The Remediation of True Crime and Its Role in Romanticizing Killers

Kaylee DeBoe

In this article, Kaylee DeBoe discusses the remediation of true crime content. She does so by tracing true crime events from spoken forms of communication to books, movies, and online spaces. By exploring the ways in which different representations of true crime events may lead to the romanticization of serial killers and evaluating the influence of different discourse communities that revolve around true crime, DeBoe suggests that ethical remediation is necessary to deter individuals from romanticizing those who commit gruesome crimes.

A few years ago, I watched *Criminal Minds* in its entirety for the first time. I was hooked on the repetitive yet varied arc of every episode, which typically went a little something like this: (1) Bad Guy does something bad, (2) the main cast of characters analyze the Bad Guy and the bad thing they have done, and (3) the characters find the Bad Guy in the nick of time and stop them. My fascination with these fictional Bad Guys and their psychology led to an eventual interest in true crime, particularly serial killer cases. My desire to learn more about these killers and their horrific crimes compelled me to search the Internet for additional information. However, as I explored the Internet, I was met with a troubling realization that there were entire online subcultures dedicated to romanticizing and admiring killers. Within these subcultures, participants express adoration for conventionally attractive, typically white, male killers, as if the physical attributes of those men overshadowed their crimes (which is a different discussion for a different article altogether). Anyway, learning this made me wonder how someone could consume media related to a serial killer and come away from it with a positive perception of the individual, while overlooking the actual crimes.

I don't presume to understand the psychological roots of romanticization or precisely what causes the shift from fascination to admiration of a killer. I do, however, think that some of the terms we use to discuss literate activity can be applied to this conversation in a way that might help me trace some of the practices that afford this kind of romanticization. In this article, I plan to explore the purpose of remediating history, in this case true crime, as well as the responsibility to do so in a way that is ethical and accurate. To unpack this point, I will use the concept of antecedent knowledge and discuss how audiences receive and interact with content related to true crime to explain how someone might begin to sympathize with or even admire serial killers.

What Is Romanticization?

As content depicting serial killers constantly multiplies, facts of heinous crimes can become muddled and overshadowed by narratives about their personal lives. Due to this proliferation of true crime material, audiences have had more and more opportunities to form their own opinions and "relationships," so to speak, with killers. Especially in the case of texts that center the humanness of killers and sideline their crimes, audiences might be more likely to sympathize with or extend understanding to them. This is, in my opinion, a problem because the victims are no longer the ones receiving sympathy. Furthermore, this perspective can lend itself to sensationalizing or, worse still, romanticizing killers. *Merriam-Webster's* dictionary defines the word *romanticize* as "to make romantic: treat as idealized or heroic" ("Romanticize"). For my purposes, I am going to specifically consider the word *romanticize* as it applies to serial killers and the process of creating a false narrative about individuals despite the reality of their crimes. This connects to the *Merriam-Webster* definition in the sense that, through these false narratives, killers are idealized and reimagined as misunderstood figures. Through romanticizing killers, individuals are able to justify their attraction to, identification with, and admiration for them because they can ignore or downplay their crimes.

Remediating True Crime

Genre remediation is a concept that involves moving content or material from one genre and putting it into a different genre, which of course can involve both changes in content and also changes in perspective about that content. For the purpose of this article, I'll be using the term *genre remediation* somewhat broadly. If we look at the historical event or person—in this instance, a true crime case or a serial killer—as the original, then the various

retellings that surround the case or the killer could be considered remediations. These retellings might involve oral remediations (verbal retellings) but could also involve a range of other genres and modalities, such as police reports, news stories, court documents, and so on. So, remediations might occur in spoken discussions that take place immediately after a crime is committed, prior to recording the event in a text, but might also be further remediated into, perhaps, a newspaper article, which might then be remediated into more extensive newspaper articles as crimes start to multiply and connect. Eventually, if the crime/killer becomes "popular" enough (even though I'm really not a fan of that verbiage, I'm not sure how else to articulate it), the narrative of events could be remediated into a documentary, book, podcast, or something else on a larger scale at some point down the line.

The very act of recording and remediating an historic event in any capacity is certainly a complex one for many reasons. Who decides which version of a true crime case is the truest? How do we decide what the "true" or "objective" narrative is, and how do we define ethical remediation of real events if there is no pure truth about an event or person (or at least not a pure truth that we can definitively recognize as such)? While it is certainly valuable to document the atrocities committed by serial killers, there appears to be an ever-present double-edged sword involved, especially as texts continue to proliferate. It's possible for even the most accurate remediations to contribute to romanticization by sensationalizing or fictionalizing real people who have committed actual crimes. As the narratives of events are taken up and remediated over and over again, the facts tend to shift, and the initial purpose of recording these killers and their crimes can be lost. It's sort of like one giant game of telephone in which everyone forgets that the original story is based on real people as it is passed down the line. Oftentimes, the names of victims go unspoken, while the names of killers are well known. At a certain point, killers can become mythologized in a way that is dangerous because they begin to appear as fictional characters who have committed fictional crimes with fictional victims (which can be easier to deal with than actual crimes). However, there is also something to be said for responsibly recording true crime and serial killers in texts. These texts tend to be geared toward offering cautionary tales and striving to remember victims. I suppose a large component of how remediations of true crime might be taken up by audiences has to do with the intention of the remediation and whether facts are intentionally skewed or softened for entertainment value as these remediations take place.

The act of remediating texts that depict historical events and people is unique in the sense that inaccuracies introduced during the remediation or revision process are unethical and disseminate misinformation. When

a director makes decisions in the case of a fictional film adaptation of an original book, it may frustrate fans if the film strays from the initial text. Even so, there are generally no long-standing, dangerous repercussions. In contrast, misrepresenting a serial killer in a documentary can have legitimate consequences that impact the way audiences think about that figure and their heinous actions. This is obvious in the context of documenting history on a broader scale because these narratives can depict only one version of the truth, perpetuating a narrative that fits their own worldview, which has tangible consequences. Just as consequences follow the choices creators (authors, historians, documentary filmmakers) make when they document history, the remediation of true crime texts comes with concrete consequences as well. The text will always have some kind of impact, whether the person creating the text is aware of this or not. Therefore, it can be understood that those remediating true crime have a degree of responsibility to consider the ways their texts might be taken up by an audience. A text that paints the killer as sympathetic and focuses upon their personal life at the expense of adequately depicting their crimes is an irresponsible and ethically unsound text.

Uptake and Antecedent Knowledge

In regard to true crime, a person's uptake of the available information about a particular case can rely pretty heavily on their antecedent knowledge about the topic. According to the ISU Writing Program, **uptake** refers to the process of thinking about, learning, and integrating new concepts. Uptake is informed by, among other things, our antecedent knowledge when we encounter a new idea. **Antecedent knowledge** (another ISU Writing Program term) is used to describe information a person already knows, which they are using in a situation in which they're dealing with new information. For example, if a person has engaged with a text that paints Ted Bundy in a sympathetic light, they may have a more empathetic stance toward him, even if they subsequently engage with a text that is less sympathetic. I've noticed that some recent depictions of serial killers—particularly films and docudramas such as *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile* and *My Friend Dahmer*—downplay their crimes and the impact upon victims as well as victims' families, while focusing more heavily upon their interpersonal relationships and the lives of killers prior to or "outside" of their crimes (if it is possible to draw a distinction between the crimes and the other aspects of their lives in the first place). For viewers who might learn about the crime through these productions, the facts of the crime are potentially displaced by these more sympathetic treatments. Ultimately, this might make them less

able to consider the factual elements of the crime. The construction of their antecedent knowledge shapes their uptake of new information, potentially leading them to focus more on the killer's humanity as opposed to the victims. The problem is that creators of sympathetic true crime texts have no way of knowing whether their audiences have the antecedent knowledge necessary to negotiate the sympathy they are made to feel for particular killers without beginning to romanticize them.

Fictionalizing True Crime

Here, I'd like to revisit my previously mentioned love for *Criminal Minds*, which drew me toward my interest in true crime. Since *Criminal Minds* is a fictional television show, it can create narratives that deal with the same general concepts and cases discussed in true crime texts without the need to be accurate about details or concerned with the lives of actual individuals impacted by the crimes. However, many of the episodes are based upon true crime cases. A quick Google search will pull up numerous lists from various online news sources titled something akin to "The [insert number] *Criminal Minds* Episodes Based on Real Crimes." Since so many of these episodes are fictional interpretations of true crime cases, they are also a sort of remediation. This brings us back to the discussion of ethical remediation. Is there an ethical way to remediate true crime into a fictional context without undermining the severe and lasting effects of the real case? Let's say, for the sake of argument, that at least when it comes to disrespecting the victims, it is *not* inherently unethical or irresponsible to remediate real killers and crimes into fiction. Do these sorts of remediations become unethical when we consider the component of their uptake and whether these versions of the narratives might lead viewers to fictionalize true crime cases in the future? I don't know that I have an answer to these questions, but it's just something to think about. Obviously, I'm a fan of the show, so I don't think it's necessarily problematic, but there are certainly unethical aspects, especially when it portrays characters who are essentially real killers with fake names in a fictionalized setting.

I can only assume that there are a large number of people, such as myself, who have found an interest in true crime by way of the Fictional Crime Show to True Crime Pipeline. If our brains are used to consuming media which depict gruesome crimes without being asked to consider the real-world events that lie beneath these stories, our antecedent knowledge could sort of predispose us to fictionalize killers, even ones that have really killed people. This is especially easy to do when many of the story lines presented

in fictional crime shows borrow elements from (or sometimes recreate) real cases. So, when we switch gears and become consumers of texts that convey actual killers with real victims, it is imperative that we consciously reframe the information we take up as real with legitimate consequences instead of trying to frame it within our prior knowledge of fictional killers. Neglecting to make this shift could create a breeding ground for romanticizing killers because it is easier to downplay the pain they've inflicted. Perhaps consumers whose interests span fictionalized crime and true crime sources have an ethical obligation to take care in differentiating the two kinds of genres.

At this point, I want to move from commercial remediations of true crime (books, movies, television) to more everyday genres where the issue of fictionalization is also a problem, namely, social media posts. As I stated at the beginning of the article, I was first introduced to the concept of serial killer romanticization while browsing the Internet for information on serial killers. Tumblr is one of the social media platforms that seems to house a large number of users who vocally romanticize and admire killers. This is another site of true crime remediation and fictionalization. On Tumblr, the True Crime Community (TCC) includes blogs and users dedicated to true crime on a wide scope, including but not limited to serial killers, mass shooters, and arsonists. Tumblr users in the TCC are generally split between two camps. The first is comprised of people with a genuine interest in discussing, investigating, and posting about true crime. Some TCC blogs are geared toward educating and informing others to some degree, but this is also typically done pretty informally, given the platform. This portion of the TCC on Tumblr engages with and remediates texts regarding serial killers in a way that is arguably relatively ethical and presents facts relating to real-world crimes. This form of remediation could be considered at least somewhat valuable in that it makes the information more accessible to more people. However, a second group within the TCC on Tumblr is comprised of people who skew factual elements of criminal cases in an effort to prove the innocence of massively well-known killers, romanticizing them and reimagining events of their crimes—editing hearts and flower crowns onto mass shooters. These remediations of killers are unpleasant and arguably unethical. These users engage in activities of remediation in a way that is toxic and dangerous. And, again, because Tumblr is such an accessible platform, these accounts centering around romanticizing killers are always multiplying and continuing to further remediate and revise the real events and killers in true crime cases. There are numerous examples of content falling within either of these categories on the Internet, but I've chosen not to include any images or examples from either kind of blog here so as to avoid making anyone uncomfortable while reading this article.

While the TCC in general may seem to be one large community of users, I'd argue that because the two groups within it use varying language and have extremely different approaches to and motivations for their interests in true crime, they should be categorized as different, even though the label of True Crime Community creates a sense of overlap. Those who romanticize killers might use some of the same terminology as those who are focused on analyzing factual elements of the cases, but their "goals" are entirely separate. The community that focuses on learning and writing about true crime events for the sake of education or due to personal interest engages in very different kinds of activity and writing than the community that focuses on romanticizing killers. This second community does not present factual information, or they present factual information in a way that is skewed toward presenting the killers in a sympathetic light. In fact, these two communities typically have such disparate perspectives on true crime that they often argue with one another and engage in conflicts over whether it is ethically sound to romanticize killers and claim to be in love with them (spoiler alert: it's not). I've even noticed that some of the fact-based blogs that are interested in the crimes themselves choose not to tag themselves as TCC to avoid being connected with those who romanticize killers.

Reception

In the ISU Writing Program's version of P-CHAT, the term **reception** refers to the way audiences take up a text once it has been distributed. In addition, reception also deals with the different ways individuals might use a text once they've taken it up, including uses that the creator of the text had not anticipated. This particular phenomenon is illustrated by the use of clips from *My Friend Dahmer*, a dramatization that depicts the childhood of Jeffrey Dahmer leading up to his initial murder, and *Extremely Wicked, Shockingly Evil and Vile*, a docudrama that portrays the personal life of Ted Bundy. Clips from both of these films are sometimes taken out of context and used as GIFs by individuals on Tumblr. Because both of the actors who portray Dahmer and Bundy in these respective films are conventionally attractive men, the GIFs are often tied to some caption equivalent to "Wow, this man is so dreamy. I love him (and he's a dreamboat) so he must be innocent," or "If [insert any killer's name here] knew me, I could've saved him from his desire to kill by showing him true love," or any multitude of other absurd, insensitive captions. I'll go out on a limb and make the assumption that the creators of these films did not intend for clips to circulate in communities that romanticize serial killers. However, once they release the text, certain receptions and future remediations are, in some cases, not under their control.

Conclusion

I hope it's clear that with this article, I don't mean to suggest that all remediations of true crime are inevitably going to have some negative impact or perpetuate the romanticization of serial killers. My aim, instead, is to bring attention to the ways that some remediations are not doing the work they could (and, in my opinion, should) be doing to frame killers as killers, instead of Misunderstood Loner Bad Boys. While the documentation of history, including true crime, is important and inevitable, more attention should be paid to the implications of different choices made during the remediation process. Therefore, it is the responsibility of those remediating true crime and serial killer cases to represent events accurately instead of relying on the antecedent knowledge of audiences to do the work for them. However, I also think it is important to think about our own antecedent knowledge when we approach true crime content. In a landscape of content that is constantly becoming more saturated with books, movies, podcasts, and any other form of media about true crime, particularly serial killers, we as consumers need to approach these texts critically. Are we regarding true crime as entertainment and divorcing it from its basis in reality? If so, how does this impact our ability to maintain a grasp on the knowledge that these are very real atrocities committed by actual killers?

Works Cited

ISU Writing Program. "Key Terms and Concepts." *Grassroots Writing Research*, Illinois State University, isuwriting.com/key-terms.

"Romanticize." *Merriam-Webster*, 2022, www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/romanticize.

Kaylee DeBoe is a Master's student at Illinois State University. In her free time, she enjoys crocheting, sewing, and baking. She also enjoys spending time on her Jon boat with her dogs and her fiancé.

Notes