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‘What Netflix Has Done Is Make It … Less of a Guilty Pleasure’: Constructing Female Audiences in Industry Discourse on True Crime Television

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Abstract

There has long since existed the perception that women are the main audience for true crime. Although detailed empirical evidence exploring this relationship is limited, there is a large amount of popular, industrial and academic discourse on this issue, making the ways in which female audiences for true crime are *talked about* of interest in its right. This article explores the ways in which the female audience for true crime television (UK) is discursively constructed in data from industry interviews (n=11). In examining how the industrial and cultural value of true crime in the era of subscription video on demand (SVOD) is contrasted with the genre in the ‘past’, the article argues that conceptualisations of the contemporary true crime audience are enmeshed within a legitimising process that pivots on a devalued female viewer and broadcast television’s historical imbrication within discourses of feminisation and domesticity. The case study of true crime thus offers unique insight into the ‘meaning-making’ around television as a medium at a time of significant cultural, technological and industrial change, and the ways in which this process is gendered.

Keywords: Female audience, Discourse, True crime, Television, Gender, Cultural value

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Introduction

There has long since existed the perception that women are the main audience for true crime across media forms (Biressi, 2001; Jermyn, 2007; Vicary and Fraley, 2010). Popular discourse has historically been somewhat pathologising about this relationship, offering tropes such as the 'serial killer lover' or 'the death row wife' (White, 2020). But commentary on the recent explosion of the genre has more frequently asked 'Why do women love true crime so much?' (Sales, 2023), before situating the answer in relation to gender, crime and victimisation. Given that the genre appears to use violence against women as a form of entertainment, there is always the suggestion that the relationships between female audiences and true crime are incongruous or surprising - thus requiring detailed explanation or discussion. Indeed, this idea of a bizarre and unsuitable union is played out in popular memes featuring women with gleeful expressions which are then juxtaposed with such comments as 'How I look when I'm watching a new documentary about serial killers' ('23 Memes', n.d.). Yet this profusion of discourse on women as the key audience for true crime exceeds the availability of empirical data. A limited number of studies are referred to repeatedly in academic scholarship (e.g., Boling and Hull, 2018; Vicary and Fraley, 2010), and these then appear as 'proof' of audience demographics in popular articles (e.g., Sales, 2023; Tuttle, 2019). Although there is some data linking female audiences to specialist true crime channels (Sky Media, n.d.), there is little information beyond this, and it is widely known that platforms such as Netflix are notoriously reticent in their willingness to release any form of audience data (Wayne, 2021). As such, the insistence on women as the key audience for true crime more often foregrounds the important work of discourse.

In their book *Meanings of Audiences*, Butsch and Livingstone (2014: 4) explore how discourses about audiences are consequential, 'telling [them]… who they are and how they should behave' - and we can note the barely submerged articulation of normative and 'appropriate' femininities in the popular discussions of women and true crime. Precisely because discourses are tools of power (Foucault, 1998), the focus on talk about audiences situates them not only in the spheres of entertainment and leisure but 'in ways that link them integrally to politics and citizenship, economics and prosperity, education and cultural improvement,' and thus also questions of identity and power (Butsch and Livingstone, 2014: 1). More specifically, discourses on audiences are a key terrain across which the relations between genre and cultural value are articulated and contested (Mittell, 2004), contributing to industrial and cultural understandings of what types of programming and audiences 'matter', for whom and in what ways. The discursive positioning of audiences, and the cultural value and hierarchies within which this is enmeshed, also plays an important role in generating 'meaning and value out of media production work', impacting creative workers' understandings of what they are doing and why (Johnson, 2014: 50). These concerns are highly relevant to the consideration of true crime. But as this article demonstrates, the meanings mobilised by talk about audiences expands beyond this, raising questions about the 'meaning-making' around television as a medium (Johnson and Dempsey, 2023: 513) at a time of significant cultural, technological and industrial change.

Drawing on eleven semi-structured interviews with individuals from UK TV production companies and channels, this article examines discourses about audiences for true crime television, with a particular focus on talk about women. In exploring how the industrial and cultural value of true crime in the era of subscription video on demand (SVOD) is contrasted with the genre in the 'past', the article examines how conceptualisations of *who* the audience

is, *how* they watch and *what* they enjoy about this programming are enmeshed within a legitimising process that pivots on a devalued female viewer and broadcast television's historical imbrication within discourses of feminisation and domesticity.

Research Contexts

Audiences, Industry and Legitimacy

The concept of 'the audience' as produced within discourse has been well theorised within Television Studies. Here we can point to Ang's (1991) canonical conception of ratings as 'fictive pictures' which enable the commercial exchange of the audience; or more recent approaches to the 'datafication' of audiences within algorithmic media cultures (Arnold, 2016). Closer to the approach of this article is qualitative work exploring the discursive construction of audiences in specific media, historical and political contexts. In terms of examining how audiences are constructed within relations of (gendered) power, of particular note is the analysis of reviews (e.g., Deller, 2016; Jermyn, 2018), or industry trade publications (Worthington, 2018). In comparison to the use of publicly available discourse, the expansion of production studies has emphasised the importance of gaining access to 'inside' industrial knowledge which can help us to understand media content in ways that textual analysis or audience studies cannot (Bruun, 2016: 135). To be sure, such a distinction is not clear-cut: industry practitioners exist within, and are shaped by, wider popular discourses on audiences, whilst aspects of industry discourse permeate popular media constructions and debates. Equally, production interviews have often been understood as performative constructions - part of image-building and spin - raising questions about 'authenticity' (Caldwell, 2008: 5). It is certainly the case that production interviews cannot be regarded as transparent reflections of the workings of any company or industry (Grainge and Johnson, 2015: 10). But such qualifications do not invalidate the pursuit of knowledge or data engendered by this method, and the insights into everyday working practices, cultures or assumptions it can offer.

Conceptualisations of the audience (composition, address) are often part of such industrial cultures. In fact, it has been suggested for some time that more should be done to integrate questions of industry and audience from a production studies point of view, including a focus on the 'imagined audience' conceptualised by media professionals (Hill, 2019; Johnson, 2014). Johnson (2014: 50) argues for an approach that situates the audience and 'cultures and hierarchies of consumption as part and parcel of industry formations' because:

> If media professionals claim meaning and value for themselves and their work by reference to the cultural hierarchies in which their audiences might be situated… we cannot fully understand the identities, claims to authority and struggles for agency or legitimacy … without accounting for the audiences in relation to whom that work is … positioned. (Johnson, 2014: 50)

Johnson foregrounds 'struggles for agency or legitimacy' and talk by industry professionals is a form of discourse explored by Newman and Levine in their book *Legitimating Television: Media Convergence and Cultural Status* (2012). Newman and Levine's focus is the discursive

construction of television's new level of cultural respectability in the twenty-first century, whether textual or aesthetic (the 'creative renaissance' linked to 'quality TV'), or in terms of changing technological contexts of viewing (shifting the 'longstanding conception of television as a household appliance toward ... understanding of TV as a sophisticated, high-tech gadget') (Newman and Levine, 2012: 1). They thus explore how this cultural legitimation has intensified within the economic, aesthetic and technological shifts of the convergence era and how this process invokes discourses of denigration surrounding gender and class. In line with wider feminist work on critiques of 'quality' TV (Havas, 2022; Nygaard and Lagerwey, 2016), such shifts have been understood as offering 'status-enhancing masculine associations' (Schapp, 2011, cited in Jermyn, 2013: 73) which distance the television of now 'from the feminized and mass audiences assumed to be inherent to the "old" TV' (Newman and Levine, 2012: 1). As many scholars have shown, from the early days of its expansion, television has been positioned as a feminised medium, in part due to its domestic location in the home and association with popular, mass pleasures (Spigel, 1991; Thumim, 2004; Jermyn, 2013). Although much of this work, including Newman and Levine's (2012), has focused on the different industrial and institutional context of American television, these discourses and hierarchies still had a currency in the UK from television's formative period (Thumim, 2004). As Jermyn (2013: 3) explains, the 'special relationship' long thought to exist between women and television remains at the very least an integral part of the medium's history in the British context. Yet despite the growth of work focusing on both audience practices and/or industry discourse in the contemporary streaming era (Johnson, 2017; Johnson and Dempsey, 2023; Wayne, 2021), there has been little discussion of how or whether discourses of legitimation are (still) articulated and how gender (and other intersections) may be imbricated within this matrix.

True crime is an especially interesting genre here for two key reasons. First, it has a long historical association with a *female* audience which remains visible and discussed within both scholarly and popular contexts. Second, although true crime has long been recognised as ethically complex, it has exploded in the digital era in ways which have raised further and urgent questions about its cultural *status* as a form of popular culture and entertainment (Horeck, 2019; Jones, 2022). Indeed, with murder narratives invariably taking centre stage, the popular and academic reception of true crime has foregrounded various ethical objections, ranging from the glamourisation of killers, the gendered exploitation of victims, violations of privacy (both victims and their families [e.g., Liu, 2024; Rascoe and Estrada, 2022]) to the boundaries of amateur sleuthing online (Jones, 2022). Underpinning such criticisms is a broader unease about the use of tragic and horrific events in the service of entertainment, especially in a landscape that is less centrally regulated than the mass media of the past. True crime thus has particular cultural and industrial work to do to convince us of its (ethical) acceptability and worth. As Biressi (2001: 32) observes, debates about the ethical problem of true crime are inseparably 'linked to questions of quality and value'. Given that hierarchies of quality and value are culturally gendered, the articulation of this process within true crime offers a rich site for analysis.

True Crime Television (UK): Invisible Visibilities

Whilst invariably containing different forms of reality material such as police interview tapes, court footage, crime scene photos or CCTV evidence, true crime 'presents accounts of actual crime cases, often in narrative form' (Durham et al., 1995: 144). In the UK, the growing

presence of true crime television over the last few years has taken place within a context which has seen the broader rise of SVOD platforms like Netflix, Amazon Prime and Disney+ - hastening a decline in the viewing of linear TV channels which was already in process (Johnson and Dempsey, 2023). Yet whether dramatisations or documentaries, serials or series, true crime has expanded across many channels and platforms, from free-to-air generalist channels (e.g, BBC1/2, ITV1, C4, C5), cable/satellite channels (especially specialist true crime services such as True Crime, Sky Crime, Crime + Investigation), as well as subscription streaming platforms.

In terms of academic scholarship, earlier work focused on what might be termed TV reality crime shows in Anglo-American contexts (*America's Most Wanted* (Fox, 1988-2021), *Unsolved Mysteries* (NBC, 1987-2010) *Crimewatch* (BBC1, 1984-2017) (Jermyn, 2007), whilst recent research has examined the growth of long-form serials prompted by the success of the podcast *Serial* (WBEZ, 2014) and the television hits *The Staircase* (Canal +, 2004, 2013), *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* (HBO, 2015-2024) and *Making a Murderer* (Netflix, 2015-2018) (Horeck, 2019; Punnett, 2018; Vedric and Little, 2023). Notably, the renewed academic interest coincided with a period in which true crime was represented by high budget documentaries and dramatisations. These tended to highlight miscarriages of justice and were aligned with an elite heritage of documentary film (Walters, 2021). In contrast, earlier examples of true crime – often characterised as 'infotainment' and 'crimesploitation' with ideologically conservative approaches to law and order – are somewhat written out of this lineage (Walters, 2021: 27). Yet the scholarly and cultural sidelining of more 'everyday' television true crime continues. A case in point is the pervasive existence of returning series, often focusing on one case per episode. Although this covers a huge number of programmes, indicative UK examples would be *Forensics: The Real CSI* (BBC2, 2019-), *Killer in My Village* (Channel 5, 2018-), *Killers Caught on Camera* (Sky Crime, 2023-), *When Missing Turns to Murder* (Netflix, 2019-), *World's Most Evil Killers* (Pick, 2017-), *Murdertown* (Crime + Investigation, 2018-) or *The Case I Can't Forget* (Sky Crime, 2020-), making up what is estimated to be '80%' of true crime production in the UK (Natalia, Commercial Director).

Whilst such programmes are frequently scheduled on dedicated true crime channels, there is no simple dichotomy between linear channels and SVOD here. Netflix may have attained cultural recognition for high-profile, bigger budget serials such as *Making a Murderer, The Keepers* (Netflix, 2017), *Don't F**ck with Cats* (Netflix, 2019)*, Crime Scene: the Vanishing at the Cecil Hotel* (Netflix, 2021) or *Murdaugh Murders: A Southern Scandal* (Netflix, 2022-2023), *American Murder: Gaby Petito* (Netflix, 2025), but it also includes a huge number of returning franchises or series, such as *Catching Killers* (Netflix, 2021-2023), *Meet Marry Murder* (Lifetime, 2022-) or *When Missing Turns to Murder* (Crime + Investigation, 2019-). Equally, both specialist true crime and generalist channels offer longer-form serials across multiple episodes - such as the commercially and critically successful *The Body Next Door* (Sky Documentaries, 2024) - even if these are usually shorter than those typically offered by Netflix. Due to the trade in acquisitions, content recirculates across different channels and platforms, whilst programmes from linear channels are also available on demand in adjacent VOD services. This reaffirms the extent to which it is impossible to separate an 'internet-distributed television "industry" distinct from established … television industries' (Lotz et al., 2018: 36) – something which again foregrounds the importance of *discourse* in exploring strategies of distinction and legitimation.

The returning series referred to above are examples of what Mills calls 'invisible television': programming that is popular and pervasive but (in terms of academia) 'is simply

overlooked or looked through as though it were not there' (Mills, 2012: 1). In pointing to both the gendering of television as a medium and gendered struggles over the 'legitimacy' of Television Studies itself, Weissman (2020: 405) has since observed how 'gender is at the heart of what keeps a lot of television invisible in our scholarship'. Although there is considerable blurring and recirculation of true crime programmes across platforms and channels, returning series certainly occupy a primary place on specialist true crime channels which have historically been associated with women (Sky Media). In *Redesigning women: Television after the network era,* Lotz (2006: 37) discusses the American growth of such niche cable outlets targeting women and their economic and cultural construction of gender. Yet due to the longer history of a generalist public service model, and the less pervasive development of these channels in Britain, there is no equivalent attention to these channels which emerged in the context of deregulation and the advent of subscription cable and satellite services (Ellis, 2000). Such 'genre-defined' branded services were (and are) rarely framed as prestigious but are rather understood as 'filler', repeating the same programmes in different timeslots to reach different audiences (Ellis, 2000: 164).

Channels such as True Crime, Crime + Investigation, Sky Crime and Discovery ID screen (and stream) predominantly British and American fare in the UK. Although some of these were only recently rebranded as true crime channels (True Crime [2023] and Sky Crime [2019] were rebrands of lifestyle/ reality channels), Crime + Investigation (2006) and Discovery ID (2009) have a longer history, but have become more focused around the genre in recent years. Such channels have also adapted to the streaming era: so all have VOD services and Crime + Investigation can now be purchased and accessed as a streaming service only. But these channels are still ultimately what Johnson (2019: 36) calls 'TV natives', in that their business 'origins lie in the delivery of broadcast, cable, satellite and/or digital television services'. As such, they are distinguished in industrial terms from 'online natives' (Johnson, 2019: 36) such as Netflix. What is crucial in the context of this article is how a history of gendered true crime viewing on television – as yoked to genre-defined specialist channels – is marshalled to make sense of true crime television now, and its cultural and industrial value in the age of streaming.

Methodology

Sample and Procedure

The data for this article was taken from a wider study into the production cultures of UK true crime television which was based on qualitative interviews. Ethical approval was received by the University of East Anglia in 2024 and participants were recruited through direct approaches to independent production companies and channels associated with true crime television in the UK. Participants were selected from smaller self-owned production companies ranging to those that could be classed as part of 'super-indies' (formed by grouping together independent producers into larger companies via takeovers), and interviewees occupied such roles as CEOs, commercial directors, executive producers, chief editors or compliance directors (eight in the sample). Because of the important role that channel commissioners play in shaping production practices and opportunities, the sample also included commissioners from specialist true crime channels (three in the sample). The

production companies collectively made programmes for traditional UK free-to-air channels such as BBC, ITV, Channel 5, as well as specialist channels such as Crime + Investigation or Sky Crime. In addition, many produced programmes for SVOD services such as Amazon Prime and Netflix. All participants are anonymised in this article via a pseudonym and are identified by their general role only.

In terms of the demographics of the sample, eleven participants took part. Nine identified their ethnicity as White British, and two as Mixed Other. Ages ranged from thirty-two to sixty-two, with an average age of forty-seven. Of the eleven interviewees, eight identified as women and three as men. The sample is clearly too small to generalise in terms of the wider demographics of the industry. But the preponderance of women that came forward here is notable, perhaps confirming the residual popular discourse that women are drawn to work in a genre that has been closely aligned with a female audience (e.g., The Secret TV Producer, 2018) (although this should not be seen to negate the extent to which gender inequalities in senior roles may persist).

The interviews took place on a one-to-one basis online and lasted between twenty-sixty minutes. Information sheets were provided in advance and consent forms were signed prior to interview. The interview agenda was structured around the two key areas of 1) Perceptions of and motivations for producing true crime; 2) Standards for true crime television. Indicative questions were 'How do they perceive the cultural status of the genre within a) the industry b) wider society?' Who do they perceive to be the audiences for TV true crime? What kind of decision-making is involved in how they approach the subject matter? Do they consider the genre to have ethical implications and if so, how do they respond to/ manage these?

Rather than the more totalising label of elite interview subjects, Bruun (2016: 139) suggests conceptualising such participants as 'exclusive informants', and the interview as thus a 'meeting between professionals from different fields'. But this does not negate conversations about positioning and power. On the one hand, although the participants knew that the interviewers had undertaken previous research in the field (thus displaying academic capital) (Holmes and Hines, 2024), it was made clear that they had no specialist knowledge of their work - asking them to explain their jobs in lay terms for example. Equally, the researchers chose to acknowledge their role as avid viewers of true crime television, with interviews frequently acknowledging shared examples that had been seen or enjoyed. As such, especially when combined with the adoption of a feminist perspective, this could lead to a rather contradictory set of positions in which the researchers were variously feminist academics, interested outsiders or hypothetical female viewer being imagined in the discourse.

In discussing the ethical and methodological questions raised after the interview, Mills (2008: 150) reflects how there 'is a significant tension between the form of argument required by academic papers and [the]… responsibility to "accurately" (whatever that means) represent … interviewees [views]'. This is especially relevant to feminist research which has a particular epistemological relationship with questioning the taken-for-granted. Participants in the study *do* speak of female audiences in ways which are problematic and sometimes derisory. But they are not the originators of these discourses and are echoing and drawing on a much longer heritage in which women's popular media pleasures and forms are located 'at the bottom of an imagined cultural hierarchy' (Gerrard, 2017: 161). As such, the aim here is less 'to be critical of the people who took part in our study but to ask critical questions' of the discursive gendering of true crime audiences within the data (Hill, 2019: 9).

Analysis

The data was analysed within a poststructural, discourse-analytic framework which offers insight into how identities or experiences are constituted in the transcripts (Weedon, 1987). Within this poststructural framework, the research drew upon the coding strategies and stages of thematic discourse analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). The data was originally coded for a broader study of production cultures within true crime television, and these themes were then recoded for discussions and conceptions of the audience for true crime – who watched it, whether this had shifted over time, constructions of the imagined viewer, to questions of investment and generic pleasures.

Theme #1: 'It Would Have Been Women – Like Over 50…': Who Watches True Crime?

It was clear in the interviews that whilst participants acknowledged a longer television heritage of true crime, the 'Netflix effect' was seen as mainstreaming the genre and instigating a broader industry boom - whilst also raising its cultural acceptability. The concept of the 'mainstream' often signifies a devalued judgement (the 'banal, homogeneous, unsophisticated, … low, inauthentic, commercial') (Huber, 2013: 8). But within the interview data it was largely positioned as a positive shift which conferred greater legitimacy on the work of professionals interviewed. So, a Chief Editor expanded how:

> [W]hen I tell people … what programme I'm making … they would make sometimes make a little joke about it as sort of … lesser TV… But what … Netflix has done is make it … less of a guilty pleasure and more … something I can talk about kind of thing ... And now I think people see it as, 'oh, that's really cool that you get to work on that type of stuff'. I think it is genuinely the effect of Netflix that's done that. (Theo)

As it is women's popular cultures that have historically been 'linked to a "guilty" subjectivity' (Gerrard, 2017: 22; see Ang, 1982; Radway, 1984), the suggestion that true crime has benefitted from increased cultural legitimacy is clearly bound up with questions of gender and cultural value, as this section now explores.

Firstly, in terms of intersecting axes of power, it is important to note that this is not just a female audience that is being invoked here, but also an *older* one. As a Commercial Director observed:

> Before it would have been women – like over fifty – sat watching true crime on Crime + investigation or on CBS Reality [the European version later became True Crime in the UK] … Crime went mainstream with *Making a Murderer,* and since then that's just grown and grown and new audiences have come to true crime in a way that they wouldn't have before. (Natalia, Commercial Director)

This equation between the 'older', broadcast audience for true crime and the 'older' female viewer is evocatively presented in the following quote from a compliance officer which also imagines their channel's typical viewer:

> I think that in the early days … we used to call our viewer… Carol… the curious Carol. We kind of called this … our core viewer. … She's someone in her mid life… this was before, by the way. I mean it's definitely changed now. (Sophie)

This idea of curiosity is returned to in the following section. But other participants imagined this mid-life female viewer within specific viewing contexts, making explicit the connections between domesticity, gender and television consumption. So, a Channel Commissioner expanded how:

> In terms of true crime … originally our viewer would watch it at 8:00 am when the kids have gone to school or at 1:00 am live… [E]veryone else had gone to bed, and she finally had charge of the remote. (Charlotte)

This situation of the lone female viewer in the domestic context – solo viewing and sitting at the fringes of schedule time – was also invoked by another participant:

> … [Y]ears … ago, I used to work for Discovery [channel]. The true crime there was largely watched by women. We called them 'night owls' because it was after everyone else had gone to bed… Maybe they were slightly lower income and it was their moment to sit in front of the telly and reflect about other people's lives and… reflect it back onto their own. And sometimes I think that if your life is … you know, boring or monotonous or not what you want it to be, then drama, documentary, all sorts of different forms of television … entertainment can give – it's an escape route, isn't it? (Nova, Managing Director)

Aside from age and the brief reference to income, no other demographic data is given on this hypothetical female viewer. This may attest to the fact that it is often middle-aged white women that have been figured as the key audience for true crime within popular and industry discourse – in part related to the preponderance of white victims and the genre's often limited engagement with intersectionality (White, 2020). If this assumption is being reproduced here, ethnicity is notable only through its absence: whiteness does not 'need' to be remarked on by virtue of its 'common sense' presence, power and invisibility (Dyer, 1997).

But in gender terms, the programming is imagined as a guilty pleasure that is squeezed in around the gendered, patriarchal rhythms of domestic and family life, relegated to the margins of the schedule and the day. In this regard, it is immediately evocative of early feminist work on TV soap opera. Whilst we might recall Modleski's (1982) idea of 'women's time' and the ways in which soap operas mirrored the never-ending labour of women's domestic work in the home, early feminist research also explored the multi-layered conceptions of 'guilt' here within the context of soap opera viewing (Ang, 1982) – guilt at indulging in a feminised and thus 'low' form of popular culture, guilt at making leisure time at all and guilt at 'abandoning unfairly allocated domestic duties like motherhood and housework to engage with the wrong kinds of popular culture' (Gerrard, 2017: 186). Indeed, the fact that the industry discussions of the previous audience for true crime is so evocative of this scholarship from forty years ago attests to the overwhelming drive to situate such audiences and viewing practices in the *past*. Within this dynamic, there is often little sense of

how the past is being quantified: it often sounds like decades ago, yet some of UK true crime channels actually emerge from recent rebrands within the last five years. Yet this ambiguity may also indicate how the invocation of this imagined female viewer seems to be something of a floating signifier in which the lack of anchoring or clarity suits the bid to make bold, clear claims about a very different context 'now'.

Indeed, in relation to the present context it was often suggested that the viewership for true crime was now 'an incredibly universal, broad audience… Most people do watch some true crime' (Matt, Executive Producer). This was presented as evidence of how 'new audiences [had] come' to the genre (Natalia, Commercial Director) – especially younger audiences and males. But as Newman and Levine remind us:

> Television is permitted to rise in respectability once it is connected to more highly valued media and audiences. Legitimation works by denigrating 'ordinary' television associated with the past, distancing the television of the present from the feminized and mass audiences assumed to be inherent to the 'old' TV. (Newman and Levine, 2012: 12)

In the case of true crime, this idea of the mass works differently here: such programming is more acceptable *because* it is now consumed by a wider, less differentiated audience when compared to the older, female 'night owls' of the pre-streaming era. Indeed, the apparently less specific demography associated with true crime in the context of SVOD parallels how Netflix in particular mobilises discourses on viewers (for its own gain). Despite the idea that the shift toward 'datatification' offers a more personalised conception than TV ratings (albeit it with algorithms discursively 'producing the person as profile' [Arnold, 2016: 49), Netflix's own institutional discourse tends to 'strip audiences of even very broad characteristics including … demographic segmentation', with the idea of a undifferentiated and global audience suggesting an attempt to 'monopolise the ability to define popular television in the streaming era' (Wayne, 2021: 82). This discursive manoeuvre is relevant to the construction of true crime and the dichotomy drawn between newer, younger and *heterogenous* streaming audiences and an older, female audience watching broadcast TV. In this regard, these discourses seem to be less about an explicit 'masculinisation' of true crime – or the bid to chase a male audience - and more about a desire to raise the industrial and cultural legitimacy of the genre by uncoupling the genre from its association with an older, female, broadcast viewer.

Given that discourses on 'quality' in TV are inherently gendered (Havas, 2022; Nygaard and Lagerwey, 2016), it is not surprising that claims were also made about aesthetic or textual shifts in true crime in ways which were also linked to questions of value. In this regard, gendered discourses pervaded both discussions of *who* watches and *how*, as well as questions of programme fare. As Carrie, a Creative Director from a super indie observed:

> [S]ince the streamers have got involved and there's been a lot more money available to tell these stories - what they can bring to that in terms of sort of cinematic quality, the drama reconstruction, and the time they get to make it and edit it. So the storytelling has got really sophisticated… holding people back and bringing them in later and you know. They've been able to experiment more with the storytelling in the genre - how you reveal and when you reveal… so you're carrying the audience with you.

Here, value-laden terms such as 'cinematic' are used to attest to the increased cultural status of the genre, and there are nods toward 'narrative complexity' (Mittell, 2015) which are normally reserved for 'quality' TV dramas. Such comments, however, were often made in contrast to implicit references to the apparently more conservative tastes of the *previous* true crime audience. So there was the suggestion (relating to the specialist channels) that moral ambiguity or narrative openness was often undesirable because 'You know, they want the bad guy to get caught so they find that very unsatisfying' (Joanna, channel commissioner). After acknowledging the idea of a fifty-five or older female audience for a specialist true crime channel, one participant also spoke about the use of music in the genre:

> And they're like… keep your music down, don't they know the audience hates the music? … I mean, it's like we'll get complaints. … They're really traditional in terms of what they like. So we have to be really careful in terms of how we produce things as well for them, bearing in mind that hopefully … our programmes will sell as a product elsewhere. (Charlie, co-founder)

Although most of the references in the interviews are to middle-aged female viewers, there is a sense ('keep your music down') in which the viewer is painted as far *older* here. Within the context of these apparently more traditional or conservative appetites, the female audience is also invoked as potentially limiting international and/ or streaming success - further consolidating a potential opposition between broadcast and streaming contexts for true crime which is mapped across a devalued, older female viewer.

Theme #2: '[S]he … Had a Very Morbid Curiosity': Pleasures and Positions

The first section was concerned with qualitative industry discourse on *who* watches true crime and broader issues surrounding the legitimacy and respectability of true crime television. Related to this, the second section examines how the pleasures or social functions of the genre are articulated in the data.

Firstly, the very concept of 'curious Carol' is evocative in gender terms given that, as feminist scholars have demonstrated across disciplines, the idea of female curiosity is devalued by patriarchy (understood as trivial or meaningless) or framed as transgressive and something to be contained (Elfving-Hwang, 2005; Mulvey, 1996). In this regard, although such a concept is historical with changing meanings across theological, mythological and media contexts, constructions of curiosity are widely understood to be gendered (Mulvey, 1996). Curiosity in men is often 'portrayed as a positive trait and as evidence of a heroic desire for knowledge', whilst curiosity in women is often framed as 'interfering with th[is]… domain' or as impulsive or meandering, operating in the realm of 'gossip' (Elfving-Hwang, 2005: 107).

There are clearly different ways in which the concept of curiosity might be positioned in relation to the generic structures and appeals of true crime. But in terms of industry conception of 'curious Carol', the idea of curiosity was most often twinned with a morbid fascination, and this seemed to be where the moniker actually came from:

> So she was our original kind of average viewer … who, you know, had a very morbid curiosity… to watch… these crime programmes. And it was very much because… the victim was a female most of the time… And why would a woman be curious about *that*? Do you know what I mean? [original emphasis] (Sophie, Compliance Director)

The idea that the curiosity might be linked back to 'the victim [being] … a female most of the time' may nod back toward the pedagogic functions of true crime, in terms of women witnessing and working through gendered forms of violence and peril. But in the quote above, this is seemingly less positioned as making 'sense' (as it often is in popular discourse) than it is framed as apparently consolidating the idea that the relationship between women and true crime is incongruous: as the participant asks, 'why would a woman be curious about *that*?'. This sense of incongruity is most broadly expressed through the idea of 'morbid curiosity' which refers to interest in objects or events conventionally thought of as disgusting or frightening, especially those related to death or dying (Pascale, 2019). The use of this term always carries ethical or moral judgements in so far as a morbid curiosity is seen to be in 'conflict with the responses one expects from a morally well-developed person' (Woodcock, 2013, cited in Pascale, 2019: 555). True crime has a long history of being associated with apparently deviant pleasures and the audience is often 'rendered suspect and distasteful, "lingering" over murder stories' in the same way as 'rubberneckers' next to a car accident (Biressi, 2001: 32). As such, these positions or pleasures are imagined as intertwined with discourses of sensationalism and imagined affect: so terms such as 'arousal', morbid fascination, shock, excitement or thrill are common here in discussions of the appeals of true crime (Tannenbaum and Lynch 1960: 382-383; see also Biressi, 2001; Wiltenburg, 2004).

Across the interviews there was a denouncement of 'sensationalist' or 'tabloid' fare as the antithesis to 'good', ethical true crime - a binary that also involved the construction of a contrast between American and British programmes, as well as between British TV and online contexts (e.g, YouTube, TikTok) (Holmes and Hines, forthcoming, 2026). Yet debates about tabloidisation and sensationalism are heavily gendered in both emphasis and terminology, from the central role of emotionality; the opposition (in relation to news) between 'soft' and 'fact-based' stories (Frisken, 2020: 1), and the emphasis on 'bodily and nonrational reactions' as opposed to cerebral rationality (Wiltenburg, 2004: 1378). Indeed, in terms the rejection of sensationalist fare, it is difficult not to observe a (further) implicit bid to shift the genre further away from its historical association with a female audience. After all, it is precisely on specialist true crime channels that a large proportion of what was framed as sensationalist American fare is screened daily, with returning series such as *Snapped: Women who Kill* (Oxygen, 2004-) and *Accident, Suicide or Murder?* (Sky Crime, 2019-) as emblematic examples.

Yet why people may *enjoy* true crime was often discussed in our interviews in ways which - despite claims to the often undifferentiated 'mass' audience for this programming- was cut across by categories of gender:

> So women… I think they want to understand *why.* … Our male viewer predominantly wants to understand *how* - and I'm not being flippant when I say that they're more interested in maybe the forensic side of it. So the hair on the piece of wood … the forensic comparison between victims … They're interested in the more technical approach, about how a crime happened.

> Whereas I think predominantly female viewers are fascinated about *why* [original emphasis] (Charlotte, Commissioning Editor and Head of Talent)

A similar contrast emerged in the discussion of an apparently younger audience who may have apparently cultivated an appetite for the genre via social media:

> Boys watch crime. They just watch different types of crime. They'll watch much [more]… visceral crime. I mean, it's cliche, but it's true. They'll watch gangs, they'll watch mafia. They'll watch action… They might not necessarily watch a *How I Caught the Killer* [Sky Crime, 2018-] because the *why* is not necessarily a male driver. It's the why that appeals to female viewers. Why have they done it? What's the psychology? [emphasis in original] (Natalia, Commercial Director)

Comments such as 'I'm not being flippant' and 'I mean, it's a cliché' suggest an awareness that such perspectives consolidate gender essentialisms or stereotypes. But such binaries are then also naturalised as (evidence of) truth. Indeed, there is a common emphasis on female audiences being invested in the 'why' (so psychology or perpetrator motivations). If we return to the idea that women's interest in true crime is somehow culturally incongruous or inappropriate, as well as the general denouncement of a position based on a 'morbid curiosity', it is this discursive position that appears to represent a more acceptable pursuit of (female) inquisitiveness.

The fact that any kind of discussion of how women may engage with the genre occupied a rather delimited space in the interview discourse is also suggested by discussions of the social value and functions of true crime. Here, the invocation of a previous, feminised form of 'morbid curiosity' was implicitly contrasted with a now more active, politicised and *engaged* audience for the genre. A Commissioning Editor reflected specifically on the subject of police corruption in this regard:

> So true crime television is now more of a … societal right to watch [and] … to judge and to understand why the killer did it or the [significance of]… the police or *With Cops Gone Bad* [Crime + Investigation, 2024-]… To get involved in a wider public conversation about these issues. Yes, Sarah Everard I think, changed the dial societally on how we view our forces. They're supposed to be there to keep us safe. (Charlotte, Commissioning Editor and Head of Talent)

The idea of a shift in which accessing true crime is 'now more of a … societal right' links to debates about true crime's contemporary 'jurification' of the audience and the notion of the viewer as 'an eagle-eyed juror-citizen "shaping the outcome" of criminal justice' (Horeck, 2019: 152). In constructing an implicit dichotomy between 'old' and 'new' true crime contexts, this contrast is also bolstered by the genre's now inextricable enmeshment with digital network culture (even whilst it may be denounced as a more unethical terrain by the participants). This in turn draws energy from a discursive dichotomy between a traditional, 'lean back', 'passive' 'couch potato' of broadcast television versus the 'lean forward', 'interactive' user of newer digital media (Johnson, 2017; Wilson, 2016) in ways which, in relation to true crime, appear to intersect with long-standing discourses on gender and television.

What is clear here is that the more contemporary, politicised conception of true crime – important in response to the chorus of objections surrounding ethics – only seemed to include women in either quite marginalised or predictable ways. For example, there were a range of potential social purposes of true crime acknowledged by participants, from exploring how criminal justice systems work (or fail); insights into police procedures (and police corruption), to highlighting 'red flags' in relationships (coercive behaviour, con-artists, catfishing). This idea of 'red flags' in relationships ('these are the ten red flags that should have been picked up' [Joanna, Channel Commissioner]), clearly echoes some of the popular and academic discourses about the relations between female audiences and true crime in terms of the genre offering them a 'how-to guide for personal survival' in ways which may better equip them to prevent violence in their own lives (Boling, 2023; Vicary and Fraley, 2010).

When compared to popular framings, this idea of the genre functioning as a gendered exercise in 'safety tips' was more marginal in the interviews and was in fact sometimes rebuffed. Thinking about why true crime audiences have historically 'skewed female', an Executive Producer asserted that:

> My opinion is it probably comes from a standpoint of empathy or relatability because depressingly, most murder stories are women being killed by men… I mean, some people always cite that … they watch it because it teaches them to be more vigilant … I'm not sure there's a huge truth to that, because I'm yet to see a true crime documentary that kind of says, you know, 'tip one, have your keys in your hand, tip two walk down a well-lit street'. (Matt, Executive Producer)

Matt is clearly critical of the oft-cited narrative concerning true crime as gendered pedagogy. From a scholarly perspective, qualitative research into women's relations with true crime television is very limited. But Matt's bid to partly complicate this narrative is also supported by our own small-scale study of female viewers in which questions of affective relations with female victims were indeed understood as more resonant than any concept of a safety 'guide', and participants especially focused on what they saw as ethical viewing relations with the victim and the relationship with questions of 'witnessing' and responsibility (Holmes and Hines, 2024).

Although not noted by Matt here, there are also other reasons to question the pervasive nature of the safety tips narratives. Feminist scholars have been critical of the 'gendered responsibilisation' (Vitis and Ryan, 2023: 296) of the female viewer here which arguably sits on a continuum with victim-blaming and rape culture. Clearly, such feminist critiques are reflective of wider cultural and political shifts following the viral #MeToo movement (2017) and broader public discussion of the need to rethink assumptions and ideologies around gender-based sexual violence. In fact, as part of this context, feminist work on the genre has suggested that we may have seen a revisionist or post-#MeToo trend within true crime which has impacted some of its ideological norms, including centring the voices and lives of the female victims over the killer; 'demystifying perpetrators' (Fogarty, 2022: 4); challenging rape myths; examining the importance of intersectionality in understanding women's victimisation and experience and acknowledging the ethical complexities of making true crime (Fogarty, 2022; Hamad, 2023; Hoffman and Hobbs, 2021; Horeck, 2019).

But there are two key points to make here. First, these debates have often (again) centred on a limited range of texts in ways which exclude much of more everyday television true crime, leaving considerable gaps in our knowledge of generic representation. Second, feminist scholarship continues to question the extent to which the genre generally situates its interest in murder and assault narratives within a context of systemic violence against women (Fogarty, 2022; Horeck, 2019). But what is most notable is that this wider political context was *not* something discussed or acknowledged by the industry participants. There was the observation that true crime programmes *had* become more victim-centred in recent years. But how this may relate to wider cultural and political debates and currents outlined was not part of the discussions – highlighting the limits of how/ whether true crime is consciously and systematically intersecting with these contexts or indicating the broader restrictions on how 'mainstream' popular feminism is permitted to be. In terms of the concerns of this article, one of the effects of this is that – despite the real profusion of discourses surrounding female audiences for true crime – there is never a position which imagines this relationship as *politicised* or situates it in relation to systematic gender inequalities and oppressions. Women are either imagined as bored 'housewives' consuming true crime as a guilty pleasure; as using the genre for safety tips, or as channelling their ('morbid') curiosity into the more acceptable terrain of psychology and motivation.

Conclusion

This article has explored the ways in which the idea of 'the audience', and especially the female audience, for true crime is discursively constructed in data from eleven industry interviews. Such a sample is small, meaning that any conclusions drawn here are limited in terms of their wider applicability and currency. Yet these discourses do map onto (and resonate with) wider historical and academic debates about the gendering of television and its relationship with cultural value, especially in the context of the contemporary media landscape of digital convergence. In 2017 Johnson (2017: 135) was able to comment on how 'the distinctions between TV and online, linear and non-linear, [are] becom[ing] harder and harder to police'. The dissolution of such distinctions has undoubtedly accelerated since this time, but given that they are mobilised within discourse, it is the process of this 'policing' that has been of interest here. True crime is of particular note as a microcosm within this context: not only has it been historically associated with a female audience, but the contemporary upsurge in the genre has engendered (more) pronounced discussion of its cultural status. In bringing these terrains together, the genre provides a unique opportunity to consider how wider scholarly debates about 'convergence-era validation' (Newman and Levine, 2012: 25) may be worked through around SVOD and the cultural, ideological and technological contexts of television's ongoing transformation.

There is certainly much evidence in this case study of a desire to 'shift away from a feminized past' in constructing the industrial and cultural status of true crime in the contemporary era (Newman and Levine, 2012: 25). As Newman and Levine (2012: 29) observe, strategies of legitimation function through 'selection and exclusion; TV becomes respectable through the elevation of one concept of the medium at the expense of another'. This involves a naturalisation of gender hierarchies which leave intact 'distinctions of value and respectability that denigrated the medium in the first place' (Newman and Levine, 2012: 25). The gendered discourses in this case study of true crime are diffuse and complex. First,

they invoke imagined viewing contexts in terms of women viewing broadcast television in the domestic sphere, often tied to the temporal context of the schedule. Second, they also underpin and shape discourses on the aesthetics of true crime, as articulated in relation to questions of genre, social purpose and ethics. In other words, this is about text and context and the ways in which discourses around the female audience are 'strategically activated and denied' (Mittell, 2004: 198) in ways which suit the bid to legitimate what true crime television *is* and who it is *for.*

This study raises questions about the ways in which discourses of value and legitimacy are being attached to different distribution technologies and contexts of viewing. In this regard, it is crucial to examine the 'processes of cultural meaning construction around television as a medium, particularly at a time when television is undergoing a process of technological, industrial and socio-cultural transformation' (Johnson and Dempsey, 2023: 514). As Johnson and Dempsey's qualitative research explores, SVOD services are more commonly aligned with 'culturally legitimated genres', and SVOD was also experienced as better placed to enable people to locate the content that fulfilled the 'sometimes new role that television was playing in their lives' (Johnson and Dempsey, 2023: 514). But such a hierarchy ('better') has to involve a contrast or distinction of some form in ways which intersect with existing structural inequalities.

In invoking Mills' (2012) concept of 'invisible television' and the cultural, aesthetic and scholarly factors at play here, we are importantly reminded of how academic discourse plays a role in hierarchies of legitimation (Newman and Levine, 2012; Weissman, 2020). Within the current scholarship on true crime, and true crime television in particular, there is a quite glaring neglect of what effectively constitutes *core programming* (across platforms, services and channels): this is less high-profile, big budget serials made over months or years, and more the role of returning series, adhering to a particular theme or episodic formula. But as this article has demonstrated, such an omission intersects with perceptions of a gendered history of true crime programming and viewing which is being distinguished from the more recently profitable and 'mainstream' 'boom'. As such, invisibility continues to be political in ways which matter.

In 'Feminist reception studies in a post-audience age: returning to audiences and everyday life', Cavalcante, Press and Sender (2017: 5) have suggested that the traditionally gendered spatial equation of public/private and its assumed intersections with everyday life have been profoundly changed by the growth of digital media and its wider mediatisation of identity and social relations. More research is needed to examine the extent of this change and its imbrication within gender and other intersectional categories. But, as the broadcast era of television recedes out of view, feminist scholars will need to remain alive to the invocation of discourses that embrace a 'shift away from [a]… feminized past' and the 'feminized medium that [it] "used to be"' (Newman and Levine, 2012: 25), and the ways in which the imagined female viewer is (re)activated here.

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