

2023-2024 Middle School Ethics Bowl Case Set

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<https://www.ethicsatkentplace.org/student-programs/middle-school-ethics-bowl>

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Case 5: Capitalizing on Capital Crime

Ryan, a television producer, wants to write a proposal for a new show about a serial killer similar to the recent Netflix series, *Dahmer - Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*. Although that show had been a record-breaking success - reaching the number-one spot on Netflix in its first week, becoming the second most-watched English language series ever, and receiving six Emmy nominations – there was a strong critical backlash. This mixed critical reaction makes Ryan hesitant to create his own series. Ryan believes that the producers of *Dahmer* made two major errors.. First, the series was produced without the knowledge or consent of the families of the victims. According to Rita Isbell, the sister of one of Dahmer’s victims, “Netflix should’ve asked if we minded or how we felt about making it. They didn’t ask me anything... I’m not money hungry, and that’s what this show is about, Netflix trying to get paid.” In addition, the show included an LGBTQ+ tag which drew swift criticism from the queer community. The tag was removed within two days.

Ryan, who studied psychology in college, thinks he can avoid these problems when producing his own show. He would, for example, communicate with victims’ families and members of the queer community. He also believes that the genre has value: it makes viewers more aware of their level of personal safety, familiarizes them with the social justice system, and potentially makes them more empathic. As well, after some true crime documentaries aired, verdicts were overturned because viewers shared DNA with law enforcement. In other words, these programs can affect real change, as well as draw attention to and combat injustice.

Still, Ryan worries that true crime shows, no matter how they are produced, normalize violence and may dehumanize victims who are often already marginalized members of society. These series may also perpetuate stigmas against people with certain mental disorders, especially when those disorders are described as “warning signs.” As well, the programs can make viewers anxious. Even more worrisome, these shows can glamorize criminals. For example, many viewers found Evan Peters, the actor who portrayed Dahmer, very attractive. Some even compiled short clips of his most gruesome moments from the show.

Ryan is torn. On the one hand, as an artist, he relishes the opportunity to create a television program that offers responsible social commentary. As *Dahmer* actor, Evan Peters put it, “It’s called *The Jeffrey Dahmer Story*, but it’s not just him and his backstory: It’s the repercussions, it’s how society and our system failed to stop him multiple times because of racism, homophobia. It’s just a tragic story.” Still, Ryan knows that there are other ways of offering social critique; perhaps shows about serial killers cause more social and personal harm than good.

Match Question: Should Ryan propose a series about a serial killer? If so, how should he go about it?

Study Questions

1. Who has the right to tell a story?
2. Do the dead have a right to respect and privacy? Why or why not?
3. Can telling a story be disrespectful?
4. Does medium matter? Can one kind of media be more ethical than another?