

“SUDDENLY, THE PODCAST WAS SEXY”: AN ECOLOGICAL AND SOCIAL  
MOVEMENT THEORY APPROACH TO TRUE CRIME  
PODCAST PHENOMENA

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## ABSTRACT

In recent years, true crime podcasting has exploded, both in number of podcasts and popular culture visibility. These podcasts act as organizations with maintenance orientations, such as mobilizing resources, competing with other organizations, increasing legitimacy, and focusing on sustaining foundings and preventing mortalities. This population also exhibits isomorphism and development of organizational form and identity. Some of these podcasts have social movement orientations as well, particularly in relation to criminal justice reform goals. As social movement organizations, they view listeners as constituents, mobilize resources, created relationship networks with similar organizations, and work to establish collective awareness and legitimacy.

This study explores this media phenomenon from the perspective of organizational ecology and social movement theories using a mixed methods approach. A demography of true crime podcasts was conducted in order to find a sample approaching a population, identify dates of foundings and mortalities, and calculate population density over time. Content analysis of news articles mentioning “true crime podcasts” was conducted to measure public legitimacy of the true crime podcast population. Additionally, 12 true crime podcasters were interviewed, and their interviews were analyzed qualitatively to further explore this phenomenon in light of theory and emerging concepts.

Evidence of true crime podcasts’ orientations as both maintenance and movement organizations was discovered, as well as the way these entities exist as hybrid or dual organizations. Emerging themes and motivations for true crime podcasters are also discussed.

## DEDICATION

For Hae.

You wrote in your diary, “Remember me forever.”

We do.

And for Cynthia Shackelford, mentor, teacher, friend, who literally tracked me down when I tried to give up journalism; who had the greatest laugh to ever grace this earth; who showed me who I wanted to be when I grew up.

Thank you.

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## INTRODUCTION

In late 2014, the podcast *Serial* (Koenig, Chivas & Snyder, 2014), from the producers of *This American Life* (Chicago Public Media, 1995), began streaming and almost immediately became a cultural sensation. The podcast, which explored the investigation of the murder of Hae Min Lee in Baltimore in 1999 and the subsequent trial and conviction of Adnan Syed, expanded on the format of *This American Life*—a calm, rational narrator, crisp editing and production, and compelling narrative told through a diverse range of voices. But *Serial* was different. As weeks went by and the twelve episodes were released—serially, as implied by the title—a cultural phenomenon was created. The buzz around the project was unusual for most media, 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 (Berry, 2015; Hammersley, 2004; MacDougall, 2011; McClung & Johnson, 2010; Meserko, 2015). At the time of 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 and continued to chart most weeks despite not releasing a full episode between March 2016 and September 2018 (iTunes Chart, 2017 & 2018; Koenig et al., 2014). In November of 2014, the *Serial* podcast became the quickest podcast at the time to reach five million downloads (Roberts, 2014).

Much has been written about the reasons for *Serial*'s success in the popular, trade and academic press. Some authors speculate that something about narrator/producer Sarah Koenig's style drew listeners, while others point to the "inside journalism" format that lets listeners feel a part of the investigation and understand a process usually not seen outside of newsrooms.

(Columbia Journalism Review, 2016). *Serial*'s popularity was also due in part to the fact that it was not just an engaging narrative, but that it was based on a real story. The *Washington Post* addressed this a few weeks into the *Serial* phenomenon:

As a pop culture obsession, *Serial* is an outlier, not because it's a podcast, but because it's a true story. And that raises a host of questions, including: How are we supposed to talk about this? Fans use the language of popular television; they talk of bingeing and addiction and fear of spoilers. Yet Hae Min Lee is not Laura Palmer. She was an actual teenager (Merry, 2014, para. 16).

The popularity of *Serial* has been credited with spurring an interest not only in podcast listening in general, but also to other true crime narratives, a phenomenon that became known as the “*Serial* effect” (Boling & Hull, 2018; Quirk, 2016; Vogt, 2016).

The “*Serial* effect” is interesting for research not only for *Serial*'s style or popularity, but also for the community of other podcasts that have been spawned since. While many of those were fan discussion podcasts that lasted only through the initial 12 episodes or which evolved to cover other topics (i.e., *Slate's Spoiler Special* and *Crime Writers On...*; *Slate*, 2014, *Partners in Crime Media*, 2014), others emerged with specific goals. These podcasts and podcasters focused not only on true crime, like *Serial*, but also specifically on wrongful convictions, cold cases, and miscarriages of justice. *Undisclosed* (Chaudry, Miller, & Simpson, 2015), which debuted just a few months after *Serial* ended, gained a following based on the popularity of Adnan and Hae's story. The three lawyer-hosts of *Undisclosed*, one a family friend of Adnan Syed, reexamined each part of the story *Serial* had revealed, uncovering new evidence and presenting a compelling case that Syed was in fact, as hinted by Koenig, innocent of the crime. Around the same time, *Serial Dynasty* (now *Truth & Justice*; New Beginning, Inc., 2015) debuted, covering both *Serial*

and *Undisclosed* and encouraging fan crowd-sourcing to find new evidence. This trio of podcasts—one by radio professionals, one by lawyers, and one by a fan—were early iterations of the phenomenon this study seeks to examine, the development of the true crime podcast population and its relationship to a growing social movement for criminal justice reform.

While academic literature on this phenomenon is still limited, popular press has been effusive in crediting these podcasts with affecting public knowledge about the criminal justice system. Siobhan McHugh, a professor at Australia’s University of Wollongong, has written extensively about podcasts, calling them a “powerful socio-political force” (August 31, 2017, para. 1), and citing podcasts from the U.S., Australia, and Sweden with explicitly social and political change goals (primarily related to criminal justice, but also to issues like LGBTQIA+ rights and climate change). Susan Simpson, a lawyer and host of two podcasts, wrote:

While podcasting is a relatively new area of expansion for the [true crime] genre, it’s had a transformative effect. Through podcasts, true crime fans can hear new content, but take a step further. Podcasts allow fans to become actively involved themselves, by connecting with the hosts, other listeners, and a growing network of criminal justice reform advocates. True crime podcasts are often at their best when they’re covering stories that are still in need of answers, or where justice may not have been done—that’s when the public awareness and engagement that podcasts can inspire have the best chance of making a real-world impact on the cases being covered (October 14, 2017, para. 4).

News media in Baltimore, Md. discussed the impact of podcasts in nearly every article about the 2018 State’s Attorney race. Candidate Thiru Vignarajah was described as “the *Serial* prosecutor,” and forced to defend his position in multiple interviews (e.g., Associated Press,

September 15, 2017; Manas, May 11, 2018; Woods, March 31, 2018). The incumbent, Marilyn Mosby, was also tied to *Undisclosed*'s coverage of her role in the trial of Baltimore police officers for the killing of Freddie Gray in 2015 (Chaudry et al., 2015). The *Breakdown* podcast, a production of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution (AJC)* newspaper, focused on miscarriages of justice in Georgia, has been noted for its effects on cases in the state. The *Southern Political Report* cites *Breakdown*'s coverage of the Justin Chapman case as an important factor in raising local awareness of the importance of holding judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys accountable (Wolf, November 23, 2016). Judge Mary Staley specifically noted *Breakdown* in her statement on the need for a change of venue in the 2016 Justin Ross Harris case, noting that the podcast had contributed to "pervasive" media attention in the Atlanta area (Season 2, episode 6, *AJC*, 2015). Another true crime podcast, *Up and Vanished*, was praised by *Huffington Post* for the "undeniable" role that the podcast played in an arrest finally being made in the 12-year-old case of the murder of Tara Grinstead (Capewell, February 24, 2017, para. 12). In perhaps the most stunning achievement to date by a podcast and its listeners, Edward Ates, a man serving life in prison for murder, was granted parole based on new evidence discovered by *Truth & Justice*'s host and fans. Ates's attorney from the Texas Innocence Project issued a public statement crediting the podcast: "This good thing has happened to a good man and his precious family because of you. You are the difference makers" (Clayton, April 2, 2018, para. 2).

"Suddenly the podcast was sexy," Rabia Chaudry wrote (2016, p. 263), describing the "astronomical" success of *Serial* and the tsunami of podcasts and related media that arose in its wake. Her statement, one line in an exhaustive book about the case that inspired *Serial*, echoes the way we often speak of cultural phenomena, as overnight sensations, sudden bursts of inspiration, or some kind of serendipitous crossing of the right stars. But such simplistic

descriptors ignore the real forces that converge, often in the background or below the surface, and discounts both the ecological factors and strategic actions that transform specific media from artifacts to cultural conversation, and, in some cases, cornerstones of a social movement. The development of podcasting from a little-known, limited use technology to a widely utilized platform with a huge and often mobilized fan base is a prime subject for exploration of the way media organizations evolve and interact with each other and society. How does a media product—be it investigative journalism, entertainment, or a hybrid of both—grow beyond simple popularity and become the impetus for a social movement? It is clear that the podcasts that grew after *Serial*—both directly and indirectly related—have had implications beyond their growing fanbases.

The study of social movements' emergence and development has a long history, spanning the fields of sociology, communication, organizational studies, and psychology for over a hundred years (e.g., Buechler, 1993; Breton & Breton, 1969; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Le Bon, [1895] 1947; McAdam, 1999 & 2017). This scholarship runs the gamut from a focus on resource mobilization to group identity, political and social processes, and the organizational structures of movements. Yet past research on organizational identity and evolution, social movement mobilization, and collective action is fragmented, and as such, it provides different, sometimes conflicting and sometimes overlapping, explanations for *how* the transformation from individual and collective awareness to action occurs. The purpose of this study is to help bridge these gaps by considering multiple conceptual approaches in tandem. In doing so, we may understand better the communicative processes that unite organizations within a population around collective identity and common causes, and how those organizations and the players within them negotiate and redefine organizational forms and boundaries as that identity evolves. This study will also

examine the environmental and organizational forces—competitive and collaborative relationships between organizations, sustainability of organization resources, renegotiation of messaging and goals—that allow these entities to exist as both successful media products and movement agents.

The media ecosystem that contextualizes the “*Serial* effect” offers a prime case for analysis of both theoretical and practical questions. First, podcasts are an emerging and understudied media technology. Despite the age of the medium, podcast research has been scarce, and the communication field still has much to understand about how producers mobilize resources for sustainability, growth and social action, and the particular media effects on listeners and fans of podcasts. The explosion of the true crime podcast population has occurred very quickly and has had real world impacts, as noted above. The ability of this medium to gain a large audience and invigorate massive fan communities both on- and off-line makes it a media phenomenon worth studying.

Secondly, these podcasts serve as an example of “democratic media activism” (Carroll & Hackett, 2006), that is, media forms that allow for non-elite access to modes of production, resources, and dissemination of information. Carroll & Hackett describe democratic media activism as not democratization *through* media but rather *of* the media; it is less about a subversive message than it is about subverting the traditional power structures of corporate media (though subversive messaging may be a goal for some producers). In one of the earliest analyses of podcasting’s possible effects on the future of media, Berry (2006) called it “disruptive technology” that would force “the radio business to reconsider some established practices and preconceptions about audiences, consumption, production, and distribution” (p. 144):

What Podcasting offers is a classic ‘horizontal’ media form: producers are consumers and consumers become producers and engage in conversations with each other. At a grassroots level there is no sense of a hierarchical approach, with Podcasters supporting each other, promoting the work of others and explaining how they do what they do (Berry, 2006, p. 146).

This kind of media is especially relevant to study in the digital age, as new platforms and technologies constantly and easily emerge, allowing producers and consumers to explore new ways of interacting, sharing information, and creating sustainable models of production. These podcasts offer an example of media products existing simultaneously as business ventures and social movement actors. Many podcasts acquire sponsors and advertisers, solicit patronage, and operate in tandem with other for- and non-profit media outlets. At the same time, some producers see themselves as “reform advocates” making “real-world change” (Simpson, October 14, 2017, para. 4). The ways in which this dual-identity is negotiated, monetized, and leveraged throughout the life cycle of these media products represent valuable research opportunities for better understanding of how social movements evolve in our increasingly digitized world. Using both an organizational ecology and social movements theory approach, this study will examine podcasts as but one example of democratized digital media in order to expand our knowledge of the dual idealistic and pragmatic motivations and choices of producers of such media.

Finally, this study seeks to expand theory. Theorists in organizational ecology and social movement theories have noted parallel concepts and “symmetrical gaps” (Greve, Pozner, & Rao, 2006; McCarthy & Zald, 2001; Van Zomeren, Postmes, & Spears, 2008) between these theories, and have suggested that combined applications of the parallel concepts from these theories may fill the gaps in our knowledge of collective action and organization. Specifically, this study

examines the development of collective action and identity around social movements, as these relate to the concepts of ecology of organizations. That is, how do the structural mechanisms explained by organizational ecology—the creation and growth of populations as aggregates of entities with similar forms, the evolution of organizational legitimacy, the acquisition of resources—interact with the theoretical components of social movement theories, such as group identity, organization of collective action, and development of effective messaging

This study will use a mixed-methods design to explore true crime podcast populations and their relationships to criminal justice reform social movements. A population analysis of the true crime podcast community will be conducted to better understand the demography of this population, including founding dates, failures and changes in legitimacy over time. This analysis will help clarify structural issues of the population—mortalities, density, boundaries—and will serve as a triangulation (Creswell, 2014) method for trustworthiness in interpretation of interview data. In-depth interviews will be conducted with producers of podcasts within the population. The interview participants will be selected based on the perceived public effect of their podcasts, relative longevity of production, and connections to the other organizations within the population. Snowball sampling will be pursued, as it is expected that other subjects will be recommended based on initial interviews. It is anticipated that the interview process will help to further clarify the boundaries of the population, including how the producers see their organizations situated within evolving and emerging niches and subniches of the true crime genre and their relationships to social movement goals. This study will not examine the media effects of podcasts on individual listeners. Instead, it will focus on the producers and organizations within the population, the mechanisms by which the population has emerged,

sought resources, sustained itself and developed, and their relationships to collective action for collective goals at the organizational level.

The next section reviews the current literature on podcasts and audio media, specific issues related to the true crime genre, and the theoretical lenses of Organizational Ecology Theory and Social Movement Theories. Precedent for theoretical synthesis is addressed, as well as the role of identity in the evolution of organizations and movements. The reviewed literature will focus specifically on application of these largely sociological theories to media and communication phenomena, and to true-crime podcasting, specifically. Following this section, the methodology for the study is explained, including the steps involved in conducting a population analysis of true-crime podcasts and conducting in-depth interviews with podcast producers.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### **Podcast Evolution and Research**

In 2004, journalist Ben Hammersley coined the term “podcasting” to describe the new technology around web-based audio production (Hammersley, February 11, 2004). He noted special features of the medium, including interactivity with internet listeners, portability of MP3 devices (this was well before the iPhone and widespread “app” usage), and the emotional intimacy of the audio format. Hammersley quoted National Public Radio journalist Christopher Lydon, who described the new technology as “a different kind of radio” and “something that newspapers can only dream about” (paras. 6, 8). 2005 was declared “the year of the podcast” (Bowers, December 30, 2005). Despite the praise of podcasting’s possibilities, the medium remained underused throughout the following decade, even leading some writers to declare “podcasting is dead” (Iskold, August 28, 2007). 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 with the Apple iTunes upgrade of 2014 which made podcasts easily searchable and a part of every iPhone’s default interface. In 2006, Edison Research found that 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 on podcasting primarily focused on the educational uses of the medium, and that trend has continued in recent publications (e.g., Cosimini, Cho, Liley, & Espinoza, 2017; Drew, 2017; Evans, 2008; Skiba, 2006). Other research emerged, particularly

within critical-cultural and performance studies, focused on specific podcast genres<sup>1</sup> such as comedy (e.g., Meserko, 2015; Piper, 2015). Building on the post-*Serial* zeitgeist and the ten-year anniversary of the “year of the podcast,” the *Journal of Radio & Audio Media* devoted a symposium and its November 2015 issue to podcast media, representing a shift in the way communication researchers discussed podcasts (Bottomely, 2015; Johnson, 2015). In this issue, Berry revisited his earlier discussion of the possibilities of podcast technology and dubbed the post-*Serial* era “the golden age of podcasting” (Berry, 2006 & 2015). Other authors addressed podcasts as storytelling and extensions of broadcast radio programs, software advancements, competition between digital and traditional audio formats, and podcast fan communities (Cwynar, 2015; Florini, 2015; Morris & Patterson, 2015; Pluskota, 2015; Salvati, 2015). Most of these articles are exploratory or commentary rather than full research projects, aimed at building a case for future research and addressing possible reasons for the seemingly sudden boom in podcast popularity.

Other research has delved deeply into particular podcast phenomena. While the present study is not focused on the media effects of podcasts, some overview of this literature seems important for understanding how listeners become personally involved with podcasts to the point that they are willing to engage in collective action with podcast-associated social movements.

McClung and Johnson (2010) used a survey of listeners active in podcast-related social media

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<sup>1</sup> The term “genre” is used here as an accepted conventional rather than theoretical term. Genre theory is deeply complex and “the attempt to define particular genres in terms of necessary and sufficient textual properties is sometimes seen as theoretically attractive but it poses many difficulties... Genres can therefore be seen as 'fuzzy' categories which cannot be defined by necessary and sufficient conditions” (Chandler, 1997, p. 3). The categorization of particular genres is used as a kind of shorthand to make communication about texts or media artifacts more efficient. Noting that genre depends on intertextuality (Wales, 1989), that is, its relationship to other texts, media descriptions, and constantly evolving social categorizations, this paper will use “genre” as the generally accepted broad categorization by producers and consumers. The “true crime genre” is described as such by podcast trade media, social media fan groups, and the producers themselves. While the boundaries of genre are permeable and constantly shifting (Chandler, 1997), the term as it is used colloquially seems sufficient for this examination.

groups to determine listening motivations. They found that listeners used podcasts for entertainment and mood management; the ability to “time-shift,” that is, to listen at their preferred time rather than a scheduled time like a traditional radio broadcast; to build their digital libraries; to support programs or sponsors associated with podcasts; and for the social aspects of fan communities. Florini (2015) also described the social aspects of podcast listening, exploring communities built around podcasts by and for Black people. These communities, she notes, often overlapped, with fans of one podcast likely to interact with fans of other, similar podcasts. Hancock and McMurtry (2017) used case studies and qualitative content analysis of fan forums to study the development of fan groups and identification within the genre of the horror podcast. Boling and Hull (2018) examined uses and gratifications in true crime podcasts, noting particular differences in listening motivations by gender, finding that social interaction was an especially important motivation for female listeners.

There are other effects for podcast listeners that may be compared to earlier research on audio media. Berry (2006) contrasted podcasts with broadcast radio, writing that radio is the equivalent of going to a newsstand and searching for a desired publication, while podcasting is the equivalent of having subscriptions of your favorite publications delivered to your door on a regular, predictable basis. Swanson (2011) echoed the importance of choice and convenience to podcast listeners. “Podcast listeners are empowered listeners. They have complete freedom to review, select, download, and listen to programming on a myriad of subjects any time they wish” (Swanson, 2011, p. 183.)

MacDougal (2011) described podcasts as an extension of secondary orality, focusing on the medium not as new technology, but as part of the ancient tradition of narrative storytelling. His phenomenological view positions podcasts as unique for both their on-demand character and

their ability to be consumed as listeners go about their days. This creates both distance from immediate surroundings (i.e., listening through headphones on the subway is simultaneously a public and a solitary act) and increased perception of social presence with the podcasts' hosts. "The podcast," he writes, "and particularly, the podcast listened to on the move, may be part of an evolution in parasocial phenomena and a fundamentally new form of mediated interpersonal communication" (2011, p. 716). Dimmick, Feaster, and Hoplamazian (2011) also write about this factor of digital media, noting that interstitial use ("no-where places" and "no-when-times," Caronia called them; 2005) serve as functional alternatives to other interactions. While Dimmick et al. (2011) largely describe interstitial usage as replacing other traditional media interactions, MacDougal writes that this media use may replace or supplement interpersonal interactions, specifically tying parasocial interaction to podcast listening. If parasocial interaction becomes a listening component for individual fans of a media product, then affective, emotional components are activated, and a connection, even a 'friendship' with hosts may be felt. These social motivations are interesting for communication scholars, as they represent an evolution to digitally-mediated interaction with hosts and even other listeners rather than the "functional alternative" to interpersonal interaction scholars found that earlier audio media served (Perse and Courtright, 1993; Rubin & Stepp, 2000).<sup>2</sup>

Other media effects found for podcasts include transportation, the feeling of being "in the story" (Brown, 2015; Florini, 2015) and identification with podcast hosts and subjects (Piper,

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<sup>2</sup> In the traditional conceptualization of parasocial relationships, the relationship is "imagined" in that it is one-sided, and no longer considered "parasocial" if reciprocal interaction occurs. However, newer research expands this definition to include limited two-way fan interaction: "Media consumers now have new ways of interacting with media personae through Facebook, Twitter, weblogs, fan sites, and other interactive media, making the dyadic one-dimensional description of PSI incomplete. Audience involvement is not merely a lone psychological enterprise; it involves interaction with others, including discussing favorite personae, reading their tweets, sending them text messages, watching them through media with friends, and personally attending their events with others" (Brown, 2015, p. 263).

2015). It is interesting to note that popular press explanations for podcasts' ability to mobilize listeners mention many of the same effects. Simpson (October 14, 2017) and McHugh (August 31, 2017) both describe podcasts as powerful based on the emotional intimacy of audio narrative, the portability and convenience of podcast technology, and the ability to engage with podcast hosts and other listeners via social media and email. Research on fan community around earlier media products found that the combination of these factors—emotional connection, shared involvement with a media product, etc.—related to creating a psychological sense of community and strengthening the bonds between fans (Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith, 2002). Today, with the prevalence and ease of social media, fans are able to have immediate and intimate exchanges with a fan community. Other scholars have noted that the freely accessible, easily-shareable, and on-demand nature of podcasts, especially highly produced, imaginatively engaging podcasts like *Serial*, makes them an important new frontier for public scholarship and a catalyst for mainstream discussions that might otherwise be dismissed (Doane, McCormick, & Sorce, 2017):

Unlike traditional forms of reporting that privilege a few dominant voices, audio media can foreground the voices and perspectives of nearly all individuals in the story. In *Serial*, Koenig incorporates the actual voices of the people involved in the story whenever possible...*Serial's* representation of multiple voices and viewpoints decenters any single authoritative truth in such a way that pushes listeners to question the very notion of authoritative voice (p. 120).

Fans of a media product spend time critiquing and dissecting the issues discussed in that media. This parsing of issues can lead to what McAdam (2017) called “issue ownership.” That is, when communities feel ownership over a particular issue, they are more likely to take real action or attempt to organize in some way to affect that issue. McAdam's (2017) and Obst et al.'s (2002)

research on fans, communities, and mobilization around issue ownership suggests that the formation of community and identity between fans and hosts of a media product may help partially explain how some of these podcasts have evolved from entertainment into movement organizations.

### **True Crime Media**

When asked why the brutal murder of a Kansas family had been the chosen topic of his “nonfiction novel,” Truman Capote told the interviewer, “the human heart being what it is, murder was a theme not likely to darken and yellow with time” (Plimpton, 1987 [1966], pp. 2-3). True crime as a sub-genre of journalism and entertainment literature existed long before Capote (Browder, 2010; Burger, 2016; Punnett, 2018), but *In Cold Blood* (1966) represented a shift to longform, narrative crime storytelling as pure entertainment. While there were still elements of journalistic norms in the fact-finding and presentation of true crime events, this “new journalism” (Plimpton, 1987[1966]) allowed the storytellers to be more literary in their treatments of crime narratives. This meant that authors were able to focus on parts of the story journalists may not have, such as the psyche and emotions of criminals or their own affective relationships to the stories (Browder, 2010).

True crime media has continued to grow in popularity. *The Guardian* called true crime a “publishing super-brand,” and noted the *Serial* podcast and HBO’s *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* as the biggest cultural phenomena of that year (Lawson, December 12, 2015). In February 2018, Michelle McNamara’s *I’ll be Gone in the Dark*, a posthumously-published true crime and personal memoir about her obsession with the unsolved Golden State Killer case, debuted as the *New York Times* number one bestseller. The book inspired a three-episode podcast and was cited as having been instrumental on the 30-plus-years cold-case when

a suspect was arrested in April 2018 (48 Hours, 2018). 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), *Serial*'s huge fanbase, when they had exhausted available information about Syed and Lee, sought similar true crime narratives. The newer podcasts, like *Undisclosed* and *Suspect Convictions* (Reeder, 2017) addressed some of the 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. Others specifically sought to give voice to populations like prisoners, refugees, or people with mental illnesses (McHugh, 2017). These podcasts turned true crime tropes around, challenging formulaic depictions of the police as heroes, the guilty as always punished, and that victims and perpetrators are neatly delineated (Browder, 2010). The new breed of true crime introduced the idea that everyday people-- listeners and fans with no connections or training in the law or social justice—could affect real change. This contrasted with the 20<sup>th</sup> century model of true crime:

While true crime may be a form of documentary, it is a dystopian version. Whereas the traditional documentary is generally designed to raise people's consciousness about terrible conditions in order to effect change, true crime presents a picture of problems that are insoluble, because they are rooted within the individual psyche and often have no apparent roots in social conditions. We are in the realm of the psychopath or, more frequently, of the sociopath, whose evil has no visible cause: legislation cannot remove the source of the problem (Browder, 2010, p. 126).

Many subjects of the present research, true crime podcasts, some of which began with or have developed social movement goals, reject this old formulation of true crime. Simpson (2017)

wrote that these podcasters approach their productions by asking, “Do we want to grab the attention of listeners and entertain them for a few episodes, or can more be achieved?... We don’t explore criminal mysteries for the sake of it” (October 14, 2017, paras., 8, 10). Even those true crime podcasts that appear to be solely entertainment-oriented (e.g., *My Favorite Murder*, Hardstark & Kilgariff, 2016) display characteristics of democratic media activism (Carroll & Hackett, 2006). In addition to their portability, affordability, and shareability, these podcasts provide a platform for voiceless victims and subvert traditional media tropes (Doane et al., 2017; McHugh, August 31, 2017). Greer (2017) uses *My Favorite Murder* as an example of podcasts taking the murdered victim—an object to be viewed voyeuristically or as only a piece of evidence in traditional true crime—and making them a real, flesh-and-blood personality through the power of aural evocation. Other scholars, particularly in feminist media studies, point toward the ability of these podcasts to empower producers and listeners by creating a platform for marginalized voices, such as women, people of color, the incarcerated, and those whose vocal style might be excluded from mainstream broadcasts (Doane et al., 2017; Tiffe & Hoffman, 2017).

Within the true crime podcast genre, there are various types of podcasts in various styles, ranging from comedic to somber to gory to strictly journalistic, and these types are supported by varying audiences and audience interests. From the perspective of organizational ecology, explored below, the true crime podcast population exists in a *niche*, that is, a supportive space conducive to the evolution of similar organizations and other entities with similar resource requirements. Within this niche, true crime podcasts seem to exist in *sub-niches*, with boundaries that may not always be clearly delineated from entertainment, journalism, or activism oriented-media. For example, podcasts like those cited by Simpson (October 14, 2017) may have different

characteristics than those that are less explicitly goal-oriented. The sub-niches are interesting from the perspective of social movement theory as well. Are there factors beyond the motivations or ideology of producers that tie certain podcasts to a criminal justice reform social movement? Looking at this population through the lenses of organizational ecology and social movements theories (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1989; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; McAdam, 1999; Melucci, 1985) may help us to understand how these media products have evolved, relate to one another, create sustainable streams of resources, and what the landscape of the media ecosystem they occupy looks like.

### **Organizational Ecology**

Organizational ecology is a sociological approach for understanding how organizations are affected by and evolve to fit their environments, which conditions lead to diversity of organizational forms, and how organizations emerge, grow, and fail. It also focuses on the political, social, and economic forces that act on organizations (Hannan & Freeman, 1977 & 1989). Based on evolutionary biology studies of population growth in organisms, early ecological perspectives of organizations from the 1960s and 1970s theorized portions of the theory, such as the *liability of newness* (Stinchcombe, 1965), *isomorphism* (Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Hawley, 1968), and a focus on populations within communities (Trist, 1977). Hannan and Freeman (1977) theorized a coherent set of assumptions and sub-theories (sometimes called “theory fragments”) that set the foundation for organizational ecology as we know it today. Their work has been followed by hundreds of empirical and analytic publications expanding the theory (e.g., Carroll, 1984; Carroll, Dobrev, & Swaminathan, 2002; Dimmick, 2003; Lowrey, 2012; Polos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002; Weber, Faulk, & Monge, 2016).

While organizational ecology notes the importance of management and internal structure, it argues that older “adaptive paradigm” perspectives of organizational studies did not account enough for the environment of organizations (“adaptive” in organizational studies literature refers to internal strategic management shifts rather than external, environmental adaptation; Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Hannan & Freeman, 1977, 1989). Organizations do not exist in a vacuum, where only internal decisions and structure or even economic competition affects them. Beyond competitive relationships within an industry, organizations are affected by socio-political and cultural factors. Socio-political and cultural factors may be as small as a change in regulation that opens a niche for more organizations or as large as the invention of entire new technologies. Greve, Pozner, and Rao (2006) examined the development of the microradio industry as a response to regulatory changes that allowed small stations to take advantages of bandwidth openings and resources unused by larger, corporatized radio. Their analysis provides an example of a population emerging in response to a socio-political change. The invention of the internet and the subsequent spread of digital platforms is an example of a large scale, cultural, social, and economic change that spurred the birth of new organizational forms and entire industries. Organizational ecology accounts for these environmental possibilities, and considers both internal, organizational (endogenous) forces and external, environmental (exogenous) forces as an explanation for why organizations form, change, succeed, or fail, and the availability of exploitable resources.

Levels of analysis are especially important to organizational ecology. These levels include the organization level (also called developmental level; Carroll, 1984); population level, and community level. Organizations belong to populations, and related populations form the community level. Baum and Shipilov explain this relationship: “The outcomes for organizations

in any one population are fundamentally intertwined with those of organizations in other populations that belong to the same community system” (2006, p. 55). In the above example from Greve et al. (2006), changes to regulations on large radio stations affected the population of micro-stations as they both were part of a larger broadcast radio community.

In addition to levels, there are three main assumptions of organizational ecology:

- 1) Populations are defined by some “unitary shared characteristic” (Hannan & Freeman, 1989, p. 45) of member organizations. These characteristics may include dependence on particular resources, similar goals, hierarchical structures, core technologies, or market strategies and can encourage homogeneity of forms and practices among organizations within the population
- 2) Populations can be defined by boundaries as well as by common forms and identity.
- 3) Populations and the organizations within them are subject to inertia so that even if radical changes occur, they are often (though not always) the product of slow, long-term processes (Hannan and Freeman, 1989).

These assumptions are derived in part from three main concepts of organizational ecology, niches, inertia, and density dependence. These “theory fragments” are interrelated, and include features such as resource dependence, isomorphism, liabilities of age, organizational form, boundaries, constraints, and legitimacy (Carroll 1984; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Singh & Lumsden, 1990).

**Niches.** *Niche* is broadly defined as the relationship between population and environment, specifically, the role of the population in the community (Dimmick, 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1989). The *realized niche* is “the set of environmental conditions in which a population can grow and maintain its numbers” (Hannan & Freeman, 1989, p. 96). Populations

are aggregates of organizations situated within niches, and the concept that organizations will be selected into niches where they can best survive is called *fitness* (Hannan & Freeman, 1977). For example, the brewing industry is a population made of individual producers within the larger alcoholic beverage producer community (Carroll & Swaminathan, 1992). The micro-brewers in Carroll and Swaminathan's analysis operated differently from the large-scale brewers and exploited resources (i.e., modes of production, ingredients, consumer markets) not used by their larger counterparts. This is also an example of levels of specialization within niches (explained in more detail below). As the concept of the niche is *relational*, while there may be untapped areas of resources, there are no empty niches (Dimmick, 2003). That is, "the niche concept... denotes a relation between attributes of the environment and attributes of the population" (Dimmick, 2003, p. 78). Niches are not empty spaces—instead the "niche" is a concept used to explain common characteristics of organizations using common resources.

What niche a population fits can be determined by several factors. Products produced, market strategies, and resource needs affect niche placement. For some industries, geographic space may be a determinant. For example, the niche of local television news stations is constrained by the geographic boundaries of the city. This population might consist of several such stations and be a part of a larger population of local media forms. The communication perspective of population niches was largely determined by technological domain in past research (e.g., newspapers; Carroll & Hannan, 1989); however, media digitalization has complicated this taxonomy. Dimmick (2003) focused on the particular nature of the ecology of media industries (both traditional and digital) from a communication perspective. While geography may still be a constraint for some media (such as the above example), the internet has changed how other kinds of media interact and how their niches are determined. Dimmick tied

ecological research to the Uses and Gratifications approach from communication and media effects traditions (Katz, Blumler, & Gurevitch, 1973), coining the term *niche gratifications*. In this perspective, media niches are defined based on the particular gratifications obtained by their consumers. Gratifications are resources, as they represent the needs and selection choices of their consumers. In economic terms, gratifications equal the utility of a particular media—gratifications represent the benefits consumers gain from using the media – and these affect how the media producer or organization will advertise, the content choices they may make, and who their competitors will be. Time is considered a limited resource for media, as consumption is constrained by being in the correct place at the appropriate time (e.g., being at home to catch a live television broadcast) or by possible volume of media intake (e.g., a consumer cannot possibly utilize more than 24-hours of content in a day) (Dimmick, 2003; Dimmick et al., 2011). Mobile-use media, like podcasts or e-books, also provide different gratifications and competitive relationships. An “information on the go” (Dimmick et al., 2011) medium like a podcast may serve as a functional alternative to broadcast radio, thus situating it in an overlapping niche of competition with both other podcasts and radio for the time and attention of consumers. Media niches may also be determined by genre, as particular genres may serve different user gratifications (Barton, 2009; Lowrey, 2012).

While members of populations may be dissimilar on many characteristics, niche membership is defined by varying more from organizations outside of the population than from one another (Dimmick, 2003). Organizations are within the same population if they share characteristics, such as common resource dependence, collective identity, core technologies, market strategies, or similar organizational form. These “clusters of features,” as well as the socially-defined boundaries, determine the organizational forms within a population (Hannan &

Freeman, 1989; Polos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002; Weber, [1922] 1947). Network relationships may also help clarify organizational forms and define population boundaries, as knowledge and resources are shared or competed for among population members (Dimaggio, 1986), thus tying organizations within that population to one another. Hannan and Freeman caution that “Populations of organizations...are not immutable objects in nature but are abstractions useful for theoretical purposes” (1977, p. 934). Polos et al. (2002) explain that an organization’s form is a cultural product and is not merely determined by niche qualities. It may be defined by how those outside the organization (i.e., consumers, competitors, opinion leaders) perceive it: “What do social agents recognize when they ‘see’ a form, or more precisely, how do they identify form boundaries?” (p. 86). In this case, “form boundaries” may be conceptualized as socially constructed ideas, where there is strongly shared agreement about similarities and differences among organizations and populations. In some cases, differentiation of forms may be as simple as linguistically obvious distinctions such as “prisons are not hospitals” (Hannan & Freeman, 1989).

Organizational form may also be defined through organizational identity. Like form, identity may shift throughout the life cycle of organization, based on exogenous and endogenous pressures and constraints. Identities are defined by satisfying constraints, such as fitting inside socially recognized boundaries or having relational ties with other similar organizations (Tilly, 1986). Polos et al. (2002) calls these “social codes,” and notes that they may be implicit or explicit. It is important to note that these social codes are not always clear, and organizations risk angering constituents or losing legitimacy (see below) if they violate expectations based on their perceived form or identity. “Organizational identity defines a certain range of acceptable or unacceptable behavior (taken-for-granted norms) and...problems with change processes,

including resistance from change recipients, arise when change processes lead to culturally unacceptable behavior and practices” (Jacobs, Christe-Zeyse, Keegan, & Polos, 2008, p. 246). The connections between factors of organizational members, internal architecture, and relationships with the environment are important to consider, as changes to one part of an organization may not always cause the organization to shift to another population or niche. For example, a major change in management structure or internal policy may have little or no effect on the perceived form and identity of the organization for outside agents (Polos et al., 2002). The socially constructed nature of organizational form and identity is important for media scholars, as it is primarily a *communicative* process of negotiation and renegotiation between organizations and stakeholders (Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Weber, 2017).

**Structural Inertia.** Structural inertia refers to the tendency of larger and older organizations to become calcified and less able to react quickly to environmental disruption. As organizations grow and develop more defined internal structures (e.g., management, organizational culture and norms, subunits, internal politics), they become less able to adapt to the environment. Inertia may also affect organizations and populations through external constraints, like barriers to industry entry or exit, information availability, or market forces (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Hannan & Freeman, 1977). While inertia can be functional for the organization, such as when procedures and internal structures become routinized and therefore more efficient, it can also be a liability if organizations cannot change. An example of this is failures of traditional newspaper organizations that were unable to shift to online readership and advertising models in the rise of the internet age (Weber, 2017). While the structures that develop as organizations become more institutionalized (e.g., independent media becoming more like traditional news outlets; Lowrey, 2012 & 2017), and may increase the perceived legitimacy

and resources of the organization, institutionalization also makes adaptation more difficult. This inertia is not a problem (and may be a strength) in stable environments – inappropriate change can be disastrous -- but it becomes a liability in unstable environments, leading to the *liability of ageing* (Singh and Lumsden, 1990). Conversely, while younger, smaller organizations may be able to adapt more quickly to unstable environments, they do not possess the excess resources or legitimacy to bounce back from disruption, illustrating the *liability of newness*, and early mortalities (Baum & Shipilov, 2006; Carroll, 1994; Stinchcombe, 1965). A less discussed phenomenon in ecology literature is the *liability of adolescence* (Baum, 2000). This phenomenon is observed in populations where plentiful resources allow new organizations to start off strong and multiply quickly. After this initial period, the market becomes saturated and resources may become scarce, leading many of the original organizations to fail. Those that survive the adolescence period—by remobilizing or restructuring—emerge stronger and are less likely to fail over the long term.

**Density Dependence.** Density dependence focuses on foundings and failures in populations and how other organizations are affected by those mortalities (Baum, 2000). Density refers to the number of organizations within a population at a given time. Like other components of ecology theory, density dependence is based on concepts from biology. For example, the animal population within a pond may increase, or become denser, until a point of equilibrium is reached, at which the maximum amount of resources is being utilized by the maximum number of individuals. If density of the population increases beyond this point, some individuals will die (or try to find a new pond) as the available resources cannot adequately support the expanding population. The same principles apply to populations of organizations. Growth rates are density dependent, in that populations may expand or contract based on the ability of new and existing

organizations to acquire and use resources. The density of a population will be correlated with resource availability as newer or smaller organizations compete with more established organizations. The niches in which populations are located have *carrying capacities*, that is, a maximum number of organizations that can be supported on the resources available. Population density within niches evolves through processes of variation, selection, retention, and competition. Variation is the human behavioral component, as leaders attempt to make strategic adjustments to the organization in response to the environment. These attempts to change organizations may lead to diversity of forms within populations or result in *isomorphism* as organizations attempt to mimic more successful forms. 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.” Organizational retention lasts until an environmental disruption causes an organization to fail, often due to liabilities of ageing. Newer populations will be more heterogeneous, while more established populations will tend toward homogeneity as isomorphic mimicry and selection lead to retention of the most optimal forms (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Baum, 2000; Carroll, 1984; Dimmick, 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Lowrey, 2012; Stinchcombe, 1965).

Legitimacy (discussed in more detail below) and density are also related. As population density increases, organizations within that population are more likely to be considered legitimate, as the growth of common forms, increasingly recognizable to both the public and other populations, is noticed (Weber et al., 2016). This relationship between density and legitimacy may occur through different processes. An organizational form may receive attention from institutions (e.g., competitors, regulators, media), thus being perceived as legitimate. The legitimization 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 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 (Audia, Freeman, & Reynolds, 2006; Weber et al., 2016).

Finally, competition between organizations and populations will affect density. Competition is dependence on the same or similar resources (Dimmick, 2003). Different levels of competition will result in different relationships. These relationships may be symbiotic (organizations depend on one another), commensualistic (organizations complement each other), neutral (no effect on each other), or fully or partially competitive (overlap of all or some resource needs) (Baum, 2000). Too much overlap in resource needs may cause one or all of the overlapping organizations to fail. “To avoid the detrimental effects of intense competition, there must be some critical difference in the niche of populations—some difference that lowers overlap—that allows them to coexist.” (Dimmick, 2003, p. 38). Some populations may also exhibit *relational density*, or formal relationships between population members and key actors that decrease rates of mortality (Amburgey & Rao, 1996).

Density considerations are also different for digital or emerging media populations. Barriers to entry are low, and niches may be more *elastic* for these organizations (Lowrey, 2012). Niche elasticity means that the carrying capacity of the niche is less strictly fixed so that the maximum number of possible entities supported may depend on factors beyond traditional resources. Digital media is less constrained by geographic space (like a radio transmission) and less physical capitol is involved (e.g., there is no printing press and delivery driver for online news). While there may be a limit to the number of television or radio stations a single

community can support, possible audiences for digital media are virtually unlimited, as theoretically, anyone in the world with internet access is a possible audience. These low barriers to entry also allow for easier access by media start-ups, many of whom organize and maintain themselves based on interests or passions beyond financial gains, though they may evolve over time in order to secure legitimacy or more resources (Lowrey, 2011). As noted above, constraints to time and attention as well as utility to the audience become important considerations for how these media compete and survive.

**Resource Partitioning and Speciation.** Within niches, organizations may exist as *generalists* – i.e., organizations that use more resources, have a broader range of capabilities, and are more able to handle environmental change -- or as *specialists*. Specialists have a more limited focus and use resources more efficiently but are more likely to be unable to recover from environmental changes (Baum, 2000; Hannan & Freeman, 1977 & 1989). Niches may have central and peripheral organizations with different resource dependencies. This division of resources is called *resource partitioning* (Carroll, 1985; Carroll et al., 2002; Greve et al., 2006). Large, generalist organizations focus on the center of the market and tend to compete with one another, using similar resources and targeting the same customers. As generalists compete for the center of markets and resources, specialists emerge in order to exploit resources and customers on the periphery of the market (Mezias & Mezias, 2000). The larger, more central organizations will use more resources, thrive in less stable environments due to resource *slack*, and be more generalist. Peripheral organizations will depend on the remaining resources of the niche, have more susceptibility to environmental changes, and be specialists. While specialists may be more likely to fail due to environmental changes, they have the advantage of efficiency since they do not carry slack resources. Generalist organizations are more stable and able to survive

disruptions, but are more prone to inertia, and so may not make beneficial changes. *Niche width* also determines resource partitioning. Niche width is the available resource space conducive to population growth. Specialists tend to be small, but, depending on the availability of the specific resources they require, may thrive in the margins, and grow into large organizations. Generalists, on the other hand, though usually larger organizations, may sometimes remain small because they require a more diverse range of resources which may be limited by niche width (Carroll, 1985). The emergence of generalists and specialists is also affected by the mortalities of each organizational form. As generalists increasingly compete with one another, their mortalities may increase, which frees resources and allows for emergence of more specialists (Mezias & Mezias, 2000).

New, specialized organizations may also emerge through the process of *speciation* (Weber, 2017). These organizations may be on the periphery of the niche or may become part of a separate population of related organizations. Speciation, in contrast to other organizational change processes, can happen very quickly, as new organizations or populations “branch out” from the existing population following disruptions such as major competitive threats or technological innovation. At the time of speciation, the emerging organizations will have full access to resources revealed by the disruption until the density of the new population increases.

Weber (2017) describes three conditions that must exist in order for speciation to occur. The first is a stable population. In a stable population, current organizations have taken-for-granted forms, similar resource dependencies, and are likely to ignore environmental changes. The second condition is inertia. The longer a population is stable, the stronger inertia becomes, as organizations routinize processes becoming larger, less nimble structures. The third condition is routinization of communication. Knowledge, information, and resources are shared through set

channels, making these organizations less likely to consider outside information and less able to adapt when instability occurs (Weber, 2017).

Speciation occurs in five stages: 1) A disruption impacts a population; 2). The population fragments; 3). New organizational forms emerge; 4). New forms grow; 5). The new population stabilizes, and competition occurs between new and old forms (Weber, 2017). As the emerging population evolves, actors in the new forms are likely to communicate with others within the new population. While these intra-population channels of communication may be a factor in inertia in older populations, they allow emerging populations to learn from one another and to gain legitimacy from their relationships. This kind of communication is seen especially in online organizations (Weber, 2017; Weber et al., 2016).

**Legitimacy.** Organizational legitimacy is strongly related to all of the above concepts of organizational ecology, as it addresses “the normative and cognitive forces that constrain, construct, and empower organizational actors” (Suchman, 1995, p. 571). Legitimacy may be conceptualized as both a resource for organizations and as part of defining form and identity. Isomorphism in populations may help confer legitimacy to members when they mimic organizations that are already seen as successful, and density increases perceived legitimacy of emerging populations (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Weber et al., 2016)

The concept of legitimacy can be traced to Max Weber’s early sociological work ([1922] 1946). Suchman (1995) defines legitimacy as “a generalized perception of assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (p. 574). Legitimacy is negotiated and conferred by *legitimacy agents* (e.g., government regulators, accreditors), *legitimacy mediators* (e.g., media or

other social actors that publicly assess legitimacy of organizations or forms), or *legitimacy guidelines* (e.g., imbedded community or societal norms that may be in constant flux) (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008). As with form and identity, legitimacy can be a product of communicative processes, as stakeholders negotiate and redefine what is “appropriate” (Weber et al., 2016).

Legitimacy of organizations is often discussed in terms of cognitive and sociopolitical legitimacy. Aldrich and Fiol (1994) explain: “cognitive legitimation refers to the spread of knowledge about a new venture... Sociopolitical legitimation refers to the process by which key stakeholders, the general public, key opinion leaders, or government officials accept a venture as appropriate and right, given existing norms and laws” (p. 648). Cognitive legitimacy is “taken for-grantedness,” that is, the point where an organizational form is widely understood and no longer has to be explained and when the form is viewed as an appropriate way of accomplishing goals. Lowrey’s (2012) research assessed cognitive legitimacy of blogs as organizational forms. At a certain point after blogs became popular, news and popular media stopped defining them when they were mentioned, thus signaling that the general public was aware of what a “blog” or a “web log” was and that substantial cognitive legitimacy had been reached. Mere mentions by media of an organizational form also serve as both a source of legitimacy and an 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 & Suchman, 2008).

Sociopolitical legitimacy may be conferred by honors or awards, but it may also come from a general societal acceptance that an organizational form is behaving in a way that fits societal rules:

Legitimation is largely a question of ‘satisficing’ to an acceptable level, and the absence of ‘problems’ is more important than the presence of positive achievements. Legitimacy is also fundamentally non-rival; it is rarely a zero-sum game within any given population; indeed, positive feedback loops and a ‘logic of confidence’ tend to produce win-win ceremonies of mutual affirmation among legitimate actors. Further, legitimacy is homogenizing, producing herd-like conformity along whichever dimensions the prevailing rational myths establish as legitimacy defining. Further, precisely because legitimacy is non-rival and homogenizing, it paints with a broad brush and tends to attach to all entities that share a given form (Deepphouse & Suchman, 2008, p. 61).

This “broad brush” allows organizations and organizational leaders to “co-opt” legitimacy through establishing relationships with other, already legitimized actors. Organizations may also co-opt legitimacy through projecting an image of shared values and exchanging resources with other population members or with adjacent populations (Downing & Pfeffer, 1975; Weber et al., 2016). Gaining legitimacy is vital to organizational success and survival. While the mobilization of resources may be a source of legitimacy for organizations (Lowrey, 2012), a lack of legitimacy may block organizational access to resources. Hirsch and Andrews (1984) discuss the ways that failing to meet the expectations of stakeholders can threaten legitimacy:

Performance challenges occur when organizations are perceived by relevant actors as having failed to execute the purpose for which they are chartered and claim support. The values they serve are not at issue, but rather their performance in ‘delivering the goods’

and meeting the goals of their mission are called into serious question... Value challenges place the organization's mission and legitimacy for existence at issue, regardless of how well it has fulfilled its agreed upon goals or function...[both] entail fundamental challenges to the legitimacy of an organization's continued existence (p. 173-174).

This explanation points to two important ways organizations' legitimacy may be threatened. Organizations may lose legitimacy by failing to meet their goals, or they may lose support if their core values and goals are deemed unacceptable, and not in accord with larger socio-political institutions. In either case, a loss of legitimacy will make an organization more likely to fail.

Carroll and Swaminathan (2002) found that in some cases, identity may be a constraint on legitimacy of organizations and may affect both generalists and specialists. In their qualitative study of the brewing industry, they found four possible explanations for the role of identity as constraint in some industries, expanding ecology's understanding of identity. These explanations include: 1). specialists, regardless of actual product quality, may be perceived as producing higher quality products than generalists; 2) consumers may identify with specialists as a rebellion against mass-production or homogenization; 3). identifying with specialist brands may be a form of consumer self-expression; 4). a level of status may be conferred to specialists as they are perceived as "experts" (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000). This study also suggests that, in contrast to other assumptions from organizational ecology, legitimacy in the case of identity-based organizations is more about identity congruence—meeting the "normative" expectations of consumers—than about density of the population. Relevant to the current study is Carroll and Swaminathan's assertion that this identity-based legitimacy and targeted marketing may be especially applicable to media organizations. They write, "The sustained appeal of specialist organizations appears to emanate from their identity" (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000, p. 752).

**Strengths and weakness of an organizational ecology approach.** Organizational ecology offers advantages over other paradigms of organizational studies as it allows for variables from a variety of levels of analysis, including environmental pressures, economic factors, social legitimacy, internal politics and behavior, and management strategy. This perspective is also well suited to empirical and analytic approaches, and a variety of methodologies, from computational modeling and statistical analysis, to in-depth interviews and ethnography (Carroll & Swaminathan, 1992; Monge et al., 2011; Raff, 2000). Hannan and Freeman (1989) note that ecological approaches are to be differentiated not only from adaptationist approaches (like strategic management), but also from Social Darwinism and gradualist approaches. “Survival of the fittest” is not an appropriate conceptualization of organizational ecology, as “fit” is dependent on multiple exogenous factors and will change with environmental disruptions. Unlike gradualist perspectives, ecological perspectives recognize that evolution may occur through sudden, drastic disruptions rather than only slow, methodical processes (Hannan & Freeman, 1989). Ecological paradigms are also contrasted with determinist perspectives of organizational studies (Burrell & Morgan, 1979), which focus on the power of management and individual organizations to control their operations while ignoring or undervaluing environmental forces.

There are, however, weaknesses in this theory, particularly in measurement and definitions of such amorphous concepts as boundaries, forms, and identity (Carroll, 1984; Hannan & Freeman, 1989; Diani, 2013). As these concepts are constantly evolving through communication and social interaction, they are difficult to operationalize and quantify. Measurement weakness also lies in the idea of aggregations versus relationships. Populations are often conceptualized as aggregates of organizations with the same characteristics, but they may

also be considered networks of relationships (Dimaggio, 1986). Carroll (1984) cautions that researchers much be aware of this duality and be careful not to use nominal variables to account for continuous processes. Baum (2000) and Amburgey and Rao (2014) also caution that demography of populations is often conducted inappropriately, leading to biased determinations of density and mortality. They argue that organizations that fail are often unaccounted for in the literature, as it is difficult to find information. Larger, more stable organizations are then overly represented in studies, thus leading to incorrect conclusions about entire populations (Hannan & Freeman, 1989).

**Ecology and the True Crime Podcast Population.** In this study, the community of interest is podcast media, specifically, the niche occupied by populations of true crime podcasts. This niche may include overlapping populations or sub-niches of the genre. For example, true crime podcast operations (as not all are formal organizations) might overlap into entertainment, storytelling, political activism, or investigative journalism niches. At the lowest level of analysis are the individual organizations, operations and producers, such as *Undisclosed* or New Beginnings, Inc.

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 & 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 also have greater diversity of organizational forms as organizations-in-creation experiment with isomorphism and heterogeneity (Katz & Garner, 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.

True crime podcast populations can be characterized by many of the concepts of organizational ecology demonstrated in the brief discussion below. Thus, our knowledge of both this media format and ecology theory may be expanded by their use in this study. This population appears to be a case of media genre shaping both the niche these podcasts occupy, as well as their perceived organizational form and identity (Barton, 2009; Dimmick, 2003; Lowrey, 2012). The increasing popularity of true crime podcasts also appear to offer an example of how organizations co-opt and confer legitimacy. A cursory analysis based on popular accounts demonstrates this. While the true crime genre was associated with “sleaziness” or poor journalism for much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, *Serial*'s winning of the Peabody Award signaled a cultural acceptance of true crime as a legitimate form for both entertainment and journalism (Punnett, 2018). Despite the popularity of the genre over time (i.e., Capote) crime entertainment was still viewed as somewhat prurient or not as “real” journalism. By contrast, *Serial* was a creation of established, respected public radio organizations, and its offspring were able to gain legitimacy from their symbolic and associational ties with the mega-hit. Later entrants to the population, like *Undisclosed*, co-opted *Serial*'s popularity to grow their own audiences and mobilize resources. When *Truth & Justice* began, it shared information with *Undisclosed*, gaining legitimacy through interorganizational transaction of resources (Koenig et al., 2014; Chaudry et al., 2015; New Beginning, Inc., 2015).

Some members of these populations of podcasts exist both as media products and social movement organizations. These podcasts, like those described by Simpson (October 14, 2017)

and McHugh (August 31, 2017) represent democratic media action (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Greve et al., 2006), where the media products offer counter narratives to mainstream media, discuss case theories for more than the sake of entertainment, or act in terms of strategic objectives (i.e., “finding the real killer”). This suggests that producers may be addressing different gratifications they perceive their audience obtains from different podcast forms, and, in a democratic participatory process, invites questions about the communicative processes that define organizational form, identities, and boundaries within this population (Hsu & Hannan, 2002; Jacobs et al., 2008; Polos et al., 2002; Weber, 2017)

The size and variety of forms in this population open the door for exploration of multiple ecological processes in this study. The heterogeneity of the podcasts in the genre, both in style and substance, suggests that resource partitioning or speciation processes may be at play in the true crime podcast niche (Carroll, 1985; Weber, 2017). While there are indications that some podcasts in the niche exhibit isomorphism, even publicly stating their intentional mimicry of *Serial* (AJC, 2015), it is not clear how others emerged or how their forms were determined. Density, mortalities, and resource mobilization for this population are also under-researched. How have density and legitimacy developed and interacted in this population? How are resources partitioned and are populations showing signs of nearing the carrying capacities of their niches? While other studies have examined small segments of this population (e.g., Boling & Hull, 2018; Doane et al., 2017; Greer, 2017), no community or population level analysis has been conducted, leaving scholars to speculate about the breadth of the phenomenon and the particular means of resource acquisition used by the medium. This dissertation attempts to address these gaps in our knowledge, while allowing for the possibility of other processes and concepts to emerge.

## Social Movement Theories

In addition to existing as media organizations with structure and processes for analysis, many of these podcasts are cited as catalysts or, at the very least, mobilizers, of social movements. As Doane et al. (2017) write, podcasts like *Serial* and its successors present new voices, new spheres for debate, and may motivate listeners to act through both entertainment and strategic discourse. Because of this dual nature, a social movement theory approach is useful for exploration of this population.

Shared across social movement theory (SMT) approaches is the idea of collective identity and action, based on Smelser's (1962) model of collective behavior. Melucci (1995) defined collective behavior as "an interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the action takes place" (p. 44). This "field of opportunities and constraints" suggests an ecological system. It is proposed in this dissertation that organizational ecology offers tools and explanations to understand the structural components at work in this system and the processes by which the system is maintained, while SMT explains the mobilizing mechanisms that allow actors within this system to come together, and collectively identify and attain goals. Undergirding this collective behavior is collective identity, a social process, which may be created dynamically as a result of action or serve as a unifying force to spur action (Cohen, 1985). Within the true crime podcast population, each organization or population may have differing specific goals or methods, but many seem to share a commitment to justice and a moral imperative to spread information and encourage advocacy (Simpson, October 14, 2017; McHugh, August 31, 2017).

Social movement theories, like organizational ecology, are concerned with meso-level phenomena; that is, they focus on organizations and collectives rather than macro, societal level

or micro, individual level phenomena. Social movement theory (SMT) approaches, developed for over a century from psychology, sociology, ethnic and revolutionary studies research, offer communication scholars a set of tools to better understand the uses of organizational communication, mass media phenomena, media ecology, and the utilization of new and alternative mediums in the creation and mobilization of social movements. Communication within movements, between ideologically associated groups, and between movements and society is central to SMT. Social movement theory paradigms include Resource Mobilization, Classical/New Social Movements/Identity approaches, and the Political Process model (Cohen, 1985; McAdam, 1999; McCarthy & Zald, 1977; 2001; Melucci, 1985, Tilly, 1978). Some scholars have tied the resource mobilization and political process paradigms of SMT to organizational ecology through explicit comparison of levels of analysis, and core concepts such as legitimacy, and collective action by past scholars (e.g., Amburgey & Rao, 1996; Greve et al., 2006; Hannan & Freeman, 1989; McCarthy & Zald, 1977 & 2002), and these paradigms offer concepts for better understanding how podcasts can be used to mobilize collective action. The concepts of these approaches offer a *systemic* rather than competing view of social movement development (Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Melucci, 1985), allowing this study to account for both structural and ideological explanations for podcast organization and population development.

SMT approaches have varied widely in focus and application, often focusing on particular phenomena associated with specific kinds of collective action. Because this collective action appears in diverse patterns depending on the historical period, sociopolitical systems, and involved actors, scholars have arrived at a variety of conclusions about the nature of movements. Traugott (1978) credits the focus on different exogenous and endogenous factors for producing “a field of study loosely joining phenomena so diverse as to defy explanation by any single

theoretical framework. The desire for inclusiveness has had a high but hidden cost in theoretical specificity” (p. 42). However, McAdam (1999) points to three uniting factors across all paradigms of SMT. The first factor is political processes. Political processes describe the environmental constraints and opportunities of the system in which a movement exists. The second factor is mobilizing structures, encompassing the organizations and networks that facilitate resource acquisition. The final factor is framing processes, or the social construction of “shared meanings and cultural understandings...including a shared collective identity” (McAdam, 1999, p. ix). This framing process is continuous and “require[s] participants to reject institutionalized routines and taken for granted assumptions about the world and to fashion new world views and lines of interaction” (p. xxi). Movement framing may be strategic by organizations and leaders in order to legitimate and motivate members and represents a transformative process of mobilizing existing coalitions to action. McAdam notes that the minimum requirement for movement existence is *group efficacy*, that is, a shared sense of aggrievement about a problem and an optimism about the possibility of collective solutions (Bandura, 1995; Klandermans, 1984; McAdam, 1999) Members of social movements are defined as collective actors whose interests are routinely accounted for in the decision-making process (Gamson, 1990).

**Classical/New Social Movement Theories/Identity approach.** Both “new” and “theory” are misnomers, as this SMT paradigm is more accurately a school of approaches rooted in older research by Touraine, Castells, Marx, Melucci, and Habermas (Buechler, 1995). These classical approaches are older and have more literature but are less formally developed than either resource mobilization or political process approaches. Rather than having structured tenants, scholarship in this paradigm often takes a more critical/cultural approach and defines

movements by collective awareness and identity rather than actual strategic goals. The classical approach focuses almost entirely on the formation and maintenance of group identities. Classical scholars have focused on specific movements using critical and analytic methods, particularly historical analysis. This approach posits that social movements today are not formed based on identity of class struggle (e.g., 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century revolts), but rather on voluntary associations. Voluntary movement associations are seen to be largely ideational and created by collective awareness and desire for change. These movements may frame symbolic victories as successful action, in that their goal may be simply bringing societal attention to a problem. Many authors in this paradigm see movements as symbolic challenges to political and cultural norms rather than strategic, goal-oriented organizations (e.g., Melucci, 1985 & 1995; Eder, 1985). Habermas's (1987) writing on the public sphere helped to solidify these ideas somewhat, but still fell on the side of symbolism. Others (e.g., Buechler, 1993, 1995a, & 1995b; Melucci, 1985 & 1995) saw something fundamentally different about twentieth century movements like the Civil Rights or women's movements that required more identity related paradigms. The classical paradigm also posits group identity or organization as a sufficient outcome of collective action, rather than only a factor that contributes to outcomes, such as policy change (Cohen, 1985; Diani, 2013).

While Resource Mobilization Theory and Political Process Model approaches often place less emphasis on symbolic, non-rational action, the classical approach embraces it. "The central process [of new social movements] is the social construction of a collective identity that is symbolically meaningful to participants and logically precedes any meaningful calculation of the costs and benefits of joining in collective action" (Buechler, 1993, p. 228). Classical approaches focus on the power of social interaction to create large-scale change. Melucci (1985) wrote that

movement actors “fight for symbolic and cultural stakes, for a different meaning and orientation of social action. They try to change people’s lives, they believe you can change your life today while fighting for more general changes in society” (p. 798).

Classical approaches place a strong emphasis on the individual and are more psychologically than politically focused. This approach can be traced to mass society or “mass-man” theorizing which viewed movements as non-structured systems arising from individual anxiety, alienation, or fear (LeBon, [1895] 1947; McAdam, 1999; Zimbardo, 1969). In this view, individuals who join movements are seen as somehow different from individuals in “normal” society – they are marginalized, or even somehow pathological. Collective behavior in classical movements occurs because of a strain or disruption to the system status quo, often the result of extreme inequity between groups.

Criticism of the classical approach points out that the role of the environment and sociopolitical structure is seldom incorporated in these analyses. This approach has been criticized for making overreaching conclusions and focusing too much on symbolic analysis rather than empirical evidence (Cohen, 1985). However, more recent scholars from this paradigm, like Buechler (1994 & 1995) and Melucci (1985 & 1995), attest that movements today operate in a post-classist environment. They situate this approach as a contrast to earlier Marxist views of collective action as being primarily driven by material factors such as economic inequality. This new social movements view of the classical approach largely disregards the effects of material resources and motivators on movements as well as the role of the environment writ large. This is a problem for the paradigm, as collective identity will not necessarily be sufficient to result in tangible collective action. Cohen (1995) uses the example of the American Civil Rights movement to illustrate this weakness. If identity and shared awareness of injustice

had been enough to create a large-scale movement, Black Americans had ample cause long before the 1950s. Action, however, resulted from the confluence of identity, awareness, resources (in the form of changing political climates and increasing mass media saturation), and substantive support from important political leaders. These researchers have found other evidence to contradict the idea that individual emotion or collective identity are enough on their own to facilitate movement (even symbolic) action (e.g., Cameron, 1974; Freeman, 1973; Shorter & Tilly, 1974). These scholars argue that movements do not emerge from individuals coming together because of a cause; instead they arise through individuals connecting over a cause through already established networks of interactions. Some kind of formal organization is required to create action from individual discontent (McAdam, 1999).

**Resource Mobilization Theory (RMT).** In response to the criticisms of the prevailing classical theory, scholars began to focus on the resource mobilization perspective of movement action. This perspective views movements as strategic responses to political systems and sought to correct the disregard for environmental and organizational factors in the classical perspective. Unlike earlier European social movement models predicated on late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century movements, the RMT approach was born out of mid-20<sup>th</sup> century movements that did not fit previous paradigms (Buechler, 1993; Canel, 1995; Jenkins, 1983). This approach sees social movements as being composed of rational actors who work in strategic ways. These movements are less reliant on charismatic leadership than those in earlier research and depend more on “rational actions oriented towards clearly defined, fixed goals with centralized organizational control over resources and clearly demarcated outcomes that can be evaluated in terms of tangible goals” (Jenkins, 1983, p. 529). This paradigm assumes that the availability of resources for mobilization is the driving factor behind moving collective awareness of an issue toward

collective action. Beyond availability, organizations must have the legitimacy and strategic knowledge to secure and utilize the resources available. This paradigm sees the best strategy for movements to mobilize resources as structuring themselves into an organizational form, also called a *politicized* identity (Diani, 2013; Huddy, 2001; Van Zomeren et al, 2008). There are four main assumptions that undergird the ability of movements to organize into effective collective action in this perspective. These assumptions are: 1). widespread knowledge of how to join or form a movement; 2) norms (or at least ideals) of free speech and assembly; 3) mass media that is friendly to covering movements; and 4) recognition that legislative and electoral action is not enough to make the changes the movement desires (e.g., legalization of an issue like LGBTQIA+ rights does not necessarily signal social acceptance). Also, while McCarthy and Zald (1979 & 2002) do not use the same terminology, these four assumptions also require perceptions of group efficacy (McAdam, 1999). Resources in RMT may be physical, monetary, or symbolic. McCarthy and Zald (1977 & 2002) and Oberschall (1973) described possible resources as legitimacy, skills, money, facilities, labor, rights or access to material goods and services, authority, moral commitment, trust, knowledge, and industry standards.

McCarthy and Zald's (1977 & 2002) RMT shares several fundamental concepts with organizational ecology, though it is important to note that these shared concepts do not represent a formal, unified framework for analysis of organizational structure, form, and competition as organizational ecology does. As discussed below, use of organization ecology concepts in studies framed by a social movement context has been extremely rare. Paralleling the ideas of organization, population, and community, RMT focuses on environmental support and constraints on social movement organizations (SMO), social movement industries (SMI), and social movement sectors (SMS). RMT also includes similar concepts to niche and resource

partitioning theory, suggesting that social movement industries are made of specialists and generalists and that niches have limited carrying capacities. While the terminology used is not identical to that of organizational ecology, McCarthy and Zald (2002) address the idea that social movement sectors have pools of resources that are divided among social movement industries and organizations, utilized based on the specializations of those entities (e.g., local versus national chapters, resource-gathering versus information-spreading organizations), and shared based on competition and negotiation. These SMOs may have competitive or commensualistic relationships. Density has been discussed, along with the effects of foundings, legitimacy, liabilities of newness and ageing, and mortalities of social movement organizations. Legitimacy is important to RMT, as social movement industries and organizations require sociopolitical and cognitive buy-in to grow and thrive. Also similar to organizational ecology, some RMT research has focused on the role of professionalization and institutionalization in the legitimacy of social movement organizations and industries. Boundaries between types of entities are well defined in RMT, and RMT focuses on the societal conditions necessary for movements to mobilize. Carroll and Hackett (2006) approach these boundaries from the perspective of alternative media, suggesting that non-traditional media forms, such as independent or “alternative” local newspapers and now, podcasts, use democratic media action to side-step the requirements of traditional media, thus redefining the movement’s boundaries. Also interesting to media-based social movement organizations is McCarthy and Zald’s (2002) discussion of *technologies of mobilization*, or specific types of communication utilized within social movement sectors.

Some criticisms of this approach are that while RMT assumes formal organization is necessary for resource mobilization, it does not fully address other ways in which efficacy and group identity form, nor does it account for the persuasive power of leaders’ communication.

McAdam (1999) calls discontent and group efficacy “psychological resources” and argues that while inequality may always be present in a society, it is changing *perceptions* of resource availability that drives movements: “Resources do not dictate their use, people do” (p. 21). RMT also fails to account for indirect or symbolic action within movements, such as an individual donating money to or spreading information about a cause that does not directly affect them. Some researchers (Jenkins & Perrow, 1977; McAdam, 1999) have pointed out that resources must often be mobilized by actors who are working to benefit some other stakeholders: “In the case of deprived groups, the aggrieved population is usually incapable of generating a social movement on its own” (McAdam, 1999, p. 29). This is especially relevant for discussion of the true crime podcasts that advocate for criminal justice reform, as their membership is made of organizations and individuals often advocating on behalf of incarcerated populations or deceased victims who require some kind of outside force to disseminate information or collect resources. RMT also cannot explain how individual motivation leads to collective action and maintenance of organizational connection (Buechler, 1993; Canel, 1997; Melucci, 1995), as can be seen in the framing process factor of SMT. RMT assumes collective identity and shared motivation, but does not fully conceptualize this process, starting instead from an assumption that there are existing structural movement components. Finally, despite its acknowledgment of the importance of the environment to social movement growth, RMT research tends to ignore the subtleties of the political opportunities that allow movements to mobilize and achieve success (McCarthy & Zald, 2002).

**Political Process Model.** The political process model specifically seeks to add the component of political opportunity to the resource mobilization approach. More recent movement research by Morris (2000) further expands the RMT and classical paradigms to

examine causality and success of movements. His work builds upon the earlier political process model (McAdam, 1999; McAdam, McCarthy & Zald, 1996; Oberschall, 1973; Rule & Tilly, 1975; Tilly, 1978), examining the informal networks and preexisting structures that may be utilized as resources. Most recently, McAdam (2017) revisited previous RMT research and stressed the necessity of what he calls “mobilizing emotions” (p. 194), such as anger at injustice or fear of threat, to create collective action.

The PPM views movements as more political than psychological, developing through continuous, dynamic processes of interaction with their sociopolitical environments. While it accounts for mobilizing emotions, PPM views movement actions as primarily rational processes by stakeholders to advance collective interests. While the organization of these movements may be noninstitutionalized, PPM still requires sufficient structure to leverage resources or exert political pressure. “The political process model is based on the assumption that movements only emerge over a long period of time in response to broad social, economic, and political processes that afford insurgents a certain structural potential for collective action” (McAdam, 1999, p. 60). Like RMT, PPM is an ecological perspective of movements, focusing on endogenous and exogenous factors of organization, collective efficacy, and alignment with the environment. It sees movements as economic actors, taking rational steps to decrease power disparities so that the cost to the environment of suppressing a movement becomes greater than the cost of the movement to sustain itself. PPM also acknowledges the different kind of actors that may enact social change. *Elite contention* is change that occurs through established political actors. McCarthy & Zald (1977) use the example of the Sierra Club as a movement organization that is part of a century-old, politicized environmental movement with elite actors. At the other end of the movement spectrum is *popular contention*, newly mobilized, self-identified political actors

who may have some reliance on non- or newly-institutionalized structures or forms (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2003).

McAdam (1999) criticizes the application of PPM in movement scholarship rather than its concepts. One such application is the operationalization of threats and opportunities. While Tilly's (1978) foundational PPM scholarship explored the interactions of perceived threats to a group and the environmental or political opportunities for action, later scholars focused on one or the other as movement motivations. McAdam theorizes that both threats and opportunities may be considered mobilizing factors, and that these concepts may interact and coexist in the same movement. Likewise, the ignoring of nuanced variation in network relationships between movements (both as partners and challengers) has also been a problem in PPM application. Relationships act as both environmental constraints and opportunities and are vital for the growth of resources and legitimacy. Melucci (1985), though writing from the classical perspective, also wrote that the identity and legitimacy of organizational forms is increased through communicative action, such as "submerged networks" of connected individuals between organizations, further strengthening McAdam's (1999) assertion that relational networks must be considered in social movement models. Other opportunities that are often ignored include political changes beyond the local reach of movements. For example, the Arab Spring movement of the late 2000s received international attention, serving as an example of movement mobilization in the Twitter age far beyond the countries it affected. McAdam called these *symbolic political opportunities*; that is, attention to other successful movement forms (through media coverage or political rhetoric) increases the salience of collective action far beyond the reach of related SMOs (McAdam, 1999).

**Application to the True Crime Podcast Population.** As discussed in the above sections, many podcasts within the true crime podcast population are attached to a social movement for criminal justice reform (*AJC*, 2015; Simpson, October 14, 2017; McHugh, August 14, 2017; Wolf, November 23, 2016). As such, these podcasts may be conceptualized as social movement organizations connected to social movement industries. What is not known at this time is how true crime podcasts, their producers, and their audiences differentiate between those podcasts that are seen as having the identity of a movement organization and those which are seen as some other kind of operation. This differentiation may involve the social construction of identity and legitimacy, the exploitation of political opportunities, and the development of new (or recognition of existing) relational networks.

### **Theoretical Synthesis**

True crime podcasts represent an interesting media phenomenon both from the perspective of practical and theoretical implications. As a rapidly growing cultural phenomenon, their popularity suggests continued interest from both outside and within academic contexts, particularly in the realm of media research. Many of these podcasts are hybrids, existing as media organizations with relations to entertainment, journalism, and pop-culture, and, seemingly, as movement organizations, with ties to social and political change movements. These podcasts operate from two orientations due to their hybrid nature. They must focus on *maintenance*, or the basic organizational and structural processes needed to maintain a media operation. This means acquiring resources, targeting audiences, and dealing with competition. They also operate from a *movement* orientation, balancing goals, identity, and collective awareness with audience members within social movements around issues like the epidemic of missing persons, police misconduct, and other criminal justice reform topics. Based on this hybrid orientation, this

population is a prime subject for exploration of the dual nature of many emerging digital platforms, and for utilizing the synthesized application of organizational ecology and social movement theories.

Using combined approaches of organizational ecology and social movement theories to explain meso-level phenomena is logical when the sum of the literature is considered. Hannan and Freeman quote Tilly (1978), the father of PPM, on the first page of *Organizational Ecology* (1989) and go into great detail about the application of ecology to the study of movements. They write, “even relatively amorphous social movements have a higher likelihood of success if they can utilize existing organization...organizations are more than passive actors: most societal change begins with actions from organizations. Indeed, organizations are constructed as tools for specific kinds of collective action” (p. 3). Hannan and Freeman explain that while organizations have all the hallmarks of collective action—efficacy, resources, collective identity—formal organizations bring competencies to movements. These competencies include reliability and stability, internal accountability and consistency, efficiency in resource mobilization, and routinization. They caution, however, that with these core competencies comes inertia, potentially making social movement organizations less able to adapt to their environment.

Organizational ecology scholars Amburgey and Rao (1996) and Carroll (1984) also cite social movement theorists and draw parallels. Amburgey and Rao (1996) write:

In a related vein, albeit with a different vocabulary, social movement theorists have suggested that the relationship between moderate and radical social movement organizations and the interplay between organizations championing a movement and organizations promoting a countermovement influence the fates of issues. Ecological models of niche width can be used to model how diffuse competition between moderate

and radical movement organizations influences the rates at which they attract new members...Density-dependent models of evolution may shed light on the coevolution of movements and counter- movements, and on how organizational dynamics underlie the rise and fall of issues (p. 1281).

Within the social movements literature, scholars have often suggested ecological frameworks be incorporated. McCarthy and Zald (2002) specifically cite ecology as a lens to extend RMT perspectives, and McAdam (2017) also noted the usefulness of ecological perspectives in social movement research. The approaches have multiple overlapping or similar concepts—levels, density, legitimacy, inertia, boundaries, resources—and also what both Greve et al. (2006) and Van Zomeren et al. (2008) call “symmetrical gaps.” Interestingly, while scholars often suggest that these theory approaches work well together, there has been very little research actually following those suggestions. A search of the main databases for sociology and business/organizations scholarship reveals very few studies blending social movement research with organizational ecology concepts despite some scholars’ suggestion that there is overlap. McCarthy and Zald’s (2002) review of resource mobilization research specifically addresses this, noting that they find it unusual that more overlapping research does not exist, particularly in the area of the effects of population density on movement legitimacy.

**Synthesis in Past Research.** There are a few scholars who have, at least partially, combined ecological and social movement approaches (e.g., Diani, 2013; Carroll & Hackett, 2006; Greve et al. 2006, Minkoff, 1999), though many of these works are theoretical analyses rather than empirical applications. Empirical studies have focused only on select concepts from both theories, such as density and legitimacy. Greve et al. (2006) identified particular weaknesses in ecology and SMT and used a combined approach (along with the “production of cultural”

perspective, which is beyond the scope of the current study) to explore reasons for the emergence of media organizations. Organizational ecology, they argued, focuses only on the distribution of resources and the latent possibilities in the social space – such as resource partitioning theory and its explanation for why small specialists are able to emerge and grow. Organizational ecology ignores the motivations of individual organizations and producers that, beyond environmental disruption and resource partitioning, may lead to “entrepreneurial attempts” and speciation processes in populations. From an SMT perspective, their study sought to uncover how population density and diversity of organizational forms affect social movement industries. The findings of this study shed light on the unique ways that media organizations, particularly those related to social movements, interact. While older ecological research focused on competition from emerging new entities that derive from resource partitioning, Greve et al. (2006) identified *community resources*, or sharing between organizations, that altered perceptions of niche width and elasticity (Carroll, 1985). They also found increased population density led to an increase in organizations and individuals with specialized knowledge about the social movement industry. Rather than leading to increased competition, this density of knowledgeable actors became a community resource, and increased perceived legitimacy of the organizational form. Within the population, increases in diversity of forms led to greater audience attention and movement membership. While diversity of organizational forms had been found to be a negative factor in terms of the growth of certain organization populations in earlier research (Ingram & Rao, 2004), it became a positive “symbolic output” (Hannan, 1988) for media organizations within the social movement industry. Part of the “symbolic output,” Greve et al. (2006) found, came from the identity of the micro-radio stations examined. In this case, diversity of form was a goal rather than a weakness. That is, these stations considered their identity to be predicated on

heterogeneity in opposition to dominant, commercial radio. Because they were goal (or movement) oriented rather than only financially oriented, the diversity of forms that proved negative in earlier research (Ingram & Rao, 2004), became a strength within the movement orientation. Greve et al. (2006) caution, however, that a point was eventually reached where too much density and diversity within a population drove the audience away through overwhelming them with choices.

Sandell (2001) researched organizational growth in Sweden using a synthesis of the theories. His findings show that resource availability alone cannot explain the growth of movement organizations. In the case of the movement organizations analyzed, density of the population was more indicative of interest in (and thus, membership growth of) social movements. In other words, many very small organizations within a SMI/population are a more significant indicator of movement success than a few large, stable SMOs. This is relevant to the current study, as it suggests that the explosion of true crime podcasts may not be indicative of an oversaturation of the market, but rather of a deeply invested, collectively-identified audience. Additionally, both Koopmans (2004) and Carroll and Hackett (2006) illustrate the merit of a combined approach, especially in cases of democratic media activism, such as citizen journalism or emerging, democratic media platforms.

Analytic scholarship has also shed light on the ways these theories may be co-utilized. Van Zomeren et al. (2008) conducted meta-analysis of 182 studies of collective action. While their findings deal largely with psychological, individual level phenomena in movement participants, they do suggest an important rationale for using dual ecological and SMT approaches to understand movement organizations. This rationale is that for any collective action, there is an interaction between the agency and motivations of organization or movement

leaders and environmental factors. Cost-benefit resource considerations are thus important to sociopolitical opportunities and collective identity if successful action is to occur. In order for scholars to fully account for the emergence and development of social movement phenomena, multiple theoretical positions must be considered. Diani's (2013) proposal offers another relevant synthesis for this study. While not adopting organization ecology directly, he does suggest that social movements may themselves be conceptualized within social space, what he calls organizational "fields." He proposes the study of movements through examining networks, boundaries, resources, collaborations, joint membership in movement organizations, collective identity formation, and organizational change (or inertia). Identity in this combined perspective is examined both at the movement level (the community/field) and the organization level (population members; Diani, 2013).

**Symmetrical Gaps.** Within both theories there are gaps that ignore or underexplain parts of organizational and environmental phenomena that seem important to the study of dual-oriented, emerging media populations. Organizational ecology literature is weak on the concept of identity. While it recognizes that identity is important to definitions of organizational form and the "boundary work" involved in differentiating "legitimate" forms, it is unclear on the hows and whys of identity formation, and it does not explore the full consequences of identity formation. As Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, (2000) and Polos et al. (2002) discuss, organizations can change their structure and form and yet retain their identity. This, and the consequences of this, is not fully accounted for by organizational ecology. As Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) discuss, identity may be of more importance for certain kinds of organizations and industries, thus changing how legitimacy is determined for those populations, the reasons for population growth, and the impact of population growth.

Social movement theories, especially the classical approach, have been criticized (Cohen, 1985; Diani, 2013) for focusing on identity to the point of ignoring more concrete, instrumental factors, such as resources, initial mobilization, and strategy. Within SMT, Resource Mobilization Theory does address mobilization and strategy, but it ignores the social construction and renegotiation of boundaries and de-emphasizes the impact of identity formation. These gaps in the theory appear to be complementary — ecology offers ways to understand how organizations and populations compete and evolve for survival, while SMT can help to further explain social processes and consequences of boundary creation, identity and identification with organizations and the larger causes behind them.

### **The True Crime Podcast Population: Concepts for Exploration and Research Questions**

Considering both the suggestions of prior literature and questions that arise from popular and trade press discussions of true crime podcasts, this study seeks to better understand this phenomenon and to act on the suggestions of prior theory and theorists. By focusing on relationships, collaboration, and shared resources (e.g., Diani, 2013), part of this study will seek to understand how goal-oriented podcasters build identity and networks while attracting listeners and mobilizing resources. These producers may see their audiences as a resource in ways beyond targeting advertising and publicity. This is in line with Dimmick's (2003) concept of niche gratifications, which drive audiences to choose media products, as well as Gamson's (1990) conceptualization of movement members as actors whose interests are vital for a movement. The audience, if they buy into the presented goals, has the potential to become a part of the movement organization and to participate in the social construction of form, boundaries, and identity. The political process model can help to explain how collective awareness of issues interacts with environmental opportunities to mobilize movements.

Focusing on the concept of boundaries in connection to form from organizational ecology, it is possible that fan communities help direct the central movement organizations (here, podcasts), in the direction that they believe is most congruent with the movement's identity. Polos et al. (2002) and Gioia et al. (2000) discuss this bi-directional boundary work, writing that audiences/constituents/consumers define an organization at least as much as the organization defines itself. This can also be related to Albert & Whetten's (1985) seminal definition of organizational identity as being composed of "how we see ourselves" and "how we are seen." As mentioned above, McAdam (2017) writes that communities are quick to point out when leaders or organizations go against movement goals as understood by the community, or to suggest new directions or issues. This also relates to Dimmick's (2003) niche gratifications theory. Fan communities grow around a particular product (or, constituents grow around a movement) based on the specific gratifications they receive. For these media products that have specifically articulated goals beyond entertainment, are podcasters aware of audiences having certain expectations that act as boundaries to the organization?

Other ecological work on institutionalization of organizations and populations also helps explain how fan communities may become active rather than passive. Lowrey (2017) writes about institutionalization in the case of fact-checking websites. These sites begin as offshoots of legacy outlets, often as supplements to other media products. Overtime, the population of these sites, through mimicry and development of shared norms, became "a thing," that is, they gain cognitive legitimacy. With cognitive legitimacy come agreed-upon, taken-for-granted norms and expectations of a population, which fosters institutionalization. In the case of the fact checking sites, members of the population took on characteristics of traditional journalism, and developed recognizable norms, both institutional characteristics. For movement-oriented media products

(and movements in general), does this institutionalization occur as well? McCarthy and Zald (2002) note the understudied importance of professionalization and institutionalization in movement organizations and industries. McAdam (2017) and Cohen (1985) also note that social movements may sometimes follow this path to institutionalization (though, both SMT and ecological theorists are quick to point out that institutionalization is *not* inevitable).

As more products on certain topics or issues appear, the population becomes denser. As Florini (2015) found, fan communities often overlap (what SMT calls voluntary, non-exclusionary membership and ecology calls commensualistic relationships) and share information. Do these network relationships—of fans, hosts, organizations, and populations—allow for resource mobilization and sharing, build legitimacy, and encourage institutionalism of the movement? Both SMT and organizational ecology have the advantage of examining the mobilization of fandoms and social movement populations from an environmental perspective. Rather than focusing solely on media and psychological effects (like parasocial interaction or psychological sense of community), they also include the sociological concepts of the environment. Socio-political pressures and opportunities are evaluated, as is the role of cultural legitimacy and cultural norms. Either of these, but particularly a use of concepts from both perspectives, allows us to better understand how individual effects, community identity, and societal level forces work together to create coherent and effective action. The current study will focus on the latter factors, examining how both structural, organizational forces and the evolution of collective identity and action may be at work in the true crime podcast population.

Considering the whole of the reviewed literature, the following concepts will be explored in this study:

## Theoretical Concepts

*The social space: niches, forms, and boundaries.* How do these podcasts define themselves? What roles do they see themselves playing in the community? How are communication and relational channels developed with similar or different forms? Do they consider the gratifications received by listeners, or are they concerned with audience metrics and revenue? Do they see these gratifications as a way to commodify and monetize target audiences, or do they see listeners as stakeholders who help define form boundaries? How do these podcasters see themselves in relation to other forms, for example, journalism and entertainment?

*Structural inertia and density.* How and why do new operations enter the population? What kind of barriers to entry might exist? Are there examples of isomorphism and adaptation? What does competition look like, and how does that affect the growth of the population, relationships between organizations, and mortalities?

*Resource partitioning, speciation, and isomorphism.* To what degree is the emergence of new entities or forms a consequence of the available resources in the niche or community and to what degree is the emergence of new entities or forms a product of identity formation in society, and between society members and podcast producers? Is there evidence of speciation? Is there evidence of intrapopulation communication, and, if so, how does that communication affect how organizations adapt to the environment? Does input from listeners change the calculation of how organizations position themselves as generalists or specialists? Is there evidence that producers mimic successful podcast forms, or do they attempt to differentiate their media products? If there is evidence of homogeneity, does this reflect an ecological move toward mimicry as a tool for sustainability or a movement tool toward collective identity or action? Is there a difference in how marginalized or non-mainstream voices are treated or utilized?

*Legitimacy and organizational identity.* Is legitimacy more a product of population size or density, or is it more related to an entity or population being congruent with particular societal and political ideals, policies, institutions, or organizations? Is there evidence of agents, mediators, and community guidelines acting to confer cognitive legitimacy? Do these organizations see identity as a constraint or a strength?

*Movement orientation, collective identity, and movement processes.* Do these podcasts see themselves as part of a movement? If so, what kind of framing processes are at work that may explain how diverse individuals or organizations create collective action? Is there a sense of group efficacy? If so, are there particular events or opportunities that affect that sense? Is symbolic action used, and, if so, how? Do podcasters recognize and utilize mobilizing emotions or are they focused on audiences as financial opportunities? Is there evidence of elite and popular contention? What kind of societal forces might exist that are affecting both podcasts as an industry and as part of a social movement?

*Institutionalization and professionalization.* Do these podcasters see a move toward or away from institutionalization and professionalization within the population? How does this affect legitimacy? Is institutionalization seen as a positive move toward legitimacy or an obstruction of the effort to move in new directions, make changes, or generate new ideas? Do these podcasts start as hobbies and then move toward legitimation, monetization or movement goals, or are there other paths and motivations at work?

*Resource mobilization.* How are resources and competition for resources negotiated? How is the audience conceptualized as a resource? Are podcasts seen as technologies of mobilization? Are there other resources beyond capital, knowledge, and audience buy-in to consider?

*Other concepts and emerging themes.* Is there evidence of a dual or hybrid organizational orientation? Is there a tension between these orientations, and if so, how is that tension negotiated? How do these producers define true crime? Do they have a commitment to issues of injustice or of subversion or redefinition of both genre and norms? What other themes or processes may be at work in this population?

**Research Questions.** In order to explore the above concepts and the many questions related to them, five broad research questions have been posed. The following questions will be used to guide investigation of the ecological implications of the true crime podcast phenomenon:

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

RQ2: In what ways, and in what contexts, do podcasters take an ecological approach?

For exploration of the nature of movement mobilization through true crime podcasts, the following research question will be examined:

RQ3: In what ways, and in what contexts, do podcasters take a social movement approach?

The following research questions are presented with synthesis of these theories and the possibility of unexpected or new concepts in mind:

RQ4: Do podcasts reflect both ecology and social movement approaches, and if so, how do they reflect both?

RQ5: What other relevant contexts or motivating factors beyond ecological and social movement approaches are evident?

## METHODS

In order to answer the research questions posed, a mixed-methods study design was utilized, including a population analysis, content analysis, and directed qualitative interviews with podcasters. These methods are represented in both organizational ecology and social movements research and provide: 1) demographic evidence of the shape and density of the true crime podcast population and its changing public legitimacy; 2) insight into both the organizational maintenance and social movement orientation motivations of podcasters and their organizations; and 3) allow for the possibility of emerging themes or disconfirming evidence.

### **Population Analysis**

Population analysis is one of the most widely used methodologies for ecological research (Monge et al., 2011). It has also been used, though far less often, in exploration of social movement industries and sectors (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). Population analysis is useful for discovering the density of populations, evidence of cognitive legitimacy, and identifying processes of speciation and resource partitioning. The findings from the population analysis of true crime podcasts are used to answer RQ1 as well as to illuminate concepts inherent to RQ2, RQ3, and RQ4 such as density, legitimacy, and resource partitioning. These findings also inform interviews and interview interpretation by illuminating which podcasters might be most useful to speak to, based on length and topic of their production, as well as by serving as data for triangulation of interview interpretation. The analysis of the true crime podcast population was conducted in three stages. The first is a demography of true crime podcasts. In demographic analysis the researcher attempts to identify as many members of a population as possible in order

to make conclusions about *foundings*, as well as *mortalities* (population members that cease to function) and to determine population density over time. The second stage involves content analysis of mentions in the news of true crime podcasts for evidence of changing cognitive and normative legitimacy of the population over time. The third involves interviews of podcast creators to discover possible evidence of specialization and niche characteristics.

**Demography.** Podcasts in this study are defined as web-based audio productions (Hammersley, 2004), regardless of length or distribution service (e.g., iTunes, Stitcher, creator websites). These productions are digital audio files delivered via RSS to websites or portable devices (e.g., the iPhone Podcast app) and which are automatically “pushed” to subscribers (Bottomley, 2015). While some podcasts, such as *Reveal*, may also be aired on public radio, the web-based nature of the format puts them in the podcast category regardless of additional avenues of distribution. The term “podcast” may also refer to the production as a whole, such as all three seasons of *Serial*, or may refer to a single episode (Bottomley, 2015). “Podcast” in this study refers to the entire production, regardless of number of episodes.

Due to the increasingly low barriers to entry into the podcasting medium, it is nearly impossible to find every podcast available. As of April 2018, Apple Podcasts reported over 525,000 active podcasts of multiple genres and over 50 billion-episode downloads (Locker, 2018). That statistic does not account for inactive but still accessible podcasts, inactive and inaccessible podcasts, and those housed on other platforms.

Beyond the difficulty of determining exact numbers of podcasts, genre categories are 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 both Apple

podcasts and Toppodcast.com, while others 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” (p. 2). He explains:

True crime and journalism share similar historical DNA, but true crime seeks to create emotional sensations regarding criminal events and transport moral messages and social truths through entertaining narratives rich in detail and color. True crime eschews a slavish, chronological mono-dimensional discourse of news events in favor of narrative forms more commonly associated with fiction... True crime is fact-based but, unlike journalism, it allows for a certain, quantifiable amount of “free play” to enhance the transportive qualities of a fictional narrative, as long as the text’s teleology is striving toward nonfiction pedagogy...[true crime often has goals] to celebrate or subvert the actions of law enforcement, to express support for victims, and to educate readers/viewers/ listeners about the lessons learned from aberrant stories ” (Punnett, 2018, p. 93-94).

Punnett conducted a textual analysis of several popular true crime products, including documentary *Making a Murderer*, podcast *Serial*, and book *In Cold Blood*, to identify themes common to the genre regardless of media format. His analysis yielded seven themes common to the true crime genre. Not every true crime product will exhibit all seven themes, but all true crime media will exhibit some. The first theme, identified as *teleology*, is shared by all media in the true crime genre. This requires that a true crime narrative be true, or at minimum purport itself to be non-fiction. This is different than narratives “based on a true story,” as such may still be heavily fictionalized. While true crime may sensationalize or misstate facts, there is an effort

to portray the story in a factual (even if not objective) way. Other themes which may be present are the seeking of justice (e.g., centering of victims, examining systems); subversion of the status quo (e.g., questioning verdicts or interrogating societal norms); locality (e.g., the geographic place and time of events is vital to the narrative); forensics (e.g., focus on 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). While still limited and incomplete, Punnett’s research is the most recent and most thorough attempt at defining and theorizing a definition of “true crime” as a genre. It should be noted here that while this prior literature offers some guidance for setting initial boundaries of the population, which is useful especially for the initial demographic study, the interviews will be used to explore and challenge, inductively, these boundary definitions.

Informed by this research and the challenges of locating all true crime podcasts available, the following process was used to identify a population of true crime podcasts. This process is based on processes used in previous ecological population studies—of computer firms (Kennedy, 2008), blogs (Lowrey, 2012), social networking sites (Weber, Faulk, and Monge, 2016), and fact-checking sites (Lowrey, 2017).

- As a starting point, a sub-Reddit thread devoted to true crime podcasts was used. This thread, identifying podcasts active prior to December 2016, when the thread was last updated (True Crime Podcasts, 2016), has been cited by Boling and Hull (2018), and lists 169 true crime podcasts, including links to RSS feeds for otherwise inaccessible, inactive podcasts.
- The Apple podcast top charts were used to identify the Top 100 podcasts for the available months. As there is currently no true crime category in the Apple charts, descriptions of

the podcasts were used to identify those relating to crime. For example, *Up and Vanished*'s description includes the words "investigative," "unsolved," "disappearance," and "Georgia cold case." These words act as clues that the podcast meets the teleological, justice, locality, and forensic criteria for a true crime narrative (Punnett, 2018). Other podcasts, for example *Wrongful Conviction*, directly state "[this is] a podcast about true crime" (Revolver Podcasts, 2016) in their descriptions, which was also considered sufficient criteria for inclusion. The Top 100 charts for the USA, UK, Canada, and Australia (all of the English-language charts) were included in the search. Additionally, the Wayback Machine internet archive (<https://archive.org>) was used to search iTunes charts back to July 2011, the earliest date available. The Wayback Machine search only yielded one additional podcast, identifying a total of 26 additional podcasts through iTunes.

- The Toppodcast.com database was also searched. Top Podcast lists its mission statement as, "The Front Page to the Podcast Industry, we are the premier destination for podcast discovery, trends and advertising, propelling a new audience of first-time listeners & businesses to discover a love for on-demand listening." Top Podcast is designed for podcast consumers, advertisers, and producers, and has research links to Nielsen, Pew Research Center, the Tow Center for Digital Journalism, the Knight Foundation, and the Nieman Journalism Lab. Unlike the Apple Podcasts Top 100, Toppodcasts.com lists a top 200, and allows users to use search terms. The top 200 was scanned for podcasts with any relation to true crime in their descriptions. The same procedure was used to search the News & Politics, Comedy, Society & Culture, and History charts. Unlike iTunes, Toppodcasts has a searchable database. The database was searched using terms relating

to Punnett's (2018) themes, including "crime," "criminal justice," "prison," "justice," "innocence," "conviction," "incarceration," "murder," "missing person," "investigate," and "forensic." Unlike the Apple iTunes charts, which only shows the top podcasts in each chart (and require a Wayback Machine search to access some charts), Toppodcasts.com's search function retrieves podcasts from any date in its archive, allowing access to those predating its Top 200. As an example, the earliest podcast in the demography, 2005's *Cyberspeak's Podcast*, was first discovered through Toppodcasts.com's archive. The Top 200 search for all categories yielded 22 podcasts, while the remaining podcasts were found through the search functions. A total of 322 previously undiscovered podcasts were identified through Toppodcast.com.

The Reddit thread, iTunes, and Toppodcasts.com searches yielded 517 unique podcasts. In order to capture very new, less-popular, and independently-distributed podcasts, several other search techniques were used, again, utilizing the same criteria for inclusion as "true crime":

- The whatpods.com November 2018 list of true crime podcast recommendations was checked for additional podcasts. From this list of 52 podcasts, ten additional podcasts were identified.
- All available posts in the True Crime Podcasts sub-Reddit were searched for previously undiscovered podcasts. These 597 posts dated back to February 2015. This search was conducted by navigating to the original post and working toward the most recent, cross-referencing the working podcast list and adding new titles as they were identified. These posts yielded a total of 93 additional podcasts.
- Reddit threads led to a link for a user-created spreadsheet of true crime podcasts (Hendricks [tijde], October 23, 2018), including independent and short-lived podcasts

unavailable in previous searches. This list is an open, crowd-sourced spreadsheet, moderated by Hendricks (personal communication, February 28, 2019) for accuracy, and includes true crime, true crime parody, supernatural, and conspiracy theory podcasts. After disregarding the non-true crime podcasts, nearly 100 additional podcasts were identified through this list.

- Google searches for additional true crime podcasts and podcast lists were also conducted, including sorting by date to capture very old or very new additions to the population. This search identified several more lists of podcasts (Nelson, July 30, 2018; Playerfm, 2018; Vulture, November 1, 2018), but fewer than one dozen previously-unidentified podcasts. Several additional podcasts were identified through links in podcast descriptions found during the above searches.

A total of 749 unique podcasts were identified through all searches as of November 28, 2018. The earliest population entry was December 14, 2005, while the most recent was November 7, 2018.

In March 2019, the search process was repeated for the original time period (December 2005 to November 28, 2018). This was done for several reasons. First, Hendrick's true crime database had gone through several updates and added podcasts not listed in the earlier version. These podcasts included many from the latter half of 2018, as well as the addition of 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 suggestions from interview participants, the original search criteria related to

Punnett's (2018) typology were extended to include terrorism, cults, and political and financial crimes. The process of updating the population involved:

- The newest version of Hendrick's true crime database was compared to the list of previously identified podcasts, and 366 previously un-identified podcasts were found. As expected, over two-thirds of those (257) were new, having begun in 2018.
- Toppodcast.com was re-searched with the original terms, as well as "cult," "white collar," "fraud," "terrorism," and "politics" + "crime," and 33 additional podcasts were identified. Of those, 22 were from late 2018.
- Three additional podcasts were found via Google searches for podcasts matching the original search criteria and the new terms.
- The True Crime Podcast sub-Reddit was revisited. Out of the 214 new posts since November 28, 2018, only one new podcast was identified.
- The iTunes Top 100 Charts were referenced again, and no new podcasts were found for the selected time period using both the old and new criteria.
- There was no updated whatpods.com list.

The final updated podcast list included 1,153 true crime podcasts that first aired prior to November 28, 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 (Amburgey & Rao, 1996; 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 still 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 podcasts types within the true crime genre. The final list of podcasts is available in Appendix A.

The next step in the demography was accounting for the dates of entry and, where applicable, exit of the population. Entries (or birthdates) were recorded based on the date of the first episode. Where a date for the first episode could not be identified, the date of the earliest episode was used (this was done for three podcasts). Exits (mortalities) were recorded as the date of the final episode for podcasts that had ended. 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 within the previous six months or if their website or social media presence had not been updated in six months. Several mortalities were identified by social media or podcast-description announcements that the podcast had ended. The population also included many podcasts that were created as 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.

The compilation of a sample that approached a population was completed on March 10, 2019. The population included 1,153 unique true crime podcasts (see *Appendix A*). Births and exits (mortalities) for these podcasts were recorded. Of the 3 podcasts where no date for the first episode could be identified, the date of the second (2 podcasts) was used as the entry date. The episode numbers for one podcast could not be found, so its entry date was recorded as the earliest episode available. The earliest podcast entry was December 14, 2005, while the most recent was November 28, 2018. Once the census was complete and births and mortalities were recorded, the growth and density of the population were calculated and graphed. 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 1).

Table 1

*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.

**Analysis of legitimacy of podcast population.** A content analysis was conducted to illustrate and track legitimacy of true crime podcasts as a media format. This involved an analysis of media mentions of “true crime podcasts” in online newspapers. Legitimacy is a vital concept in both ecology and social movement theory approaches. As media mentions can both confer and be evidence of legitimacy for organizational forms (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Deephouse & Suchman, 2008), this analysis helps clarify changes in level of legitimacy across time of the true crime podcast genre, and to inform interviews with podcasters, as well as the interpretation of interview findings. Kennedy (2008) calls this legitimation by media “becoming real” (p. 270) and notes that social movements as well as organizational forms gain strength and recognition as categories of entities as the public becomes more familiar with them.

The entire time from the earliest identified podcast to the completion of the demographic analysis was included. This time period was selected for two reasons: 1) the earliest mentions establish a base-line for discussion about the population. This helps to clarify whether “true crime podcasts” as a media types 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 boundary negotiation (which is related to positioning and isomorphism). This method addresses cognitive legitimacy, or the “taken-for-grantedness” of a social entity (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994)—here, an organizational form (or movement). 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, or the degree to which an entity is accepted as consistent with wider beliefs and norms (Scott, 2013), was also examined. This concept was measured by coding for whether or not a positive judgement of the genre (true crime) or medium (true crime podcast) was present in the article. A LexisNexis search of three daily national newspapers –*USA Today*, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*-- during the identified interval was conducted using the search terms “podcast” + “true crime.” These papers were selected because they are targeted to broader, more general consumers, rather than other media which may target specific entertainment or technology sectors and publish with an expectation of specialized knowledge. Additionally, these three papers have similar archival and search functions and are available through LexisNexis.

Single articles, including news, opinion, and entertainment, were coded. The individual article was the unit of analysis.

A total of 87 articles were identified, and the earliest of these articles was dated January 14, 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.

High cognitive legitimacy signals that a particular organizational form (in this case, true crime podcasts), is well known and no longer needs to be explained or defined (e.g., Lowrey’s 2012 study of blogs). Normative legitimacy is a somewhat different concept. High normative legitimacy signals that a form has been accepted as “appropriate” or good for society. Both kinds of legitimacy were coded in the content analysis, and scores were created for each 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 (the story is the unit of analysis) 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. (See Appendix B-Content Analysis Codebook).

A second coder was used to establish reliability for the coding scheme. First, reliability was checked in a preliminary way. 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 reach 83% (Krippendorff's  $\alpha=.59$ ; Hayes & 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.

### **In-depth, Directed Qualitative Interviews**

To answer RQ 2, 3, 4, and 5, as well as to further clarify RQ1, in-depth, directed qualitative interviews with podcast hosts and producers were conducted. This method involves crafting interview questions around a set of themes informed by theory (Creswell, 2014). This method is both deductive, as it is guided by the implications of known theory, and inductive, as the possibility of emergent themes or unexpected theoretical implications is left open (Kvale, 2007). In addition to emergent themes, interviews may reveal disconfirming evidence for theoretical concepts. In-depth interviews have been used by scholars of ecology (e.g., Raff, 2000;

Lowrey, 2012), social movement theories (e.g., Kurzman, 1996), and synthesis research (e.g., Carroll & Hackett, 2006).

**Design and Interview Guide.** Concepts from the prior literature will be used to create themes to guide interview questions (see Appendix C-*Interview Guide*). The demographic analysis and the analysis of changing legitimacy over time also informed interviews and interview interpretation. IRB approval for human subjects research was obtained prior to any participant recruitment (See Appendix I-*IRB*). Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions were coded using the themes from the codebook (see Appendix D-*Codebook*), as well as emerging themes.

**Participant Sampling and Recruitment.** The current study is a *phenomenological* study, that is, one that seeks to better explain or contextualize aspects of a “central phenomenon” and to “describe the essence of the experience” involved in said phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, p. 89). Purposive sampling is used in the case of phenomenological studies in order to identify participants with direct knowledge or involvement with the object of study (Creswell, 2007; Plano Clark & Creswell, 2008). Participants were selected based on their involvement in the production of selected true-crime podcasts. Initial recruitment focused on participants who seemed both most accessible and most salient. For example, podcasters involved with the early *Serial* off-shoots such as *Undisclosed* have received major attention in trade, academic, and popular press. A host of that show, Colin Miller, is a faculty member at the University of South Carolina, and is the colleague of an acquaintance of the researcher, making him more easily reachable than a subject like Sarah Koenig of *Serial* who may be overwhelmed with press and publicity. Attempts were made to recruit participants from different kinds of true crime podcasts, podcasts with different lengths of production (i.e., both older and very new podcasts), and hosts

and producers from different backgrounds (i.e., journalists, lawyers, hobby-podcasters, academics, men, women, etc.). Varying these conditions provides a heterogeneous domain, which allows for more thorough application of theory, and also allows for unexpected findings. Other participants were recruited through snowball sampling -- that is, contacted on the basis of recommendations by earlier interviewees.

Recruiting was done through email or social media direct messages, trying as often as possible to establish a network connection through prior acquaintance or other interviewees (see Appendix E-*Recruiting Document*). Contact information for podcast hosts and producers is available through many podcast webpages or episode descriptions, and many have active, public social media accounts where they welcome interaction. These webpages and social media accounts were used to contact several podcasters whose other contact information was not publicly available.

Creswell (2007) writes that phenomenological studies may use as few participants as one (Dukes, 1984) and as many as 325 (Polkinghorne, 1989). More commonly, phenomenological studies use between 10-20 subjects (Creswell, 2007). Kvale (2007) suggests that researchers should select the maximum number of participants possible for representation that available researcher resources can support. Based on the time needed for recruitment, interviews, and analysis, 24 podcasters were contacted, with 12 participants agreeing to and completing interviews. Four additional podcasters agreed to interviews but were unable to participate due to scheduling conflicts. Additionally, a questionnaire was sent to participants prior to the interviews both for background information and to encourage participants to begin thinking about concepts they might want to share during the interview (e.g., see Guest et al., 2013; Meho, 2006). This questionnaire was not a survey, but rather an extension of the interview, allowing participants

time to give detailed responses to conceptual questions such as “How would you define true crime as a genre?” (see Appendix F-*Questionnaire*). Only three participants completed the questionnaire. The questionnaire answers were coded along with interviews using the same code book, and those answers are included in the interview analysis.

For this study, interviewee anonymity is not protected. All subjects are public figures who have produced, recorded, or been involved with the public dissemination of these podcasts, therefore their names are already associated with the work and in the public eye. Because of the ease of identifying many of these podcasters even without their names, participants are identified by their real names in this document. For particularly sensitive but useful information (such as comments for which the interviewee requested anonymity) anonymity has been used on a case-by-case basis. Participants were made aware that confidentiality and anonymity are not guaranteed in this study before they consented to take part. This was done both in the form of a written consent document that participants received via email before the interview and in a verbal consent statement at the top of each recording.

Interviews were conducted with 12 podcasters representing 11 true-crime podcasts (though several are involved with multiple podcasts; see *Table 2*). Interview length ranged from 25 minutes to 1 hour and 20 minutes, with an average length of 42 minutes. Interview participants and podcasts included:

- 6 women and 6 men.
- 2 lawyers, 3 public radio journalists, 1 crime blogger, 4 print journalists, 1 video editor, and 1 real estate broker. Three of the participants were also academics, including 1 law professor and 2 journalism instructors.
- 10 were active podcasts, 1 in pre-release stage, and 1 mortality

- Podcasts ranged in age from being in the pre-release production stage to being four years old.
- 2 podcasts were affiliated with newspapers, 1 with a local public radio station, 1 with National Public Radio, and 7 were independently produced.
- All podcasts were U.S. based.

Table 2

*Interview Participants*

Participant	Role	Podcast(s)	Entry Date	Affiliation
Chip Brantley	Co-host	Untitled	05/2019	NPR
Rabia Chaudry	Co-host	<i>Undisclosed</i>	04/12/2015	Independent
	Co-host	<i>The 45<sup>th</sup>**</i>	02/26/2017	
Sarah Delia	Host	<i>She Says*</i>	05/16/2018	WFAE Charlotte
Samara Freemark	Producer	<i>In the Dark</i>	08/28/2016	APM and Minnesota Public Radio
Scott Fuller	Host	<i>Frozen Truth</i>	03/04/2018	Independent
	Host	<i>What Happened to Jodie?*</i>	12/04/2017	
Amber Hunt	Host	<i>Accused</i>	08/19/2016	<i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i>
	Host	<i>Aftermath*</i>	05/08/2018	
Colin Miller	Co-host	<i>Undisclosed</i>	04/12/2015	Independent
Mike Morford	Co-host	<i>Criminology</i>	07/27/2017	Independent
	Co-host	<i>The Murder in My Family</i>	06/07/2018	
Steven Pacheco	Host	<i>Trace Evidence</i>	05/21/2017	Independent
Bill Rankin	Host	<i>Breakdown***</i>	05/13/2015	<i>Atlanta Journal-Constitution</i>
Jami Rice	Host	<i>Murderish</i>	11/27/2017	Independent
Ottavia Zappala	Host	<i>Missing Alissa*</i>	07/27/2017	Independent

Note: \*limited series \*\*not true crime \*\*\*mortality (04/26/2018)

**Data Collection.** Participants took part in a single recorded interview. While all participants agreed to follow-up interviews, none were needed for clarification. Eleven interviews were conducted by phone, while one was conducted in person. Interviews were recorded via computer software. Interviews were open-ended and followed the interview guide. This guide was meant as such—it is a guide, not a script. A strength of qualitative research is the ability to discover emerging themes and to glean unexpected insights beyond the researcher’s initial expectations. The interview technique should be “unobtrusive, nondirective” (McCracken, 1988, p. 21). While the interview guide was followed, additional prompts were used to coax participants to expand on prior statements, and additional questions were asked based on the flow of conversation or interesting points brought up by participants. This expansion helped to prevent misunderstanding of participants’ meaning and encouraged participants to give rich descriptions rather than simple “yes” or “no” answers. Interview recordings were transcribed using the Transcribe by Wreally online software and checked against the recordings for accuracy. Cleaned transcriptions were printed and coded by hand.

**Qualitative Validity.** In contrast to quantitative reliability and validity, qualitative research is focused not on generalizability of findings, but rather on employing consistent strategies across the research project (Creswell, 2007; 2014). Other researchers (e.g., Eisner, 1991; Lincoln & Guba, 1985) prefer terminology such as “credibility” or “trustworthiness.” In either case, establishing validity for qualitative findings involves a process of transparency and rigor on the part of the researcher. (Creswell, 2007). To ensure consistency across the coding scheme, three (one fourth) of the transcripts were re-coded after completion of initial coding. This allowed the researcher to identify how the coding scheme had shifted throughout the

process. If shifts occur, all transcripts will need to be reevaluated. If no shifts have occurred, the researcher can be reasonably assured that the coding scheme is consistent throughout. Additional instances of the existing codes were identified, and the transcripts were recoded to reflect those additions.

A member check or “member validation” was done to ensure the research has “verisimilitude” for those involved in the phenomenon (Creswell, 2007, 2014; Kvale, 2007). This involved having one of the interviewees read the researcher’s analysis of another participant’s transcript to see if it “rang true” based on their lived experiences within the population. The member offered feedback and confirmed that both the interview guide and analysis method appeared “trustworthy.” A peer debriefer was also asked to read the analysis and to ask questions. This debriefer read the analysis of three interviews and offered feedback. This debrief suggested additional instances of one code and confirmed the trustworthiness of the analysis. Suggestions from both the member check and peer debrief were incorporated into the final round of analysis.

**Analysis.** The analysis technique described by Creswell (2014) for directed qualitative interviews was used. The steps of this technique are as follows:

- 1). The transcript was read through without making any coding notes. This allowed the researcher to get a holistic view of the material in the interview. General notes were made at this stage, identifying interesting quotes and emerging themes. Word choices that “stood out” for any reason were also circled at this point (See Appendix G-*Coding Examples*).

- 2). Next, using the codebook as a guide, the researcher coded the interviews by identifying themes line by line. Margin notes were used to mark noted themes, and interesting

quotations were marked for reference during the reporting stage. Emergent themes and disconfirming information were also noted at this stage.

3). After coding three of the interviews, the researcher looked back at the margin notes in each and reevaluated the coding scheme. At this stage, some emergent codes were visible, and initial codes were reevaluated. The original coding scheme was retained, though some definitions were combined and simplified for clarity.

4). Using the re-evaluated coding scheme, the remainder of the transcripts were then coded, and the first three interviews were re-coded (see Appendix G-*Coding Examples*).

5). In order to ensure trustworthiness of findings, a peer reviewer and member check were used. A peer, familiar with the coding technique and theory, read three coded transcripts and offered feedback on both the coding scheme and emergent themes. For the member check, one interviewee reviewed another participant's coded interview, and offered suggestions on the researcher's interpretations of the interview. Neither the member check nor peer review suggested any changes, though the peer reviewer did note two passages in which one code had been overlooked in the initial coding. These passages were recoded after the review.

6). A document was created that organized codes, emergent themes, and useful quotations from the codes, including incorporating additional material noted after the peer review and member check. In the process of organizing this document, all transcripts were analyzed for a third and final time.

7). Using this document, the final report was written, using thick description and quotations from interviews to illustrate the findings.

The following section details the results of the population analysis, content analysis, and interviews, and addresses how each method relates to the research questions.

## RESULTS

### **Ecological Context of True Crime Podcasts**

In order to answer the first research question, which asks about the nature of the ecological context of true crime podcasts, 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 foundings of limited-arc series podcasts, those intend to only cover one story or topic for a limited time, in relation to density.

Media coverage, cognitive legitimacy, and normative legitimacy were also graphed (See *Figures 3, 4, and 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 that attention from media may be a signal of growing population legitimacy (e.g., Weber et al., 2016)

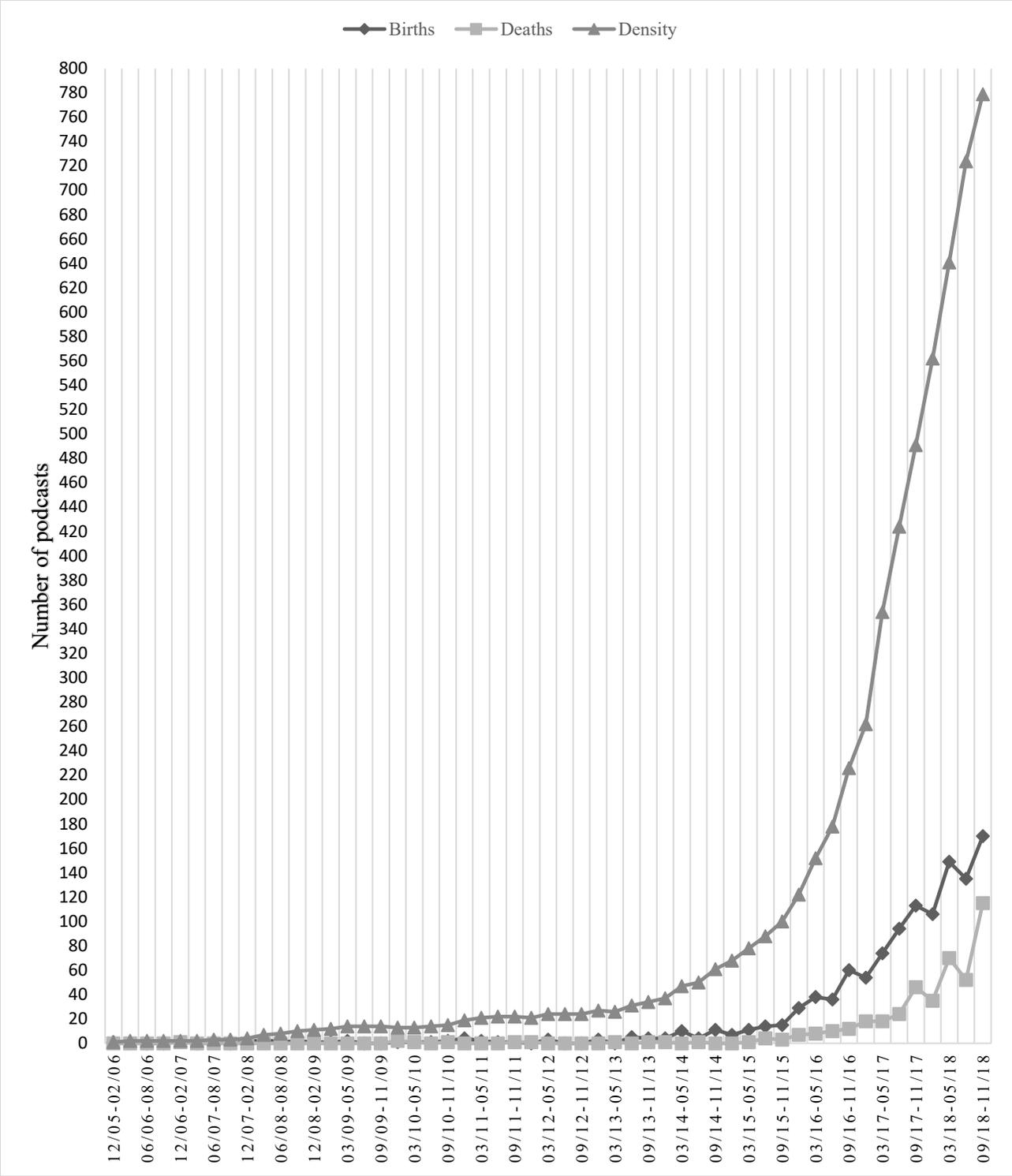


Figure 1. Foundings, mortalities and true crime podcast population density over time. X-axis represents 3-month intervals from the date of the first identified true crime podcasts to the end of the analysis

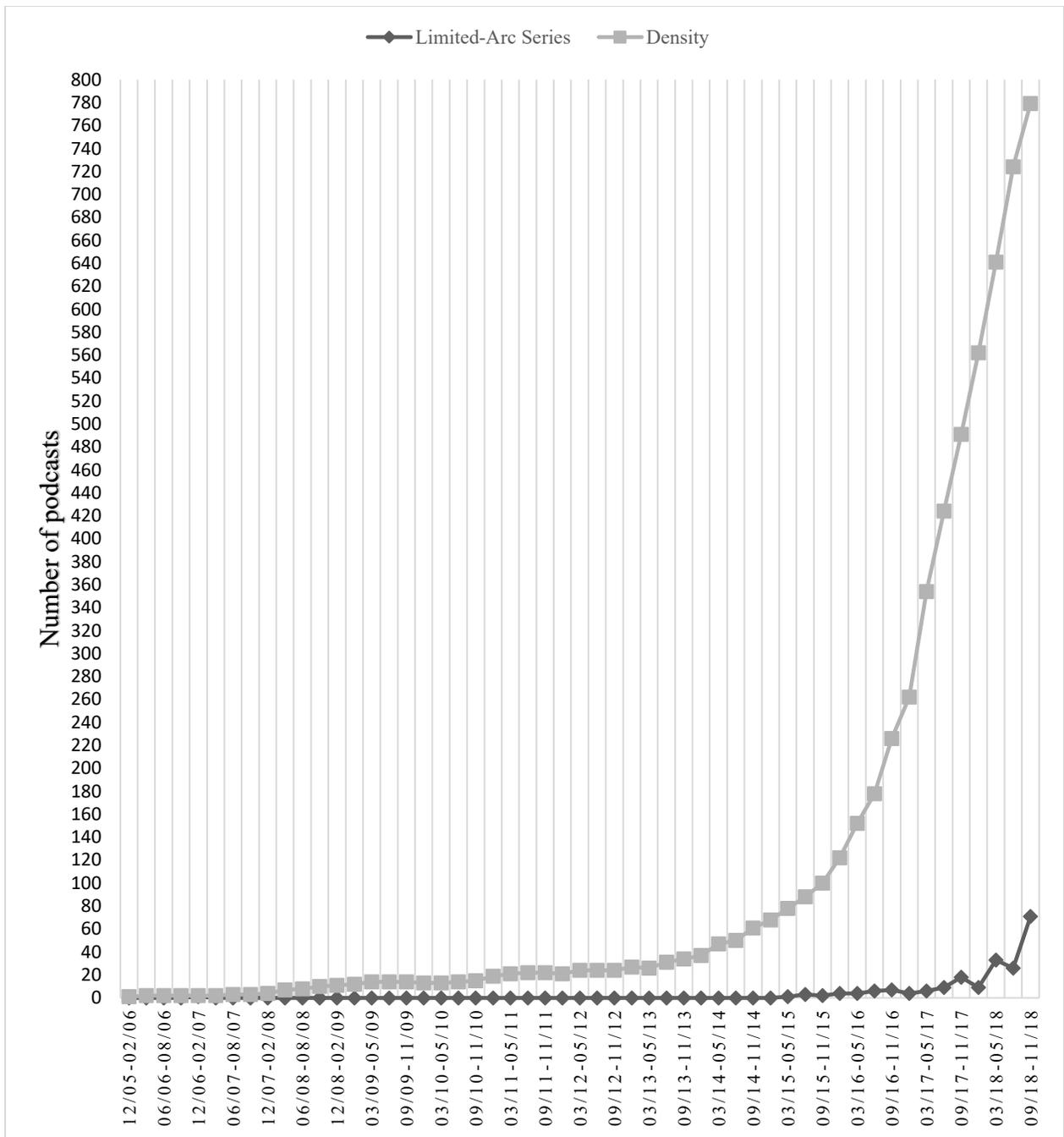


Figure 2. Number of limited-arc podcasts and podcast population density. Limited-arc series podcasts are those that are produced to tell one story, often uploaded all at once, and do not have additional “seasons.” These podcasts are usually produced by a media outlet or network. X-axis represents 3-month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

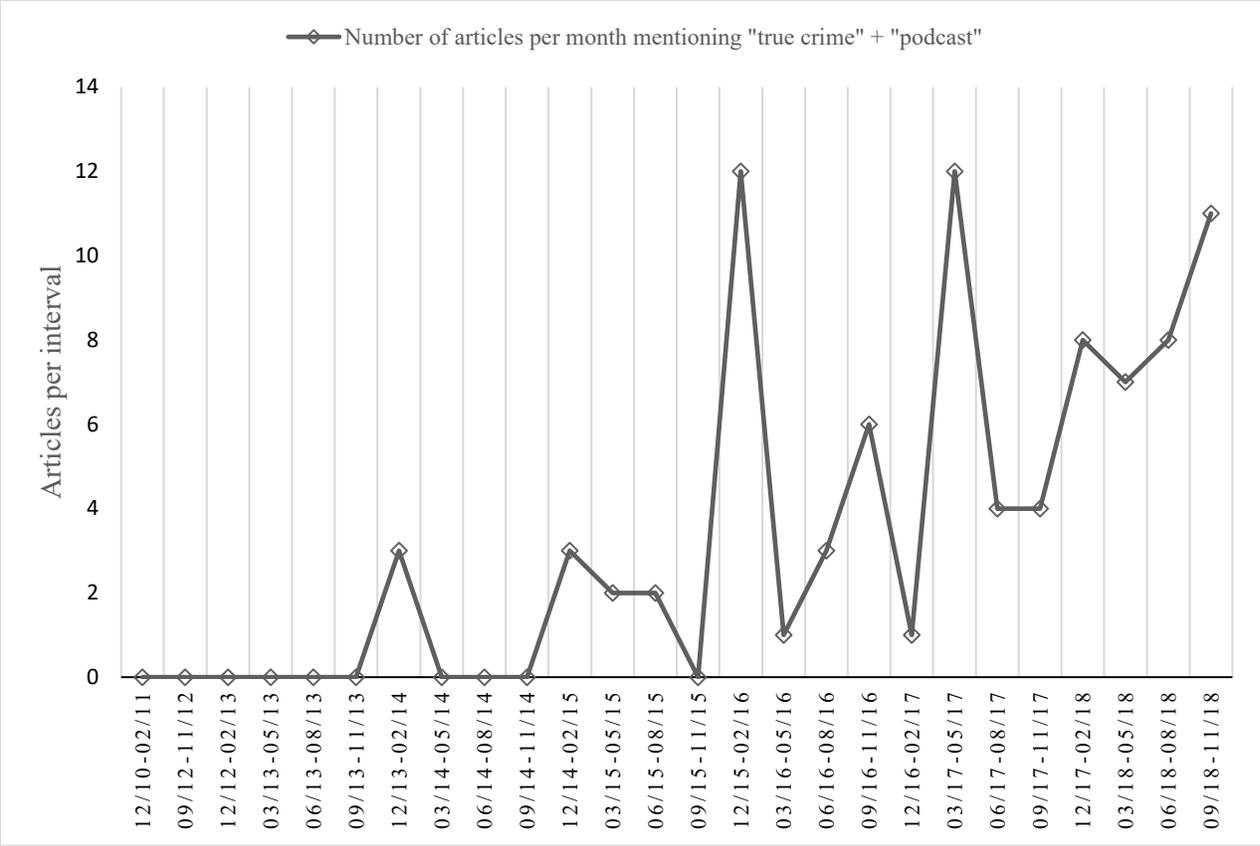


Figure 3. X-axis represents 3-month intervals. There was no news coverage found prior to 12/13-02/14 interval. There was no news coverage in intervals 03/14-05/14, 06/14-08/14, 09/14-11/14, and 09/15-11/15.

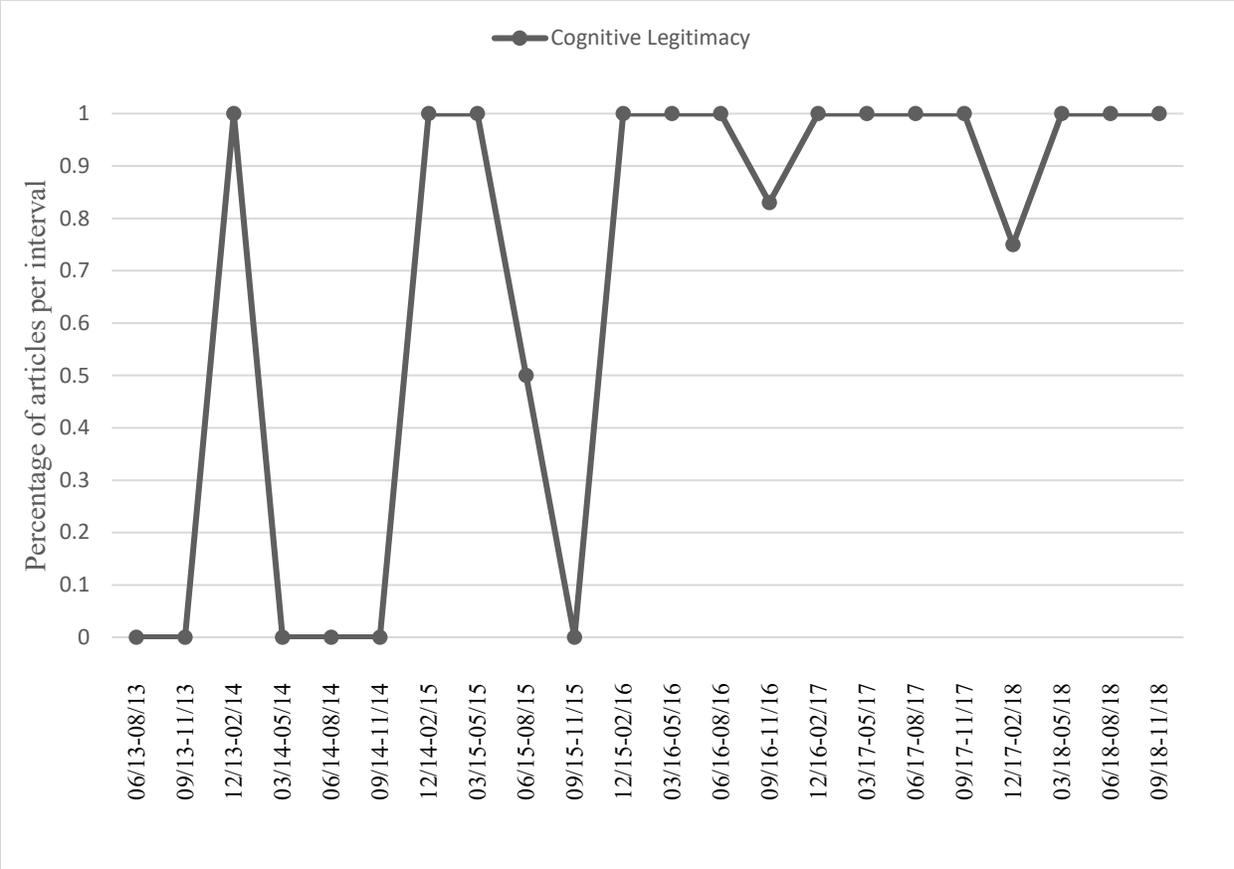
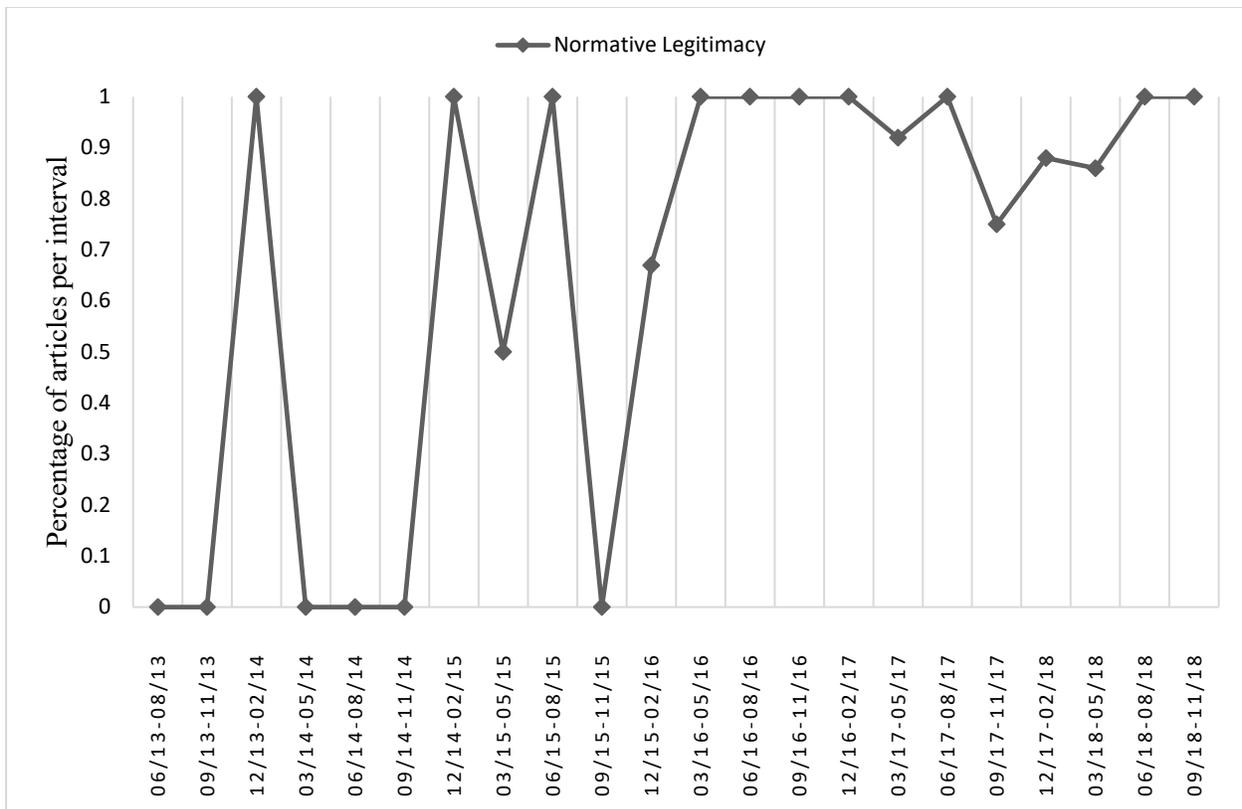


Figure 4. Cognitive legitimacy over time: percentage of news articles per 3-Month interval that mention "true Crime" + "podcasts" and offer no definition for these podcasts. X-axis represents 3-month intervals. There was no news coverage found prior to 12/13-02/14 interval. There was no news coverage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



*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.

## Podcasts and Ecological Approaches

The remaining research questions were addressed through responses from the in-depth interviews. The second research question asks how podcasters and podcast organizations act as members of an ecological community. Interviews with podcasters illustrated many of the concepts of organizational ecology, including niche development, environmental opportunities and constraints, negotiation of organizational form and identity, competition, density, disruption, and legitimacy.

**Typification of true crime podcasts.** Each participant was asked to describe their podcast in their own words. These descriptions offer a starting point for exploring ecological concepts of niche, isomorphism in the population, organizational form, and identity, as well as the goal orientations addressed later in this paper. There is evidence of both specialization and shared characteristics in these descriptions, as well as references to Punnett's (2018) true crime themes, including teleology, seeking justice, subversion of the status quo, forensics, and vocative elements.

- Chip Brantley (Untitled, forthcoming). "It is an investigative podcast about a Civil Rights cold case... We've always thought of it as sort of an audio documentary about a Civil Rights cold case that touches on sort of broader themes of race in America... As much about ...the stories we tell ourselves as it is about solving the crime."
- Rabia Chaudry (*Undisclosed*). "Investigative true crime wrongful conviction podcast... The point is not just to talk about the story but to really investigate the case... It's very, very involved, it's very detailed, it's pretty gritty."
- Sarah Delia (*She Says*). "It's about the criminal justice system and how it works, and it's really a system that people don't know a lot about until they have to figure out how the

hell it works...Our intention was just telling her story, but also talking to a lot of experts along the way to help us explain to people how this really archaic system functions or it doesn't."

- Samara Freemark (*In the Dark*). "We are not *necessarily* a criminal justice podcast, like we can do work later that is in a different field, but the core of what we do is investigative journalism and that's always been the case...We don't think of ourselves as much as a true crime podcast as a criminal justice podcast."
- Scott Fuller (*Frozen Truth*). "What I try to do is tell a story. It's the story of a missing person, and that's been the case for all three seasons, but that wasn't necessarily the original intention... My purpose was to try and solve the mystery... I'm trying to tell a story more so than produce an *In Cold Blood* kind of true crime podcast."
- Amber Hunt (*Accused*). "We're an investigative podcast that focuses on unsolved murders."
- Colin Miller (*Undisclosed*). "We are not a journalism podcast, where I think a lot of the true crime podcasts are produced by people with a journalism background. We're three attorneys who are discussing not only the narrative but also bringing our legal insight... We're just really digging into the legal minutiae and trying to find ways to use these cases to find relief for the people we're dealing with but also to explain legal concepts to our listeners."
- Mike Morford (*Criminology*). "100% serious, very serious...It's a very serious type podcast, not a lot of banter. Not a lot of small talk. We've pretty much very to the point in that podcast."

- Steven Pacheco (*Trace Evidence*). “My podcast focuses on only the unsolved cases in true crime. Mostly I do disappearances. I do some murders...I haven't done a case that has been solved. I guess what differentiates my podcast from other true crime is that I try and put a lot more focus on the victim.”
- Bill Rankin (*Breakdown*). “Like I’ve done all my journalism career, I’m just trying to tell a story in an engaging and compelling way.... I just try to tell an entertaining and compelling story that hopefully gives people a better understanding of the criminal justice system.”
- Jami Rice (*Murderish*). “Murderish is a true crime podcast.... It’s a mixed bag podcast, in that I have some storytelling episodes, I have some interviews, but it’s all related to true crime...I don’t cover missing person’s cases where there’s no conclusion.”
- Ottavia Zappala (*Missing Alissa*). “We call it a narration, like longform type of podcast. Investigative. It’s not just a story, it’s an investigation.”

**Community and population.** While their initial descriptions of the individual podcast types were varied, all participants agreed that they were in some way attached to the true crime podcast population. Several interviewees also noted the population’s place within larger ecological communities. Nearly every interviewee compared true crime podcasts to other kinds of true crime media, including examples such as Netflix’s *The Keepers* documentary and Capote’s *In Cold Blood*. This is triangulated by the quantitative findings which show that news media also compared true crime podcasts to other true crime media in 61% of the articles analyzed. Several participants also noted that true crime podcasts are a part of the larger general podcast community. Both Chaudry and Rankin specifically noted the emerging population of political podcasts as connected to (and often overlapping with) the true crime population.

**Niche, isomorphism, and heterogeneity.** In organizational ecology, niches include both the environmental conditions required for populations to grow as well as the role of the population in a larger community (Dimmick, 2003, Hannan & Freeman, 1989). Within niches, populations may share “clusters of features,” and population members may exhibit both *isomorphism*, or similarity, as well as some *heterogeneity*, or differentiation (Carroll, 1985; Weber, 2017). While all the podcasters acknowledged being a part of true crime media definitionally, they each described their podcasts as a specific type, or sub-niche. Several podcasters used terms such as “shades of true crime,” “subgenres,” and “segments” to describe the population. Rankin said: “There’s so many. Too many? And they’re from all shapes and sizes.” Many podcasters explicitly defined their podcasts as unique. For example, Zappala stated “I think my model is different than the majority of podcasts,” also saying of most other hosts, “They’re not journalists.” Others differentiated themselves by production style. Fuller described his “public radio style” of going on location to record as rare among independent podcasts, while Freemark pointed out that devoting the resources of an entire professional investigative team to a serialized podcast is done by few other podcasts. Others, like Chaudry, noted that the specific goals of their podcasts (in her case, working to correct wrongful conviction cases) separate them from the vast majority of true crime shows. Others admitted they were very similar to other podcasts but pointed out differentiating characteristics, such as *only* doing unsolved cases (Pacheco) or *refusing* to do unsolved cases (Rice). Morford summarized the variation by saying, “That’s the thing about podcasts—there’s so many different kinds of styles for different listeners. There are people who probably share a similar style to ours, but I like to think we’re a little bit different.”

While all of the podcasters were able to point out some kind of competitive or brand differentiation for their individual shows, the participants as a whole indicated that there were substantial similarities across the population, and that this similarity plays at least some role in their own productions. Often this is couched in terms of “inspiration” rather than direct mimicry. *Serial* was most often mentioned, though several podcasters also noted Freemark’s show, *In the Dark*, as an inspiration. Rankin noted that his show began as an explicit desire by his editor to produce a *Serial*-type investigation. Several of the other participants also mentioned using more successful and popular podcasts as models. “I think all of us podcasters take little pieces from podcasts that we love and that we admire and incorporate those pieces into our show, but we do it our own way,” said Rice. Delia described how she modeled her own podcast after *Serial*:

Serial was a huge influence. I went back and listened to the first season to figure out how they formatted the podcast episodes... My mom makes lots of dresses, and so I kind of think of it like a pattern. *Serial* was kind of like the dress I was taking apart to look at the pattern that was used to make it.

Participants mentioned that other podcasts offered examples of both stylistic and professional standards to emulate, particularly for those podcasters without a formal audio background. According to Miller:

We are all sort of avid listeners of podcasts out there in the true crime field...I personally listen to them and learn from them and see things that they are doing that we might want to incorporate into our own reporting...Through listening to their podcasts I’ve learned a lot from them about being professional journalists and how they sort of tackle things. That has helped us in developing our own podcast.

Fuller echoed this sentiment, referencing “standards” of reporting he tries to mimic from National Public Radio and Canadian Broadcast Corporation productions. Brantley said, “There are models that we aspire to just because of their overall competence and artistry and intrigue.”

Morford noted the fine line between emulating others’ styles and direct mimicry:

I have shows that I enjoy, shows that appeal to me, certain aspects that I like, that I respect, and I think are good ideas, and I might say something like, “I like the way they did that” and maybe I’ll remember that when I’m doing something on my podcast, but I don’t directly steal from anybody or anything that somebody’s creating and sort of make it my own.

All of the participants noted at least one podcast they felt was similar to their own. This comparison was also seen in the content analysis, as 30% of the articles about podcasts compared true crime podcasts to each other. Most often the comparison referenced *Serial*, though later articles also mentioned *My Favorite Murder*. Several participants also wondered if isomorphism within the population was positive. “Now 2,030 true crime podcasts pop up every day and some of them are good and some of them aren’t, and they all have these angles and you get this repetition,” said Pacheco. Fuller agreed, noting, “There’s something from every angle, and there’s probably 10 different podcasts for every angle at least, or more.” Hunt mentioned that the constant comparison of podcasts to one another added a layer of pressure to producers as listeners’ expectations evolve. “We worried [listeners would say] ‘oh, this sounds like shit compared to *Serial*.’”

**Forms, boundary work, and identity.** Shared characteristics of organizations within niches often include forms and identities. Identity may involve relational ties with other similar organizations within populations or by fitting within certain recognized social boundaries (Polos

et al., 2002; Tilly, 1986). How organizations negotiate form and identity both internally and with outside agents, including what is “acceptable behavior” (Jacobs et al., 2008), constitutes boundary work. For media organizations, form and identity also have implications for how organizations act as “functional alternatives” to other types of media, such as radio, television, or print media (Dimmick et al., 2011; Perse and Courtright, 1993; Rubin & Stepp, 2000).

In discussing the organizational and stylistic forms their podcasts take, participants positioned podcasts as both extensions of and functional alternatives to older media, particularly journalism, radio, and true crime television. Perhaps not surprisingly, podcasters with journalism backgrounds positioned their work differently than those without news backgrounds. They describe podcasting as both a way to “do” journalism and to help people understand how journalism works. Hunt said of her podcast and those similar, “It *is* journalism, it just happens to be in podcast form.” Delia agreed:

This is hardcore journalism. What's more hardcore than investigating somebody's case where something has really gone wrong?... To me it just keeps coming back to the basic principles of journalism—is this accurate and am I being fair— and that's just the attitude we carried into it.

Rankin credited the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*'s “big leap of faith” into producing *Breakdown* with proving to other print outlets that the podcasting format could work for long-form journalism. Both Brantley and Hunt mentioned that, as journalists, one of the most compelling parts of listening to journalist-led true crime is the “inside journalism” perspective the shows offer. Brantley, like previous critics (e.g., Columbia Journalism Review, 2016), suggested that *Serial* was a story about Sarah Koenig's process as a reporter more than a story about a crime, and described debating with his co-host how much of that perspective should be a

part of their podcast format. Hunt said of *Accused*, “I was able to take people along the journey, so they could not only understand what I uncovered but they could understand what it is to do journalism...that's really valuable.” Fuller, a radio journalist turned independent podcaster, described a hybrid orientation between traditional true crime and his journalism background:

I have been tasked to talk to as many people as I can who were involved in it, and that's where the journalism comes in. Some of the people I'm going to talk to are victim's family members and investigators and that's where the true crime comes in.

Fuller also stated that he sees the lines between more traditional storytelling-true crime and journalistic-true crime podcasts becoming delineated as the population matures, evidence of boundary creation. He used television true crime as an example of such delineation, pointing out the differences between shows like *Forensic Files* and more sensational (“Cousins Who Kill!,” he quipped) programs. Independent-podcaster Pacheco made a similar comment, comparing many true crime podcasts to tabloids filled with gruesome crime scene photos, noir novels with risqué covers (“a woman in a bra and a man with a knife”), or slasher films (“torture porn”) in contrast to a more “traditional” *Dateline* or evening news style.

In response to why podcasting was chosen over another technological format, several participants described it as a uniquely suited alternative to other ways of both telling stories and delivering entertainment. “I’ve seen people get out of radio and just go to podcasting,” said Rice. Freemark remarked on the luxury of virtually unlimited time to tell detailed stories compared to radio broadcasting. Delia described podcasting as the *only* format in which she could have seen her story working. “It was definitely not going to fit into like four and a half minutes in a radio segment, and also we wanted to talk about this really graphic thing that it's hard to talk about on the radio.”

Closely tied to podcast form and style were the participants' evaluations of who their listeners are and the kind of gratifications they believe those listeners to be seeking. Listeners are also considered a resource and a part of collective identity, both discussed in more detail below. Overwhelmingly, participants described their audience as between 60 and 90 percent women, a statistic in line with prior study of true crime podcast listeners (e.g., Boling & Hull, 2018). They also described having listeners of all ages and from multiple countries. Several participants used descriptors like "well educated," "diverse," "invested," and "engaged." Chaudry described listeners as people "who have investigative minds," while Hunt called them "people who appreciate solid journalism." Brantley, whose podcast is still in production, says he tries to imagine his future listeners as himself. "People want true crime—they don't want to be lectured about race in America." In contrast, Fuller said he often feels "a disconnect" from the true crime fans in his audience. "I think they listen to 75 percent true crime podcasts. They kind of devour each of these podcasts and just move on." Rice and Pacheco brought up specific motivations for listeners' interest. "They're not into it for the salacious details. They're into it for the psychology," Rice said. Pacheco agreed, "[listeners don't want] sensationalized aspects of true crime. They want the humanity of the story, and they want to discuss the mystery." While Pacheco stated that his audience specifically disliked comedy true crime, Rice noted, "I've learned my audience has a very good sense of humor." These listener evaluations also touched upon podcasters' awareness of implicit community guidelines. Hunt described this in terms of production choices. "We knew that people would not forgive us for bad quality just because we didn't know what we were doing." Hunt also mentioned that these guidelines made her keenly aware of the challenge of going from print to audio reporting, including whether she had "a personality that can carry the narration." Pacheco mentioned guidelines as knowing what

listeners do *not* want to hear (“blow by blow...detailed grotesque”), while Morford noted the importance of translating listener feedback into “doing the kind of stuff to make your listener base proud.”

All participants also discussed the creation of boundaries and norms within the population, as well as examples of violations of those norms. These norms differ somewhat based on the segment or sub-niche of true crime podcast, as noted above in the different interpretations of the place of comedy in true crime stories. As much of the boundary work and norm negotiation participants mentioned overlaps with the goal-orientations of true crime podcasts, norm creation, violation, identity, and stakeholder negotiation will be discussed in more detail below.

**The competitive space: density, disruption, inertia, resources, and relationships.** As populations grow or shrink, organizations experience ripple effects in resource availability (Baum, 2000). These changes in density may change the perception of the population for outside actors, prospective member organizations, and existing population members – for example, increasing or decreasing the population’s legitimacy -- as well as lead to speciation, or the emergence of generalist and specialist organizations (Weber, 2017). Disruptions in the population may also change the nature of resource competition or may change how member organizations negotiate their competitive and collaborative relationships. Inertia often prevents organizations, especially larger and older organizations, from being able to respond quickly to their environments (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976, Hannan & Freeman, 1977), though relationships may help organizations navigate volatile environments. Other constraints, such as knowledge or resource gaps, may prevent organizations from adapting or lead to early mortalities. How these concepts apply to true crime podcasts is explored below.

*Density.* Over and over again, participants noted very low bars to entry for new podcasts. The low entry barrier, low startup costs, and elasticity of the digital media environment appear to affect some of the calculations that individuals and organizations make when entering the population. Participants noted these factors in discussing the density of their competitive environment. “Everyone and their mom has a podcast,” Delia joked, but added, “I think there’s enough space for everyone—it’s just an abyss of space and time.” Pacheco noted the exponential growth of the population around the time he began his podcast in May 2017 (see Figure 1), “[You could say] ‘name me five true crime podcasts’ and people would rattle off the same five, and now you get five different ones from everyone you ask ’cause there’s so many of them out there.” Some participants see this easy entry as positive for the development of the population. “It’s a low bar to entry, it doesn’t cost much at all, you can edit stuff at home, it’s free to put online, I mean, it can’t get better,” said Chaudry. Others expressed concern that low bars to entry diluted the quality of podcasts being produced. Pacheco said:

I think there’s a lot of people that just kind of looked at it and thought, ‘Well, this is interesting.’ And then saw people making money and thought, ‘Well I can create a true crime podcast and just make money and I don’t really care if I’m accurate or factual or respectful. It’s just a job, and I just want to make cash doing it.’ Because of that you have all different levels of professionalism or lack thereof.

Fuller described the true crime podcast population as “really saturated” and “a crowded space” and theorized that “the true crime bubble is bursting.” He noted however, that as the popularity of all podcasts and the number of podcast users continues to grow (see also Edison Research, 2018), there might still be expansion of the population, though with caveats:

You only have so many TV channels and you have so many dials and frequencies on the radio. There's an infinite number of podcasts available to people. I think it will probably put some upward pressure on creators. You have to be good at what you do, and you're going to have to set expectations—whatever your genre—set expectations and meet them just like you have to in any other media format.

Not all of the podcasters agreed with the idea of oversaturation and declining quality. “Maybe there will be a certain point at which it's oversaturated, and you start to get some projects where maybe people aren't taking it seriously, but really, the ones that I've seen out there and started listening to, they're pretty high-quality,” Brantley stated, adding that he believes the medium has not “matured” enough to predict its future direction. Freemark also agreed that increased density was a strength rather than a weakness of the podcast space:

I think it's all for the good when the podcast field grows. I don't think more people listening to *Serial* takes away from our audience. If anything, it's good for us. I think we get listeners when people listen to other podcasts and then get interested in the medium and want to listen more.

Several participants also noted the importance of the interstitial, or time-shifted and “multi-task-able,” usage of podcasts in allowing continued population growth. “It's just the wave of the future because it's so easy to listen to podcasts while you're driving, while you're working, while you're doing housework,” said Morford.

**Disruption.** Participants also cited moments of environmental disruption in the population. While it is hard to pinpoint causation with certainty, it is interesting to note that disruptions mentioned in the interviews appear to coincide with density changes in the quantitative analysis (see *Figure 1*). Two participants noted technological shifts that influenced

the rise of the general podcast population. Morford, a former car salesman, said he began to notice the shifts to satellite radio and Bluetooth technology in new vehicles in the early 2010s and cited the changing technology as one of the reasons he felt secure changing careers to full-time podcasting. At the same time, he noticed advertisers begin to appear on big-name podcasts (while true crime podcasts had not received much attention at the time, there were other very popular, long running shows in other genres). Morford said:

I think advertisers said, “Hey, we can reach a lot more people, maybe at a lower price than doing traditional TV or radio.” I think that was sort of a big realization for me. Just seeing, learning more about podcast revenue and advertising. That was when... I realized that it was something that that could be more mainstream.

Fuller pointed to a different technology—the Apple iPhone update that made the podcast application native and non-deletable. This echoes the findings of Quirk (2016), who credited the iPhone update just weeks before *Serial*'s launch as the real motivator of the podcast explosion that happened in late 2014 and early 2015.

All but one of the participants cited *Serial* in some way, as either a major disruptor to the population or as a driver of their own podcast interest. Some of their comments included:

- Rice: “A lot of people say *Serial*, and I would be one of them. I bet three out of every five people would say ‘oh, *Serial*.’ Yeah... I had a really crappy commute, you know for the longest time, and I would come to work frustrated and a friend said, ‘Why don't you listen to podcasts?’ He's like ‘Give me your phone,’ and he immediately subscribe me to *Serial*. He said, ‘Listen to this and you will be hooked,’ and he was right. I mean, I've never been the same since.”

- Freemark: “*Serial* Season 1 was the big one. That’s when podcasts became like an actual ‘thing.’ Yeah, that’s like the big moment.”
- Chaudry: “It’s not that there was no podcasting before *Serial*, but *Serial* made it sexy. *Serial* made it cool. *Serial* made it A THING. I didn't know what a podcast was until *Serial* and for a lot of people, for many--I would say millions of people—*Serial* was their introduction to the world of podcasts. Yes. That is the most I think significant moment. I think they turned everything around for the industry.”
- Miller: “[*Serial*] opened the floodgates to all these interesting true crime podcasts that a growing segment of the population have started listening to... true crime has been around for decades, and I kind of feel like before *Serial* came around, predominantly true crime seemed to be more sensationalized and it wasn't necessarily done with the integrity and nuance that I think is important to that type of reporting.... sort of right after *Serial* you start to see other podcasts like *Breakdown* and *In the Dark* and *Accused* and *Missing & Murdered* coming out.”
- Hunt: “[*Serial*] opened the door for us.”

Other smaller disruptions were also mentioned by participants. Both Rankin and Hunt credited their own and each other’s podcasts with beginning the growing trend of newspaper-produced podcasts. While Rankin’s *Breakdown* offered a format model for print-reporter driven podcasts, Hunt’s *Accused* proved that newspaper podcasts could attract the listeners and advertising dollars to be monetarily successful. “We opened the door for other newspapers to feel they could invest in this medium,” Hunt said. Brantley noted another disruptor in *S-town*, the limited series podcast from *Serial*’s producers that debuted on March 28, 2017. “*Serial* was a television show, but *S-town* was a novel,” he said, stating that *S-town* changed the model for the

way that true crime narratives could be told. Pacheco pointed to two major crime stories that coincided with related true crime podcasts and brought new attention and fans to the medium. The first was *Up & Vanished*, an independent podcast covering a missing person case in Georgia when the first break in the case in over 12 years occurred. The second was the capture of the Golden State Killer during *Criminology*'s coverage of the decades-long case. While neither podcast was directly involved in solving the crimes, Pacheco credits their "right place, right time" coverage as being hugely influential in bringing new listeners to the population.

A possible imminent disruption was also mentioned by several participants. Chaudry, Pacheco, Brantley, and Fuller all pointed out the emergence of true crime-focused podcast corporations and the shift of traditional media mega-corporations, such as Clear Channel, into the podcast space. Brantley voiced concerns that, much like social media, podcasting could eventually become controlled by a few corporations or a single channel, noting the immense power that Apple already has over podcast distribution. Pacheco also expressed concern over the possible disruption from big money and professional media entering the still largely-independent space:

It's coming to a point probably in the future where you're going to see independents dying out. It's becoming kind of a corporate thing. Even a lot of the independents now who are very popular are joining corporate networks and getting guaranteed contracts plus the advertising just to bring them in, and then their names are being associated with other things.

***Inertia and constraints.*** Participants offered insight into the kinds of organizational or environmental constraints that might lead to inertia and inability to adapt to disruption. Their answers reveal several different kinds of restraints, but do not offer insight into possible inertia in

the population. Pacheco said podcasting has limited visibility to the general public, noting that while podcasting is a rapidly evolving field, those involved often forget that it is not fully mainstream, “Podcasting is weird in that a huge amount of people listen to it and about the same amount of people don't even know what a podcast is.”

Mentioned often were constraints such as lack of technical audio skills, lack of storytelling or investigative experience, or being overwhelmed by the amount of time required to sift through information and edit the final product, particularly for those podcasts without a full team or with other professional obligations. Pacheco called it “confusing” for a new podcaster, “Even if you ask questions or Google it you're going to get a million different answers about what the best microphone is, what the best program is, and I really just kind of learned you’ve got to figure it out yourself.” Miller expressed similar frustration:

We had no idea what we were doing whatsoever when we started our podcast. We’re in different locations. My co-podcasters are in the DC area. I’m down in South Carolina, and we had to figure out how to do it remotely, how to edit it, how to do all the sound. When we started our podcast, it was a complete disaster.

While some podcasters discussed knowledge constraints, such as being unfamiliar with audio editing or distribution, others described actual threats to their physical or mental health as constraints to their continuing work. Zappala said that for those involved in investigating and producing podcasts in ongoing cases, personal safety may become an environmental constraint, citing a time she felt dangerous people involved in the case may have been coming after her. Fuller, Delia, and Brantley, all journalists as well as podcasters, mentioned mental health struggles as a kind of internal constraint that they experienced and saw in others involved in telling difficult stories. Brantley called the experience of researching an in-depth and often very

dark case “overwhelming” for producers. “I can’t tell you the kind of like, emotional and moral whiplash I’ve had on any given day talking to people,” he said. Delia described her own emotions and expressed concern for others working independently or for small news organizations:

That's very isolating especially when you're talking about a really dark subject. It's hard. We don't talk a lot about mental health in journalism...especially when you cover really serious stuff. I think that we do a good job with resources for journalists who cover wars, but obviously smaller shops don't have that culture or don't have those resources in place for people that need it. I was dealing with a lot of second-degree trauma from people's stories that were horrific. How do you go home? How do you process things? How do you just be a human?

Fuller similarly described the mental toil that telling true crime stories has had on him and others:

You see the polished finished product, but you don't see the family members being angry with you... some people get sued because of the result of their podcast. You don't see any of the negativity that comes your way. It's really kind of stressful. I don't know if it's something that I'll do forever.

**Resources.** While organizational resources are often thought of as economic, participants more often described knowledge, physical, and symbolic resources. Several described knowledge from their time as print or radio reporters as an important resource, ranging from short stints as crime beat reporters to over 25 years of covering courts. Both Miller, an evidence professor, and Chaudry, an immigration lawyer, credited their knowledge of the court system as a resource. Chaudry also noted that her personal case knowledge was an immense resource in

*Undisclosed*'s first case. Both Hunt and Morford cited their history as true crime authors; Hunt, as the author of several true crime books, and Morford as the creator of the exhaustive True Crime Guy website and blog. Brantley noted the value of his print journalism background and his co-host's documentary film skills in collaborative storytelling. Pacheco also credited the transferability of his video storytelling skills to producing audio stories. Only one participant mentioned prior experience with podcasts before entering the true crime population: Fuller, who had experimented with a spoken-word podcast as early as 2005. Rice was the only participant to have no prior knowledge resources beyond fandom and a love of true crime.

Participants also acknowledge the importance of physical resources, namely, equipment, time, and capital. Delia, who began the podcast on her own time before formally proposing it to her employer, described a growing need for support as the impetus for pitching the project. "I didn't have any resources really. I knew I was struggling to do it by myself. So I asked one of the smartest people, I think, at the radio station to help me with it." Even after the station took on the project, time and money were tight, and Delia called the process "lots of negotiation and struggle." Though Hunt's outlet had more resources, she still called *Accused* "cost intensive." Freemark also expressed how, even for professional investigative organizations like American Public Media, producing a podcast like *In the Dark* was "a resource heavy proposition." For Rankin, whose podcast required hours of courtroom audio, the availability of useable audio proved the most challenging resource to acquire. Due to laws in Georgia, courtroom audio (unlike transcripts) is often not allowed to be copied or shared, requiring Rankin to either be present at each day of a hearing to record his own audio or to rely on relationships with judges and court reporters for older recordings.

While the resource inputs were described as obstacles by many participants, others described growing opportunities to bring in capital through podcast advertising. Fuller said that podcaster awareness of the increasing availability of advertising dollars is changing how aggressively producers research and pursue funding. Chaudry cited the importance of producing a quality product in order to tap into potential advertising revenue. She said:

There's a lot of money coming and there's a lot of room for growth. Something I realized is that we get sponsors every week, advertisers every week. And what I realized is like, it's like a roll of sponsors here. There's like 30 or 40 of them, and there are still thousands of companies out there who have not realized, tapped into their marketing potential yet. And the advertising companies we work with know that, and they're working on that. I really do think it's going to continue to grow. But like any other media, like any other art form, the cream rises to the top.

Pacheco also agreed that advertising dollars were an increasingly important part of the podcast industry, describing how finding advertisers had quickly allowed his podcast to become his primary source of income. He cautioned, however, that growth in ad revenue might also be a sign of the coming end of the free podcast and speed up corporate disruption of the population.

Participants also noted symbolic resources they believed were helping to grow the population or their own podcasts. Fuller mentioned growing awareness (i.e., the aforementioned cognitive legitimacy) of the podcast medium as a major resource. Others mentioned disruptions in other media populations, such as newspapers, as important for the growth of podcasting. Hunt said:

We in the newspaper industry are constantly being told we need to think outside of the box. Maybe our jobs straight up depend on it these days because you know, the

environment has been decimated. We get pink slips all the time. So I said, ‘maybe we could do an audio component to go along with it?’ And I just so happened to have bosses at that point that were completely amenable to that.

Brantley noted another kind of symbolic resource for podcasters tackling social issues, particularly topics that are race-related: societal privilege. His podcast deals with uncovering the truth about a civil rights era murder, and he described his unique ability to gain access to players in the story. As a white man from Alabama, he said he was able to earn trust from Southerners who are often (rightly, in some cases, he noted) portrayed as evil, one dimensional-characters by outsiders, thus allowing him to get closer to the truth of the 60+ year-old murder. Brantley noted that this ability to go to places and speak to witnesses that other podcasters—for example, a Muslim woman of color like Chaudry—may not have the social capital to access acted as both a resource and to make him “legitimate” in the eyes of his often-reticent subjects.

Listeners were also cited as important resources by participants. While Fuller and Rice both mentioned the importance of knowing their own style and recognizing that they cannot please everyone, both said they often receive helpful advice or case suggestions from listeners. Rice and Pacheco both pointed to listener interaction on social media as important. “I draw a lot of inspiration and motivation from my social media interaction with listeners,” said Rice. Rankin and Miller both said listener feedback was helpful for understanding how to make writing style and case explanations clearer. Zappala and Chaudry credited listeners with providing new information or perspectives for cases, and Chaudry noted that listeners had provided connections to important stakeholders in several cases. For Delia, listeners became an integral part of her podcast, as she directly incorporated listener voicemails into *She Says*.

**Relationships networks.** Inextricably tied to resources are the relationships across the podcasts and podcasters. These relationships exist both among the individuals involved, in the form of personal friendships and rivalries and as competitive or commensualistic relationships between organizations. Competitive relationships occur when organizations require some or all of the same resources, while commensualistic relationships allow organizations to complement each other, either through shared resources or by conferring legitimacy (Baum, 2000; Dimmick, 2003). Formal relationships, or relational density, in a population also decreases the mortality rate for the population (Amburgey & Rao, 1996).

Participants described both formal and informal relationship networks among podcasters, podcast organizations, and outside actors and organizations. Brantley called having a formal relationship with NPR a “megaphone” for advertising, a relationship that allowed him and his cohost to focus on content rather than promotion. According to Chaudry, *Undisclosed* has worked closely with the Pennsylvania and Georgia Innocence Projects on their cases and has been integrated into the orientation for interns at the Philadelphia District Attorney’s Office. Miller also noted the importance of formal relationships to *Undisclosed*, including inviting other podcast hosts to “guest star,” and working with Rebecca Lavoie of New Hampshire Public Radio to improve the technical aspects of their podcast (it should be mentioned that Lavoie is also a leader in the true crime podcast population, hosting several podcasts of her own and working on the *Bear Brook* podcast for NHPR). Rankin was the only participant to say he had little formal or informal interaction with other podcasters until well into his podcast career.

For Delia, who described often feeling isolated, forming friendships with successful podcasters helped her through both the emotional and technical stress of creating *She Says*. Brantley and Zappala said they reached out to other podcasters, particularly to learn about the

advertising and promotion side of podcasting. Brantley also said he relied on other podcasters to help him navigate the transition from writing for print to writing for audio. While Pacheco said he has avoided formal relationships and prefers to work alone, he said he had developed friendships and found advice through social media and events like Crime Con. Rice also described the role of informal relationships for her podcast:

The community has been great. I have made what I think are lifelong friends, you know, who I would have never met had I not gotten into podcasting, other podcasters, things like that. I speak to other podcasters on a daily basis. We speak about ideas, we talk about cases, we talk about different criminal laws.

Freemark said of formal relationships, “We don’t collaborate directly,” but she noted the closeness of informal networks of podcasters from audio journalism backgrounds. “It’s a small field and a lot of people come from public radio. It is kind of a tight field.” Fuller said his public radio background allowed him to keep going after several prominent podcasters ignored or denied his requests for mentorship. Morford was one of the podcasters who did help Fuller and was mentioned by several other participants as an important influence. Morford described his view of podcasters’ relationships:

For the most part, everybody in the true crime genre seems to interact with each other and is willing to do a reading of something, that kind of thing. Sometimes there’s collaboration of two shows together for a topic. That’s the cool thing about podcasting—you get to meet a lot of people and, for the most part, it’s all positive and everyone is helping each other.

**Relationships and competition.** When directly asked about competition, participants used words like “helpful,” “supportive,” “congenial,” “collaborative,” “community,” and “friendly rivalries.” Rice said:

I also get very motivated when I see other podcasters doing well, and I knew them and followed them when they were just itty bitty and had a few listeners and then they just blow up because they’ve done so well, and people love their show. I find that to be inspiring and it keeps me motivated to continue working on my content and putting out better and better content each time because I want my show to grow like that as well. But one thing that I saw which is a great, you know, right when I joined this true crime podcasting community, is it it's a great community. It's, for the most part, very welcoming of other’s podcasters.... Yes, there are, you know, some out there that I've gotten to know who are sort of that kind of like, “me, me, me.” You know, “I've got to be the best” and things like that. But for the most part, we all want to do well, but we also are very good about helping each other do well and grow our shows.

Miller expressed a similar sentiment:

It’s not like we say, “we want to be better than this other podcast, we want to figure out how to beat some other podcast.” I enjoy what they’re doing, and I think that’s great and there are a number of excellent true crime podcasts out there.

Delia too described positive relationships with other podcasters.

If I don't know how to do something, I find the person that knows how to do it and have a conversation with them, and I did that over and over and over again. I just found people to be really kind and gracious with their time. It's weird. I mean I guess like other people feel competition. I don't know.

Hunt positioned competition within the true crime podcast field in contrast to her experiences in journalism, including podcasts' relationships to media consumers.

It's a friendly comradery. Much more supportive field than some others—cough journalism cough. Journalists are very competitive with each other, and, for some reason, the podcast world seems to be much more supportive of each other. There seems to be more of an understanding that, you know, one's success can be everyone's success and people who like one tend to listen to others. You know, it's not like they go all “I heard *Accused*. I'm not gonna listen to *In the Dark*.” They binge this stuff that took me a year. They listen in a weekend and they're like “next!” The community has been really supportive. I get a lot of pick-your-brain kind of emails from others.

While these responses seem to paint a picture of a commensualistic, friendly confederacy of true crime podcasters, deeper probing and comments throughout the interviews suggest that there is more competition than participants many have wanted to admit. Rankin said that he had been so affected by competition with another podcast while working on *Breakdown* that he was not willing to talk about it in any way. Fuller said that while other podcasters were often friendly, as a whole, they tend to be very protective of information about monetization or downloads. He also described recognizing that, while he did not feel directly threatened by competitors, he saw evidence of more intense competition between other podcasters. Fuller said:

I try to keep everything at an arm's distance, but I hear stories about podcasters kind of feuding in a strange way. I know there's some of that negativity, but I'm not sure if that's competition or what.... There's kind of a middle-school feuding cliquish element to the whole podcast community that I'd rather stay away from.

Pacheco described similar experiences:

When you first start off it's hard not to [feel competition]. You're looking around at these other podcasts who are better, doing something similar. As far as true crime, you might do a case that someone else has done before, so you feel this pressure of like well, "I have to do it better than they do," or "I have to do it different" or whatever. You listen to other podcasts, and you see the way people respond to them. It's like anything else... the true crime community with podcasting is very strange in that many, many people are supportive, and we try to help each other out, but at the same time it's sorta competing for the same listeners. We're competing for the same advertising dollars, so there's certainly an underbelly to it that you learn the deeper you get into it. People who will maybe present themselves as though they're helpful, but they're not. And there's definitely people out there who are trying to submarine other people, so it's a little crazy.

Other participants seemed to distance their podcasts from competition by differentiating their resource needs. Hunt said that because of the way listeners use podcasts, consuming multiple similar shows quickly, she does not see competition for listeners as an issue. While Chaudry described *Undisclosed's* relationships with other podcasts as "collaboration," she noted that it was possible that she did not see direct competition because of the show's unique format, citing only *Truth & Justice* as similar. Zappala stated that "90% of true crime is not a competitor" because of style and format differences. "Everyone has their own style of doing it where there's something different about every podcast, so I don't feel like I'm competing. I'm not worried about that," she said. Freemark sees growth in the population as positive for all true crime podcasters rather than as an increase in competition. She said, "I think what we do is pretty unique; I don't think we have a direct competitor. We just really don't think about it in those terms."

Brantley described competition as being not only within the true crime population but also with others in the podcast community, and with standards he holds for himself:

I think we are aware of competition. I think of competition as not so much to other podcasts that are trading in true crime or investigative work, but more just like listenability...one of my favorite podcasts is... a music podcast. I think about competition, and it's like, I want someone to have the same reaction to this podcast that I have to that. Where it's like, I can't wait to listen to it, regardless of the fact that it's not serialized...it has nothing in common with what we're doing, but that's how I think about competition more so than I think about, like you know, the type of thing we're making.

Many of the participants' other comments about competition and relationships are also related to their social movement orientations. The “feuding” aspect is especially evident in mentions of how the “appropriateness” of true crime podcast styles and formats is negotiated and is discussed in more detail below.

These comments from participants illustrate the way that true crime podcast organizations take ecological approaches, as asked in RQ 2. Participants are aware of niches and subniches, relationship networks, resource needs, and competition. Many of the participants' comments offer evidence of a *maintenance* orientation for their podcasts, that is, ways of negotiating survival within the ecological niche. Participants did not offer examples of the role of inertia but did describe isomorphism and mimicry in podcast form and content.

The following section will explore podcasts as social movement agents.

### **Podcasts and Social Movement Approaches**

The third research question asks how podcasters take social movement theory approaches and was explored through the qualitative interviews. The true crime podcast population shows

evidence of collective identity, exploitation of social and environmental opportunities, mobilizing structures, and framing processes at work (Cohen, 1985; McAdam, 1999). Group efficacy and collective action are also evident (Bandura, 1995; Gamson, 1990; Klandermans, 1984; McAdam, 1999). Legitimacy, organizational identity, and stakeholder negotiation are concepts of both organizational ecology and social movement theory and will be discussed in a later section.

**Collective identity.** The concept of collective identity is shared across the classical, resource mobilization, and political process paradigms of social movement theory, and may be both a mobilizing force for collective action and an outcome of social movement processes (Cohen, 1985). Participants expressed both pre-existing identity with true crime-related issues (e.g., empathy for victims, an orientation toward justice, concern for criminal justice issues, etc.), and for some, a growing identification with true crime related social movements over time.

Many of the participants identified as life-long true crime fans, a fandom that evolved over time to caring about both systemic and specific crime issues. Fuller described his love of *Forensic Files*. Other participants also mentioned television and other true crime media as formative:

- Morford: “I’ve always had an interest in true crime. It started when I was a kid. I used to watch *Unsolved Mysteries* and a lot of other shows plus a lot of different true crime channels. You know, the Discovery Channel and some of these networks.”
- Pacheco: “I have been listening to true crime podcast for a couple of years, but I was always into true crime. I watched *America's Most Wanted*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, all that kind of stuff growing up. It was always something I was interested in.”

- Chaudry: “I mean I grew up on the stuff. I loved it. I love those one-hour pass-time shows, but you know, it's not that I don't love it now.”
- Rice: “I’ve always been into true crime, like since I was a preteen. I’d be reading books on serial killers, and different crime stories, watching TV shows about it, and movies, and then my interest continued.”
- Zappala: “I have always been interested in cold cases and missing person cases. Since I was a little girl.”

Their prior fandom for true crime podcasts was mixed. While some, like Morford, expressed that they “only listen to true crime,” others, like Rankin, Fuller, Rice, and Pacheco described themselves as big fans of many kinds of podcasts, with true crime only being one of many interests. Others, like Chaudry and Zappala, were led to podcasts by specific true crime narratives, specifically *Serial*.

As mentioned above, long before her involvement with podcasts, Chaudry was an advocate for Adnan Syed, based on her childhood friendship with his family. She credits her identity, as both a true crime podcast fan and podcaster, with being directly related to her role in his case. A pre-existing connection to a case or cause was mentioned by several other participants as well. “I wanted to do something I was passionate about,” Morford said. Fuller began his first podcast based on a case that he had been following, first as a journalist and later out of curiosity, for eight years. Pacheco said his drive to start a true crime podcast was based on his desire for more information on cases he cared about. “[I knew there] were other people like me out there.” He continued:

I enjoyed the podcasts that I listened to, but I always found I wanted more information because at the time I thought a lot of podcasts were sort of giving you like the Wikipedia

summary of the case. So I would always be asking myself questions during an episode and, at the end of it, I wouldn't have the answers. So I would research stuff myself to find out what I wanted to know. It just kind of became a decision of if I'm going to do this and research it anyway I might as well just make a show where I do a podcast the way I want it done.

Rice also expressed a desire driven by a personal connection to share stories with others who cared about true crime:

[I] sat on a first-degree murder trial last year for a murder that happened here close to my home...I wanted to tell the story and I had already been listening to podcasts. It was a kind of perfect storm of "I have a story to tell plus I love podcasts and kind of want to start one of my own."

While some participants, like Miller, became podcasters specifically to advocate for criminal justice causes, others developed their identity with criminal justice movement goals after beginning their podcasts. Morford described starting his podcast out of a desire for a career change and a love of telling stories but developed a passion for amplifying the voices of victims after interviewing Golden State Killer survivors. Zappala and Fuller told similar stories of beginning their podcasts to tell journalistically oriented missing persons stories but identifying with larger causes over time, like advocating for child victims of assault. Delia's podcast and subsequent passion for exposing how the justice system interacts with victims of sexual assault began through covering a story on her crime beat. She developed a relationship with the victim of an assault, and, through their conversations, saw a story that she felt demanded to be told.

Participants also mentioned how becoming involved in producing true crime changed their focus from specific cases to systemic issues. Fuller described how investigating the second season of *Frozen Truth* caused him to become an advocate for children in the foster care system:

I came away a changed person...I thought this is a story that needs to be told... I've gone from a journalist fact-finder to find her, to find Ayla Reynolds, to an advocate for foster care system reform. And there again, you're straddling that line. After I uncovered that part of the story, I felt that it needed to be included.

Chaudry described a similar phenomenon of discovering how procedure and bureaucracy—even for those familiar with the criminal justice system—could become obstacles to finding justice, and her desire to advocate for systemic changes. The obstacles she mentions facing as an advocate are the same that Rankin described as external constraints from a journalism perspective. Chaudry said:

Thinking about this from an advocacy space—one of the things that's been shocking for me is a lot, in all these convictions that we work on, the perception, even as a lawyer, my perception was that what happens in the court room, the public owns it, right? Like, there's public access, there should be access to public recordings of all those proceedings. But it's not. And one of the most shocking things to me is that often times things happen in a courtroom, and, if there is a recording, you can't have it, or there is a recording and you can have it, but you can't air it. There are records that just disappear. How easy it is for huge holes in systems to remain forever and nobody ever try to do anything about it.

Interactions after entering the true crime podcast space were credited with further developing participants' sense of belonging to a collective cause or motivating them to advocate for particular issues. Zappala said:

I saw that I got a lot of response from listeners about some themes that came up in the later episodes, like domestic violence and sexual assault. So many people reacted to that in the next episode that I'm preparing to be talking more about it.... Maybe I wouldn't have if I hadn't seen so much interest in those topics, because a lot of women have said "I've had a similar experience," and they write me emails about what happened to them.

Participants also mentioned that fans of their podcasts share often their identity as both true crime fans and people who care about crime-related issues. Chaudry described her listeners as "people who have investigative minds, who are also really interested in criminal justice issues and wrongful conviction as a phenomenon, and there've just very socially justice kind of oriented." These listeners often see the podcasters as allies in a shared cause and reach out to increase publicity. Rice said:

I've had listeners reach out to me on Facebook and say hey, "my cousin was murdered by so and so," and that person actually happened to be a serial killer, a lesser known serial killer, and I ended up telling that story on the podcast... I got an email from a listener saying that she sat on a jury for a horrendous murder out of New York State, and I'm going to be telling that story on the podcast as well.

What seems to take podcasters (and their listeners) from members of a fandom to a collective identity around social causes is a commitment to "justice." While commitment to justice is one of Punnett's (2018) defining aspects of true crime, as alluded to in previous sections, not all true crime has a justice orientation. Over half of the participants mentioned justice or advocacy in some way. Others, while not directly using the word "justice," described desiring some acknowledgement of systemic wrongs through their work. Rankin offered journalistic podcasts like his own, *Accused*, and *In the Dark* as examples "focusing on failures in

the system.” Delia, while uncomfortable with “advocacy” as a journalist, sees working toward better systemic understanding as the point of her work. “You do it to do good work, and if needed change comes from that work, then that's great to know. That's why you do the work.”

Hunt, also a journalist, had no hesitation with referring to herself as an advocate, and said that balancing journalistic ethics with advocacy in her cases had been a deep discussion over the production of the podcast. She described the position that she and her team decided on:

I'm comfortable being an advocate for a dead person. I mean, she was brutally killed, I'm comfortable with that. She did not deserve that. Nobody deserves that. I can be on her side. That's okay.

Both Rice and Brantley specifically described their views of podcasts' relationships to justice through the allowing stories to be told. Rice said:

There's been no justice in a case and then you've got a popular podcast that tells the story and boom! Now you've got a thousand eyes on it, and, all of a sudden, things start working again, and they're bringing justice.

Brantley proposed that the act of exposing truth through storytelling might in itself bring some kind of catharsis to people and communities involved in crimes: “We talked a lot about Truth and Reconciliation, and that's sequential. There's a sequence; you can't have reconciliation without truth...what part of justice is just getting a true account?” More about the role of justice and advocacy is discussed below in relation to legitimacy and identity.

While many participants described identifying with movements to encourage broader knowledge of and involvement with systemic criminal justice issues, others suggested that not all true crime podcasters, even those who focus on criminal justice reform issues, have such altruistic motives. Both Pacheco and Brantley used the word “narcissistic” to describe both

themselves and other podcasters. They suggested that, even if the intent of the podcast is good, the podcaster may still focus on glory or fame for themselves or be more concerned with growing the podcast than with helping a cause. Others, like Fuller, described how identifying too much with a cause or becoming too invested in a case might cause a podcaster to lose perspective and detract from any original movement motivations.

**Movement orientation.** Social movement theory approaches, particularly those within the classical paradigm, consider both symbolic and tangible action to be evidence of movement orientation (Buechler, 1993; Cohen, 1985; Diani, 2013; Eder, 1985; Melucci, 1985). Collective identity and issue awareness may in themselves be a kind of social movement, regardless of the existence of formal movement organizations (Cohen, 1985; Diani, 2013). From this viewpoint, collective identity can be both a goal and an input for those focused on driving social changes.

***Collective identity as input and goal.*** Participants gave examples of listener identification acting as an input (this can also be considered a symbolic or knowledge resource) for the growth of their podcasts as movement organizations. Miller and Chaudry both credited help from listeners with the tangible successes of their podcast. Listeners connected the podcasters with an autopsy expert in the first season, leading to valuable case evidence. In other seasons, listeners have been responsible for tips and information throughout the investigations. Chaudry describes the willingness of her listeners to see themselves as involved in the criminal justice reform movement beyond *Undisclosed*, including a willingness to crowdfund other organizations. She said:

There are so many people chiming in on our podcast. I mean whenever we plug—and we do this once or twice a year—we’ll start off one of our shows with saying, “Hey would you mind texting or whatever to this number and just giving five bucks to an Innocence

Project or something.” And literally, when we’ve done that in the past, these organizations will raise their funding for the year. There’s a lot of trust. People have a lot of trust in the hosts of the podcast they listen to.

Chaudry also described creating listener willingness to advocate—more evidence of collective identity—as a goal for justice advocates:

There’s not a single wrongful conviction that gets overturned or exoneration that doesn’t happen without someone. It could be a family member, it could be somebody who read about the case. There has to be one person on the outside who is advocating.

Delia expressed the importance of giving voices to sexual assault victims in helping to encourage listeners to become empathetic. By telling the stories of people who might not be considered “the perfect victim,” Delia said she hoped to help people identify with the issues all kinds of victims of assault face. Brantley’s definition of encouraging collective identity included the preservation of “institutional memory, the collective memory” to keep justice issues salient.

***Tangible and symbolic action.*** While collective awareness and identity are necessary for all social movement approaches, symbolic and tangible action illustrate the necessary component of collective behavior (Smelser, 1962), and define social movements as defined by the resource mobilization and political process paradigms. These actions may be facilitated through *technologies of mobilization*, or forms of communication used to increase collective awareness within social movement sectors (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). In the context of resource mobilization and political process paradigms of social movement theory, “technology” refers not only to equipment or technological advances, but also to the networks, relationships, and institutions that may facilitate the flow of knowledge, resources, and shared identification in a movement. These technologies of mobilization may also be referred to as *mobilizing structures*

(McAdam, 1999; McCarthy & Zald, 1996 & 2002). Participants pointed to many instances of both tangible and symbolic action through true crime podcasts and described the role of these podcasts as mobilizing structures.

*Tangible* action, like the high-profile cases mentioned in the introduction to this study, has received more attention in popular press, but can be harder to attribute directly to podcasts. The interviews provide evidence that the players involved in the true crime podcast population firmly believe that, as Rice said, “It’s real and it’s happening.” Participants mentioned these high-profile cases, such as Syed’s new trial ruling following *Serial* and *Undisclosed* and new evidence in the Tara Grinstead case after *Up and Vanished*, but also offered concrete examples from their own experiences. Rankin described having judges in two cases bring up his podcast during jury selection as a possible influence to be considered during voir dire. Freemark, while hesitant to credit her podcast’s investigation, said that Curtis Flowers, the defendant in *In the Dark*’s second season, had his case accepted for review by the U.S. Supreme Court, possibly based on information found during the podcast.<sup>3</sup> For Delia, hearing that survivors of assault have found strength to navigate the judicial system is tangible proof of results: “We had someone from Canada email us the other week like, ‘I listened to your podcast and it inspired me to report my sexual assault to the police and I never had the courage to do that before’.”

Miller scoffed at the idea that true crime podcasts’ ability to create social change was even in question. “The things that we are reporting on have led to possibilities of relief for these people. That’s the answer, proof of concept.” Miller also described the ability of podcasts to take on reform issues without a narrative arc and still achieve tangible results:

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<sup>3</sup> While Freemark did not take credit during the interview, the Supreme Court likely accepted the case based on findings discovered over the course of a massive data journalism project by the *In the Dark* team. Their investigation discovered evidence of a pattern of racial discrimination in jury selection that has been reported as the reason the high court agreed to hear the case (Liptak, Feb. 18, 2019).

Early on, I recognized that I wanted to do sort of discrete episodes that looked at particular issues in the criminal justice system. And you know, through those episodes for instance...one focused on compensation for people who are exonerated and wrongly convicted and a second was on looking at the lack of laws in this country that make it so that police officers can't claim consent as a defense when they engage in sexual acts with people in their custody. Those are both things that I'm working with a legislator here in South Carolina who is now basically filing bills on those issues next year.

Rice illustrated within-sector mobilization by comparing true crime podcasts to mobilizing true crime documentaries like *The Keepers*. Her description matches those found in the content analysis, as many of the analyzed news articles also compared true crime podcasts to other true crime media. Rice described podcasts in particular as a tool for advancing podcaster's movement goals:

The thing that I'm most excited about when it comes to podcasting, and to true crime specifically, is the power that podcasters have to really do good. To bring awareness to cases where justice has not been served or the case has not been solved. And I think that's very exciting.

Chaudry too used a "tool" analogy to describe the advocacy power of podcasts:

As an advocacy tool, I think it's a fantastic tool, and you have to use every tool in your arsenal. Social media is a tool, podcasting is a tool, any kind of media can be a tool. In terms of if it's the right method—if it works it's the right method. It's as simple as that. And it has worked...It's worked. And if its working, then yeah, at the end of the day, if you can bring somebody justice, it's working. It's a tool. You can abuse it, and you can use it properly.

Participants offered more examples of *symbolic* action. Rankin credited both true crime and political podcasts with improving civic knowledge. He said, “There are people who normally wouldn’t read the newspaper or watch TV news, and it’s making them more informed.” Several participants cited the attention that podcasts bring to both individual cases and to systemic issues as the most important and widespread form of symbolic action. Pacheco and Rice mentioned attention as the primary output of their podcasts and similarly-formatted shows, particularly for less well-known cases. Rice said:

Podcasts have had a real impact on solving crimes and bringing justice to families just by telling these stories...if a podcast has a certain number of listeners, you know, a large audience, they can really make an impact on solving, let’s say a cold case or bringing enough attention.

Zappala too mentioned the ability to bring attention to “miscarriages of justice” through popularity that other forms of investigative journalism might not garner. Morford and Delia described the power of amplifying the voices of survivors. Morford said:

When somebody opens up to you about something so personal, it’s sort of moving because it’s something that a lot of people don’t like to talk about, and they share their stories with you. And then you share their stories with the world. It’s an odd feeling. It’s really a pleasure to do that, to give somebody a platform for them to talk. The interesting thing about podcasting is that you can help...There’s people learning about things that maybe they didn’t know before, being outraged about things...the subject of rape and some of the Golden State Killer coverage we did—some people just didn’t know how bad things were in that case and some of the stuff that was done—it brought up the subject of untested rape kits. I think as people learn about stuff they become more involved, more

educated, and do things like tributes, money to certain funds... there's a really good learning process to learn things and about causes you might not have known about before these podcasts.

Delia's also expressed the importance of education about systemic issues through the stories of survivors, particularly as a way for men to understand women's experiences:

There's a lot of power in hearing your story and saying it out loud even if no one knows who you are.... [I had] men telling me they understand women's assaults better now. I got a lot of feedback that they were just horrified. It was an education for them about women being believed or not being believed... When I look at the work that we are doing it's really affecting people, and it's really doing things, and it's really making people look at these systems that are so important that we all don't know how to navigate.

Increasing knowledge and awareness of how the judicial system works was mentioned by almost all participants as the most valuable symbolic contribution of true crime podcasts.

Depending on the podcast, this knowledge may deal with racial disparity, sexual assault, missing persons, forensic science, or even personal safety. Chaudry credits being a fan of podcasts herself with teaching her ways of protecting herself:

They [particular podcasters] work with Crime Stoppers and they work with law enforcement, so they're not just saying "Oh, let me tell you about this case from 1995 that's so crazy and so horrible," but they're saying "Does anybody know anything? These are the numbers to call." Also, they're providing valuable information. I learned a lot from listening to true crime podcasts about how to keep yourself safe.

Chaudry went on to describe the impact of true crime podcasts to challenge the narrative of traditional depictions of "law and order" and criminal justice. She said:

One of the things of value is these podcasts are showing people actually how the system works. Because people don't realize it. We've been watching TV, we've been growing up on this stuff, and on *Dateline* and these true crime shows, rarely did you see the police getting it wrong. Rarely do they point out like all the flaws in prosecution or investigation, and podcasts are very, very well able to. And people like the long format. They are willing to listen to a series, they're willing to pay attention and get it and understand why criminal justice advocates, criminal justice reform advocates, for years have been saying "This shit is broken." People are getting it now. I've gotten tons of emails over the years from people who are middle aged, midwestern white people who say "I never got it until I listened to your show. Now I get it."

Hunt also stressed the value of podcasts' ability to show the real judicial system:

We might not be able to really move the dial of a case, you know, our best efforts might not get us there. But at least we can do work that highlights flaws in the law enforcement process or the legal system or just inform people about parts of this process that they don't know about.

Hunt also offered the strongest rationalization for recognizing true crime podcasts as structures for advocacy: the testimony of the people personally affected by the stories these podcasts address. She said:

People who have been in this kind of situation, they know that the attention paid when they're adopted in this way is invaluable. There was a woman at our live show that said, "I would have paid a million dollars for this." I think it was her son that was murdered.... It's not so much that they want us to solve it. They just want to be heard and to have it looked at properly. When you feel like police have done too cursory of a job or have

somehow failed you, or that your loved one is somehow forgotten, is just some a statistic, it's hard to move forward with your life without feeling like you're betraying that person. So these podcasts at least, you know, they highlight issues that people need to know about. They pay attention to victims who are often forgotten and when they're done well, they can make a real difference in a case.

**Movement Processes.** In the resource mobilization and political process paradigms of social movement theory, movements go beyond collective awareness and identity to organized, politicized forms (Diani, 2013; Huddy, 2001; Van Zomeren et al., 2008). These organized forms require group efficacy, symbolic and environmental political opportunities, and physical, monetary, and symbolic resources to survive (McAdam, 1999 & 2017; McCarthy & Zald, 1977 & 2002; Oberschall, 1973). *Framing processes*, such as mobilizing emotions, are used to negotiate boundaries and tactics by acting as the social construction of “shared meanings and cultural understandings... including a shared collective identity” (McAdam, 1999, p. ix).

***Symbolic and environmental political opportunity.*** Participants described both symbolic and environmental political opportunities over the past several years that have allowed true crime podcasts to be effective as movement organizations. Brantley credited the surge in true crime popularity across media formats as one such opportunity that has allowed podcasters to capture audience. “Woo them with the true crime and then keep them there for the meditation on race in America,” he said. Brantley and Chaudry both described the post-2016 presidential election climate as an opportunity. While Chaudry sees both the expansion of political podcasts and “resistance” rhetoric as related to and beneficial for true crime-related movements, Brantley pointed directly to the rise in conversations about race in America as an opportunity for his podcast: “Put yourself back in early 2017. We've just had an election, everyone is talking about

white nationalism. There are things happening in the country that make that feel like a good conversation to have.”

Hunt described environmental opportunities as a convergence of timing and resources. The effectiveness of her podcast was possible because of technological, forensic, popular culture, and media shifts (i.e., her print outlet exploring new ways to monetize) at a point when original suspects in the 1978 case were still alive and able to be investigated.

Miller, Rice, and Chaudry each credited an unlikely source of symbolic political opportunity—celebrities’ social media. Both Rice and Miller referenced the impact of reality star Kim Kardashian’s interest in criminal justice reform, specifically the Cyntoia Brown case. Brown, an inmate in Tennessee, received a life sentence at 16 for killing a man who had paid her for sex and allegedly threatened her life. Miller credited Kardashian’s tweets about Brown with drawing his interest to the case, leading to an episode of *Undisclosed* and Miller’s involvement with 16 other legal organizations to petition on Brown’s behalf (Brown was granted clemency in January of 2019; Gafas & Burnside, January 8, 2019). Rice mentioned pop star Rhianna’s social media activism as influential for drawing attention to criminal justice reform issues, as well the conversation of other celebrities about *Serial* and Syed’s case.

Chaudry too pointed to the relationship between true crime podcasts, pop culture, and celebrities becoming involved in advocating for issues of justice. She said:

Where some podcasts have been useful is not just talking about a specific defendant, but talking about systemic issues. And that’s caught the eye of certain celebrities. I mean, I think just yesterday Jay-Z [rapper and husband of Beyonce Knowles] announced a new initiative for criminal justice reform. I’m not saying that’s been influenced by podcasts,

but I think in general that podcasts are adding to the urgency of these issues and that's a good thing.

Participants offered examples of taking advantage of environmental and symbolic political opportunities, but also mentioned ways that outside political actors affected these opportunities. One example is the pushback from the state of Georgia in several cases covered by podcasters. While Rankin described using his existing relationships with judges and court officials to side-step courtroom audio rules, Chaudry and Miller both mentioned being stymied by state officials. One such case led all the way to the Georgia Supreme Court, which ruled against *Undisclosed's* request for court audio (*Undisclosed LLC v. The State*, 2017).

***Framing processes.*** In the context of social movement processes, “framing” goes beyond the kind of linguistic frame analysis common to communication literature (e.g. Goffman, 1974). While the use of particular frames to shape a movement narrative may be a part of framing processes, social movement scholars describe the creation of collective action frames as “an active, processual phenomenon that implies agency and contention at the level of reality construction” (Benford & Snow, 2000, p.614). Framing within a social movement paradigm is a phenomenon that involves action choices on the part of the mobilizing organizer, as well as the negotiation and redefinition of goals and emotions through bi-directional communication with constituents. This process is closely related to what organizational ecology calls “bi-directional boundary work,” the process through which an organization’s audience and consumers help to define the identity of the organization (Gioia et al., 2000; Polos et al., 2002). These framing processes, including mobilizing emotions, group efficacy, and issue ownership, affect the evolution of collective identity into politicized forms (McAdam, 1999).

Participants offered examples of these framing processes. One such example is the “motivational framing” (Snow & Benford, 1988) movement leaders may employ to encourage constituents to feel efficacy and issue ownership. Miller described *Undisclosed*’s efforts to build efficacy among podcasts with criminal justice reform goals. He said:

Podcasts can have a terrific role in advocating for social change. We’ve actively promoted other podcasts, again under the thinking that we want people tackling these issues in the criminal justice system.... We want our podcast to secure justice for people we think are wrongly convicted.

Miller’s expressed goal orientation (“to secure justice for people we think are wrongly convicted”) is also evidence of issue ownership. Several participants mentioned podcasters feeling either protective of certain issues or cases, or of wanting to incorporate ownership of an issue into their listener’s collective identity. Pacheco said, “You’ll cover a case, and someone will get mad because they had this proprietary thing, ‘that’s my case.’ Well, it’s really not anybody’s case.” Fuller also described feeling protective of his case and the victim’s family as he came to know them. Delia felt that her audience owned the stories:

I wanted people to feel like this was their podcast and that even though maybe their assault didn’t involve drugs or didn’t involve a stranger or whatever, that they had a voice and that everyone’s story is different and that everyone’s story is valid.

Mobilizing emotions were also important to participants. In some cases, these emotions were present in the way that podcasters chose to produce their podcasts. For Rankin and Freemark, a desire for accountability of elected officials and law enforcement served as motivation. Hunt said that the *Accused* team kept photos of the victims in their cases up in their work room to be a constant reminder of the goals behind the project. In addition to humanizing

their subjects, Hunt said the photos helped the team to be aware of ethical considerations as they worked. She said:

Our bias was that we were clear that we wanted to move this case forward, that we wanted to help find a resolution. We want to help solve a murder. It wasn't because I wanted bragging rights. It was because this victim's family deserved it.

Pacheco mentioned trying to keep a similar emotional motivation behind his process working with missing person cases:

This person was a person. So a lot of times people get wrapped up in the disappearance and not the this was an actual person that had friends and family and kids or whatever, and so I try to make that come to life a little bit instead of just being the background to what happened.

Almost all participants described their work in terms of goals, generally related to criminal justice issues, and expressed shared identity as both true crime fans and supporters of systemic change to the way justice issues are handled in the U.S. They often described their listeners as compatriots in those goals and as people with similar attitudes toward crime and justice. What these responses do not illustrate, however, is how widespread this orientation is across the ever-expanding true crime podcast population. In describing the violation of "norms" they see by some other podcasters (below), participants suggested that many true crime podcasts do not have goals beyond organizational maintenance as entertainment entities. These responses illustrate that, in response to RQ 3, *some* members of the true crime podcast population operate from a social movement orientation, though that orientation is often more aligned with an idea of spreading awareness for the cause of "justice" rather than a clear connection to a fully formed social movement.

The following section discusses the ways that some members of the true crime podcast population show evidence of overlapping or hybrid movement and ecological orientations.

### **Podcasts as Hybrid Organizations**

Both organizational ecology and social movement theories include the concepts of organizational identity, legitimacy, and stakeholder negotiation. Identity is related to form and niche, and it may evolve over the life cycle of an organization. Identity evolves as the definition of norms, or acceptable behavior, is negotiated within the organization, with other population members, and with outside agents (Jacobs et al., 2008; Tilly, 1986). Legitimacy, both for the maintenance of organizations and the acceptance of social movements, may be affected by how well the identity of an organization matches with the needs or goals of its population or movement sector. Both legitimacy and identity are affected by negotiation with stakeholders and outside agents as the organization or movement evolves. The fourth research question asks if true crime podcasts exhibit hybrid characteristics of organizational ecology and social movement theories. Participants discussed several concepts in ways that reflect both ecological and social movement paradigms, supporting that yes, *some* true crime podcast organizations do have hybrid orientations.

**Organizational norm creation and violation.** As discussed above, boundary work establishes the niche fit of organizations. The negotiation of norms within a population is a kind of boundary work and may also define the identity of organizations. Participants gave examples of ways norms have been established for true crime podcasts as well as their perceptions of norm violations.

Several participants mentioned that norms may still be in flux for true crime podcasts and compared these norms to other media. “There are not a lot of stringent standards to telling these

stories,” Rice said, adding that the lack of standards separates a lot of true crime from what she would consider journalism. Pacheco made a similar comment, saying, “It’s a very strange environment because there’s no rules to it.” Miller too described the lack of clear boundaries for podcasters, particularly in dealing with legal matters. He said, “I think rules are still being figured out in terms of how these are handled and how they sort of intersect with the legal system, but it’s exciting.”

More than one participant used the term “wild west” to describe the true crime podcast community. Because of the lack of formal standards, podcasters reported a kind of self-policing of the space, with other podcasters and listeners constantly negotiating what is “acceptable.”

Pacheco said:

In terms of the community itself, there's a huge debate about the way [stories] should be handled, and you've got everything from the people who are very comedic about the way they tell them to the people who are very serious... Most of the debate is between podcasters...hosts try to self-moderate the world of true crime so that if they feel someone stepped over the line then some of the bigger names might say something publicly about it. But then the bigger names go back and forth, and you see these debates happening all the time between upper echelon podcasters.

Chaudry described this self-policing as a consideration for deciding which other podcast hosts to have as guests or to endorse on *Undisclosed*. She said:

We are very careful in our assessment of shows that we think might be exploitive to a case and the defendants and victims, and we stay away from that... It’s a tool. You can abuse it, and you can use it properly.

Interactions with listeners were credited with helping to shape the norms of the population by several participants. Miller noted that listeners helped his team negotiate the language barrier between seasoned attorneys and people with a strong interest in criminal justice but no formal training. Pacheco said listeners helped him understand what kind of content might require a “trigger warning” and how to be more sensitive when discussing topics like sex work or assault. Morford said the development of his “very professional, very serious, very respectful” style had also been shaped by listeners:

I'm very creative, and it's important to me to be fact based and detail-oriented and put a lot of work into it. and I think the end result, you know, it shows, and the listeners appreciate that.

Hunt said she trusted listeners to recognize high quality podcasts and to support deserving population members:

People recognize the power of telling a story in this format. I don't necessarily agree with how every other podcaster approaches this in, you know, in the field, but I'm hoping that you know, the quality ones rise, and the less savory ones hopefully fall away.

Chaudry and Pacheco both described the importance of podcasters doing investigations and interacting with open cases in careful and ethical ways, particularly, what information podcasters chose not to broadcast. These comments reflect some podcasters' focus on tangible outcomes of their work. Said Chaudry:

We don't do anything, we don't report anything that has not been cleared because we do not want to hurt the defendant's case. We don't care about the listenership, we don't care about the wow factor, we don't want to hurt that person's case.

Pacheco expressed the importance of podcasters recognizing their responsibility to “not make things worse.” Of discovering unknown or titillating information about a case, he said:

I've got to hold that back. There are other people to be like, “No one else has heard this! We'll get more downloads if I put it out there!” So, it's a really sticky situation of being a true crime podcaster. It isn't always “Let me tell you everything.” Sometimes it's knowing what to tell and what not to tell.

The lack of clearly set boundaries for true crime podcasters is reflected in Freemark's hesitation to call *In the Dark* a “true crime podcast.” While Freemark's show clearly fits the boundaries of the true crime population, based both on Punnett's (2018) criteria and the way it is marketed and discussed by media, listeners, and other podcasters, she insisted, “I think people are very clear on the distinction between what we are doing and like a traditional true crime thing.” In explaining how she views the distinction between “traditional true crime” and her work, Freemark too noted the lack of clear standards and boundaries. She said:

In the same way as TV, there's like true crime TV stuff that's really just like, you know, lots of like dramatic music and focus on blood splattered walls and like reenactments of someone stabbing someone to death. And then, on the other hand, there's something like *Making a Murderer*, more like a criminal justice broadcast that like is just reporting. In TV, we don't really lump those together. We understand the distinction there. I think in podcasting for some reason we have trouble drawing some of those distinctions which are distinctions which should be drawn. Again, there's work that's really based on the storytelling of crimes, and then there's work that adheres to more traditional journalistic standards, and so we do our best to be the latter of those. And again, we would never

describe ourselves as a true crime podcast. Like, we would describe ourselves as criminal justice reporting.

While other participants were fine with their identities being defined as “true crime,” they were quick to offer multiple examples of norm violations of what they see as “acceptable” ways of doing true crime. Some of these violations are more ecological, relating to boundaries between journalism and sensationalist media, while others relate to the movement orientations of podcast, such as how goal-focused investigations are conducted. Delia described “bad” true crime as those with poor production and editing quality. Pacheco noted that some podcasts “steal” content from others and wondered how long it will be until the population begins to see pushback or lawsuits between members. Hunt described being uncomfortable with podcasts that she saw as gratuitous or disrespectful:

I don't think that reflects well on the rest of us... I'm very careful. I saw another podcast doing a promotional type of act that was like “wine cheese and murder” and it's like, there's a real person in this case!

Zappala expressed a similar criticism, particularly pointing to the divide between podcasts by journalists and those by amateur reporters:

I think it's definitely just as professional as other ways of talking about news or issues as long as it's done by a professional. There's definitely a lot of those podcasts I was mentioning, I don't want to bad-mouth them, but a lot of times I find that they approach things in an unprofessional and disrespectful manor because they are not journalists and they just want to chat about cases... Yeah, of course it can be unprofessional. Some people enjoy it that way. I don't.

Morford too expressed dismay at the nature of many popular true crime podcasts, describing one of the most popular as “joking through Wikipedia.” He continued:

You know, that for me personally, not to damn anybody that listens, it’s hard for me to hear about these stories of what happened to people and make jokes. That’s not me. And I think... it helps people laugh a little bit, you need some laughs, but for me it’s just hard to mix the two. I think when I’m dealing with victims of crime or family members of victims or the police, you treat them very seriously and professionally and with respect. We’re putting our reputation on the line so that’s why we do that.

Chaudry described audience appetites and podcasters’ quests for ratings as a possible driver for the kinds of true crime she personally finds disturbing:

I’m continuously kind of surprised. I shouldn’t be because, when I think about it, there’s a lot of podcasts out there that are not great in terms of substance but have a huge following. And sometimes it’s kinds of annoying because it signals the kinds of public appetites that exist for things that are not great. Just recently there was a podcast that was announced a couple of weeks ago and I was shocked. Anyways, the whole podcast pitch is that “This is some of the goriest true crime incidents that have ever happened, and we’re gonna air the goriest gore of it, and we’re not gonna be squeamish, and we’re gonna play the 911 calls, and we’re gonna play the audio of people screaming.” And you know what? Huge audience for this shit.

Several participants described podcasts that they saw as violating norms—either of the true crime population or of basic human decency. Brantley described some popular podcasts as “irresponsible and gross” in the way they treat their subjects. He described one podcast as having, “done more harm for journalism than anything I can think of.” Brantley, along with

several other participants, described how podcasters who are not mindful in their work can easily distort a case and exploit already traumatized families. Several participants also used the colloquialism “murder porn” to describe this kind of exploitative true crime. Fuller said:

I know for some people it's kind of an unhealthy fascination and obsession with murder and with really strange death and torture...If you're not advocating for the victim, you're probably not journalistically going after any information. You're simply showing the recreation of a series of what *South Park* the TV show called “murder porn.” It's hard to come up with a better description...at what point are you trying to help someone, are you trying to solve a mystery, and at what point is it just voyeurism?

The language choice of participants in describing things they view as norm violations or to be avoided in their work is noteworthy. Three participants were very concerned with professional versus unprofessional behavior of podcast hosts, often using examples of journalistic norms as standards of professionalism. Several participants also used words like “exploit,” “exploitative,” or “exploitativeness” to describe the ways “unprofessional” podcasters treat victims or families. Other examples of participants’ descriptions of “inappropriate” ways to tell podcast stories included “salacious,” “sleazy,” “sensational/sensationalized/sensationalist,” “voyeurism,” “grotesque,” “lurid,” “harm,” and too much focus on “blood and guts” or “gore.”

There were two very successful podcasts and their hosts who were brought up repeatedly by multiple participants as extreme examples of norm violations. While none of the participants were comfortable going on the record with criticism in the interview (though several have been open in their criticism in public forums; see DISCUSSION), their comments are worth discussing anonymously. One of these podcasts was started in 2013 and has continued to be one of the most well-known and widely-listened true crime podcasts. It is now a member of one of

the largest corporate podcast networks and has major advertising contracts. While participants commented on the strength of the podcast in terms of accurate information and technical quality, they questioned the ethics of its host (this host was also one of the people many participants described as a negative or “feuding” influence within the informal personal networks of podcasters). Participants suggested that this host, and the host of another podcast described as particularly “exploitative,” are involved in true crime because of its current popularity and revenue potential rather than any real passion for victims or causes. Said one participant:

For the most part, the fans will listen and enjoy it, but amongst other podcasters they will look at certain people and say, “That guy doesn't really care about the case or about the victim, he just wants to make money. He’s just making things up or doing whatever.”

Other participants lamented that the monetary success of these norm-violating podcasters might lead other people to mimic their style in hopes of duplicating that success. On the other hand, a listener boycott of the podcast network and social media backlash against insensitive (particularly misogynist and transphobic) comments by one of these podcasts were mentioned as examples of listeners helping to define “appropriate” boundaries. Another participant suggested that podcasters—even successful, relatively famous ones—are not prepared to deal with the possibility of millions of listeners without having the public relations support a traditional media outlet might provide. At the end of the day, one participant said, even the most demonized host is “just a guy doing a podcast.”

**Stakeholder Negotiation.** As noted above, listeners, victims, and families of victims are considered stakeholders for true crime podcasters, as resources, consumers, and movement compatriots. Participants discussed the ways in which these stakeholders and others connected to

cases (i.e., prosecutors, judges, and police) influence the creation of boundaries and the podcast production process.

Negotiation with law enforcement and judges was often described as important for the investigation of cases. Rankin credited his prior relationships with judges and court reporters from years of work for the *AJC* with allowing him access to audio and court documents that other podcasters (like *Undisclosed*) were unable to get. Delia said that she and her producers met with local police often both to include their side of the story and to build rapport in hopes of gaining information. Chaudry too noted the value of working with law enforcement, despite her cases often involving police or prosecutorial misconduct:

We do our best to reach out to the law enforcement involved, the prosecutors that were involved, to current prosecutors, to the people in the system who either had an impact on the case or can have an impact. We always did that. A lot of times, they don't want to talk. Sometimes we get lucky... We have been told that whenever we go about reporting about or investigating on these cases, stakeholders are listening, the D.A. will be listening. Ex-judges will be listening. People are paying attention.

Hunt was quick to note that while she was happy to work with police, her journalistic investigation was a separate endeavor. “We are not an arm of law enforcement. They need to do their own damn jobs,” she said. Zappala said that mayor of Phoenix had become involved in the case after her reporting in his community, and that law enforcement and families were her greatest resource. She credited the sister of the victim and the help of a retired detective as the most important elements in her choosing and sticking with the Alissa Tourney case. Several participants described the particular negotiations involved with working with families of victims. Rice said:

I was very mindful of the way I told the story because I realized that—and I always know— that there’s a chance that victims’ families are listening to these stories. Like, I try not to be too salacious and tell about the blood and guts and all that stuff.

Hunt said that, while as a journalist she never allowed the family any editorial oversight, she worked closely with families and often gave them information before airing the podcast to prevent hurtful on-air surprises. Brantley said that being mindful of promising too much to families was an important consideration. He said, “You're entering into people's already kind of fractured and damaged lives often, and you're offering some sort of like, redemption.” Pacheco described families as “open to getting attention” and “very appreciative,” but noted that he avoided talking to close stakeholders until after he had done his own research, as he found stakeholders to often be too biased to provide good information.

Participants also brought up the legal complications associated with open or pending cases. Miller described the negotiation of attorney-client privilege, pointing to how *Serial* had been used to argue in court that closed documents could be considered public record because of the podcast. Miller also said that his team stressed to defense attorneys and possible subjects that while a podcast might help someone wrongfully convicted, it might be just as likely to have negative effects on their case. Fuller, whose podcast deals with cold cases, said that negotiation with law enforcement had not been difficult, as he found them so desperate for any leads that they were happy to share information and work directly with him.

Brantley mentioned negotiation with stakeholders as sometimes involving interacting with people that he might normally avoid. Getting to a story, he said means the podcaster must “treat them with dignity.” He said:

You have to go and sit down and have all-you-can-eat catfish dinners with KKK members. And like, that's not a thing that flies very well in the world right now, but it is part of this work. You have to sort of sit and listen and hear other people whose views you find despicable, but you're not there to tell them they're wrong and to virtue signal. You're there to get them to tell you the truth.”

**Legitimacy.** The stakeholder negotiation process may both increase the perceived legitimacy of true crime podcast organizations and be aided by pre-existing legitimacy. As demonstrated in the content analysis, cognitive legitimacy, or the “taken for granted” understanding of true crime podcasts appears to be widespread. Participants offered anecdotes illustrating this. Both Hunt and Fuller talked about recent pop culture references to true crime podcasts, including the most recent *Halloween* franchise movie and Saturday Night Live sketches. Brantley described sensing the ubiquity of true crime podcasts by how often he hears students outside his office having conversations about podcasts like *S-town*.

Normative legitimacy, or the societal acceptance of the “appropriateness” of true crime podcasts, is also relevant to their organizational and movement orientations. Participants offered examples of how listeners, podcasters, and outside agents negotiate normative legitimacy. Fuller said that while traditional media outlets may not be ready to see podcasts as peers, he believes that audiences have already made that switch. He said:

I think the media—like TV, radio, newspaper, mainstream media—still thinks of itself as a bit above podcasting. In terms of the audience, I think most of the audience is willing to accept you as a news source if that's what you're giving them. People aren't given enough credit for being able to listen to something and say, “This is being done in a really good way and here's why” and “This is being done in a comprehensive way.” You could be

comparing two podcasts and know which one is a lot more valuable to the listener. I think listeners can figure that out.

Fuller also described the way that law enforcement had treated him as evidence of the growing legitimacy of true crime podcasts:

Law enforcement takes podcasts seriously almost out of fear. They understand what the medium has done to some others. They've made some agencies look pretty silly on different podcasts, and they don't want that. So, as far as law enforcement is concerned, when I've ever approached any agency, they got back to me as if I were a producer for *Dateline*. Just in this last year. That probably wouldn't have been true 10 years ago.

Different kinds of outside agents were described as helping to legitimize true crime podcasts as well. Several people mentioned the Apple iTunes chart as valuable for conferring institutional legitimacy, though also voiced concerns that Apple's "gatekeeping" might keep good podcasts from being discovered. Pacheco said that top charts as well as "best of" articles constantly being filled with the same few network-connected podcasts despite the size of the population suggested that algorithms, corporate negotiation, and advertising ties may be keeping independent podcasts from reaching legitimacy. Pacheco also pointed out that iTunes' lack of a "True Crime" category may show that the genre is "still likely not completely accepted."

Participants noted examples of celebrities and political figures conferring legitimacy to their podcasts, the podcast medium, and the true crime genre. Alabama Senator Doug Jones was interviewed by Brantley for his podcast, and, as already noted, Zappala credits the mayor of Phoenix for increased police corporation in her case. Several participants mentioned major celebrities—like Oprah, Conan O'Brien, Alec Baldwin, and Anna Farris—starting their own

podcasts as evidence that the medium was continuing to grow. Rice said, “They’re doing really well in their lives, but they’re turning to podcasting for some reason.”

Participants also described the involvement of important associations and figures in legitimizing the advocacy and justice missions of their podcasts. Hunt called actor John Cryer her “biggest fan,” and credited his enthusiasm for *Accused* with helping to grow its audience. Chaudry mentioned the recent involvement of celebrity defense attorney Kathleen Zellner with *Truth & Justice*’s sixth season as proof of the value of that podcast’s wrongful conviction work. Rankin said that winning the American Bar Association Silver Gavel Award for court reporting proved that *Breakdown* was doing superior journalism in podcast format. Morford described the attention his podcast received after being mentioned in a *Time* magazine article for its coverage of the stories of Golden State Killer victims:

When *Time* magazine recognizes that there’s people out there that are in-depth about these things and they talk about it, I think it shows you how serious and how much attention there is out there for good stuff in podcasts.

Miller, who also described the impact of celebrity interest in true crime as a resource, credited celebrity attention with helping true crime podcasts gain legitimacy. “It’s great that celebrities have gotten interested in true crime and are advocating changes, and I treat that with respect. I think that is something that’s a good thing,” Miller said. Three podcasters also said that they had been approached by television networks about turning their true crime podcasts into TV shows but were contractually prevented from disclosing details.

***Co-option.*** For many podcasters, legitimacy was co-opted (Deephouse & Suchman, 2008; Downing & Pfeffer, 1975) by relationships with established organizations. While conference of legitimacy comes from recognition (like winning an award) by established agents,

co-option (also called *co-optation*) involves a relationship, either formal or informal, with already legitimized agents (Downing & Pfeffer, 1975). Rankin, Hunt, and Freemark mentioned their jobs at the *Atlanta Journal Constitution*, *Cincinnati Inquirer*, and Minnesota Public Radio as allowing their endeavors to be seen as legitimate from day one. Brantley said he felt the same advantage in working with NPR. “Just to be totally honest, the show could totally suck, and it would still reach a lot of listeners because it's NPR,” he said, noting that NPR has the power to negotiate with Apple iTunes on his behalf. Others described co-opting legitimacy by teaming up with well-connected individuals while producing their shows. Miller mentioned the importance of retired law enforcement officials for his cases, while Rice talked about gaining listener trust by interviewing retired FBI profilers, *Dateline* hosts, and Debra and Terra Newell (real-life survivors known from mega-podcast-turned *Bravo* show *Dirty John*) on her show. Chaudry described both benefiting from co-option of legitimacy by being a spin-off of *Serial* and conferring legitimacy to others by promoting podcasts with what she called “the *Undisclosed* bump.”

***Threats and what is “appropriate.”*** As already discussed in terms of identity and boundaries, true crime podcasters must decide how to balance the entertainment aspects of the medium with journalistic or social justice goals. Participants also described this negotiation in terms of legitimacy and being seen as credible or trustworthy operations.

Hunt talked about the ethical debates that went into deciding how far her show could lean into advocacy while still being seen as journalistically legitimate:

It felt more appropriate to embrace the biases rather than to bury them... we also didn't want to then sway too far, you know anti-police. For example, I love cop sources. Some of them are amazing, you know they've broken cold cases just, you know, by shoe leather

detective work. But in this case, I--obviously and very clearly--don't think that they did a thorough job. So, we just had to talk all of that out.

Brantley too acknowledged ethical struggles with how to treat sources in his investigation as both a journalist and someone out to solve a mystery:

This touches on the real ethical struggles with true crime... I believe there is sort of an underlying condition of this work, which is that you have all the power whether you think you do or not. You have all the power, and you have to weigh the invasion of privacy and any inevitable exploitation of other people's stories and voices against the story that you're doing.

While not a journalist by trade, Rice acknowledge a similar quandary over the right way to tell very personal and sometimes graphic stories. She used the example of *The Keepers*, a recent documentary series about the murder of a nun and the molestation of children by a priest in Boston, as an example of the “appropriate” way to treat crime stories and victims. “Yes, you heard a lot of the salacious details, and some of those were very hard to hear, but it was just done in such a respectful and artistic manner that I think gives true crime a very good reputation,” she said.

Fuller also described podcasts as unique opportunities to explore issues or take positions on cases that might be frowned upon by traditional journalistic outlets. He specifically mentioned the narrative format of podcasts as a way to tell journalistic stories through a new lens, such as *In the Dark's* exploration of the power of U.S. sheriff's departments. He said:

One of the things that I think true crime can do that journalism can't...is advocate for victims or their causes. If you're looking at criminal justice reform, people look at *Serial* and may see a true crime podcast. The real thing in that story is that they're pursuing an

angle of a certain part of the criminal justice system, and they're just using a case to bring it to light.

Both Rankin and Rice acknowledged negotiating how much humor they could use and still be considered part of “legitimate” true crime rather than one of the norm violators discussed previously. Rice said that interaction with listeners through social media taught her that fans shared “a dark sense of humor,” and could tolerate a certain amount of comic relief. Rankin described being aware of the balance in his delivery as well:

I try to make it entertaining, if I can. I try not to be serious all the time. I try to make people laugh a little bit because I’m dealing with such serious, sad, sometimes morbid topics. So, I try to see if I can find a moment to bring a little levity to that.

**Countermovements.** As political actors, either established elite or newly mobilized movement actors, act to create social changes, there may be evidence of countermovements working in opposition to the movement actors (Amburgey & Rao, 1996; McAdam et al., 2003). The emergence of countermovements may imply that a movement is seen as a legitimate politicized form (McAdam, McCarthy, & Zald, 1988; Meyer & Staggenborg, 1996). Countermovements may also play a role in movement framing processes (Benford & Snow, 2000). Organizational ecology scholars have described ways that countermovements to movement-connected organizations may also affect the evolution of niches and population density through altering resource availability (Amburgey & Rao, 1996; Carroll, 1984). While participants did not offer evidence of an organized countermovement, they did describe incidences of pushback against their work or its goal.

Freemark described virulent pushback to *In the Dark's* reporting and attributed it to a desire by elite opponents in the Curtis Flowers case to bury evidence of misconduct. She said

that she expected to have received the same pushback regardless of the format of the reporting. “I don’t think that’s related to the impact of podcasts. That’s just people that don’t want something dug into,” she said. Hunt said that as her podcast received more attention and success, she began to receive criticism accusing her of being motivated by making money off of cases rather than a true desire for justice.

Fuller said that he does not see an organized countermovement yet, but felt that more pushback against true crime, particularly investigative, podcasts, was possible if creators are not responsible and diligent in their reporting:

It hasn't really happened yet, but if somebody irresponsibly goes about doing this and puts someone in danger or puts themselves in danger, if some unfortunate event happens because of a podcast, then that might change that.

Pacheco expressed concern that podcaster biases may have a chilling effect on movements associated with true crime podcasts and that pushback seems inevitable. He pointed out that podcasters can easily manipulate an audience by only telling one side of a story. He said, “It's very weird to try and figure out who's being honest and who's not.” He also described being troubled by negative attitudes toward law enforcement he sees from others in the community and being concerned by the possibility of growing political polarization dividing the true crime audience:

They're [true crime podcasts] having an effect on social change. Whether or not that's positive or negative is up for debate depending on what side of it you're on... One thing I see but never really gets talked about in true crime—because you think it really doesn't have a place in there, but it does—is the politics of it in terms of liberal versus conservative, Republican versus Democrat, whatever. There's a back and forth there

where you've definitely got true crime podcasts out there that lean very liberal, so they're going to approach a case and look at the law from a liberal point of view. And then you have more conservative ones that are going to look at it from their point of view. And you can listen to two podcasts cover the same case and get to very, very different impressions just based on their personal political or social beliefs.

Pacheco described the rise of social movements like the Women's March and #MeToo as forcing podcasters to think about their language choices and treatment of victims, but he added that the opposition to those movements had inspired listener pushback criticizing him for any perceived "political correctness." Pacheco also noted (but would not name) podcasters he sees as intentionally crafting shows to counter narratives that are victim- or justice-focused, including explicitly trying to offend listeners or other podcasters who express concern.

**Evidence of dual orientation.** While the true crime podcast population shows evidence of both an organizational maintenance and social movement orientation through the creation of identity, boundaries, legitimacy, and stakeholder negotiation, participants also *explicitly* talked about their work in dual terms. For some participants, those orientations blended seamlessly, such as Miller's description of being motivated by sharing "the message in a quality way," whether to influence movement outcomes or to acquire listeners and advertising. Morford said that he got into podcasting because he recognized that it was a way to turn his passion for sharing true crime and victims' stories on his website into a viable career.

Other participants described a "grappling" process or tension between motivations, whether that motivation was to produce journalism or entertainment in addition to sharing their cause. Pacheco described his own ethical debates over making a profit from missing persons cases and the multiple identities podcasters have to negotiate:

There's a certain degree—at least for me when I'm doing it—where it's hard like to do advertisements sometimes because there's a point, there's a part of me that feels like “Am I exploiting this person by making money by telling their story?” And that's something that I kind of wrestle with on every case that I do. For the most part, I'm able to justify it because I'm able to say, “Well, a lot of people haven't heard this and maybe if I can get it out there, maybe somebody remembers something, or somebody has seen something.” Or it makes the family feel better because people are talking about it, and their loved one isn't forgotten. But there's certainly a little bit of an internal debate there about the concept. I'm telling this terrible story about this terrible thing that happened, and then I'm getting money for doing that. That can be challenging emotionally and mentally... Maybe this isn't just entertainment. Maybe this is, maybe these people are actually trying to do something that can help...I think as a podcaster you're constantly stuck in the middle. Are you someone talking about true crime, or are you a journalist? Are you a detective? It's kind of a blending of all of those and you're not officially any of them.

The participants who were professional journalists as well as podcasters also reported feeling pulled by dual motivations. While they described their work as the job of professional journalists and journalism organizations, they also pointed to positions of advocacy in their podcasts. Brantley said of his podcast, “I don't feel like an advocate at all,” but later expressed that his goal was “to arrive at some definitive answer... I feel like an advocate...for truth and reconciliation.” He also described wrestling with the dichotomy of telling serious, journalistic stories in an entertainment medium:

It's inherently a medium where people have to be entertained. If people are not entertained in some way, they're not going to listen. They're going to stop listening. I

think—of course “entertaining” is its own loaded word that we could debate—I think for us, we struggle with this a ton. Like, how much do you play on what draws you as a listener? Like *Serial*, that sort of drama, the mystery, the stakes, all the sort of narrative hooks, the way the narrative hooks us—how do you reconcile that with what is a very serious mission?

Delia described wrestling with the role of advocating for the rights of assault victims without becoming seen solely an advocate rather than a journalist:

*She Says*, I know it didn't just impact Linda, the main character in the story. I know it had an impact on so many women and men too. That's meaningful. That's what you want as a journalist, for your work to be accurate, educational and to have some kind of meaning without an agenda.... the fact that some people found a lot of good out of the work that we do, that's what it's all about. If your work leads to positive change or just enlightens people in a certain way than what they would have been otherwise, you can sometimes be seen as an advocate. And as a journalist, I do not want to be seen as an advocate, but I also want to listen to people, and I want to connect with people.

For Fuller, the lines between journalist, advocate, and participant have been especially blurred. Through his coverage of the Ayla Reynolds disappearance, Fuller grew to know the family so well that he was asked by a family member to draft public relations statements for them. He described how the closeness to victims’ families and investigators affected him and his view of the true crime podcast space:

I am straddling the line between journalist and advocate at that point, and I’m taking sides.... you lose your objectivity, and you start looking at the case through the prism of something that is different from where you started...It's a weird space...You've got

victims' rights, and you've got people whose lives have been destroyed trying to heal themselves through helping others, and then you've got everyone who's kind of watching behind the scenes for whatever reason.

Other participants talked about the evolution of their podcasts as a business model after the success of their goal-focused first seasons. Hunt said, "The focus has always been on the victim...we're going to keep doing what feels right because that's what worked the first time." Chaudry expressed surprise that her passion project, the follow-up to *Serial* with the goal of sharing all the facts in Syed's case, had turned into a job:

We kind of threw ourselves into podcasting just for Adnan's case, not ever thinking we're going to continue to do this. Not ever thinking that this was going to become like work. The first time I went to a podcast conference, Podcast Movement, it was like, "Oh my god, this is a real industry." It's really growing and evolving.... It's just exploding. There's a lot of money flowing into it.

In response to RQ 4, it is clear that even those podcasters who push against the idea of advocacy also express goal-oriented motivations. These tensions and dual motivations illustrate that podcasters themselves think of their work from both ecological and social movement perspectives. Additional tensions exist between journalistic orientations, like telling a factual story in a non-biased way, and orientations toward entertaining the audience and advocating for producers' personal or shared causes.

### **Emerging Themes for True Crime Podcasts**

The final research question asks what other motivations or concepts might exist within the true crime podcast community. Two additional themes emerged through the interviews and are discussed in the following section.

**Re/definition of the “true crime” genre.** Participants were asked how they defined the true crime genre, both as a whole and for podcasts, or how they saw their work fitting into the genre. Some participants echoed definitions similar to Punnett’s (2018) typology, such as Fuller’s description of the importance of locality to telling true crime stories. “It is different when you see a place where something happened... you can't even get that through Google Maps or Google Earth. It's never like how you expect it to be when you see the place where something happened,” he said.

Descriptions of true crime were generally positive. Miller said, “I feel like the way that true crime medium now is done is in a generally pretty nuanced, rigorous, and encouraging way.” Several participants suggested that lumping true crime into a single genre was reductive and ignored the complexity of true crime subgenres. Miller described “shades of true crime,” ranging from entertainment to “print journalism...in a new medium.” “I think true crime can be divided into three segments: journalism, advocacy, and morbid curiosity,” said Fuller. Pacheco suggested further division:

True crime...is maybe too broad of a term. It has subgenres that aren't really addressed. Like I said, you got true crime comedy, serious true crime, conversational true crime, unsolved true crime, white collar crime.

Rice gave a similar definition:

I think of anything from white collar crime to murder to the serial killers. To the guts and the blood, all that stuff. Missing people cases. Things like that. So my first thought, my mind doesn’t just immediately go to that salacious murder story. True crime is white collar crime as well... I guess for most people, when they think true crime, they think you know, murder and things like that, and the salacious stories.

Other participants described their own desire to subvert or redefine true crime storytelling within the podcast population. Delia said:

True crime can mean a lot of different things. To me it means not only telling a compelling story...but also explains the “system” the person I’m reporting has to navigate. We’re all guilty of it—we don’t understand certain systems (i.e., healthcare, judicial, legal, etc.) until we need to, but we fund these various systems with our tax dollars and have to use them at one point or another, or have people close to us who do.

Fuller described wanting to be the introduction to true crime podcasts for people unfamiliar or reticent about the medium. “I want to be that *Serial* for new listeners,” he said. “I want to expose people to podcasts using my podcast. I think that’s the way to grow the medium and to grow the space.” Both Fuller and Brantley mentioned the evolution of true crime’s ability to tell the complex stories of complicated, “anti-hero” types of people. Both referenced fictional crime drama *The Sopranos* as a model for their desire to redefine how listeners think about crime stories. Brantley also said that having listeners redefine their relationships to true crime narratives is a goal for him. He said:

We’re exploring...the way that stories get modified and metastasized to serve the purpose of the person telling it. It’s as much about the stories that we tell ourselves and how and why we tell those stories.... I want to pull people in and make them super interested and then turn around and be like, “Why are you super interested in this? What does that say about you? What does it say that we’re all super interested in this, and also that we’ve allowed this thing to go unsolved when it could have been, and it should have been, and what does that say about us?” So, I think we’re trying to do a little bit of that...to upend true crime a little bit.

**Power of Audio Media.** In line with past research (e.g., Brown, 2015; Dimmick et al., 2011; Florini, 2015; MacDougal, 2011; Piper, 2015), over half of participants brought up “intimate and personal” characteristics of audio media that have particular effects on audiences. According to the podcasters, audio affects both the way that audiences react to podcast hosts and their willingness to engage in collective identity and action. They also suggested that audio media have a unique power to transport and persuade listeners. Some of these comments included:

- Rankin: “That made all the difference in the world to be able to bring the listener inside the courtroom where they get to actually hear, you know, hear the witnesses for themselves. It makes a difference when you hear someone instead of just reading it on a blank page. You can hear the inflections in their voice. You can gauge their credibility and it draws you right into the moment.”
- Delia: “Having the sound, hearing the sound of how the detectives speak to her, I mean, she said to me at one point, ‘Think about if I hadn't recorded? Who would have believed me?’ I think she was right. Radio is just—there's a closeness, intimacy in radio that you don't get in any other format.”
- Fuller: “Podcasting allows a very personal connection. You're literally in someone's head, you're in someone's ears. It's exponentially more powerful than the written word for better or worse. Even more so than TV or visuals... Podcast allows you, as you unfold your argument or your story, it allows you to suck the person in, immerse them, and once you have them that's a very powerful connection...the way of how we all used to sit around the campfire and tell stories, that's sort of a modernization of that I think.”

- Brantley: “The great thing I think about podcast are—again, this is coming from someone who spent his first chunk of his professional life writing words that people read to themselves quietly—I think there's something so important and powerful about how passive listening to podcasts is. You know that we can do it anywhere, doing anything else... They're literally piping a voice into our brains, and that we can be doing laundry or driving or anything else.... it's an old medium. We've just found a new delivery mechanism for it.”
- Hunt: “When you can hear the voices of people affected by something, it's night and day from reading it in black and white. And I say that, I mean, I love writing, that's my lifelong passion. But when you're reading a book, usually you have somebody's voice in your head like you sort of dramatize it in your head, right? With the podcast, you don't have to try and figure out what it sounds like. You can hear it, and it's so much more meaningful and moving when you can hear the voices of the people affected... I just think that hearing it from the people you're talking about, it makes a huge difference for the audience understanding an issue.”
- Chaudry: “Podcasts are a fantastic tool for advocacy on any kind of issue. There’s something really intimate for people when they listen to a podcast, having people’s voices in their ears. I do the same thing. I have podcasts I listen to religiously. I’m a big fan for them. I have not met these people, but I feel like I know them, you know what I mean? You can hear people’s personalities, you can hear people’s stories first hand.”

These emerging themes suggest additional areas for research of the true crime population, particularly in boundary and norm formation and the evolution of audio media.

## DISCUSSION

This study sheds light on how these true crime podcasts entities and their producers—some journalistic, some entertainment, some goal-driven, and some hybrids of all three—negotiate and develop their identities and orientations. While some producers start their podcasts with social movement motivations, many develop these through interactions with listeners and relationships with other producers. The interactions and relationships shape the boundaries of the population and allow podcasters to take positions and advocate for causes in ways that are accepted as legitimate and “appropriate” by their peers, constituents, and outside agents.

The findings of this study also bridge theoretical “symmetrical gaps” between organizational ecology and social movement theory. Perhaps most significantly, this study provides evidence that organizations oriented toward maintenance (survival, growth, and success within their niche) make use of “submerged networks” of relationships (Melucci, 1985; McAdam 1999) to shape their organizational identity in much the same way as previous research has shown social movement organizations to do. This study also provides evidence of the ways that relationships—both competitive and commensualistic—affect how producers acquire and utilize resources and become seen as legitimate both within and outside of the population.

The findings of this study offer substantial evidence of the ways that true crime podcast organizations exist and operate from both organizational ecology and social movements theory paradigms, as well as providing examples of other factors at play, such as contention between journalistic and entertainment motivations. The demography, content analysis, and interviews offer triangulated corroboration for how this population has grown, its increasing size and

legitimacy, and the ways that population members understand and interact with changing environmental conditions. The following sections discuss these findings in terms of the concepts of organizational ecology and social movements theories as well as explore other emergent ideas.

### **Niches, Forms, and Boundaries**

Interviews provided evidence of the existence of niches, subniches, and boundaries in the population. Participants described multiple “types” of true crime podcasts, expanding Punnett’s (2018) criteria to include political crimes, white collar and financial crime, terrorism, and exploration of cults in their definitions and recommendations (*Dear Franklin Jones*, a cult-centered podcast, was a favorite of several participants). Some participants, like Brantley, directly stated a desire to subvert or expand how consumers understand true crime media.

Some of these podcasters, like Chaudry, Miller, Hunt, and Morford, described their roles within the true crime podcast community as encouraging the development of similar podcasts and promoting or mentoring newer podcasters. Other participants specifically cited the value of these relationships, describing having been helped along the way by more established podcasters. By playing a mentoring role, these podcasters and others mentioned (like Rebecca Lavoie) help to grow the population, establish boundaries of acceptable behavior and content, confer legitimacy on younger operations, and reduce uncertainty about the form, technique, and technology for would-be entrants to the population. From an organizational ecology standpoint, these network relationships (Dimaggio, 1986) allow for knowledge to be shared throughout the population, strengthening organizations and decreasing liabilities of newness. From a social movement theory orientation, these relationships facilitate the sharing of community resources for larger purposes (Greve et al., 2006).

The importance of these network relationships also supports the conceptualization of these podcasts as pre-organizations in an early stage of community and population growth (Aldrich, 1999; Bryant & Monge, 2008; Katz & Gartner, 1988). In this stage, relationships tend to be more collaborative than competitive as the population negotiates its way from emergence to maintenance of organizational forms and relationships (Aldrich, 1999; Bryant & Monge, 2008). Participants' descriptions of the growing role of more formal, corporatized organizations in the population suggest that true crime podcasting may be entering this next phase of community development.

Participants also discussed the ways that the form and boundaries of true crime podcasts are negotiated. The interviews reveal that the form the podcasts take (e.g., narrative style, case per episode versus series, investigation or storytelling, victim or perpetrator focused, etc.) is often a product of negotiation and reevaluation through communication with listeners, other podcasters, and stakeholders. This is consistent with Polos and colleagues (2002) explanation of organizational form and boundaries as a product of social and cultural construction rather than only niche fit. This is also an example of organizational identity being determined by how the organization is "seen" by its publics as well as how it sees itself (Albert & Whetten, 1985). McAdam (2017) described this as a central role of social movement communities as well, as constituents act to shape the actions of movement leaders and organizations. This negotiation process with listeners, often through social media feedback, also gives podcasters insight into the gratifications that listeners may be seeking (Dimmick, 2003), an important factor both for organizational maintenance through attracting and retaining audiences and for meeting the demands of listeners who identify with movement goals. The interviews also support Florini's

(2015) findings that podcast fan communities tend to overlap with each other, further encouraging podcasters to support the flow of community resources.

Podcasters' definitions also challenged the delineation of journalism and true crime. Punnett draws a distinction between journalism and true crime, writing that true crime is differentiated by telling "moral messages and social truths through entertaining narratives rich in detail and color" (2018, p. 93) and by using "free play" in narration to transport true crime consumers. He contrasts this with structured, just-the-facts reporting. Participants, even those who considered their work to be strictly journalistic, all described their podcasts in almost Punnett's exact terms. They discussed using rich narrative and sharing "social truths" (for example, systemic issues or statistics about victims) and described trying to draw in listeners or be "entertaining" in some way. Rankin, for example, said his podcasting, like his career in journalism, involved "trying to tell a story in an engaging and compelling way." Those who were resistant to the true crime label, like Freemark who preferred "criminal justice reporting," still positioned their work in relation to other true crime products. While many of these podcasts are inarguably journalistic, the findings of this study suggest that journalism podcasts focused on crime narratives are a subniche of true crime rather than a separate organizational form. At the same time, it is also clear that many members of the true crime podcast population are *not* journalism. Participants drew clear distinctions in that regard and offered multiple examples of ways that other podcasts violate journalistic norms while telling true crime stories.

### **Density, Structural Inertia, and Competition**

Beginning with the emergence of the first identified true crime related podcast in 2005, the population has experienced a pattern of growth with no current evidence of slowing (*Figure 1*). This pattern extends across the subniches of the population, as evidenced by the uptick in

limited-arc podcasts as well as regularly-produced podcasts (*Figure 2*). As the population has grown, other media have recognized this growth and have focused more attention on true crime podcasts as legitimate organizational forms (*Figures 3, 4, and 5*). This is directly in line with organizational ecology's explanation of the relationship between population density and legitimation (e.g., Audia et al., 2006; Weber et al., 2016).

Participants specifically noted the extremely low barriers to entry to the podcast industry. This was repeatedly cited as a major influence on the growth of the population. As more people “discover” podcasts, they may attempt to make their own because the initial investment of time and equipment is so low. This also allows those with a movement-oriented goal, such as bringing to light an injustice in a case in which they have personal investment, to attempt mobilization with few resources. While this niche elasticity can be positive for increasing true crime podcast density, participants also noted that easy entry can decrease quality by allowing anyone to enter regardless of skill or ethics. This suggests the same double-edged sword described by Greve et al. (2006): more founding attempts can increase legitimacy of a population, but at a certain point, may lead to lower acceptance and retention rates for new findings.

Similar to the findings of Sandell (2001) and Greve and colleagues (2006), this study also found that participants viewed population density and legitimacy as important for the social movement orientations of true crime podcasts, mentioning how the growing visibility of true crime podcasts brings more attention to certain cases or causes. Interview participants supported the evidence of growing population density and legitimacy in other ways as well. Participants often referred to true crime podcasts becoming “a thing,” citing the viral acceptance of pioneer podcasts like *Serial* and *S-Town*. Others, like Pacheco, Fuller, and Hunt, described how listeners

supported the growth in density of the population by expanding their awareness and consumption beyond a select few true crime podcasts.

The population analysis seems to cast doubt on one assertion made by several participants—the idea that the true crime podcast “bubble” might be bursting, or that population density has reached a point of over-saturation. These participants mentioned the growth in true crime satire podcasts—like *The Onion’s A Very Fatale Murder* and *Done Disappeared*—as evidence of this. Traditional media outlets have also questioned this possibility, such as a *Guardian* article entitled, “Could a Very Fatal Murder kill off the true-crime podcast?” (Verdier, February 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. Satire as evidence of the maturation of organizational forms has been noted in previous organizational studies, such as the evolution of satirical Mardi Gras krewes as both celebration and subversion of accepted forms (Islam, Zyphur, & Boje, 2008). From the perspective of social movement theory, satire may also represent a budding countermovement or attempt to delegitimize movement goals, similar to the ways that comedic delegitimization frames were used against movements like Occupy Wall Street (Young, 2013).

This study did not find evidence of structural inertia in the population. There may be several reasons for this. First, structural inertia is a product of calcification of structures within established organizations (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Hannan & Freeman, 1977). While these podcasts may be established in terms of the relatively young podcast industry, they are still fairly

new operations (or pre-organizations), suggesting that they may not have had time to calcify or are still in the organization-in-creation stage (Katz & Gartner, 1988; Lowrey, 2012). Secondly, many of the podcasts are operations with few (sometimes only one) staff members. Management hierarchies are not a constraint to change in those situations. Finally, while the lack of routinization and institutionalization of many true crime podcasts may be a liability in stable environments (Lowrey, 2012 & 2017; Singh & Lumsden, 1990) in the constantly evolving landscape of digital media, remaining nimble is advantageous to podcast operations, which may further discourage processes that lead to inertia.

This study also reveals the way that population members conceptualize competition. On one hand, some podcasters see their products as unique and not easily substituted. On the other hand, some participants suggested that true crime podcasts are almost interchangeable, or “functional alternatives” (Dimmick et al., 2011) for each other. Perhaps because most true crime consumers have voracious appetites for these podcasts (as Fuller said) and often discover new podcasts through other podcasts, producers described competition within the industry as more collaborative than competitive. These findings support Berry’s (2006) description of the emerging podcast population as non-hierarchical and connected through conversations among producers and between producers and consumers. Participants also offered evidence of formal ties among podcast organizations, another factor that may lead to less contentious competitive relationships and lower mortalities (Amburgey & Rao, 1996). Again, these commensualistic relationships may also be a sign of a population in the early phase of community development (Bryant & Monge, 2008). In addition to illustrating the kinds of competition associated with organizational ecology, these relationships fit with resource mobilization theory’s conceptualization of competition in social movement sectors (McCarthy & Zald, 2002). From a

dual perspective, the ability of listeners to participate in non-exclusionary membership as fans or constituents of these podcasts also lessens the effects of competition on podcast operations (Sandell, 2001). Participants did describe seeing evidence of more intense competition among other podcasters, particularly those they viewed as “norm violators.” It is possible that these other podcasts are more oriented toward building audience and revenue than the podcasters interviewed or have less investment or interest in building community relationships.

### **Resource Partitioning, Speciation, and Isomorphism**

The descriptions of growth of subniches within the true crime podcast population after *Serial* offer evidence of resource partitioning and speciation. Podcasters cited listeners as a resource and described “different kinds of styles for different kinds of listeners.” From the ecological view of listeners, the division of “type” of listener by “type” of podcast illustrated both a division of resources and niche gratifications (Carroll, 1985; Carroll et al., 2002; Dimmick, 2003; Greve et al., 2006). Several participants also described this partitioning in terms of their competition, such as Zappala’s statement that “90% of true crime is not a competitor” because of the division of listener resources based on gratifications.

The emergence of specialist true crime podcasts illustrates speciation within the population (Weber, 2017). Participants described their podcasts in ways that suggest that most view their podcasts as specialist rather than generalist organizations. All of the participants’ podcasts emerged post-*Serial* season one (arguably, one of the clearest generalists in the population) in order to exploit the growing true crime podcast fan base (resource) and to take advantage of the exploding podcast industry. This is in line with Mezias and Mezias’s (2000) description of the emergence of specialist organizations. Participants also described a desire to differentiate themselves from their competition, focusing on identification as “experts.” Hunt

said this explicitly: “We’re not just some people off the street that decided that they wanted to do this for the sake of doing it.” Podcasters’ positioning themselves in this way as “expert specialists,” for example, by promoting their credentials in law or investigation, may help increase their podcasts’ legitimacy. Legitimacy may also be increased by listeners identifying with particular specialist “brands” (Carroll & Swaminathan, 2000), like *Truth & Justice*’s fan “T&J Army” or *My Favorite Murder*’s “murderinos.”

Participants also offered substantial evidence of isomorphism and mimicry across true crime podcasts. Most participants pointed to attempting to mimic *Serial* in at least some way and described using established or successful podcasts as examples of how to craft their own. Some described attempting to increase legitimacy by following the patterns of established podcasts (Deepphouse & Suchman, 2008; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Weber et al., 2016), or feeling honored by comparison to podcasts like *Serial* and *In the Dark*. Isomorphism was also evident in the content analysis, as media stories compared true crime podcasts to one another in many of the analyzed stories. At the same time, participants also described ways in which their podcasts exhibit heterogeneity. This heterogeneity was most often discussed in terms of brand differentiation. Heterogeneity in this case may be an example of a still-new population discovering the optimal forms to insure retention within the population (Aldrich & Pfeffer, 1976; Baum, 2000; Carroll, 1984; Dimmick, 2003; Hannan & Freeman, 1977; Lowrey, 2012; Stinchcombe, 1965), or evidence of ongoing speciation (Carroll, 1985; Weber, 2017). Participants also described heterogeneity in terms of movement orientations, such as Chaudry’s assertion that her show is unique for its specific, stated goal of correcting wrongful conviction cases. Others described their podcasts as similar to other podcasts, but different from other forms of “traditional” true crime media. This seems closely related to Greve et al.’s (2006) findings that

diversity within goal-oriented populations may be a result of acting in opposition to dominant forms as a type of movement orientation or collective identity. Challenging dominant media traditions may also be evidence of democratic media action, particularly for those podcasters who utilize crowdsourcing and other horizontal forms of collective action (Carroll & Hackett, 2006).

### **Legitimacy and Organizational Identity**

The content analysis and interviews shed light on the way legitimacy has developed in the true crime podcast population. As density increased, so did media mentions of true crime podcasts, and the majority of those mentions assumed general public knowledge of true crime podcasts as “a thing,”—something that is widely recognized and understood or even taken-for-granted-- suggesting high cognitive legitimacy of the form. Participants noted an increase in popular knowledge of true crime podcasts as well, pointing to multiple recent pop culture references, like movies and Saturday Night Live. 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 participants’ observations of exponential growth in the podcast audience. These environmental factors (in addition to internal population factors, like density) are also in line with previous research on the development of legitimacy in populations in the emergence stage of community development (Bryant & Monge, 2008).

Participants described legitimacy in ecology terms, offering examples of how podcasts becoming “a thing” through increased density and attention was good for the sustainability of the

population. Freemark specifically cited the growth of density in true crime podcasts as an important factor in the acceptance of the form. *Serial* was noted as important for both cognitive and normative legitimacy. From a cognitive legitimacy standpoint, *Serial's* viral success brought new listeners to the podcast medium, either through hearing it promoted on NPR and *This American Life*, or through social and popular media discussion. Chaudry particularly mentioned this, noting that *Serial* was her own introduction to podcasts. She, and others, also mentioned the importance of *Serial* for normative legitimacy, as it led to a mainstreaming of not only the often-maligned true crime genre, but also of wrongful conviction narratives. This mainstreaming of a criminal justice issue also offered evidence of the legitimacy of growing awareness of social movement orientations for true crime.

The content analysis and interviews also addressed the development of normative legitimacy in terms of the “appropriateness” of true crime as both a revenue producing media product and a driver of social movement goals. They included examples of how this “appropriateness” is negotiated among podcasters, stakeholders, and listeners. Participants, like Pacheco, noted that they believe listeners are able to discern between “good” and “bad” podcast content, and can be trusted to evaluate the value of sources as “legitimate” or “illegitimate.” Podcasters also described how stakeholders like law enforcement and families have deemed true crime podcasts legitimate by being willing to share resources or partner on cases. Evidence of conference of legitimacy by outside agents (e.g., podcasts receiving the Silver Gavel or Peabody awards) as well as cooption of legitimacy through establishing formal and informal relationships with respected entities was also found. However, instances of low normative legitimacy for true crime podcasts were also described, such as Apple and other podcast rankers’ reluctance to add a “True Crime” category. It is also possible that perceptions of low legitimacy of true crime

podcasts is related to the populations stage of development, as legitimacy grows as communities “come of age” and move from emergence to maintenance (Bryant & Monge, 2008).

Legitimacy was also discussed in terms of appropriate identities for true crime podcast organizations. Participants described tension between competing goals and identities. For some, this tension is between balancing journalism and entertainment. They described wanting to be factual and professional while still attracting and retaining listeners. This suggests an ecological orientation toward organizational maintenance. Others described a balance between advocacy for criminal justice related goals, like bringing awareness to systemic mishandling of sexual assault cases, with journalistic ethics. Several specifically mentioned walking a line between their own bias and telling a balanced story. For these journalistically oriented participants, legitimacy seems to be a push and pull between their identity as journalists (e.g., working with the *Cincinnati Enquirer*) and their identification with criminal justice advocacy. Other tensions were present as well, such as how to balance humor and gravity or finding the line between providing valuable detail and veering into the grotesquely graphic. This suggests that in addition to organizational maintenance and movement orientations, there are identity-oriented motivations and tensions at work in the true crime podcast population. These tensions are constantly negotiated by participants, stakeholders, and publics, supporting the concept that organizational identity is a product of communicative social construction processes (Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Melucci, 1985; Weber, 2017).

### **Movement Orientation, Collective Identity, and Movement Processes**

The interviews offered mixed support for the conceptualization of true crime podcasts as social movement agents or mobilizing structures. While the participants in this study all described orientations toward furthering “justice” in relation to true crime narratives, they were

clear in noting that not all true crime podcasts share any such motivation. The strength of this justice orientation and its links to a social movement around criminal justice reform also differed among participants.

The podcasters interviewed expressed an identity as (most often, life-long) true crime fans. For many, this fandom led to interest in particular cases. For others, personal connections involved pulled them into a case. Some participants described how individual cases led them to become advocates for systemic issues, like child victims or more thorough investigation of rape cases. A desire for “justice,” whether through telling a victim’s story or bringing attention to a systemic problem, often led podcasters to feel an obligation to uncovering “truth” in the service of justice, broadly.

For podcasters who were also journalists, there seems to be a fine line between a journalistic orientation toward the basic principles of fact-finding and information sharing as a good in itself, and the desire to bring about change through sharing those facts. Participants reported wrestling with journalistic ethics and their own biases. They were divided in how they justified their positions, with some falling firmly on the side of reporting without advocating broadly, while others clearly stated advocacy motivations. Some, like Fuller, cautioned that while advocacy could be ethical to a point, becoming too close to stories could become detrimental both to advocacy causes and their own credibility.

The importance of identity as part of a social change movement oriented toward criminal justice reform is evident in the way some podcasters spoke about themselves. They used words like “passion” to describe their podcasts and cited mobilizing emotions (McAdam, 2017) growing from their personal connections to a cause. Even those participants who considered themselves to be most oriented toward traditional journalism rather than advocacy expressed the

desire to tell a story in a way that would lead listeners to feel a connection or call to action around an issue. This suggests the classical social movement paradigm which considers awareness and symbolic challenges to systemic norms “victories” (Eder, 1985; Melucci, 1985 & 1995). Participants’ expression of a commitment to justice is also in line with McAdam (1999 & 2017) and Cohen’s (1985) motivating factors for collective action in both political process model and classically oriented social movement theory paradigms. In addition, participants expressed a sense of efficacy that their work could have tangible effects, nearly all offering, as Miller phrased it, “proof of concept” that their methods work. This sense of efficacy, commitment to justice (or, recognition of injustice), and politicized identity are strong predictors of effective social movements in the social identity model of collective action (Van Zomeren et al., 2008) as well as the political process model (McAdam, 1999; McAdam et al., 1996; Oberschall, 1973; Rule & Tilly, 1975; Tilly, 1978), further supporting that at least some of these true crime podcasts and their listeners are acting more as social movement agents and less as journalists or entertainers.

Whether participants’ desire to create collective awareness of criminal justice issues regardless of formal attachment to a social movement sector represents a movement orientation depends largely on the social movement theory paradigm through which it is interpreted. As mentioned above, the classical approach conceptualizes the creation of collective awareness and identity as a type of movement on its own, regardless of the mode or organization of collective action that follows. It is clear from participants’ descriptions of the growing interest in criminal justice oriented true crime media, celebrity involvement, and popularity of criminal justice-oriented documentaries, as well as the increasingly bi-partisan support for criminal justice reform (Fandos, December 18, 2018), that there is some kind of growing criminal justice social

movement in the U.S., from the standpoint of social movements as collective identity. How much credit for mobilizing that movement can be given to these true crime podcasts, however, is debatable.

From a resource mobilization or political process perspective, the work of goal-oriented podcasts can be conceptualized as *popular contention*, or action by non- or newly-institutionalized forms (McAdam et al., 2003). Resource mobilization also offers a framework for possibly explaining how different podcasters fit into a social movement framework. Two of its four assumptions require the spread of knowledge about a movement and the friendliness of mass media toward covering the movement (McCarthy & Zald, 1979 & 2002). While some of the journalists-podcasters may not be explicitly movement actors themselves, they may provide the “friendly mass media” environment needed for more directly involved actors to thrive.

Recent scholarship has suggested that social movement theory frameworks like resource mobilization and the political process model can lead to erroneously conflating movement organizations with the movement itself (Johnston, 2014). Johnston describes movements as “big, change oriented ideas” that unify various separate organizations and groups. It is networks of loosely connected and broadly defined agents that form a social movement, and no one organized, elite contender is required. Diversity of forms under the umbrella of those “big ideas” may represent “symbolic outputs” for a movement. These “symbolic outputs” are especially relevant for populations of movement-oriented media organizations (Greve et al., 2006; Hannan, 1988). Interviews with podcasters point to this diversity, with some explicitly describing their podcasts as social change organizations, while others described their work as more loosely tied to “big ideas” like justice for victims, police accountability, and spreading knowledge about systemic criminal justice issues. Some participants, like Rice and Bratley, offered examples that

echoed Carroll and Hackett's assertion that within social movements, "alternative media are not simply a political instrument but a collective good in themselves" (2006, p. 88.). Participants' descriptions of creating collective identity by spreading awareness also reflects the classical conceptualization of modern social-movement mobilization: "Occasions for identification have to be created—the public sphere has to be 'made' (Habermas, 1989, p. 201).

### **Resource Mobilization**

Participants described resources in terms of physical, knowledge, and symbolic resources. Economic factors were mentioned, particularly for the more in-depth, investigative journalism-oriented podcasts like *In the Dark*. More often, participants described time and technical support, rather than money, as their biggest resource challenges. The relational networks of these podcasters were often used to fill these gaps, such as partnering with a more experienced podcaster for editing or promotion support. While advertising was discussed, it seems to be a still largely-untapped resource for these podcasters. Participants described balancing the ethics of making a profit through stories of others' suffering, but also pointed to the small number of advertisers investing in podcasts. This lack of advertising support may be indicative of low legitimacy, either from advertisers not recognizing the power of the podcast industry (cognitive) or of being uncomfortable associating with the subject matter (normative). Participants also suggested that the lack of advertising resources may also be symptomatic of their lack of business knowledge—podcasters enter the population with little or no idea how to monetize.

Symbolic resources were described in terms of access or privilege by several participants. Rankin noted that his history with court officials allowed him access that other podcasters (and journalists) do not have. Brantley described societal privilege as a symbolic resource for his

podcast, as his demographic identity helped him to gain access and trust from people who had previously been unwilling to cooperate, or who could be literally dangerous to another kind of podcaster. While Chaudry did not mention it in the interview, she has publicly discussed a lack of this kind of symbolic resource as a detriment to her podcast (Chaudry et al, 2015). She has described how, as a Muslim woman of color, she has been unable or felt unsafe entering the communities involved in some cases, leading her to lean on co-hosts to take on those tasks. This conceptualization of privilege as a symbolic resource has been noted in social movements literature as an important component of rational movement mobilization, as at least some members must have the symbolic capital to “take risks” in order to accomplish movement goals (Olson, 1968; Jenkins, 1985).

The positioning of listeners as resources by participants offers support for both organizational maintenance and social movement mobilization orientations. Interviewees described listeners in terms of their contributions to knowledge and boundary negotiation, as well as for supplying information about cases. Generally, the participants in this study downplayed the idea of listeners as a commodity, noting that they were not focused on metrics or download numbers beyond a general sense of curiosity about geographics. Instead, participants tended to discuss listeners from a social movement-oriented view. In these descriptions, listeners are described as compatriots or constituents, suggesting that podcasters see listeners in the way Gamson (1990) defined movement members—as collective actors whose interests affect the decision-making process. Participants who describe themselves as part of a social change movement, for example, Chaudry, describe their listeners as similarly committed. This suggests that these podcasters may be viewing social change through the classical approach paradigm of social movements, that is, as Buechler put it, their “central process is the social construction of a

collective identity that is symbolically meaningful to participants” (1993, p. 228). In the classical view, and as some participants described, the creation of awareness and identity is both a goal and an outcome. From this perspective, when listeners become aware and then voluntarily associate with discussion about systemic issues, that identity is itself a kind of symbolic action (Cohen, 1985; Diani, 2013). Conversely, this *politicized* identity (Van Zomeren et al., 2008) also develops as a result of action, such as the influx of new supporters *Undisclosed* received after its efforts helped lead to new appeals in the Syed case.

### **Institutionalization and Professionalism**

Additionally, the value of knowledge resources was described by the participants, and many of these participants cited knowledge acquired from other industries, like law and journalism. Most described self-teaching or informal network relationships as their introduction to how to “do podcasting.” From an ecological standpoint, this points to the current lack of formal institutions and organizations for learning podcasting, especially when compared to an industry like journalism. Formal, or “ancillary” organizations within an industry contribute to the spread of innovations, the development of organizational norms, and the increase of legitimacy of organizational forms (Aldrich & Ruef, 2007; Lowrey, 2012; Lowrey, Sherrill, & Broussard, 2019) However, as mentioned by several participants, organizations focused on podcasting (and true crime podcasts) are beginning to emerge, possibly signaling a growing institutionalization of the population. At this stage, most of the formal organization seems to be in the form of conventions (e.g., Pod X, Crime Con, Chicago True Crime Podcast Festival) or panels and lectures at other media conferences (e.g., SXSW, Broadcast Educators Convention/National Broadcasters Association), though media schools are increasingly focusing on adding podcasting courses or labs (Banville, Aug. 31, 2015; NYU Journalism, 2019). The effects of institutions on

organizational practice has also been tied to the development of norms for social movement sectors (e.g., Lounsbury, 2001), adding another rationalization for the development of formalized knowledge organizations related to the population.

### **Other Concepts and Emerging Themes**

Interviews and the population and content analysis also shed light on other factors at work in the true crime podcast population. Many interview participants, as well as previous popular and academic literature, described *Serial* as either a pioneer or a disruptor in the emerging true crime podcast population (e.g., Boling & Hull, 2018; Chaudry, 2016). However, other interview participants as well as the population analysis suggest a more complicated set of environmental factors at work. The first of these factors is advances in streaming technology, a kind of resource. In 2005, podcast subscriptions were first added to the iTunes interface, leading to the first podcast boom (Patel, September 24, 2018), though, as one *Slate* writer said, podcasting was still “the nichiest of niche media” (Bowers, December 30, 2005). For the next several years, podcasting technology stagnated, and with it, the growth of true crime podcasts (TABLE 1). 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, February 10, 2015). Morford mentioned this as what he sees as the most important moment for population growth, and the demography confirms that population density began to rise quickly around this time (FIGURE 1). 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, February 2, 2018). These changes are likely as responsible for the explosion of population growth in late 2014 as any “*Serial*-effect.” The importance of these changes was suggested by Fuller, as well as in prior literature (e.g., Bottomley, 2015). In

June 2018, Google introduced its first native podcast app for Android (Tech News, June 30, 2018). While it is too early to say for certain, it is likely that the introduction of the Android platform has had positive effects on population growth as well. These technological developments have been shown to be important factors in the stage development of populations in previous research (e.g., Bryant & Monge, 2008), again suggesting that the true crime podcast population is moving from the emergence to maintenance stage.

Participants' interviews compared to the population analysis and timeline of podcast technology developments suggest that true crime podcasts did not inexplicably become "suddenly sexy." From an ecological standpoint, environmental disruptions in the form of technological innovations (Weber, 2017) was an important factor that allowed for speciation processes to work very quickly. While *Serial* was unquestionably a viral phenomenon and an inspiration for the interview participants, it emerged as part of the evolutionary process of the population, and new forms developed to compete with it, existing older podcasts, and one another.

Another disruption mentioned by interview participants was the emergence of the newspaper-produced true crime podcast. This form comprises the bulk of the limited-arc series podcasts. Rankin and Hunt's podcasts are largely credited with the introduction of this form, but again, the population analysis offers another perspective on this disruption. Rankin's *Breakdown* in 2015 marked the emergence of this form in podcasting's second decade, but it was, in contrast to the interviewees' assertions, *not* the first of its kind. In 2006, the *Lancaster New Era* produced a six-part podcast series on an Amish school house shooting called *Lost Angels*. While the series and its associated news stories won the 2007 Eugene S. Pulliam National Journalism Writing Award, the podcast received very little other attention, and the paper converted the podcast into a

book at the request of readers (LancasterOnline, January 24, 2007; 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” (Iskold, August 28, 2007). By the time Rankin and Hunt’s podcasts emerged nearly a decade later, conditions were ripe for new forms to emerge. From a social movement theory perspective, the difference in distribution and reception of *Lost Angels* in 2006 and *Accused* in 2016 also illustrates the importance of the correct mix of symbolic political and environmental opportunities (McAdam, 1999) for the growth of movement sectors.

Other participants described the growth of podcast networks as an emerging disruption. The often corporately produced, mostly generalist true crime podcasts coming out of these networks are an increasingly large part of the population. As of the first week of March 2019, 19 of the 33 true crime podcasts on the Apple iTunes Top 100 belonged to one of these networks (e.g., Wondery, Parcast, Gimlet; iTunes Chart, March 7, 2019). Participants suggested that the growing power of these networks may begin to increasingly affect the choices made by podcasters, as well as podcasts’ ability to advertise and monetize. An example of this phenomenon played out with a very public severing of ties between the Wondery Network and one of its top true crime podcasters. This podcaster, one of those described by participants as a negative influence and norm violator within the true crime podcast community, has a well-documented history of negative social media behavior, including posting violent or crude memes, doxing challengers, and sending inappropriate messages to female fans (Society for the re-education of Sword and Scale fans [closed Facebook group], 2018), in addition to producing graphicly violent podcast content. In March 2019, Wondery Media tweeted that they would no

longer carry the podcast on their network (WonderyMedia [Twitter post], March 9, 2019). This announcement came after a boycott of other Wondery podcasts by fans. Prominent podcasters (including several interviewed for this study) led a sustained social media campaign to pressure Wondery as well, including calls to drop the offending podcaster by other Wondery hosts.

This anecdote offers a real-world example of the way true crime podcasters and their fans negotiate and police the boundaries of the acceptable behavior in the population. The day after the Wondery decision, Rebecca Lavoie (a prominent podcaster mentioned by several of the interview participants) wrote a Facebook post describing why she had been so outspoken. Lavoie called the removed-podcaster “a real liability to his partners and to our industry” and wrote:

[He] has been recently leveraging his platforms much as certain fake-news fringe broadcasters have, deliberately spreading misinformation, harassing and bullying those who express counter-opinions, and then activating his most rabid fans to do the same, as well as to harass people online and in the real world (Lavoie [Facebook post], March 10, 2019).

While this is only one example in a vast population of true crime podcasts, it provides a snap-shot of population members with clear ideas about what is “appropriate” behavior and content, as well as the collective identity and buy-in of fans of these podcasts and podcasters. Wondery’s actions also offer a first-glance at what kind of negotiations the emerging podcast networks may have to undertake and what kind of power they may have.

### **Limitations**

While this study offers a snapshot into the dueling motivations of a cross section of the true crime podcast population, there are various limitations to these findings. The first is the representation of a limited sub-niche of true crime podcasts. The podcasts in this study were

chosen specifically for their ties to criminal justice reform advocacy, or through referrals to podcasters in those relational networks. This excludes many of the sub-genres of true crime podcasts that may have weak or no ties to advocacy goals.

The sample also excludes perhaps the most popular sub-niche of true crime podcast, true crime comedy (e.g., bigger-than-*Serial*-sensation *My Favorite Murder*). There are none of the gore-centric podcasts in this sample, nor any of the emerging crop of corporate-produced podcasts. Additionally, the inclusion of different types of true crime podcasts may have offered more clear evidence of generalists and specialists in the population.

Another emerging form of true crime podcast excluded from this study is the law enforcement-perspective podcast. Podcasters from this sub-niche were contacted for the interviews but did not respond to requests. Some of the earliest podcasts discovered in the demography, like those produced by the FBI, fall into this category. Additionally, there are podcasts produced by investigators (*Gone at 21*), military prosecutors (*Military Justice*), and retired police officers (*Slim Turkey*). These podcasts (there are many more) offer different perspectives from those produced by civilians and may have different conceptualizations of norms, boundaries, and goals.

Podcasts that may represent “countermovements” were also not included in this analysis. Again, podcasters were contacted, but did not respond to requests. These podcasts range from those created to push back against advocacy-focused true crime (e.g., *Rebutting a Murderer*) and those who specifically describe themselves as intentionally violating the norms or “political correctness” expected from other true crime podcasts (e.g., the above-mentioned *Sword & Scale*; hyper-gory *Monstruo*). It is likely that producers of these podcasts would conceptualize their roles and listener gratifications in very different ways than those expressed by study participants.

The population analysis is also somewhat limited. While it was conducted thoroughly, including re-searching with multiple terms and at additional time periods, it is not possible 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 very early in the analyzed period and failed quickly are still undiscovered.

There is also the semantic question of whether it is accurate to conceptualize these podcasts as “organizations” from an organizational ecology standpoint, but are rather “pre-organizations” (Katz & 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*, *Hollywood and Crime*, *Crimes of Passion*, and *Cults* are all produced by the same company, Parcast. A demography of the population might involve operationalizing production companies as the unit of analysis rather than individual podcasts. It is possible that the re-operationalized population might offer more evidence of resource partitioning and speciation and alter the density calculation.

The content analysis is also limited due to the selection of the three media outlets. These outlets (the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, the *Washington Post*) were selected to measure cognitive and normative legitimacy because of their broad appeal. However, an argument can 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.

This analysis focuses on these podcast operations as organizations, both from the ecological and movement orientation. Because of that focus, it ignores one of the largest criticisms of true crime—the centering of overwhelming White and privileged voices and victims. While this is not intended to be a critical-cultural study, it seems irresponsible not to mention this limitation. The participants in this study are overwhelmingly White, and most are highly educated (e.g., lawyers, professors, journalism professionals). While some of their advocacy does lend itself to less privileged groups—e.g., wrongly-convicted men of color—much of their work, and true crime in general, falls into the trap colloquially called “missing white woman syndrome” (Demby, April 13, 2017). Sommers (2016) specifically looked at the overrepresentation of White, female missing person cases in news media, and other scholars have examined how media misrepresent people of color as both victims and perpetrators (e.g., Crichlow & Lauricella, 2018; Dixon & Linz, 2000; Gilliam, Iyengar, Simon, Wright, 1996). While some podcasters have tried to specifically address this disparity (McHugh, August 31, 2017), it seems important for both producers and scholars to continue to challenge these stereotypical crime narratives, particularly while the clearance rates for U.S. homicides (among other crimes) remain racially disparate.<sup>4</sup> Other scholars have described the unique ability of true crime podcasts to amplify marginalized voices (Doane et al., 2017; Tiffe & Hoffman, 2017), but more work is needed to understand who this population may actually be serving and which voices are truly being amplified.

Finally, this study is largely qualitative, and the findings are limited by the lens of the researcher. While all possible steps were taken to insure validity and trustworthiness, personal

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<sup>4</sup> According to the Murder Accountability Project (2018), murders of White women are most likely to be solved (79.37 %), while those of Black men are least likely to be solved (65.79%). Murders of Black women and White men each have a 73% clearance rate. Additionally, it is estimated that nearly half of all homicides of Native Americans are not accurately reported to federal agencies.

influences shape the human instrument. An explanation of the way the researcher interrogated her own positions is included in Appendix H-*Reflexivity*. While this is not a weakness, as qualitative data provides richness and context unattainable by quantitative analysis, it is necessarily limited in scope. Additional research (from multiple methodological lenses) is necessary to fully explore the complexities of this phenomenon.

## CONCLUSIONS

This study sought to understand how true crime podcast operations act within organizational ecology and social movement theory paradigms, as well as to better understand the motivations of podcast producers and to expand theory, or fill “symmetrical gaps.” The findings of this study support a dual-orientation for this population and provide evidence that identity—both organizational and collective—is an important factor for the success of both maintenance and social-change oriented organizations.

True crime podcast organizations operate in many ways as maintenance-oriented organizations, as might be expected from an organizational ecology standpoint. The true crime podcast population displays characteristics of density, niches, and boundaries. Density and legitimacy show evidence of being directly related to the growth of one another. Interview participants described niches and sub-niches and offered examples of the ways organizations negotiate their fit with those niches. There is evidence of isomorphism in the population, as well as resource partitioning and disruptions leading to speciation. Listeners were described both as a commodity to be obtained to maintain the organization and as sources of knowledge and collective identity.

From a social movement theory perspective, at least some members of the true crime podcast population operate from a movement orientation. They depend on collective identity and seek to grow their constituency through spreading awareness of systemic issues among their listeners. While these podcasts do not seem to belong to a single defined movement sector as McCarthy and Zald (1979 & 2002) and resource mobilization theory would define, many of

them do exhibit an orientation toward correcting or spreading awareness of criminal justice issues that fall within a larger movement orientation (Buechler, 1993; Johnston, 2014; Melucci, 1985). They share community resources, and listeners have non-exclusionary membership with multiple podcast fan/constituent identities (Greve et al., 2006; Sandell, 2001). These factors suggest that identity and political process paradigms of social movement theory offer better theoretical explanations for true crime podcasts' social-movement orientations than do resource mobilization approaches.

This study also sought to expand the theoretical synthesis between organizational ecology and social movements theory. Participants offered multiples examples of both listeners and relational networks working to shape organizational boundaries through communication and negotiation. This bi-directional boundary work provides more support for Polos et al. (2002) and Gioia et al.'s (2002) conceptualization of audiences' role in defining organizations and their niches and niche boundaries. These findings are also evidence that the "submerged networks" of relationships observed in social movement organizations (Melucci, 1985; McAdam, 1999) can also be at work in maintenance organizations, helping to fill one of the "gaps" of organizational ecology, the formation of identity through intrapopulation network relationships. These network relationships help new entrants to the population understand norms and boundaries, attract listeners, and become identified as legitimate members of the community. This study also gives further support to Greve et al. (2006) and Sandell's (2001) explorations of dual-oriented populations. True crime podcasters' entrepreneurial attempts are often encouraged by a personal goal orientation, such as a desire to help in a particular case combined with a sense of efficacy, suggesting that personal goal orientation and identity goals have a place in the explanation for niche emergence and development. Participants' explanations for the explosion of true crime

podcasting as a legitimate form and population with rapidly increasing density offer evidence of widespread identity with and belief in the effectiveness of these podcasts. While it is just beginning to emerge, the institutionalization of true crime podcasts (and podcasts in general) may also hint at support for McCarthy & Zald's (2002) suggestion that institutionalization and professionalization occur in social movement industries similarly to the way they occur in other industries.

Finally, this study found that multiple motivations beyond maintenance and social movements may be at work for true crime podcast producers. These producers expressed journalistic orientations toward sharing facts and information and described a desire to subvert the true crime genre. The interviews in this study suggest that current delineations of both journalism and true crime may be too limiting and that new digital forms and communities, like those of true crime podcasts, may require scholars to use new lenses for exploration and interpretation.

### **Future Research**

The findings and limitations of this study, as well as the remaining lack of general understanding of podcasts as media forms, 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 available resource at the researcher's disposal, there may be additional ways of arriving at an even more thorough and meaningful demography. For example, there are search engines that use API (a way of creating applications to access specific operating system or search criterion) that might be used to create podcast-specific search engines. One search API, called the Digital Podcast Search Service, currently has limited utility, but might be of use if its creators continue to upgrade its capabilities. Another possibility might

be creating a crowd-sourced database, similar to Hendricks (2018) and sharing it to true crime podcast fan community sites to harness the knowledge of thousands of true crime consumers.

Another direction for future research is continued exploration of the processes of organizational identity negotiation through relational networks. This study supports that organizations use this negotiation to form their identities as maintenance organizations as well as movement organizations, and continued research may strengthen this area of organizational ecology. A network analysis of these podcast organizations may be useful for exploring this phenomenon. The role of institutionalization for movement-oriented organizations also deserves more exploration. As previous scholars and this study have suggested, it appears likely that organizations with movement orientations may move toward institutionalization as the population matures. The emergence of conventions and conferences, as well as training programs, offers a starting point for evaluating the roles that these ancillary organizations may play in spreading innovations and norms within this population.

This study also raises questions about how journalistic norms and ethics are negotiated as traditional journalism intersects with entertainment-oriented media. How do journalists, particularly those telling true crime narratives, remain true to journalistic principles while engaging in the “free play” and stylistic choices expected by audiences in true crime media? Additional research into how journalists negotiate these choices, as well as what successful navigation looks like seems valuable, particularly as a way for the journalism field to retain and attract digital natives who may not engage with traditional journalism.

Continuing study of true crime podcasts should also include a wider range of types and sub-types of true crime. The motivations and orientations of producers may be vastly different across the population, and an expanded sample may offer more insight. Shifting the focus from

producers to listeners may also provide more knowledge of audience gratifications, including where those gratifications overlap and diverge. A better understanding of podcast audiences may also help producers and advertisers determine target markets, thus expanding the opportunities for monetization and resource mobilization for this media format.

Finally, the podcast community, true crime as well as other genres of podcasts, offer communication researchers a valuable opportunity to explore the concept of *listenability*. While communication scholars have identified scales for other mediators of entertainment effects, such as *watchability*, there is still no accepted scale for listenability. This seems an odd exclusion, particularly since audio is one of the oldest mass media platforms. Podcasts offer researchers a vast landscape of heterogenous products with a massive audience and various levels of popularity and success. By comparing the styles, formats, content, and listener feedback of these thousands of media products, media scholars may be able to fill this enduring gap in the communication literature.

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## APPENDIX

### Appendix A-True Crime Podcasts December 14, 2005-November 28, 2019

12/26/1975  
#fsck 'em all!  
(Sometimes) Dead is Better  
...These Are Their Stories: The Law and Order Podcast  
100: 1 the crack legacy  
107 degrees Maura Murray  
10-96 Crime Chicks  
13 O'Clock  
13: The search for leigh Occhi  
16 Shots  
18 Days  
2 Girls, 1 Scaredy Cat  
30 for 30  
36 Times  
48 Hours  
5 Live Investigates  
5 Roses  
70 Million  
74 seconds  
911 Florida Raw Audio  
911 Moms Pod  
99% Chance of Wine and Murder  
A Date with Dateline  
A Day with Crime  
A Killing in the Cape  
A Mother of a Murder  
A Murder of Crows  
A Murder on Orchard Street  
A Murder on the Space Coast  
A Slice of True Crime  
A Story of Innocence  
A Tale Most Foul  
Accused  
Actual Innocence  
Adventures in Murderland Podcast  
Affirmative Murder  
Africa Investigates  
Aftermath  
Aider and Abettor Podcast  
Alibi  
All Aussie Mystery Hour Podcast  
All Crime No Cattle  
All Killa No Filla  
All Rise Podcast  
All Things Awful  
Already Gone  
Ambushed  
American Crime Story After Show  
American Crime Story Recap Rewind  
American Crimecast  
American Greed  
American Grift  
American Hysteria  
American Scandal  
America's Missing podcast  
AMICI: Third branch Info & Insight  
And That's Why We Drink  
Another Not Guilty  
Another True Crime Podcast  
Anslinger: The Untold Cannabis Conspiracy  
Antiquitas  
AntiSocial Murder Club  
Anyways, How's Your Sex Life?  
Archangels of Justice

Architects of Justice	Booze with the Hound
As the Key Turns	Boushie
Ask a Doc-Ask a Cop: Crisis Intervention Team Minutes	Boevrville
Astonishing Legends	Box of Oddities
Atlanta Monster	Breakdown
Atrocity	Breathless
Australian True Crime	Brew Crime
Bad to the Bone	Bribe, Swindle, or Steal
Bag Man	Broke Busted & Disgusted
Bailstreet	Broken Harts
Ballarat's Children	Broken Justice
Based on a True Crime	Brutal Ends
Bay Area Mystery club	Bumblebutt Podcast
Bear Brook	Bundyville
Bedtime Stories	Buried
Beer, Blood, and the Bayou	Buried Alive
Behind the Bastards	Buried Truths
Behind true crime	Burner Phone
Believed	California Innocence Project
Best Case Worst Case	California True Crime
Beyond Bizarre True Crime	Caliphate
Beyond Contempt True Crime	Can We Cult
Beyond Prisons	Canada Obscura
Beyond Reasonable Doubt	Canadian True Crime
Beyond the Badge	Cancrime
Beyond the Blood	Carousel Sniper Victim
Bizarre	Carruth
Black Hands	Case Acquaint
Blame	Case Closed, Beers Open
Bless This Mess	Case Identity
Blood & Wine	Case Notes
Blood On the Rocks	Case Remains
Blood Sausage	Case Unsolved
Blood Ties	Casefile
Bloody Murder	Cash Cow Radio
Blunt History	Caskets & Cocktails
Body on the Moor	Caught
Bombfire: Making a Murderer	Chapo
Bone and Sickle	Charm City
Bone Palace Ballet	Chasing Ghosts
Boobs and Boos	Cherry Avenue

Chicago Real Crime Podcast  
 Chilluminati  
 Chime In  
 Christian Underhistory  
 Christina Grimmie: The Murder of a Rising Star  
 Civilly Speaking  
 Class A Felons, B-Films, C-Cups  
 Click for Murder  
 Cocaine & Rhinestones  
 Code Severe  
 Coffee & Crime  
 Coffee and Cults  
 Coffee, Crime, and Conspiracies  
 Coir: An Irish True Crime Podcast  
 Cold  
 Cold Blooded Podcast  
 Cold Case Files the podcast  
 Cold Case Murder Mysteries  
 Cold Case Notes from the Goober State Queen  
 Cold Cases  
 Cold Girls  
 Cold Traces  
 Color Me Dead podcast  
 Colored Red  
 Come Sail Away  
 Comeback  
 Conspiracy Theories  
 Convicted  
 Cooking and Crime  
 Corgi Shakedown  
 Coroner talk  
 Corpus Delicti  
 Cosby Unraveled  
 Countdown to Capture  
 Counterclock  
 Court Junkie  
 Cover-up  
 Cracking Open a Cold Case  
 Crawlspace  
 Creep it Real  
 Creep: A True Crime Podcast  
 Creeps over Coffee  
 Creepy Caffeine  
 Creepy Club  
 Criime  
 Crime & Co.  
 Crime & Dine  
 Crime & Forensics  
 Crime & Justice with Ashleigh Banfield  
 Crime & Precedents  
 Crime + Investigation podcast  
 Crime After Crime  
 Crime and Cocktails  
 Crime and Justice News  
 Crime and Mystery  
 Crime and Scandal  
 Crime and Time in the Rocks  
 Crime Bites  
 Crime Blotter  
 Crime by the Bar  
 Crime Crack  
 Crime Crazy  
 Crime Culture  
 Crime Diaries  
 Crime Dolls  
 Crime Historian  
 Crime in Color  
 Crime in Movies  
 Crime in Music  
 Crime in Sports  
 Crime Inc.  
 Crime Junkie  
 Crime on the Mind  
 Crime Over Coffee  
 Crime Quad  
 Crime Redefined  
 Crime Roulette  
 Crime Scene: True crime Stories and Investigations  
 Crime Screen Podcast  
 Crime Smith  
 Crime Stories with Nancy Grace  
 Crime Tales

Crime Writers On  
 Crime&Stuff  
 CrimeQuest  
 Crime-ridden  
 Crimeroom  
 Crimesphere  
 Crimetown  
 Criminal  
 Criminal (in)justice  
 Criminal Behaviorology  
 Criminal Broads  
 Criminal Court Insider  
 Criminal Justice Evolution  
 Criminal Justice Office Hours  
 Criminal Justice Research Podcast-NIJ  
 Criminal Musings  
 Criminal Onions  
 Criminal Record  
 Criminality: A True Crime podcast  
 Criminals Who Care  
 Criminology  
 Crooked Cousins  
 Cruel & Unusual  
 Cult Faves Podcast  
 Cult Life with Robin Jackson  
 Cult Liter  
 Cult Podcast  
 Cult Talk with Erin Martin  
 Cultish  
 Cultish with Tina Dupuy  
 Cults  
 Cults of our Lives  
 Cults, Cryptids, and Conspiracies  
 Curiosity Kills  
 Curtain  
 Cybercrime Investigations  
 Cyberspeak's podcast  
 Daily Mystery Pod  
 Dark Divide  
 Dark Histories  
 Dark History Podcast  
 Dark Poutine  
 Dark Stories  
 Dark Topic  
 Dark Windows  
 Dark Winter Nights  
 Dark, Dark World Podcast  
 Darkest Corners Podcast  
 Darknet Diaries  
 Dawn of Mantis  
 Day-by-day: The Nick Hillary Trial  
 Daytona 911  
 Dead and Buried  
 Dead Bodies  
 Dead Man Talking  
 Dead Rabbit Radio  
 Dead Souls Social Club  
 Dead Things Podcast  
 Dead Wrong  
 Dear Franklin Jones  
 Death by Champagne  
 Death by Misadventure: True Paranormal Mystery  
 Death in Ice Valley  
 Death Metal Dicks  
 Death Penalty Information Center Podcast  
 Deathcast  
 Death's Door  
 Decarcerated  
 Decrypted  
 Deep Cuts & Sensational Stories  
 Defrauded  
 Deliberations  
 Dennis Mahon's Podcast  
 Detective  
 Detective Society Podcast  
 Devil's Teeth  
 Dial M for Mueller  
 Dialogues on law and justice  
 Did You Hear?  
 Dirty John  
 Disaster Area  
 Disgraceland

Dissected  
Disturbed State  
Do Justice  
Doin' Crime  
Doll Heads  
Don't Talk To Strangers  
Double Loop Podcast  
Down & Away  
Down Home Fear  
Dr. Death  
Drilled  
Drugs & Stuff  
Drunk in Crime  
Drunk Women Solving Crime  
Dude, It's a Cult Podcast  
Dude, Where's My Killer  
Dumb & Busted  
Dumb People Town  
Dupe of the Week  
Dying to Know  
Ear Hustle  
Earshot ABC  
Eccentric Earth Podcast  
Eerie and Beery  
Eight Minutes  
Embedded  
Emma Phillipoff is Missing  
Empire on Blood  
Empty Frames  
En Clair  
End of Days  
Esoteric Oddities  
Evening Booze Hour  
Evidence Locker  
Exploited: Crimes Against Humanity  
Exposed  
Extraordinary Stories podcast  
Eye for an Eye  
Eye of the Storm  
Facing Evil with Candice Delong  
Faded Out

Fairy Tall Tales  
Family Ghosts  
Family Plots  
Fatal  
Fatal Females  
Fatal Voyage: The Mysterious Death of Natalie Wood  
Fatalities  
FBI Confidential  
FBI Retired Case File Review With Jerri Williams  
FBI This Week  
Fear and Fame Podcast  
Felon True Crime podcast  
Felony Florida  
Female Criminals  
Field of Screams  
Fiercely Altered Perspectives  
Finding Tammy Jo  
Finish Line WBUR  
First and Felony  
First Day Back  
Flagged Podcast  
Flawed Justice  
Flipbook Podcast  
Florida Men  
Forensic Files  
Forensic Fools  
Forensic Geek  
Forensic Transmissions  
Forgotten Darkness  
Fox4 Crime Files  
Framed: An Investigative Story  
Freud and Fava Beans  
Frightday Podcast  
Frontline Dispatch  
Frozen Truth  
Fruit Loops: Serial Killers  
FT Investigation  
Futility Closet  
Future State  
Gangland Wire  
Gatecrash

Generation Cult  
 Generation Why  
 Getting off  
 Ghost Town  
 GIMG.tv  
 Give Me Murder or Give Me Death  
 Gladiator: Aaron Hernandez & Football Inc  
 Gone  
 Gone at 21  
 Gone Cold  
 Gone Fishing  
 Good Morning Jonestown  
 Good Nightmare  
 Goodnight Marilyn Radio: The Investigation. The Life of a Town's American Crime Story Podcast  
 Movie.  
 Gotcha Podcast  
 Graphic Detail  
 Gravely Gossip  
 Great Lakes True Crime  
 Grove Road  
 Guilty  
 Hackable  
 Hacked  
 Hacking Humans  
 Half Sisters, Whole Crime  
 Halfway to Thundertown  
 Halloween Unmasked  
 Hanging  
 Hanzai: True Crime from Japan  
 Happy Face  
 Haunted Heart  
 Haunted True Crime  
 Haunting History  
 Heaven's Gate  
 Heist Club  
 Heist podcast  
 Hell and Gone  
 Hell and High Horror  
 Hey, Have You Heard About...  
 Hidden Staircase  
 Hidden Truth  
 High Crimes  
 High Crimes and History  
 High-Tech Crime Investigations  
 Hillbilly Horror Stories  
 Historical Blindness  
 Historical Figures  
 Histories, Mysteries & Conspiracies  
 History Creeps Podcast  
 History Dweebs  
 History of 1995  
 History of Organized crime  
 History Told by Idiots  
 Hoax  
 Hollywood's American Crime Story Podcast  
 Hollyweird Paranormal  
 Hollywood and Crime  
 Hollywood Crime Scene  
 Hollywoodland: unsolved  
 Homicidal Hangout  
 Hoosier Homicide  
 Horror Talk with the Toys  
 Hostage  
 House of mystery  
 How I met My Murder  
 How I Survived  
 How Not to Die  
 How to Avoid Murder and Other Awkward Situations  
 Hysteria 51  
 I am a Killer  
 I Can Steal That!  
 I Got the Hell Out  
 I Said God Damn  
 I Should Totally Be Dead Right Now  
 I, Survivor  
 ICTJ Podcast  
 Ignorance was Bliss  
 I'll Be Gone in the Dark  
 I'll Drink to Fact  
 Impact Statement  
 In God They Trusted  
 In Search of the Most Dangerous Town On the Internet

In Sight  
In the dark  
IndoctriNation  
Inside Crime  
Inside Crime+Investigation  
Inside the FBI  
Inside the Squad  
Into the Basement  
Into the Fray Radio  
Intrigue  
Invisible Choir  
IRE Radio Podcast  
It Came From the Woods  
It's About Damn Crime  
It's A Crime  
Jim Harold's Crime Scene  
Jolted  
Judge and Jeremy  
Juicing the People  
Just a Story  
Just Another Murder  
Just another true crime  
Just the Tip-sters  
Justice for Jennifer  
Justice for Jennifer: Missing in Nashville  
Justice in America  
Justice Interrupted  
Justice is Served  
Justice...Delayed  
Juvie  
Karas on Crime  
Kids Court podcast  
Killafornia dreaming  
Killer  
Killer Cocktails  
Killer Fun  
Killer Jobs  
Killer Queens  
Killer Vibes  
Killer's Crawlspace  
Killers, Cults, and Nutjobs

Killin' It: The Crimecast  
Kills and Chills  
Kim Knows Nothing  
Kingpins  
King's Last March  
Kitchen Table Cult  
Kiwi Crimes  
Knock Knock  
L.A. Not so Confidential  
Last Podcast on the Left  
Last Seen  
Law and Disorder  
Leap in the Dark  
Leeds True Crime Podcast, The  
Left Behind  
Legal Wars  
Legally Insane  
Let's Go to Court  
Let's Talk About Sects  
Let's Talk Forensics  
Liar City  
Lie, Cheat, & Steal  
Life After Linc  
Life and Crimes with Andrew Rule  
Life and Death Row  
Little Girl Lost  
Living Dead Girls  
Living Visceriously  
Lock Your Doors  
Locked Up Abroad  
Lone Star Law & Disorder  
Lords of Death  
Losing Paul  
Lost Angels: The Untold Stories of the Amish  
School Shootings  
Lost in Larrimah  
Lost in Sydney  
Love is Amazing  
LRC presents: All the President's Lawyers  
Lure  
Lustmordia

Lynching in America  
 Macabre London  
 Made in Sweden  
 Madlogic Mysteries  
 Mafia  
 Making a Mania  
 Making a Murderer by Justin  
 Making a Murderer by Netflix  
 Making Marsy's Law  
 MAKTAC  
 MALICIOUS LIFE  
 Malicious Life  
 Manson's Lost Girls  
 Marble Orchard  
 Marcia Clark Investigates the First 48  
 Mared & Karen-the WVU Coed Murders  
 Married to Murder Podcast  
 Martinis & Murder  
 Martinis & the Macabre  
 Marvelously Morbid  
 Mason Jar Chronicles  
 Mason Road Podcast  
 Mass Exoneration  
 Meet Me in the Basement  
 Memories of Murder  
 Mens Rea Podcast  
 Merchants of Menace  
 Merlot and the Mon  
 MI Crime Time  
 Michael Connelly Murder Book  
 Michigan Crime Stories  
 Mid-day Musings  
 Mile Higher podcast  
 Mile Marker 181  
 Military Justice  
 Millionaire Murder  
 Mind on Crime  
 Minnesota's Most Notorious  
 Misconduct  
 Misfortune  
 Missing  
 Missing Alissa  
 Missing and Murdered  
 Missing in Ohio  
 Missing Maura Murray  
 Missing Pieces Fox 5  
 Missing Pieces KHOU  
 MJP Radio  
 Mobcast  
 Mogul  
 Moms and Murder-Melissa and Mandy  
 Mondeo Law  
 Monograph  
 Monsters who Murder  
 Monstruo  
 Morbid Curiosity  
 Morbid Moment  
 Morbid: A True Crime Podcast  
 Morgan & Morgan Whistleblower Attorneys  
 Most Notorious  
 Mostly Murder  
 Motel Hell  
 Motrue Crime  
 Mueller Time  
 Mugshot  
 Murd Up  
 Murder & Margs  
 Murder & Mysteries  
 Murder and Such  
 Murder Archives  
 Murder Blows  
 Murder City  
 Murder Dictionary  
 Murder Down Under  
 Murder is My Sign  
 Murder Made me Famous  
 Murder Metal Mayhem  
 Murder Mile True Crime  
 Murder on Orchard Street  
 Murder Road Trip  
 Murder She Spoke  
 Murder Under the Midnight Sun

Murder Was the Case  
Murder We Wrote  
Murder, Alaska  
Murder, Myth, & Mystery  
Murderers and Their Mothers  
Murderific True Crime  
Murderish  
Murderous Minors  
Murders, Mysteries, and Mimosa's  
Murdertown  
Murderville, GA  
Music of Mind Control  
My Aryan Princess  
My Father the Murderer  
My Favorite Murder  
Mysteries Abound  
Mysteries and Urban Legends  
Mysteriously Listed  
Mysterious Circumstances  
Mysterious Disappearances  
MysteriYes  
Mystery Murdery Thingy  
Nature vs. Narcissism  
Never Found  
New England's Unsolved  
New Idea Investigates  
New Thinking  
New York City Crime Report  
Nightmares Before Bedtime  
Nighttime  
No Better Death  
No Man Knows My Herstory  
No Man's Land  
No Remorse  
Noir Factory  
Nordic True Crime  
Not Another True Crime Podcast  
Not for the Dinner Table  
Not in My County  
Not Perfect or Functional  
Nothing but the Truth

Nothing Rhymes with Murder  
Obscura  
Occultae Veritatis  
ODRC Voices  
Of Myth and Mercy  
Offbeat Oregon  
Office Murder Club  
Offshore  
Oh No Ross and Carrie  
Ohio Valley True Crime  
On Drugs  
On the docket  
Once Upon a Crime  
One Eye Open  
One Man Lost  
One More Crime  
One Tough Podcast with Bo Dietl  
Open: The Case of Leigh Occhi  
Order 9066  
Origin Mysteries  
Our True Crime Podcast  
Out of the Cold  
Out of the Shadows  
Outlines  
Pajama Crimes  
Paradise After Dark  
Paranormal Chicks  
Patty Has a Gun: The Life and Crimes of Patricia Hearst  
PD Stories  
People vs. Masters: Making a Murderer  
Perhaps it's You  
Phoebe's Fall  
Pin Kings  
Pink Shade with Erin Martin  
Pints and Puzzles  
PIs Declassified  
Plead the Belly  
Pleasing Terrors  
Podcast of the Universe  
Point Blank  
Police Academy

Police Inner Views	Route 29 Stalker
Ponzi Supernova	Russia, if you're listening...
Pop, Crime & Wine	Rusty Hinges
Pretend Radio	SBS True Stories
Pretty Scary	ScamWow
Prime Time True Crime	Scary Mysteries
Prison Life	Scary Social Club
Prison Professors	Screen of the Crime
Profession Confession	Search for Closure
Profiling Payne	Searching for Ghost
Project Cold Case	Searching for Rachel Antonio
Project Random	Secrets of the Fifth Estate
Pros & Cons	Sects Ed
Psych Your Crime	See No, Hear No, Speak No
Psychopath in Your Life	Seeing Red
Punt PI	Septic Podcast
Pursuit of Justice	Serial
Putting Racism on the Table	Serial Chillers
Q6 Cold Case Files	Serial Killer Brains
Queens of Crime	Serial Killer Documentary
Quid Pro Quo	Serial Killers
Ready Set Podcast	Serial Sisters
Real Crime Café	Serially Disturbed
Real Crime Profile	Serially Obsessed
Real Crime with Danny Lopez	Service Roads
Rebutting a Murderer	Sex Crimes
Redhanded True Crime with Suruthi & Hannah	Sex Love & Murder
Redrum Blonde	Shattered
Redrum, Redrum: Girls on Murder	She Says
Reducing Crime	Shots in the Dark
Re-Enacted Podcast	Sick & Wrong
Reentry Radio	Sick Sad World
Relic	Sinister Stream
Repeat	Sinisterhood
Reveal	SKRIM
Rippercast	Skullduggery
Ritualistic Podcast	Slate Presents Standoff
RNZ: Black Sheep	Slate's Amicus with Dahlia Lithwick
RNZ: Pants on Fire	S'laughter: True crime podcast
Roberta Glass True Crime Podcast	Sleuth
Root Access	Slim Turkey

Slits& Giggles  
Slow Burn  
Small Town Dicks  
Small Town Murder  
Smashing Security  
SNAFU'D  
Snapped The Podcast  
Sofa King  
Sold In America  
Somebody Somewhere  
Someone Knows Something  
Something's Not Right  
SOTW  
Sounds like MLM  
Southern Disgrace  
Southern Fried True Crime  
Southern Gone  
Southern Grimoire  
Southern Mysteries Podcast  
Southern Nightmare  
Spree Podcast  
Spycast  
Standup, Speakup  
Stat!  
Status: Pending  
Steve McNair: Fall of a Titan  
Still at Large  
Still Missing  
S-Town  
Strange Matters  
Strange Stories UK  
Strange Talk  
Stranglers  
Strictly Homicide  
Stuff They Don't Want you to Know  
Suicide by Cop  
Sun Crime State  
Surreal Talk  
Surviving Scientology  
Survivors  
Survivor's Tales of Famous Crime

Suspect  
Suspect Convictions  
Suspicion  
Suspicious Circumstances  
Suspiria  
Swindled  
Sword and Scale  
Sword and Scale Rewind  
Sworn  
Taboo and Murder  
Tales of a Cult Insider  
Talk Forensics  
Talk More About That  
Talk Murder to Me  
Talk Stranger  
Talking Crime  
Talking Justice  
Targeted True Crime Domestic Violence  
Task & Purpose  
Tell Tale Science  
Teresa Rodriguez Stories beyond the headlines  
Terror in Old Town  
Terror Talk  
Terrorism 360  
Testify  
Texas 10-31  
Texas True Terrors  
That's a Cult?  
That's KC  
That's Spooky  
The 8th Sin  
The After Midnight Podcast  
The Apex and the Abyss  
The Appeal  
The Armchair Detective  
the Asian Madness Podcast  
The Assassination  
The Bad Taste Crimecast  
The Black Umbrella Podcast  
The Blotter Presents  
The Brohio Podcast

The Brothers Commonplace  
The Center for Court Innovation  
The Chronicles of Justice  
The City  
The Cleaning of John Doe  
The Color Line Murders  
The Confessors  
The Conspirators podcast  
The Cooper Vortex  
The Creepover  
The Crusty Crackpot Podcast  
The Cult of Domesticity  
The Dark Divide  
The Dark Side of Sport  
The Darkercide Podcast  
The Dave Ryan Show's Murder Monday  
The Death of Dr. John Parker  
The Dig  
The Disappearance of Genette Tate  
The Docket  
The Doe Files (Beyond Your Nightmares)  
The Dollop  
The Doorstep Murder  
The Double Loop  
The Dream  
The Drunk Detectives  
The Drunk Files  
The Fall Line  
The Fallout Files  
The First Degree  
The First Degree Podcast  
The Florida Files  
The Florida Justice association  
The Frontline Dispatch  
The Gateway: Teal Swan  
The Ghost Museum  
The Goth Librarian  
The Grave Truth podcast  
The Grenfell Tower Inquiry with Eddie Mair  
The Grey Mask  
The Grift  
The High Street Abduction  
The History of 1995  
The Home Babies  
The Investigation Continues  
The Jinx Podcast  
The Jury Room  
The Killer Podcast & Sh...  
The Lady Killers Podcast  
The Lady of Crime  
The Land of the Unsolved  
The Less Dead  
The Lineup  
The Little Podcast of Horrors  
The Lizzie Borden Podcast  
The Lone Gunman  
The Long Dance  
The Lost  
The Making of Crimecon  
The Mannina Files  
The Mind of a Murderer  
The Minds of Madness  
The Missing Minority Project  
The Mist  
The Morbid Curiosity Podcast  
The Most Dangerous Town on The Internet  
The Muddled Exploits  
The Murder in my Family  
The Murdertown Chronicles  
The Mysterious, Missing & Murdered  
The Mystery Theory  
The New York City Crime Report  
The Noir and Bizarre Podcast  
The Nowhere dispatch  
The One True Way  
The Online Fraudcast  
The Opperman Report  
The Outlines Podcast  
The Payless Murders  
The Perfect Scam  
The Peripheral  
The Permanent Record

The Philosophy of Crime  
 The Plain People's Podcast  
 The Pope's Long Con  
 The Real Crime Podcast  
 The Reckoning  
 The Redemption Podcast  
 The RFK Tapes  
 The Right Wrong Turn  
 The Salty Canadian True Crime Podcast  
 The Scofflaws: A History of Law and Disorder  
 The Security Brief with Paul Viollis  
 The Serial Killer Documentary Show  
 The Serial Killer Podcast  
 The Serial Serial  
 The Shot  
 The Sicario Effect  
 The Sick Sad Podcast  
 The Sisters Grimm  
 The Sitdown with Mike Recine and Frank Terranova  
 The Stack Pack  
 The Strange and Unusual Podcast  
 The Tape Room Podcast  
 The Teacher's Pet  
 The Thread  
 The Trail Went Cold  
 The Trials of the Vampire  
 The True Crime Enthusiast  
 The TX Files  
 The Uh Oh Feeling  
 The Unresolved  
 The Unseen Podcast  
 The Vanished  
 The Week in Scary  
 The Wonderland Murders  
 The Worst People in Earth  
 The X Podcast  
 Theory & Crime  
 Theory: True Crime Podcast  
 They Walk among us  
 Thin Air podcast  
 Things That Keep Me Up at Night  
 Thinking Sideways  
 This is Actually Happening  
 This is the Place  
 This Week in True Crime History  
 Those Conspiracy Guys  
 Thunder Bay  
 Tim Dillon is going to hell  
 Timesuck with Dan Cummins  
 To Love & To Perish  
 Tony Talks Charles County Crime  
 Too Macabre Ladies  
 Toronto True Crime  
 Totally Weird Los Angeles  
 Trace  
 Trace Evidence  
 Transmissions from Jonestown  
 Trial Lawyer Confidential  
 True Crime & Chill  
 True Crime After Dark  
 True Crime All the Time  
 True Crime All the Time Unsolved  
 True Crime and a Glass of Wine  
 True Crime and Mysteries  
 True Crime Asia  
 True Crime Brewery  
 True Crime Cascadia  
 True Crime Couple  
 True Crime Diary  
 True Crime Down Under  
 True Crime Fan Club  
 True Crime Finland  
 True Crime Garage  
 True Crime Girls  
 True Crime Grapple  
 True Crime Guys  
 True Crime Historian  
 True Crime Island  
 True Crime Japan  
 True Crime Melting Pot  
 True Crime Obsessed  
 True Crime review

True Crime Sisters  
 True Crime Storytime  
 True Crime Sweden  
 True Crime Tea  
 True Crime Truckers  
 True Crime Uncensored  
 True Crimecast  
 True Murder  
 True North Crime  
 True North Strange & Weird  
 Trump, Inc.  
 Truth & Justice  
 Truth About True Crime with Amanda Knox, The  
 Truth and Reconciliation  
 Twisted  
 Twisted Britain  
 Twisted Philly  
 Twisted Sisters Podcast  
 Twisted Tangents  
 Two Girls True Crime  
 UK True Crime podcast  
 Unconcluded  
 Uncover  
 Uncovered: The Lovers' Lane Murders  
 Uncovering Unexplained Mysteries  
 Under Oath With Rick Lomurro  
 Under the Gavel  
 Undercover Coven  
 UnderState  
 Undisclosed  
 Unequal  
 UnErased  
 Unexplained  
 Unfinished  
 Unforgotten  
 Unfound  
 Unmasking a Killer  
 Unobscured  
 Unpopular Culture  
 Unprisoned: Stories from the system  
 Unqualified Gays  
 Unravel True Crime  
 Unraveled  
 Unsolved Murders: True Crime Stories  
 Unsolved Mysteries of the World  
 Unsolved podcast  
 Unspeakable  
 Untold: The Daniel Morgan Murder  
 Untrue Crime  
 Up and Vanished  
 Up North Cold Case  
 Vanished: The Tara Calico Investigation  
 Versus Trump  
 Vile  
 Voice of the Victim  
 Voir Dire  
 Wander the Podcast  
 Wanted by the FBI  
 Watching ID  
 We are Starting a Cult  
 We Love Dead Things  
 Websleuths Radio  
 Weird Religion  
 Weird World  
 West Cork  
 What Did You Do?  
 What Happened to Jodi?  
 What Happened to Vishal  
 What the Crime  
 What the F Podcast  
 What Was That Like?  
 What Were You Thinking  
 What's Blood Got to Do With It?  
 Where is Kerry Jones?  
 Where is She?  
 Which Murderer?  
 Whispered True Stories  
 White Wine True Crime  
 Who Killed Amy Mihaljevic?  
 Who Killed Elsie Frost  
 Who Killed Teresa  
 Whose Crime Is It Anyway?

Wicked Buzz  
Wild Cat Crime  
William Ramsey Investigates  
Win at All Costs  
Wine & Crime  
Wine & Punishment  
Witch Hunt  
Within the Trenches  
Without Warning  
Worst Crimes Ever  
Writing about Crime  
Written Inside  
Wrong Skin  
Wrongful Conviction with Jason Flom  
Yo Vinnie's Legal Insanity  
York Crime Walk  
You Can't Make This Up  
You Must Remember Manson  
You Must Remember This  
Young Charlie  
You're Crime or Mine  
You're Wrong About...  
Yours in murder  
Zealot  
Zion's Lost

*Appendix B-Content Analysis Codebook*

Cognitive legitimacy:

Is a definition of “podcast” given? Yes=1 no=0

Normative legitimacy:

Is there a positive value judgement of “true crime”? Yes=1 no =0

Example: described as “helpful” vs. “salacious,” “exploitative,” etc.

Is there a positive value judgement of “true crime podcasts?”? yes=1, no=0

If the article mentions both positive and negative judgements, decide what the holistic valence of the article is.

Note anything odd or interesting about the description in the article (most will not have a notation)

## Appendix C-Interview Guide

Do you consent to taking part in this study?

Do you consent to this interview being recorded for purposes of data collection and analysis?

Do you consent to being identified by your real name in the final study?

1. How would describe the “type” of podcast you are producing? Has that evolved over time? Are there podcasts you see as “similar” to yours?  
**(boundary/isomorphism/form/identity)**
2. When you were starting the podcast, were there any kinds of resources you had to gather first, or were there any obstacles to getting started that you had to overcome? Has that evolved, and if so, how? **(resources)**
3. Does competition with other podcasts affect your process or content? If so, how? Can you give any specific examples? **(resources)**
4. How would you describe your audience? When you think about your listeners, how do they affect your process? For example, how much do you focus on tracking how many listeners you have through audience metrics? Personal feedback and interaction? Can you give me an example of a time listener involvement has affected a decision about the podcast? **(resources/identity)**
5. Do you focus on particular needs or wants of your audience? If so, what kind of factors do you consider? How do you know about their needs/wants? Is that affected or determined by particular podcast goals? Has that evolved over time? **(form/identity)**
6. Are there other stakeholders you consider beyond listeners (e.g., victims, families, law enforcement, advocates)? If so, who are they and how do they affect your decisions?  
**(legitimacy/identity)**
7. Are there moments when the legitimacy of your format or content has been questioned or threatened? Specific examples? **(legitimacy/identity)**

8. Do you see outside agents (media, politicians, celebrities, etc.) affecting the legitimacy of podcasts? For example, has the attention of politicians, celebrities, media, etc. changed how podcasts are produced or accepted? Specific examples? **(legitimacy)**
9. Did you reach out to other people involved in similar projects? If so, how does that communication shape the direction of your project? **(relationship networks/identity/boundaries)**
10. Do you see podcasting evolving as a media format? Can you give me examples? If so, is there a moment or event that stands out to you as an important shift? **(form/legitimacy)**
11. Do you see podcasts playing a role in social change? If so, how? Do you see your podcast having a specific role? How effective do you think podcasts can be in social change? **(identity/legitimacy)**
12. Historically, true crime has been seen as somehow “sleazy” in comparison to other types of media, especially journalism. Do you hear that criticism? Has that changed over time? **(legitimacy/identity)**

Are there any other things you learned or experienced through the process of creating your project that you'd like to share with me? Is there anything surprising you've learned?

Will it be alright for me to contact you with follow-up questions?

## Appendix D-Interview Codebook

### **Niches/Forms/Boundaries:**

Relational networks  
Podcast as journalism  
Podcast as entertainment  
Podcast as movement advocates/actors  
Podcast as new media/old media  
Cognizance of audience gratifications

### **Structural Inertia:**

Environmental constraints  
Internal constraints

### **Density:**

Population emergence/growth  
Mortalities  
Competitive relationships  
Commensualistic relationships  
Formal relational density/partnerships

### **Resource Partitioning:**

Podcast as generalist or specialist  
Disruption and speciation processes  
Entrepreneurial attempts

### **Isomorphism:**

Evidence of mimicry/homogeneity  
Evidence of heterogeneity/diversification

### **Legitimacy:**

Evidence of agents/mediators  
Community guidelines/stakeholder negotiation  
Definition of stakeholders  
Co-option  
Threats to legitimacy

### **Organizational Identity:**

Norm creation/violations  
Norm negotiation/boundary work

### **Collective Identity:**

Development  
Evidence of pre-existence

### **Movement Processes:**

Political opportunity symbolic  
Political opportunity environmental  
Mobilizing structures  
Framing processes/mobilizing emotions  
Framing/group efficacy  
Framing/issue ownership and negotiation  
Countermovement

### **Resource Mobilization:**

Listeners as resource  
Capitol, knowledge, physical resources  
Symbolic resources  
Community resources

### **Movement Orientation/Goals:**

Collective identity as input  
Collective identity as goal  
Symbolic action  
Tangible action  
Strategy/rationalism  
Podcasts as technologies of mobilization  
Commitment to justice

### **Other concepts:**

Evidence of dual/hybrid orientation  
Definition of “true crime” as genre  
Subversion/redefinition  
Emerging/other codes

## *Appendix E-Recruitment Document*

Interview Recruitment (to be sent via email or social media direct message)

Hello,

Because of your involvement in the [insert title] podcast, you have been identified as a possible participant in a study being conducted by Lindsey A. Sherrill, a researcher at The University of Alabama. As a participant, you will be asked to agree to an interview about your involvement with the [insert title] podcast. This interview will be recorded for data collection purposes.

This study seeks to examine how podcast organizations related to issues of true crime negotiate the creative process, form alliances with other podcasters, podcasts, and related organizations, and mobilize resources and community support. Because of your public involvement with this phenomenon, I would like to interview you for my research. This research will identify the podcasts, and if you agree to take part, you will be identified in the final study.

Initial interviews will take 1-2 hours and may include 1-2 follow-up interviews. We can discuss the most convenient way to conduct the interview, whether in person, via phone, or Skype. If you may be willing to take part in the study, I will be happy to answer any questions regarding your participation, how information will be gathered and analyzed, confidentiality issues, and any other questions you may have. Prior to any scheduled interview, I will also email you a full copy of the consent form fully explaining the details of your consent to the study.

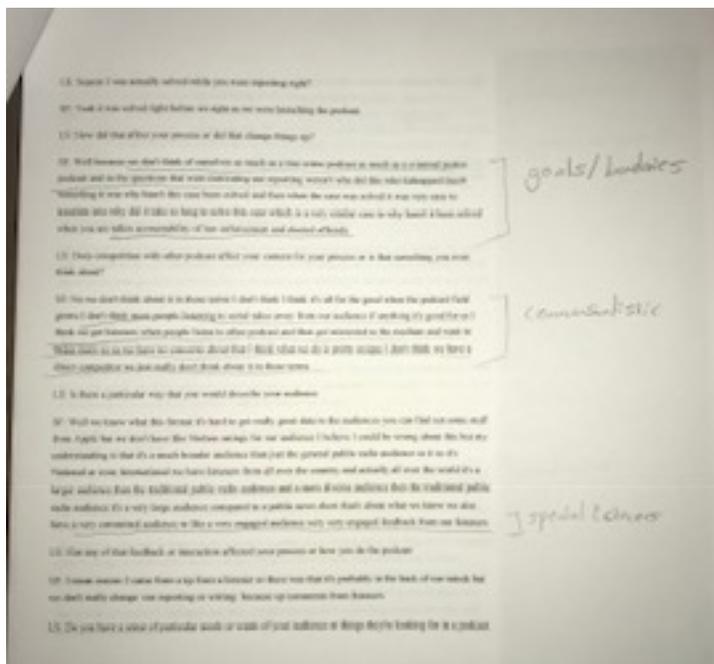
If you are interested, please reply to this email, and we can set up a time to talk further and schedule a formal interview. Thank you.

Appendix F-*Questionnaire*

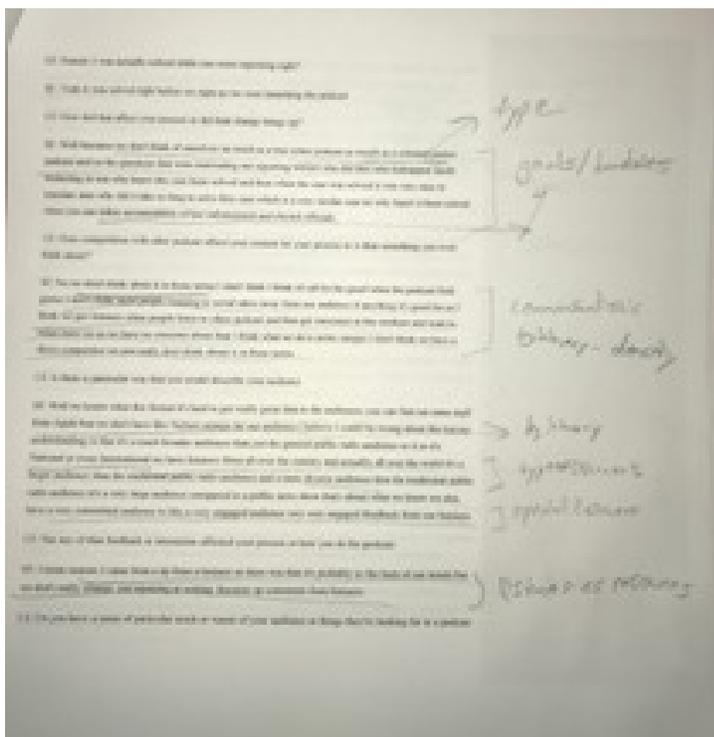
To be sent to participants via email pre-interview. All questions were included in original IRB.

1. Prior to becoming involved with the *XXXXX* podcast, were you a fan of podcasts? Are there any specific podcasts or producers that you consider influential?
2. What kind of interest or involvement did you have in true crime media prior to your current project?
3. How would you define true crime as a genre?
4. Are there any other people you would suggest that I speak to?
5. Do you have any recommendations for true-crime podcasts I may not have encountered?
6. Do you interact with other podcast or non-podcast organizations? (Example of non-podcast organizations: Innocence Projects, NAMUS, etc.) Please list names and nature of relationship. You may include organizations as well as individuals. (Example: John Smith, *Missing People*, met at Crime Con, helped with technical information, etc.)

### Appendix G-Coding Examples



Example 1: Interview after first round of inductive coding, underlining and circling important passages and noting themes without using the code sheet.



Example 2: The same interview after the final round of coding using both themes from the code sheet and those suggested by the peer and member debriefs.

### Appendix H-*Reflexivity and Positioning*

On March 24, 2003, Melinda Wall McGhee went missing from my hometown.

At the time, I was working for a local paper. I didn't cover crime stories (I was the football and hurricanes girl), but I was fascinated with her case. I've remained fascinated for 16 years, despite never hearing another piece of evidence. Every few months I'll search her name, but there is never a break in the case. Occasionally, someone will attempt to tie her to a serial killer, like the Baton Rouge co-ed killer Derrick Todd Lee, or the abductions of other women in Mississippi and Oklahoma. But it never pans out. Melinda is still missing, and I can't stop thinking about her.

I was not a *Serial* early adopter. The craze had been ongoing for around six months when I finally listened. I remembered a *This American Life* episode from a year earlier in which Koenig talked about Adnan's case, but I found nothing particularly memorable or compelling in the story at the time. When I finally download the podcast, I was hooked. The style reminded me of the radio dramas I had loved as a kid, like *Adventures in Odyssey* or dramatized Hardy Boys books, as well as the true crime narratives I'd long consumed as a guilty pleasure. I vacillated with Koenig between certainty of Adnan's innocence and certainty that he was lying. I usually listened during my runs, and still associate certain parts of the case with shady streets and warm, floral-scented spring evenings.

Before *Serial*, I had never really listened to podcasts (in fact, I think my only previous experience was downloading a missed episode of *Fresh Air* to catch an interview with Matthew Weiner to get my *Mad Men* fix between seasons!). By the time I joined the *Serial* craze, *Undisclosed* had begun, so I rushed headlong into their episodes, desperately needing more, more, more about the story. A few months later I binged all 34 of the *Serial Dynasty* episodes. Just a few weeks ago, I listened to *Crime Writers On...*'s early episodes for the first time, and I caught the *Serial* bug all over again.

As I listened to these productions about Adnan, I started to notice a community forming. There were other podcasts and podcasters connected to these podcasts, and the producers and listeners seemed to all have common ground. These new podcasts weren't just about true crime for entertainment's sake (though there are many of those that I certainly enjoy); they were focused on a bigger mission. They all pointed—some directly, some by implication—to the need for criminal justice reform in the U.S. As I was noticing this phenomenon, I was also returning to graduate school. I began doing some initial research, mainly Google Scholar searches for “podcasting,” “*Serial*,” “new media and criminal justice.” Nothing. I started pitching my ideas about what I had noticed to professors and colleagues. I received blank stares or outright disbelief that what I thought I saw was “a thing.”

Fast forward a few months. SXSW 2017 hosts panels on podcast communities. The Broadcast Educators Association convention features special panels on podcasting. Suddenly, people stop questioning my proposal as “a thing.” Obviously, they say, it's “a thing.”

I tell the above story because it underscores how close this research is to my heart. This movement, of criminal justice reform through podcasting, was my obsession long before it

became a research goal. I have to admit to having re-listened to *Undisclosed* all the way through three times, and *Serial* four times. Okay. Fine. I'll be honest—five. As I approached this study, I was very aware of the biases I carried. I watched this phenomenon grow and believe myself to be so intimately acquainted with that growth that it takes conscious effort to back up my own anecdotal evidence with sources and citations. I have been invested in these podcasts, as well as their associated social media communities, for several years now, and I am hard pressed to remember the last day that I didn't listen to at least some part of an episode.

In conducting the research for this study, I realized that I had to be constantly aware of my own emotional connection to this work. My initial concern with interviewing, that I would be star-struck or “fan-girling” over my subjects, wasn't as much of a problem as I expected--My issue was reminding myself that I am not the expert. While I may be more invested than the average podcast fan, I am still a fan, and my parasocial relationships with these producers are not evidence. It was a challenge not to turn the interviews into free-wheeling celebration of a shared passion, especially when interviewees gushed about the podcasts that inspired them or described incidents of seeing their work affect real world change in the criminal justice system. When one participant described how he must fight the impetus to “fall in love with his interviewees,” I felt that, deeply. I know collective identity is real in this population, because I felt it every time one of my interview participants excitedly told me about their true crime fandom or their desire to solve a case—or about the first time they listened to *Serial*.

In order to combat these biases, I set parameters for myself: Number one, pretending I knew nothing. This was hard, especially when I wanted to ask for more details about things that had no relevance to my study, or I had to act as if I did not know the identity of a podcaster participants were describing but trying not to name. Secondly, sticking closely to the interview

questions and prompts so as not to lead participants was a challenge. I chose to stay away from questions about content and instead focus on relationships and resources as conceptualized by the theoretical framework. Third, I allowed myself the “fan” moment only at the end of the interview, after all data was collected and the recorder was off. It would have been dishonest not to tell Rabia Chaudry that the title of my dissertation came from her book, I reasoned, or to tell Amber Hunt that her soothing voice had gotten me through a tumultuous summer. As another safe guard against my own biases, I included four podcasters whose podcasts I have never heard and know next to nothing about. Hearing the same kind of responses from them helped reassure me that the validity of the other findings was sound.

From a theory-application standpoint, I made a conscious decision not to look back at literature or review my research questions before my first reading of the transcripts. For this first round of analysis I looked at notes I had taken during the interviews and read with an eye for emerging patterns and words or phrases that “stuck out.” After this inductive reading, I went back to the literature and code sheet, and re-analyzed the transcripts through a theoretical lens. The same themes still stood out, but the patterns began to make sense, and unexpected findings were obvious in the first-round notes that didn’t quite “fit.”

One of those “hard-to-fit” findings was how participants described competition and relationships. Going into the interviews, they were all a big family in my mind, but I was prepared to be surprised. Maybe my subjects weren’t a part of this close, goal-oriented supporting community I imagined—maybe they all hate each other, and I’d romanticized this whole phenomenon. What I found was a mix of responses (that, in hindsight, may make the “family” analogy spot-on). Many of these podcasters are connected, some loosely, some inextricably. They support and encourage, but they also fight and backstab and compete. I was,

perhaps more than anything, surprised by how small the population felt when people talked about their connections. Everyone, it seems, really does know everyone else.

While I've tried to separate myself as much as possible from the analysis, I know that I am still too close. Participants described ethical struggles around finding entertainment in the suffering of others versus the desire to keep someone's memory alive. I've definitely felt that, even to the point that I've sometimes continued listening to something I didn't enjoy because I felt like a forgotten victim deserved my attention—it sometimes feels like the least I can do. If anything, this research has increased my sense of collective identity as both a fan and a constituent. It feels appropriate that the first day of the semester in which I wrote this was the 20th anniversary of Hae Min Lee's disappearance. The day I completed the results was the day Adnan was denied a new trial by Maryland's Supreme Court.

The discovery of how far my collective identity with this population goes was perhaps the most surprising moment. When two participants described podcasters as having a “narcissism” that allows them to believe they can make a difference or solve something where investigators have failed, and that people will actually want to hear their voices, I agreed. Yep, I said, you're right. That's something most people don't think. I don't.

But as I've continued this work, an idea keeps popping up in the back of my mind. Sarah Delia told me, “everyone wants to make a radio show,” pointing to a childhood playing with cassette recorders. I knew what she meant—I'd been that kid on my bedroom floor playing D.J. Before I started working at the newspaper in my teens, I'd tried to get a job at the local radio station. Whatever that personality trait might be—narcissism or a desire to speak truth for justice—it's definitely in me somewhere too. Maybe—someday—I'll start digging into case files

too, carrying a recorder “just in case.” I have the beginnings of a relationship network now. I have the journalistic skills to investigate and write. And I can’t stop thinking about Melinda.

Or maybe I’ll just listen to *Serial*. Again.

## Appendix I-IRB Approval and Revisions



November 27, 2017

Lindsey Sherrill  
Department of Journalism & Creative Media  
College of Communication & Information Sciences  
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 17-OR-402, "'Leveraging the Serial Effect': Podcasting and the Criminal Justice Reform 'Niche'"

Dear Ms. Sherrill:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your proposed research.

Your application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of written documentation of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

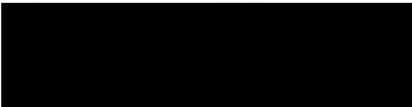
*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

Your application will expire on November 26, 2018. If your research will continue beyond this date, please complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, please complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, please complete the Request for Study Closure form.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office for Research Compliance

September 20, 2018

Lindsey Sherrill  
 Department of Journalism and Creative Media  
 College of Communication & Information Sciences  
 The University of Alabama  
 Box 870172

Re: IRB # 17-OR-402-R1 "Leveraging the Serial Effect: Podcasting and the Criminal Justice Reform 'Niche'"

Dear Ms. Sherrill:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has granted approval for your renewal application. Your renewal application has been given expedited approval according to 45 CFR part 46. You have also been granted the requested waiver of documentation of informed consent. Approval has been given under expedited review category 7 as outlined below:

*(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies.*

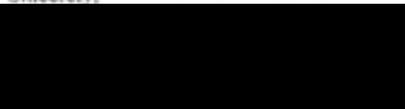
Your application will expire on September 19, 2019. If your research will continue beyond this date, complete the relevant portions of the IRB Renewal Application. If you wish to modify the application, complete the Modification of an Approved Protocol Form. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants. When the study closes, complete the appropriate portions of the IRB Study Closure Form.

Please use reproductions of the IRB approved informed stamped consent form to obtain consent from your participants.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the above application number.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,



Director & Research Compliance Officer  
 Office for Research Compliance

October 22, 2018

Lindsey Sherrill  
Department of Journalism and Creative Media  
College of Communication & Information Sciences  
The University of Alabama  
Box 870172

Re: IRB # 17-OR-402-R1-A "Leveraging the Serial Effect: Podcasting and the Criminal Justice Reform 'Niche'"

Dear Ms. Sherrill:

The University of Alabama Institutional Review Board has reviewed the revision to your previously approved expedited protocol. The board has approved the change in your protocol.

Please remember that your protocol will expire on September 19, 2019.

Should you need to submit any further correspondence regarding this proposal, please include the assigned IRB application number. Changes in this study cannot be initiated without IRB approval, except when necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazards to participants.

Good luck with your research.

Sincerely,

A black rectangular redaction box covers the signature of the Director & Research Compliance Officer.

Director & Research Compliance Officer  
Office for Research Compliance