



The “*Serial* Effect” and the True Crime Podcast Ecosystem

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ABSTRACT

Recently, true crime podcasting has exploded. These podcasts organizations mobilize resources, compete with other organizations, gain legitimacy, and focus on sustaining foundings and preventing mortalities. This study uses a mixed methods approach to explore this media phenomenon from the perspective of organizational ecology. A demography of true crime podcasts was conducted and population density over time was calculated. Content analysis of news articles mentioning “true crime podcasts” was conducted to understand how journalists from other media organizations act as legitimacy agents to confer public legitimacy on organizations within the population. Explanation of the true crime podcasts’ ecosystem is provided, as well as evidence of growing public legitimacy.


KEYWORDS

Podcast; true crime; organizational ecology; legitimacy; density; population demography

In late 2014, the podcast *Serial*, which explored the investigation of the 1999 murder of Hae Min Lee and the subsequent trial and conviction of Adnan Syed, became the fastest podcast at the time to reach five million downloads (Roberts 2014). At initial release, each *Serial* episode was being downloaded an average of 1.2 million times (Merry 2014), and it remained in the iTunes Top 100 for over 1,100 straight days (iTunes Chart 2019). The buzz around the project was unusual, but especially so for a podcast, a just-over-a-decade-old medium that had been generally relegated to public radio replays, comedy talk shows, and distance-learning lectures (e.g., Berry 2015; Meserko 2015).

The popularity of *Serial* has been credited with spurring an interest not only in general podcast listening, but also in other true crime narratives, a phenomenon that became known as the “*Serial* effect” (Vogt 2016). This group or “population” of true crime podcasts is an exemplar of a media genre operating as an ecological system; that is, in sociological terms, the podcasts within this genre exist in a “niche” which shapes the evolution of their organizational form and the way they are perceived by their creators, fans, and other media outlets (Barton 2009; Dimmick 2003; Lowrey 2012). Various popular media have credited *Serial* with the growth of this population (e.g., Rao 2018), while others point to concurrent factors, such as the evolution of audio technology (e.g., Berry 2015; Vogt 2016). While other studies have examined small segments of this population (e.g., Boling and Hull 2018; Doane, McCormick, and Sorce 2017; Greer 2017), no population

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level analysis has been conducted, leaving scholars to speculate about the breadth of the phenomenon, including just how widespread it may have been before *Serial's* mass-market takeover. This analysis addresses these gaps in our knowledge. Using organizational ecology theory as a framework, two methods were used in this study. A population analysis of true crime podcasts was conducted to better understand the demography of this population, including founding dates and failures, while a content analysis explores how journalists position true crime podcasts' public legitimacy over time. Together, these methods help explain this media ecosystem and offer a snapshot of this population at a time of pivotal growth (its "tipping point," Berry 2015, 171). This analysis is not focused on the creators of these podcasts but instead on the larger sociological factors, such as industry density and evaluation by other media outlets, that have influenced the growth and acceptance of the true crime podcast genre.

The Growth of the True Crime Podcast

In 2004, Hammersley (2004) coined the term "podcasting" to describe new technology around web-based audio production. Despite the praise of podcasting's possibilities, the medium remained underused throughout the following decade. Bottomley (2015) notes the role that evolving technology played in podcast dissemination during those years, moving from audio to RSS feeds, then RSS to iPod, and blossoming when the Apple upgrade of 2014 made podcasts a part of every iPhone's default interface. In 2006, only 22% of Americans even knew what a podcast was. By 2018, that number was up to 64%, with 17% of respondents having listened to a podcast in the last week (Edison Research 2018). Early academic research primarily focused on the educational uses of the medium (e.g., Drew 2017; Skiba 2006). Building on the post-*Serial* zeitgeist, the *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* devoted a 2015 symposium to podcast media, representing a shift in the way communication researchers discussed podcasts (e.g., Bottomley 2015; Johnson 2015).

True crime as a sub-genre¹ of journalism and entertainment existed long before *In Cold Blood*, but Capote's work represented a shift to longform, narrative crime storytelling as pure entertainment (Browder 2010; Punnett 2018), and true crime media has only continued to grow in popularity. Throughout the life of the genre, true crime has grappled with a dichotomy: on one hand, narratives uphold "law and order" and function as "morality tales" (Browder 2010, 126), while also centering criminals, grisly details, and subversive characters. True crime has always co-existed with journalism, with journalists often toeing a line between traditional reporting and crime entertainment, a balance that crime writer and investigator Ann Rule acknowledged in one of true crime's most famous tomes, *The Stranger Beside Me* (Rule 1980).

One of the fastest growing mediums in the true crime genre today is true crime podcasts. While there are true crime podcasts that pre-date *Serial* (e.g., *Generation Why*, 2012, and *True Murder*, 2010), many post-*Serial* podcasts, like *Undisclosed* and *Suspect Convictions*, address past criticism of the true crime genre, such as how people of color, the poor, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and other marginalized members of society were often portrayed as the criminals in true crime, but seldom as the victims. These podcasts provide a platform for voiceless victims and have been described as more "legitimate," less tawdry portrayals of crime storytelling than earlier true crime narratives (e.g., Browder 2010;

Doane, McCormick, and Sorce 2017; Greer 2017; Tiffe and Hoffmann 2017). For the purposes of this study, the way that journalists describe this new form of true crime can help us to understand how its reputation as a genre has evolved with the explosive growth of the podcast.

The True-Crime Podcast Ecosystem and Organizational Ecology

Organizational ecology is a sociological approach to understanding how organizations are affected by and evolve to fit their environments, and how political, social, and economic forces act on organizations (e.g., Dimmick 2003; Hannan and Freeman 1977, 1989; Lowrey 2012; Polos, Hannan, and Carroll 2002; Weber, Faulk, and Monge 2016). These forces may be as small as a change in regulation (e.g., Greve, Pozner, and Rao 2006) or as large as the invention of entire new technologies, like the internet. Organizational ecology considers both internal, organizational (endogenous) forces and external, environmental (exogenous) forces as an explanation for why organizations form, change, succeed, or fail.

From the perspective of organizational ecology, the true crime podcast population exists in a *niche*, that is, a supportive space conducive to the evolution of similar organizations with comparable resource requirements. These related organizations form a population (Baum and Shipilov 2006). While “niche” and “population” are closely related terms, there are subtle theoretical differences relevant to the current study. The niche is broadly defined as the relationship between the population and environment; niche refers specifically to characteristics that define organizations within a population (Dimmick 2003; Hannan and Freeman 1989). In the past, population niches were largely determined by technological domain (e.g., newspapers; Carroll and Hannan 1989); however, digitalization has complicated this taxonomy. While geography may still be a constraint for some types of media (think local news markets), the internet has changed how other kinds of media interact and how their niches are determined. Dimmick (2003) tied ecological research to the Uses and Gratifications approach (Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch 1973), coining the term “niche gratifications.” In economic terms, gratifications equal the utility of a particular media—gratifications represent the benefits consumers gain from using the media. Media niches may also be determined by genre, as particular genres may serve different user gratifications (Barton 2009; Lowrey 2012). From the perspective of media producers, such as podcast hosts, belonging to a particular niche (like true crime) affects audience expectations, ethical norms, advertising, creative choices, and competition.

While population members may have some dissimilarities, organizations within a population niche will share characteristics, such as resource dependence, collective identity, core technologies, market strategies, or organizational structure. These “clusters of features,” as well as socially defined boundaries, determine the organizational forms within a population (Hannan and Freeman 1989; Polos, Hannan, and Carroll 2002). Organizational form, perhaps more so than any other feature, is a cultural product defined by how those outside the organization perceive it (Polos, Hannan, and Carroll 2002). Internal and external stakeholders in a population (i.e., producers, audience, competitors) have socially constructed ideas about similarities and differences among organizations which may result in constraints to what is acceptable or who “belongs” in a population. While

organizational forms may shift throughout the life cycle of an organization based on endogenous and exogenous pressures, organizations may still belong to a population if they are perceived to fit within socially recognized boundaries or have relational ties to other similar organizations (Tilly 1986); “positioning” is the negotiation of organizational fit within the societally accepted boundaries of a form. In some cases, these boundaries are not clear, and organizations risk angering constituents or losing legitimacy if they violate expectations based on their perceived form. As an example, think of a familiar organizational form, the traditional newspaper. This paper is recognized as belonging to a niche of similar media organizations that follow specific professional and organizational norms which dictate everything from ethical reporting standards to visual layouts to advertising. Should at some point this newspaper stop meeting those standards—perhaps by sloppy reporting or questionable ethics—it might, over time, be seen as a less legitimate member of the population or be rejected outright for being outside the socially accepted boundaries of the traditional newspaper form.

Legitimacy

As noted in the above example, organizational legitimacy may be achieved through meeting accepted standards of organizational form. Public legitimacy is a widespread acceptance “...that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Suchman 1995, 574; see also Deephouse 1996). Legitimacy is negotiated and conferred by accepted social actors or “legitimacy agents” (Deephouse and Suchman 2008), and, as with form, legitimacy can be a product of communicative processes, as stakeholders negotiate, redefine, and position within the boundaries of what is “appropriate” (Weber, Faulk, and Monge 2016).

Cognitive legitimacy is one dimension of public legitimacy. It is “taken for-grantedness,” that is, an organizational form no longer has to be explained and is viewed as an appropriate way of accomplishing goals. Lowrey (2012) assessed cognitive legitimacy of blogs. At a certain point, news media stopped defining blogs, thus signaling public awareness of what a “web log” was and that cognitive legitimacy had been reached. Mere mentions by media of an organizational form serve as both a source and indicator of legitimacy. While increased public discussion about a form (in the case above, a new media format) may signal “this is becoming important and worth writing about,” a decrease in mentions may also indicate that the form (or technology) has become so ubiquitous that it is no longer unusual or newsworthy (Deephouse and Suchman 2008). Another dimension of public legitimacy is normative legitimacy, or the degree to which an entity is accepted as consistent with wider beliefs and norms (Scott 2013). Achieving normative legitimacy means that an organization or organizational form is seen as upholding certain societal values, or of being beneficial in some way. This is especially relevant to the study of true crime products, burdened by historic associations with sensationalism and vulgarity. Organizations may lose legitimacy by failing to meet their goals or may lose support if their core values are deemed unacceptable or not in accord with larger socio-political institutions (e.g., Hirsch and Andrews 1984). In either case, a loss of legitimacy will make an organization more likely to fail.

Legitimacy may be conceptualized as both a resource for organizations and a defining feature. While the mobilization of resources may be a source of legitimacy (Lowrey 2012), a lack of legitimacy may block organizational access to resources. An organizational form may also be perceived as legitimate through receiving attention from institutions (e.g., competitors, legacy media). The legitimation of this form will in turn signal to nascent organizations that a population is a “safe bet,” thus increasing their willingness to join the population and increasing the density of that population. Alternatively, increasing density (see below) of a population may signal to important outsiders (e.g., institutions, other populations, new organizations) that a population is legitimate. The processes of legitimation and density growth may happen in either order, or in tandem (e.g., Weber, Faulk, and Monge 2016).

Density

Density refers to the number of organizations within a population at a given time. Growth rates are density dependent, in that populations may expand or contract based on the ability of member organizations to acquire resources (Baum 2000). The density of a population will be correlated with resource availability as newer or smaller organizations are “selected out” of a population if they are not able to adapt, either by failing or by moving to another niche with better “fit.” Newer populations will be more heterogenous, while more established populations will tend toward *isomorphism*, or mimicry of the most optimal forms (Aldrich and Pfeffer 1976; Baum 2000; Hannan and Freeman 1977; Lowrey 2012).

For digital or emerging media populations, barriers to entry are low, and the carrying capacity of the niche is less fixed so that the maximum number of entities supported may depend on factors beyond traditional resources (Lowrey 2012). Digital media, like podcasts, is less constrained by geographic space and less physical capital is involved. These low barriers to entry also allow for easier access by media start-ups, many of whom organize and maintain themselves based on interests beyond financial gains, though they may evolve over time in order to secure legitimacy and resources (Lowrey 2011). Utility to the audience is an important consideration in how these media compete and survive. With population maturation, the market becomes saturated and resources become scarce, leading some organizations to fail. Those that survive by remobilizing or restructuring are less likely to fail in the long term (Aldrich and Pfeffer 1976; Baum 2000; Baum and Shipilov 2006; Hannan and Freeman 1977).

Ecology and the True Crime Podcast Population

In the present study, density and legitimacy are the population characteristics of interest. While popular media has presented *Serial* as the impetus for the growth of true crime podcasts, it is unlikely that the astronomical popularity of a single media product fully explains the explosive growth of the genre. By examining how the true crime population niche has grown over time, as well as its level of public legitimacy, this study seeks to lay a foundation for continued exploration of this phenomenon. Considering both the suggestions of prior literature and questions that arise from popular and trade press discussions of true crime podcasts, this study addresses several research questions. The first seeks to

better understand the true crime podcast ecosystem from the perspective of foundings, failures, and density over time. The remaining questions explore the state of public legitimacy for true crime podcasts, including cognitive legitimacy of the medium, normative legitimacy of the genre, and how journalists (in this case, acting as legitimacy agents) have positioned true crime podcasts in relation to other true crime media, other podcasts, and societal, normative values.

RQ1: What is the nature of the ecological context for true crime podcasts?

RQ2a: What is the state of public legitimacy for true crime podcasts?

RQ2b: How do journalists position true crime podcasts in relation to other true crime media?

Method

A mixed-methods study design was utilized, including a population demography and content analysis. These methods provide demographic evidence of the shape and density of the true crime podcast population and its changing public legitimacy. Individual podcasts in this study are treated as single organizations, similarly to Lowrey's (2012) analysis of the health blog population. In actuality, many of these podcasts may be more accurately described as "pre-organizations" (Lowrey 2012) or "organizations-in-creation" (Katz and Gartner 1988). Pre-organizations exhibit characteristics of intention to become organizations, mobilization and competition for resources, boundary negotiation, and exchange of knowledge with other organizations and individuals. Populations inclusive of pre-organizations will have greater diversity of organizational forms as organizations-in-creation experiment with form (Katz and Gartner 1988). A small number of members of this population are different podcasts produced by a single organization. For the purpose of this study, these podcasts have been treated as individual operations regardless of their parent production company.

Population Analysis

The method of population analysis attempts to identify as many members of a population as possible in order to make conclusions about organizational foundings and mortalities and to determine density over time. Population analysis is one of the most widely used methodologies for ecological research (Monge et al. 2011), and this process is based on previous population studies—of computer firms (Kennedy 2008), blogs (Lowrey 2012), social networking sites (Weber, Faulk, and Monge 2016), and fact-checking sites (Lowrey 2017).

Podcasts are defined as web-based audio productions regardless of length or mode of distribution (e.g., iTunes, Stitcher, creator websites), delivered as digital audio files via RSS to websites or apps, and which are automatically "pushed" to subscribers (Bottomley 2015). The term "podcast" may refer to the production as a whole, such as all three seasons of *Serial*, or may refer to a single episode. "Podcast" in this study refers to the entire production, regardless of number of episodes. Due to low barriers to entry, it is nearly impossible to find every podcast available. As of April 2018, there were over 525,000 active podcasts of multiple genres and over 50 billion-episode downloads

(Locker 2018), not accounting for inactive but still accessible podcasts and inactive and inaccessible podcasts. Genre categories are also limited, and often do not include a “true crime” category, instead separating podcasts into larger genres. For example, popular podcast *My Favorite Murder*, is listed as “Comedy” by Apple podcasts, while other true crime podcasts are listed as “News & Politics,” “Society & Culture,” or “History.”

Punnett (2018) wrote “there is no overarching theory that determines what is and what is not true crime” (2) and posited seven themes common to the true crime genre. Not every true crime product will exhibit all themes, but all true crime media will exhibit some. The first theme, *teleology*, is shared across the genre. This requires that a true crime narrative be true, or at minimum purport to be non-fiction—there is an effort to portray the story in a factual (even if not objective) way. Other themes include seeking justice (e.g., centering of victims); subversion of the status quo (e.g., questioning verdicts or interrogating societal norms); locality (e.g., geographic place and time of events is vital to the narrative); forensics (e.g., the systematic and scientific elements of criminology); and vocative and folkloric elements (e.g., non-neutral narrators, emotional appeal, or a “lesson” imbedded in the story; Punnett 2018). All of the podcasts included in this analysis meet multiple, if not all, of Punnett’s criteria.

A multi-step process was used to identify the population. Searches of multiple databases, websites, and Redditt threads were used to identify as many true crime podcasts as possible. Podcast descriptions were searched for clues that podcasts met the teleological, justice, locality, and forensic criteria for a true crime narrative (Punnett 2018). Some descriptions directly state, “this is a podcast about true crime,” which was also considered sufficient criteria for inclusion. Multiple sources were used in order to capture very new, less popular, and independently distributed podcasts, utilizing the same criteria for inclusion. A total of 749 unique podcasts were identified through all searches as of 28 November 2018. The earliest population entry identified was 14 December 2005, while the most recent was 7 November 2018 (See Table 1).

Table 1. True crime podcasts identified as of 28 November 2018.

| Source | Search terms used/Documents analyzed | Unique Podcasts Identified |
|---|--|----------------------------|
| True crime sub-Reddit (Boling and Hull 2018; True Crime Podcasts 2016) | N/A | 169 |
| iTunes Top 100 English language charts July 2011–November 2018* | “true crime;” related terms in podcast descriptions such as “investigative,” “unsolved,” “disappearance,” “cold case.” | 26 |
| Toppodcast.com Top 200 and database | “crime,” “criminal justice,” “prison,” “justice,” “innocence,” “conviction,” “incarceration,” “murder,” “missing person,” “investigate,” “forensic.” | 322 |
| Whatpods.com | November 2018 true crime recommendations list | 10 |
| True Crime Podcast sub-Reddit thread | 597 posts from first post February 2015 to November 2018 | 93 |
| The True Crime Podcast Database (Hendricks 2020)** | N/A | 100 |
| Google searches for additional lists (Nelson 2018; Playerfm 2018; Vulture Editors 2018) | “true crime” + “podcast” | 29 |
| Total | | 749 |

* The Wayback Machine internet archive (<https://archive.org>) was used to search iTunes charts to the earliest date available; English language charts include United States, United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia

** This list is an open, crowd-sourced spreadsheet, moderated by Hendricks for accuracy.

In March 2019, the search process was repeated for the original time period (December 2005 to 28, November 2018). This was done for several reasons. First, Hendricks (2020) True Crime Database had gone through several updates and added podcasts from the latter half of 2018, as well as English-language podcasts from New Zealand and South Africa. Secondly, it is often difficult to discover very new podcasts (as most early promotion is “word of mouth”) unless they have backing and promotion from a network. When searched several months later, these podcasts are easier to find, and previously undiscovered podcasts from the later months of the search can be identified. Finally, based on Hendricks (2020) and inclusions in popular-press rankings of “true crime podcasts,” the original search criteria were extended to include terrorism, cults, and political and financial crimes. See Table 2.

The final updated podcast list included 1,152 true crime podcasts that first aired prior to 28 November 2018. These multiple sources—databases, Reddit threads, and links from other podcasts—were included in the analysis in order to avoid the pitfalls of over-citing surviving organizations and undercounting early mortalities (e.g., Baum 2000). True crime podcasts of any type, including companion podcasts to television shows and other podcasts, were counted for this study. While the list is likely incomplete and is always changing, it offers a snapshot in time of the breadth of the population this study examines, including the wide variety of podcast types within the true crime genre. (See online supplement, Appendix)

The next step in the demography was recording dates of entry and exit from the population. Entries were recorded as the date of the first episode. Exits (mortalities) were recorded as the date of the final episode (where applicable). A final posting was counted as an *exit* only when no new episode had been posted in six months. Podcasts that record in seasons were counted as mortalities if a new season had not been announced or if their website or social media had not been updated in six months. Several mortalities were identified by social media or podcast-description announcements. The population also included many limited-arc series. These podcasts, often produced by news organizations, only tell one story, and all episodes are often released simultaneously. The final episode dates for these podcasts were noted and counted as mortalities. Of the 424 total mortalities, 200 were limited-arc podcasts.

Table 2. Unique true crime podcasts founded as of 28 November 2018 (March 2019 Search).

| Source | Search Terms used/Documents Analyzed | Unique podcasts identified |
|--|---|----------------------------|
| The True Crime Podcast Database (Hendricks 2020) | N/A | 366 |
| Toppodcast.com database | "crime," "criminal justice," "prison," "justice," "innocence," "conviction," "incarceration," "murder," "missing person," "investigate," "forensic," "cult," "white collar," "fraud," "terrorism," "politics + crime" | 33 |
| Google searches | "true crime" + "podcast" | 3 |
| True crime Podcast sub-Reddit thread | 214 new posts from November 2018 to March 2019 | 1 |
| iTunes Top 100 English language charts November 2018–March 2019* | | 0 |
| Whatpods.com | | 0 |
| Total from November 2018 and March 2019 search | | 1152 |

*New Zealand and South Africa were added to English language charts.

Content Analysis

A content analysis of media mentions of “true crime podcasts” in online newspapers was conducted to track public legitimacy. As media mentions can both confer and be evidence of legitimacy for organizational forms (Aldrich and Fiol 1994; Deephouse and Suchman 2008), this analysis helps clarify changes in the level of legitimacy of the true crime podcast genre across time. Kennedy (2008) calls this legitimation by media “becoming real” (270) and notes that categories of organizational forms gain strength and recognition as the public becomes more familiar with them. Additional qualitative content analysis of these articles was conducted in order to understand if comparisons to accepted or “legitimate” other forms of true crime media are used to position them within the genre or to confer normative and cognitive legitimacy.

The time from the earliest identified podcast to the completion of the demographic analysis was included because (1) the earliest mentions establish a baseline for discussion about the population. This helps to clarify whether “true crime podcasts” as a media type were already assumed to have legitimacy or if “true crime podcasting” was considered a new or novel medium at the time; and (2) mentions over time can work as measures of cognitive and normative legitimacy and may offer evidence of comparison and contrast to other podcast or media genres, thus providing information about boundary creation and negotiation. This method addresses cognitive legitimacy, or the “taken-for-grantedness” of a social entity (Aldrich and Fiol 1994)—here, an organizational form defined by genre. Defining “podcast” or “true crime podcast” illustrates that the author of the news article assumes the audience is not familiar with the medium. An absence of these mentions is evidence that writers expect the audience to be familiar with the term, thus illustrating cognitive legitimacy (Lowrey 2012). Normative legitimacy was measured by coding whether or not a positive judgement of the genre (true crime) or medium (true crime podcast) was present in the article. LexisNexis search of three daily national newspapers—*USA Today*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*—was conducted using the search terms “podcast” + “true crime.” These papers were selected because they are targeted to a broader, general audience, rather than specific entertainment or technology sectors, and publish without an expectation of specialized knowledge. Additionally, they have similar archival and search functions and are available through LexisNexis. Individual articles, including news, opinion, and entertainment, were coded. A total of 87 articles were identified, and the earliest of these articles was dated 14 January 2014. It is significant to note that, even when cross-checked by the outlets’ own archives and through a basic Google search, no other articles matching the search parameters were found prior to this date.

Scores for both normative and cognitive legitimacy were created by finding the mean of articles with evidence of cognitive or normative legitimacy. For cognitive legitimacy, whether or not a definition of either “true crime podcasts” or “podcasts” was provided in the article was coded as yes=1, no=0, then reverse coded for graphing and analysis. A reverse-coded score of 1 signals higher cognitive legitimacy as it suggests that the author assumes the average reader does not need a definition. Normative legitimacy was coded on two criteria: whether a positive evaluation of the true crime genre in general was made in the story and whether a positive evaluation of true crime podcasts was made. Whether stories made negative or neutral evaluations were coded as 0,

positive evaluations as 1. Evidence that journalists used comparison to other true crime podcasts or true crime media was also coded, and examples of comparison were saved. Articles containing comparisons to other true crime media were coded as evidence of Positioning, while articles in which a true crime podcast was compared to other podcasts were coded as evidence of Isomorphism (mimicry). Any additional unexpected comparisons or quotations from each article were also saved to a spreadsheet and labeled “emerging concepts.”

A second coder was used to establish reliability for the coding scheme. First, both coders analyzed the same five randomly selected articles but agreed on less than half of the codes. The code book was reevaluated, and the same coders analyzed five additional articles. After the second round of coding, agreement reached 83% (Krippendorff's $\alpha=.59$; Hayes and Krippendorff 2007). On the third round of coding – the formal intercoder reliability test – both coders analyzed 21 articles (24% of the total sample) and reached 95% intercoder agreement (Krippendorff's $\alpha=.78$). Using the final coding scheme agreed upon with the second coder, the researcher coded the remaining articles.

The emerging concepts spreadsheet was used as a guide for thematic analysis. Articles marked by the original two coders as containing comparisons or possibly valuable quotations were reexamined by the researcher. Each article was re-read and notes were taken for emerging thematic clusters. This process was repeated twice more to identify and clarify important concepts, discussed below.

Results

Population Analysis

The compilation of a sample that approached a population was completed on 10 March 2019. The population included 1,152 unique true crime podcasts. Births and exits (mortalities) for these podcasts were recorded. The earliest podcast entry was 14 December 2005, while the most recent was 28 November 2018. Once the census was complete and births and mortalities were recorded, the growth and density of the population were calculated and graphed. In order to answer the first research question, density was calculated by recording cumulative frequency of entries, minus cumulative mortalities per interval. Intervals for analysis are three-month increments from the date of the earliest entry to the time of completion of the population analysis, a total of 52 periods (see Table 3).

The population was graphed to show density in relation to births and mortalities. Population density was graphed for all types of true crime podcasts across the 52-time intervals (Figure 1). Figure 2 shows the foundations of limited-arc series podcasts, those intended to only cover one story or topic for a limited time, in relation to density.

Content Analysis

To answer RQ2a, media coverage, cognitive legitimacy, and normative legitimacy were also graphed (See Figures 3–5). Evidence of media coverage appears to begin around the time of the first major spike in density, which is in line with prior research suggesting

Table 3. True crime podcast population over time.

| Time | Births | Deaths | Limited-arc podcasts | Time | Births | Deaths | Limited-arc podcasts |
|-------------|--------|--------|----------------------|-------------|--------|--------|----------------------|
| 12/05-02/06 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 06/12-08/12 | 1 | 0 | 0 |
| 03/06-05/06 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 09/12-11/12 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 06/06-08/06 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12/12-02/13 | 3 | 0 | 0 |
| 09/06-11/06 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 03/13-05/13 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| 12/06-02/07 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 06/13-08/13 | 5 | 0 | 0 |
| 03/07-05/07 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 09/13-11/13 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 06/07-08/07 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 12/13-02/14 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 09/07-11/07 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 03/14-05/14 | 10 | 0 | 0 |
| 12/07-02/08 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 06/14-08/14 | 4 | 1 | 0 |
| 03/08-05/08 | 3 | 0 | 0 | 09/14-11/14 | 11 | 0 | 0 |
| 06/08-08/08 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 12/14-02/15 | 7 | 0 | 0 |
| 09/08-11/08 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 03/15-05/15 | 11 | 1 | 1 |
| 12/08-02/09 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 06/15-08/15 | 14 | 4 | 3 |
| 03/09-05/09 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 09/15-11/15 | 15 | 3 | 2 |
| 06/09-08/09 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 12/15-02/16 | 29 | 7 | 4 |
| 09/09-11/09 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 03/16-05/16 | 35 | 7 | 3 |
| 12/09-02/10 | 1 | 2 | 0 | 06/16-08/16 | 36 | 9 | 5 |
| 03/10-05/10 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 09/16-11/16 | 59 | 12 | 7 |
| 06/10-08/10 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 12/16-02/17 | 54 | 17 | 4 |
| 09/10-11/10 | 2 | 1 | 0 | 03/17-05/17 | 71 | 18 | 6 |
| 12/10-02/11 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 06/17-08/17 | 94 | 23 | 8 |
| 03/11-05/11 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 09/17-11/17 | 111 | 45 | 18 |
| 06/11-08/11 | 1 | 0 | 0 | 12/17-02/18 | 104 | 33 | 9 |
| 09/11-11/11 | 1 | 1 | 0 | 03/18-05/18 | 143 | 67 | 33 |
| 12/11-02/12 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 06/18-08/18 | 135 | 73 | 26 |
| 03/12-05/12 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 09/18-11/18 | 164 | 94 | 70 |

Note: Time represents 3-month intervals from the date of the earliest identified founding to the end of the analysis.

that attention from media may be a signal of growing population legitimacy (e.g., Weber, Faulk, and Monge 2016)

Research Question RQ2b asks if evidence of positioning, or comparison to other true crime media, is used by journalists as a signal of legitimation. This question is answered in two ways. The first, a quantitative content analysis, shows positioning in comparison to other forms of true crime media (books, movies, etc.) and evidence of *isomorphism*, or homogeneity within the population, via comparison to other true crime podcasts (e.g., *Serial*, *My Favorite Murder*) in news stories about true crime podcasts. These comparisons are shown in Figure 6.

Further qualitative analysis found evidence of several emerging themes in the ways that journalists discussed true crime podcasts. These themes help to triangulate the quantitative findings for cognitive and normative legitimacy, and also offer more insight into how journalists position the growing true crime population in relation to other media and podcasts.

Cognitive Legitimacy

Only 5 of the 87 articles coded offered any explanation of the podcast format, signaling high cognitive legitimacy for the technological form. The way the articles that do explain the “podcast” frame the definition also tended to be “tongue-in-cheek” rather than true explanations, such as a 2015 article calling podcasts, “a terrible tech insider’s name for delivering radiolike shows directly to your phone.” This further strengthens the quantitative finding of high cognitive legitimacy by showing that journalists assumed their audience already understood what a “true crime podcast” entailed.

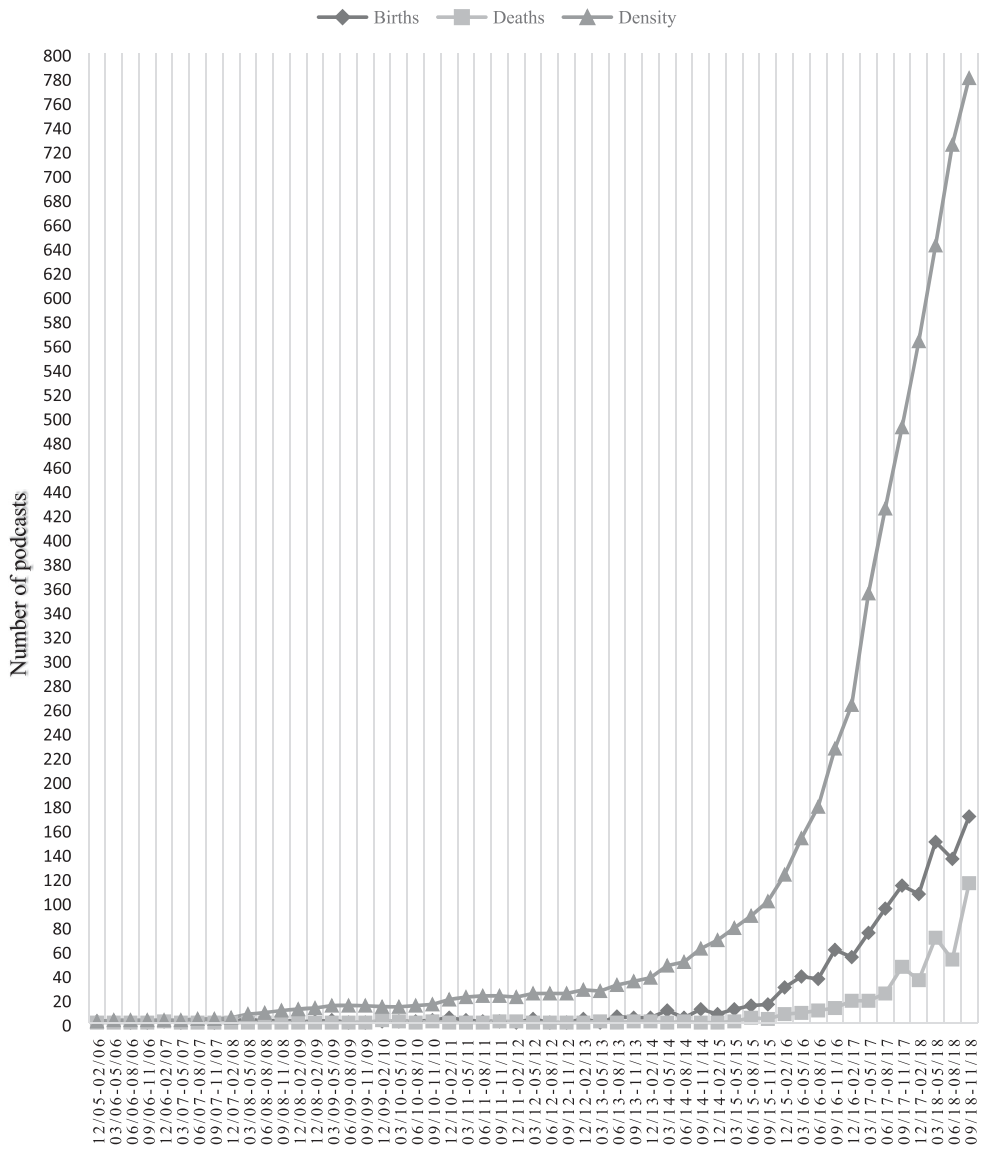


Figure 1. Foundings, mortalities and true crime podcast population density over time. X-axis represents 3-month intervals from the date of the first identified true crime podcasts to the end of the analysis

Normative Legitimacy

While the quantitative findings for normative legitimacy focus on positive evaluation of true crime podcasts, deeper analysis of the remaining articles tells a more complicated story. Journalists described the genre as “salacious,” “tawdry,” “lowbrow,” “grisly,” and as having “prurient appeal.” Some questioned the ethics of journalists-turned-podcasters who publicly name suspects and accused producers of distorting facts and turning the justice system into “the ultimate reality show.” On the other hand, other articles positioned the true crime population as more nuanced, with both good and bad actors,

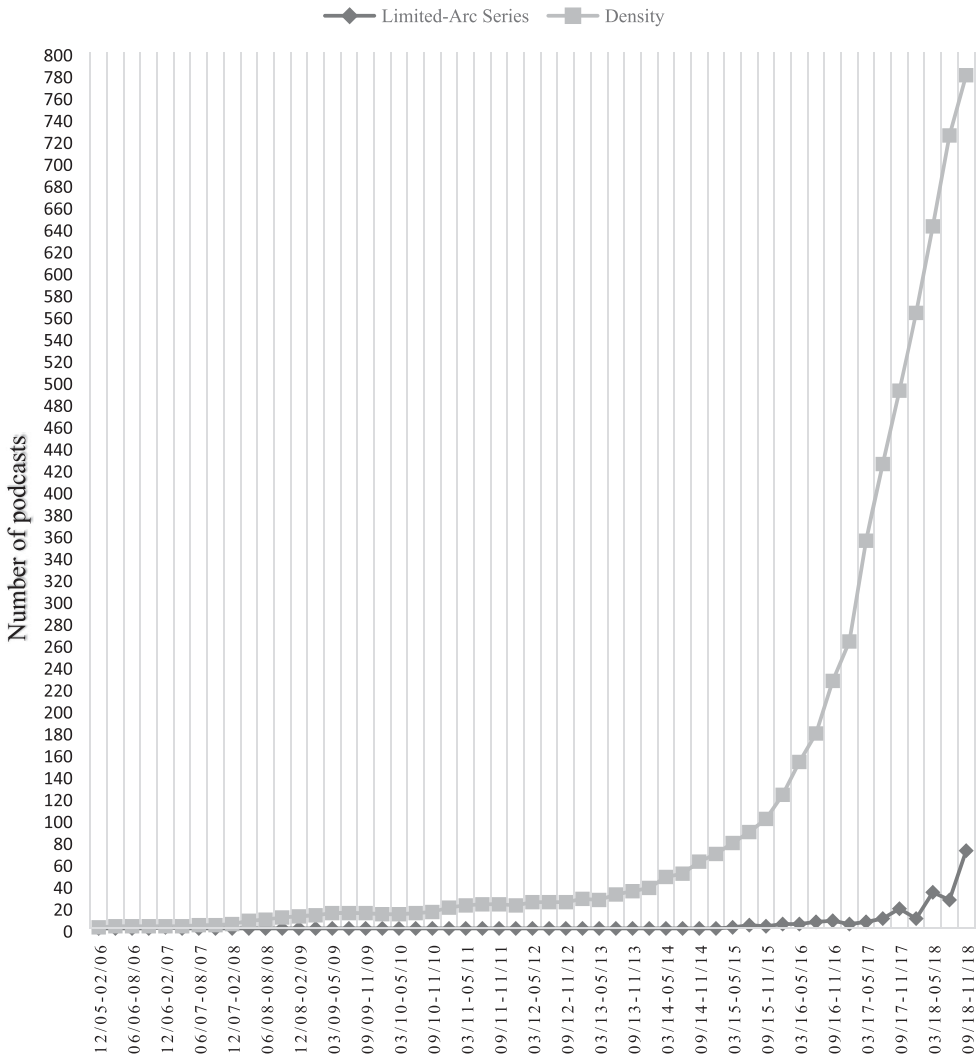


Figure 2. Number of limited-arc podcasts and podcast population density. Limited-arc series podcasts are those that are produced to tell one story, often uploaded all at once, and do not have additional “seasons.” These podcasts are usually produced by a media outlet or network. X-axis represents 3-month intervals from the time of the earliest identified podcast to the date of the analysis.

and complicated effects. Authors note that true crime in “a mix of journalism and entertainment” with the potential to either distort facts for the sake of entertainment or to educate and advocate for justice. Several articles also mentioned the cathartic role some true crime podcasts served for victims of violence as well as their ability to bring to the forefront safety and crime prevention, particularly for women.

Evidence of Positioning

Journalists most often used comparisons to other true crime media and other true crime podcasts as a way to describe these podcasts. *Serial*, as might be expected from other popular and academic descriptions (e.g., Berry 2015; Merry 2014), was mentioned in

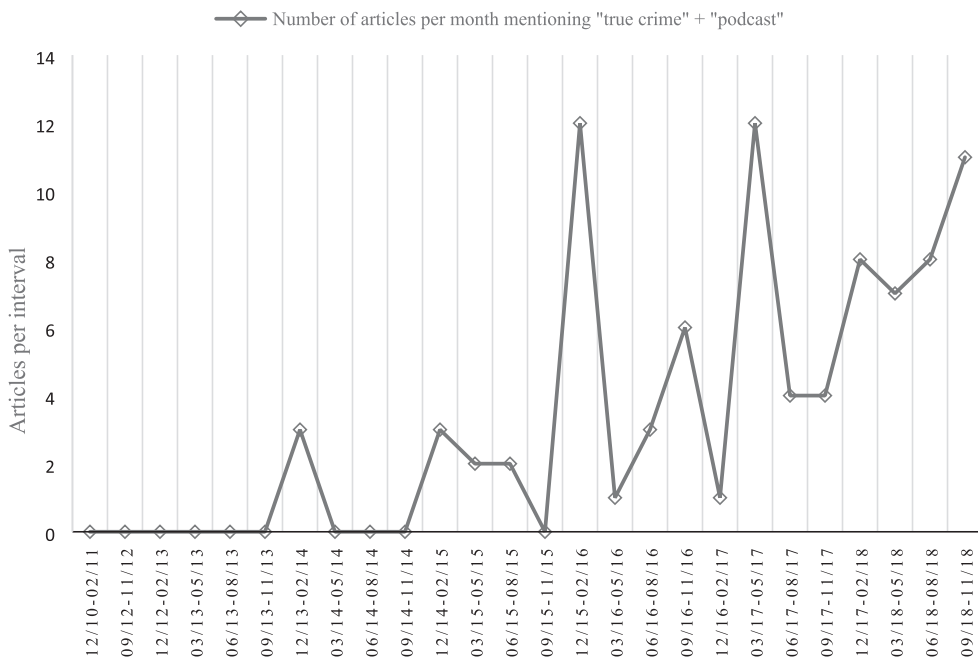


Figure 3. X-axis represents 3-month intervals. There was no news coverage found prior to 12/13-02/14 interval. There was no news coverage in intervals 03/14-05/14, 06/14-08/14, 09/14-11/14, and 09/15-11/15.

nearly every article, most often noting similarities (isomorphism) between *Serial* and other true crime podcasts. Nine articles credit *Serial* in full or in part for beginning the recent true crime boom, a finding in contrast to the evidence from the population analysis. *Serial* was compared to other true crime media forms in 29 articles: documentaries (10), books (3), television (9), movies (1), and live theater (1). Another hugely popular podcast, *My Favorite Murder*, was used as a comparison in four articles, and was compared to documentaries and television. Several articles used the Netflix true crime documentary *Making a Murderer* to describe particular podcasts, and others compared true crime podcasts in general to other forms of media easily accessible to amateur producers, such as YouTube and blogs.

Discussion

Beginning with the emergence of the first identified true crime podcast in 2005, the population has experienced a pattern of growth with no evidence of slowing. This pattern extends across the population, as evidenced by the uptick in both limited-arc podcasts and regularly-produced podcasts. Other media have recognized this population growth and have focused more attention on true crime podcasts as legitimate organizational forms. This is directly in line with organizational ecology's explanation of the relationship between population density and legitimation (e.g., Weber, Faulk, and Monge 2016).

The population analysis seems to cast doubt on one assertion being made by some media—the idea that the true crime podcast “bubble” might be bursting, or that

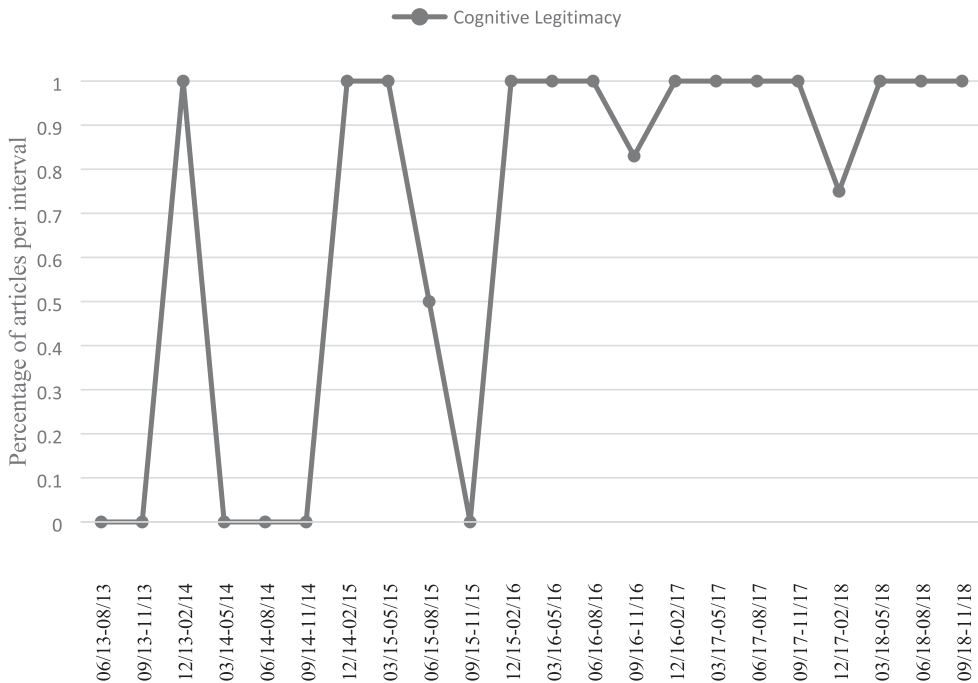


Figure 4. Cognitive legitimacy over time: percentage of news articles per 3-Month interval that mention “true Crime” + “podcasts” and offer no definition for these podcasts. X-axis represents 3-month intervals. There was no news coverage found prior to 12/13-02/14 interval. There was no news coverage in intervals 03/14-05/14, 06/14-08/14, 09/14-11/14, and 09/15-11/15.

population density has reached a point of over-saturation. The growth in true crime satire podcasts—like *The Onion’s A Very Fatal Murder* and *Done Disappeared*—has been used by traditional media outlets to suggest this possibility, such as a *Guardian* article entitled, “Could *A Very Fatal Murder* kill off the true-crime podcast?” (Verdier, Feb. 20, 2018). The growth trend of the population shows no evidence to support this observation. Not only is the density curve rising steadily across time (including the three highest-birthrate periods of the analysis occurring in 2018), a cursory count for the period after the formal analysis (12/18-02/19) found nearly 150 new true crime podcasts, the second-highest birth rate since 2005. It seems more likely that the satire of the population’s organizational form is evidence of a maturing population, as noted in previous organizational studies (e.g., Islam, Zyphur, and Boje 2008).

The content analysis sheds light on the way legitimacy has developed in the true crime podcast population. As density increased, so did media mentions of true crime podcasts, the majority of which assumed general public knowledge of true crime podcasts as “a thing,” suggesting high cognitive legitimacy of the form. The 2019 Infinite Dial Report supports these results, finding that podcasts had 20 million new American listeners in 2018. For the first time since the first 2006 report, over half of Americans (51%) had listened to a podcast, with 22% having listened within the last week, and 70% reporting familiarity with podcast media (Edison, March 6 2019). While these statistics are not specific to true crime podcasts, they do support this analysis of the exponential growth

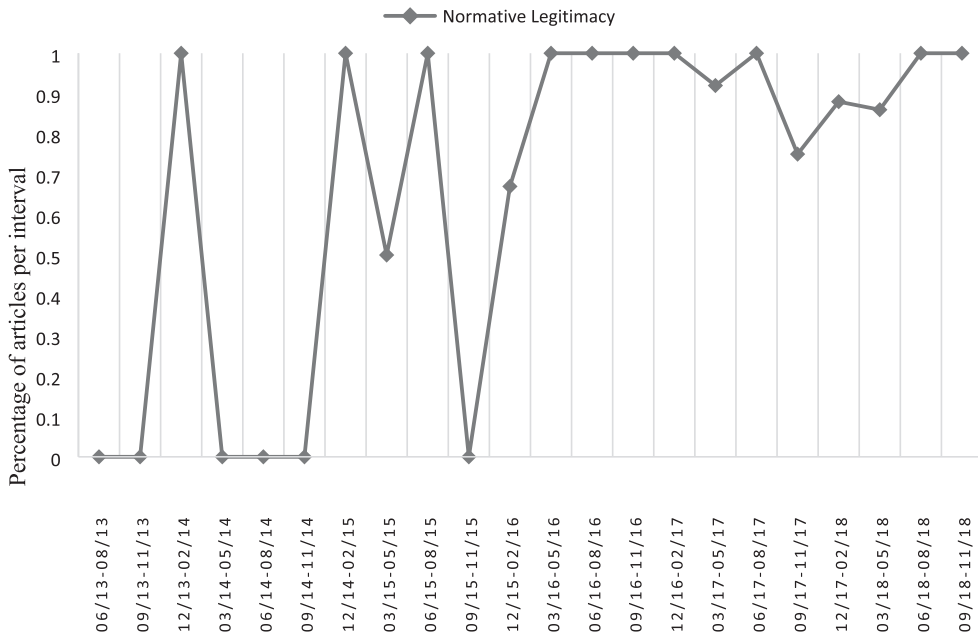


Figure 5. Normative legitimacy over time: percentage of news articles per 3-month interval that mention “true crime” + “podcast” and make a positive value judgment about these podcasts. X-axis represents 3-month intervals. There was no news coverage found prior to 12/13-02/14 interval. There was no news coverage in intervals 03/14-05/14, 06/14-08/14, 09/14-11/14, and 09/15-11/15.

in the podcast audience. These environmental factors (in addition to internal population factors, like density) are also in line with previous research on how legitimacy evolves in populations moving from emergence to maturation (Bryant and Monge 2008).

The analyses also point to other factors at work in the true crime podcast population. Much of the popular and academic literature describes *Serial* as either a pioneer or a disruptor in the emerging true crime podcast population (e.g., Boling and Hull 2018; Chaudry 2016). However, the population analysis suggests a more complicated set of environmental factors at work, such as streaming technology (a resource). In 2005, podcast subscriptions were first added to the iTunes interface, leading to the first podcast boom (Patel, Sept. 24, 2018), though, as Bowers (2005) said, podcasting was still “the nichiest of niche media” (para. 7). Podcasts (of all kinds) began to be more easily accessible to consumers when, in 2011, Pioneer introduced the first phone app-connected car stereo (Garvey 2015), and the demography confirms that population density began to rise quickly around this time. Other changes to podcast technology also coincide with rises in population density. In 2012, Apple introduced the first podcast app separate from iTunes, and in 2014, the podcast app became native to iOS8 (Resler 2018). These changes are likely as responsible for the explosion of population growth in late 2014 as any “*Serial*-effect” (e.g., Bottomley 2015). While it is too early to say for certain, it is likely that the introduction of the Android podcast platform by Google in June 2018 has had positive effects on population growth as well (Tech News 2018). These technological developments have been shown to be important factors in the stage development of populations in previous research (e.g., Bryant and Monge 2008), suggesting that the

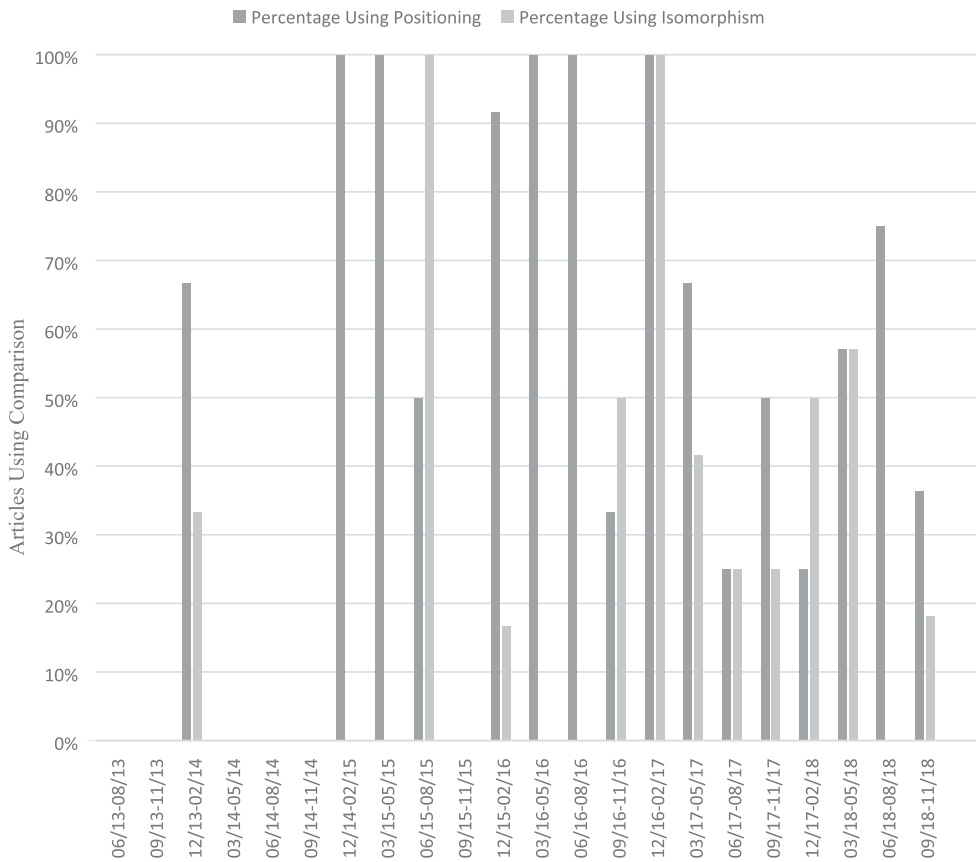


Figure 6. Journalists’ use of comparison to other media forms over time: Positioning and Isomorphism. Percentage of news articles per 3-month interval that mention “true crime” + “podcast” and compare these podcasts to other true crime media or other true crime podcasts. X-axis represents 3-month intervals. There was no news coverage found prior to 12/13-02/14 interval. There was no news coverage in intervals 03/14-05/14, 06/14-08/14, 09/14-11/14, and 09/15-11/15.

true crime podcast population is moving from the emergence to maintenance stage of ecological growth.

Another factor is the emergence of the newspaper-produced true crime podcast, comprising the bulk of the limited-arc series podcasts. The *Atlanta Journal Constitution’s Breakdown* in 2015 marked the emergence of this form in podcasting’s second decade, but it was not the first of its kind. In 2006, the *Lancaster New Era* produced *Lost Angels*, a six-part podcast series on an Amish school house shooting. While the series won the 2007 Eugene S. Pulliam National Journalism Writing Award, the podcast received very little other attention at the time (Staff and Wire Reports, March 5 2007). This again illustrates the importance of environmental factors for the growth of organizations in populations. While 2005 may have been “the year of the podcast,” by 2006, writers were declaring, “podcasting is dead” (Bowers 2005; Iskold 2007). A decade later, conditions were ripe for new forms to emerge.

From a practitioner’s standpoint, the qualitative analysis suggests several important insights. While *Serial* may not have been as important as one might be led to expect

from a population growth perspective, it appears to have been a major factor in the legitimization of the true crime podcast from a fringe, “salacious” sub-genre to a main stream force. Journalists from legacy media repeatedly used *Serial* as a referent for quality true crime, positioning it alongside other media like documentaries and books and using isomorphism with *Serial* as an indicator of the caliber of other podcasts. Simultaneously, these journalists question the normative legitimacy of the true crime podcast genre, bringing attention to the continued presence of its more problematic elements. For podcasts creators and producers, understanding this process of public legitimization, particularly from traditional journalists, may be vital to the genre’s continued growth. Using accepted forms, such as *Serial*, as models may help them to avoid some of the criticisms of the genre, gain stronger normative legitimacy, and thus increase their ability to gain resources and compete in the ecosystem.

There are several limitations to this study. Despite re-searching with multiple terms and at additional time periods, it is impossible to say with certainty how thorough the demography is. Podcasts are emerging at an exponential rate, and there is no central database with which to locate them. It is also possible that many mortalities were undiscovered, leading to a “left-censored” analysis (Baum 2000). That is, because organizations may not be discovered until they are larger or older, it is possible that podcasts that were founded and failed quickly were omitted. There is also the semantic question of whether it is accurate to conceptualize these podcasts as “organizations” or “pre-organizations” (Katz and Gartner 1988; Lowrey 2012). While each podcast was treated as a separate entity in this analysis, is that accurate from an organizational perspective? For example, podcasts like *Unsolved Murders* and *Cults* are produced by the same company, Parcast. A re-operationalized demography of the population might involve treating production companies as the unit of analysis, possibly altering the density calculation.

The content analysis is also limited due to the selection of broad-appeal publications (*New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*) to measure legitimacy. An argument could be made for the inclusion of more “niche” media, such as those focused on digital technology or media, like *Slate* or *Wired*. In methodological terms, these niche media are more “finely tuned instruments” that may allow for closer analysis of the growth of niche legitimacy over a longer period of time than the more “blunt” instrument of mainstream, generalist publications.

Finally, this analysis is limited by its scope. Both the demography and population analysis end in late 2018, a time which was arguably the height of the true crime podcast boom. Hendricks (2020) database alone now contains over 2800 true crime podcasts, and *USA Today*, *New York Times*, and *Washington Post* have published 253 additional articles about true crime podcasts since November 2018. However, this “snapshot” offers us an understanding of the true crime podcast environment at a moment in time just before the explosive growth of corporatized podcasting, such as Gimlet, Spotify, Parcast, Wondery, and Luminary (Moore and Moore 2019). This analysis, combined with future research and updated demography, may help us understand just how influential that shift has been on the industry.

The findings and limitations of this study suggest several avenues for continued research. The first is a re-exploration of the population analysis with an expanded repertoire of tools. While this analysis was undertaken with every resource at the researcher’s disposal, there may be additional ways of arriving at an even more thorough and

meaningful demography, such as creating an application program interface (API) to search. Another possibility might be creating a crowd-sourced database, similar to Hendricks (2020) and sharing it to true crime podcast fan community sites to harness the knowledge of true crime consumers.

Additional qualitative research is also needed. While this study focused on environmental factors influencing the growth of true crime podcasting, little is known about how the podcasters themselves interact with their audience and competitors, and the roles that journalistic norms, entertainment, and advocacy may play in their productions. Future research might include surveys or in-depth interviews with producers, as well as thematic and textual analysis of podcast content.

Note

1. The categorization of particular genres is used as a kind of shorthand to make communication about media artifacts more efficient. Noting that genre depends on intertextuality (Wales 1989), this paper will use “genre” as the generally accepted broad categorization. While the boundaries of genre are permeable and constantly shifting (Chandler 1997), the term as it is used colloquially seems sufficient for this examination.

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