

# From “Love Bites” to Cannibals

## How American Media Shaped the Cultural Acceptance of Serial Killers

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*Throughout history, the fascination with true crime has been an ever-present theme. However, with the rise of media and nationwide news outlets in the twentieth century, true crime grew in not only popularity but in its social acceptance of criminals. How did the figure of popular serial killers emerge, and why were some men such as Ted Bundy able to achieve fame and recognition, while others never did? With changes to media such as the introduction of televised nationwide news, crime news was able to spread at a much more rapid pace. True crime spread to a national and, in some cases, international level, increasing its interest and intrigue. The fear of a new type of criminal brought not only public attention to their crimes but a new level of fear and attention. With a growing interest and understanding of the different minds and people at play in a serial killer case, some serial killers have been able to achieve an inordinate amount of fame and recognition from their crimes. What factors play into the captivation that some serial killers had over others and what role did the media play in their portrayals of these killers? While examining the use of media representation and its involvement in portraying specific serial killers, trends become clear with how and why they were launched into infamy. Whether it be public stereotypes or breaking of societal norms, serial killers and their apparent public appeal, have created a new category of who can achieve fame.*

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### The Reach of True Crime

True crime is an ever-growing topic, both in popularity as well as in body count. The act of murder itself dates back thousands of years, across continents, cultures, and different groups of people throughout history. True crime has seemingly always

been of cultural interest in the Western world. Professor Harold Schechter examines this phenomenon throughout his work in true crime and American literature, where he examines the trend of fascination in morbid and gruesome crimes,

No sooner had Gutenberg invented movable type than enterprising printers began churning out



My name is Elisabeth Pearson, and I graduated with a history degree from the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa in 2021. I plan to continue on to an advanced degree in social and cultural American history. This piece is a portion of my HIST 496 Senior Thesis which looks into the cultural acceptance of serial killers and how American media has played a role in the fascination surrounding serial killers and violent offenders. Through my research for this paper, I was able to explore how the growth of Hollywood and national news media led to an increased fascination as well as somewhat of an “acceptance” of serial killers in both history and modern-day pop culture.

graphically violent murder ballads. Whenever a particularly ghastly killing occurred, it was promptly cast in doggerel, printed on a large sheet of paper known as a “broadsheet,” and peddled to the hard-working masses eager to brighten their dreary days with a little vicarious sadism. Throat-slittings, stranglings, bludgeonings and ax-murders were among the many grisly subjects of these crudely written verses [...].<sup>1</sup>

The fascination and intrigue of true crime would only continue to spread with the increase and expanse of available sources such as newspapers and eventually television.

Due to the increasing breadth and reach of the media and news outlets in the twentieth and twenty-first century, it is not surprising that with this growing expanse came a growing interest in crime across the country. Increased availability to nationwide news coverage and stories, as well as the speed in which news traveled, created more intrigue about true crime. This opened the door to stories and crimes that would, in an earlier time, have only been known in a particular town or state.

Looking into the most popular form of true crime, the notion of serial killers emerges. Those who have performed some of the most heinous acts on humanity have somehow won the fascination and, in some cases, true fame from the American people themselves. Dr. Julie Wiest, a cultural sociologist, explains that even in the twenty-first century, when there is already a flood of famous people to glamorize, serial killers seem to continue to earn fame and recognition, “Recent media portrayals of serial murderers tend to be attractive and appealing, and some serial murderers receive more national publicity than movie stars, musicians, and professional athletes.”<sup>2</sup> How have these killers who are already on the outside of American societal norms, somehow create a hierarchy of acceptance? The same people who feared them while they were free soon became enamored by them once they were caught. Nevertheless, not all serial killers are viewed in the same popular light. What makes some serial killers more captivating than others? Why are some able to achieve a type of fame and societal acknowledgment for their crimes while others are forgotten?

### What is a “Serial Killer”?

In modern times, the term “serial killer” is not one that seems new or unheard-of; most people today could name at least one

1 Harold Schechter, “Our Long-standing Obsession with True Crime.” *Creative Nonfiction*, no. 45 (2012): 6–8. online via JSTOR. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/44364921>. Accessed May 7, 2021.

2 Julie B. Wiest, *Creating Cultural Monsters: Serial Murder in America*. Baton Rouge: Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. Accessed May 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. 93.

infamous serial killer without hesitation based purely on the pop culture and popularity surrounding the killers themselves. It was not until the mid-70s that Robert K. Ressler, an instructor for the Federal Bureau of Investigation, who went on to later interview many serial killers, is thought to have coined the term “serial killer.” It is not entirely known whether Ressler was the first to put these two words together, but he was the first to use it in terms of creating a category for these killers who, while having similar traits, did not fit in the classification of mass murderers. Up until Ressler coined this term, there was no actual term that encompassed everything that was a serial killer. Before the term was coined, criminals, who would later be known as serial killers (such as the “Zodiac Killer,” David Berkowitz, aka “Son of Sam,” and John Wayne Gacy aka “The Killer Clown”), were often only called mass murderers. However, while this term did fit for some aspects of serial killers’ crimes, the term did not correctly encompass the traits of many serial killers in comparison to the traits and distinctions of a true mass murderer. Mass murderers were categorized as such because they followed similar patterns, killing at least four people at the same site.<sup>3</sup> James Holmes shot and killed 12 people at a movie theater in Colorado in 2012<sup>4</sup> placing him in the category of mass murders. Serial killers possessed some of the qualifications needed for the definition, mainly being the act of murder, yet were vastly different in their crimes, both in body count as well as in the timeline for their crimes. The timeline and the presence of a break in killings became one of the biggest distinctions between the two types of killers. According to the FBI, “This break-in-time was necessary to distinguish between a mass murder and a serial murder. Serial murder required a temporal separation between the different murders, which was described as: separate occasions, cooling-off period, and emotional cooling-off period.”<sup>5</sup> It was important to create a distinction for serial killers and separate them from mass murderers because even though serial killers were not a new phenomenon, with the increase of research and investigation, it became clear that serial killers were in fact a breed of their own and should be categorized as such. Today, the FBI has definitions for each term and defines serial killing in the US as, “a series of three or more killings, not less than one of which was committed within the United States, having common characteristics such as to suggest the reasonable possibility that the crimes were committed by the same actor or actors.”<sup>6</sup> With the

3 Robert J. Morton and Mark A. Hilts, eds., “Serial Murder,” FBI (FBI, May 21, 2010), <http://www.fbi.gov/stats-services/publications/serial-murder>.

4 Erica Goode et al., “Before Gunfire, Hints of ‘Bad News,’” *The New York Times* (The New York Times, August 27, 2012), <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/27/us/before-gunfire-in-colorado-theater-hints-of-bad-news-about-james-holmes.html>.

5 Robert J. Morton and Mark A. Hilts, eds., “Serial Murder.”

6 Robert J. Morton and Mark A. Hilts, eds., “Serial Murder.”

growing number of serial killings, there needed to be a way to categorize this very specific type of violent offense.

During the 1970s in the US, there was growing disparity between the fantasy of living in a time of free love and safety in communities, where people could leave their homes unlocked, and the number of violent offenders. With television shows increasing in popularity, those which portrayed life, such as *The Brady Bunch* and *The Partridge Family*, seemed to stay more on the side of innocence and safety, ending each show with a happy conclusion. Even the more popular crime shows of the era, such as *Hawaii 5-0* and *Charlie's Angels*, continuously played to the notion that good triumphs over evil, with the protagonist consistently being the victor by the end of the episode. While the perception of American middle-class safety was being portrayed on these shows, serial killers and serial rapists became exceedingly prevalent during this time but were viewed in a vastly different light than today. What then caused the interest and fascination of serial killers over other types of killers and murderers?

### The Comparative Role of Sexuality

Two of the most infamous American serial killers, Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer, had drastically different media representation yet both were able to attain fame. While both achieved fame to some degree, their media representation and personal characteristics kept them from receiving the same type of societal acceptance. While Bundy was glamorized for his looks and heterosexuality, scholar David Schmid explains "the celebrity enjoyed by a safely individualized heterosexual serial killer such as Ted Bundy."<sup>7</sup> Dahmer was demonized for his homosexuality, "In a similar fashion, to the extent that the concept of 'notoriety' still has any meaning at all, it aptly describes the celebrity personified by Jeffrey Dahmer and Aileen Wuornos, both of whom are representative of the equally notorious types of the homicidal homosexual."<sup>8</sup> Each killer was represented in radically different ways, seemingly to question what the exact interest was in both men. The newspapers and new reports in the mid-1970s portrayed Bundy in a much more humanized way, playing the part of the handsome and intelligent stranger who was accused of having an evil side. Dahmer received different treatment from the media, he was immediately demonized. The media played to the evilness of the individual, "Their association with traditional monster imagery is especially clear when considering the nicknames given to many serial murderers by the media, which frequently include the words 'ripper,'

'stalker,' 'slasher,' 'butcher,' 'vampire,' and even 'monster.'"<sup>9</sup> Unlike Bundy, Dahmer was always represented as a monster. The media and the authorities focused not only on his crimes but on his sexuality. So, what was the draw to these two men? The answer seems surprisingly simple. They both broke the traditional ideas of what evil could truly look like during this time.

### Who Received Fame?

Both Bundy and Dahmer shaped the standard for what a serial killer can look like, who they can attack, and how they can be perceived. By achieving fame from the first nationally televised trial it seems clear that Bundy set a new precedent for who could be capable of this type of crime. Dahmer on the other hand, fit more of the basic markers of a serial killer but his victim type, sexuality and cannibalism created a new model of what a serial killer could do.

Although Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer seem to have set the "standards" of fame that can be achieved, this fame was not given to all serial killers. Being a serial killer no longer seems to grasp the attention of the nation as it had for previous generations, especially in today's world of 24-hour news reports and the increase and evolution of science in terms of DNA testing. There are some serial killers who yearn for that very attention yet fail to earn the fame they so crave. Dennis Rader, also known as "BTK" (Bind them, Torture them, Kill them)<sup>10</sup> is a prime example of someone wanting so much to be as admired as those serial killers before him; yet when he was finally caught, the American people did not place him on the pedestal he so had hoped for. Rader desperately wanted to be placed in the same ranking as other famous serial killers, yet he never earned the notoriety that Bundy had. Even though Rader was active in the 1970s, the same time as Bundy, he was not caught until 2005. When there was finally a face and a name to "BTK," the American public had lost much of the shock factor of serial killers. There was no huge media coverage like there had been for Bundy in the 70s and Dahmer in the 90s. He became just another face to an ever-growing list of serial killers. Nevertheless what stood out about Dennis Rader and his crimes in comparison to both those of Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer? All three men had vastly different victim types, "M.O.s" (i.e., how they killed their victims, disposed of their bodies, etc.)<sup>11</sup> but each was given a distinctive character in the media, which played into how society responded to them. The rapidly growing societal interest truly started in 1970s American pop culture and can seemingly be narrowed down to the

7 David Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities: Serial Killers in American Culture*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005). Accessed May 6, 2021. ProQuest Ebook Central. 242.

8 Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, 242.

9 Wiest, *Creating Cultural Monsters: Serial Murder in America*, 93  
10 Paul Fransen, "Cold Case: Catching BTK After 31 Years!" Medium (Medium, March 6, 2019), <https://medium.com/@pauljfransen/cold-case-catching-btk-after-31-years-ebf70461brea>.

11 Robert J. Morton and Mark A. Hiltz, eds., "Serial Murder."

first televised trial of a serial killer, not just any serial killer, but Theodore “Ted” Bundy.

## Ted Bundy

Ted Bundy was an infamous serial killer during the 1970s in America, killing across multiple state lines including murders in Washington State, Colorado, Oregon, Utah, Idaho, and Florida. Bundy was believed to be active and killing from 1961 to 1978 but was only connected to murders starting in 1974. Ted Bundy committed his first known murder in Washington State on February 1, 1974. He killed and then buried the body of a twenty-one-year-old student, Lynda Ann Healy. He had beaten her to death in her house then proceeded to take her body with him and bury her at Taylor Mountain, where only some of her bones were found. After Healy, Bundy went on to kill 10 more women in Washington State, continuing to bury many of them on Taylor Mountain. After leaving Washington he proceeded to commit murders in Colorado, Oregon, Idaho, Utah, and finally in Florida. Throughout his murders, he managed to maintain a relationship with his longtime girlfriend Liz, also caring for her daughter. His crimes in Utah and Washington State were only connected after his first arrest in Utah. It was not until he was caught and had confessed to the 30 known murders, that police and the public learned the reason behind his specific victim type. Early in his murders, it became noticeably clear that Bundy had a specific type of woman that he went after: young, attractive brunettes with middle parts in their hair. Bundy’s victim type was specific in resemblance to the woman who first hurt him, his ex-fiancé. Before meeting Liz, Bundy was in a relationship with another woman who was all the things his victims were; young, beautiful, and dark-haired.

Once he was arrested and charged with the attempted kidnapping of Carol DaRonch in 1974, Bundy decided he would defend himself in court. He was not a lawyer, in fact, he was only a law student at the time, but he genuinely believed that because he was handsome and charming, he would be found not guilty. Surprisingly, his plan almost worked. Ted Bundy had so many people in his life who knew him or had seen him in the newspapers and on television and began to sincerely believe that he could not have done these horrific crimes. Not only were Bundy and his crimes continuously on the news, but these newscasts were where his notoriety and celebrity began. With increasing viewers at his court hearings as well as the continuous coverage of his case, the nation became more and more enveloped in Ted Bundy himself. The attitude toward Bundy was changing as well. With a face to the crimes, there became doubt that someone who seemed so put together and so normal could have done such horrific crimes. While the CBS news station was covering the case and trial, they interviewed many different women to see how they viewed him. One woman responded to questions about Bundy’s trial by say-

ing “I’m not afraid of him. He just doesn’t look like the type to kill somebody.”<sup>12</sup> Another woman seemed to cast doubt on his guilt by wondering if he would be capable of committing these crimes.<sup>13</sup> One of his living victims, Carol DaRonch, was even questioned if she was sure, she had pointed out the correct man in her line-up. DaRonch remembers the encounter she had with a woman who approached her about the Bundy line-up, “Carol, are you sure you have the right guy?”<sup>14</sup> She goes on to say, “She was questioning me just because he was a college student and charming, good looking, smart and I was frustrated.”<sup>15</sup> This became just another influx of comments and doubt placed upon Bundy’s guilt because he fit all the stereotypes of what he should be as a middle class white male. America was holding onto the life that was being portrayed on TV, and therefore could not comprehend the acts of murder with the normalcy that he presented, “Bundy presents the puzzling relationship between normality and abnormality in serial killers in a particularly concentrated form because of the apparent extreme contrast between his successful, ambitious, handsome, white, straight, Republican, male, middle-class exterior, and the ‘monster within.’”<sup>16</sup> The thought that someone who was able to seem so normal and fit into society without notice seemed to be the impossible suspect for this now growing list of crimes, including murder, kidnapping and sexual assault.

Before Bundy was caught and before there was a face to these murders, the media reported it very straightforwardly; with no leads and no suspects, the news outlets could only report on what had occurred. News outlets relayed messages warning women who had dark hair to be on-guard, recommending girls not walk around alone and to be vigilant in who they talked to. ABC news released a news segment after the abduction of Georgann Hawkins in Seattle, Washington and urged women to stay in groups and use their front doors.<sup>17</sup> Up to this point, there were very few depictions of murderers and truly evil people as normal, ordinary human beings; most film and television depictions relied heavily on the representation of evil as something that looked the part, rarely being the everyday middle class white person. The perception was that someone would be able to point out an evil or dangerous person on the street because they would “look the part.” This misperception is exactly how Bundy was able to remain faceless for so long.

12 ArchiveNewsFootage, “Ted Bundy Groupies.” March 22, 2015, YouTube video, 2:05, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvEKhdKmSnk](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kvEKhdKmSnk).

13 ArchiveNewsFootage, “Ted Bundy Groupies.”

14 *Confessions with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*, directed by Joe Berlinger. (2019). [Video file]. In *Netflix*.

15 Berlinger, *Confessions with a Killer: The Ted Bundy Tapes*.

16 Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, 212

17 ABCNews, “Bundy 20/20 Pt 2: Ted Bundy Murders Women, Whose Disappearances Cause Fear around Washington.” February 15, 2019, YouTube video, 7:14, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YhcxWquufo>.

He preyed on the natural weakness of people during this time, when children played in the streets unattended and people felt safe enough to leave their cars and homes unlocked. Where no one would notice a white man, who appeared in place; someone who could be seen talking to young women yet not come off as a threat. He would often approach women out in the open, asking for help in moving his boat, getting them away from other people and then attack and abduct them. Once he was caught and there was a face to all the evil, the media played a vastly different angle.

The American media honed in on the fact that Bundy was handsome and charming, playing up those aspects of him rather than the true acts of horror he committed. In 1979, the New York Times published a headline calling Bundy "The Love Bite Killer."<sup>18</sup> The media understood the peoples' shock to the idea of Ted Bundy and played to that very effect. Many Americans, during this time, could not separate Ted Bundy's look and personality from the murders he committed. The newspapers and news channels knew the angle they wanted to present; it was no longer just about the facts and outcome of the case but rather about how America could be deceived by such a "well put together" performance such as Ted Bundy. The media seemed to try their best to humanize him by continuously including information about his life and who he was as a person while focusing less on details of his crimes. While studying the television interviews, there is a clear separation of those who believed it was possible Bundy committed the murders and those who believed him to be completely innocent. Bundy's case became the first televised murder trial in American history, with the entire nation captivated by his charm and crimes. Unlike past crimes, Bundy's case was one that had nationwide interest because of the use and spread of nationwide news and television. While other cases and crimes before Bundy remained relatively local news stories, his was able to draw interest from all over the country, not only because his crimes spread across the country but because his news coverage did as well.

It was not until he was convicted and sentenced to death that he began to not only confess to his crimes but explain in his own words how and why he did what he did. He accepted an interview with journalist Stephen Michaud, allowing their conversations to be taped. In these interviews, Bundy explains details of his crimes as well as his thoughts throughout this period of his life. He gives insight into how he wanted to present himself and to best convince everyone around him that the charges against him were false. Within these tapes, he began to show how his charm and charisma was all an act he put on to get away with his crimes; how he played a part to the media and knew they would focus on how well spoken he was and

how charismatic he seemed in court. He seemed to think that by creating doubt about him being a violent person or being capable of doing such horrific crimes he would be found not guilty. He saw how important the media would be in creating a social opinion of him and he played to the advantage that he already had by being a white middle-class man in America. Bundy used the influence of the media to shape his representation because he saw that a key aspect of his defense would come from how he was represented to the public. The media used the fact that Bundy did not fit into the stereotypes of a monster as a way to humanize him in the way they did; and Bundy knew that by placing himself alongside his lawyers and wanting to defend himself in court it would only create doubt of his guilt in the eyes of the American people.

Bundy's facade ended abruptly once he was convicted. After that, his interviews, and quotes showed a different side of him, a side much closer to what his victims would have most likely seen. His interviews began to show much clearer insight into his mind, where he explained that he knew it was all an act for him. He knew he was an evil person, and, in some ways, he seemed to know that he deserved the death he would inevitably receive, "I'm the most cold-blooded sonofabitch you'll ever meet."<sup>19</sup> Bundy understood that his charm, charisma, and good looks were key not only to his survival as an active serial killer; but they were also key to creating reasonable doubt when he was caught. Bundy's charm and good looks only helped him for a certain time. After his first escape in Colorado, the public began to grow concerned about his innocence. What seemed to be the true tipping point for both the media and society was his second escape from jail and the subsequent murders and attacks at the Chi Omega sorority house at Florida State University. Once he was recaptured and convicted to death, the media shifted the nation's response to the now convicted murderer, Ted Bundy. On the morning of January 24, 1989, Ted Bundy was executed by the electric chair while people gathered around the prison holding the infamous "Burn, Bundy Burn" signs.<sup>20</sup>

Ted Bundy was one of the first American serial killers to cross the bridge to infamy, with similar fame to that of gangsters and mob bosses (such as Al Capone and Bugs Moran) of the 1920s and 1930s; the popularity and American fascination for organized crime can be seen in popular movies such as the 1931 movie *Public Enemy* as well as the 1932 movie *Scarface*. Not only did Bundy gain fame from his crimes but he removed some of the stigma around the topic of murder and true crime.

18 Alanah Reid, "Ted Bundy: Through the Papers: Historic Newspapers US," *Historic Newspapers* (Historic Newspapers, December 23, 2020), <http://www.historic-newspapers.com/blog/ted-bundy-newspapers/>.

19 Jack Rosewood and Rebecca Lo, "Ted Bundy," in *The Big Book of Serial Killers: 150 Serial Killer Files of the World's Worst Murderers: An Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* (Middletown, DE: Lak Publishing, 2017), pp. 63–68.

20 Laura Barcella, "What Was Ted Bundy's Execution Like?," A&E, March 24, 2021, <https://www.aetv.com/real-crime/ted-bundy-execution>.

With so much publicity surrounding his crimes, trials, escapes, interviews, and ultimate death the American media, as well as their audience, appeared to have found itself with a growing intrigue into a gruesome yet seemingly fascinating topic. Even now, the popularity of Bundy has remained in the American culture. In 2019, several different movies and documentaries were released on the 30th anniversary of his execution. The release of the Netflix movie *Extremely Wicked, Shocking Evil and Vile* brought a new and revised representation of Ted Bundy to the younger generation. By casting Zac Efron as Ted Bundy, it bridged a connection between generations, from those who lived through it to those who watched it 30 years later. Hollywood continues to thrive off the fascination surrounding the first publicized trial of a serial killer, continuing to add not only to their own wealth but to his lasting imprint on American culture.

Understanding why Ted Bundy was so intriguing to Americans and the media and why he was able to create such a distinct memory in American History; how then does another serial killer who seems the opposite of Bundy reach an equivalent level? In almost complete contrast to Ted Bundy, there lies American serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer. These two men displayed key differences; victim type, sexuality, and approach to murder were on seemingly opposite sides of the spectrum. While Bundy was able to lure his victims with his charm, good looks, and ruses, Dahmer had to use other tactics, such as the promise of payment if the men went home with him and posed for nude photos. One of the largest factors that set these two killers apart was their victims. Bundy attacked women that were of the same socio-economic status and racial background, while Dahmer attacked lower-class young men who were predominantly people of color.

## Jeffrey Dahmer

Jeffrey Dahmer was an American serial killer who was active between 1979 and 1991 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin. Dahmer killed 17 men and boys, ages ranging from 14, the youngest, to 36 years old, his oldest victim. Dahmer wanted to use these men to create “sex zombies” by drugging them, drilling holes in their heads, and pouring either boiling water or acid onto their brains. Once his victims were dead, he would dismember their bodies and, in some cases, save parts of their bodies to eat.<sup>21</sup> Dahmer’s 13th victim was a 14-year-old boy named Konerak Sinthasomphone. After attacking Sinthasomphone and leaving him with a hole in his head at his apartment, Dahmer returned to find Sinthasomphone on the

21 Jack Rosewood and Rebecca Lo, “Jeffrey Dahmer,” in *The Big Book of Serial Killers: 150 Serial Killer Files of the World’s Worst Murderers: An Encyclopedia of Serial Killers* (Middletown, DE: Lak Publishing, 2017), pp. 106–110.

street begging for help. After police arrived, they gave the boy back to Dahmer who then took him back to his apartment where he killed him by pouring more acid onto his brain. Dahmer then kept Sinthasomphone’s decapitated head in his freezer.<sup>22</sup> Dahmer went on to murder four more men before being arrested after police found photos of his victims in his apartment. He was charged and convicted of 15 murders and sentenced to 15 life sentences. Dahmer was then killed, in prison, by another inmate in 1994.

In comparing Bundy and Dahmer, both in their crimes as well as their representation to the public, they were virtually complete opposites. Whereas Bundy killed young white women, Dahmer killed young men, usually people of color. It was not only their victim types that set them apart from one another but their sexuality as well. This became one of the biggest distinctions in how they were portrayed in the media. As the media and American public saw him, Dahmer was not only a serial killer or even a cannibal, but he was homosexual. The news coverage of his case played to the stigma and stereotypes of the 1980s and 1990s that surrounded the LGBTQ community. Schmid explains, “The straight gaze that assumes a correlation between homosexuality and violence takes many forms in true-crime narratives about Jeffrey Dahmer.”<sup>23</sup> The media went on to reference Dahmer as the “Milwaukee Cannibal”<sup>24</sup> or the “Milwaukee Monster” and began portraying him in a similar yet distinctly different manner than Bundy. In a 1993 interview with Dahmer, the reporter discusses the fact that Dahmer is well spoken and unassuming but that it is all just “a thin disguise.”<sup>25</sup> While Bundy played a similar character, Dahmer never seemed to have the same doubt around his crimes that Bundy was able to create through the media. Rather than humanize Dahmer in a similar light to Bundy, he was viewed as a look into depravity. In more recent times there has been a new wave of fascination about Jeffrey Dahmer, including a 2017 movie entitled *My Friend Dahmer* that stars Ross Lynch as Jeffrey Dahmer as well as a 2019 documentary mini-series entitled *Jeffrey Dahmer: Killer Cannibal*.

## The Infamy of Serial Killers

Dahmer and Bundy both faced the American public with a new representation of what a serial killer could look like. They

22 Jack Rosewood and Rebecca Lo, “Jeffrey Dahmer,” pp. 106–110.

23 Schmid, *Natural Born Celebrities*, 224

24 Rick Jr. Paulson, “Jeffrey Dahmer, the Milwaukee Cannibal,” Serial Killers Info (Serial Killers Info, October 12, 2018), <https://serialkillersinfo.com/serial-killers/jeffrey-dahmer-serial-killer/>.

25 cbstvdinsideedition. “*Inside the Mind of Jeffrey Dahmer: Serial Killer’s Chilling Jailhouse Interview*.” November 27, 2018, YouTube video, 17:11, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWjYsxBjBI](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iWjYsxBjBI).

shifted the focus, and in some ways, created a new category of evil and of what could capture the nation's attention. Even today, there continues to be intrigue and fascination into the minds and crimes of infamous serial killers. Although much of the shock and awe reaction to these crimes has seemed to fade with the changing perceptions and understanding of true crime, there remains the captivation. The media and its many branches continue to use their influence to inform and shape the nation, and in many ways, form the acceptability of taboo subjects and normalize unaccepted social traits into everyday American life. With the influence of media, serial killers have been able to gain fame and, in some cases, have become household names. News and media sources continue to profit off the notoriety of these killers and continue to breed interest in the topic of true crime. With the expanse and popularity of movies, television, and podcasts, true crime has become a genre of its own. No longer hiding in the horror section of the genre lists, with less subtle references to true crime in television shows, the reach of true crime has become a booming topic. With media such as documentaries, miniseries, and even this paper, the fame and infamy surrounding serial killers continues to be perpetuated. The consumption of these various forms of media allows for serial killers such as Ted Bundy and Jeffrey Dahmer to remain infamous. Keeping their own names and crimes alive while their victims, in many cases, are forgotten.

The theme of serial killers has evolved into a well-known phenomenon that has become widely accepted as a societal norm. In current times, it is not seen as breaking news to uncover another long-awaited serial killer from the past, or to even discover a serial killer that we did not know existed. Up to the minute media coverage of true crime is the new normal and continues to be an impactful presence in everyday life of the American people. While few cases seem to grab the nation's attention in the way serial killer Ted Bundy did, the fascination with the topic only continues to persist. With ever-growing availability to news and media, the reach of true crime will continue, bringing with it the continued fascination that has surrounded the topic for centuries.

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