When Podcast Met True Crime: A Genre-Medium Coevolutionary Love Story

Line Seistrup Clausen ✉ Stine Ausum Sikjær ✉

1. Introduction

"I hear voices talking about murder… Relax, it's just a podcast"

— Killer Instinct Press 2019

Critics have been predicting the death of radio for decades, so when the new podcasting medium was launched in 2005, nobody believed it would succeed. Podcasting initially presented itself as a rival to radio, and it was unclear to people what precisely this new medium would bring to the table. As it turns out, radio and podcasting would never become rivals, as podcasting took over the role of audio storytelling medium – a role that radio had abandoned prior due to the competition from TV. During its beginning, technological limitations hindered easy access to podcasts, as they had to be downloaded from the Internet onto a computer and transferred to an MP3 player or an iPod. Meanwhile, it was still unclear how this new medium would come to satisfy an audience need that other types of storytelling media could not already fulfill. Podcasting lurked just below the mainstream for some time, yet it remained a niche medium for many years until something happened in 2014.

In 2014, the true crime podcast *Serial* was released, and it became the fastest podcast ever to reach over 5 million downloads (Roberts 2014). After its release, podcasting entered the "post-*Serial* boom" (Nelson 2018; Van Schilt 2019), and the true crime genre spread like wildfire on the platform. Statistics show that the podcasting medium experienced a rise in popularity after 2014, with nearly a third of all podcasts listed on iTunes U.S. being launched between 2014 and 2015 (Morgan 2015). Similarly, before the launch of *Serial,* only 27 percent of Americans had listened to a podcast (Goldberg 2018), compared to 51 percent today (Podcasting Insights). In the following years, several true crime podcasts were launched and well-received by audiences, such as *Undisclosed* (2015), *My Favorite Murder* (2016) and *S-Town* (2017), and in 2019, 50 percent of the top ten podcasts were true crime (Heaney

2019). True crime podcasts have become part of mainstream popular culture, and they continue to dominate charts around the world. In America, Canada, and on global charts, a true crime podcast is currently ranking as number one, and four out of ten podcasts on the top ten American Spotify chart are of the true crime genre (Chartable 2020). What is the connection between the rise of podcasting and the rise of true crime?

We argue that podcasting, a new type of narrative medium used for telling stories, has developed alongside true crime, a flexible genre with a long-standing tradition of reinventing itself to adapt to a new medium's distinctive qualities. Jointly they have influenced each other's possibilities and ultimately grown from niche to mainstream. The combination of the true crime genre and the podcasting medium generates content that listeners can engage with in ways that cater to 21st-century audience behavior. We will examine how true crime and podcasting have influenced each other by analyzing two of the most popular, yet distinctly different true crime podcasts, the first season of *Serial* (2014) and *My Favorite Murder* (2016-). The aim of the analysis is to explore how the creators' style of narration and the form of the podcasts aim at engaging audiences, how it affects audiences, and how the podcasts are received by audiences. The analysis is structured around three categories: Narration, form, and reception. The different categories will focus on key terms from the theory section, including true crime genre characteristics, convergence culture, participatory culture, and key features of podcasting. We have chosen *Serial* as it is the podcast that initiated "the golden age of podcasting," (Berry 2014, 171) and because of its immense popularity. To this day, *Serial* remains the fastest podcast ever to reach over 5 million downloads (Roberts 2014) and is, according to analytics, the most downloaded podcast of all time (Baxendale 2019; Davies n.d.). As for the second, we wanted to choose a podcast that is entirely different from *Serial* in narration style and form yet remains well received by audiences. *My Favorite Murder* is an ongoing podcast with 19 million loyal monthly listeners (McDonnell-Parry 2018) that differs drastically from *Serial*.

2. Theory

2.1 History of true crime

The true crime genre has existed for centuries, and its main theme has always remained the depiction of real crime events as well as the people involved (Franks 2016, 239). The call for entertainment drives the true crime genre, yet at the same time, it insists on reflecting the truth and facts about the crime in question (240). True crime can be traced back to Ancient Greece, where it was used in dramas, acted out on stage, and some scholars even argue that the first true crime story is found in the Bible (Punnett

2018, 5-6). As Ian Case Punnett (2018) states: Cain killed his brother Abel and tried to cover it up, and just as in any true crime story, "a motive was established, the murder was committed, a cover-up was attempted, the crime was solved, and the perpetrator was brought to justice—with God as the first homicide detective" (5-6). As Punnett describes in his book *Toward a Theory of True Crime Narratives* (2018)*, true crime as a genre shares similarities with fairytales, as both genres "are created in order to teach humans how to be safe by instructing them about who should be avoided" (46). Due to the genre's messages of safety as well as its innate ability to reinvent itself, true crime has been a resilient genre ever since its existence (Franks 2016, 251). Moreover, the genre reflects society historically and contemporarily, and especially at the occurrence of significant social changes, the genre's ability of reinvention becomes noticeable (251). Rachel Franks presents three significant societal changes that are reflected in true crime: "Impacts of an increased application of capital punishment in 1720s England, introduction of the investigator as standard for the true crime tale in 1800s England, and the widespread incorporation of literary techniques into true crime story-telling in 1960s America" (240-241).

At the beginning of the 18th century, England and especially London were struck by a crime wave caused by the country's deep desperation and significant level of poverty, which led to a dramatic increase in execution punishments (241). Not only was it a time of a vast number of crimes, but the policing was inconsistent, leaving the public no reassurance of laws being upheld. The public wanted to know the scope of criminals that were disruptions to society, how the state was going to stop crimes and punish the perpetrators. In order to fulfill the public's desire to learn about the crime world, distributions of true crime pamphlets were put in place (243). The distribution of true crime pamphlets was possible because of technological advancements in the printing press that allowed for "tentative flirtations between the world of the criminal and the world of the printer [to] became a full-blown affair" (242). Jean Murley (2008) further presents the idea of true crime stories spreading in society: "In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the story of murder was told very differently than it is told now, and was circulated in society mainly through broadsheets, pamphlets, and execution sermons" (7). Pamphlets that contained detailed information about murders were distributed in communities (Browder 2010, 122). A significant case both in Britain and the U.S. was that of Jack the Ripper, who at the beginning of the 19th century was rampaging the Whitechapel district in London (122). The story of Jack the Ripper was much-circulated and received considerable attention, leading to an increase in true crime material (122). Franks (2016) further explains that "the demand for both

crime fiction and true crime texts would increase, dramatically, across America and between 1830 and 1900" (247-248), where journalists wrote pamphlets, columns, and articles about true crime (248).

The public's desire to know all the details on crimes led to the *American National Police Gazette* starting to report about crime in 1845 and "its early incarnation relied on sensationalism and headlines shouting about "horror" and "fiends," and the Gazette's writers employed the standard conventions of melodrama and sensation to narrate murder" (Murley 2008, 9). Edgar Allan Poe, furthermore, contributed to this early tradition of telling murder stories in a narrativized form with "The Mystery of Marie Rogét" from 1842 (Rachman 2010, 17). Poe's telling of Marie Rogét was based on the actual events of "the real murder of Mary Cecilia Rogers whose corpse was discovered in the Hudson River in the summer of 1841" (23), a story familiar to its audiences as it was covered in most major newspapers in the country. The professional investigator became a significant character in society in the middle of the 19th century (Franks 2016, 245), and soon after, Edgar Allan Poe introduced the detective character in his writings (Rachman 2010, 21). Poe's first detective was also found in "The Mystery of Marie Rogét," however, as a fictional character (21). In true crime settings, the investigator is centered in the criminal case as "a figure to be celebrated, one to take center stage in the crime event narrative" (245), similar to the way detective stories are built up around the detective. The investigator is seen as an all-knowing and all-powerful character with the ability to fail, being the hero of non-fiction literature (247), and for many true crime narratives, the investigator is the main character as well as the most essential.

One of the frontrunners to what has become the modern true crime genre was true crime magazines. In the 1920s and 1930s, these magazines published stories that would "offer one slice of American reality, highly stylized and even fantasized, which was involved with reporting, shaping, and documenting crime for an imagined white working-class readership" (Murley 2008, 16). True crime magazines built on the same feature of sensationalism that was found in pulp fiction and in true crime articles in newspapers and further utilized the sense of sensationalism by narrating actual crime events, including photographs of victims, crime scenes, and potential offenders in the magazines (17-19). Murley (2008) argues that "this preoccupation with biographical details of killers and the newly emerging and fast-growing forms of crime narratives in printed material would lead to the formation of a new genre, the sensational account" (8). Photographs added context to the stories as well as they bore "a stamp of authenticity and [provides] readers with points of identification for victims" (Biressi 2000, 183-184). Although true crime magazines existed for 80 years, they were especially popular from the 1930s up until the 1960s, where they had to compete with the new medium television (Murley

2008, 15). However, the conventions defining the true crime magazine have become essential for the development of "the prototype for many of the non-fiction murder narratives used in every aspect of the media today" (Punnett 2018, 7). Behind the stories in true crime magazines existed a need to create sensational headlines that tended to audiences' thirst for entertainment, instead of a vision to explore and criticize the political and economic landscape of crime and punishment (Biressi 2000, 188). A need for sensationalism that has continued to follow the true crime genre into modern true crime.

Modern true crime fell into place in the 1960s with the publishing of *In Cold Blood* by Truman Capote (Murley 2008, 54). It was a genre reintroduced "against a social backdrop – forever changed by two World Wars – that presented an increasing array of entertainments including film and television, true crime would, again, reinvent itself" (Franks 2016, 248). The story accounts for the Clutter murders, the investigation of the crime as well as the execution of the murderers. It was initially published in *The New Yorker* in four installments and later published in book form (Murley 2008, 54). Capote made use of techniques usually found in the world of fiction: "Although it is highly questionable that Capote invented a new literary genre, he did reinvent a true crime-like story in a prosperous, novel-length form, breaking it out rhetorically and literally from the magazine length rut in which true crime had been stuck in print, on the radio, and on television" (Punnett 2018, 42). With the reinvention of true crime at this time, the genre shied away from centralizing the story around the investigator as it had characterized the genre earlier. Instead, it built the story up around the crime committed with the perpetrator as the main character (Browder 2006, 932). Capote describes the perpetrators and their state-of-minds in detail in his novel, which has become a significant characteristic of the true crime genre. Murley (2008) argues that an understanding of the offenders' psychology builds on the intimacy between offenders and the author (10). An intimacy Capote established as he corresponded with the perpetrators of the Clutter case in order to write *In Cold Blood*. Murley further argues that "as advances in criminology and new theories about human psychology became more well known, a rhetoric of medical deviance began to infuse murder narration, with the result that killers were no longer portrayed as moral monsters, but as moral deviants with physical, measurable differences from "normal" people" (10). The new way of portraying perpetrators originates in Capote's involvement in the case and his relation to the perpetrators.

Capote was the first true crime writer to have a higher level of involvement in the lives of the criminals, and Murley describes the involvement as a "closeness to the subjects of his book [that] would set the standard for a different degree of involvement between writer and subject, and would forever change the nature of murder narratives" (55). A closeness that later would be picked up by

other true crime writers such as Ann Rule, who was friends with the serial killer Ted Bundy, before he was in the police' limelight and convicted of murder (60). Capote has been criticized for his subjective shaping of the narrative; however, as modern true crime started to integrate into popular culture, it has been accepted that there is an "authorial power to shape, and sometimes shift, the facts to suit narrative ends" (Murley 2008, 58). *In Cold Blood* lead to a significant increase in true crime books and, thereby, ignited what has since become the modern true crime genre, and as Laura Browder (2010) explains: "In Cold Blood made reading about gory crime – in this case, the random murder of a farm family in Holcomb, Kansas – respectable" (121).

Books of the true crime genre, similar to true crime magazines, often contain multiple photographs depicting the crime scene, the victim and essential objects found in the investigation (124), "a multipage insert of what are usually described as dramatic, shocking, or chilling photographs of the killer and the victim(s)" (Browder 2006, 930). The books were, therefore, often not only read for the plot, "but for detailed description, and for their linear analyses of what went wrong" (Browder 2010, 125). Similar to how fiction literature is constructed to keep the suspense throughout, so is true crime. By keeping the suspense building only to be released at the very end, audiences become engaged (Punnett 2018, 47).

> While true crime may be a form of documentary, it is a dystopian version. Whereas the traditional documentary is designed to raise people's consciousness about terrible conditions in order to effect change, true crime presents a picture of insoluble problems, because they are rooted within the individual psyche and often have no apparent roots in social conditions. We are in the realm of the psychopath or, more frequently, of the sociopath, whose evil has no visible cause: legislation cannot remove the source of the problem" (Browder 2006, 932).

In Cold Blood ushered a theme which has since been richly imitated by other true crime authors, "that shows violent crimes as acts that can fundamentally reshape a community and create and lay bare the unspoken fears between members of that community" (Browder 2010, 121). A theme that became established as a standard in non-fiction literature in the 70s and 80s, and as according to Murley (2008) came to include that "there was a dawning recognition first of the rise in violent crime, specifically random-seeming sexual or sadistic crimes against women, and then a secondary recognition that punishments for such crimes weren't nearly severe enough" (46). True crime reached a new height in

popularity in the 1970s with the immense expansion of the women's liberation movement as the genre is especially read by women. In the 1970s, the focus of the genre also changed: "While the true crime books of the sixties tended to focus on the dangers from without – men who broke into houses to kill single women, or peripatetic psychopaths far removed from the main currents of American society – the new true crime books emphasized the danger from within the nuclear family" (Browder 2010, 126). As Browder explains, in the 1970s, true crime stories started to focus on "horrendous murders committed within the family setting, usually by respectable men, pillars of society" (126). The true crime genre spans across a wide array of different media to be published on as well as different types of crimes to focus on, often accordingly to the development of society.

Reviewing the history of the true crime genre, it becomes clear that the genre has the ability "to adapt to, and capitalize on, various social changes" (Franks 2016, 251). It is a genre that is not contained to one specific medium, but on the contrary, utilizes the formats and media that are available in the present time (Punnett 2018, 16). It, therefore, reflects not only the technological developments, but it also takes into consideration how crime and punishment unfold in the societies in which we live" (250). True crime as a genre, thus, provides both information as well as entertainment. Although the genre has always been widespread, it has not been considered a respectable genre and, therefore, it has reinvented itself multiple times for new technological trends and societal developments (240).

> The true crime genre has enjoyed significant stability in terms of popularity, though changes in format and focus have made the category an unstable one that has experienced several watershed moments. These moments demonstrate the true crime genre's capacity for reinvention and indicate its readiness to take advantage of changing technologies in print, film, and television, as well as web-based media (240).

Throughout time, true crime has been stigmatized as lowbrow culture and "it was in the 1960s that the first few of what we would recognize today as true crime books began to appear – paperbacks thick enough to function as door stoppers and featuring the inevitable photo insert" (Browder 2006, 930). True crime has "tended not to include cases where the institutional knowledge was substantially challenged, even when the producers of those texts gathered knowledge from noninstitutional sources" (Bouzis 2017, 258) as for an extended period, it was a genre mainly thought of as entertainment. However, in more recent times, the objective for creators of any form of true crime has been a search for the truth (258) and "to question the very foundations of patriarchal culture" (Browder

2006, 936). As Michael Buozis (2017) argues: "The tension between reality and representation in the conventions of true crime has allowed recent projects like *Serial* to retain aspects of criminal biography, but to shift focus to critique the criminal justice system by placing the voice of the accused in a prominent textual space, allowing narrative room for questions of innocence" (258). The spread of true crime texts with the goal to raise awareness has, furthermore, resulted in changes in the criminal justice system, and innocence projects are being initiated throughout the U.S. (Boling 2019, 174).

2.2 Defining the genre

A clear-cut definition of true crime as a genre has yet to reach a public and scholarly consensus, which might be the result of the genre's long-standing tradition of reinventing itself. Notable landmarks of the genre, such as *In Cold Blood*, Crime Magazines of the 20s and 30s, and the podcast *Serial*, are extremely varied in format and focus, making it challenging to determine a set of defining genre characteristics without bringing forth problematic exceptions to the rule. Similarly, many of the examples of what American society has come to consider points of direction for the true crime genre, are not labeled as true crime by its creators. Punnett (2018) argues that there is a general unwillingness of creators to refer to their products as true crime (2). Nevertheless, a clear definition of the true crime genre is determinative for this article, as it helps narrow down the abound of products that claim, or contest, to being true crime. The following chapter will provide the most defining characteristics of the genre that this article will continuously use as a point of reference.

Most definitions of true crime in dictionaries are some variety of the following: "A genre of writing, film, etc., in which real crimes are examined or portrayed" (OED s.v. true crime). Even though that definition accurately describes *In Cold Blood*, which is a non-fiction novel that examines real crimes, it was never actually categorized as such by its author. The same goes for *Serial*, a non-fiction narrative based on actual events of a murder, but was never recognized as true crime either (Punnett 2018, 2). According to Punnett, creators' reluctance to label their products as true crime might be caused by the genre's reputation of being a non-credible medium (3). Historically, true crime has always closely resembled journalism, but many journalists and vanguards of journalism have been quick to tag the genre as "non-proper" (3). True crime is notoriously known for being "the lowest common denominator" or a form of "low-brow entertainment" (Flanagin 2016), and these preconceptions about the genre stem back decades. As mentioned earlier, true crime gained immense popularity in the 1920s and 30s, with the arrival of crime magazines, which can be characterized by using multiple modes of media. Whereas most true crime narratives up until then had been textual, these new magazines

introduced a visual element, featuring illustrations and photos of crime scenes alongside the texts (Punnett 2018, 3). In the early 20th century, the elite regarded visual elements, such as photographs, as "less important" to the text (3). At the time, it was believed that pictures and photographs were meant for those, who could not read, from which an association with true crime as unintellectual came. Today, adding visual modes to the written word is common practice and is referred to as intertextuality, which simply entails the juxtaposition of different texts (3).

Vanguards have spent many years disclaiming true crime as a type of journalism, yet it is difficult to argue against the many similarities that the two share. Joy Wiltenburg (2004) compares true crime with crime reporting, since 'sensationalism' is the most defining feature of both genres (1379). Sensationalism refers to emotionally charged content, often focusing on violence and crime, conveyed to the general public (1377). The term has gained a negative reputation through years of being associated with exaggeration, subjectivity, and "appealing to the low instincts of uneducated masses" (1379). Even though one of true crime's most salient features is being true or authentic, Wiltenburg argues that the genre is notorious for depicting a distorted image of crime. Studies show that people who watch or read a lot of crime reporting greatly overestimate the amount of crime that takes place in their communities (1377). According to Alexis M. Durham et al. (1995), media accounts of crime do not always portray an accurate representation of criminal activity (144). For many, the appeal of the true crime genre lies in its authenticity, and as the genre continually rises in popularity, many Americans are utilizing the genre as a means of gaining information about crime. It is, therefore, essential to gain a better understanding of the genre to ultimately determine if and how it can influence public perceptions of crime (146). The three authors carried out a study in which they compared data from the FBI's crime reports to the content of true crime accounts of homicide cases, to see if there was a correlation between the two. Crime reports from the FBI show that homicide only accounts for 1% of the total crimes, yet 80% of true crime books discussed homicide. According to the authors, this representation can lead to a public perception of murder as a far more frequent crime than, for example, rape or theft, which in reality are much more common crimes (146). Similarly, representations of victims in true crime books did not correlate with the FBI's crime reports either, where most victims were either significantly younger or older than the average victims. Results also show that even though only 47% of victims are Caucasian, almost all victims (95,6%) of true crime books were, at the time, Caucasian (147).

This type of misrepresentation of crime in the true crime genre appears to have been changing in the last couple of years. Many true crime podcast creators are attempting to bring equality to the

genre, like the podcast *Affirmative Murder* (2017-), where the two creators take turns telling true crime stories about minority killers, and *Cases of Color* (2019-), in which the host accounts stories of missing persons of color and brings light to the many injustices involved in their cases (Podcasts in Color n.d.). Similarly, podcasts created by and telling stories about Indigenous people also appear more frequently. The podcast *Missing and Murdered: Finding Cleo* (2016-2019), hosted by Connie Walker, tells the story of the crimes committed against Cleopatra Semaganis Nicotine, an Indigenous girl from Canada, who was forcibly taken away from her family by social workers (Barcella 2019a). Another podcast investigating crimes against Indigenous people is *Thunder Bay* (2018-), which is hosted by Ryan McMahon. Both podcasts are combining the true crime genre with Indigenous history, "deploying a trusted formula to reveal a world frequently invisible to white listeners, but reaching beyond the violence that draws much of the public's attention" (Buckley 2019).

A potential reason behind true crime's tendency to misrepresent crime might be because creators often take on subjective involvement in their work. The journalistic codes of ethics have, for long, enforced the importance of objectivity and neutrality to avoid bias and one-sided reporting. However, subjective journalism has always been around. Hunter S. Thompson coined the term "gonzo journalism," which describes emotionally charged reporting that happens whenever "news workers involve themselves in the story they are covering" or attempt to be "instruments of justice" (Punnett 2018, 13). Punnett argues that the true crime genre is notorious for not complying with the journalistic codes of ethics, and points toward the irony that lies in commercial journalisms' readiness to dismiss true crime as "gonzo" or "sensational," while simultaneously applying the same devices to create popular and appealing content (14). According to Jean Murley (2008), subjective involvement from the creator is vital, and she defines the genre as a "murder narrative" that tells authentic stories interpreted by the creator (6). Rather than criticizing true crime for misrepresenting crime, she argues that a true crime text reflects the social context of its time through "shifts in widespread religious beliefs, philosophical understandings about crime, definitions of insanity, and shifting perspectives on the meaning of mystery of radical evil" (7). Subjective involvement from the creator first arrived in the 60s with Truman Capote's *In Cold Blood* but has become a distinctive feature of the true crime genre ever since.

The personal presence of the creator also affects the experience of the audience. According to Stella Bruzzi (2016), the true crime genre employs many different tools that make the role of the audience active rather than passive. She uses the example of the popular true crime documentary, *The Staircase* (2004), that investigates the potential murder of Kathleen Peterson, of which her husband,

Michael Peterson, is accused. *The Staircase* uses a narrative technique common of the true crime genre, which is accounting past events in the present tense (253). Rather than accounting the events retrospectively, the narrator tells the story with "all the heightened urgency – the cliff-hangers, the contradictions and twists and turns – of a trial narrative unfolding in the present" (252). According to Bruzzi: "The urgency of this in-the-present address makes spectatorship an active as opposed to passive activity, which in turn conveys both urgency and presentness to the viewer. Recounting in the present tense summons up into the present a charged historical moment, regardless of when we are watching" (253).

What exactly the defining features of the true crime genre are, is challenging to determine, since a wide array of definitions exist. The genre is often categorized as a branch of journalism, yet the relentlessness from journalists to embrace the true crime genre raises questions. Punnett (2018) has developed a theory of true crime in order to limit confusion about the genre that offers eight codes for determining whether or not a product or artifact is of the true crime genre. The first and most important code is the teleology (TEL) code, which states that any true crime artifact must strive to be as accurate as possible. If an artifact does not meet this code, it can never be considered true crime. If an artifact meets the TEL code, further analysis can help define the nature of the artifact through the justice, subversive, crusader, geographic, forensic, vocative, and folkloric codes (96). The justice (JUST) code states that the true crime artifact must seek justice for the victim(s) as its primary objective. The subversive (SUB) code states that the creator of the artifact will urge the reader/viewer/listener to reconsider already existing testimonies, evidence, or attempt to expose injustice or juridical malfeasance (97). The crusader (CRUS) code does not seek to overturn a specific wrong but instead calls for new awareness or social change in general. For the geographic (GEO) code, it is the location or the setting of the crime that frames the story, similar to the way that Capote described the crime scene, an isolated Kansas farmhouse, in great detail in *In Cold Blood* (98). The forensic (FOR) code entails vivid descriptions of crime scenes, evidence, autopsies, investigations, and any other technical elements that come along with murder. The FOR code often interplays with the JUST, SUB, and CRUS codes, as the combination results in sensory experience of the audience that is associated with sensationalism (98). Punnett argues that the vocative (VOC) code is what sets true crime apart from traditional crime reporting, where the position of the journalist changes from an objective to an advocacy position. The last code is the folkloric (FOLK) code, which emphasizes how true crime narratives sometimes "instruct without teaching," meaning that they are based in a real story but attempt to use that story to give a lesson to the audience (98).

Punnett's theory offers some interesting observations regarding the true crime genre, which are useful in better understanding its underlying motivations. Perhaps the most critical aspect of his theory is the TEL code, which narrows the genre down comprehensively and excludes works that are based on true stories and dramatic reenactments. Though the TEL code does give rise to contradictions, for example, *In Cold Blood* has often been questioned for its truthfulness, as Capote was known to be a compulsive liar (100). Nevertheless, we argue that Capote's work is so fundamental to the entire foundation of the true crime genre that it can stand as the only exception to the rule. *In Cold Blood* was a literary turning point, and the true crime genre might not be what it is today, had it been classified as fictional rather than factual. Also, some critics argue that, contrary to traditional journalism, the truth in non-fiction literary forms, such as *In Cold Blood*, "is so complex that the search for it may actually be better served by some degree of invention and exaggeration" (24). Furthermore, Punnett's interpretations of the motivations behind true crime narratives fit well with how the genre differs from traditional journalism in that its content is often emotionally charged and carries ulterior motives, rather than merely having an informational function.

True crime is a genre known for its ability to reinvent itself and has managed to adapt throughout history to remain relevant. Even though the genre has always had a reputation of being low-brow culture targeted at the lowest common denominator, it has continued to exist within the realm of the entertainment industry. Today, the genre has spread into new media and reached new heights as popular streaming platforms began producing true crime documentary series, such as Netflix's *Making a Murderer* (2015-), and HBO's *The Jinx* (2015). Furthermore, the genre has found its place in the podcasting medium, where it has gained immense popularity, resulting in what has been named the golden age of podcasting (Berry 2015, 171). In 2019, 50 percent of the top ten podcasts were true crime (Heaney 2019), and *Serial* remains the fastest podcast ever to reach over 5 million downloads (Roberts 2014). How come a genre with a tarnished reputation of being low-brow culture is suddenly dominating mainstream popular culture? The true crime genre dates back hundreds of years, so why exactly is it surging in interest now?

2.3 The new media paradigm

With constant digitization and the arrival of new media, the media industries are undergoing a paradigm shift. This paradigm shift has by many been referred to as a "digital revolution" that involves the assumption that new media will take over, and old media will inevitably become irrelevant. Television would replace radio, the Internet would replace broadcasting, and cinema would replace theatre

(Jenkins 2006a, 5). Nicholas Negroponte draws the contrast between "passive old media" and "interactive new media," and concludes that easy access to niche on-demand content will result in consumers abandoning their old means of entertainment, ultimately "predicting the collapse of broadcast networks" (5). Others believe that rather than replacing them, new technologies will absorb old media and integrate them into new media. This belief was quickly dismissed by George Gilder, who argues that the computer industry will converge with the television industry in the same way that the automobile converged with the horse. From Gilder's perspective, the computer is not going to transform mass culture, but rather destroy it (5).

The rave about the Internet quickly came to a halt with the dot-com bubble in the late 1990s and early 2000s, which meant that people needed a new way to understand the interaction of old and new media – and in came convergence culture (6). The initial ideas of convergence grew from Ithiel de Sola Pool's book *Technologies of Freedom* (1983), in which he accurately predicted that a "convergence of modes" would happen in the future, where the lines between media, point-to-point communications, and mass communications are diminished (23). He observed that any type of service that was provided by a specific medium in the past, was suddenly providable in a number of different physical ways, indicating that "the one-to-one relationship that used to exist between a medium and its use is eroding (23). Henry Jenkins (2006a) has expanded on this idea and aims towards describing how convergence is "reshaping American popular culture and, in particular, the ways it is impacting the relationship between media audiences, producers, and content" (12). Rather than reducing convergence culture to the merging of technological devices, he assumes that media is a cultural system that enables communication and that each medium "has a set of associated "protocols" or social practices that have grown up around that technology" (13-14). Even though digitization and the availability of new technological devices are a prerequisite for media convergence, it is not simply determined thereof. While the digital revolution predicted the replacement of old media by new ones, the convergence paradigm concludes that old and new media will continue to interact in ways that will gradually complexify (6).

Marshal McLuhan introduced the term *media ecology* (Scolari 2013), which closely aligns with Jenkins' idea of media as a complex and dynamic system. The term compares media to an ecosystem with four overlapping spheres: technology, government regulation, economics, and culture. Carlos Scolari (2013) expands on the work of McLuhan in an attempt to present an integrated model for understanding the evolution of media. Scolari explains that the ecology metaphor can be interpreted in two complementary ways: "The media as environments or the media as species that interact with

each other" (1419). The former interpretation argues that technologies create environments that affect people, whereas the latter focuses on the relationship between media, which is also the interpretation in question of Scolari's model. McLuhan explains the latter interpretation as follows: "No medium has its meaning or existence alone, but only in constant interplay with other media… Radio changed the form of the news story as much as it altered the film image in the talkies. TV caused drastic changes in radio programming, and in the form of the thing or documentary novel" (1419). Scolari condenses Lehrman-Wilzig and Cohen-Avigdor's six-phase model into three, "a natural life cycle of a new media evolution," which illustrates the transformation that a medium goes through:

Table 2. The Natural Life Cycle Model Compared to the Media Evolution Model.

Natural life cycle of new media evolution	Media evolution
Birth Market penetration Growth	Emergence
Maturation Defensive resistance	Dominance
Adaptation, convergence, or obsolescence	Survival or extinction

Figure 1: Scolari 2013, 1423

In the first phase, *emergence*, the new medium appears in the media ecology. The second phase, *dominance*, is when a specific medium gains a central position in the ecology, like cinema and radio between the 1920s and 1950s. According to Scolari, even when a medium experiences a dominant position in the media ecology, its position is not stable but subjected to tensions generated by the other media (1426). The third and last phase, *survival* or *extinction*, a reduction of *adaptation, convergence, or obsolescence*, will ultimately determine the life of the medium.

The main point of media ecology is that media has the ability to adapt by creating niches for themselves that are particularly well suited to that medium. Jenkins correspondingly agrees that Negroponte and Gilder were both mistaken in their assumption that old media will become redundant and eventually disappear because once a medium comes to satisfy some core human demand, "it continues to function within the larger system of communication options" (Jenkins 2006a, 14). A medium's content, audience, or social status might change, as when radio became a music medium rather than a storytelling medium, or when theatre went from a mainstream activity to an elite one. When YouTube arrived as a convergence medium between the Internet and TV, it struggled to diverge itself from traditional broadcasting (Christian 2012, 352). Today, YouTube is nothing like traditional broadcasting, as it found ways to fulfill a different audience need, and is now characterized by content

that is "short, mostly humorous and easily accessible" (Kim 2012, 54). The second major point of media ecology is that changes cause a ripple effect within the ecosystem. Technological changes have had a significant impact on audience behavior, such as the arrival of the DVD player. Previously, audiences often watched TV series in random order, as all they could do was watch whatever was currently on. DVD players paved the way for audiences to engage more actively in their media consumption, while simultaneously allowing creators to incorporate narrative complexity to TV series (Mittel 2015, 41).

The conventional episodic form is characterized by a need for plot closure within each episode, in order for a TV series to be watchable in random order (18). That is no longer necessary, as audiences can binge-watch entire seasons in one go. Similarly, this newly gained control that audiences have over their media consumption means that creators must find new ways to attract and engage them. One such way is through *serialization*, which is "an interplay between the demands of episodic and serial storytelling, often oscillating between long-term arcs and stand-alone episodes" (19). Mittell (2015) defines the serial experience as follows: "Television series in their original broadcast form alternate between episodic installments and mandatory temporal gaps between episodes – it is these gaps that define the serial experience" (27). Today, technology has allowed access to all media on demand, which has ultimately fragmented the mass audience into smaller dedicated audiences that actively seek out the content that they enjoy. Similar to how the mediascape is increasingly complexifying, so is audiences, and their behavior continues to change accordingly.

2.4 Participatory culture

Clay Shirky argues that the arrival of the Internet has meant the death of the media consumer altogether: "The Internet destroys the noisy advertiser/silent consumer relationship that the mass media relies upon… In the age of the Internet, no one is a passive consumer anymore because everyone is a media outlet" (Joyce 2018, 15). Not even television, which might still be considered the most dominant medium, no longer enjoys a mass audience. Nightly news programs that used to be viewed by the majority of Americans have seen a decrease in audience share, which is why many news stations have decided to target a more specific group of viewers rather than the mass due to audience fragmentation. An example of this was when Fox News converted into a right-wing media organization, in hopes of targeting a specific demographic rather than the general American (21).

According to Jenkins, the fragmentation of the mass audience not only means that the mass audience no longer exists, but also that the idea of the audience as passive spectators no longer is

accurate. The dichotomy of media producers and consumers has been effaced, and instead, Jenkins (2006a) sees both as participants, who interact with each other "according to a new set of rules that none of us fully understands (3). He refers to this as *participatory culture*, which, alongside *media convergence* and *collective intelligence*, make up the three key elements of convergence. Jenkins defines convergence in the following quote: "The flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want" (2). Convergence covers not only the technological aspects of media but also the industrial and cultural changes that happen over time. One of the main reasons behind the circulation of media content across platforms, industries, and national borders is due to participatory culture, meaning the active participation of audiences.

Jenkins explains that "convergence occurs within the brains of individual consumers and through their social interactions with others" (3). Convergence should not only be understood as a technological process of bringing multiple platforms together but also as a "cultural shift as consumers are encouraged to seek out new information and make connections among dispersed media content" (3). The Internet has altered the role of audiences, and "more than ever, thanks to social media, the creator and the consumer are one and the same" (McGuinness 2016, 521). Audiences build their personal 'mythology' out of the many impressions they get from fragments of information that are handpicked out of the enormous flow of media. Through these impressions, audiences make sense of their lives and shape their understanding of the world (Jenkins 2006a, 3-4). Jenkins' idea of participatory culture grew out of observations that he made about fans back in 1992. He sees fans as more than consumers of mass-produced content, "but as a creative community" (Jenkins et al. 2015, 1). Rather than consuming media passively, fans create online spaces where they share their creative ideas and critical thoughts of the specific media text in question (1-2).

Fandom has, for long, been stigmatized and regarded as unworthy of attention within the fields of cultural studies. Matt Hills (2002) emphasizes the institutionalized division that is often proposed between 'the fan' and 'the academic,' in which academia is regarded as the 'good subject,' while placing fandom as 'the Other' (19). This type of thinking results in what Hills refers to as *moral dualism* that frequently ends up devaluing fandom as unworthy of scholarly pursuit (9). Instead, Hills argues that fandom deserves to be presented on its own terms, and proposes a more general theory towards media fandom. Rather than focusing on fans of a particular text or as the immoral counterpart of a dichotomy, he focuses on the "transmedia and multimedia consumption of media fans" and seeks towards making sense of consumption patterns of fan activities (2). Fandom has been the subject of

Jenkins' academic research, and he has spent more than twenty years involved in fan communities himself. Jenkins notes that these communities are defined by "equality, reciprocity, sociality, and diversity," and that fans usually have a clear understanding of the effect of their participation, and "how their production and circulation of media content contributed to their shared well-being" (Jenkins et al. 2016, 2). Participatory culture does not only belong within fan communities, but Jenkins still considers fandom an essential element in shaping the contemporary understanding of the term. Fans were amongst the first to interact across borders, establishing communities based on shared interests, and they are historically the first to adopt new media platforms as well (3). Fans make out only a portion of the many networked communities around the world, who, for long, have sought after gaining "greater access to the means of cultural production and circulation" (3). Similarly, Shayne Bowman and Chris Willis introduced the concept of participatory journalism and *We Media*: "The act of a citizen, or group of citizens, playing an active role in the process of collecting, reporting, analyzing, and disseminating news and information. The intent of this participation is to provide independent, reliable, accurate, wide-ranging and relevant information that a democracy requires" (Joyce 2018, 15).

Jenkins' (2009) defines participatory culture as one that includes one of the following five:

1. Relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement.
2. Strong support for creating and sharing creations with others.
3. Some type of informal mentorship whereby what is known by the most experienced is passed along to novices.
4. Members who believe that their contributions matter.
5. Members who feel some degree of social connection with one another (at the least, they care what other people think about what they have created) (5-6).

He furthermore groups together the different ways that participation takes form in four categories:

1. Affiliations: Memberships, formal and informal, in online communities centered around various forms of media, such as Friendster, Facebook, MySpace, message boards, metagaming, or game clans.
2. Expressions: Producing new creative forms, such as digital sampling, skinning and modding, fan videos, fan fiction, zines, or mash-ups.

3. Collaborative problem-solving: Working together in teams—formal and informal—to complete tasks and develop new knowledge, such as through Wikipedia, alternative reality gaming, or spoiling.

4. Circulations: Shaping the flow of media, such as podcasting or blogging (8).

Not all members of a community have to contribute but must believe they are always free to contribute and that their contributions will be valued. According to Jenkins (2009), the community alone provides its members with a sense of creative expression and active participation that teaches young people the value of the creative process in itself. Ultimately, he argues that this leaves young people with a strong sense of self, general respect, and value for the creative work of others (6).

Philosopher Pierre Lévy coined the concept *the cosmopedia*, or *knowledge space*, which emerges when audiences fully realize the potentials of the new participatory media environment (Jenkins 2006b, 136). A 'deterritorialization' of knowledge is happening, according to Lévy, who suggests that the Internet facilitates communication that enables participation and community across nations (136). These self-organized virtual communities become knowledge communities that are defined by "common intellectual enterprises and emotional investments," and are held together "through the mutual production and reciprocal exchange of knowledge" (137). In his book, *Collective Intelligence: Mankind's Emerging World in Cyberspace* (1997), Lévy explains: "Not only does the cosmopedia make available to the collective intellect all of the pertinent knowledge available to it at a given moment, but it also serves as a sight of collective discussion, negotiation, and development" (217). Furthermore, he distinguishes between shared knowledge and collective intelligence, the first being knowledge shared by all members of a community, and the latter being knowledge available to all members of a community (Jenkins 2006b, 139).

Jenkins uses the history of science fiction fandom to illustrate how knowledge communities emerge, as fans had a massive impact on the surfacing of the genre back in the 20s and 30s. Many of the most significant science fiction writers came from fan communities, and as the genre spread into film and television, reciprocity remained among readers, writers, and editors. Science fiction fans have always used activism and lobbyism to affect changes in movies or to keep a series on the air (138). Jenkins (2006a) uses collective intelligence to describe how media consumption has gone from an individual to a shared process, and as illustrated by the science fiction example above, it is often considered an alternative source of media power (4). Collective intelligence broadens a community's range of expertise, and, as Nancy Baym argues: "A large group of fans can do what even the most

committed single fan cannot: accumulate, retain, and continually recirculate unprecedented amounts of relevant information" (139).

Lévy contrasts the concept of collective intelligence to the concept of *the hive mind*, in which individuals conform to a mutual consciousness. Rather than promote conformity, collective intelligence is empowered by "multiple ways of knowing" (140). The reciprocal nature of the knowledge communities challenges traditional forms of expertise "and destabilizes attempts to establish a scriptural economy in which some meanings are more valuable than others" (140). Lévy's idea of collective intelligence challenges what Peter Walsh (2003) describes as *the expert paradigm* (365). The expert paradigm trades back to the beginning of human culture, and was potentially a way of putting value and use to knowledge (365). Walsh argues that the Internet is breaking down the knowledge hegemony, in the same way, that the knowledge hegemony of the medieval church lost its credibility with the arrival of the printing press. Translations of the Bible into common languages and pamphlets criticizing the church removed control from the church to the people (368). Similarly, knowledge communities online are decentralizing and democratizing knowledge and skills, as "our traditional assumptions about expertise are breaking down or at least being transformed by the more open-ended processes of communication in cyberspace" (Jenkins 2006a, 52).

In order to better understand audience participation and collective intelligence, one must also understand how contemporary media environments spur this type of audience engagement. A potential way that media creators can engage audiences in participatory ways is through spreadable content. *Spreadability* is a term coined by Jenkins to explain the wide distribution and circulation of information on media platforms. When Jenkins talks about spreadability, he is not interested in distribution in the traditional sense, which has customarily been measured through the sum of people who watch a movie on TV, or the number of tickets sold at a movie premiere. Instead, he sees it as a process where "a mix of top-down and bottom-up forces determine how material is shared across and among cultures in far more participatory (and messier) ways," or put more simply, the capability of media being spread (Jenkins et al. 2013, 1). According to Jenkins', networked communities play a significant role in how media circulates. The shift from a top-down distribution, where prominent media conglomerates distribute content for audiences to consume, to this type of circulation mentioned above, signals a movement toward a participatory model of culture (2). As mentioned earlier, the idea of a homogenous mass audience that passively consumes reconstructed messaged is no longer sufficient in describing contemporary audiences "who are shaping, sharing, reframing, remixing media content in ways which might not have been previously imagined" (2). Therefore,

Jenkins wishes to expand on the concepts of *stickiness* and *impressions* through his concept of spreadability, which takes into account the "importance of the social connections among individuals, connections increasingly made visible (and amplified) by social media platforms" (6).

So, what exactly makes anyone Tweet about a movie, share a YouTube video on Facebook, or recommend a product to family and friends? Jenkins answers this question in the following: "When people pass along content, they are not doing so as paid employees motivated by economic gain; they are doing so as members of social communities involved in activities which are meaningful to them on either an individual or social level" (Jenkins et al. 2008, 4). John Fiske distinguishes between mass culture and popular culture, in that mass culture is consumption, and popular culture is "the active process of generating and circulating meanings and pleasures within a social system" (1989, 19). Fiske refers to content that is spread the furthest and fastest as 'producerly,' meaning that they are "open ended enough to allow diverse communities to appropriate them and deploy them to express local meanings and interpretations (Jenkins et al. 2008, 4-5). Creators are imposed to give up a certain amount of control over the messages that they are trying to convey, in order for people to interpret their own messages, so that "cultural materials, such as advertisements, become the raw materials which community members use to express shared meanings or to reaffirm social ties with each other. It is their openness to such reworking which allows these cultural goods to... acquire "worth" within particular social contexts" (5).

Changes in the mediascape have fragmented the mass audience into smaller niche audiences. Similarly, they are no longer viewed as passive spectators, but active participants and their behavior have changed accordingly. Audiences are in complete control of their media consumption, and the traditional dichotomy of creator and audience has been effaced. In order for a medium to survive, it must adapt to cater to these changes in behavior. An example of a medium that has successfully adapted is podcasting. The rise of podcasting took everyone by surprise, as people had been predicting the death of radio for long and simply considered podcasting an extension of radio. How exactly has the podcasting medium been shaped by the principal features of convergence culture resulting in the golden age of podcasting?

2.5 Podcasting

> "The podcast trend appears to have stagnated, while podcasting has just been going out of fashion at a steady clip" (Iskold 2007).

"All of which brings me back to my original question: Is podcasting dead? My answer is, yes, I think it is" (Wolfe 2008).

Podcasting was by many expected to be a 24-hour bug that would quickly die out. Podcasting grew steadily for a period of 10 years, but only catching the attention of the few. However, this all changed in 2014, with new technology coming to the fore as well as the release of one extremely popular podcast, namely *Serial*. Before 2014, the majority of people did not know what the word 'podcasting' meant, let alone what it was (Cwynar 2015, 190). The new medium's close association with radio contributed to the confusion of whether the medium could bring anything new to the table, or if it was merely a new way to listen to the radio. Therefore, to understand the rise of podcasting, it is necessary also to understand the history of radio.

Its evolutionary ability has helped radio survive the invention of other technologies. When TV was invented, it replaced radio as the primary storytelling medium found in most homes, so instead, radio became a medium for playing music (Jenkins 2006a, 14). As Michele Hilmes (2013) explains "radio's death was predicted as often as its survival, as the individualized listening experience of iPods, headphones, and playlists seemed poised to replace everything that had most endeared radio to its public as a live, shared medium over the previous eighty years" (43). In order to survive, radio started catering to different types of audience needs by moving away from loudspeakers and back to headphones. This change, alongside the invention of the car radio, made listening to the radio into a more individualized activity (Cordeiro 2012, 495). Stephen Joyce in *Transmedia Storytelling and the Apocalypse* (2018) argues that "radio adapted by focusing on things television didn't do, such as music or local news. More specialized stations found smaller but stable audiences bound by music genre or location" (20). As the medium became characterized as a music-playing medium, it allowed station owners to develop multiple formats. According to Douglas (2004), "industry representatives also note that many people listen for only ten minutes at a time and move among six different stations; programmers are at the mercy of such habits, they emphasize. Their point is that people have become more selfish and less tolerant listeners and that stations must cater to this" (348). As mentioned earlier, the invention of a new mass medium does not necessarily result in the death of another medium (Joyce 2018, 21). It is, however, causing the splintering and fragmentation of audiences (21) and, in the case of radio, "provided niches and outposts for different people of different tastes, attitudes, and desires" (Douglas 2004, 11). The end of the mass audience has led to what Douglas (2004) calls *cultural segregation*

(354), and she argues that radio, along with cable TV, magazines, and niche advertising, has become a significant part of dividing the audience (354) .

The fragmentation of the audience means the appearance of new target audiences, and as Berry (2006) argues: "Young people are disconnected by contemporary broadcast radio and seek out new forms online or choose their own music over radio" (149). Furthermore, these target audiences are becoming increasingly more challenging to reach. The question that then arises is: with new types of technologies allowing people to stream music and listen on-demand, is that part of radio's evolutionary process, or is new media coming to the fore and thereby pushing radio aside? As Hilmes (2013) argues: "No longer constrained by the technologies, institutions, and practices of the pre-digital era, radio must now be understood as soundwork: the entire complex of sound-based digital media that enters our experience through a variety of technologies and forms" (43-44). Hilmes (2013), thereby, argues for radio being the umbrella concept that entails different types of soundwork such as "comedy podcasts, archived discussion programs, time-shifted voice tracking, public radio magazines, short and long-form documentaries" (44) and more. In order to understand Hilmes' argument, it is essential to understand why audio media differ from other types of media, an idea we will first explore, and thereafter consider why podcasting is a medium on its own and not an extension of radio.

Podcasting and radio are closely connected, and podcasting has, therefore, by some been considered a part of radio (Berry 2016, 8), but as Hilmes (2013) asks, "what is radio?" (43). Radio is defined as "the transmission and reception of radio-frequency electromagnetic waves ... the use of this process as a means of communication" (OED s.v Radio) and as "organized wireless broadcasting in sound; sound broadcasting network or service as a whole; sound broadcasting as a medium of communication or as a form of art or entertainment" (OED s.v Radio). Radio is presently considered a medium of nostalgia (Douglas 2004, 3-4) and a constant that has been in American society since the 1920s (6). It was developed in the 1890s as a "point-to-point communication system" (Berry 2006, 147), but it did not take long before set owners started to listen in on other transmissioners' conversations (147), allowing the medium to become a fixed part of the homes of the general public.

The content on the radio has changed throughout the decades. The 1920s was defined by much static noise; during the 1930s, radio was a storytelling medium; and in the 50s, it was music that dominated the medium (Douglas 2004, 6). Furthermore, it is not only *what* people listened to that has changed throughout the years, but also *how* they listened. At the beginning of radio's history, its audience listened through headphones as loudspeakers were not invented yet (Skretvedt & Sterling n.d). Later on, with the invention of loudspeakers, it became something for families to gather around

before TV sets became common property (Berry 2016, 10). Then in the 1960s, people once again consumed aural media through headphones, and with the invention of the Walkman, the MP3, and then the iPod, it became possible to bring music on the go (Nyre 2015, 280). Both content and methods of listening to aural media have changed significantly (Douglas 2004, 35), underlining radio's ability to adapt itself to the world around it, and supporting Berry's (2016) statement that "radio is an evolutionary animal" (8).

Audio media differs tremendously from other types of media by the fact that it relies entirely on its audience's ability to concentrate their attention on their aural sense (Douglas 2004, 8). Douglas argues that "even as mere background noise, radio provides people with a sense of security that silence does not, which is why they actively turn to it, even if they aren't actively listening" (8). Audio media work with the concepts of aurality and orality that is respectively defined by McHugh (2012) as "relating to the ear or the sense of hearing" (188) and "the fact and quality of oral/verbal communication" (188). These two concepts are intertwined as sound "envelops us, pouring into us, whether we want it to or not, including us, involving us" (Douglas 2004, 30). The importance of creating aural media, thus, lies in creating an "acoustic landscape" that generates an intimacy with the audience (McHugh 2012, 188). One of the essential aspects that separate audio media from other types of media is its disconnection from a specific time and place, and as Winocur (2005) explains: "With the exception of the radio and the telephone, consumption of other mass media (television, video, and computer) is associated with a time and space segmentation that suggests a moment and a place for each activity of the domestic routine" (320). With the invention of the Internet, radio became even more independent of any time and space segmentation, as it branched out and became accessible through digital platforms. Programs could, therefore, be preserved after broadcasting (Hilmes 2013, 49-50), which Hilmes describes as radio having a "temporal fixity" (49).

The sonic landscape has been marked by the screen-based technology and allowed the different elements of the soundscape to become accessed through screen media, allowing for the similarities of the sonic landscape to surface (44). Furthermore, aural media allows listeners to use their own imagination to complete the pictures in the stories being told and to put the individual pieces together instead of watching it all on a screen (Douglas 2004, 4).

> As radio engages the imagination, it has the potential to create a uniquely personal relationship between the listener and the content. Voice is the intimate key to audiences' hearts. By listening to detailed personal experiences of 'others,' listeners become

connected to the people whose stories they share. Listeners feel like they know the people speaking in the radio programs, both the journalists and the interviewees (Lindgren 2016, 27).

Douglas (2004) explains the turn to aural media and the art of listening as follows: "Most of all the turn to listening reactivated, extended, and intensified particular cognitive modes that encouraged, simultaneously, a sense of belonging to a community, an audience, and a confidence that your imaginings, your radio visions, were the best and truest of them all" (39). Back in the 1930s, radio dramas were a big hit (6), and families sat together around the radio and became immersed in the story worlds (Berry 2016, 10), a capability that podcasting shares with radio.

> Podcasting is the way audio drama will reach Americans more widely and in more concentrated form, hearkening back to the celebrated Old Time Radio (OTR) of the past, but presenting something entirely new. *Serial,* while not a drama podcast, provides an excellent blueprint for how to bring nationally broadcast, culturally relevant audio drama back to American listeners (McMurtry 2016, 306).

As Lindgren (2016) states: "Radio and podcast storytelling is perfectly placed to explore lived, personal experiences" (24). McHugh (2014) further argues that "the popularity and accessibility of the audio storytelling genre also make it an ideal format for communities to use to tell their 'own' stories, unmediated by outsiders or professionals, who inevitably bring external values and traditions" (142). Aural media is truly separated from visual media in that it connects imagination and memory, and that the individual listener is allowed "to create a personal response, engaging both head and heart" (143).

Critics agree that podcasting has evolved from radio and, therefore, can be seen as an extension from the older medium (Berry 2016, 8). Richard Berry and other podcast critics further argue that, as podcasting has had time to develop, it has become a medium of its own (8). What makes podcasting its own medium, separated from radio, is the fact that it does not have to live up to the structures set for radio programs, as podcasting was never intended to be used for radio broadcasting (8-9). Sterne et al. (2008) further differentiate between radio and podcasting with the fact that "podcasting isn't licensed, it doesn't require any formal training (even the most radical community station usually requires aspiring broadcasters to go through some kind of minimal training program) and it is not centrally scheduled" (13). Menduni (2007) suggests that podcasting may have a part to play in radio's

future, but to a great extent, it does also recall radio's past, looking back to the amateur phase of radio (16). Podcasts were, therefore, initially created by anyone who had an interest in the medium, professionals as well as amateurs (10). Hancock and McMurtry (2018) further illustrate this connection to the past by comparing present day's podcast with the technology of radio's early days: "Post-Serial podcasts require full, immersive audience attention, in a way that radio has seldom been credited with since the Crystal set's demise" (89). Kelli Boling (2019) aligns with this statement, as she argues that podcasting as a medium falls close to what radio was before the invention of television (173). Even though podcasting was never meant for radio, radio networks were quick to adopt the podcasting practice after its release, allowing listeners to access already aired programs (Menduni 2007, 15). Berry (2016) argues for the idea of podcasting being its own medium, but at the same time, states that "podcasts can be radio, made by radio stations or by former radio professionals. Other podcasts can be created by individuals with no experience with the above, or any interest in sounding like radio, and although they might sound different, they share listening and distributive practices" (Berry 2016, 9).

Boiling and Hull (2018) define a podcast as "a digital audio file, usually a series of files, that can be downloaded via the Internet. Users choose to play the file using an app or web service" (94). Podcasting was brought into the market in 2005, and it uses the software RSS 0.92 developed by Dave Winer that allows listeners to subscribe or download directly from web-based sites (Bottomley 2015, 164). The use of the RSS technology does, according to Bottomley (2015), imply seriality (166) and he, further, explains: "The fact that it incorporates RSS means that a listener subscribes to a "feed" and new recordings are automatically pushed to the listener's device whenever they are uploaded by the podcast's producer" (166). However, for the first years of its life, podcasting struggled due to the competition from video-sharing technologies, as well as the release of YouTube in 2006 (165). Many were quick to stamp podcasting as a "dead" medium in its early days due to its lack of integration into popular culture, but the medium continued to grow from its release until 2014 (165). In 2014, Apple integrated a native podcast app into its iOS mobile device, allowing users to download podcasts directly to their phones through the app (McHugh 2016, 65). This technology launched alongside the release of the podcast *Serial* (65), allowing the medium to enter its second evolutionary step, or what has also been called the golden age of podcasting (Berry 2015, 171). The golden age was a time that saw a substantial rise in podcast listeners.

Even though radio and podcasting share many of the same qualities, they differ to the extent that allows podcasting to have its own ecosystem and limits the competition with radio (Berry 2018, 26). As Lotz (2017) explains: "A "medium" derives not only from technological capabilities, but also

from textual characteristics, industrial practices, audience behaviors, and cultural understanding" (3). All of these elements are what composes the ecosystem of the podcasting medium (Berry 2018, 27). When podcasting started in 2005, it could be argued that it was a remediated form of radio, but as it developed and became its own medium, it also found its own audience and "the most popular podcasts of today have been created with the podcast listener in mind" (27). Hancock and McMurtry (2018), further, explain: "The podcast no longer operates merely as re-played radio, wrenched from another media form, or as an assortment of eclectic one-offs, but rather as media form which is increasingly recognizable as consciously self-contained, pre-recorded, play-on-demand acoustically complex, and formally sponsored" (86). Even though, podcasting in its form is more flexible and freer than traditional radio, podcasting still has to maintain certain conventions to "frame audience expectations" (84). Expectations that develop from the properties that set it apart from radio and allow it to be recognized as a medium in its own right.

The freedom and flexibility of the podcasting medium come from the ability to allow anyone to produce and release their own podcast (Berry 2006, 158) and as Berry furthermore, argues: "The Podcaster does not require studios, transmitters or licenses, making the movement from listener to producer easy" (151). The easiness of producing has also meant that the podcasting industry is not influenced by conglomerates in the same way as the radio industry is controlled by a few major corporations (Joyce 2018, 25). It is, however, necessary to mention as the podcasting medium has become immensely popular many radio stations and media companies have started to release podcasts as well, and podcasting companies are being created in the current mediascape (Berry 2006, 158). Exactly Right is an example thereof, a podcast network that "provides a platform for bold, creative, voices to bring life provocative, entertaining, and relatable stories for audiences everywhere" (Exactly Right). The podcasting industry is, moreover, not subject to "censorship by the US Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and without the gatekeeping functions of media organizations and advertisers" (Wrather 2016, 44), podcasting has for now remained a freer and non-political medium (Berry 2006, 145-146).

One of the defining characteristics of this new medium is that listeners can hear programs anytime and anywhere (Bottomley 2015, 166), whereas radio is a broadcasting medium where listeners tune into whatever program that is scheduled for that specific time (Berry 2016, 11). Podcasting diverges itself from radio and ultimately reflects an aspect of the 21st-century mediascape by being an on-demand medium (Bonini 2015, 21). The on-demand culture found in podcasting is similar to streaming services such as Netflix and HBO and allows users to not only access content at anytime,

anywhere, but also allows for binge-watching/listening (Berry 2016, 16). Hancock and McMurtry (2018) further unfold this distinction between radio and podcasting: "Whereas traditional radio was ephemeral and fleeting, podcasts may be paused and replayed, allowing listeners to follow more complex plots. Rather than passing from one story to the next, the listener must juggle many strands of the same story, over 12 or so installments" (90). Audiences can, therefore, listen to as many podcast episodes they want as well as skip episodes or simply relisten to their favorite ones (Berry 2016, 16). The on-demand culture furthermore diverges podcast listeners from the radio audience, as they have a different journey to reach programs (12). Berry argues that "the podcast listener is a more actively engaged participant than the radio listener" (12) based on the fact that they have to choose which podcast they want to listen to (12), and therefore, podcast creators often attempt to set themselves apart from others.

McMurtry (2016) has developed an equation that potentially entails the elements of a successful podcast, one that can predict the "content to produce for a hypothetical large-scale, sustainable US audience" (307). This equation for potentially creating a successful podcast reads:

$$\text{Seriality + high production values + star casting + passion +}$$
$$\text{fiction/reality = success? (307).}$$

A majority of podcasts make use of seriality, which helps build the structure of a program and create intimacy, giving the audience a sense of being part of the 'in-group' that has information from stories told in previous episodes. It is up to the producer and the host of the show to decide when to release new information in order to keep audiences wanting to tune in for new episodes (311). Moreover, high production value is beneficial for podcasts or other aural media to engage listeners, as they depend only on their hearing and helps "achieve smooth and coherent social interchanges" (Nyre 2015, 281). It is, therefore, important to make sure of the quality of the product so that it is easy for the audience to consume (McMurtry 2016, 313). Star casting in true crime podcasting does not mean getting A-list stars to participate, but it is instead what Durrani et al. (2015) explain in regard to *Serial*: "Buttressed by the promise of an investigative journalist to answer that burning question at the center of the series: Did he do it?". Star casting is, thus, finding a story with interesting characters and no clear ending to the case.

Another characteristic where podcasting truly excels is in its ability to provide "extra material, divergence, and update, as fast as the producers can mix and upload it" (Hancock & McMurtry 2018,

86). This allows podcasts to update on cases almost instantly, whereas radio and television have to fit programs into broadcast scheduling (86). Not only can podcasts update their listeners immediately, but they also seek to engage audiences as much as possible into the universe of the show. As Boling and Hull (2018) explain: "True crime podcasts typically maintain extremely detailed websites, posting court documents, case files, and photos of evidence and people related to the case. As a result of offering a variety of ways to engage with podcast hosts, true crime podcasts have cultivated a very participatory online audience" (106). This way of engaging the audience, furthermore, allows the audience to participate in the investigation and even double-check the work of podcasters (106). As Wrather (2016) furthermore concludes: "This particular study of podcast fan interactions and the texts (podcasts, interactive spaces and fan creations) shows how participation and interest flow between the podcast creators and their audiences work together to create a rich, complex community" (46).

Podcasts are not only characterized by the ability to create material for the audiences to engage with, but also the way that audiences interact with the podcast in question. Radio is a medium that does not require its listeners to be fully absorbed into its universe, but listeners can do something else at the same time; for example, domestic tasks (Berry 2016, 12). Radio is, therefore, often considered an "aural wallpaper to set a mood or provide accompaniment to routine tasks" (12). Contrary, podcasts require their audiences to pay attention in order for them to follow the storytelling in the podcast (Lindgren 2016, 27). Even though radio has been a medium that was consumed through headphones, and still can be, it is in its current state mostly heard through speakers either in the home or in the car (Douglas 2004, 3). Podcasting, however, makes use of the intimacy that can be created through headphones. Mia Lindgren (2016) explains the intimacy created through headphones as a way to emphasize "the individual's experience of listening to a conversation with a friend" (27). The intimacy created is the product of personal narration through the podcasting medium and stories told here are "unlike stories produced for screens where emotions are acted out in visual form, audio stories (readily available on smartphones) explore our lives through sounds and spoken words, intimately whispered into our ears" (24). This explains why so many podcast creators employ this type of personalized and subjective storytelling, as it is "intrinsically linked to the intimate nature of the audio medium" (24). However, headphones alone do not create the intimacy found in the podcasting medium. Berry (2016) argues that the space, podcasts use to tell stories, is different from that of radio; there are more freedom and no constraints in terms of fitting into a specific broadcasting linear process (9). Furthermore, the fact that audience members choose a specific podcast lets the production behind the podcast know that listeners have actively chosen that podcast over others (McHugh 2016, 72).

As well as radio throughout the years started catering to smaller audiences that wanted to listen to a specific format, so is podcasting accommodating to niche audiences (Berry 2016, 11). Nyre (2015) calls it "the for-anyone-interested structure" (283) and explains that "podcasters can be said to address only those people interested in the topic at hand" (283). However, as podcasting is growing in popularity and development, it is moving into the mainstream market (Bonini 2015, 27). Podcasting is especially moving into the commercial market. It is not shifting away from niche content, but on the other hand, the audience is becoming larger (27), though still, an audience fragmented into different genres and niches of the medium. A larger audience, furthermore, means that the economic side of podcasting is changing; it has now become a commercial market, "where it may sell itself (through crowdfunding) or audiences (through embedded advertising or "toll podcasting")" (27-28). However, advertising on podcasts are host-read (McHugh 2016, 75), and has often been considered of higher value than advertising broadcasted in radio as "The hosts are often right in your ear, and there's no quick way to change the station, like on a radio. Even scrolling past an ad takes more effort than it's worth. What if you skip ahead too far?" (Bonini 2015, 27). In the "second age of podcasting," the podcasting medium has, therefore, become an economically structured medium with sponsorships, advertisements, crowdfunding, infomercials, and more (27).

Hancock and McMurtry (2018) further argue for the importance of visibility within podcasting. Even though aurality is the most crucial aspect of podcasting, it is not only an aural medium, as "visibility plays an important role within podcasting, with website imagery, logos and show/episode 'posters' compromising integral aspects of a podcast's reception (89). They (2018) continue: "Only be appropriating the podcast's audio-visual properties and creating a multi-sensory, multi-platform narrative, may the story function adequately" (91). Not only does the visibility aspect allow the audience to immerse themselves further and entirely in the podcast's story, but they are allowed "to double-check, study and dissect, such materials, audio-visual podcast narratives coax acts of armchair detective-work and interactivity, as listeners not only discuss and argue the various podcasts' mysteries, but, on fan forums like Reddit, work collaboratively to solve them" (93). Hancock and McMurtry (2018) write the following about the podcast *Serial*: "*Serial* established a narrative style which was informed by, and exploratory of, podcast media identity, and its properties of mobility, fragmentation, and integrated multi-platforming" (83). They here comment on the properties of the podcasting identity as being mobile, fragmented, and integrating multi-platforms, which aligns with being part of convergence culture as it is explained earlier. John Sullivan (2018) further argues that "the key benefits of podcasts over traditional broadcast media are their portability and their ability to time-shift other

forms of media (such as radio broadcasts)" (38). What makes podcasting fall into the category of convergence culture is "its availability, convenience and near ubiquity thanks to global adoption of mobile smartphones" (39). At the same time, the integration of multiple platforms, creating a universe for the podcast, also aligns well with the concepts of convergence culture (Hancock and McMurtry 2018, 93). As Berry (2006) explains, podcasting is a converged medium that brings together "audio, the web, and portable media devices" (144).

Furthermore, podcasting has the ability to emotionally involve listeners in its universe (Berry 2018, 27), and the immersion factor leads people to participate at different platforms and on different levels (Berry 2006, 144). Wrather (2016) builds on Jenkins' argument (2008) about the convergence of new technologies allowing "content to through many different channels and assume many different forms at the point of reception" (11) and states that "this can be seen in the interactions, relationships and bonding between podcast producers, audiences and communities across many forms of media beyond the episodes themselves (45-46). Berry (2006), furthermore, argues that "there can be few media forms where producers of work communicate so freely with each other and persuade the listener to seek out the work of others" (152). Not only do podcast hosts and producers promote each other's shows, but they also appear as guests on other shows, for example, the hosts of *My Favorite Murder* guest-starring on *The Murder Squad* (Apple Podcasts 2020).

When podcasting first arrived in 2005, people presumed it was a passing fad or would remain a small niche medium within the mediascape. Today, proving such critics wrong, podcasting has gone mainstream, and 51 percent of Americans have listened to a podcast (Winn 2020). The most downloaded podcast is still, to this day, *Serial,* and before its launch in 2014, only 27 percent of Americans had listened to a podcast (Goldberg 2018). When the true crime genre met the podcasting medium, they mutually influenced each other's developments. We might call this process "genre-medium coevolution," a term coined by Joyce (2018) to describe "the co-development of a genre and new narrative platform through a symbiotic relationship that promotes both" (10). An early example of this process can be found in André Bazin's book *What is Cinema vol 2* (2005), in which he argues that the Western is the essence of cinema and that it is the only genre whose origins are almost identical with those of the cinema itself (142-143). Joyce's process of genre-medium coevolution suggests that a medium benefits from taking on a genre that is considered low-culture, such as the Western, as they are usually accompanied by fewer conventions and structures. It allows the medium to have artistic freedom as people have fewer expectations and preconceptions about the genre (Joyce 2018, 100).

Joyce compares the coevolutionary process of cinema and the Western to a more contemporary case, namely the connection between the post-apocalyptic genre and transmedia storytelling (10). Transmedia storytelling is a medium for telling one story across multiple platforms, and the post-apocalyptic genre is new and amenable and, therefore, able to adapt to the distinctive qualities of the platform (10). Joyce argues that the romantic comedy would be challenging to turn into a video game, for example, as it is constrained by conventions, whereas "the post-apocalyptic provides a low-culture genre of recent vintage that game designers are free to develop in ways that suit their Platform" (2018, 100). What exactly is it about the true crime genre that blends so well with podcasting? In the following, we will analyze two of the most popular podcasts of all time, namely *Serial* and *My Favorite Murder*. The analysis is structured around three categories: Narration, form, and reception. The different categories will focus on key terms from the theory section, including true crime genre characteristics, serialization, participatory culture, key features of podcasting, and more.

3. *Serial*

3.1 About *Serial*

The first season of *Serial* investigates the murder of Hae Min Lee, a high school student who disappeared in 1999 in Baltimore and was found dead in Leakin Park in the following months. Adnan Syed, Hae Min Lee's ex-boyfriend, was arrested and convicted of the murder (Bruzzi 2016, 271). This is the case that journalist Sarah Koenig is trying to make sense of throughout the entire season (Serial n.d.a), which is described on their website as follows:

> Sarah Koenig sorted through thousands of documents, listened to trial testimony and police interrogations, and talked to everyone she could find who remembered what happened between Adnan Syed and Hae Min Lee. She discovered that the trial covered up a far more complicated story than the jury – or the public – ever got to hear. The high school scene, the shifting statements to police, the prejudices, the sketchy alibis, the scant forensic evidence - all of it leads back to the most basic questions: How can you know a person's character? How can you tell what they're capable of? In Season One of Serial she looks for answers (Serial n.d.b).

The season consists of 12 episodes, ranging in length between approximately 30 to 60 minutes, in which Koenig dives into the case and all of its layers. She conducts interviews with people who have central roles in the case, including several of Adnan's relatives and friends and potential witnesses in the case (Serial n.d.b). Moreover, Koenig continuously converses with Adnan himself over the phone, who plays an essential part in the podcast. The purpose of the podcast is not necessarily to solve the case, but merely to tell "one story – a true story – over the course of a season" (Serial n.d.a).

Serial became a hit overnight and "was downloaded by millions of listeners, who followed weekly episodes" (Lindgren 2016, 28). It was launched on October 3, 2014, and according to Apple, it went global as the "fastest podcast ever to reach over 5 million downloads" (Roberts 2014). Boling and Hull (2018) state that "in 2016, over a year after the final episode of season one aired, there had been more than 80 million downloads" (92). So even though the last episode of season one aired December 18, 2014, "listeners continue to participate in online discussions, new people engage with old episodes, updates are released" (McCracken 2017, 1) leading to the season being downloaded about 175 million times by 2017 (Spangler 2017). The podcast ranked number one on iTunes even before it debuted and remained on top for several weeks (Larson 2014). Outside of America, it also gained immense popularity and was the top podcast in several countries, including Canada, the U.K., Australia, and in the top 10 in Germany, South Africa, and India (Gamerman 2014). Moreover, *Serial* was the first-ever podcast to win the Peabody Award, a prestigious award that recognizes excellence in TV, radio, and online media (BBC 2015). It also won other major awards for broadcasting, including duPont-Columbia, Scripps Howard, and Edward R. Murrow (Serial n.d.a). All 12 episodes can be accessed through *Serial's* website and on digital platforms such as Soundcloud, YouTube (Berry 2015, 170), Apple's podcast app, Google Podcasts, Stitcher, Pandora and RadioPublic (Serial n.d.a).

As the show is accessed for free on various platforms, the producers have turned to advertising as a means of financing the show, and each episode starts and ends with a commercial. When *Serial* was first released, it was sponsored by MailChimp for "a projected 300.000 downloads", but after season one ended, "the producers spliced new ads into the episodes of season 1 for subsequent listeners" to keep the show updated as well as contributing to further revenue (McCracken 2017, 66). In the second season of *Serial,* the advertising strategy is made more effective in order for the audience to keep listening throughout the commercials by letting the preview of the next episode succeed the commercial (66). The podcast's host, Sarah Koenig, works for the radio and podcast program *This American Life*, which is a "well-known, much loved, and highly respected brand" (174). The program heavily promoted *Serial* on multiple platforms (174), and *Serial's* association with *This American Life* is

considered one of the causes for its instant popularity (Berry 2015, 174). *Serial* undoubtedly was able to leverage popularity from the fact that its creators were already established and renowned in the industry, which has also helped other podcasts gain prominence, such as *S-Town* (2017), and the following two seasons of *Serial* (2015–2016; 2018). Alongside association with *This American Life* comes experience from a program that generates hundreds of stories that uses "an organizational storytelling structure that has been applied to *Serial,* albeit over a longer narrative. If nothing else, *Serial* has set a benchmark for quality—one which has been widely seized upon by other" (Berry 2015, 174). Moreover, the podcast was released at a time when the true crime genre was prevailing and spreading into new media platforms, and *Serial* is considered a pioneer in true crime podcasting today (Boling 2019, 162).

3.2 Narration

Besides its association with a well-established program, its high production value, and its intriguing and original storyline, another important factor in *Serial's* immense popularity is its host, Sarah Koenig, and her subjective narrative style (Fang 2015). She has formerly worked for *ABC News* and *New York Times* in Russia and covered State House Politics for both the *Concord Monitor* and the *Baltimore Sun* before she switched to radio and became a producer on *This American Life*. On switching from print to radio, Koenig mentions how she prefers the more collaborative approach to journalism that characterizes radio. In an interview with *The Chicago Maroon,* she talks about how radio sparked an excitement in her and explains how even though she loved working at newspapers, "her heart was never really in the stories" (Fang 2015). Her passion for the field has borne fruit, and in 2006, she won a Peabody Award for her work on "Habeas Schmabeas" (Jewish Women's Archive n.d.) – an episode of *This American Life* that covered Guantanamo detainees and the War on Terror (This American Life 2006). Today, Koenig has become a household name due to the rise of *Serial,* and people around the world recognize her voice.

As she started covering criminal cases, such as *Serial,* it sparked an interest in her, and she became involved in her work to a greater extent than before (Fang 2015). In the first episode of *Serial,* Koenig explains how she first heard about the case from Rabia Chaudry, a friend of Adnan's family:

> Rabia was writing to me because way back when I used to be a reporter for the Baltimore Sun and she'd come across some stories I've written about a well-known defense attorney in Baltimore who'd been disbarred for mishandling client money. That attorney was the

same person who defended Adnan. Her last major trial, in fact, Rabia told me she thought the attorney botched the case (E1).

Furthermore, Koenig herself explains her motivation for creating the podcast and why she fell for this exact case later in the episode: "If you're wondering why I went so nuts on this story versus some other murder case, the best I can explain is this is the one that came to me. It wasn't halfway across the world or even next door. It came right to my lap. And if I could help get to the bottom of it, shouldn't I try?" (E1). Koenig's motivations behind *Serial* can also be explained in terms of Punnett's (2018) codes of true crime genre characteristics. The vocative code points towards the shift from an objective to a more advocative position of the narrator (98). In this case, Koenig does not take on an advocative role to necessarily prove Adnan's innocence, but rather to bring attention towards the case and its many legal malpractices. Koenig herself explains her motivation as a duty: "If I could help get to the bottom of it, shouldn't I try?". Whether it is her duty towards Adnan, Hae, or the general public, is unclear, but something about the case made her feel obligated to investigate the case.

The fact that Koenig explains her motivation behind doing the podcast implies a level of subjective involvement in the case. As mentioned earlier, the true crime genre is often characterized by subjectivism and an apparent personal presence from the narrator. This is usually due to the emotionally charged subject matter of the genre that revolves around real-life people's tragedies. When a narrator gets involved in a true crime case, the stakes are much higher than what is usually the case in general journalistic content. When Koenig decided to get involved in Adnan's case, it was on the basis of the fact that she could potentially uncover the truth. It is an immense responsibility to take on, and throughout all 12 episodes, Koenig attempts to pass on some of that responsibility to the listeners. Rather than merely stating the facts of the case, she continuously shares her doubts and thereby invites listeners to make up their own minds about the case. An example of this is in the first episode when Koenig states: "The second thing which you can't miss about Adnan is that he has giant brown eyes like a dairy cow. That's what prompts my most idiotic lines of inquiry: could someone who looks like that really strangle his girlfriend? Idiotic, I know" (E1). Another example comes later in the episode after Koenig finishes an interview: " But what I took away from the visit was, somebody is lying here. Maybe Adnan really is innocent. But what if he isn't? What if he did do it, and he's got all these good people thinking he didn't?" (E1). Additionally, in episode five, Koenig shares her doubts about the entire case with the listeners: "There are parts of Jay's story that make no sense. Where it seems like there must have been more going on than he is saying. But here is what's also the truth: you

can say the same thing about Adnan's story too" (E5). Rather than simply passing on facts and information to the audiences, she invites them into her train of thoughts but leaves it up to each listener to make up their own conclusions, and whereas most journalists take on the role of passive mediator, Koenig participates as an active character in the story.

By choosing to tell this story in an auditory medium, Koenig creates an intimate space that is shared with the listeners. As most listeners consume podcasts through headphones, the only thing that connects them to the story is the sound of the narrator talking into the ear of the listener (Lindgren 2016, 24), which creates an intimate relationship between the two (24). This intimacy can be found in the second episode, where Koenig tells the listeners about the experience of talking on the phone with an inmate: "That's the prison phone system telling us that our time was up. This happens every half an hour. It surprises me every time because I often sort of forget where he is" (E2). The real story of *Serial* is not centered around Adnan or what happened back in 1999. It instead becomes the story of Koenig herself and her current investigation to find out the truth, and as listeners, you are given the role of co-conspirator. The intimacy between Koenig and listeners is further enforced through her casual use of language, and how she brings her personality and humor into the narration. This is illustrated when Koenig is interviewing Rabia and her younger brother Saad, who is also the best friend of Adnan. They are talking about how young people sometimes have a secret side to themselves that they keep from their family:

> Saad: So I was in the same boat. My parents, my sister, they didn't know about this at all. Right now, more than 10 years later, she's finding out. I know, I'll admit. On one side, my family thinks I'm a virgin. But on the other hand, I play-- you know.
> Rabia: --way too much.
> Saad: But it's the truth.
> Sarah Koenig: TMI, TMI, TMI.

Another example of this can be found in episode two, where an interview between Koenig and a girl named Adjali plays. Adjali describes Adnan in the following: "He was cute, (laughs) and charming! He's just a very sweet guy. Um, very flirtatious", and then Koenig adds as a voiceover comment to the interview: "Sorry, Saad. She's not talking about you" (E2). Koenig also makes her humorous and playful nature shine through in episode three, when she is describing one of the former suspects in the case: "And here's the part of the story where you'll understand why I'm not using names, Mr. S is a

streaker. And not the frat party kind. The freaky kind" (E3). In episode eight, she is talking to one of the jurors on Adnan's trial, who mentions that "we all have somebody in our life like that… who if something goes wrong, you think you can call to help you". To this statement, Koenig once again resorts to humor, when she replies: "When you just said that, I just did a very quick scan of all of my contacts in my family, and I feel like I can't think of one. They're all so useless!" (E8).

Besides incorporating humor into here narration, Koenig also tends to describe places and people using subjective and personalized words that come off as authentic to how she might talk in a more private setting as well. When describing Baltimore County, she uses the word 'badass': "It's where a lot of middle class and working class people go, many immigrants included, to get their kids out of the badass city. Though the badass city is close by" (E1), or when Koenig defines Rabia's lack of attention to details as 'loosey-goosey': "I later fact-checked all these accolades, of course, and learned that Rabia was mostly right, though she sometimes gets a little loosey-goosey with the details" (E1). When Koenig meets Rabia in episode one, she describes her not only by using descriptive words but also by words that are subjective and that discloses her own opinion of Rabia: "Rabia is 40. She's short, and she's got a beautiful round face framed by hijab. She's adorable looking, but you definitely shouldn't mess with her. She's very smart and very tough, and she could crush you" (E1). By using informal and impressionistic language, and by letting her personality shine through, Koenig establishes an intimate narrative style that allows listeners to experience a connection with her, as she comes across as inviting and approachable. Stella Bruzzi (2016) refers to Koenig's causal language and choices of words as 'chatty,' suggesting that she is engaging with audiences in the same way that someone engages with a friend (273). Bruzzi uses an example where Koenig recalls a phone call between her and Adnan, where she asked him about the day of Hae's disappearance: "The problem is, when you ask Adnan to go back and tell his version of what happened that day, to refute Jay's story, everything becomes a lot mushier" (E1). The word 'mushier' is from Bruzzi's perspective, a classic 'Koenig word': "At once informal, chatty and highly suggestive" (273). In an article in *Vulture* magazine, journalist Alice Bolin recalls discussing *Serial* with a friend and recommended that they should watch *Dateline*. The friend replied: "Yeah, but *Dateline* isn't hosted by my friend Sarah" (Bolin 2018), illustrating that the intimate relationship that listeners forge with Koenig throughout the podcast can even amount to a feeling of friendship.

Several times throughout *Serial*, Koenig directly addresses the listeners. Rather than letting them passively consume the podcast, she involves the listeners and invites them to participate in her investigation. She thereby conveys the impression that she genuinely values the listeners' opinions and

views, as when consulting a friend for advice. According to Bruzzi (2016), Koenig's intimate and engaging style ensures that listeners remain involved in the case, and emphasizes that their role is important (272). An example of this is in episode one when Koenig is talking to Adnan on the phone about his motivations for killing Hae:

> Adnan: No one ever has been able to provide any shred of evidence that I had anything but friendship toward her, like love and respect for her. That's at the end of the day, man. The only thing I can ever say is, man, I had no reason to kill her.
> Koenig: He's adamant about this. You can hear it, right? He's staunch (E1).

Koenig interprets Adnan's behavior as unrelenting in this particular situation, but by adding "you can hear it, right?" it implies that she is unsure and, therefore, seeking the advice of the listeners. By that, the listening experience becomes active rather than passive, which corresponds with podcasting being an interactive medium and Shirky's argument that the passive consumer is dead. In episode 10, Koenig addresses the audience, in regard to a conversation with Adnan's mother about the proclaimed anti-muslim behavior of the police in the case. Koenig is not convinced and states: "You can hear me not believing her, right? The notion that the cops and prosecutors, in this case, were driven by anti-Muslim feeling, by racism, and by racism alone" (E10). Koenig recounts speaking to a girl that lived next door to Jay, the other suspect and proclaimed accomplice of Adnan, about how the police never interviewed her: "Laura didn't go to Woodlawn. She didn't know Adnan. She'd known the neighbor boy since they were little, they were friendly. Laura said she never spoke to police about this; they never questioned her. So this sounds really, really bad, right?" (E6). Again, Koenig brings the listeners in play and invites them to participate in the investigation actively. As Jenkins explains, audiences today are less like passive consumers and more like a creative community (Jenkins et al. 2016, 1). Koenig utilizes audiences' want to engage actively in their media consumption by addressing them directly, which ultimately constructs a dedicated and engaged audience.

One of the characteristics of true crime narratives is emotionally charged content, which is partly due to the dark nature of the genre, and partly due to the fact that sensationalism remains one of the genre's most defining features (Wiltenburg 2004, 1379). Emotive content alone is not necessarily sufficient in constructing a tragically or emotionally charged atmosphere but depends upon the narrative voice and tone that the narrator employs (BBC n.d.). Even though Koenig speaks in a casual and light-hearted tone and frequently makes jokes and humorous remarks, there are several situations

in which her tone changes. This change is evident in episode nine, where Koenig describes Hae to the listeners: "About Hae, I can tell you only what I have heard from non-family members. That she was cheerful and light and funny… That she could charm you without trying. That she was a good friend to her friends. She took in their problems and their pain and tried to help them if she could" (E9). After this description, she is silent for ten seconds, while melancholic music plays. Listeners can potentially interpret this moment of silence as a gesture of respect and commemoration for Hae. Similarly, Koenig's tone is more somber as she recalls Hae's mother speaking in the courtroom: "Her pain throughout must have been abject. On this day, through a translator, Hae's mother speaks. She tells the court about her daughter. She tells the court about a Korean proverb that says, when parents die, they're buried in the ground, but when a child dies, you bury the child in your heart" (E9). Neither taking time describing Hae, commemorating her or recounting the words of her mother have any particular function in means of furthering the investigation, but Koenig still prioritizes to incorporate it in the podcast. Sequences like these provide another layer of emotions to the podcast, which accentuates the personal experiences of its characters (Lindgren 2016, 24).

Koenig's emotional involvement adds to the relationship between her and the audiences, as one cannot help but relate to her on a deeper and more personal level. Additionally, this emotionally charged content allows audiences to relate to other characters in the podcast. For example, when Koenig talks about the struggles of Adnan's family: "I can't say what would truly be easier for his family. Knowing their son had murdered someone or feeling as if he'd been taken from them unjustly" (E9). Julie Snyder, the executive producer of *Serial*, compares how listeners are invested in the people that the podcast revolves around in the same way that fans of popular drama series are often invested in its main characters (Lafrance 2014). This was always the intention of its creators, and Ira Glass, the editorial advisor on *Serial*, explains that "our hope is to give you the same experience you get from a great HBO or Netflix series, where you get caught up in the characters, and the thing unfolds week after week… like *House of Cards* or *Game of Thrones*, but you can enjoy it while you're driving" (Maerz 2017). Besides content, there are more ways that a podcast like *Serial* actively draws audiences in and keeps them hooked. Fiction benefits from narrative techniques that are tailored to create suspense and withholding audiences' attention, and the creators of *Serial* have found ways to utilize those in a true crime setting.

3.3 Form

Serial consists of one narrative arc in which the storyline is continued throughout 12 episodes. At its launch, the *Serial* website stated: "We follow a plot and characters wherever they take us. We won't know what happens at the end until we get there, not long before you get there with us" (Haugtvedt 2017, 7). According to Erica Haugtvedt, this introduction grooms listeners to expect a story with a plot and characters (7), which is reinforced by Koenig's comparison of the case to a typical Shakespeare play:

> I read a few newspaper clips about the case, looked at a few trial records and on paper the case was like a Shakespearean mash-up. Young lovers from different worlds, fording their families, secret assignations, jealousy, suspicion and honor besmirched. The villain not a Moor exactly but a Muslim all the same. And a final act of murderous revenge and the main stage: a regular old high school across the street from a 7/11 (E1).

According to the actantial model, a model used to analyze the roles of the characters of a story, the main and most essential character of a narrative is the subject (Jensen and Højer 50). Every narrative contains a subject and an object, and the subject covets the object. In the case of *Serial,* Adnan might initially appear to be the most essential character, since the entire podcast revolves around him and his alleged crime. However, in the light of the actantial model, Koenig is the actual subject, who chases the object, which in this case is the truth (50). She introduces the first episode by saying: "Here's the case I've been working on" (E1). This statement clarifies that without Koenig's pursuit of the case, there would be no current narrative. The podcast is centered around Koenig and based on her point of view exclusively.

According to Franks (2016), the investigator takes center stage in true crime narratives (245), correspondingly to the way that Koenig leads the narrative in *Serial.* She is the omniscient narrator that possesses all knowledge, and it is entirely up to her to share that knowledge with the listeners. They, therefore, only know what Koenig wants them to know, and she holds back vital information throughout the 12 episodes. An example of this can be found in episode five: "Jay also mentions another call around this time. This call is incredibly important and I will talk more about it in another episode, I swear. But for right now, what you need to know is…" (E5). In episode eight, Koenig once again demonstrates her control over the audiences: "I asked Stella the same thing, I ask anyone who has come in contact with Jay. And by that, I don't mean his plea deal, but he pleads guilty to accessory

after the fact in a first-degree murder, testified against Adnan, and got no prison time as a result. I'll talk about that in another episode" (E8). Narrative techniques, such as withholding information, are commonly employed by creators to sustain the curiosity of the audience. Even though true crime narratives recount past events, it is not unlikely for creators to use present tense in the retelling (Bruzzi 2016, 253). According to Bruzzi, rather than accounting the events retrospectively, the story is told with "all the heightened urgency – the cliffhangers, the contradictions and twists, and turns – of a trial narrative unfolding in the present" (252). These narrative techniques, like when Koenig withholds information, "makes spectatorship an active as opposed to passive activity, which in turn conveys both urgency and presentness to the viewer" (253).

One of the most effective narrative techniques to keep audiences engaged is cliffhangers. Each episode of *Serial* ends with a cliffhanger that either contains fragments of information or Koenig asking a series of questions. The pilot episode is the most crucial, as it is the one that determines whether or not a listener will get hooked. Therefore, the cliffhanger of the first episode of *Serial* is different from the others, as it not only lifts the curtain on the following episode but the entire season:

> Coming up this season on Serial.
>
> Male Speaker: I think that there are other people involved. I think maybe he was set up somehow.
>
> Female Speaker: Clearly you could tell something was going on that wasn't good. I mean, it was just strange behavior for anybody.
>
> Female Speaker: Basically threatened me, like, you know what happened to Hae. This is what's going to happen to you. That's how I felt that day.
>
> Sarah Koenig: What are you thinking right now? You have the same smile I do.
>
> Female Speaker: I'm literally thinking, like, could he have gone crazy?
>
> Male Speaker: Jay told me he was being blackmailed by Adnan. Because Adnan knew that Jay couldn't go to the police.
>
> Rabia: Like if this works, every question we've had for the past eight months, he knows it.
>
> Male Speaker: Yeah, I mean, who else did it? They're running out of suspects. (E1).

The cliffhanger includes several clips from interviews with different essential characters of the podcast, but these characters are yet unknown to the listeners. When hearing all these fragments of information, like: "Basically threatened me, like, you know what happened to Hae. This is what's going to happen

to you. That's how I felt that day," listeners are going to wonder, not only who is speaking, but also, who is threatening the speaker, who knows what happened to Hae, what is going to happen and to whom? Listeners can find out the answers to all these questions by merely listening to the rest of the episodes. The cliffhanger from episode two is distinctly different but nonetheless intriguing. Koenig sums up all the questions that she, and the listeners, are facing after all the new information that has been laid out in the first two episodes:

> So, he reverses himself. Why would he do that? Why would he tell the first cop he's expecting a ride, and then once it's clear Hae is missing change his story? Maybe the girl's thinking of a different day. Or maybe Adnan misspoke when he talked to that first cop. Or maybe he did ask Hae for a ride at some point that day, but he's forgotten. Or maybe he's lying. I'm not a detective, but I consider this a red flag. What I don't know is - is this a teeny tiny red flag like he just got confused and so what? Or is this like a great big flapping in the breeze red flag? Like maybe he's hiding something. More next week (E2).

In episode 11, the second to last episode, the cliffhanger is short but straightforward: "At this point he wrote, "It doesn't matter to me how your story portrays me, guilty or innocent. I just want it to be over." It will be. Next time. Final episode of Serial" (E11). Even though Koenig never actually solves the case, the cliffhanger leads up to the story's grand finale and suggests that a closing verdict over Adnan will fall in the following and final episode.

The anticipation that cliffhangers cause is vital in creating a dedicated and engaged audience. This is part of what Mittell (2015) refers to as the serial experience in complex TV (27), which can also be applied to the podcasting medium. The serial experience lies in the temporal gaps between episodes, where the audiences' imaginations can run wild and promote participatory culture. Seriality is ultimately key in creating and maintaining a dedicated audience that keeps coming back for more (Haugvedt 2017, 7), which is also the case in *Serial*. Koenig starts each episode by presenting the podcast as a continuing story that lives up to its name by being told in a serialized format: "From *This American Life* and *WBEZ* Chicago it's *Serial,* one story told week by week, I'm Sarah Koenig" (E1). The importance of the serialized format is enforced throughout the episodes, as Koenig urges audiences to listen to the episodes in order: "We're at episode 2. You probably heard episode 1... But if you haven't: Stop - go back to the beginning. We are telling this story in order" (E2). One of the conditions of seriality is

commonly that episodes are not released at once but week by week. So, how does an engaged listener stay occupied while waiting for the next episode?

3.4 Reception

To activate the collective intelligence of audiences, it is crucial that the story stays alive on other platforms. *Serial* has official profiles on Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and Tumblr, but especially their website has been an important factor in keeping audiences engaged. At the website, it is possible for audiences to engage with the material that Koenig uses to create the podcast, such as evidence material, affidavits, transcribed interviews, and maps of the route that Adnan allegedly drove to dispose of the body (Serial n.d.c). As a result, many listeners have become hunter-gatherers of information and actively sought out new details about the case, while waiting for new episodes. Listeners engage actively with other listeners in online forums and engage in what Jenkins calls 'collaborative problem-solving,' which is one of the different ways that participation can take form (2009, 8). Listeners meet online to share their thoughts on newly gained evidence, conspiracy theories, suspects, and more, and ultimately try to solve the case in unison. Creators of *Serial* furthermore caters to the active participation of listeners by creating a newsletter that they can sign up to and get notifications about the podcast and Adnan's case. After the podcast's final episode, *Serial* created three additional update episodes during Adnan's hearing to keep listeners informed about the developments in the case. In 2019, a new season of the podcast *Undisclosed* was released with the main focus of uncovering evidence to free Adnan. The season was co-hosted by Rabia, Adnan's family friend, who told PBS that fans of *Serial* are "still intrigued, they still want to know more. They want *Serial* to do updates, and *Serial* isn't. So we will" (Robinson 2015). Rather than keeping the same neutral investigative course as *Serial*, Rabia's podcast is biased and chases evidence that will prove Adnan's innocence.

It is important to note that Koenig never directly encourages audiences to seek out information or to act as desktop detectives, and neither does she urge listeners to support the podcast financially. Podcast hosts requesting financial support from listeners, promoting other platforms, or urging audiences to recommend their podcast, is not unusual, as their survival often depends on it. Independent podcasts, such as *Let's Not Meet*, commonly rely on listeners paying for memberships in order to survive. The host, Andrew Tate, promotes his Patreon, a membership platform for creators to run subscription content to fans who wish to support his work (Patreon n.d.). The reason why Koenig does not do this in *Serial* might partly be due to the fact that it is not a necessity, and partly because she is trying to preserve a certain degree of professionalism. Whether it is on account of its

association with *This American Life* or perhaps an attempt for Koenig to preserve her journalistic integrity, is unknown, but it is clear that any type of participation from the audience is spontaneous. Koenig often emphasizes the importance of respecting the privacy of her subjects, and even states that after multiple attempts to reach Hae's family, she ultimately respects their decision not to participate. The fact that listeners participate actively without Koenig urging them to, suggests that the fictional narrative techniques, such as cliffhangers and seriality, are actually working.

Some podcast hosts do, however, urge their audiences to locate information for them. For example, the podcast *Jensen and Holes: The Murder Squad* regularly ask listeners to help solve their cases. On their website, it is stated that "you have been watching and listening to stories about violent crimes and investigations for years. Now is the time to put all of that knowledge and wits to good use to actually help solve a crime. Welcome to the Murder Squad" (The Murder Squad n.d.). Each episode contains an assignment for listeners to carry out as well as a code of conduct. For example, in episode 38, the assignment is as follows: "For this week's assignment, we want you to share information about Brittany's case. Her killer may still be in Tulsa, or he could be thousands of miles away. The case is solvable. There is DNA. If you have any information, no matter how small, please contact us" (The Murder Squad 2019). According to McCracken (2017), thousands of fans have taken on the role as desktop detectives, and engage in "forensic "drilling," in which they go deeper and deeper into the evidence, the facts presented, and the inconsistencies, posting this work online as active participants in the narrative" (56). An example of desktops detectives that drill for evidence is from the Netflix show *Don't F**k with Cats,* where an online community of animal activists catches a Canadian murderer after he posts a video of himself killing two kittens online (Harrison 2019).

Some of the different ways that listeners of *Serial* participate is by creating their own material related to the podcast on websites and social media, such as fan fiction, analytical videos, parodies on YouTube, and more (McCracken 2017, 56). Reddit is a social media website that is frequently used by online communities to engage in discussions about their favorite media texts. These networked communities are referred to as subreddits, and according to an article from BBC, *Serial*'s subreddit, "A place to discuss Serial: The Podcast," has attracted more than half a million users (Wendling et al. 2014). Similarly, listeners of *Serial* have been highly active in reviewing and rating the podcast on different platforms, and the majority of comments are overwhelmingly positive: "Serial is the gold standard for what podcasts of informational stories should aspire to be. It's just so well done! The stories keep you riveted and wanting more - Jhbemmer" (Podbay). On the Stitcher platform, the podcast is reviewed as "the true crime podcast that started it all! Sarah is what podcasters should strive

to be" and "the podcast that started my addiction to podcasts. Serial is addictive to listen to, and Sarah Koenig makes it that much better… I still have yet to find a podcast that intrigued me quite like season one of Serial" (Stitcher n.d.).

According to Haugtvedt (2017), the discussions that listeners of *Serial* are engaging in online can run into trouble, as they sometimes end up taking things too far. Fans of the show have realized how easy it is to access full names, social media accounts, and other private information about the people involved in the case, and many have taken on the role of desktop detectives to help solve the crime (8). Haugtvedt explains that the sometimes reckless behavior of fans is a result of the fictional nature of the podcasts, which inspires dedicated fandom: "Serial links episodes to each other through the curiosity of speculation. When the podcast's fans continue that speculation beyond idle chatter online and desire to continue the story by investigating it themselves, then the ethical ramifications of seriality are amplified for the podcast" (8). Mike Wendling et al. (2014) report that "personal details including Facebook pictures of key witness Jay… have been posted on the *Daily Mail* website". They furthermore reveal that some fans have found criminal records of witnesses and shared personal information on different social media platforms (2014). Reddit has rules against 'doxing,' "providing personal information and documents about people who wish to remain private," but in an online forum that is overrun by contributions, it is difficult to enforce (Haugtvedt 2017, 8). At some point, someone went on the subreddit and claimed to be the younger brother of Hae and posted a plea asking people to leave the family alone that received a lot of attention, both condolences, but also people doubting the person's identity (Reddit 2015). To this day, six years after the podcast was released, *Serial's* subreddit is still active, and people continue to provide their perspectives on the case (Reddit 2016).

Serial has become a staple in true crime podcasting and has established a set of conventions for the genre. Subjective narration, intimate creator-listener relationship, seriality, and cliffhangers are seemingly essential ingredients in creating and maintaining a dedicated and engaged niche audience. Many creators have subsequently imitated the narrative techniques and form of *Serial*, proving the conventions to be effective, such as *Up and Vanished* (2016-), *Dirty John* (2017), *Dr. Death* (2018), *Broken Harts* (2018-2019), *Bear Brook* (2018-2019) and more. These podcasts all share similar topics, narrative style, and form, and the question is, how long the conventional true crime podcasting genre will continue to entertain. Conventions can sometimes go stale, and a genre can successfully reinvent itself and regain relevance by breaking traditional genre patterns to surprise audience expectations. The true crime genre is once again displaying its ability to reinvent itself, which is illustrated in the podcast, *My Favorite Murder* (2016-). This podcast rejects the premise established by *Serial* and thereby falls outside

of category (Devitt 2004, 86), ultimately forming a niche within the true crime genre. A niche that the two hosts refer to as true crime comedy (Favorite Murder n.d.). *My Favorite Murder* actively goes against genre conventions that have proved effective in attracting audiences, yet remains immensely popular. The following section will examine how.

4. *My Favorite Murder*

4.1 About *My Favorite Murder*

My Favorite Murder is a weekly true crime podcast hosted by Karen Kilgariff and Georgia Hardstark. In every episode, the two hosts each select and recount a true crime story, which commonly revolves around a murder, a serial killer, or a survival story. As one host tells her story, the other host makes comments, asks questions, and reacts expressively. Besides the two stories, the rest of the episode is made up of casual and spontaneous conversation between Kilgariff and Hardstark. Episodes are relatively long, sometimes up to two hours in length, which may be the result of a lack of planning and how their conversations often tend to wander off-topic. During episodes, they will come about topics unrelated to true crime ranging from "where to go on holiday to what to do if you suddenly find yourself caught up in a cult" (Hughes 2019). Besides their regular weekly episode, they release a weekly 'minisode,' which includes their listeners' personal hometown murder stories.

Their first episode was released in January 2016 with Feral Audio and was an immediate success, ranking number eight on the iTunes podcast chart in 2016 (iTunes 2016). In 2018, the two hosts launched their own podcast network Exactly Right in partnership with Stitcher, and are now curating a series of shows that are all tailored to fit the interests of their, at the time, 19 million monthly listeners (McDonnell-Parry 2018). Their podcasts range from popular investigators *Jensen and Holes: The Murder Squad,* who attempt to solve retired cold cases with the help of listeners, to *The Purrrcast,* which is hosted by Sara Iyer and Steven Ray Morris, who talk to cat people, "because they can't talk to their cats" (Exactly Right n.d.). Today, *My Favorite Murder* can be listened to on its website, Apple Podcast, Spotify, Stitcher, and Player FM (My Favorite Murder n.d.). The podcast is not only immensely popular in the US, but the two women have sold-out venues in Australia, Ireland, and the UK, since they started doing live shows (Hughes 2019). In 2019, Kilgariff and Hardstark made an estimated $15 million, earning them a second-place on *Forbes'* inaugural ranking of the top-earning podcasters (Shapiro 2020).

Just as *Serial*, *My Favorite Murder* has sponsorships, and the hosts are reading advertisements out loud during the podcast. The advertisements are not only shelved to the ending of the show but break

up the episodes in the same way that commercials interrupt programs on television. Listeners will know when advertisements are being brought as they are signaled by a melody, whereafter the two hosts and sometimes their sound technician is part of the commercial as well. An example of this is found in episode 73:

> Georgia: Alright Karen, food we have to do it almost every day.
>
> Kilgariff: Food, right.
>
> …
>
> Kilgariff: If it's not sushi, you gotta cook it.
>
> Hardstark: What do you do then?
>
> Kilgariff: Me? I don't know.
>
> Hardstark: Okay, well I'll tell you. You get Hello Fresh.
>
> …
>
> Steven Ray Morris: Karen, Georgia, I have to say I tried one of their new breakfast options… (E72).

By listening on sites such as Stitcher or Spotify, where listeners can acquire a premium membership, it allows you to listen without external advertisements (Shapiro 2020). Besides external advertisements, the hosts also advertise for their merchandise that is sold on their website as well as their podcast network and the podcasts launched on it. *My Favorite Murder* has established a fan club of 55,000 people, who all pay $40 annually to be able to receive exclusive episodes and access to presale tickets to live shows (Shapiro 2020). The fan club members also receive "T-shirts, message boards, and other VIP goodies" (Hawgood 2018). *My Favorite Murder* "stole the number one spot on the iTunes comedy podcast chart" after only two months of existence (Sacks 2017, 1), and by 2019, the podcast continues to appear among the top 20 podcasts on the iTunes chart (Marks 2019). In 2017, after only a year in the podcasting industry, *My Favorite Murder* had achieved four-and-a-half stars out of five on iTunes from 8,200 reviews. The podcast is also present on multiple social media platforms, with 344.000 followers on Twitter, 442.000 followers on Facebook, and 877.000 followers on Instagram (Twitter n.d.; Facebook n.d.; Instagram n.d).

4.2 Narration

The two podcast hosts have both previously worked in the entertainment industry before launching *My Favorite Murder* (MFM). According to the Exactly Right website, Hardstark has previously written for *ELLE*, Food Network and guest-starred on Comedy Central's *Drunk History*. Kilgariff is a stand-up comedian, who is well-known for her work on HBO's *Mr. Show,* for her writing on the FX series *Basket* and *The Ellen Show* (Exactly Right n.d). Whereas Koenig entered into the true crime genre with the approach of an investigative journalist, Kilgariff and Hardstark's motivation for creating MFM was purely interest-based. The two met at a Halloween party in Los Angeles in 2015 at a mutual friend's house. The women had met before, but it was not until then that they realized their shared interest in true crime cases, and according to Hardstark: "I met someone who didn't want me to shut up about murder" (Shapiro 2020). Their friendship and partnership began with a true crime story, as Kilgariff was telling a macabre story about a car crash and found that everyone was walking away from her - except Hardstark, who came running across the room to hear the story and said: "Oh my God, I need to hear every word. Tell me everything" (Fitzpatrick 2017).

The two hosts quickly bonded over a mutual fascination with true crime, which became the starting point of MFM. Neither of the hosts claims to have any expertise within the field, and according to Kilgariff, the premise of the podcast is simply "two friends telling each other a fucked-up story, [that's] essentially what the name of this podcast should be" (Fitzpatrick 2017). According to the hosts, before creating the podcast they experienced how other women would shy away from the topic of true crime in casual conversation. Kilgariff stated in an interview: "I think women believed for a long time that it was inappropriate for them to be interested in true crime. It made them judge themselves, or feel weird or ghoulish" (Barcella 2019b). Kilgariff and Hardstark are essentially two true crime fans, who found that there was no content out there that satisfied their particular needs, and therefore put matters into their own hands. Fan creators are a clear example of how the new media paradigm is increasingly blurring the line between creators and audiences, as more and more fans are creating their own content (Jenkins 2006). This is frequently seen in the podcasting industry, because of its low requirements in technology, making it possible for anyone to be part of the industry (Berry 2006, 152).

While Koenig takes on the role of investigative journalist in *Serial,* Kilgariff, and Hardstark present themselves as fangirls with motivations that can be compared to those that drive any type of online hobby community. The difference in roles and motivations create a dissimilar creator-listener relationship from what is found in *Serial*. Since the hosts of MFM present themselves as fans instead of professionals, they automatically position themselves at eye level with the listeners. As previously

mentioned, subjective involvement from the creator is quintessential of the true crime genre, however, most true crime creators manage to preserve a professional distance to the audience. In *Serial,* Koenig shares her thoughts and doubts about the case, but she always stays on topic and never actually discloses any private information about herself. The opposite can be said of the two hosts of MFM, who do not establish any boundaries between themselves and the listeners. When they started the podcast, episodes were recorded in one of the hosts' living rooms. The first episode starts off as follows:

> Kilgariff: Let's just relax into what we're about to do, which is our new podcast, My Favorite Murder.
> Hardstark: Let's get cozy and comfy and cuddle up and talk about murder.
> ...
> Hardstark: We got a fire lit, we're having some hot cocoa.
> Kilgariff: I'm swirling a brandy around over my head. No, I love this topic.
> Hardstark: I do to.
> Kilgariff: And that's why we're friends.
> ...
> Hardstark: That sounds creepy but that's who we are (E1).

One minute into the first episode, the hosts have invited listeners into their private homes, created a cozy tone, introduced their relationship as friendly rather than professional, and shared their motivation for the podcast; their love for true crime. Most listeners will find themselves able to relate to at least one aspect of the introduction. Furthermore, they set the tone of the podcast as honest and straightforward, when Hardstark states: "That sounds creepy, but that's who we are". Another example of the hosts being upfront with the audience, is illustrated as they blatantly talk about their lack of professionalism:

> Kilgariff: On this podcast, Georgia and I just kinda say the things that we think to say every week. There is not a ton of planning. There is definitely no pre-writing except for the stories we're trying to get said.
> ...

Kilgariff: Look, you're on your own. This is more of a starter - information starter kit. Now you go look stuff up.

Kilgariff: You feel beholden to do transitions like that?

Hardstark: We gotta pretend to be professional.

Kilgariff: No we don't. That's just it, we never have (E197)

The hosts never filter their conversation, which enforces the intimate tone to the podcast additionally. This is illustrated in the beginning of an episode, where they talk about burping:

Kilgariff: I just belched at Georgia while smiling and pretending that I was about to say something.

...

Hardstark: I would never censor your burps, are you kidding me? I live for them.

Kilgariff: You censor your burps though.

Hardstark: I do, because there are so many. It almost seems aggressive, you know what I mean? (E209).

Another example of how Kilgariff and Hardstark are comfortable sharing private information about their lives can be found in episode 118, when Hardstark talks about her father:

Hardstark: I already texted my dad and said: "Hey, did you know an ex-cop *laughing* in Irvine in 1986ish?"

...

Kilgariff: Where would Marty [Georgia Hardstark's father] hang out? Like a whole foods type of place.

Hardstark: Mothers, they were called mothers markets back then.

Kilgariff: Cause he is a little bit of a hippie right?

Hardstark: He is a fuckin' carrot-eating hippie. Kidding me (E118).

Hardstark is comfortable with disclosing private information about her father and is even making jokes on his behalf, adding to listeners' experience of the podcast as a space of confidentiality. Although MFM is no longer recorded in their living room, they still attempt to establish a homey and cozy tone

in the studio:

> Hardstark: That is a great podcast sweater.
>
> Kilgariff: Cosy, kinda like, it's an outfit but you don't have to commit.
>
> Hardstark: It feels like I'm in a blanket at home, but I'm in the studio where I don't live (E209).

By sharing private information about themselves, they invite listeners into their circle of trust, creating an inner circle relationship between them and the listeners. Hardstark emphasizes this point by telling audiences that "this is a safe space for you" (E1). Sara Sacks (2017) states that "MFM offers a space in which listeners can forget about taboos, stigma, and judgment and freely express their love of the true crime genre" (88). This is supported by Jenkins' concept of participatory culture (2009) in which members of an online community do not necessarily have to contribute to participate, but they must believe that they are valued and that their contributions matter (6). Both Kilgariff and Hardstark contribute to the idea of a safe space by sharing their own personal struggles with alcoholism and mental illness respectively. Hardstark frequently talks about her own struggles with anxiety and depression: "And listen, as someone with like basic, run-of-the-mill depression and anxiety, I know that the first instinct when you start taking pills and they work is that you say, "I'm fine now" and you stop taking them" (E11). By sharing their issues with millions of listeners, they help normalize topics that are otherwise taboo. Moreover, the hosts speak openly about their therapist and encourage others to get the help they need:

> Hardstark: You know how much fuckin' travel anxiety I have and how scared I get and how worried I get… My therapist says it's not codependency, its interdependency, and if it works for you it's fine.
>
> Kilgariff: That's where I found mine.
>
> Hardstark: Yeah.
>
> Kilgariff: And that's where Georgia found hers.
>
> Hardstark: Yeah. We're big on therapy, you guys. Take care of yourselves (E61).

Kilgariff speaks straightforwardly, when she shares her issues with alcohol abuse and dealing with trauma:

> When you start telling yourself stuff because you are in trauma, you're in a bad place, when you're like "everybody thinks I'm a piece of shit," if you're hearing messages like that from within your own head, you have to pause it and you have to step out and go "that could also not be true at all; everyone could love me." Because when you get into that mindset, you start making bad decisions for yourself as punishment, and you don't deserve that punishment (E149).

By creating a safe space to share their personal and intimate accounts with listeners, the hosts meet the audience at eye level. In addition, this intimacy is enforced by their choice of medium, namely podcasting, which is largely characterized as an "intimate bridging medium" that is able to eradicate boundaries between creator and listener (Llinares et al. 2018, 9-10). This demonstrates the shift from a top-down hierarchical media distribution, to a more flat and democratic structure that reflects a blurring of boundaries between the traditional roles of creators and audiences (Jenkins et al. 2013, 2; Jenkins 2006a, 6). In one of their minisodes, Hardstark reads aloud a letter from a listener, Dana Marie, who shares her struggles with anxiety: "Two years ago, Dana Marie, would never write a letter like this… Anxiety has lied to me my entire life, convinced me that I had nothing to offer, my ideas weren't valid, my hard work in vain, and my success temporary flukes" (M82). Immediately after reading the letter out loud, the hosts positively reinforce the listener's honest contribution:

> Kilgariff: I can't tell you how often my brain is like: "Stay home, lay down, don't get up".
> Hardstark: As Dana Marie is saying: "My anxiety is fuckin' lying to me", and that is 100% true.
> Kilgariff: Anxiety is a liar and it wants to, quote on quote, keep you safe (M82).

This example indicates that the intimacy from the hosts is being reciprocated by listeners, endorsing the argument that the podcast is a safe space. As a listener, when you hear your contribution read out loud in the podcast, and experience how the two hosts relate to your struggles, it furthermore encourages audience participation.

As mentioned earlier, the emotive and tragic content of true crime is not necessarily sufficient in creating an emotionally charged atmosphere to the podcast, as it is largely dependent on the specific tone that the creator sets (BBC n.d.). Whereas Koenig adjusts the tone according to the nature of the specific subject matter, Kilgariff and Hardstark take on a different approach. As they talk about subjects involving alcoholism, mental illness, murder, rape, and more, they go against societal conventions of how to react in specific situations. Instead, they use humor as a coping mechanism in dealing with difficult topics, such as when Hardstark jokes about drinking alcohol in the morning, while fully aware of Kilgariff's history of alcoholism:

> Hardstark: *Joking* and it let's me drink whiskey in the morning.
> Kilgariff: Finally!
> Hardstark: Cause I can't do this podcast without drinking whiskey. That's not true!
> Kilgariff: Let me just- I just need to put this out here. If you or any of your friends are drinking whiskey in the morning, that was the end stage for me right before I was hospitalized (E78).

Another example of them joking about alcoholism is seen as they discuss the rising prices of alcohol in Los Angeles: "Here, every drink is 14 fuckin' dollars, so you can only be an alcoholic if you're rich as fuck" (E118). Joking at one's own expense can, according to Helga Kotthoff (2006), have a healing function for women to overcome "the constraints in their lives" (15). In female friendship, making jokes about personal misfortunes is common, such as when Hardstark banters about drinking whiskey in the morning, which was the low point of Kilgariff's alcohol abuse. Kilgariff herself also jokes about her alcoholism: Kilgariff: I sound like I'm slurring, but I've been sober for quite some time. (Georgia laughs) Or at least I should specify - don't drink... Because when people are like, "your sobriety means a lot to me," then I'm like, well, I stopped drinking in 1997, but I'm definitely on meth (E61). As Kotthoff (2006) explains, it is a way for Kilgariff to overcome the constraints she has faced in her life, while simultaneously appearing honest and relatable to the audience.

Most true crime podcasts follow the conventions set by *Serial,* where the creator remains respectful and reacts in ways that are considered appropriate from a societal point of view, such as when Koenig takes a moment of silence in honor of the victim, Hae. MFM goes against those conventions by approaching severe topics of violence and mental illness in a lighthearted and humorous way. According to Sacks (2017), this approach "allows people to bond over shared meaning

and experiences and to cope with what can sometimes be a dark existence" (22). An example of this is from episode 85, when Kilgariff narrates her true crime story as a screenplay, putting on different characters and voices (E85). This illustrates how the hosts ignore standard true crime conventions and approach the topic in any way they please. Similarly, in a different episode, where Kilgariff is in the midst of telling a gruesome story of how a 15-year-old girl had both her arms cut off and was left to die in the middle of nowhere, and a car with two men drove past her without stopping. Hardstark makes a joke about the two men having a secret relationship, and Kilgariff then continues her story. Later on, in the same episode, Kilgariff explains how the 15-year-old girl was eventually rescued by a couple, who was on their honeymoon, and Hardstark once again interrupts to make a joke: "Can I say real quick, half the people that are listening that are murderinos: dream honeymoon. Like what else are you gonna do? Fuckin' play canasta?" (E18). 'Murderinos' refer to the podcast's fanbase and is a fitting example of how the hosts manage to create an in-group feeling between them and their listeners. Other examples include inside jokes and catchphrases, which will be further explained later on.

Another example of how they go against true crime conventions is illustrated, as they refer to the victims of their stories. True crime narratives have historically revolved around "the damsel in distress" (Punnett 2018, 9), focusing on defenseless beautiful white women. In MFM, the hosts often refer to their stories' victims as strong, capable, and 'bad-ass.' This is demonstrated, when Kilgariff tells the story of three teenage girls that were abducted, but eventually free themselves:

> Kilgariff: And then they abducted the girls. So they were sisters age 12, 13, and 14. I do not know why you'd wanna fuck with three sisters in that age range.
> …
> Kilgariff: That's dangerous.
> Hardstark: Yeah.
> Kilgariff: These idiots didn't know it, but they were about to find out.
> ...
> Hardstark: Don't mess with sisters. Don't mess with Junior high-level sisters. They will murder you! (E197).

Similarly, whereas offenders in true crime narratives are often characterized as big and scary monsters, Kilgariff and Hardstark often manage to humanize them through humor and ridicule. In the example mentioned above, Kilgariff calls the perpetrators 'idiots', making them appear ridiculous rather than

scary. In a different episode, Kilgariff makes the perpetrator of her story seem less frightening by describing him using words that are typically not associated with fear: "And he looked like a grandfather… He is this big pot-bellied kinda grizzly old guy" (E18). Additionally, the hosts always talk about the assailants in a biased and emotive way: "Well and also this piece of shit takes him and then eventually kills him… The highest Strada in hell basically (E18).

4.3 Form

While *Serial* tells one story throughout 12 episodes, MFM uses episodic storytelling in which each episode contains at least two new stories that are not necessarily connected. It is, thus, possible to listen to episodes separately in no specific order. In MFM, each episode contains new stories that are very different in nature, ranging from encouraging survival stories to stories containing graphic descriptions of violence and dismemberment. The audience is consequently not receiving the serial experience that is otherwise useful in getting audiences hooked, therefore, establishing a dedicated audience can be challenging. However, MFM has 19 million monthly listeners. How do Kilgariff and Hardstark manage to attract and maintain a loyal listenership without seriality, cliffhangers, and strategically withholding information that was all proved effective by *Serial*?

A standard MFM episode is roughly structured as follows: 1) Intro music, 2) casual conversation, 3) business updates (tour schedules, merchandise, new podcasts and more), 4) 'corrections corner,' 5) sponsors, 6) one host's true crime story, 7) the other host's true crime story, 8) 'fucking hooray' and goodbye. 'Corrections corner' and 'fucking hooray' are two segments in which the listeners come into play. Fucking hooray is when the two hosts exchange good news, and they also read out loud a selection of listeners' contributions. The fucking hoorays that the two hosts share with each other and the audiences' contributions vary in character, where some are of a more serious nature and others are more trivial:

> Hardstark: Do you have a fucking hooray?
> Kilgariff: I'm sure I do.
> Hardstark: I guess my fucking hooray is a future fucking hooray. I can't wait to step onto that plane tomorrow.
> Kilgariff: Hell yes girl!
> Hardstark: I can't wait (E197).

However, listeners' contributions are typically of a more serious character, but regardless of the nature of the fucking hooray, the two hosts always treat them with a high level of concern and interest. Such as in the following example:

> Sherri: So tonight, I went alone to see Chris Fairbanks in Milwaukee and I tried to talk myself out of it a few times, but I drove an hour in the dark to a place I've never been. I felt weird and awkward at first, but very soon I met some murderinos and a few other solo attendees, and the awkwardness quickly went away. Another solo person named Jay, sat next to me and said she was proud of me for coming. And she was right... So fucking hooray to me (E211).

The hosts' reply:

> Kilgariff: I love the idea that there is a secret network of murderinos.
> ...
> Hardstark: We all know how scary it is, how scary life is.
> Kilgariff: How scary being alone can be.
> ...
> Kilgariff: Wear a little pin. Make yourself known. You got friends waiting for you (E211).

As previously mentioned, the hosts encourage the intimacy between them and their listeners by using positive reinforcement. The listeners' contributions to the fucking hooray segment demonstrate that they consider MFM a safe space and that they can share intimate and private details about themselves with the hosts. According to Shirky, audiences no longer consume media passively, so by encouraging participation, the hosts ensure that they remain dedicated, as they become active participants in their media consumption (Joyce 2018, 15). How the hosts encourage listeners' participation is illustrated in a recent episode, where a listener shares insight into her mental health:

> Annalisa Denning: My fucking hooray is that I have been dealing with depression after disclosing my sexual abuse to both my boyfriend and my family. It has been really hard and I was suicidal for a while, but I have had a really good week. I know that my depression hasn't just gone away, but it feels good to just be genuinely happy even if it's only for a

couple of days (E211).

The hosts' response:

> Hardstark: Amen
>
> Kilgariff: Keep it up. Days turn into weeks (E211).

Again, Kilgariff and Hardstark use positive reinforcement to praise and encourage listeners to continue to contribute to their shared intimacy.

Another fixed segment in the podcast is the corrections corner, where listeners can send corrections to the hosts, if they get any details wrong, or audiences can offer further explanations to the stories. An example of this is in episode 74:

> Hardstark: Do you have any corrections? That was my corrections corner.
>
> Kilgariff: Um yes, I have a couple. Let's see. Well these are the tweets we've gotten of like, this is now. Nearer a corrections corner where people are giving us the corrections and we're just reading them out loud.
>
> Hardstark: Right.
>
> Kilgariff: So, Boone's farm was the wine you were trying to think of…
>
> Hardstark: I was gonna say that mine was that if you had guessed Arbor Mist, that's fine (E74).

Sometimes the hosts correct themselves from an earlier episode. For example, when Hardstark apologizes for stigmatizing a word:

> Hardstark: I like you, Portland. Umm… oh, so I have a corrections corner.
>
> …
>
> Hardstark: I have to apologize. Hobo is an absolutely (Karen laughing) okay word to say (E61).

Kilgariff and Hardstark are always appreciative of listeners contributing with corrective or new information and make sure to thank them in the podcast:

> Kilgariff: John, thank you first of all for being such a gentle corrective hand. 'Cause really, it was the best way to learn that I had made - defamed two heroic American women. So what do we do when we are horrified and we leave our body? (E197).

These two fixed segments, along with the hosts' true crime stories, give structure to the podcast, and listeners come to expect this structure. This is one of the ways in which MFM keeps their audiences engaged, as the structure creates anticipation and something for audiences to look forward to. Some listeners have even claimed that their dedication to the podcast comes from the two segments: "The 'corrections corner' and 'fucking hooray' segments are why I keep coming back to *My Favorite Murder* even when it imprints grisly images onto my brain" (Not Fun at Parties 2018).

Whereas *Serial* relies heavily on seriality, cliffhangers, and withholding information in order to maintain a dedicated audience, MFM promotes participatory culture by embracing the two-way communication that the new media paradigm allows for. The mass audience no longer exists, and similarly, audiences are no longer passive spectators (Jenkins 2006a, 3). Kilgariff and Hardstark interact with their listeners in new ways, effacing the dichotomy between them and their listeners (3). The interactive relationship between the hosts and their audience is found in the two segments mentioned above, but also in what the podcast refers to as minisodes. The shortness of the minisodes gives audiences the possibility to consume these anytime, anywhere (Bottomley 2015, 166), which is one of the defining characteristics of podcasting. In the first minisode, they introduce the concept as follows:

> Hardstark: I love it. Well, then this is Murder Mini for a thing of My Favorite Murder. I'm Georgia, that's Karen, we're going to read you a couple of things.
> Kilgariff: Yay!
> Hardstark: Off your stuff, cause you guys are great.
> Kilgariff: We will do this super quick, you can do it while you're at lunch at work, you can cram it in really fast at work.
> Hardstark: When you pee.
> Kilgariff: When you run to the bathroom, you can listen to four murder stories (M1)
> ...

> Hardstark: Yeah, so join the My Favorite Murder group on Facebook, and you can talk about this with other people. I have a lot of comments. Then email us your hometown murders at myfavoritemurder.gmail and follow us on twitter at my favorite murder.

In minisodes, the hosts read out loud two to four of their listeners' personal true crime stories that have been sent to them by email. Audiences' contributions make up the entire content of the minisodes, which puts them in the role of co-creator rather than passive spectator. Furthermore, the hosts praise their listeners' contributions, creating a community in which listeners feel free to contribute and that their contributions will be valued, which, according to Jenkins', promotes an environment in which participation spurs (Jenkins 2009, 6).

Aditionally, the minisodese function as paratext or additional material to the main podcast, similarly to extra- or behind-the-scenes material that sometimes comes along with DVDs. This type of additional material is typically created for the most dedicated audiences, and in the case of minisodes, offer audiences an opportunity to engage in the podcast and interact with the hosts. Even though the minisodes are available to all, the hosts agree that they are intended for their most dedicated fans:

> Hardstark: I wouldn't say that in a real- in a normal episode, but I think the people who are like, dedicated, and are listening to actual minisodes like they know what they're getting into.
>
> Kilgariff: They get it. We don't have to explain anything, no- it's almost been a full fuckin' year. They get it.
>
> Hardstark: You guys are the solid fuckin' believers, you guys are the...
>
> Kilgariff: Achievers (M32).

According to Rachelle Pavelko and Jessica Myrick (2019), the podcasting medium provides fans with multiple opportunities to engage with the content (4). Besides engaging with the content, podcasts also allow audiences to engage with each other, a condition set by the new media paradigm and the Internet.

4.4 Reception

As illustrated by the analysis above, MFM goes against true crime podcast conventions set and proven effective by *Serial*. Even though several podcasts have subsequently copied Koenig's narrative techniques and the serial experience, the hosts of MFM deliberately break with those conventions and

establish a niche genre. A genre that deliberately breaks the formal pattern of what audiences expect of a true crime podcast, yet has been embraced by millions of people worldwide. As briefly mentioned earlier, MFM's fanbase is called 'murderinos.' To join their 'fan cult', you must pay an annual membership fee of $40, and in return you get exclusive offers. Hardstark describes their fan cult as "a community of shit that you're not supposed to talk about in polite society, which everyone fuckin' thinks about constantly" (Fitzpatrick 2017). The anarchistic mentality of breaking with conventions that distinguishes MFM is a vital characteristic of their in-group mentality. According to Jenkins (2009), a way for audiences to participate in their favorite media texts is through 'affiliations' that can range from formal, such as MFM's fan cult, to informal, where audiences initiate subreddits, Facebook groups or other social media communities (8). Additionally, this illustrates that audiences not only have an interest in the media text itself but in each other and the community as well. An example of this is found in podcast users, who often search for other listeners' reactions to specific episodes on Twitter (Pavelko and Myrick 2019, 4).

Throughout the 215 episodes and 167 minisodes, the hosts have invented a series of catchphrases and inside jokes that would be foreign to a new listener: "You're in a cult, call your dad," "Toxic masculinity ruins the party again," "Lock your fucking door," "Pepper spray first and apologize later," and several more. All these different catchphrases are written on their merchandise, such as t-shirts, coffee mugs, doormats, and more. Additionally, they end each episode with: "Stay sexy and don't get murdered." By naming their fanbase murderinos, using catchphrases and inside jokes, the hosts create an in-group language for listeners to use to represent their in-group mentality. The listeners contribute to the idea of an in-group language by buying the merchandise and by reusing the catchphrases in their own contributions to the podcast or in online communities. For the 'minisodes, the majority of listeners' emails end with some variety of one of the catchphrases:

> "Stay sexy, don't get stabbed - Mitch from Charlotte NC" (M27).
> "Thank you guys for taking a minute to recognize the efforts of EMTs... Stay Sexy and Learn CPR! - Jenna Kate" (M27).
> "That's what I have! Stay sexy and keep being open about mental health - I dig it (M167).
> "My kids will remember all my lessons I've learned from MFM podcast: stay out of the forest, buddy up always all the time, and if you're in a cult, you can call me. Thanks, ladies! - Lea" (M27).

On social media platforms, the catchphrases are often used as idioms to comment on situations outside of the MFM universe, for example: "Toxic masculinity ruins the (Democratic) party again… Like, it's not a fucking hostage situation you narcissistic piece of shit!" (Reddit 2016). Additionally, the catchphrases are also used when fans share their true crime stories online: "This creep got into this 11-year-old girl's bedroom at night (through an unlocked door. PEOPLE! LOCK YOUR FUCKING DOORS!)" (2016) or to comment on other fans' stories: "This person definitely stayed sexy and didn't get murdered. Very similar to pepper spray first, ask questions later" (2016).

Another form of audience participation is through, what Jenkins calls, 'expressions' (2009, 8). This includes any type of creative fan production, such as fan art, fan fiction, fan videos, and more. When an audience feels a strong sense of belonging in a particular online community, it can spur participation and creative expression (6). An example of this can be found in a minisode, where one of their listeners have mailed them a letter and a box of fan art. The letter states: "I love how supportive and appreciative you are of the community that has sprung up around you. I love that I don't feel alone anymore. I could never express my gratitude with words, but as an artist, I find it pretty easy to do visually… S s d g m love and light, Dana Marie" (M82). Hardstark proceeds to express appreciation with the listener's art: "So she makes this art. The shit she made for us is like next level. I will forever in my life fuckin' cherish this". On the social media site Pinterest, a wide array of fan art can be found, and a podcaster named Nick Terry has created several animations for different stories from the show (Seeber 2019). On Instagram, more than a hundred thousand results come up when searching #Myfavoritemurder, including fans who post pictures of merchandise and their own creative expression on their private profiles.

According to Fiske, audiences spread relatable content that expresses meaning to them (Jenkins et al. 2008, 4-5). The fact that audiences spread MFM related content on social media indicates that they have a desire to express their identification with the community to the outside world. Moreover, fans have even gotten catchphrases from the show tattooed (Kelly 2017), symbolizing a devoted and long-term dedication. This type of dedication might suggest MFM is not merely a true crime podcast, but a community of shared values and beliefs that listeners can reflect themselves in. Fan, Melanie Hargraves, expresses her gratitude for being part of the community, and she, furthermore, meets up with other murderinos living close to her (Kelly 2017). According to Pavelko and Myrick (2019), this community gives listeners a sense of empowerment to confront and deal with their issues (2). An example of empowerment that fans have gotten from the community is reflected in the following comment from a fan: "I feel like in my life I have been told so many times about how because I'm

female, I have to be chaperoned in some capacity. I think there is so much strength in this podcast and what it stands for as a symbol of women uniting in their own right under something that has been used to keep them in their place" (Kelly 2017).

Instead of complying with conventions of the true crime genre, MFM introduces a new niche and still manages to establish a large and dedicated audience. They do so by creating a networked community that functions as a safe space for both creators and listeners. By completely eradicating the boundaries that most creators maintain between themselves and their audiences, Kilgariff and Hardstark build an intimate in-group feel in which audiences can feel empowered and a sense of belonging. An environment in which audience participation can spur that the hosts take advantage of by using listener contributions as content for their podcast. Many creators have attempted to replicate the conventions set by MFM, purposely or unpurposely, such as *Morbid: A True Crime Podcast* (2018-), *And That's Why We Drink (2017-), Sinisterhood* (2018-), *Wine and crime (2017-)* and *True Crime Garage* (2019-), which is the male version, where they talk about true crime and drink beers in a garage. Many podcast creators have also taken different approaches to the true crime genre, such as *Jensen and Holes* (2019-), *Ear Hustle* (2017-), and *Criminal* (2014-), all of which are popular. This depicts the fragmentation of the mass audience into niches and displays how true crime podcasting has been shaped by the principal features of convergence culture. It is a genre that is constantly evolving, and as it continues to dominate popular culture along comes many cultural and ethical questions, such as its, at times, easy acceptance of violence as entertainment.

5. Discussion/Conclusion

Serial initiated the golden age of podcasting and added legitimacy to the true crime genre. Subjective narration, intimate creator-listener relationship, seriality, and cliffhangers all became defining features and established a set of conventions for the genre. In any genre, conventions can go stale; however, the true crime genre is characterized by its ability to reinvent itself. MFM breaks with the conventions established by *Serial* and surprises audience expectations. Whereas true crime genre conventions typically dictate a somber and serious style of narration to match the tragic nature of the content, the hosts of MFM go against those conventions and take on a humorous tone throughout the podcast. Kilgariff and Hardstark employ an intimate style of narration. Instead of maintaining a professional distance to the listeners, they eradicate all boundaries between the listeners and themselves. Koenig takes on the role of an investigative journalist in *Serial,* whereas Kilgariff and Hardstark openly declare themselves true crime fans. Fans assuming the role of creator reflects a shift from a top-down

hierarchical media distribution to a more flat and democratic structure in which anyone can take on the role of media distributor, ultimately diminishing the dichotomy between creators and audiences.

The true crime genre and the podcasting medium have mutually influenced each other and essentially benefited from one another. We might call this process "genre-medium coevolution" (Joyce 2018, 10). For a new medium to develop a niche within the mediascape, it has to offer something that established media cannot. One such way of doing that is by tapping into audiences of low-culture genres that established media tend not to pursue. True crime has for long been considered a non-proper and low-brow form of entertainment. If established media, such as TV and books, were to take on a low-culture genre, they risk being subjected to ethical criticism from either their huge audience or well-established critical apparatus. Podcasting, on the other hand, reaches a much smaller audience and is thereby less likely to trigger mass media criticism. Through genre-medium coevolution, both media and genre can develop in creative and innovative ways that are free of expectations and conventions, ultimately drawing positive attention to both. However, coevolution might falter as the medium goes from niche to mainstream, since it might not continue to steer clear of criticism from the mass audience.

Serial not only popularized the podcasting medium, but it legitimized the importance of the true crime genre, and according to Boling, the genre's impact can be seen outside the entertainment industry. Based on new information uncovered by *Serial*, Adnan's legal team has appealed for a new trial. Although the appeal was denied, Adnan's defense attorney remains hopeful and continues to explore other legal options (The Guardian 2019). True crime podcasts have the ability to shed light on inequalities and malpractices in the U.S. justice system and to transform listeners' interest into activism (Simpson 2017). Listener interest turned activism "can result not only in real changes for the individual cases that are covered but also fosters awareness and support for broader transformations in criminal justice legislation and policy" (2017). However, listeners getting caught up in cases of true crime podcasts does not always result in something positive or constructive. When true crime was less prominent and widely disregarded as a low-brow niche genre, questions about its ethics were trivial and not on people's minds. Concurrently with the rise of true crime podcasting and how the genre is dominating more platforms, cultural and ethical questions about the genre become increasingly more relevant.

The overall motivation of the genre, and the fan culture it promotes, is more often than ever being brought into question. Boling (2019) asserts that by "connecting facts from the real world with a fictional-style narrative format, true crime stories naturally blur the line between news and

entertainment" (164). When real events are coated as entertainment, audiences sometimes forget that behind the characters portrayed in the narrative, there are real people and their tragedies. How audiences interfere with the lives of the subjects portrayed in *Serial* raises questions about the nature of the true crime genre and the type of fannish behavior it sometimes spurs. Even though the creators' motivations may be pure, *Serial* has been subjected to criticism for its use of a true story to cater to the entertainment industry in a format that is similar to a fictional drama from HBO or Netflix (Lindgren 2016, 28). Jay, the main witness in the case against Adnan, was harassed by fans of the podcast, which Haugtvedt (2017) argues is due to *Serial's* storytelling strategies (13). According to Haugtvedt: "Even as the creators of *Serial* never authorized Jay's harassment by fans, their serial storytelling cultivated the impression of an ongoing investigation in which fans thought they could participate. Thus, the creators of *Serial* are implicated in Jay's harassment even if they are not wholly responsible" (13). Similarly, fans overstepping boundaries happened after the release of the hugely popular Netflix documentary series *Making a Murderer* (2015) that investigates whether or not Stephen Avery, who is currently convicted, actually killed a woman named Teresa Halbach. Millions of fans became convinced of Avery's innocence (Mahdawi 2018), and some even took to more than simply protesting for his release. Ken Kratz, the prosecutor in Avery's case, has received thousands of death threats since the release of *Making a Murderer,* has had packages explode in his office, and his car shot at (2018).

Podcasts like MFM have been criticized for using people's tragic stories as a pure form of entertainment. The light-hearted and comedic tone of the podcast is problematic, as it is often interpreted as a sign of inconsideration to the victims and their relatives. A hugely popular true crime podcast in Denmark called *Mørkeland* that shares the premise of MFM, is widely denounced as disrespectful towards the relatives of the deceased (Nielsen 2019). Danish radio host, Sandie Westh, accuses the two hosts, Camilla Bjerregaard Aurvig and Kristine Sofie Bugbee, of being unprofessional and in total disregard of the murder victims that they discuss in their podcast. Westh's sister was murdered years back, and by that, she strongly advises against using someone's greatest grief as a means of entertainment (2019). The criticism is not only directed at the two hosts, but also at the podcast's listeners, and Westh encourages everyone to display more skepticism towards the type of entertainment that they consume (2019). True crime podcasts, like MFM, are not only accused of exploiting real tragedies, but also for distorting reality. Andrea Denhoed argues that the two hosts of MFM have a fixation with white female murder victims, "feeding into a recklessly limited worldview" (2019). The 'how to avoid getting murdered'-jargon of the podcast portrays a reality in which most homicide victims are white women when, in reality, they are black men (2019). This misrepresentation

of reality is not only evident in MFM, but, according to Sturges (2019), the entire podcast boom is primarily built on the abuse and murder of white women.

    Serial and the rise of podcasting momentarily turned the spotlight on the true crime genre, but as the *Serial* craze dies down and the act becomes too familiar, increasingly more people are left with a wavering feeling of skepticism. What am I participating in? What is the cause, and what is the cost? What started as a renaissance of an old, tarnished genre on a new, exciting medium, has resulted in an array of true crime material, not wanting to tell a true story, but to hopefully experience some of the *Serial* fame. With audiences no longer being wrapped up in the hype of true crime podcasting, the genre is starting to look like exploitation of trauma concealed as a quest for truth, and the survival of true crime podcasting becomes uncertain. Even though the true crime genre and the podcasting medium developed alongside each other into a widespread cultural phenomenon, the two are not bound together and may eventually break away from each other. As reflected throughout the article, neither genre nor medium is fixed, and what was a useful symbiosis for podcasting and true crime at an initial stage of development can ultimately break down at a later stage. Although the true crime genre remains dominant in the podcasting industry, cracks are starting to appear on the surface along the foregrounding of the genre's ethical and moral dilemmas. Perhaps the genre will find a new medium to latch on to and successfully reinvent itself anew, or maybe its time is up. Nevertheless, true crime podcasts have taught us insightful lessons about the dynamic mediascape, contemporary American culture, and to always pepper spray first and apologize later.

6. Product description

As our article focuses on media and genre, more specifically podcasting and true crime, we find it particularly relevant and appropriate to experiment with both on a more practical level. Since the article aims at explaining and analyzing aspects of how the podcasting medium actually functions and how it differs from other types of media, such as radio and film, we found it beneficial to try it out ourselves so that our perspective and knowledge extend beyond our theoretical research. Therefore, we created a true crime podcast as our product. Instead of creating a stereotypical true crime podcast, like the ones that we analyze in our article, we decided to create a meta-podcast that displays awareness of conventions of the podcasting medium and the true crime genre. However, our podcast is set up like an investigation, similar to *Serial,* but instead of investigating a crime, it investigates the rise of true crime podcasting. Thereby, we reuse the traditional conventions at a meta-level to exhibit a level of understanding of these.

We have structured our podcast into three episodes according to our three analytical categories: Narration, plot techniques (form), and fans (reception). The three analytical categories are presented as potential suspects in our podcast, and by the end of the third episode, we present a solution to the investigation. Each episode also contains a quiz segment named 'Fact or Fiction'*,* which adds a fixed structure to the podcast episodes as well as increases the entertainment value. In that connection, we have also created a website, ear-cuffed.simplesite.com, on which listeners can access the podcast and find the answers to the quiz. By structuring the podcast episodes according to our analysis, our product reflects our research and contributes to the overall argument. Moreover, we consider the podcast a great opportunity to communicate our theory and findings while operating free of academic regulations. Ultimately, combining theory and practice has led to a better overall understanding of both the podcasting medium and the true crime genre.

The podcast displays several aspects of the article. First off, we have separated our podcast into three short episodes to create seriality, which, according to our theory, creates suspense and anticipation. Secondly, we end each episode with a cliffhanger that lifts the curtain on the following episode to appeal to listeners' curiosity. Cliffhangers furthermore emphasize the serial experience as audiences will have to listen in the consecutive order of the podcast. Besides providing answers to the 'Fact or Fiction' quiz, our website also allows listeners to engage with the podcast on more than one platform. The website contains true crime podcast recommendations as well as our motivation for creating the podcast. We also explain our motivation for creating the podcast in the first episode to highlight the subjective narration style that many true crime podcast narrators employ. While creating the podcast, we have gained insights into the ethical dilemma that accompanies true crime. As we were brainstorming ideas for our quiz segment, we kept running into questions of ethics in relation to using crime and violence as a means of entertainment. We established a set of guidelines to avoid crossing any ethical boundaries, such as only using true crime stories that are more than 40 years old. Simultaneously, we also came to realize some of the things that podcasts such as *Serial* and *My Favorite Murder* does so well. Keeping listeners entertained only through sound is a challenge that so many podcast creators succeed in through hard work and dedication.

Link to website on which the podcast can be accessed: www.ear-cuffed.simplesite.com.
The episodes must be downloaded in order to access the full content.

Credits to: Wind Chime, Gamelan Gond, A.wav. by InspectorJ (www.jshaw.co.uk) of Freesound.org.

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