

## Killer ratings: our obsession with true crime TV series

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Are TV audiences evolving into bloodthirsty voyeurs, desperate for more true tales of violence and crime? Or are other factors propelling the true crime genre up the popularity charts?

2016 will go down as the year that the true crime TV genre went mainstream. Suddenly, instead of just Game of Thrones, everyone was talking about Netflix doccie Making a Murderer and The People vs OJ Simpson: American Crime Story, a fictionalised re-telling of the OJ Simpson murder trial.

They dominated media coverage, were the topic of conversation from dinner parties to the office break room, and had millions glued to the tales of real-life grisly murder and their subsequent high-profile court cases. Making A Murderer went on to clock an impressive 19 award nominations, of which 11 were wins. Meanwhile, The People vs OJ Simpson fared even more spectacularly, boasting a gobsmacking 53 nominations of which 27 were wins. That includes the biggies – Outstanding Limited Series at the Primetime Emmy Awards and Best Limited Series at the Golden Globes.

Since then, TV producers have been scrambling to dish up more true crime tales. A second season of Making a Murderer is already in the works (even though season 1 took a decade to film), while season 2 of American Crime Story, entitled The Assassination of Gianni Versace, starts January 2018. Plus, there's Mindhunter, The Keepers, Amanda Knox, Confession Tapes, Chandra Levy: An American Murder Mystery, The Lost Wife of Robert Durst and I Am Elizabeth Smart.

But why are we so obsessed with real-life crime? And why is it so popular now? The answers require some detective work.

### **Bloodlust... or more?**

Violence, and by extension, crime, is nothing new in our entertainment diets. For decades, we've gorged ourselves on episodes of CSI, Law & Order, Murder She Wrote and countless other shows where the premise was a simple, yet gripping 'whodunnit'. It feeds into our naturally curious natures but also our love of violence.

Simply put, while we're not a bunch of primal savages (anymore), we do tend to like our TV series, to use a meat metaphor, a little on the bloody side. The ancient Greeks with their tragic plays knew it. Shakespeare knew it. And TV producers know it too.

Criminology professor and author of Why We Love Serial Killers, Scott Bonn, has researched the subject and concludes that we like a good murder-infused tale because it's an adrenaline rush. The tension of knowing the killer's still out there, the final chase sequence, the kill itself, solving the murder... they all add up to an exciting hour of TV viewing. Those bursts of adrenaline, Bonn says, can be extremely addictive. Maybe not on the same level as alcohol or cigarettes, but ask any extreme sport enthusiast why they do what they do and you'll probably hear about 'the rush'.

An engaging TV show can have just as much impact for the 'armchair adrenaline junkie'.

"After much consideration, I believe that for many people, including me, true crime shows generally offer guilty pleasure to thrill-seeking adults," Bonn concludes in a column for time.

### **A different kind of escapism**

Why do we watch TV? Escapism is one reason (comedies, fantasy and sci-fi series, for example) and information (such as documentaries and news). But true crime series straddle the boundary between these two by keeping us engrossed in the story of the crime as well as offering insights (that's the information part) into the mind of the killer.

Or as Lucia Swart-Walters, editor of tvplus magazine, says, in today's information-overload age, the need for the truth is greater than ever. "In the current global political climate, people want transparency from their government, leaders and social environment," she says. "Thanks to Donald Trump, the phrase "fake news" is now in the Oxford Dictionary – a sign of the times we're living in. This also unknowingly drives people to know the truth behind high-profile cases: they want to know." True crime shows have started to become as appealing as cop/crime shows like *Breaking Bad*, *Dexter*, *How to Get Away with Murder*, *Lethal Weapon*, *Murder in the First* and *MacGyver*.

While that might have to do with the fact that there are dozens more action-fuelled, scripted crime shows on TV than true crime shows, it's not simply a case of audience fatigue in the traditional 'case of the week' shows. The difference is that with true crime, the audience knows it's 'real'. Well, based on real people and events to the extent that we know, director's bias aside, that it's a lot more real than a traditionally scripted TV series. Having that added authenticity, that these things happened to real people like you and I, adds layers of excitement, interest and intensity.

True crime is, Swart-Walters says, the next level of reality TV. "Reality TV has always been popular, but as more and more reality shows popped up, people realised that they were sometimes faked, staged and manipulated," she says. "True crime shows give you a sense of "real reality" without the fakeness, quenching the reality thirst without it being totally flimsy."

### **Searching for stories**

Hollywood's scriptwriters and producers also have a hand in growing the current true crime trend. TV producers are always looking for new takes on existing stories. Why? The logic is sound: if people already know the story, they'll be more likely to come along for the ride. While that can backfire (the spectacular failure of *Emerald City*, NBC's attempt to put a *Game of Thrones* spin on L Frank Baum's beloved classic *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* is one recent example), with true crime, they work rather well.

The bigger the case, the more the interest in the TV series. It's why there was a flurry of true crime specials on the 20th anniversary of the JonBenét Ramsey case and arguably why *The People vs OJ Simpson* gripped America, returning the US to a time in history when the entire country was in the grip of OJ trial fever.

That sense of familiarity, of making sense of history, is why Charles Manson and his murderous cult were the subject of the two-season thriller *Aquarius*. It's also why *Law & Order*, a TV crime staple that has produced over 1 000 episodes since debuting in 1990, has turned to the true crime genre for its latest spin-off series, *Law & Order: True Crime*. The first season of the show, a scripted re-telling of a single high-profile case per season, looked at the murder trial of Lyle and Eric Menendez, who were convicted in 1996 of murdering their parents.

"High-profile court cases being broadcast live during the testimony and sentencing (like the Oscar Pistorius case that made worldwide headlines) have captured people's attention and awakened a need to be more informed about the process, why it's happening and how it's unfolding," says Swart-Walters. "This spiked an interest in old cases, like the OJ Simpson trial, to be dug up, re-enacted and shed light on why exactly the events unfolded like they did."

So, is it only a matter of time before a true crime series about the Oscar Pistorius trial has us all enthralled? If the genre continues its immense popularity, the idea seems certain to deliver killer ratings.