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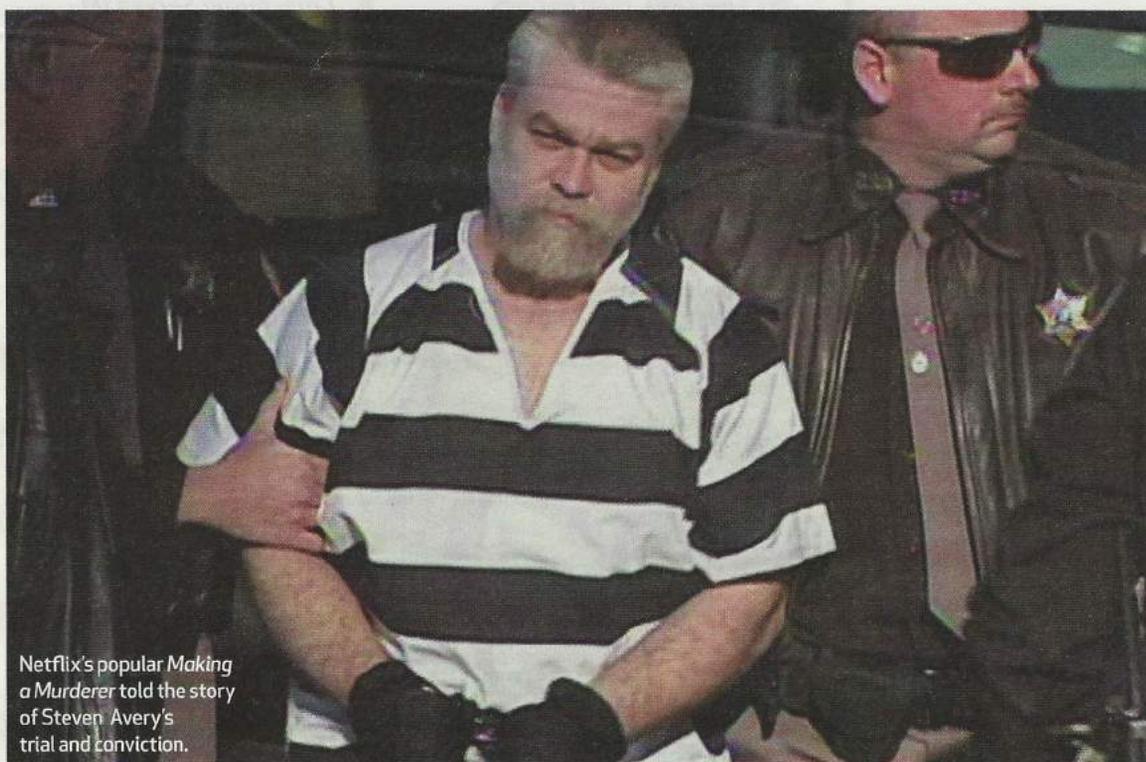
Book 'Em

Murder, mayhem ripped from the news
fuels a deadly serious ratings race

Discovery Communications
ID's *Homicide Hunter*: Lt. Joe Kenda is one of the more popular entries in cable's burgeoning true-crime genre.

True Crime Confidential

Why real-life tales of murder and mayhem are filling network lineups



Netflix's popular *Making a Murderer* told the story of Steven Avery's trial and conviction.

BY R. THOMAS UMSTEAD

UNWITTING VICTIMS kidnapped off the street and brutally murdered. Serial killers scattering body parts across miles of swampland. Desperate searches by law-enforcement officials in a race against time to find a missing person.

At first blush, these terrible incidents seem incomprehensible to the typical TV viewer. Yet millions tune in almost every night to one of several networks that depict such stories — part of the popular genre of true-crime programming.

Such networks as Investigation Discovery (ID) — which devotes its entire programming lineup to true-crime content — as well as Lifetime, Oxygen, TV One and A&E are betting that depictions and re-enactments of disturbing and mysterious tales of real-life murder and mayhem will continue to captivate viewers who can't seem to look away from the tragedies explored in genre-based series, documentaries and specials.

The true-crime genre has particular appeal to women viewers, who generally favor mysteries with dramatic storylines but also see their greatest fears reflected in the TV genre's harrowing tales of murder and violence, most often featuring stories of crimes against women.

Just last year, cable and broadcast networks aired five projects about the 1996 death of 6-year-old JonBenet Ramsey and three projects on the 1995 murder trial of

TAKEAWAY

True crime is paying off with big ratings for TV programmers — particularly among women viewers.

O.J. Simpson. LMN, NBC and ABC this year aired shows about the life and crimes of cult leader and murderer Charles Manson.

And more projects are on the docket:

- Women-targeted lifestyle channel Oxygen will offer a reboot of the Dick Wolf-produced series *Cold Justice* as part of its late 2017 rebrand into a crime destination network targeting millennial women.

- NBC is gearing up for a new entry in the *Law & Order* franchise focused on the sensational 1993 murder trial of Lyle and Erik Menendez. Edie Falco (*Nurse Jackie*) will star in the eight-episode *Law & Order: True Crime — The Menendez Murders*.

- Lifetime will also delve into the Menendez brothers' murder of their parents as part of an original movie, which will star Courtney Love as Lyle and Erik's mother.

- A&E, which last month resurrected its iconic series *Cold Case Files*, will tackle the 1990s murders of rap stars Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur in separate episodes of its reimagined *Biography* franchise, which returns later this year after a five-year hiatus.

- ID will comb through the child-murder trial of Casey Anthony in April with limited series *Casey Anthony: An American Murderer*.

TV executives cited several factors for true crime's TV resurgence, including the current crowded TV environment, with more than 450 scripted series on offer, and a confusing political and news arena where real vs. alternative facts are the subject of debate. Viewers are fixated on both current real-life crimes and incidents from the recent past that remain unsolved or invoke more questions than answers.

WIDE-RANGING APPEAL

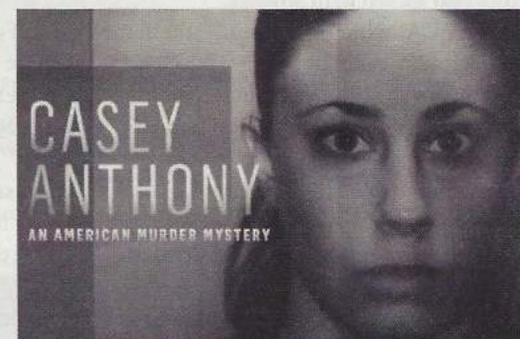
"There's a certain kind of sensationalism that in some ways, as a genre, appeals to both educated and barely educated men and women equally," said Steven Weinstock, co-president and co-CEO of production company Truly Original, which produces ID's scripted series *Vanity Fair Confidential*. "There's a certain kind of touchstone that true crime hits, because in a narrative form, it's very effective in creating a puzzle that forces an engagement in the process by the viewer."

Added A&E executive vice president and head of programming Elaine Frontain Bryant, "I think people love a good mystery, and because there is so much chaos in the world, I think people just love to settle down and watch with the satisfaction of knowing that problems can be solved."

The genre isn't exactly new to cable: Unscripted reality shows such as Oxygen's *Snapped* and A&E's *Cold Case Files* and *The First 48*, as well as newsmagazine shows such as NBC's *Dateline*, have chronicled real-life murderers and unsolved mysteries for decades. Interest in the genre seems to have peaked in recent months, though, with the



Networks ranging from ESPN to ID are getting on the true-crime bandwagon with documentary series.





HBO's *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst* drew attention to the New York real-estate heir who was a person of interest in several murder cases.

launch of high-profile series that have captured viewers' imaginations.

Projects like HBO's 2015 docuseries *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst*, which followed the Manhattan real-estate heir who was considered a person of interest in several murders; and Netflix's gripping *Making a Murderer*, which shadowed the Wisconsin murder trial of Steven Avery, have breathed additional life into the genre.

Truly Original's Weinstock said the sensational nature of the real-life crimes depicted in those shows appeals to the basic human desire to be safe, and to viewers' sense of voyeurism with regard to violent incidents and actions that would otherwise invoke fear and emotional stress.

'SOCIAL REALISM'

"Part of the appeal of true crime is a kind of social realism," Weinstock said. "True crime can describe events that are risqué, deviant or even mundane that [viewers] wouldn't otherwise have access to."

Also, true-crime shows allow viewers to play the role of couch detective as they try to finger the perpetrators before the actual killer is revealed — or of judge and jury when they already know who did it.

Supercharging the genre were three recent programs on the 1995 O.J. Simpson "Trial of the Century": ESPN's five-part docuseries *O.J.: Made in America*, which last month won an Oscar for best documentary; FX's limited scripted series *The People v. O.J. Simpson: American Crime Story*, which won five Primetime Emmy Awards; and ID's *Is O.J. Innocent? The Missing Evidence*, which explored new theories and never-before-seen evidence regarding the trial.

Series such as *Is O.J. Innocent?* introduced well-known crime stories to younger audiences who may not have known much about the trial's details, and allowed those viewers to make up their own minds about the verdict, said Henry Schlieff, president of the Discovery Communications network group that includes ID.

"In the case of O.J., if you go with the murder trial verdict, the killer was never found, so we give them a chance to decide what happened for themselves based on the evidence presented," Schlieff said.

True-crime shows haven't reached the lofty ratings level of top scripted shows such as AMC's *The Walking Dead*, or even popular reality shows like Bravo's *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* or Discovery Channel's *Gold Rush*, both

of which average more than 2 million viewers per episode. But true-crime aficionados are a loyal, passionate audience representing a cross-section of viewers, network officials said.

Some genre-specific shows have slashed through the cornucopia of TV content to generate big ratings. Lifetime's Nov. 5 original movie *Who Killed Jon Benet?* drew 1.5 million viewers, among the network's highest-performing movies of last year.

Overall, ID set a network primetime ratings record in February, averaging more than 1.1 million viewers, according to Nielsen. It finished February as the most watched network on a total-day basis (Nielsen live-plus-3) among women 25-54.

Thirteen of ID's primetime shows averaged more than 1 million viewers in February on a Nielsen live-plus-3-day basis, including shows with such provocative titles as *Homicide Hunter: Lt. Joe Kenda*, *Murder Chose Me* and *Evil Lives Here*.

ming and development Rod Aissa said.

"We hear in focus groups all the time that a lot of this true crime is identifiable for women: Be careful where you go; be careful dating online; make sure people know where you are," Aissa said. "It's very tangible for our audience."

Since it launched in 2016, Oxygen's "Crime Time" weekend block of true-crime programming has posted a 22% increase in viewing by women 25-54 and a 42% increase in total viewers compared with 2015, according to Oxygen.

In October, the network expanded the block to include Fridays and Mondays.

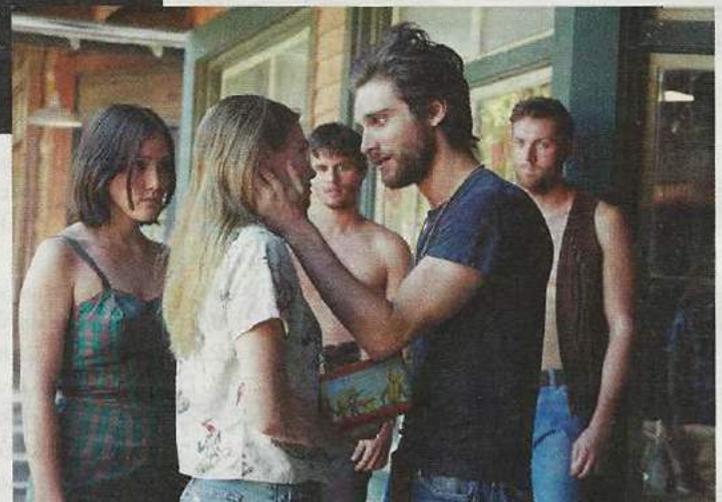
HOLDING OUT FOR HEROES

Along with unsuspecting victims, true crime programming also depicts heroes in the detectives who do the dirty work to find killers or missing persons, A&E's Fountain Bryant said — and that also resonates with viewers. That's one of the reasons the network decided to bring back *Cold Case Files* after more than a decade's hiatus.

The 10-episode series, which reopens criminal cases



Scripted shows based on actual events include (clockwise from right) FX limited series *The People v. O.J. Simpson* and Lifetime telepics *Manson's Lost Girls* and *Who Killed Jon Benet?*



"We do a lot of research, and people anecdotally are saying that that they've had enough of scripted drama and love to see these true crime stories play out," Schlieff said. "The true-crime genre has never been hotter, so we love our position."

Oxygen also will look to slay female viewers when it rebrands. The network, which already features the longest-running series in the genre with the 14-year-old *Snapped*, will build on its true-crime lineup when it revamps later this year with the relaunch of former TNT series *Cold Justice*.

Oxygen's shift in focus will mean removing hits with broader appeal, such as *Bad Girls Club*, with hopes that true crime will draw younger and older women to the network. The crime stories entertain while offering viewers a cautionary tale, executive vice president of program-

that have gone unsolved for years, debuted Feb. 27.

"I think this is also a time when people need to look for heroes — the people who will not let it go until they solve the case," she said.

Despite the sprec of new shows, ID's Schlieff isn't concerned about true-crime oversaturation.

"We love the fact that others are finally coming into our space," Schlieff said. "It heightens the interest in the category." ○