Keeping It Real: Why NPR's 'Serial' and Netflix's 'Making a Murderer' Are Grabbing Attention — and Headlines

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[netflix/serial/wbez]

I admit it. I got sucked in — not just once, but twice, over the course of a few months. And I know I'm not alone. NPR's podcast "Serial" took the listening public by storm in 2015, and Netflix's "Making a Murderer" almost surpassed network coverage of presidential candidate Donald Trump in early 2016.

Combined, more than 135 million people tuned in to these programs in 2015 alone — that's 20 million more viewers than who watched the 2015 Super Bowl. In essence, these were two reality shows that soared to the front lines of public discourse faster and with more fandom — an odd word for two programs about murder, I know — than even their creators expected.

So what *was* it that set these series apart from the myriad of "Cold Case Files," "Solved," "Homicide Hunters" and a long list of other reality-based true-crime programming? In my opinion, two things were at work: they put the "real" back in "reality," and they tapped into consumers' desire for good old-fashioned journalism.

First, about reinfusing "real" into "reality." We know that most current reality shows — from "The Bachelor" to "The Biggest Loser" — have only a smidge of reality in them. Producers encourage bachelorettes to stir up controversy and trainers overly coach health-seeking contestants to give up and give in. And we, as viewers, have gotten wise to this. And while it still makes for good TV, it leaves the viewer or listener craving the un-spun version — what's really happening behind the scenes. No frills, no preset agendas, just the real story.

Participating in the media

Consider NPR's "Serial." For those of you who aren't familiar with the podcast, reporter Sarah Koenig created "Serial" to sleuth through a potentially wrongful murder conviction after receiving a variety of

indications that led her to believe that the Baltimore high-school student Adnan Syed may not have killed his teenage girlfriend — more than 15 years into his prison sentence. Rather than tell us what she discovered, she took us along for the ride. We, as listeners, heard her interviews with detectives live and unfiltered, and then listened to her thought process as she determined her next step and unanswered questions. Sure, she had to edit the hourlong episodes, but only to better tell the story and keep the unimportant sausage-making to a minimum.

Similarly, Netflix's "Making a Murderer" eliminated the typical polished narrator/voiceover found in many reality-based crime series and let interviewees tell the complex story of Steven Avery's journey, from a small-town father of five in blue-collar Manitowoc County, Wisc., to a questionably convicted murderer. The viewer was left to draw conclusions and piece together the likelihood that Avery was wrongly convicted.

Second, let's talk about our unspoken desire for journalism. While Sarah Koenig described her podcast in her Peabody Award acceptance speech as "a 10-hour audio documentary about an old murder that I did not solve," she also added, "I think, I hope, what it means is that, contrary to what we thought, people do have patience for journalism that takes its time."

That's an interesting notion. In an era of social media and 24/7 news, perhaps people are craving a slower, more traditional news process, complete with uncertainty and thorough fact-finding.

"If this genre survives, it will be because the public wants a particular relationship to news that has to do with working through complex sets of facts together to reach a collective understanding of what has happened and what should be done about it," said University of Southern California journalism professor Henry Jenkins in a January *Adweek* article. "They do not want the journalist in control, telling us, 'That's the way it is.' They want the journalist struggling to stay one step ahead of us, figuring it out as they go, and thus constructing a game in which we can all participate."

I find Jenkins' comment to be particularly salient, as it speaks to the highly participatory nature of media today, particularly social media. It only makes sense that consumers are drawn to broadcast programming that allows for that same ability to intuit and participate — as opposed to being told the answers and conclusions. Today's consumers crave the ability to discuss, tweet, blog about and "scoop" each other. We like to act the part of journalists.

To give you a sense, in the first month after "Making a Murderer" debuted, thousands of people tweeted about the case — some vehemently supporting the conviction and others condemning the process. In fact, the "Serial's" Adnan Syed case landed in People magazine years after his conviction and is being retried in part due to the fervor generated by the listening public. (There are new, short "Serial" podcast updates on the retrial of the case airing as of press time.)

Now compare this to the chatter about "Cold Case Files" or any other reality crime drama, which would never see this kind of participation or emotional investment.

Combining storytelling and journalism

Call it great storytelling or great journalism — or both — but a common element in "Serial" and "Making a Murderer" that is often missing from other reality crime series is that the producers left enough uncertainty and unanswered questions that it felt like authentic, "we're still figuring this out too" reporting.

So what does this all mean? To me, it's plain and simple: Back-to-the-basics, authentic reporting and storytelling are what carry the day. True, we may get diverted by the flashy nature of reality programming from time to time, but ultimately, we as consumers want the real deal.

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