (Lasky, 2012) Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold, who were the shooters, both wrote in their journals about their obsession with Natural Born Killers. They also referred to April 20, the day of the shooting, as "the holy April morning of NBK." They also write about the man who conceived the story for Natural Born Killers, Quentin Tarantino, and if it would be appropriate to direct a film about their life story. (Lasky, 2012) Later the massacre at Columbine High School influenced other school shooters.

Many serial killers have admitted to being influenced by those who have come before them, they study them and, in at least one case, have even asked for advice. (Conti, 2015) The majority of the time it seems to be out of motivation to gain notoriety. The offenders that have inspired them gained some attention from the media and they desire that as well. Due to this, they model their crimes after their inspirations.

Serial Killers Learning from the Media

Not only are copycat killers influenced by the media but serial killers in general can use the media to learn techniques and keep up with how the investigation is progressing. Serial killers can use forms of media as guides for their actions. Due to the public interest in serial

killers and true crime, there have been many documentaries and TV shows that have been made on this topic. Killers are now able to use some of the expertise shared to increase their chances of getting away with murder.

The Craigslist Killer is one example of how increased media can be harmful to investigations. He was originally thought to be a police officer due to his knowledge of crime scene investigation techniques. It was also obvious that whoever had killed these victims had knowledge about what the police were looking for. There had been attempts made to remove an identifying tattoo from one of the victims, the bodies had been dismembered, and the remains had been dumped in various locations along the Long Island shoreline and further inland. (Pavia, 2011) With shows like CSI becoming more popular the techniques used by crime scene investigators have become more known. With this, the Craigslist Killer was able to elude police and delay the identification of his victims.

Serial killers can also watch the news to keep up with how the investigators are doing regarding solving the cases in which they are involved. There have been problems in various investigations due to the media giving information to the public and to the killer that should have been kept secret. (Villalon, 2020) Information that could hinder an investigation should not be released to the media. For instance, there is sometimes information that will only be known by the killer. If this information is then released, it takes away the leg up that law enforcement has when conducting interrogations. Even worse, if a perpetrator learns that the police are catching up to them, they may flee or change their MO in an attempt to avoid capture.

Case Studies

To investigate the interaction between serial murderers and the media further, three cases will be analyzed where serial killers communicated with the media and police throughout the perpetration of their crimes. These case studies include the crimes of Dennis Rader (the BTK Killer), the Zodiac Killer, and Theodore Kaczynski (the Unabomber).

The BTK Killer

Dennis Rader was a man, who from the outside, seemed like a normal husband and father of two. He was an active member in his church, a Cub Scout troop leader, and he served in the Air Force at one point. However, Rader, who gave himself the moniker BTK Killer (Bind, Torture, and Kill), murdered 10 people in the Wichita Kansas area in the years 1974 to 1991. During this time, he would communicate with the local media outlets, mostly *The Wichita Eagle*, about his crimes. Rather unusually, he took a hiatus from killing for almost 13 years (1991-2004) and disappeared out of the spotlight of the media. (Johnson, 2012) Eventually, he would reach back out to the media, which ultimately led to his arrest in February of 2005. The victims of Dennis Rader include 4 members of the Otero family (Joseph, Julie, Josephine, and Joseph Jr.) and Kathryn Bright in 1974, Shirley Vian and Nancy Fox in 1977, Marine Hedge in 1985, Vicki Wegerle in 1986, and Dolores Davis in 1991. (Vultaggio, 2020)

Speaking Out in the Media

Dennis Rader introduced himself to the media and the police in October of 1974. Three men had already been arrested for the murders of the Otero family after one young man confessed, also implicating two friends. An editor for *The Wichita Eagle* received a peculiar

phone call directing him to a mechanical engineering book that was housed in the Wichita Public Library. (Piccotti & Ott, 2023) The police went and located the book and found a letter inside. In this letter, Rader took credit for the murders. He claimed,

> "I write this letter to you for the sake of the taxpayer as well as your time. Those three dude you have in custody are just talking to get publicity for the Otero murders. They know nothing at all. I did it by myself and with no ones help. There has been no talk either. Let's put this straight...." (Piccotti & Ott, 2023)

He also backed this claim as he was giving information that would only have been known by the killer. Later in the letter, Rader describes how hard it is to control the "monster" that is in his head stating, "Maybe you can stop him. I can't." At the end of this disturbing note he introduces his moniker in the postscript, "Bind them, torture them, kill them, B.T.K., you see he at it again. They will be on the next victim." (CrimeLibrary, 2007) In addition to details about the Otero murders that were, at that time, unknown to the public, the letter was also riddled with misspellings and grammatical errors.

After binding and strangling a then 25-year-old Nancy Fox, on December 8, 1977, Dennis Rader called 911. He went to a nearby pay phone and told the 911 operator, "you will find a homicide at 843 South Pershing". (Piccotti & Ott, 2023) It was not long until he was heard from again. In January of 1978, he referred back to his sixth victim, sending a poem to *The Wichita Eagle* that began with "Shirley Locks, Shirley Locks, wilt thou be mine." The note was passed to the paper's classified ads department after the mail clerk thought it was a Valentine's Day letter.

In early February of that same year, BTK sent a letter to KAKE-TV where he claimed that he had killed seven so far. He showed that he was getting angry at the lack of response that

he was getting to his previous letters. "How many people do I have to kill before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?" he writes, before reeling off a list of suggested nicknames, including "The BTK Strangler," "The Wichita Hangman" and "The Asphyxiator." (Piccotti & Ott, 2023) There were four pages to this letter in total. On one page was the poem "Oh! Death to Nancy," another page had a drawing of how he left Nancy Fox's body arranged, and the other two pages were the letter in which the above quote was excerpted. (CrimeLibrary, 2007) In this letter, there were again many misspellings and grammatical issues.

The last of the BTK's officially recognized letters, before he went on hiatus, was in April of 1979. He sent Anna Williams a poem titled "Oh Anna, Why Didn't You Appear" along with some items he had stolen from her house. In this poem, Rader explains how he was waiting in Anna's house to kill her. However, he lost patience and left before she arrived back home. After the last three victims, Dennis Rader stops killing, and BTK seemingly drops off the map.

Sharing Personal Details

Via the letters that Dennis Rader sent throughout the years, police were able to learn quite a bit about his life. He described how as a young boy he would catch stray animals ultimately strangling them to death. Then he escalated to secretly watching pornography which included images of sadomasochism, bondage, and domination. (Krishnamurthy, 2018) Rader also admitted that by the time he was 18, he was a peeper and had begun stealing underwear for his "private collection". Around the time he entered his 30s, he was using bondage on prostitutes, some of the women would get scared and refuse to see him again.

Distinctive and personal details were also revealed in these letters. Some believe that he did this because he wanted to be caught. Specific details were discussed by Rader, such as the

fact that he was born in 1939, his lifelong fascination with trains, the loss of his father during

World War II, and that his mother dated a railroad detective. He even included discussions of

some of his hobbies like hunting, fishing, and camping. (Krishnamurthy, 2018)

BTK's Return

      After 13 years of lying under the radar, BTK reached back out to the media on March 19,

2004. *The Wichita Eagle* received an envelope from "Bill Thomas Killman" which contained

Vicki Wegerle's driver's license, photos of her body, and BTK's signature. It was said that the

crime scene photos could have only been taken by the killer since Vicki was taken to the hospital

and no photos of her at the crime scene were taken by police. (CrimeLibrary, 2007) This

shocking return came after speculation that whoever was the BTK Killer was either in prison for

unrelated charges or had died. This behavior could be explained by Dennis Rader's need for

attention and to get notoriety for the crimes he committed. Up until this point, it was not known

that Vicki Wegerle was a victim of the BTK Killer, many people believed her husband was the

one who killed her.

      On May 5, 2004, KAKE-TV also received a letter from BTK. Included were a bogus ID,

chapter titles for his biography, and a word search including words like "prowl" and "fantasies."

While it wasn't known at the time, it was later discovered that the letters R-A-D-E-R were

grouped around the number 6220, which was Rader's street address. (Piccotti & Ott, 2023)

While a couple of other letters were left, the next big development in this case came in December

of 2004. On December 13, 2004, a man, who remains unidentified, found a questionable white

plastic bag that was wrapped in rubber bands. Inside the bag was a driver's license belonging to

Nancy Fox and a Barbie doll with a hood over its head and its arms tied behind its back. (Piccotti & Ott, 2023)

While acting according to the instructions of a postcard that was mailed to KAKE-TV, police were able to find a cereal box, which contained a vivid description of the Otero murders along with another doll. There was also a section of the postcard that mentioned another cereal box that was supposedly located at a local Home Depot. After questioning people in the store, it was found that an employee had found the cereal box in the bed of his truck. Without looking in the box he had thrown it away. Once recovered from the trash, another message from BTK was discovered inside the cereal box. He was asking if he could communicate via a computer floppy disk without being traced. The police were told to take out a newspaper ad that contained the message "Rex, it will be OK" if he could not be traced via the floppy disk. (Piccotti & Ott, 2023)

<u>"Rex, it will be Ok."</u>

At the direction of an undercover detective, *The Wichita Eagle* ran a classified ad that read, "Rex, it will be ok, Contact me PO Box 1st four ref. numbers at 67202." (Piccotti & Ott, 2023) Six days later, BTK confirmed he got the message via a postcard sent to KAKE-TV. Once the floppy disk was received by investigators, they got to work. Contrary to what they told Rader, they could trace the floppy disk. The hidden metadata revealed that the disk was used by a user named "Dennis" at Christ Lutheran Church as well as the Park City Library. A quick search for Christ Lutheran Church revealed that the president's name was Dennis Rader. A DNA sample was obtained from his daughter's pap smear, and he was positively identified as the BTK Killer. After pleading guilty to 10 counts of first-degree murder, Dennis Rader was sentenced to 10 consecutive life sentences.

Figure 6. The Victims of Dennis Rader a.k.a The BTK Killer
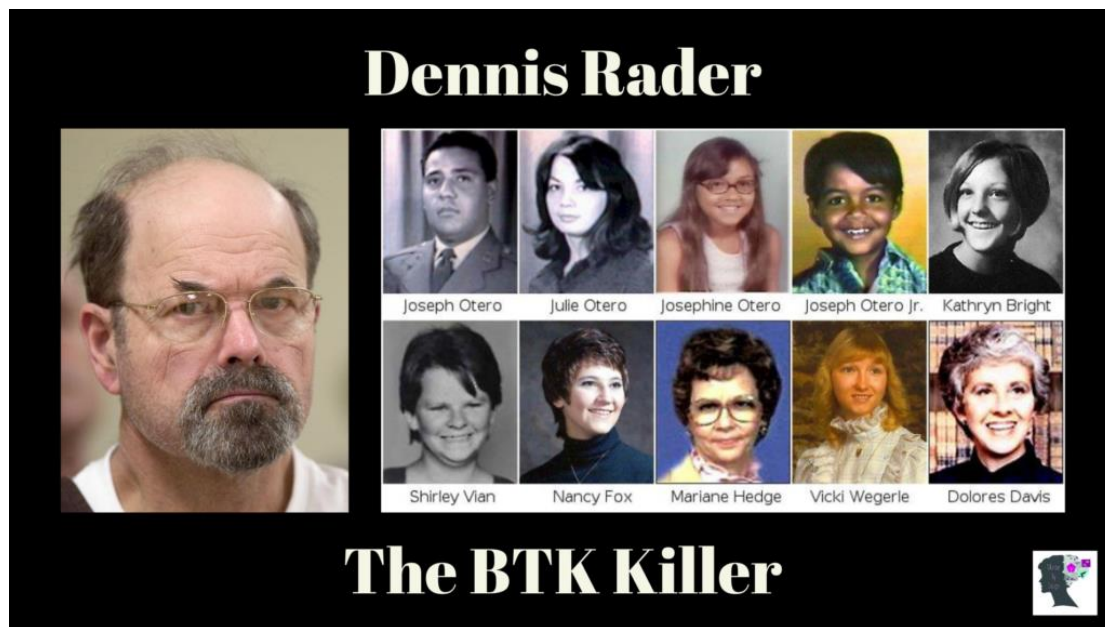
The Zodiac Killer

Perhaps the most well-known serial killer who communicated with the media, as well as the police, was the Zodiac Killer. Similarly, The Zodiac Killer and Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, both liked to taunt the police with letters. The biggest difference is that the Zodiac Killer has never been caught. He is however credited with 5 murders and 2 attempted murders in Northern California in 1968 and 1969. Through communications with the police and the media, he has claimed to have killed as many as 37 people. (Piccotti, 2023) Although continuing communication for several years after the Zodiac's last confirmed victim, these letters and ciphers diminished around 1974. It has been speculated, similarly to what happened in the BTK case, that he was either arrested for other charges or had died. It has also been theorized that he

may have just decided to stop killing or moved to a new location and continued to kill under a

new modus operandi (MO). (Hickey, 2016)

<u>Victims of the Zodiac</u>

Four separate attacks are undoubtedly perpetrated by the Zodiac Killer. The first took

place on the night of December 20, 1968, when 17-year-old David Faraday and 16-year-old

Betty Lou Jensen went on their first official date. Shortly after 11:00 PM, passing motorists saw

David's car, a Rambler, and the two high schoolers parked at a lovers' lane spot along Lake

Herman Road in Benicia, California. Not long after, another driver noticed what seemed to be

two lifeless bodies on the side of the road. (Butterfield, 2023) Once on the scene, Benicia police

discovered Betty Lou Jensen dead, with five bullet wounds in her back. David Faraday was

found next to the car with a bullet wound to the head, at this point, he was just barely alive. It

was suspected that the killer fired shots to lure the kids out of the car as there were bullet holes in

the car's roof and back window. Investigators at the time believed that the two teenagers were

randomly chosen by a stranger for unknown reasons.

The second attack came seven months later on July 4, 1696. On this day 22-year-old

Darlene Ferrin picked up her friend by the name of Michael Mageau and parked in the parking

lot of Blue Rock Springs Park. Michael survived and later told police that another vehicle pulled

into the parking lot around midnight, left, and then returned a couple of minutes later. The driver

of the car got out, shined a bright light into the windows, and then fired into the car. Darlene was

shot several times, and Michael was also shot in the jaw, shoulder, and leg. (Butterfield, 2023)

This is when the Zodiac started to communicate. At 12:40 AM a man used a gas station phone to

call Vallejo police. During this call, he claimed to be responsible for this attack as well as the

previous murders on Lake Herman Road. According to the police dispatcher, the caller spoke in a low, monotone voice, saying: "I want to report a murder. If you go one mile east on Columbus Parkway, you will find kids in a brown car. They were shot with a 9-millimeter Luger. I also killed those kids last year. Goodbye." (Butterfield, 2023) While Michael was lucky enough to survive this attack, Darlene Ferrin died on arrival at the hospital.

On September 27, 1969, the Zodiac Killer claimed his fourth murder victim. College students Bryan Hartnell and Cecelia Shepard were relaxing on an isolated part of the shore of Lake Berryessa near Napa, California. Suddenly a man appeared holding a gun and wearing a hooded costume with a white crossed circle stitched over the chest. (Piccotti, 2023) The man bound their wrists with a pre-cut plastic clothesline while explaining that he had escaped from jail and needed money and a car to get to Mexico. Suddenly he started to stab Bryan in the back, for a total of six stab wounds. Then, while Cecelia struggled to survive, he stabbed her ten times. The individual then made his way to Bryan's car and, using a pen, drew a crossed circle on the door that included the times and dates of the earlier attacks, as well as the notation, "by knife," and the dates, "Sept 27 69." (Butterfield, 2023) A man reported "a double murder" to the Napa police station around 7:40 PM. The caller identified Bryan's vehicle, gave police directions to the crime location, and said, "I did it." The call was traced by police to a pay phone at a Napa car wash. Two days later, Cecelia Shepard passed away, but Bryan Hartnell survived his attack.

The last confirmed attack by the Zodiac took place in San Francisco where 28-year-old Paul Stine worked as a cab driver. On the night of October 11, 1969, Stine picked up a fare headed for a destination in the upscale Presidio Heights neighborhood. At the intersection of Washington and Cherry Streets, the passenger shot Stine in the head and removed a piece of the victim's shirt. Just before the police arrived, the guy left. However, the police radio broadcast
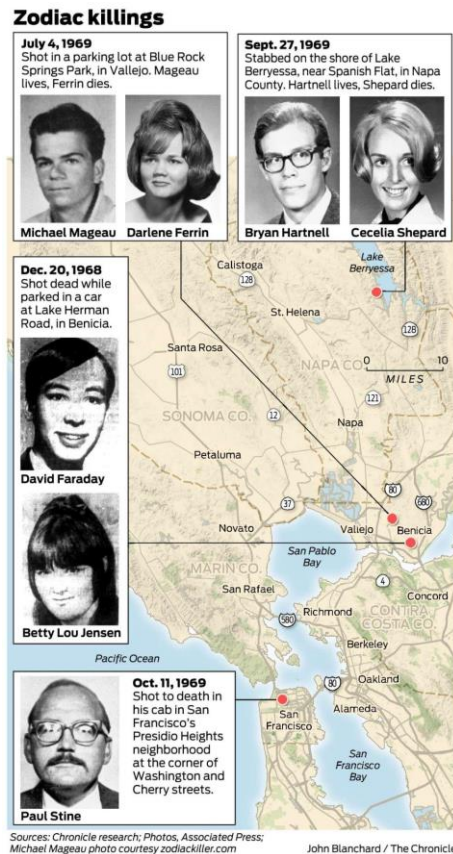
misidentified the culprit as a Black man, leading officers to dismiss a white man who fit the proper description. (Butterfield, 2023) This was thought to be a routine robbery until the office of *The San Francisco Chronicle* acquired an envelope with a letter from the Zodiac claiming otherwise. With descriptions from witnesses who had seen the murderer of Paul Stein leaving the cab from their bedroom window, police were able to create and circulate a composite sketch of the killer. There were, however, no other leads that were generated as a result. (Piccotti, 2023)

Figure 7. A Composite Sketch of the Zodiac Killer from 1969

https://www.biography.com/crime/zodiac-killer

Figure 8. The Victims of The Zodiac Killer

Zodiac killings

July 4, 1969
Shot in a parking lot at Blue Rock Springs Park, in Vallejo. Mageau lives, Ferrin dies.

Michael Mageau   Darlene Ferrin

Sept. 27, 1969
Stabbed on the shore of Lake Berryessa, near Spanish Flat, in Napa County. Hartnell lives, Shepard dies.

Bryan Hartnell   Cecelia Shepard

Dec. 20, 1968
Shot dead while parked in a car at Lake Herman Road, in Benicia.

David Faraday

Betty Lou Jensen

Oct. 11, 1969
Shot to death in his cab in San Francisco's Presidio Heights neighborhood at the corner of Washington and Cherry streets.

Paul Stine

Sources: Chronicle research; Photos, Associated Press; Michael Mageau photo courtesy zodiackiller.com

John Blanchard / The Chronicle

https://www.beaumontenterprise.com/crime/article/zodiac-killer-case-50-years-later-tracing-the-13464347.php

Police Encounter with the Zodiac

While he was never caught, the police encountered the Zodiac on the night of Paul Stein's murder. To make matters worse, they did not just simply walk by him unknowingly, the police actually spoke to him. The police asked the Zodiac if he had seen anything suspicious and of course, he lied, telling him that he had. In the true Zodiac Killer fashion, he then had to tell the police about his encounter. In a letter to *The San Francisco Chronicle* one month later he started

with the words, "I am the murderer of the taxi driver." (Butterfield,2023) Later in this note, he explained:

> "p.s. 2 cops pulled a goof abot 3 min after I left the cab. I was walking down the hill to the park when this cop car pulled up + one of them called me over + asked if I saw anyone acting suspicious or strange in the last 5 to 10 min + I said yes there was this man who was runnig by waveing a gun & the cops peeled rubber + went around the corner as I directed them + I disappeared into the park a block + a half away never to be seen again,"
> (Lamoureux, 2023)

The envelope this letter came in also contained the piece of Paul Stein's blood-stained shirt. It was said that at the crime scene, the cab, the murderer left fingerprints, however, the Zodiac denied this claim. He also claimed the police sketch that was being circulated was inaccurate. He claimed that he had worn a disguise the night of the murder, although it is not known if this was a true statement. (Butterfield, 2023)

This is the Zodiac Speaking

Since the beginning of the Zodiac's reign of terror in Northern California, he has sent letters and ciphers to the police and multiple media outlets. On July 31, 1969, a few weeks after Darlene Ferrin and Michael Mageau were attacked, the first written communications began. Three local newspapers, *The San Francisco Chronicle, the San Francisco Examiner, and the Vallejo Times*, all received almost identical hand-written messages. The letters began: "Dear Editor, This is the murderer of the 2 teenagers last Christmas at Lake Herman & the girl on the 4th of July near the golf course in Vallejo,...To prove I killed them I shall state some facts which only I & the police would know." The letter then provided specific details like the type of ammo

used in the Lake Herman attack, the total number of shots fired, and the orientation of the bodies.

He also provided details about what Ferrin had been wearing the night she was killed, the ammo

used in her attack and added that Mageau had been shot in the knee. (Sederstrom, 2023) Each

paper also received ⅓ of a cipher the killer claimed would reveal his identity. This was the

longest of all the ciphers that were sent out and consisted of 408 characters. (Bauer, 2023)

Furthermore, all of the letters were signed with his signature, a circle with a cross through it.

Donald, a schoolteacher, and Bettye Harden, his wife, are credited with solving this cipher,

which included the phrase, "I like killing people because it's so much fun." (Butterfield, 2023)

On August 4, 1969, is when he wrote a letter to *The San Francisco Examiner* where he

officially dubbed himself the "Zodiac". The letter began, "Dear Editor, This is the Zodiac

speaking." Fast forwarding to a letter received by *The San Francisco Chronicle* postmarked

November 8, 1969. In addition to another piece of Stein's shirt, there was a 340-symbol cipher.

While the previous cipher was solved in about 20 hours this one took 51 years. In December

2020, the FBI announced that the 340 cipher had finally been cracked. The amateur team of

sleuths who decoded the cipher include David Oranchak, a software developer in Virginia, Sam

Blake, an applied mathematician in Melbourne, Australia, and Jarl Van Eycke, a warehouse

operator and computer programmer in Belgium. (Sederstrom, 2023) The text is said to read:

> "I HOPE YOU ARE HAVING LOTS OF FUN IN TRYING TO CATCH ME THAT
>
> WASN'T ME ON THE TV SHOW WHICH BRINGS UP A POINT ABOUT ME I AM
>
> NOT AFRAID OF THE GAS CHAMBER BECAUSE IT WILL SEND ME TO
>
> PARADICE ALL THE SOONER BECAUSE I NOW HAVE ENOUGH SLAVES TO
>
> WORK FOR ME WHERE EVERYONE ELSE HAS NOTHING WHEN THEY REACH
>
> PARADICE SO THEY ARE AFRAID OF DEATH I AM NOT AFRAID BECAUSE I

KNOW THAT MY NEW LIFE WILL BE AN EASY ONE IN PARADICE DEATH"

(Bauer, 2023)

There were other letters sent up until 1974. According to ZodiacKiller.com, between 1968 and 1974, more than 20 written communications were sent to police and various newspapers. Some of these communications include ciphers that still to this day have not been cracked. Over time the letters just stopped. Just as suddenly as the Zodiac had appeared, he disappeared.

Figure 9. The 340 Cipher that Remained Unsolved for 51 Years
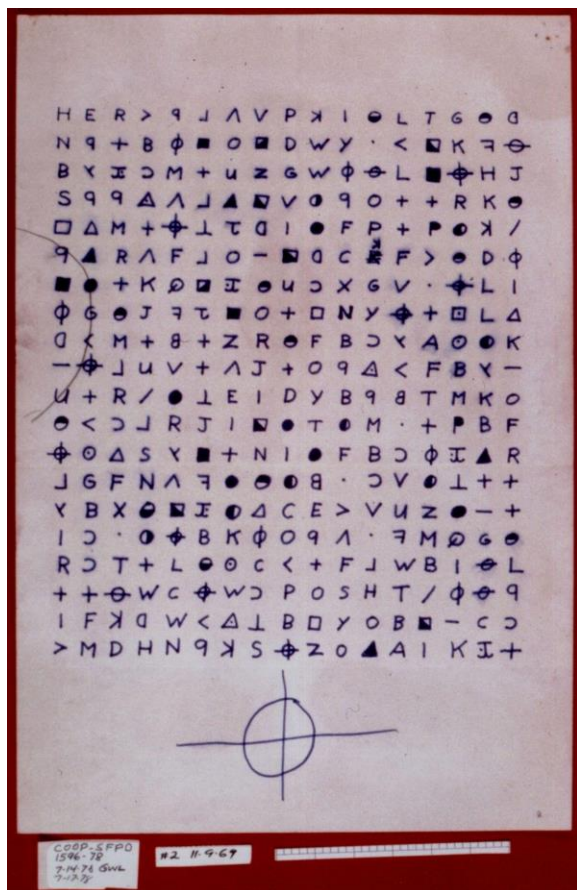
http://zodiackillerciphers.com/wiki/index.php?title=Solved_340-character_cipher

The Unabomber

Theodore Kaczynski, who goes by Ted, had been a math prodigy and professor at the University of California, Berkeley. This was, of course, before he withdrew from society and declared war on the modern world. (Kreuz, 2023) On May 25, 1978, a package arrived in Evanston, Illinois at Northwestern University. To everyone's surprise, it exploded. No one could have guessed that this was the first of a series of 16 bombings that would occur over the next 17 years. Three people were killed over the course of these bombings and 23 others were injured. (Davies, 2017)

Ted Kaczynski, who became known as the Unabomber, triggered the longest and most expensive criminal investigation in U.S. history. (Kreuz, 2023) He would send several pipe bombs through the U.S. Postal Service, other times he would plant, or hand deliver them. Even with this law enforcement had very little evidence to go on. James R. Fitzgerald, an FBI criminal profiler, began to work on the case in July of 1995. He refers to Kaczynski as a "criminal mastermind" who went to remarkable lengths to mitigate any trace of physical evidence within the explosives. (Davies, 2017) Fitzgerald recalls how FBI labs revealed that Ted ripped the skins off the batteries, so they were untraceable. He also avoided commercial glue and instead made his own epoxy by melting down deer hooves. With these other measures he took, it is not surprising that there were also no fingerprints or DNA found.

The Manifesto and Psycholinguistic Analysis

Fitzgerald and his colleagues did have one particularly useful source of evidence. In the 1990s, the Unabomber began to send letters to the media and some of his victims. In 1995, he sent a 35,000-word manifesto to *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*. In this

manifesto, he explained why he believes that technology is evil and how society should disband

the technological system and live in agrarian tribes. (Davies, 2017) The Unabomber proposed

that if a well-known newspaper published his manifesto, he would pause the attacks.

The Washington Post did so with the support of the FBI. The hope was that someone would

recognize the writing style.

Psycholinguistic analysis, or the evaluation of language used by perpetrators, was a major

factor that helped to identify Ted Kaczynski as the Unabomber. This concept was discussed in

more detail in a previous section. Based on the manifesto and other writings by the Unabomber,

FBI forensic linguist James Fitzgerald and sociolinguist Roger Shuy were able to decipher

various hints regarding the perpetrator's identity. For instance, the Unabomber misspelled certain

words oddly, using "clew" for "clue" and "wilfully" for "willfully." Shuy identified these as

spellings, while they were never generally implemented, that had been supported by *The*

Chicago Tribune in the 1940s and 1950s. The bomber's usage of them implied that he may have

grown up in or close to Chicago. There were also terms used that were consistent with the

vocabulary of a middle-aged person of this time. Additionally, the manifesto uses somewhat

unfamiliar terminology like "chimerical" and "anomic," indicating that its creator was a highly

educated person. (Kreuz, 2023)

All of this added up perfectly to reflect Theodore Kaczynski. He was born in Evergreen

Park, Illinois which is about 25 minutes away from Chicago. Furthermore, he was born in May

of 1942 which made him 53 years old at the time of his arrest in April of 1996. (History.com,

2018) Lastly, Ted was extremely smart. Ted was described by others who went to school with

him as a "loner" who did well academically. Upon completing his high school education early,

having bypassed the eleventh grade, Kaczynski received a full academic scholarship to attend

Harvard University at the age of 16. Although Kaczynski didn't make many friends at the Ivy

League institution, he nonetheless excelled. In 1962, he received his bachelor's degree in

mathematics from Harvard. He would eventually graduate from the University of Michigan with

a master's in 1964 and a PhD in 1967. After finishing his studies, in the fall of 1967, Kaczynski,

then 25 years old, was employed at the University of California at Berkeley, becoming the

youngest assistant professor in history to teach undergraduate geometry and calculus.

(History.com, 2018)

A Brother's Suspicion

The decision to go through with publishing the manifesto ended up being the factor that

led to the Unabomber's arrest. Linda Patrik read the manifesto and showed it to her husband,

David Kaczynski. She asked him if he thought it sounded like something his brother had written.

While he was skeptical at first, he noticed expressions, unusual to many, but used by Ted.

(Kreuz, 2023)

David Kaczynski approached the FBI with his suspicions. He also shared letters that he

had received from his estranged brother, Ted, over the years. Investigators were able to compare

the typewritten letters to the pages of the original manifesto, and linguistic analysis later

confirmed that the documents were most likely written by the same author. (History.com, 2018)

Both the original manifesto document and explosive devices were discovered during a search of

Kaczynski's cabin. The Unabomber had finally been arrested on April 3, 1996. He pled guilty to

all charges and was sentenced to four life sentences plus 30 years. In June of 2023, he was found

dead in his prison cell, located in Durham, North Carolina, at the age of 81. It was reported that

he committed suicide.

Figure 10. Ted Kaczynski a.k.a. The Unabomber

https://www.oxygen.com/sites/oxygen/files/2020-02/ted-kaczynski-g.jpg

Conclusion

The purpose of this research paper was to evaluate if news media has any effect on a serial killer and their behavior. One particular aspect of their behavior that was studied, and is of great interest, is their communication. The discussion regarding how usual it is for serial killers to desire communication and recognition from the police and the media alike. This topic is addressed in the case studies of the BTK Killer, the Zodiac Killer, and the Unabomber. As a result of these cases, it is evident that it is not unusual for serial killers, at least of the organized kind, to not only monitor media coverage of their crimes and the police's investigation but also to communicate directly with the police and various media sources. They will also react to what they see, which could potentially be dangerous.

It was observed that Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, had many correspondences with the media, the majority of which was in the year leading up to his arrest. In this specific case, it seems that the attention garnered from carrying out his crimes provided a similar motivation for the killing themselves. It is obvious from some of his statements that Rader's motivation for corresponding with the media was to gain attention. This is evidenced by his own words, "How

many people do I have to kill before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?" (Piccotti & Ott, 2023)

Also, we can see that the Zodiac Killer wanted to appear to be the smartest person possible. In addition to getting credit for his crimes, he wanted to be feared. He would send his letters and ciphers as a way to cause panic among the public and even among the police. In other cases where serial killers communicate with the media and police, they are fairly straightforward with what they want to convey. This was not the case for the Zodiac Killer; he would write in ciphers having multiple symbols for each letter, and then he would taunt the police when they were not immediately solved. His motivation for writing was an attempt to show how smart and superior he was, especially in comparison to the police. He wanted to be respected as a killer and wanted to get the recognition he believed he deserved.

Similarly, the Unabomber also did more than just follow media coverage. He used the media to publicize his ideas and beliefs in the form of a manifesto. Instead of agreeing to disagree, he chose to react violently. He claimed that in an attempt to save humanity, he had to get revenge on figureheads of the digital revolution. He decided that his best course of action was to hurt the people representing modern technology and large-scale organizations he believed were ruining humanity and the world around them.

The BTK Killer, the Zodiac Killer, and the Unabomber all followed the media coverage of their crimes and also had some level of communication with the police and the media. Therefore, it can be concluded that the characterization of serial killers following the news and police investigations has been corroborated. Knowledge of this characteristic was essential in the case of the BTK Killer and the ultimate apprehension of Dennis Rader.

While cooperating with the media may help catch serial murderers, it's also critical to manage the information that is released about possible suspects to avoid setting off a potentially dangerous chain of events. While these three cases did show communication between the offender and the media, such a connection is not necessary for the media to be utilized in serial killer investigations. Even though many serial killers avoid direct communication with law enforcement, they do keep an eye on media reports, if only to find out if the authorities have apprehended any suspects and are actively pursuing the murderer. As a result, media coverage may be used by the police, profilers, and media to incite and lure killers into communicating. To prevent dangerous reactions to media reports from violent, mentally unstable offenders and serial killers, profilers, police, and the media can work together with Public Information Officers to help control the information released to the public and, ultimately, the serial killer. This could assist in the apprehension process in future cases.

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