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## Serial Murder and Media Coverage

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# SERIAL MURDER AND MEDIA COVERAGE

by

MOLLY GROSS

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Honors in the Major Program in Criminal Justice  
in the College of Community Innovation and Education  
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## ABSTRACT

This study sets out to explore the relationship between news media coverage on serial killers and their behavior. As a result of the lack of previous research on this topic, utilizing past research on a few historically well-known serial killers and news media reports about those serial killers, this study attempts to determine if news media has any effect on a serial killer's behavior prior to apprehension. After a review of the history of serial murder and the past findings about serial murderers, as well as background on the history of the media coverage of crime, this study will look closely at the media coverage and behavior of Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer; David Berkowitz, Son of Sam; and John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo, the D.C. Snipers. These three cases received unparalleled attention from the media and involved a unique two-way communication between the offenders and the media/police. The relatively new role of the Public Information Officer in law enforcement agencies will be briefly reviewed to examine the expansion of their role in relation to considering the impact the media has on serial murderer behavior. The subsequent findings of this research will aid in increasing knowledge of serial killer behavior in relation to news media coverage so that news media can be a potential tool used by law enforcement to better control and predict serial killer behavior and aid in their apprehension.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES .....	iv
INTRODUCTION .....	1
<u>Definitions of Serial Murder and Characteristics</u> .....	2
<u>The Windows of Serial Murder</u> .....	3
TYOLOGIES OF SERIAL MURDERERS.....	5
<u>Typologies Based on Psychological Motivations</u> .....	5
<u>Organized vs. Disorganized Killers</u> .....	6
<u>Geographically Stable vs. Mobile Killers</u> .....	6
MEDIA COVERAGE OF CRIME .....	7
<u>The Overall Crime Rate: Myth vs. Reality</u> .....	7
<u>The Media and Sensitivity Training</u> .....	8
<u>The Media's Role in Apprehending and Assisting the Criminal Justice System</u> .....	8
<u>Is the Media Complicit in the Crime Problem?</u> .....	9
<u>The Police and Public Information Officers</u> .....	10
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND SERIAL KILLERS.....	12
<u>The Role of the News Media</u> .....	12
<u>Interconnections Between the Media and Violent Crime Perpetrators</u> .....	13
THE COMPULSIVITY OF SERIAL KILLERS .....	14
<u>Social Learning Theory and Serial Killing – The Copycat Effect</u> .....	15
CASE STUDIES .....	16
<u>BTK Killer</u> .....	16
<u>Dennis Rader's Letters</u> .....	16
<u>Details About Rader's Life in the Letters</u> .....	18
<u>The Pause and Later Need for Recognition</u> .....	19
<u>The Communication Trap</u> .....	19
<u>The Serial Killer's Legacy</u> .....	20
<u>Son of Sam</u> .....	21
<u>The First Reports</u> .....	22
<u>Communication to the Media, Police, and Public</u> .....	22
<u>Contact with the Media</u> .....	23
<u>Communications and Identifying Features</u> .....	25
<u>The Capture and Arrest of David Berkowitz</u> .....	26
<u>D.C. Snipers</u> .....	27
<u>Impact of the Media</u> .....	28
<u>Misleading Elements of the Investigation</u> .....	29
IMPLICATIONS .....	30
REFERENCES .....	33

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: The Windows of Serial Murder .....	4
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## INTRODUCTION

Long before individuals who took the lives of others over time were labeled serial killers, they were viewed as supernatural or god-like beings with a thirst for blood and vengeance. This is likely because society had no other explanation for this type of evil, reckless, and vile behavior. People with psychopathic, aggressive, and homicidal tendencies (including potential serial killers) were thought to be possessed by demons; to have made a pact with the devil; or to be monsters, such as werewolves and vampires. For example, in sixteenth-century Germany, Peter Stubb murdered thirteen children and two expectant mothers. He raped and tortured his victims before killing and eventually cannibalizing their bodies. At the time, his criminal behavior was explained by the claim that he was a werewolf (Hickey, 2018). In 1866, Richard von Krafft-Ebing published *Psychopathia Sexualis*. Although the text focused on sexual pathology, it included a description of many of the characteristics that serial homicide investigators still use today to profile crimes. These characteristics include the tendency to lie and manipulate, take souvenirs from the crime, bind victims, prolong torture to increase sexual arousal, escalate sadistic behavior, use pornography, humiliate victims, and carefully plan murders so to avoid detection. In addition to these characteristics, Krafft-Ebing also observed that this population tended to display no obvious signs of psychopathology. It was not until the 1970s and the Son of Sam killings that the term “serial murderer” was coined by FBI Special Agent Robert Ressler (Miller, 2014).

In 1984, the FBI appeared before the Senate to get funding for a program designed to target violent criminals specifically. To support their argument, the FBI claimed that as many as 5,000 people per year were killed by serial murderers. While this number clearly overstated the seriousness of the problem, the program was approved and received congressional funding. In reality, the number of victims or perpetrators of serial killing was unknown (Hickey, 2018). Now, however, the FBI estimates that there are approximately twenty active serial murderers in the United States at any given time (Walters, Drislane, Patrick, & Hickey, 2015). This estimate varies, based on time, the efforts of law enforcement, and the number of sociopaths living outside the confines of correctional and mental institutions. Some estimate that there are up to 100 active serial killers in the United States at any given time (Holmes & Holmes, 2008). The reason for this discrepancy is the lack of clear criteria for classifying and reporting on both serial killers and victims. As a result of a lack of communication among law enforcement agencies, many cases are not linked and therefore treated as separate cases. This is often referred to as linkage blindness. The paradigm of linkage blindness was first espoused by Egger (1998).

#### Definitions of Serial Murder and Characteristics

The FBI currently defines serial murder as “the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offenders in separate events.” While serial killers are either true psychopaths, as determined by the PCL-R, or possess psychopathic traits, only about 2-4% are considered legally insane by the court. Of this group, approximately 50% are black, 17% female, one in four has one or more partner(s), the majority are of average intelligence, and most remain in their local area to kill. Additionally, it is a myth that

serial killers are incapable of ceasing to engage in their homicidal activities. Some stop killing for years before either starting to kill again or being apprehended, Dennis Rader being a prime example (Hickey, 2018).

### The Windows of Serial Murder

While the characteristics of serial murderers vary, similarities can be found in their behavior, as identified by the stages they often cycle through. The first stage is distorted thinking, which is a positive state of equilibrium, where the person doesn't dwell on deviance and keeps up the appearance of normalcy by portraying themselves as such to society. The second stage is the fall, which is when something in their environment challenges them and the equilibrium established by distorted thinking. The fall can be caused by either one event or the accumulation of many minor events. The third is a negative inward response generated by the fall, where the person is forced to deal with feelings of inadequacy. This involves the revalidation of their self-status and leads to the mental preparation for what is done in stage four. The fourth stage is a negative outward response. In this stage, the killer needs to act to reaffirm their sense of superiority. At this point, the killer is incapable of considering the consequences for such an act and will choose vulnerable victims to avoid risking more negative feelings that would result from further failure. And the final stage is restoration. The superior status is restored successfully by the act performed, which means the killer can acknowledge and deal with the consequences, taking care to destroy any evidence to avoid detection. Once all personal risk is minimized, the killer can return to stage one of distorted thinking (Holmes & Holmes, 2008).

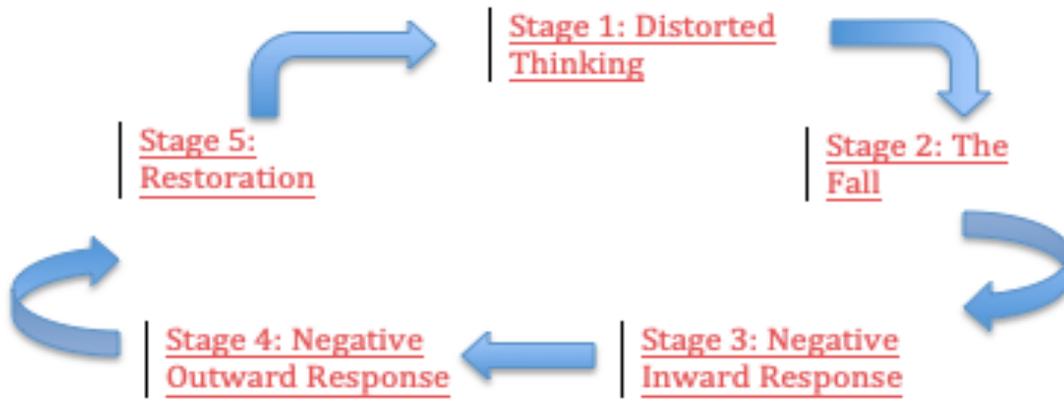


Figure 1: The Windows of Serial Murder

## TYPOLOGIES OF SERIAL MURDERERS

In attempts to better understand serial murderers' motivations and behavior, various typologies have been identified. Some are based on psychological or intrinsic motivators; others are based on elements presented by the offender during the attack; while others are founded upon whether the killer preys on his/her victims in their own hometown or travels to pick up and fatally dispatch their victims.

### Typologies Based on Psychological Motivations

Focusing on motivation, Holmes and DeBurger identify four types of psychological motives, based on the belief that serial murderers generally benefit psychologically from their actions rather than materially even when there are some material benefits. The four types are visionary, mission-oriented, hedonistic, and power/control-oriented. The visionary killer acts as a result of commands from voices or visions and is the only type out of the four that is believed to have some form of psychosis that causes the hallucinations. The mission-oriented killer is motivated to kill by the belief that it is their mission in life to rid society of a certain group of people. The hedonistic type derives some form of satisfaction from the murders, which motivates them to kill. Within this type, there are two categories, the comfort-oriented killers and the lust murderers. The comfort-oriented killers are driven by the promise of some materialistic gain for committing the murder. In contrast, the lust murderer is motivated by the act itself, which involves sexual acts with their victim and often postmortem mutilations. If a woman is a serial murderer, she will usually fall under the comfort-oriented type. Unlike the hedonistic lust murderers, power/control-oriented killers' primary source of pleasure is not sexual, but their ability to exert control over the victim.

Because of this, strangulation is a common method to be used by the power/control-oriented type (Hickey, 2018).

#### Organized vs. Disorganized Killers

According to the FBI, serial murderers can also be divided into two categories, organized and disorganized. While the characteristics of each type can be useful, it is also not uncommon for the two to overlap. In general, the organized killer is characterized as highly intelligent, socially competent, engaged in planned crimes, and primarily victimizing strangers. The disorganized killer is defined as having average or below average intelligence, being socially immature, engaging in more spontaneous crimes, and being likely to know the victim before dispatching them (Hickey, 2018).

#### Geographically Stable vs. Mobile Killers

Another way to distinguish between serial murderers is by where they kill. Those that are geographically stable kill in the same area they live or feel comfortable. On the other hand, geographically transient killers travel to commit their murders, often to avoid detection and confuse law enforcement. With geographically transient killers, it is easier for linkage blindness to occur since they often travel across state, county, or city jurisdictional boundaries. Place specific is less related to where the person kills in relation to where they live and more related to where specifically they kill, which could have more to do with their signature. If a murderer is place-specific, then they tend to commit the offense in the same specific place each time (Holmes & Holmes, 2008).

## MEDIA COVERAGE OF CRIME

Presently, the media is capable of covering all aspects of the criminal justice system, from arrest through to prosecution and corrections. However, it wasn't always acceptable to have this extent of coverage. In 1985, footage of bodies and body bags on national networks was unusual and led to public outcry, especially from victim advocates, when such footage was made public. Presently, with 24/7 news cycles and the push for ratings, shock footage brings higher ratings and the general public now demand closer and more detailed coverage of even the most heinous crimes.

According to a 1997 national survey, 95% of the 1,500 respondents reported, "*they want to know about crime,*" which is a higher percentage than for any other topic, including local news, the environment, and world news (Seymour, 2000). This interest in crime is not new, despite the relatively new proliferation of media. People were always interested in witnessing crime and punishment, as evidenced by the crowds that gathered to view executions and offenders placed in stocks or in a pillory (Brookes, Wilson, Yardley, Rahman, & Rowe, 2015).

### The Overall Crime Rate: Myth vs. Reality

While news reporting of crime has increased drastically, the overall crime rate has been dropping, which results in false perceptions by the public. A 1996 *U.S. News & World Report* article reported that "the number of crime stories on the network evening news in 1995 was quadruple the 1991 total." The networks aired 375 stories on murder in 1995, excluding the O.J. Simpson trial, which was four times the 1990 total. However, the actual homicide rate was higher in 1990 than it was in 1995. The media coverage is often misleading and can result in a false perception on the danger

of befalling victim to violent or property crime. But, the media does have a role to play in covering public safety. Theoretically, crime reporting should inform the public about increases and decreases in crime; trends in violence and victimization; current efforts being made to prevent crime, reduce violence, and assist victims; and measures individuals and communities can take to promote safety.

#### The Media and Sensitivity Training

The role of the media to cover crime is complex, as there is the responsibility to keep the public well informed but also the responsibility to respect the victim's right to privacy. As a result, the role of victim advocates has increased regarding ensuring those rights are protected by the media and helping the victim cope with the media coverage throughout the process. To address this issue, media professionals now are encouraged to seek sensitivity training from crime victims and advocates (Seymour, 2000). While the increase in media coverage of crime has been addressed in relation to its impact on victims, there are other issues that increased coverage has caused that have yet to be addressed, such as the effects the media coverage could have on the general public and criminals.

#### The Media's Role in Apprehending and Assisting the Criminal Justice System

The media is frequently used as a tool by the authorities to display information about crime in an attempt to gain more information from the public about the crime and apprehend the criminal. One study found that despite 24-hour news coverage of high-profile victims and perpetrators, the public failed to remember either the victim or the perpetrator. Out of the 103 participants surveyed, 78% were unable to name any of the victims or perpetrators previously displayed to them. While it can be easy to merely

recognize a face, it is more of a challenge to identify who that specific person is and how they know them. Because of this, news media portrayals of perpetrators and victims are often not successful in getting the public to recognize a victim or perpetrator on the street from a picture shown on the news. Findings indicate that, instead, media coverage of such high-profile crimes has the tendency to be consumed and forgotten not long after (Brookes et al., 2015). This research would suggest that the news media has a limited effect when it comes to alerting the community to assist in the apprehension of criminals. If news coverage of crime does more to sensationalize crime for the public rather than inform, then perhaps news coverage of crime should be more aimed at the perpetrators of crime rather than the general public in order to better aid the criminal justice system.

#### Is the Media Complicit in the Crime Problem?

In addition to research examining the effect news media has on the public, there has also been research to analyze if media coverage of crimes can affect perpetrators of crime. One study (Rios & Ferguson, 2018) looked at how media coverage of violent crimes affects homicides perpetrated by drug traffickers in Mexico. The study tested the General Aggression Model and the copycat theory. The General Aggression Model argues that exposure to media coverage of violent crime will “trigger” the development of aggressive attitudes and behaviors by desensitizing people to violence. According to this model, someone previously not prone to violence could become more violent as a result of being exposed to violence through the media. Others argue that media is not capable of having this triggering effect on the general population. However, media coverage can influence offenders in a copycat manner, meaning that other offenders

may mimic behavior they see on the news. During the study, 32,199 homicides were tracked and analyzed based on their stylistic characteristics and their press coverage. They found that news coverage of violent crime does not increase the amount of crime but does have a copycat effect, supporting the copycat theory more than the General Aggression Model. A possible explanation for these results is that some criminal groups may be motivated to copy the methods of other criminals that receive a lot of media attention in an attempt to gain notoriety and media attention to aid in their visibility and intimidation of their enemies. While news media does not appear to have much of an effect on the behavior of the general public, this study provides some evidence that offenders attend to and react to the media (Rios & Ferguson, 2018).

#### The Police and Public Information Officers

With the increase in news coverage of crime, has come the need for an additional police role in society. Public Information Officers (PIOs) work to improve the public's perception of police, thereby restoring people's confidence in the police. The President's Commission on Law Enforcement and Administration of Justice and the National Advisory Commission on Criminal Justice Standards and Goals are the two groups that recognized the importance of building stronger community relations programs and more positive news media relations, leading to the formation of public information units. These units were a result of significant social and political events, including urban riots and civil rights protests, which occurred in the 1960s. Since then, many departments and agencies have established public information offices. It is estimated that 75% of police departments in the U.S. employ full-time PIOs (Motschall & Cao, 2002).

A 1992 survey (Motschall, 1995) examined the role of the PIO and found that most describe their role primarily as media relations oriented. Still, some report that conducting research and advising management is a critical part of their job. With a growing focus on the service role of the police, an increasing number of PIOs are civilians with backgrounds in journalism and communication. In general, public relations refers to the use of “two-way communication to facilitate the development of mutually beneficial relationships” (Motschall & Cao, 2002, pp. 156-157). The main goals of public information units are to enhance community relations and attract financial support. The job involves writing press releases, making formal and informal contact with the media, monitoring, and editing news stories, and holding press conferences. The role of the PIO is reactive, in that it was born out of the necessity to organize the information being released about crimes already committed to manage the appearance of the situation and affect the audience’s perception of the news (Motschall & Cao, 2002).

## THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN MEDIA AND SERIAL KILLERS

As a Public Information Officer, one can only affect the public's perception of real-life events as portrayed by the news media. However, other sources influence people's perception of crime. These other sources include entertainment media. Between 1990 and 2008, there was a substantial increase in the number of films involving the topic of serial killing. From 2000 to 2015, there have been more than 500 films in this genre (Hickey, 2018). The movie *Monster* was made about Aileen Wuornos, who shot and killed seven men between 1989 and 1991. It is not only the film industry that has been influenced by serial killers, but also music. The 1969 Rolling Stones' song, *Midnight Rambler*, referenced Albert DeSalvo, the Boston Strangler, who sexually assaulted and strangled women from 1962 to 1964 (Miller, 2014).

### The Role of the News Media

In addition to impacting entertainment media, serial killing is also portrayed by the news media, which affects the public's perception of serial killers' acts and deeds. Walters, Drislane, Patrick, and Hickey (2015) examined the role the news plays in forming public misconceptions about serial killers. As addressed before, current estimates are that there are between twenty and one hundred active serial murderers in the U.S. at any given time. However, media coverage of the crime would suggest that there is a proliferation of serial murder. In reality, a murder by a serialist is a rare event (Walters, Drislane, Patrick, & Hickey, 2015).

Similar to entertainment media, the news media also recognizes and takes advantage of the allure of serial killers. The relationship between the media and serial killers has been described as a symbiotic one, as serial killers offer "rich opportunities to

capture public attention by capitalizing on deeply resonant themes of innocent victims, dangerous strangers, unsolved murders, all coalescing around a narrative of evasion.” The portrayal of serial killers by the media can be naturally full of realistic drama, horror, and mystery. Along with serial killers, spree and high-profile individual murders are of interest to the media and the general public (Brookes et al., 2015).

#### Interconnections Between the Media and Violent Crime Perpetrators

Miller (2014) has suggested that serial killers may be just as interested in the media’s portrayal of them as the media is in them. Many form special connections with the media. The infamous serial murderer, Jack the Ripper, who terrorized Victorian England in the late 1800s, sent taunting letters to the press, threatening to continue and escalate his crimes. Albert Fish, from the 1920s to 1930s, a serial murderer in New York, abducted and killed a young girl. Then, six years after her death, he sent a letter to her mother detailing the crime, which led to his arrest shortly after the letter was traced back to his home (Miller, 2014).

## THE COMPULSIVITY OF SERIAL KILLERS

As communicating with the media and police can increase the risk of apprehension, one might question why serial murderers decide to engage in this form of communication. The compulsivity of serial killers can explain this phenomenon. Serial killing is often a compulsive act for a serial killer reacting to some element in their environment which researchers have called “the fall”. This compulsion to kill is based on the need to satisfy their often violent sexual fantasies. The fact that serial killers are interested in the media’s portrayal of them can be observed by uncovering the fantasies of these killers, which often can include details about receiving media attention. One man from Arvada, Colorado expressed his fantasies through drawings that depicted abducting, sexually assaulting, torturing, and killing young girls. The drawings included fake news articles written by the offender reporting about the missing girls, indicating that, along with the criminal acts, part of the man’s fantasy was receiving media attention. Research on the criminal profile of male serial killers has revealed that publicity is a strong motivator, as attracting attention increases their feeling of power over others. Having power and control over others is a deep need for many serial killers and, thus, a strong motivator. For some sex-related killings, the attention from publicity itself can be a strong motivator, serving as a replacement for the attention the killer failed to attract as a child. The experience or the “act,” may involve abducting the victim, performing ritualistic acts, engaging the victim sexually, killing the victim, disposing the body, eluding detection, and following the police investigation in the media. For the killer, pleasure is received from every part of the process, and this pleasure motivates them to perform more acts. Because receiving media attention is

part of the act and a source of pleasure, seeing the media portrayal contributes to the offending behavior and encourages them to take additional victims (Phillips, 1996).

#### Social Learning Theory and Serial Killing – The Copycat Effect

With all the media attention dedicated to following serial killers, there is a risk that, like the drug traffickers in Mexico, serial killers could learn from the media, which can lead the individual to incorporate additional hedonistic themes in future kills. Further, social learning model suggests that the availability of information about murder through the media may provide potential killers with insight regarding the crimes and procedures that may be taken to avoid detection. This model supports not only the copycat effect but also suggests that the media, in a sense, educates killers. While there is research that shows that part of the motivation to kill is to receive attention from the media and that serial killers could pay attention to media coverage in order to avoid detection, there is still the question of whether serial killers actually pay attention to the news. From researchers' interviews with offenders, they have found that it is common for serial killers to read about the murder they committed in the newspaper and, in some cases, even talk to the police. Those classified as organized serial killers have been found to be particularly interested in following their crimes in the newspaper, evidenced by newspaper clippings often found during searches of their residence. Additionally, it is not uncommon for serial killers to call or write letters to the police to provide information relating to the murder (Phillips, 1996).

## CASE STUDIES

In order to further examine the relationship that exists between serial killers and the media, three cases will be analyzed where serial killers had a two-way communication with the media and police throughout the perpetration of their episodic crimes. The three case studies include the crimes of Dennis Rader, David Berkowitz and John Muhammed.

### BTK Killer

Dennis Rader, who gave himself the nickname “BTK Killer” (Bind, Torture, & Kill) murdered ten people from 1974 to 1991 around Wichita, Kansas. He stands out from other serial killers because he paused his offending career for nearly 18 years only to reappear with new media messages. His contact with the police through the media was what eventually led to his arrest in 2005 (Miller, 2014). Rader’s victims consisted of the Otero family and Kathryn Bright in 1974, Shirley Vain and Nancy Fox in 1977, Marine Hedge in 1985, Vicki Weerle in 1987, and Dolore Davis in 1991. In 1977, after his seventh murder, he wrote, “How many do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national recognition?” In total, he sent 19 messages to the police and the media, ten of which were sent within a year of his arrest (Nicolaou, 2019). With Dennis Rader, it was clear that gaining recognition for his crimes was a powerful motivator.

### Dennis Rader’s Letters

The first of Rader’s letters detailed the Otero family’s murder, where he murdered Joseph, Julie, Josephine, and Joseph Jr. Otero in their home. In the letter, he took credit for the crime, writing:

*“Those three dudes you have in custody are just talking to get publicity for the Otero murders. They know nothing at all. I did it by myself and with no ones help. There has been no talk either. Let’s put this straight.”*

In order to validate his claim, he included details of the murders that only the killer would know. In addition to making it clear that the purpose of the letter was to make sure he got the credit for his crime and not the people suspected by the police, Rader also wrote about how difficult it is to control the “monster” in his brain, apologizing for what his lack of control resulted in. He claimed,

*“If you ask for help, that you have killed four people, they will laugh or hit the panic button and call the cops,” saying he couldn’t stop the “monster” and wishing the police “Good luck hunting” (Nicolaou, 2019).*

Cathy Henkel, a reporter in Wichita, wrote about Rader’s first letter in “The Wichita Sun.” The letter was placed inside a book at the downtown public library and was retrieved by the police after receiving a tip. Henkel, too, received the letter later from a “trusted source” and wrote to warn the public that the letter spoke of the killer’s intentions to strike again, having begun already to stalk his next victim, and that the police were keeping the threat quiet. The letter again detailed the murders of the Otero family, Henkel making it public that the killer wrote about the type of knot he used to tie the family up; the clothing they wore; how he left their bodies; and the souvenirs he took with him, the son’s radio and the father’s watch. The article contained an excerpt from the letter, which stated,

*“When this monster enters my brain, I will never know. But, it here to stay... Society can be thankful that there are ways for people like me to relieve myself at time by day dreams of some victim being torture and being mine. It a big complicated game my friend of the monster play putting victims number down, follow them, checking up on them waiting in the dark, waiting, waiting... Maybe you can stop him. I can’t. He has already chosen his next victim”* and was signed, *“Yours, Truly Guiltily, BTK”*.

Additionally, Henkel wrote about the packets left around the city with souvenirs, photos of victims, and chapters from the killer’s book, titled “The BTK Files” (Henkel, 2005).

#### Details About Rader’s Life in the Letters

Other letters that Rader sent throughout the years included various details about his life, including information about how his criminal behavior escalated, starting with how he would catch stray animals as a child and strangle them to death. Later, he started looking at pornography depicting sadomasochism and was a peeper and stole undergarments by the age of eighteen. The letters detailed that by Radar’s early thirties, he engaged in violent sadism and masochistic games with prostitutes, resulting in some women refusing to see him again. In addition to details about his antisocial behavior, he also wrote about himself. For instance, his letters contained personal information such as the year he was born, his fascination with trains, the loss of his father in WWII, and information about his mother dating a railroad detective. He also wrote about some of his hobbies, including fishing, hunting, and camping (Krishnamurthy, 2018).

### The Pause and Later Need for Recognition

After killing for 17 years, he paused his offending career and went eighteen years without killing or contacting the media or police. There was great speculation about what caused the cessation of offending behavior and contact with the media. Some speculated that he was incarcerated on other offenses, while others postulated that he was dead. Then just as the letters had ended so mysteriously 18 years ago, he sent another in 2004. The reemergence of Radar could have been a result of his need to reaffirm his existence and his legacy. In this letter he stated that he had continued to kill into the 1980s and beyond, appearing as an attempt to counteract the media's false explanations (Hansen, 2006). According to Hickey (2018), "The fact that Robert Beattie, a lawyer, was writing a book on the BTK strangler when the killer suddenly resurfaced further supported the notion of this killer's need for recognition," (p. 34) as Rader wouldn't have been able to resist ensuring that he got the credit for his murders in such a book. On June 9th, 2004, after having resurfaced, a package was found taped to a stop sign that once again outlined the 1974 murder of the Otero family. This time, it included quotes from the victims, such as the daughter screaming to her mother and yelling, "Mommy, I love you" (Krishnamurthy, 2018).

### The Communication Trap

Two FBI agents from the Behavioral Analysis Unit helped devise a strategy for dealing with the BTK Killer. They created a personality profile and offered ongoing advice throughout the investigation on how to keep the suspect communicating with the police and media without alienating him. This advice included assigning one person to be the designated go-between to establish the trusting relationship between that person and the suspect that would be needed to get Rader to give himself away. Because of

this, a rapport was established between Rader and Lt. Ken Landwehr, the head of the multiagency task force, to the extent that Rader referred to the lieutenant by his first name and trusted him not to trace the floppy disk he sent into the police back to him (Hansen, 2006). The communication between Landwehr and Rader that led to his apprehension began in January of 2005, when a postcard was sent to the Wichita T.V. station describing the location of two packages. One package contained additional details about the Otero murders, and the other contained the first floppy disk, requesting for safe and confidential communication with the police (Nicolaou, 2019). The police lied, claiming it wouldn't be possible to trace the floppy disks back to a particular computer. They responded to Rader by taking out an ad in the classified section of the local newspaper, as they had been instructed to do so by Rader, saying, "Rex, it will be OK." As a result, a few weeks later another disk was sent by Rader to the local T.V. station, that was traced back to Rader through the computer at his church. Once apprehended, Rader exclaimed his astonishment at being deceived by his friend, Lt. Ken Landwehr (Hansen, 2006).

#### The Serial Killer's Legacy

Despite having ceased killing for years, Rader was discovered to have been planning another murder at the time of his arrest. He admitted during his confession that he intended to finish his book about himself, which was to be placed in a safe deposit box under an assumed name and discovered only after his death. Similar to many serial killers, Rader had a desire to be involved with law enforcement, as he had a job as a code enforcement officer. Although Rader's behavior indicated that media attention was important to him and an essential motivator for his crimes, there is

disagreement among profilers over how common it is for serial killers in general to want such attention from the public, media, and police. Retired FBI agent Roy Hazelwood, one of the agency's original profilers, considered Rader's frequent communication with the police and media to be unusual, claiming that most serial killers do not communicate with the authorities and especially not to that extent. However, retired FBI profiler, Robert Ressler, a specialist in violent criminal offenders, says that such behavior is typical of serial killers, as they seek attention for their crimes to tend to their fragile egos (Hansen, 2006).

### Son of Sam

Around the same time that Rader was looking for national recognition for his crimes, Son of Sam had quite literally made a name for himself in New York City. David Berkowitz, labeled by the media as the "44-Caliber Killer" and by himself as the "Son of Sam," began a two-year killing career in New York City during the years 1976 and 1977 before being apprehended. He was known to stalk young women with long, brown hair before shooting them, often also killing or harming whomever they were with at the time (Miller, 2014). In the end, he murdered five women and one man, in addition to wounding seven others. Throughout this time, Berkowitz wrote two letters, the first that he left behind at a crime scene and the second that he sent into The News Building, addressed to a columnist at the *New York Daily News*. The *New York Daily News* followed the killings of Son of Sam from his first murder on July 29<sup>th</sup>, 1976 to his apprehension on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1977 ("The Hunt for Son of Sam," 2017).

### The First Reports

The first *New York Daily News* article published about the Son of Sam killings was on July 30<sup>th</sup>, 1976, reporting about how two young girls were shot while sitting in a car, resulting in the death of one and injury to the other (Duddy, 1976). The second shooting was reported on November 28<sup>th</sup>, when another two girls were shot at on the street near one of their homes. The two victims were both injured, and the article stated that the detective said, "It appeared to be an indiscriminate thing... A horrendous street shooting" (para. 5), not yet linking the two crimes, as the first took place in the Bronx and the second in Queens (Pugh, 1976). Despite two more attacks on January 30<sup>th</sup>, 1977 and March 8<sup>th</sup>, it was not until a report on April 18<sup>th</sup> that the offenses were connected. In this article, the killer was referred to as the ".44-Cal. Slayer" and linked to the previous deaths and the recent murder on April 17<sup>th</sup> of a young woman and her fatally wounded boyfriend, both shot in a parked car. The murders were linked through the same handgun that was used, and it was identified in the article that the offender's target appeared to be young women with brown hair. It was also revealed that the killer left behind a letter at the latest crime scene but that the contents remain classified by the police (Davila & Liff, 1977).

### Communication to the Media, Police, and Public

Despite the reports that the police intended to keep the contents of the letter left by the killer a secret from the public, only a day after the previous article, a second article revealed details of the letter. The April 19<sup>th</sup> article reported how the letter was found on the front seat of the victim's car, addressed to Captain Joseph Borrelli, the Commander of the Queens homicide squad. The writers claimed that the police refused to discuss the contents of the note; and thus, the information they received came from

another official source, who referred to the killer as a “real sicko” who was “taunting the police and daring them to catch him.” The article included an excerpt from the letter, where the killer stated that he “lives in a nightmare world where he sees blood-sucking vampires and Frankenstein monster,” presenting the killer as someone who appears to be psychotic. In addition to threatening to “do it again,” the killer also confirmed that he read the newspaper accounts of the murders and was actively following the ongoing investigation, expressing his belief that the police didn’t know what they were doing. In a seemingly taunting manner, the article quoted their source as saying that the killer was most likely “an ugly man who has trouble with girls” (Federici & Meskil, 1977, para. 11).

#### Contact with the Media

Before committing another crime, Berkowitz wrote another letter that was addressed in a June 3<sup>rd</sup> article. This time, the letter was meant for Jimmy Breslin, a Daily News columnist, rather than the police. The reason the letter was likely addressed to the reporter was that the police refused to discuss the case, while the *New York Daily News* was making his crimes front-page news and providing the killer with more fame and notoriety than he could have imagined.

The second letter wished detectives luck in their hunt for him and contained emotional references to Donna Lauria, Berkowitz’s first victim. Berkowitz threatened in the letter that he would keep killing, saying it is a compulsion to kill, and the number of victims would not stop at five (Edmonds, 1977).

Another article on June 4<sup>th</sup> included this quote from the second letter: “Don’t think because you haven’t heard from (me) for a while that I went to sleep. No, rather, I am

still here like a spirit roaming the night. Thirsty, hungry, seldom stopping to rest; anxious to please Sam. I love my work. Now, the void has been filled” (Singleton, 1977, para. 1). Again, the second letter mentioned how the killer followed the news stories and, this time, said that he was a regular reader of Breslin’s column. Unlike the first letter, the second one included Berkowitz asking that the news media stop writing about Son of Sam because he did not want the publicity (Singleton, 1977). It may be that the insulting response to his first letter from the April 19<sup>th</sup> source, where the killer was referred to as “an ugly man who has trouble with girls,” resulted in Son of Sam’s souring on his own publicity (Federici & Meskil, 1977).

On June 5<sup>th</sup>, Breslin responded to Son of Sam’s letter in another article, telling Berkowitz to give himself up to the authorities. The majority of the article was dedicated to describing Breslin’s visit with Donna Lauria’s parents after he received Son of Sam’s letter. Included in the article were quotes from his meeting with the parents showing how much they have been affected by their loss. In the letter, Son of Sam had referred to Lauria as a “very sweet girl but Sam’s a thirsty lad, and he won’t let me stop killing until he gets his fill of blood” (Breslin, 1977, para. 10), which Breslin responds to by saying, “the hope is that the killer realizes that he is controlled by Sam... The only way for the killer to leave this special torment is to give himself up to me, if he trusts me, or to the police, and receive both help and safety” (Breslin, 1977, para. 34). Breslin hoped to appeal to the killer’s sense of lack of control to convince Berkowitz that giving himself up would be the best solution to get help and gain control of his life (Breslin, 1977).

## Communications and Identifying Features

A June 6<sup>th</sup> article revealed more details about the second letter, specifically about how Son of Sam signed it at the end. The killer provided a list of names that he could be referred to, which the police spent time trying to identify as an actual person and suspect with no success. The article emphasized that these names provided were most likely a distraction and meant to mislead the police in their investigation (Edmonds, 1977). On June 26<sup>th</sup>, Son of Sam once again attacked, wounding a couple in their car in Queens. Before the attack, Son of Sam had called into the Northern Blvd. Police Station in Bayside, where the attack happened, and said that he was going to “hit Bayside” the next week. As a result, patrols were increased in the area, but it was not possible to prevent the incident (Edmonds & Meskil, 1977). After the June 26<sup>th</sup> attack, articles addressing the formation of a special task force (Federici, Cosgrove, & Meskil, 1977), a possible Jekyll and Hyde personality of Son of Sam (Federici & Moritz, 1977), and speculation about Son of Sam’s motive being linked to his dad or friend’s death were released (Federici & Moritz, 1977).

On July 1<sup>st</sup>, Pete Hamill, a journalist for the *New York Daily News*, appealed directly to Son of Sam in an article. The article contained many logical reasons supporting why Son of Sam should turn himself in, but it is questionable whether one can reason with a serial killer who is suspected of having a psychotic disorder. Hamill tells Son of Sam, “You cannot kill everyone in this city, you cannot kill every young woman with long, dark hair” (Hamill, 1977, para. 2). Later, on July 28<sup>th</sup>, Breslin published another article, as it had been precisely a year since Son of Sam began killing. The article included an interview Breslin did with the police, where the inspector

claimed Son of Sam could not take the pressure of being in a club full of young girls, in relation to Son of Sam's June 26<sup>th</sup> attack outside of a club. "He'd fall apart... You know he was waiting outside. That's his spot. Alone in the dark," the inspector said, further on describing Son of Sam as "alone and mean" (Breslin, 1977, paras. 4-6). Also in the article, Breslin recognizes how writing about Son of Sam gives Son of Sam the power he wants, saying, "He who would be God with the lives of young women can also use his great power to direct the newspapers to write what he wants and when he wants it" (Breslin, 1977, para. 18). Breslin says this because Son of Sam had sent him the letter about Lauria, which led Breslin to further write about Lauria, which was what Son of Sam had intended to happen (Breslin, 1977). On July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1977, Son of Sam took his last life. However, in this murder, his victim had blonde instead of dark or brown hair (Raine, 1977). While potentially unrelated to Hamill's article, the murder of a blonde woman could have been Son of Sam's response to the article stating that he could not kill every woman with "long, dark hair" (Hamill, 1977).

#### The Capture and Arrest of David Berkowitz

On August 11<sup>th</sup>, a *New York Daily News* article reported the arrest of David Berkowitz, the Son of Sam, on August 10<sup>th</sup>, 1977. Berkowitz was a 24-year-old mailman with a psychiatric record. The police were able to find him because of a parking ticket he received for illegally parking near his last crime scene. Around the same time, a woman had contacted the police with a detailed description of what the suspect looked like, as she had seen him soon after he claimed his last set of victims. Once the police tracked Berkowitz's car back to his home address, they searched the car and found the 44-caliber Bulldog revolver that was used to commit the crimes and

writing that resembled the writing on his letters to the police and the media (Moritz, Oreskes, Davila, & Doyle, 1977). After the arrest, on August 12<sup>th</sup>, an article was written about how the *New York Daily News* and the police had been cooperating from the beginning. Prints had been found on the two letters, which the press had agreed to withhold from the public to prevent Son of Sam from communicating with them further. The prints were then used to rule out other potential suspects. In addition, the police told the newspaper to print the letter sent to Breslin in an attempt to encourage communication between Son of Sam and the press, and a police psychologist reviewed Breslin's response (Oliver, 1977).

#### D.C. Snipers

Like Rader and Berkowitz, the D.C. Snipers communicated with the media. However, while Rader and Berkowitz left behind detailed letters, the D.C. Snipers had a different method of communication that was more focused and concise. In 2002, John Allen Muhammad and his 17-year-old protégé, John Lee Malvo, murdered ten people in the Washington, D.C. area. Using a single hunting rifle, they shot their victims from the trunk of an old car (Miller, 2014). John Allen Muhammad's killing spree, however, did not begin with the killing of strangers. Eight months before the killings in D.C., John Allen Muhammad came to the door of Keenya Cook's house in Tacoma, Washington, and shot her in the face with a .45 caliber handgun when she answered the door. Keenya Cook's aunt, who had sided with John Allen Muhammad's wife during divorce proceedings, was the intended target. After Cook's murder, John Allen Muhammad fled Tacoma, Washington, with John Lee Malvo. On their way to Washington, D.C., they killed in Alabama and Louisiana before arriving in D.C. in October, 2002 (Hickey, 2018).

While they narrowly missed a shopper on October 2<sup>nd</sup>, there were no more misses after. They shot at strangers in public areas, while people were getting gas, shopping, and mowing the lawn. Because of the unpredictability of the attacks, schools were placed on lockdown, and people avoided going outside (Hickey, 2018).

#### Impact of the Media

In an attempt by the Montgomery County Executive Douglas Duncan and Chief Charles Moose of the Montgomery Police to reduce the public's fear after the first five killings had all taken place within a two-mile radius inside of Montgomery County, Maryland over a mere 16 hours, public schools were declared safe havens (Turvey & McGrath, 2009). Also, the media reported that all the victims had been adults and that children did not appear to be the target. The next day, however, a 13-year-old boy being dropped off at school was shot and killed. Left behind at the crime scene was a tarot card with the message "Dear Policeman, I am God" written on it, appearing as a response to the previous day's claims, the shooter's way of telling law enforcement that he heard the media's report and had the power to kill anyone, even children.

On October 19<sup>th</sup>, a note was found at the scene where a man was shot and critically injured. The note stated again that the sniper was God, and it blamed five of the deaths on police incompetence, especially with regard to their failure to respond to the sniper's phone calls. Also included was a bank account number, credit card data, and a pin number so the authorities could deposit a sum of ten million dollars in order to stop the killings. The note said, "Your children are not safe anywhere at any time," as if to clarify that the previous attack on the 13-year-old boy was in direct response to the police and media's message to the public that children were safe (Hickey, 2018).

John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo took their last victim on October 22<sup>nd</sup>. By then, they were linked to the Alabama killings, and Washington state police found ballistic evidence linking John Allen Muhammad to their crimes there. The Montgomery County Police Chief released a notice that they were wanted for questioning for the Beltway killings. Additionally they released information that the killers would likely be driving a blue Chevrolet Caprice with a New Jersey license plate. On October 24<sup>th</sup>, the two were found sleeping in the car and were arrested. In total, they had killed 13 people and wounded 3 (Hickey, 2018).

After the arrest, an article was released on the 26<sup>th</sup>, detailing the contents of the letter left behind by the snipers (Dakss, 2002). The four-page letter was shared with the press by a federal law enforcement source. The article stated that the goal of the letter was to make contact with the police, as it provided a number for a phone booth and told the authorities to wait for a call if they wanted to avoid more deaths (Dakss, 2002).

#### Misleading Elements of the Investigation

Throughout the D.C. Sniper investigation, there were two major misleading aspects that kept the police looking elsewhere for suspects. Despite the later discovery that John Allen Muhammad and John Lee Malvo were driving in a blue Chevrolet Caprice, there were multiple reports of a white Chevy Astro Van leaving the crime scenes. This was an important detail that misled the investigators (Hickey, 2018).

In addition to the car, the suspected profile of the sniper was flawed. The investigators didn't expect there to be two snipers. They also did not suspect that the snipers would be African American and one would be only 17 years old (Hickey, 2018).

## IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to determine if news media has any effect on a serial killer's behavior prior to apprehension. The disagreement between retired FBI agents Roy Hazelwood and Robert Ressler, concerning whether it is usual for serial killers to desire communication and recognition from the police and media, is addressed by the case studies of the BTK Killer, Son of Sam, the D.C. Snipers, and many others. From these cases, it is apparent that it is not unusual for serial killers to not only follow media coverage of their crimes and the police investigation, but also to communicate with the police and media and react to news reports in potentially dangerous ways.

In total, Dennis Rader, the BTK Killer, sent 19 messages to the police and media, of which 10 of them were sent within the year of his arrest (Nicolaou, 2019). The increase in the frequency of these messages within that last year parallels the increased frequency of murders that usually occur as a serial killer progresses through the stages of the cycle, and the compulsive and violent nature of the offender's fantasies begin to dominate their lives (Holmes & Holmes, 2008). Because of this parallel, at least for Dennis Rader, it would seem that the media attention gained from his crimes provided similar intrinsic motivators for him as the killing itself. In addition, it was evident that Rader was also motivated to send in messages to the media and police to gain national attention as evidenced by this words: "How many do I have to kill before I get a name in the paper or some national recognition" (Nicolaou, 2019).

Despite claiming he did not want the publicity, Son of Sam sent two letters, one addressed to a police captain and the other to a *New York Daily News* columnist, where he admitted to following the media coverage and police investigation. When a *New*

*York Daily News* article revealed the contents of his first letter, along with the information that the police had refused to divulge, Berkowitz addressed his next letter to the *New York Daily News* columnist rather than the police. This seems to indicate that Berkowitz wanted his letter exposed and the media attention on himself and the crimes he initiated. After Pete Hamill wrote an article about Son of Sam, where he told Son of Sam, "You cannot kill everyone in this city, you cannot kill every young woman with long, dark hair," Berkowitz killed a young woman with blonde hair (Hamill, 1977, para. 2). As this diverted from Berkowitz's usual target victim, it appears to have been a response to the article or statement that he didn't like.

Like Son of Sam, the D.C. Snipers did more than just follow their media coverage. As a response to the police assuring the public that public schools would be safe havens and the media reporting that children were not the apparent target, the D.C. Snipers shot a 13-year-old boy the following day (Turvey & McGrath, 2009). Later, they left a note behind, declaring, "Your children are not safe anywhere at any time" (Hickey, 2018).

As the BTK Killer, Son of Sam, and the D.C. Snipers all followed the media coverage of their crimes and the police investigation and had some level of communication with the police and media, the characterization that serial killers follow the news and police investigation is legitimate. Knowledge of this characteristic was used successfully in the BTK Killer case to apprehend Dennis Rader, as the police established a line of communication between themselves and Rader and used the rapport between Rader and Lt. Landwehr to locate and arrest Rader (Hansen, 2006). If the importance of this characteristic of serial killers received more recognition, it could

be a useful tool in serial killer investigations. Because successfully using the knowledge of serial killers' tendency to follow and communicate with the media would involve some level of collaboration between the media and police, Public Information Officers (PIOs) could potentially play a more significant role in this effort. The PIO role was developed initially to organize information released in order to manage the public audience's perception of the news, and the audience includes those who commit the crimes, as well as the general public (Motschall & Cao, 2002).

While working with the media could aid in the apprehension of serial killers, it is also essential to control what the media releases about potential suspects to prevent triggering a dangerous reaction, as evidenced by the targeting of the 13-year-old boy by the D.C. Snipers and the blonde, young woman by Berkowitz. Although the three cases discussed were unique because of the two-way communication between the offenders and the police and media, such a connection is not necessary to utilize the media in serial killer investigations. Even though many serial killers do not communicate directly with the police, they do follow the media stories, even if it is just for the purpose of knowing if the police have identified any suspects and are hot on the killer's tail. Because of this, the police, profilers, and media can utilize media coverage to provoke and entice killers to communicate. A collaborative effort between profilers, police, and the media, with the help of PIOs to aid in controlling the information released to the public and the serial killer consequently, can prevent dangerous responses to media reports from violent, mentally unstable offenders and serial killers and subsequently aid in apprehension efforts.

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