An Ethical Case Study of *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*

# An introduction to ethical case study of *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*

Jeffery Dahmer is a notorious serial killer from Wisconsin. Dahmer is known to have killed and dismembered at least 17 men from 1978-1991. His case made the rounds through the media in the late 1990’s when he was caught and pled guilty. Dahmer was later killed in jail. To this day, true crime enthusiast’s enjoy watching shows and documentaries about Dahmer.

Many of the makers of these series do not ask consent from the victims’ families to produce the shows. Additionally, many do not compensate the victims’ families for the exploitation of their relatives’ stories.

That was exactly the case with the new Dahmer series that was produced. This time Netflix and Ryan Murphy produced a documentary about the Dahmer case called *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*. While like other true crime shows, the difference between this show and other true crime/based on a true story show’s is the extreme detail. The Dahmer show portrays the murders very accurate based on what Jeffery Dahmer described in tapes of him in prison. In one scene, a family member of a victim is depicted to the same shirt that they wore in court. This is where the ethical concerns begin. Family members of the victims claim that Netflix did not reach out to them for permission to air their family members story. They also have not compensated them for using their likeliness. This relates to the overarching ethical concern of if it is okay and ethical for companies like Netflix to produce a documentary for people’s pleasure and entertainment based on horrific events like the Dahmer murders in such extreme detail.

The stake holders in this case are Netflix, Ryan Murphy, and the victims of the Dahmer murders families. Netflix represents a large production company. Ryan Murphy is a producer. And the victim’s families represent victims in general. While there is a Son of Sam law preventing criminals from profiting on their crimes, there is no law preventing companies from profiting. Since everything played out in court many production companies, like Netflix argue it is public records and knowledge. So, the issue lies with ethics not law. Netflix and Ryan Murphy were able to earn millions of dollars from the show. The victim’s families did not gain anything. This was not some sort of preventive show. The only thing that happened was more loss and grief being brought up from depicting the crimes. Despite this series getting heat from its unethical practices, Netflix has renewed the series with Ryan Murphy as a producer. It will cover other “notorious” cases.

This essay further looks at the ethical concerns of such a documentary being produced. It will analyze the type of ethics that Murphy and Netflix used to justify producing such a series. And it will look at alternatives to their ethical choices. Readers can learn it all comes down to deontological vs. teleological ethical reasoning. Finally, an analysis of what was learned from this case will be shows. Netflix and Ryan Murphy should not have produced *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story.*

# The ethical choices of *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*

For those that have watched *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story,* they are aware that this is a hyper realistic film about the Dahmer crimes. The actor Evan Peters looks just like Dahmer and sounds like him. When listening to the descriptions from actual tapes of Jeffery Dahmer, the details and sound are not easily distinguishable. It isn’t easy to separate the fact from fiction in this series. This includes depicting the victims and victims’ family to the exact *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story* it of what they were wearing. One woman, Rita Isbell had a mental breakdown in court after her brother was killed by Dahmer. Her exact outfit was portrayed in the show. Relatives of Isbell took to the internet expressing their discontent.

Eric Perry, cousin of one of Dahmer’s victims, tweeted about his cousin’s portrayal. The LA Times covered this with, “Perry retweeted a video that seemed to compare a scene from the Netflix series to real-life courtroom footage of Rita Isbell, Lindsey's sister, charging at Dahmer. In the scene, actor DaShawn Barnes portrays Isbell and rushes Peters' Dahmer before she is stopped by courtroom security. In a tweet, Perry said, “like recreating my cousin having an emotional breakdown in court in the face of the man who tortured and murdered her brother is WILD" (Del Rosario, 2022). Perry continues his tweets saying that Netflix never reached out to the family. He acknowledged that it is “It’s all public record, so they don’t have to notify (or pay!) anyone,” (Perry, 2022). While what Netflix did is legal, many question that it is not ethical. They took someone’s most traumatizing events of their life and aired it exactly as it happened without asking for permission. A rational actor would argue that is not okay.

Creator Ryan Murphy argues that nothing was ethically wrong because they reached out to victims’ families, and they did not respond. At an event he held in LA, Murphy said, “It’s something that we researched for a very long time. And we — over the course of the three, three and a half years when we were really writing it, working on it — we reached out to 20, around 20, of the victims’ families and friends trying to get input, trying to talk to people. And not a single person responded to us in that process,” (Verhoeven, 2022). The answer is unknown if Murphy and Netflix reached out to the victims. Regardless, there should have been a clear answer to this before the show was produced. However, Murphy has said the show needed to be produced because it showed homophobia, white privilege, and racism of the time. In summary, the ethical choice of Ryan Murphy and Netflix was to produce the documentary series *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story* without consent from the victims’ families as they believed it was their ethical duty. This is a deontological argument.

# Theoretical Analysis of *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*

Murphy has said the show needed to be produced because it showed homophobia, white privilege, and racism of the time. Murphy used deontological ethical reasoning in the production of the show. As a reminder, deontological reasoning is duty-based ethics. He believed that it was his duty to show the victims stories instead of just having them as a statistic. Additionally, he wanted to address those concerns mentioned above.

After looking at Murphy’s background, it is possible he believed that it was his personal duty as someone with a platform to produce a series about Dahmer because of his sexuality. Dahmer was gay and he lured his victims to fulfill some sort of sexual need. And then as the show depicted, something took over and he killed them. At the time of murders, being gay was not as acceptable as is it today. So, Dahmer could use excuses that some of his actions were homosexually motivated and get away with it because the police did not want to get involved with that. Murphy is also gay. It has not been confirmed. But, can assumed that Murphy believed it was his duty to show the victims stories because he relates to them as a gay man himself.

Specifically, Murphy’s ethical decisions align with ethical subjectivism and the categorical imperative. Ethical subjectivism is the most volatile type of ethics. In our reading of *Overview: Foundations for Media Ethics*, it explains what this ethical theory is. This is whenever “ethicist who is saying that a certain action is right is simply expressing personal approval or disapproval of an action” (Merrill, 2011). Murphy believes that he should have produced this series simply because he wanted to. He essentially believes that he has the right to produce a documentary about this tragedy simply because he can. In simple terms, he did because he thought he should.

In addition to ethical subjectivism, Murphy used categorical imperative to justify producing *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story.* The categorical imperative is an ethical theory that was created by Immanuel Kant. In our reading of *Overview: Foundations for Media Ethics*, it explains what this ethical theory is. Merrill states, “He believed that only an action taken out of self-imposed duty could be ethical, and he formulated what he called the categorical imperative, which said that what was ethical for a person' to do was what that person would will that everyone should do” (Merrill, 2011). This essentially means that you should do something every time regardless to your desired outcomes or beliefs. Based on what Murphy has said, it is possible that he used the categorical imperative for his justifications. He is gay and may feel that regardless of what his desired outcomes are he should always advocate for gays. Another possible grimmer explanation is that Murphy may think anytime he can produce something that will be successful he will. To wrap this all up, Murphy believed in deontological reasoning and that it was his duty to create the series.

# Credible Alternative Ethical reasoning for Dahmer*-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story*

Murphy used deontological ethical reasoning to produce *Dahmer-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story.* In many cases deontological reasoning is the best form of ethical reasoning. But, in this case, teleological reasoning would have been the best way to go about producing a series like this one. It feels like Murphy simply used duty’s that he thought he had to justify creating the series. He did not consider the possible consequences that the victims’ families would incur.

As mentioned above, Murphy claims that he reached out to the victims’ families, and they did not respond. That should not have been the end of him thinking about the victims’ families. The repercussions that they felt should have been the number one thought in producing this mini documentary series.

In the reading *Overview: Foundations for Media Ethics* a specific teleological ethical reasoning was illustrated. It is utilitarianism. Merrill wrote, “utilitarianism - whose aim it was to bring the greatest happiness (or pleasure) to the greatest number,” (Merrill, 2011). While utilitarianism can be a dangerous ethical principle to use whenever one is using it for all the decisions that they make, it should have been used here. This mini documentary series deals with a few participants. And their good should have been considered first. All the victims’ families would have made up a greater number than Netflix and Ryan Murphy. However, in the making of this documentary series, it seems that Netflix may have thought of their audience as the greatest number instead of people directly affected by this production.

# Conclusion of Dahmer*-Monster: The Jeffery Dahmer Story* Ethical Analysis

Whenever Dahmer – Monster: The Jeffrey Dahmer Story, I was leery of watching it because I am not one to like horror films or shows. However, as a journalist, I felt obligated to watch this material that caught the eye of so many different people. Upon watching it, I was disgusted. I did not understand the point of the mini-documentary series. I get the true crime drama fascination, but most of those series have a purpose besides just entertainment. That purpose could include something as simple as scaring people into locking their doors. But to me, the Dahmer series was just making fun of the victims. It portrayed them as naive. And, after later watching the Dahmer tapes, it was way too real. The gruesome details were just too much for a series.

The ethical choice of continuing to make this series without any permission from the victims’ families is not okay. Ryan Murphy and Netflix are exploiting these victims that did not consent to any of this. It is profiting off the horror that they endured. Murphy has made claims that he felt the need to produce this series to show white privilege, anti-LGTBQ sentiment, and problems with the police. But those goals could have easily been reached by showing issues in today’s news with current activists that are willing to talk about those issues. Murphy came up with an odd deontological reason for this film. And, as alluded to above, consequential-based ethical reasoning should have been used. The aftermath of releasing such a series should have been considered whenever producing this.

Ryan Murphy was the executive producer of the Dahmer series. I am a news producer at KY3. While I do not get to curate the news in the same way that he was able to create the show, there are things that I could do that are unethical. The case taught me that it is vital to not exploit victims of a crime. Even if it were to bring up ratings or revenue, it is not okay to put family and the victims themselves through more trauma than they have already experienced. My professional goal is to move up markets till I am in a top 10 market as a news producer. It is easy to try and get there using unethical manners. But this taught me it is important to not do that. No matter what duty I think I have, it is important to look at the consequences whenever you are dealing with victims. I have learned from this to not keep going forward if you do not get a response. In my job and future as a media professional, I will stand up and say, you know maybe we should do something else to get our message across. There are multiple ways things can be achieved and it is imperative not just jump over major red flags. And, if for some reason those flags are crossed, it is important to resolve your mistakes after they have been done. Murphy and Netflix could have given some of their profits away to the victim’s family. But they chose not to. In my future as an ethical leader, I would say this is what needs to be done to be ethical. To conclude, this project and case were helpful to my future as a journalist.

References

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