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# “You Know Who I Am, Don’t You? I’m the One They’re Writing About in the Newspapers and on TV”

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“You Know Who I Am, Don’t You?  
I’m the One They’re Writing About in the Newspapers and on TV”

by

Casey Killen Crane

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Arts  
with a concentration in Mass Communications  
Zimmerman School of Advertising and Mass Communications  
College of Arts and Sciences  
University of South Florida

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Keywords: Serial killer, mass media, representation, uses and gratifications, frame analysis

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## DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis to three very special people in my life, the first of whom is my husband John Crane, who has not only supported me through this arduous process but also helped me to smile and stay motivated along the way. You have been my rock, best friend, and confidant, supporting and reenergizing me when I have felt like giving up.

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The third person I would like to thank and dedicate this thesis to my father, Michael Feldkamp, for his unwavering support, compassion and understanding during some of the most difficult times of my adult life.

Finally, this thesis is dedicated to all the victims of violent crime, particularly the victims of serial murder, including the victims of Dennis Rader.

### *Murder victims of Dennis Rader:*

Joseph Otero	Shirley Vian Relford
Julie Otero	Nancy Fox
Joseph Otero, Jr.	Marine Hedge
Josephine Otero	Dolores Davis
Kathryn Bright	Vicki Wegerle

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## ABSTRACT

News media play a key role in U.S. society, helping to inform members of the public as gatherers and reporters of information, as well as by serving as government watchdogs. In the ongoing search for and reporting of information, media professionals must be aware of how they report on crime by being cognizant of how they represent killers, victims, and their families, and by being aware of how they represent any gratifications those groups may receive from the media coverage. This study considers the interactions between serial killer Dennis Rader, investigators and media organizations, and how some of these groups may use the media as a tool to gratify or achieve their goals, as reported or represented in newspaper articles. This analysis will examine news stories concerning one of the most well-known serial killers in American society through a mixed-methods approach study that includes a qualitative thematic analysis and a limited quantitative content analysis.

*Keywords:* Serial killer, mass media, representation, uses and gratifications, frame analysis

## CHAPTER ONE:

### INTRODUCTION

“We serial killers walk beside you, we walk behind you. We walk the spaces in your mind where you are afraid to go.” – Anonymous.

The traditional role and responsibility of news media professionals is to cover topics for the purpose of providing the most objective presentation of gathered information to the public so each person can make an informed decision. Journalism as a practice often is taught in education from this ideological perspective, but this idealized role does not always translate from the classroom to the real world (Joseph, 2009). The oft-quoted phrase “if it bleeds, it leads” refers to the more sensationalistic news getting good placement in the media, such as inches on the front page of a newspaper (Stoop, 2007). According to the Society of Professional Journalists, considered the most broad-based journalism organization in the United States, there are four guiding principles that serve as the foundation for its code of ethics: to “seek truth and report it,” to “minimize harm,” to “act independently,” and to “be accountable and transparent” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). These tenets span the gamut of journalistic concerns ranging from cultural values and economic pressures to journalists acting with the best interest of society in mind in their reporting (Howell, 2007). Since the early days of American newspapers in Boston—with the publication attempts of Benjamin Harris and John Campbell around the turn of the 18th century—the role of journalism has continually transformed (Folkerts, Teeter, & Caudill, 2009). According to Folkerts, Teeter, & Caudill (2009), what started as a means for

sharing information and foreign news turned into discussions of politics and government before the newspaper press eventually established itself as “an institution intricately connected with the new government it had participated in forming” (p. 2). Newspapers experienced modernization and growth during the second half of the 19th century. It was not until the late 20th and early 21st centuries that U.S. newspapers shifted into the realms of sensationalism and muckraking, a form of exposé journalism (Folkerts, et al., 2009), before eventually evolving to its more fundamentally recognized function of objectively gathering and reporting news that informs the public (Gibbs, 2015). This style of reporting shifted during a period of concern regarding propaganda around World War II before eventually being replaced with investigative journalism (Barnhurst & Nerone, 2009). In its most ideal function, “journalism is a discipline of verification,” separating itself from other forms of media such as art, entertainment or fiction (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2007, p. 79). Kovach and Rosenstiel (2007) recognize journalism as the system through which people within a society “live our lives, protect ourselves, bond with each other, identify friends and enemies” (p. 2).

Throughout human history, stories of crime have been shared that detail the human condition (LaMay & Dennis, 1995). Since at least the 1830s, the prominence of crime-related news rose with the creation of the penny press, which transformed the way in which news was shared (LaMay & Dennis, 1995). A hot topic of fascination in news and entertainment media for more than a century is the phenomenon of serial murders. While serial killers have been part of the world’s history for centuries, it was not until the relatively recent emergence of “Jack the Ripper” in late 19th century England that the concept of a *serial murder*—and, later, the *serial killer*—truly became part of the modern lexicon (Gibson, 2002). In the nearly 125 years since they were committed, this unidentified killer’s murders have continued to receive unprecedented

coverage (Vronsky, 2004). In the United States, Jeffrey “Milwaukee Cannibal” Dahmer, David “Son of Sam” Berkowitz, and the still-unidentified “Zodiac Killer” are just a handful of serial killers whose crimes captured national and international media attention and coverage. During his spree of crimes, Dahmer copulated with and killed, dismembered, and sometimes cannibalized upwards of 17 males (Hickey, 2010). Berkowitz, a former postal worker and arsonist who targeted couples and individual women in New York City, would leave notes at crime scenes and mail letters to the media and the police (Gibson, 2004). The “Zodiac Killer,” who remains unknown to this day, outsmarted law enforcement at every turn and would communicate with not only the media and police but also with victims’ families (Gibson, 2004). Some serial murderers, like New York serial killer Joel Rifkin, would collect newspaper articles, books and other research material chronicling the crimes of these serial killers (Timati Marshall, 2015). Rifkin, who claims to have killed 17 prostitutes, said entertainment media serial murderers, such as the character Robert Rusk from Alfred Hitchcock’s thriller film “Frenzy” inspired him (Timati Marshall, 2015).

This manuscript will examine a sample of newspaper articles from *The Wichita Eagle*, the largest news publication in Wichita and the surrounding area (The Wichita Eagle, n.d.), pertaining to the investigation of and murders committed by Dennis Rader, who is known as “The BTK Strangler.” The analysis within this manuscript is conducted through a primarily qualitative thematic analysis and limited quantitative content analysis. Heber (2011), a criminologist whose research explores how the press represents fear of crime in the press, argues that newspapers deliver longer, more in-depth news stories than do other forms of news media. “Newspapers, then, do not merely report the news: they ‘make the news meaningful’” and are “the product of a social transaction between producers and readers” (Hall, 1975, pp. 21-22).

This analysis concerns Rader—one of the nation’s most infamous serial killers, whose period of murders in the Wichita, Kansas, area spanned from 1974 to 1991—and how his murders were reported and publicized in the local newspaper. Rader, who evaded capture and terrorized citizens for decades, admitted to killing 10 people (Potter & Laviana, 2005; Sylvester, 2005d) whose ages ranged from 9 to 62, and said he planned to kill others as well (Finger, 2004a). Now age 72, Rader is incarcerated at the El Dorado Correctional Facility in the Kansas Department of Corrections and is serving 10 life sentences (Kansas Department of Corrections, n.d.).

It is not the goal of this manuscript to provide Rader—or other serial killers—with celebrity status, nor is it to celebrate his horrendous decisions that cost 10 people their lives. Rather, the purpose of this research is to explore the news media coverage of serial killers and illuminate any relationships or interactions between serial killers, the police, and media as they are reported or represented in the newspaper coverage. The aim is to create a better understanding of the dynamics that may exist between these groups, and how news media professionals can best serve the public without unnecessarily increasing risk or harm to the public. To be in alignment with the SPJ code to “minimize harm,” journalists are called to be cognizant of the potential impact or consequences of their actions while balancing their duties to report the truth and to “show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage” (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). However, not all journalists view this value as a priority. According to Plaisance and Skewes’ (2003) survey of 600 newspaper journalists from across the U.S., most considered the minimization of harm to not be a top journalistic value, with that standard falling more than half way down the list below other values like being “imaginative” and “independent” (p. 839). Results from an unrelated study by Herkov and Biernat (1997) about a community’s exposure to news relating to a serial murderer showed that

residents viewed the press as both beneficial and detrimental, and that journalists must balance the community's right to know with their responsibility to the community. "Having the constitutional right to report gruesome details of victim decapitation or unsubstantiated rumors does not mean that one should report such information" (Herkov & Biernat, 1997, p. 914). Vanacker and Breslin (2006) note a care-based approach to journalism that calls on journalists to elevate dignity and compassion above traditional truth-telling values of journalism. Both of these concepts align with the SPJ code of ethics, which calls on journalists to recognize the harm that gathering and reporting may cause and that "pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance" (Society of Professional Journalists, 2014). For the purpose of this manuscript, Rader primarily will be referred to by his legal given name or by a more generic term, such as *killer* or *murderer*, in lieu of his preferred moniker so as to not provide him with the recognition and celebrity status that many serial killers seek.

Although much of the available literature states that occurrences of serial killers reaching out to the media or police—and vice versa—are statistically rare (Fox & Levin, 2015), other literature states that there are a number of recorded instances of these types of communications taking place (Gibson, 2004). The communications may serve as opportunities to taunt law enforcement or merely to leave clues (Gibson, 2004). Ideally, this research will help mass media professionals better understand how their work as journalists—creators and consumers of mass media—is being used by the public as well as the often unconsidered segments of news media consumers: the serial killers themselves and the investigators trying to bring them to justice.

The responsibility of news media to inform the public and conduct reporting without potentially encouraging future acts of violence is something journalists need to keep in mind. This way they, their editors and other news providers can understand the impact of their work

and how people may use it, and in what ways, if any, they contribute to providing these killers with celebrity status.

The following are the research questions (RQ) this manuscript aims to answer:

RQ1: How are the police, serial killer, and victims represented? How are the first two reported as using news media, and what are they reported as getting out of it?

RQ2: In what ways do news media report the interactions between the police, serial killer, media organizations, and the public?

## CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

While the probability of a serial killer committing murders within a local community is a statistically rare occurrence (DeHart and Lee, 2017; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016), it is still a phenomenon that captures the morbid curiosity within the human psyche of people around the world and is meaningful because of the killers' impact in society. Cases about serial murders attract significant attention from the general public, members of the media, law enforcement, mental health professionals, and academia (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). This area of study is interdisciplinary, relating to areas of research in the fields of criminology, psychology, and sociology (Hickey, 2010). The definition of a serial killer is one that varies according to the source by the number of murders, motivations, and other temporal aspects. In 1998, the U.S. Congress defined the term *serial killings* as three or more killings that share common characteristics that would imply the crimes were committed by the same person or persons (Protection of Children from Sexual Predators Act, 1998). The Federal Bureau of Investigation's (FBI) National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime has been the leading body in the research of serial and sexual murder, with its research instigating academics, law enforcement professionals, and mental health practitioners to conduct their research (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). The FBI previously defined a serial murderer as someone who kills three or more people with a "cooling off" period in between kills (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). These interpretations differ from the definition of a mass murderer, which is someone who kills large numbers of people in a single incident and location, or a spree killer, which is



someone who kills two or more people without a cooling off period (Federal Bureau of Investigation, n.d.). However, in 2008, the FBI redefined a serial murder as “the unlawful killing of two or more victims by the same offender(s), in separate events” (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2008; Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2016). This type of definition differentiation demonstrates that there is still disagreement even within law enforcement about what defines a serial killer (Reid, 2016).

### **A Breakdown of Characteristics of Known Serial Killers**

Known serial killers in the United States constitute much of the academic research about serial killers that is available to date. Wiest (2016) states that there may be connections between U.S. serial murders and elements of culture in the U.S. relating to “values of individualism, competition, recognition, and personal achievement” (p. 329). However, there are some recorded cases of serial murders occurring around the world in countries that include England, Denmark, Germany, Russia, and Italy (Vronsky, 2004). The literature regarding the killer as a human being primarily tends to focus on psychological (Gibson, 2004) and physiological components (Miller, 2014b); psychopathy (Beasley, 2004); sociocultural influences (Miller, 2014b;), or is male-focused in nature (Branson, 2013; Miller, 2014a). Some literature focuses on the disproportional representation of white serial killers as compared to minority serial killers in news and entertainment media (Branson, 2013; Hickey, 2010; Lester & White, 2014). For example, in a study by Hickey (2010) of 249 U.S. serial killers, 23% of those surveyed were African American. Moreover, 44% of the male serial killers identified between 1995 and 2004 have been African-American (Hickey, 2010). There also is literature discussing cases of female serial killers. However, they tend to be significantly rarer in occurrence than their male counterparts and are more reactive than predatory when it comes to committing murder (Easteal,

Bartels, Nelson & Holland, 2015; Farrell, Keppel, & Titterington, 2013). At the time of this manuscript, it appears that there is limited research that looks at law enforcement public information policies and practices, such as the research by Chavez and Gibson (2004), Gibson and Chavez (2004), and Gibson (2006); how newspapers that receive correspondences from serial killers handle the ethical correspondences like in Howell (2007); and literature that focuses on how communications between police and killers may impact investigations like the work by Guillen (2002). This brings us to the literature gap: Little literature appears to address the ways in which the media represent information provided by serial killers and the police; and, at this time, there is little to no research that also focuses on what the various parties—serial killers, police, media, and the public—are reported by the media as receiving from the engagement.

This literature review will explore the ways in which news and entertainment media present serial killers, the history of communications between law enforcement entities and serial killers, and how media coverage may appeal to serial killers. The literature review of this manuscript will look at some of the most commonly covered areas of research about serial killers and the media. Chapter three of this manuscript will outline the methods used to collect data through limited a quantitative content analysis and in-depth qualitative textual analysis, and will discuss the results.

### **Serial Killers in Entertainment and News Media**

Much of the academic research available about serial killers pertains to how the killers are portrayed in entertainment media as well as news media (Weist, 2016). Egger (1998) and Vronsky (2004, 2007) posit the murderers are commonly portrayed as either deranged, deprived monsters or exceedingly friendly and disarmingly charming. However, little to no research appears to focus on how the potential relations or interactions between serial killers, police, the

media, and even members of the public are reported or represented in the media—about how the media reports each of these groups as using the media as a medium, and what they get out of the experience.

Jarvis (2007) stated that the topic of serial killing makes for big business in entertainment media with more than 1,000 films featuring the topic with the majority created after 1990. The subject of serial killers mortifies, disgusts, fascinates, but moreover entertains the masses by preying on the darker aspects of the human psyche. Mark Seltzer (1998), a professor of literature at the University of California – Los Angeles, whose work focuses on serial killers, refers to a “wound culture” in society, or “the public fascination with torn and open bodies and torn and opened persons, a collective gathering around shock, trauma, and the wound” (p. 1). For the public, that morbid curiosity causes people to watch scary movies and television shows and read mystery thrillers about murder and death (Hickey, 2010). People are drawn to, and fascinated by, television shows like *Criminal Minds*, *The Following*, *Hannibal*, and *Bates Motel*. The public cheers for the lead character in *Dexter*, a vigilante serial killer who works as a blood spatter analyst and kills “bad people” who will otherwise get away with committing murder.

The importance of crime reporting cannot be understated, and scholars estimate that crime reporting in the news ranges anywhere from 10 to 85 percent of reported coverage (Chermak, 1995; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991; Howell, 2007; Klite, Bardwell & Salzman, 1997; Meloy & Miller, 2011), demonstrating the topic’s significance in news media. Moreover, not all crime is equally represented. When considering five- and 10-year trends, the FBI’s Uniform Crime Reporting Program reported that violent crimes were 0.7% below the 2011 level, and 16.5% below the 2006 level (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2015). However, much of the reviewed literature shows that violent crimes, such as homicides or murder, are overrepresented

in comparison to more mundane or commonplace crimes (Gruenewald, Pizarro & Chermak, 2009), a misrepresentation that does not align with the journalistic tenet of promoting truthful reporting (Howell, 2007).

News and entertainment media create and intensify the spectacle form of media culture, creating what Kellner (2003) refers to as *megaspectacles*. Theorist Guy Debord (1983), who founded the concept of the commodity of the spectacle, defines the spectacle as the transposition of life; an image-mediated relationship between individuals that “unifies and explains a great diversity of apparent phenomena” (section 1; section 4; section 10). Moreover, Debord (1983) states: “The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the *total occupation* of social life” (section 42). Kellner (2003) argues that media culture drives the economy and provides models for consumption in everyday life. By obsessively reporting on serial killers, media turn serial killers into megaspectacles through overly dramatized and sensationalistic reports about their murders to draw mass audiences to their publications or television programming (Kellner, 2003). The media circus surrounding the OJ Simpson vehicle chase of 1994 and his subsequent murder trial verdict of 1995 are examples of this concept. More than 95 million viewers tuned in to watch the California highway vehicle chase (Smith, 2004), and an average of 54 million viewers tuned in for the verdict on 10 television networks (The Nielsen Company, 2008). With these types of megaspectacles, Kellner (2003) argues that the analytical writing and investigative reporting held in high esteem by traditional journalists are set aside for sensationalistic infotainment that result in increased profits. This sentiment echoes Debord’s (1983) idea that the spectacle’s production and consumption of information or entertainment is a presented form of reality in the mass media that replaces reality (section 6). Taking this a step further, Marxist-turned-postmodern theorist Jean Baudrillard elaborates on the concept of the

spectacle by looking at the permeation of reality by what he refers to as the “simulacrum,” an artificial representation or a “copy without an original” (Durham & Kellner, 2012, p. 383). In “The Precession of Simulacra,” Baudrillard (1994) argues that the reality presented by the media is truly a hyperreality—a realer-than-real reality that displaces reality—that deflects attention from important societal issues and everyday life (Durham & Kellner, 2012). The hyperreal reality in which serial killers find themselves through the mediated exposure of their crimes provides them and the criminal profilers who track them, such as Robert Ressler, with celebrity status in contemporary culture (Pawlett, 2016).

Mass media essentially helps to feed a market that profits off death—one in which serial killer memorabilia, or what is known as “murderabilia,” is created, bought, and sold (Holmes & Redmond, 2006; Schmid, 2006; Weist 2002). As of the writing of this manuscript, a quick search on the Google search engine for “murderabilia” returned more than 56,000 search results, and “serial killer memorabilia” returned more than 418,000 search results. Serial killer comic books and magazines; mass killer and serial killer playing cards; and correspondences from a serial killer. It is through this morbid reflection of society that serial killers achieve greater celebrity status, with their faces and “stats” featured on trading cards like athletes are featured on baseball cards (Fox & Levin, 2015; Weist, 2002).

When these statistically rare murders do occur, it is the responsibility of news media to inform the public about the danger that exists within their community—to provide details concerning the killer’s movements and the progress of the investigation (Fox and Levin, 2004). However, journalists must be cognizant that they not cross into the realm of influencing how people react to the news because they may end up feeding the egos of the criminals about which they are reporting. Richard Ramirez, known first as the “Valley Intruder” and later as “The

Night Stalker” in the mid-1980s, is a prime example of a serial who took pride in his reputation in the media. While sexually assaulting one of his victims, he reportedly asked, “You know who I am, don’t you? I’m the one they’re writing about in the newspapers and on TV” (Fox and Levin, 2002, pa. 6).

### **Communications Between Serial Killers and Police Via the Media**

The relationship between serial killers, the police, and the media is sensitive. Although the media can serve as a useful tool to the police and an information source for the public, it also can spread and intensify the impact of a fame-seeking criminal’s actions by publicizing and broadcasting their actions to the community and the world (Ghetti, 2007). Dennis Rader, who created for himself the moniker “BTK” (an acronym for “bind, torture, and kill”) as an homage to his preferred method of murder, complained in one of his communications to the local newspaper, *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, about what he viewed as a lack of publicity about his correspondence and name: “How many do I have to kill before I get my name in the paper or some national attention?” (Gibson, 2006, p. 58). Over a period of more than 30 years, Rader communicated 19 times to the media and police via letters, phone calls, packages, drawings, photos, and postcards—10 of those instances within the 11 months leading up to his arrest in 2005 (Gibson, 2006; Hansen, 2006). His first telephone call was made in October 1974 to a newspaper editor, directing him to a specific book in the Wichita Public Library (Guillen, 2002, p. 59). He went silent for more than two decades before resurfacing with a letter to media after *The Wichita Eagle* posted a story about how after 30 years, the police were no closer to catching the killer. Ironically, it was his final communication about a year later that led to the discovery of his identity through hidden properties on a floppy disk that he sent to the local TV station, and it led to his arrest (Rosen, 2014). James Alan Fox, a renowned criminologist who has studied

serial killers for 35 years, spoke to *Dateline* (James Fox, 2013) about why he believes serial killers like Dennis Rader reach out to the police:

“He felt invincible. Unstoppable. And that’s why serial killers do communicate with the police—it’s not because they want to invite capture; it’s because they feel that the police are no match for their skill; their cunning; their stardom; their brilliance. So what often happens among serial killers is that they get so cocky and they make a mistake.”

Most serial killers choose to keep their activities and identities out of the media by not reaching out to the police or the media (Fox & Levin, 2015). In addition to Rader, there have been only a few prime examples of serial killers in the United States reaching out to taunt and communicate with the police and news media over the last 50 years (Howell, 2007). The “Zodiac Killer” in the 1960s and 1970s, who was never captured, sent cryptic, coded messages to local newspapers to taunt the media and police in San Francisco; David Berkowitz, the “Son of Sam” killer of New York, would leave letters for the police (Howell, 2007). In both instances, the police used the media to send strategic, coded messages to the killers in an attempt to elicit responses that could contain clues as to their identities.

Although it is relatively rare for the police to speak to suspects through the conduit of the news media, there have been some cases in which police officials have been successful in this approach. In addition to Rader, investigators have reached out to several serial and mass killers around the country using the media, including the DC snipers and Berkowitz (Butterfield & Flynn, 2002). The majority of the content of many of the communications between serial killers and the police or the media are intentionally kept from the public, as the police and media are careful about what information they publish. This police practice and culture often is attributed to a history of keeping *polygraph keys*, meaning referring to key facts from an investigation are

kept secret so the unpublished information can be used for polygraph testing to verify whether someone being held and questioned is, in fact, the killer. This way, only the investigators and the killer would have knowledge of those key, unpublished facts (Chavez & Gibson, 2004; Guillen, 2002).

### **How Media Coverage May Appeal to Serial Killers**

Although it is common for criminals to gloat and boastfully share about their crimes to friends or family, this often is not the case with serial murderers. While many of these killers instead choose to remain silent, Helfgott (2015) says that a small handful—Dennis Rader in particular—relish and seek publicity to bring themselves glory, attention, and fame:

Perhaps one of the best recent examples of this convergence of influences is the BTK killer, Dennis Rader. Here is someone who tortured and murdered 10 people over a 30 year period, all the while watching his own crimes in the media. Driven by deviant sexual fantasy, sadism, psychopathy, and narcissism...and some might say the cultural lore of the brilliant serial killer, he followed his own crimes in the news, studied criminal justice to stay a step ahead of investigators, and was caught only because he decided to contact the media himself because there was too long of a lull in media attention to his crimes. Even at his sentencing where he received 10 consecutive life sentences, he gave a 30 minute speech that sounded like an acceptance speech for an academy award (p. 49).

Fox and Levin (2015) point to Donald Harvey as another example of a killer who finds the illumination of the media spotlight appealing and irresistible. Harvey, a serial killer who confessed to killing many patients while working as a nurse's aide at several Cincinnati-area hospitals, agreed to be interviewed by Oprah Winfrey for a segment of her talk show about nurses who kill patients. When the show's producers realized that he was receiving pleasure



from describing the details about the murders of his patient victims, they decided to cancel the program, thereby depriving the killer of his chance to receive recognition on national TV (Fox & Levin, 2015).

Mike Aamodt (“World Wide Serial Killer,” 2015), a professor of industrial and organizational psychology at Radford University, points to the importance many killers place on the notoriety they receive from their crimes: “One of the things that you’ll find with organized serial killers is that real need for attention. They want to be in the media. They want to have a nickname—they want to have a good nickname.” Haggerty (2009) argues that serial killers and the media have a “symbiotic” relationship in that they benefit from one another (p. 174). Media organizations exploit and benefit the interests of the public in the topic, and killers look to the media to help them develop their identities (Fox & Levin, 2015).

CHAPTER THREE:  
THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

**Theoretical Perspectives in Literature**

Theoretical frameworks suggest key issues for researchers to address, and qualitative researchers allow the evidence to guide their interpretation of the content (Brennan, 2013). From a historical perspective of research about serial killers and the media, much of the literature this researcher discovered tend to analyze the phenomena from one or more of a handful of communications-related theoretical perspectives. Among these theories is media effects, which promotes the idea that people are vulnerable or susceptible to the consequences of viewing portrayals of violence in mass media, such as news or entertainment media, or that this type of news may result in bad effects in its audience (Callanan & Rosenberger, 2011; Ericson, Baranek & Chan, 1991; Helfgott, 2015; Jewkes, 2004; Meloy & Miller, 2011). This manuscript cannot effectively be approached from a media effects perspective because this researcher will conduct a textual thematic analysis and will not conduct a test or experiment to gain feedback from participants to understand the reactions or effects of the media on the various groups included in the study.

A few other theoretical perspectives considered by researchers include critical theory (Gibson, 2002), agenda setting theory (Gibson & Chavez, 2004) and its theoretical extension framing analysis, and cultural analysis (Easteal, Bartels, Nelson, & Holland, 2015; Weist, 2003; Weist, 2016). However, from the articles discovered through the literature review, none of them

appear to explore the same area of interest or explored related areas through cultural and frame analyses in conjunction with a uses and gratifications perspective. In this manuscript, this researcher will use this combined analytical approach to textual analysis to identify how the media represents the police, serial killers, media, and the public, and what the media reports them as receiving from their interactions with each other through this medium.

## **Cultural Studies**

The concept of culture describes the shared societal practices and meanings that human beings create based on their interpretive frameworks to help them understand the world (Hall, 1997). Kellner (1995) defines cultural studies as the study of popular, mass-mediated culture. However, there are some variations to cultural studies that involve theorists from Britain, North America, and Europe—each region with a different take on the approach (Gronbeck, Farrell, & Soukup, 1991). Jamaican-born cultural theorist Stuart Hall is considered one of the pioneers of British cultural studies in the mid-20th century as part of the University of Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which studied the representations and ideologies of ethnicity, gender, and class in culture texts and the effects of mass media (Durham & Kellner, 2012; Shepherd, 2014). Human thoughts and feelings in and of themselves are considered “systems of representation” (Hall, 1997, p. 4). Hall (1997) describes representation as “the production of meaning through language” and identifies three approaches to defining it as being reflective, intentional, or constructionist in nature (pp. 15-6). Representations will be discussed more in the Frame Analysis section of this manuscript.

Existing within many cultures is a form of mass media, which Weist (2016) describes as being the conveyer of messages within those cultures. Through its selective emphasis, treatment, and presentation of people and phenomena, the press interprets and reflects the process of social

change within a society (Hall, 1975). Kellner (1995) describes the emergence of a media-oriented culture that helps people to create an understanding of their individual self-identities, values, and places within the world, yet also is commercial in nature. The stories published by the media “provide the symbols, myths, and resources which help constitute a common culture” (Kellner, 1995, p.1). Wuthnow, Hunter, Bergesen, and Kurzweil (1984) recognize one of the primary objectives of cultural analysis is to identify regularities or patterns and what makes them meaningful. People living within a specified culture share ideas and images that enable them to perceive the world and interpret it in similar ways, sharing what can be thought of as “cultural codes” (Hall, 1997, p. 4). It is through the manner in which people say what they think and feel—their interpretive frameworks—that gives those things or messages meaning (Hall, 1997).

### **Frame Analysis**

The concept of frame analysis pertains to the context through which information is being represented or perceived. Tankard (2001) defines framing as “a central organizing idea for news content that supplies a context and suggests what the issue is through the use of selection, emphasis, exclusion, and elaboration” (p. 100). Scholars often attribute the concept of representation and the theoretical frame to sociologist Erving Goffman, whose many publications include “The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life” and “Frame Analysis” (Smith, 1999). Goffman (1974) primarily identifies a frame in terms based on the two-part definition by anthropologist Gregory Bateson (p. 7). Bateson (1987) defines frames as cognitive models that help people interpret messages, and as “metacommunications,” or messages about messages. In a nutshell, frames are the ways through which audiences receive and interpret messages; it relates to what information or context the communicator, such as a journalist, includes when presenting phenomena. From that definition, Goffman’s (1974) frame analysis refers to “the

examination in these terms of the organization of experience” (p. 11). Volkmer (2009) recognizes framing theory as a way not only to define how different media organizations present a story but also helps to detect journalistic biases.

Goffman (1974) identifies the theatrical frame as a representation of life in terms of a performance that turns individuals into stage performers for the engagement of an audience. Essentially, the people represented within the story all play a role. Following this ideology, newspapers like *The Wichita Eagle* serve as the stage upon which the reported phenomena take place—in the case of this study, the murders committed by serial killers like Dennis Rader, and the subsequent investigation of the crimes by law enforcement. The analysis will explore how the newspaper reporters frame the coverage of the murders, as well as the victims, killer, police, the media organizations themselves, and members of the public through their representation of the phenomena. Dennis Rader, the law enforcement investigating him, the media itself, and the public are all actors within this form of theater. For this manuscript, this researcher will seek to understand the representations of Rader, law enforcement, media, and other individuals and groups as reported in sample articles from *The Wichita Eagle*.

## **Uses and Gratifications**

This manuscript aims to examine the potential impact of news media coverage of serial killers as reported in the media from a combined frame analysis and uses and gratifications theoretical approach. This research will explore the ways in which the different groups—the police, killers, media, and public—are represented within the articles, as well as how these groups are reported to interact and use the media to achieve some form of gratification. The concept of uses and gratifications theory promotes the idea that media users choose the content they wish to consume and the media they use on a daily basis according to the specific needs

they wish to gratify (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011; Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). They are active, discriminating consumers of media, not passive, and they use media to achieve their goals (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011). Sociologist Elihu Katz often is viewed as one of the first to help the uses and gratifications concept turn away from the “hypodermic needle” or magic bullet theory, which viewed the audience as passive participants in the viewing process (Brown, Lauricella, Douai, & Zaidi, 2012), to instead view them as active participants and focus on the types of gratifications the audience received. The theory truly got its start in the 1940s with lesser-known researchers like Herta Herzog (Littlejohn & Foss, 2011) but interest waned for a few decades before eventually experiencing a revival during the 1960s and 1970s. According to Katz, Blumler and Gurevitch (1974), there are at least three distinct sources of audience gratifications: media content, media exposure, and “social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media” (p. 24).

Some members of the public may consume mass media content about serial killers to understand the threat in their community, perhaps to get tips on how to stay safe or to get updates about the situation. Others may tune in to get more of the morbid or salacious details about the killings to satisfy their curiosity or fascination, or because it may inspire them. But consumers of the media are not just members of the public but also the police and serial killers whose actions are creating the news. Several examples of serial killers who used the media for their own devices include “Jack the Ripper,” David Berkowitz, the “Zodiac Killer,” and Dennis Rader. In addition to seeking fame, the “Zodiac Killer” and Rader sought to achieve power over investigators and the cities they held in terror.

## CHAPTER FOUR:

### METHODS

When determining their approach to research, social scientists often fall into primarily quantitative or qualitative camps (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2013). Creswell (2013) defines quantitative research as “the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem” (p. 44). It is exploratory in nature, and researchers use it with the goal of helping to explain the world around the studied subject(s) or phenomena (Guest, Namey, & Mitchell, 2013). Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, and McCroskey (2013) describe quantitative research as a scientific approach that attempts to provide theories or generalizations relating to communication. For this manuscript, the researcher has chosen a primarily qualitative approach with quantitative data to provide deductive data and inductive perspectives as well to attempt to answer the questions outlined in this manuscript. Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014) recognize this type of mixed-methods research as that which “integrates both qualitative and quantitative data and analyses for a more multidimensional approach to inquiry” (p. 8).

Identifying the concept of “text” is integral to the qualitative research method of textual analysis, as it describes more than written content (Brennen, 2013). Hall (1975) identifies texts as “literary and visual constructs, employing symbolic means, shaped by rules, conventions and traditions intrinsic to the use of language in its widest sense” (p. 17). Qualitative textual thematic analysis is an approach that enables a researcher to analyze or explore a problem and

collect data through a variety of methods to identify any underlying themes or patterns (Creswell, 2013). A theme is something significant in the data and represents a form of meaning based what the researcher determines to be significant (Braun & Clark, 2006). Themes may appear prevalently or relatively little in a data set, but they may capture some important element of the studied phenomena or subjects within a specified context (Braun & Clark, 2006). This approach allows researchers to use ideas and concepts drawn from a variety of sources including interviews and written texts (Rosenberry & Vicker, 2009). It begins with the researcher's broad assumptions and open-ended research questions to direct the collection and analysis of a variety of data, which is then represented and discussed with comparisons to other literature and perspectives (Creswell, 2013). The benefit of utilizing a qualitative method is that more in-depth information will become known about a phenomenon; however, it will not be generalizable to the overall population as the resulting data would be from a quantitative study (Jackson, Drummond, & Camara, 2007).

The purpose for using thematic analysis in this manuscript is to attempt to identify the themes and categories being represented by reporters at *The Wichita Eagle*, and the representation of the various parties featured in the articles relating to Dennis Rader and his victims. Creswell (2013) identifies themes as "broad units of information that consist of several codes aggregated to form a common idea" (p. 186). The identified themes in the text, therefore, are derived from carefully reading and re-reading the text. From the many existing forms of thematic analysis, this researcher has chosen to align her approach with some of the thematic analysis strategies outlined by Braun and Clark (2006), Creswell (2013), and Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014).



Steps of thematic analysis begin with the researcher organizing the articles for analysis, then reading and re-reading them to become familiar with the analyzed data. This process helps the researcher understand the material and will help to inform the early stages of the thematic analysis and to write notes (Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2013). The next steps pertain to the generation of initial codes that will help the researcher identify interesting pieces of latent or semantic content that may be contained within the data and help her to organize them into meaningful groups and themes (Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2013). In lieu of counting codes to determine how often they appear within data, Creswell (2013) said counting codes would convey “a quantitative orientation of magnitude and frequency contrary to qualitative research” and that there would be an expectation that “all codes should be given equal emphasis, and it disregards that the passages coded may actually represent contradictory views” (p. 185). When the coding is complete, the researcher analyzes the identified codes, sorting them into a group of overarching themes (Braun & Clark, 2006). This collating and organizing of the codes into potential themes involves focusing at a broader level to take what often results in a long list of codes and determining where they best fit within the families of themes. This use of qualitative research is highly interpretive (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014), as the researcher is attempting to make sense of and determine the greater meaning of the analyzed data or phenomena (Creswell, 2013). It involves writing an analysis of each of the individual themes, identifying and discussing each theme and how it fits into the broader picture (Braun & Clark, 2006).

Once the interpretation of data is complete, the researcher moves on to the task of representing the data and creating the report to support and validate the analysis for the manuscript’s audience (Braun & Clark, 2006; Creswell, 2013; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña,

2014). Some of the methods include the inclusion of key examples that demonstrate the points made within the report (Braun & Clark, 2006). Creswell (2013) also points to the use of some form of visuals within the report, such as comparison tables, and Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña (2014) points to the usefulness of graphs, charts, or other visual illustrations. Ultimately, each of the identified themes and the data extracts link back to the original research question(s) that the researcher is attempting to answer (Braun & Clark, 2006).

The additional use of quantitative research in this manuscript aims to provide additional support of the research and to provide another means through which to study the subject matter. The currently accepted understanding of quantitative research methods, or scientific methods, used by researchers dates back to René Descartes and Sir Francis Bacon, later defined by Charles Sanders Pierce, with the earliest variations reaching back as far as ancient Egypt and Greece (Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey, 2013). Wrench, Thomas-Maddox, Richmond, & McCroskey (2013) credit the birth of the scientific method to the optics-related research by scientist Ibn al-Haytham a millennium ago, as his work detailed seven steps for conducting experiments.

According to Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), the general benefits that quantitative analyses provide include experimentation, generalizability, measurability, and a plethora of statistical tools. They outline three approaches to including quantitative data in mixed-methods research: 1) “quantitizing” qualitative information that can be counted or otherwise converted into scales or ranks for measurement; 2) comparing qualitative textual data with numerical data; and 3) designing a quantitatively-based study that involves combinations of research methods (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014, p. 43). The first approach will most closely align with the research method this researcher will utilize in the quantitative content analysis research for this

study. Neuendorf (2002) describes content analysis as “a summarizing, quantitative analysis of messages that relies on the scientific method (including attention to objectivity-intersubjectivity, a priori design, reliability, validity, generalizability, replicability, and hypothesis testing)” (p. 10). It applies to a number of areas in inquiry and contexts (Neuendorf, 2002). The assessed variables in the analysis for this manuscript will be discussed more in-depth in the Data Collection section.

The content for this mixed-methods study is from the website of the local Kansas news publication, *The Wichita Eagle*, formerly known as *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, which extensively covered the news about Dennis Rader’s serial murders during his 30-year span of murders. *The Wichita Eagle* was the main newspaper in the area to cover the murders committed by Dennis Rader. Another area publication, a startup weekly newspaper called the *Wichita Sun*, went out of business just two years after its launch in the mid-1970s. Because LexisNexis does not have articles from *The Wichita Eagle* or the *Wichita Sun* available in its online database, the researcher used *The Wichita Eagle*’s newspaper’s website and purchased an online subscription to run searches through its online search database.

### **Data Collection**

While searching for all entries (stories, videos, and online photo galleries) on *The Wichita Eagle* website’s online database (www.kansas.com), the initial search returned 256 results for “Dennis Rader” and 371 results for “BTK”—nearly a 45% higher rate for the latter search term. When searching only for stories, it returned 249 results for “Dennis Rader” and 360 results for “BTK.” The stories range from re-publications of the original 1970s articles about some of the murders to articles published as recently as Fall 2016—more than 10 years after Rader’s capture by the police. Due to time constraints for this project, and to limit the scale of the study, the

number of articles analyzed for this project was limited to a total of 120 articles. The 120 articles pertaining to Rader and his victims were randomly selected from the newspaper's website to serve as the sample population. The articles, which cover a span of 42 years, are organized chronologically and analyzed in an attempt to identify and explain any significance in media coverage and how the killer, police, and public used the represented media, and how the media used itself to achieve goals. The research divided the articles' authors into 25 unique author IDs. The author IDs include individual authors, combinations of two or three authors who collaborated on individual stories, and the writer or writers who are identified only as "Eagle Staff." There also were additional articles that did not include any mentions of an author of staff in the bylines by *The Wichita Eagle*.

## **Procedure**

The articles were placed into individual text documents and run through Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software using its standard LIWC2015 internal dictionary to identify word count and sentiment. Beyond that, this researcher created a set of custom dictionaries that were uploaded to LIWC to determine any significance in the number of times Rader was identified by his legal name, variations of his self-proclaimed moniker, as well as other terms such as killer, monster, or murderer in the stories or headlines. Additionally, the researcher created a mixed-methods code book that included several specific qualitative and quantitative content components to assess in each article, which include: The name(s) and description(s) of victims (name[s], age[s], sex[es], race[s] of the victim[s]; relationship[s] of victims, and other descriptions of victims); the number of victim(s) killed or injured by Rader; how the author refers to the killer (name [Dennis Rader, Rader, or a variation of his given name]; moniker [BTK or BTK Strangler]); specifying what channel of communication the killer used

(no communications mentioned/does not specify an organization; KAKE-TV; *The Wichita Eagle* or variations of its name; the *Wichita Sun*; Wichita Police Department; the “media” [generic not identifying a particular organization]; multiple media organizations; Wichita Police Department and one or more media organizations); the method of communication (no communications mentioned, written or mailed correspondences, telephone calls, written and telephone communications); and whether the killer was directly quoted or paraphrased in the article.

### **Coding Scheme**

Additionally, a preliminary reading of the first 50 chronologically-ordered articles was conducted in Fall 2016 with a goal to identify any themes or categories for a research methods class project. This first step of the process involved reading over each article and was followed by the second step of re-reading each article, line-by-line, to manually code each article to identify any significant statements and themes derived from the content. The purpose of this approach is to provide the researcher with time to absorb the information and have an opportunity to glean new insights perhaps missed during the first read. These themes were then examined and reduced into clusters and then narrowed further into overarching categories for the purpose of this analysis. The objective of this deductive data-based approach analysis is to provide a basis for understanding and interpreting any underlying codes, themes, or categories that may exist within the represented text. In the case of the first 50 articles, several major categories were identified: Victims and Their Representations in the Media, Suspected Motives and Victim Selection, Victims’ Families and Friends, The Killer, The Killer’s Communications and Interactions with the Public, Investigators and Media; Police and Investigators; The Media; and The Public’s Responses and Reactions. These categories were then applied to the remaining sample articles for study and to determine whether any additional categories and themes would

be derived from the remaining sample content. The resulting findings and any changes made to the categories will be discussed in chapter five.

## CHAPTER FIVE:

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 120 articles collected from *The Wichita Eagle* website for this study, 95% were written after the publication of a January 17, 2004 print article (posted on the website with a date of March 24, 2004) that detailed the release of an upcoming book about the BTK serial killer who, at that time, remained at large after 30 years. The analyzed articles showed that it was the publication of this article that reportedly led the killer to break his 16-year silence and reach out once again to the Wichita Police Department and the media (Potter, 2005b). Moreover, 63.33% of the 120 articles sampled were written after Rader's reported capture and arrest in February 2005. For this study sample, the shortest article was 115 words, including only the body copy and headline, whereas the largest sampled article constituted 6,612 words, totaling an average of 1,076.5 words per article. Articles published prior to Dennis Rader's capture averaged 869 words per article, whereas the articles published after his capture and arrest averaged 1,196 words per article.

While conducting the qualitative analysis of this case study of newspaper articles, a number of themes and significant concepts were drawn from those articles and are broken down into major categories in Table 1. The categories include: Representations of Victims in the Media; Reported Suspected Motives and Victim Selection; Victims' Families and Friends; Representations of the Killer's Family in the Media; Representations of the Killer in the Media; Representations of the Killer's Communications in the Media; Representations of the Police,

Investigators; Representations of Media in the Media; and Reported Responses, Reactions of the Public. The following sections of this manuscript chapter will break down some of these categories for discussion of some of the themes.

**Table 1.** Major Categories of the News Articles Featured in *The Wichita Eagle*.

Major Categories	Associated Themes or Concepts
Representations of the Victims in the Media	Varied identification of victims; victims sometimes identified by their relationship to another person rather than by name; victims not well-known by neighbors; victims may have known killer; some victims' backgrounds considered for cause of death; media-reported treatment of victims by killer; different attention focused on female versus male victims; different injuries to female versus male victims; male victims appear to have been roadblocks; murders showcase sexual overtones but not rape; victims include men, women and children; victims range in age, ethnicity, and marital status; some victims complied with killer's demands, others fought back; victims viewed as projects, objects by killer; coverage focused mainly on murder methods; families, friends recall victims
Reported Suspected Motives and Victim Selection	Robbery; mistaken identity of victims; killings mostly are not random; killer discovers victims while "trolling" neighborhoods; stalked victims, planned attacks; killer seeks control victims, to engage in sexual fetishism, BDSM; motivated by sexual fantasies; boredom; frustration with lack of employment; one victim not original target; killer targeted older women when he aged; thought he no longer could fight younger women; killer thought Latina women were attractive; killer outlines codes, guidelines for victim selection
Representations of the Victims' Families and Friends in the Media	Families discover victims' bodies, in some cases; injured brother sought help, survived attack; families' lives are forever changed; families still angry at killer years later; families confident killer would be caught; surviving male victim provides accurate description to authorities; witnesses relive murders throughout lives; witnesses believe killer would have killed them if he had the chance; unrelated children of victims develop friendship through loss; specific scents trigger memories of murders for son of victim; victims' families experience relief after killer's capture; seek answers; view killer as a monster; file lawsuits against Rader; seek to prevent killer from profiting from crimes
Representations of the Killer's Family in the Media	Descriptions of family life; wife viewed as clueless Christian by public; wife temporarily left Wichita area after arrest; son and daughter are intelligent, well educated; police portray Rader family as some of Rader's victims; Rader's kids had normal childhoods; family unaware Rader was killer; wife, daughter initially defend killer; family doubts killer's innocence; daughter compares personal memories to BTK timeline; daughter feels angry, violated by police; daughter's DNA was used to link killer to murders; family feels exploited; daughter fears father used family for murder cover story; family hounded by local, national media; description of daughter; daughter shares physical characteristics with father; wife divorces Rader; family avoids media; Rader's mother receives crank calls; family dreads a public trial; treated by police as victims; daughter grateful to police; daughter cares about, angry at father; daughter is glad father is incarcerated; daughter waits years to speak to media; family suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder; son in aftermath; daughter sought professional help; daughter turned to family, faith for strength; daughter breaks nearly decade-long media silence to speak out against novelist; daughter makes distinction between killer and father; daughter struggles to forgive father, still cares about him; daughter disturbed by father's psychopathy; daughter occasionally writes to father; family has not visited killer in prison



<b>Table 1 (Continued)</b>	
<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Associated Themes or Concepts</b>
Representations of the Killer's Family in the Media	Descriptions of family life; wife viewed as clueless Christian by public; wife temporarily left Wichita area after arrest; son and daughter are intelligent, well educated; police portray Rader family as some of Rader's victims; Rader's kids had normal childhoods; family unaware Rader was killer; wife, daughter initially defend killer; family doubts killer's innocence; daughter compares personal memories to BTK timeline; daughter feels angry, violated by police; daughter's DNA was used to link killer to murders; family feels exploited; daughter fears father used family for murder cover story; family hounded by local, national media; description of daughter; daughter shares physical characteristics with father; wife divorces Rader; family avoids media; Rader's mother receives crank calls; family dreads a public trial; treated by police as victims; daughter grateful to police; daughter cares about, angry at father; daughter is glad father is incarcerated; daughter waits years to speak to media; family suffers with post-traumatic stress disorder; son struggles in aftermath; daughter sought professional help; daughter turned to family, faith for strength; daughter breaks nearly decade-long media silence to speak out against novelist; daughter makes distinction between killer and father; daughter struggles to forgive father, still cares about him; daughter disturbed by father's psychopathy; daughter occasionally writes to father; family has not visited killer in prison
Representations of the Killer in the Media	Represented at times as a monster or a boogeyman; background of killer; often reported as not identifiable by witnesses due to varying descriptions; represented as patient, methodical, prepared, fast-thinking, unpredictable, and narcissistic; showcases a wry, taunting sense of humor; self-identifies as a serial killer; seeks to achieve fame, celebrity status; follows his own crimes in the media; compares himself to other serial killers, has super killer "heroes" he strives to be like; views self as James Bond, spy-type persona; believes himself to be superior to police; exhibits some and rejects other known serial killer traits; modus operandi (M.O.) changed, evolved; evades capture for decades; unusually long periods between last known kills, communications, and reemergence; described by a surviving victim as 5-foot-10 white man with a mustache and dark brown or black hair; motivated by sexual bondage fantasies, roleplay; dehumanizes victims; engages in cross-dressing, roleplay, bondage on himself; stalks victims, plans attacks; killer's techniques, planning evolve; dishonesty: fantasizes about murders; uses a ruse or lie to trick some victims into compliance; uses a gun to coerce some victims into compliance; seeks to control situations, loses control of situations with some victims; adaptive to unexpected circumstances; portrays himself as caring about victims; police investigation; takes keepsakes from victims, shoots photographs of some bodies; sends evidence to police, media; dishonesty: killer lies to and misleads his family during the 30 years of murders and communications; uses family relationships, roles in community, and education to commit murders; son of victims believes killer did not act alone; killer sexually stimulated while killing women, children; plans attack on 11th victim before capture, arrest; killer linked to murders by DNA; feigns inexperience as reason for repeated strangling of victims; said he wanted to kill law enforcement; fearful of being caught by police; police say killer sought advice from cybercops for sending anonymous emails; sought to evolve to electronic communications; trusted police to be honest; candid with police after arrest; viewed himself as colleague of police; attempts to present himself how he wants to be seen; seeks to tell autobiography on his own terms; killer has numerous social obligations; killer's flaws later emphasized in reports: misspellings, typos, mistakes at crime scenes, clumsiness; views murders as about himself, not victims; uses court testimony to boast about murders; relives crimes through court testimony; portrayed as getting away with murder as being "lucky;" admits to murders not previously linked to killer; shows no remorse, proud of crimes; almost blames victims for their deaths; portrays himself as caring for his family, defends them in communications to media; signed over his media rights to families of victims

<b>Table 1 (Continued)</b>	
<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Associated Themes or Concepts</b>
Representations of the Killer's Communications in the Media	Communications primarily consist of letters, phone calls, emails, packages; seek to promote publicity and celebrityization; help him create his signature name or moniker; provide glimpse into personality, egocentric in nature; serve as killer's platform; taunt investigators and the media; provide graphic, detailed descriptions of some of the murders; attempt to create shock value; communications disgust police; plagiarize poems; praise other killer's murders; dishonesty: killer lies to and misdirects police and media in his communications; taunt citizens through correspondences; claim victims and send evidence of murders; communications cease for about 25 years; killer sought new means for communications; killer's communications lead to eventual identification, capture, and arrest
Representations of the Police, Investigators in the Media	Police fearful of killer; change living, sleeping habits; seek to protect their families; multiple law enforcement agencies collaborated on investigation; collaborate with the media; reach out to, communicate with killer through media; used local media: held public news conferences, subtly crafted messages to appeal to killer's ego; police strategy to spur killer to communicate with hope he would make mistake; built trust with killer through communications; lied to killer to facilitate capture; cooperate with library and members of the public; withhold select information from the public; remind public to exercise caution; re-test evidence in old BTK cases, cold cases; technological advances aid investigation; multiple generations of police officers, detectives involved in BTK murder investigations; police hypothesize Rader may have killed more people; career progression of investigators; description and backgrounds of lead task force investigator, four colleagues; lead investigator achieved national fame through investigation; lead investigator humble; police sought to embarrass killer; dismiss killer as pseudo-intellectual, egotistical
Representations of Media in the Media	Collaborate with investigators; communicate with killer; report on investigation, murders; inform the public about a serial killer; media attention wanes when killer disappears; killer's resurfacing draws local, national and international media interest; media contribute to megaspectacle; reporters rush to report, do not always verify accuracy of victims' information; hung up on a number of killer's calls to report communications; publishes list of common serial killer characteristics; refer to serial killer characteristics, traits in articles; asks court to unseal list of witnesses' names, publishes full list; take and report questions from the public; emphasize killer's shortcomings (poor spelling and grammar, mistakes); BTK murders inspire short stories, books, TV news and radio interviews, video documentaries, and movies; helps killer remain relevant
Reported Responses, Reactions of the Public	Curious about murders, killer's background; attempts to assist in investigation; pranksters inspired to taunt fellow citizens pretending to be killer; give false confessions; react to news about killer; fearful of killer; area women change daily habits, exercise extra caution; many Wichita men bought guns and taught their wives, daughters and younger sisters how to use them; seek more information, answers; fearful killer targeted them; skepticism of BTK's return after hiatus; younger generation does not understand reason for fear; many more curious about than fearful of killer; respond en mass to police call for information; demands openness from police; public is critical of the Wichita Police Department; public expresses mixed reactions when killer is arrested; public surprised killer is normal, average; some annoyed by media coverage interrupting TV schedules; public compelled to watch trial; emailed messages of support to relative of murder victims; treat houses of the victims and the killer as landmarks; disbelief at identity of killer; public facination with BTK trial extends to national level; make crank calls to killer's family; some of public insensitive to Rader's family, others show sensitivity, compassion; seek to play roles of killer, victims in TV documentary; media to stop giving killer publicity so community can heal; write to killer in jail; woman befriends Rader in jail, seeks to write book; another writes book with Rader

Table 2 provides an overarching summary of some of the themes derived from the content in the newspaper articles. With regard to the 10 murder victims, they often are objectified and dehumanized by media and the killer in their representations. Their descriptions often are in the context of their murders, the positioning of their bodies, or how the killer recalled their final moments. In the case of the first four victims, the Otero family, their international backgrounds were initially considered the potential cause for their murders.

One of the most poignant themes regarding Rader, both as a killer and as a human being, is deception. He lived a double life as a serial killer unbeknownst to his family, living as the firm but loving Christian father and husband on one side and stalking and murdering his victims on the other. Rader tricked many of his victims into compliance either by using a ruse or lying to them. Rader deceived the police and media, misleading them and misrepresenting himself through his communications and his projected self-representations. Table 4 and the Representations of the Killer in the Media section of the manuscript include additional discussion and detailed information about Dennis Rader as a person.

More information about these groups of themes and related information will be discussed in some of the following sections of this manuscript.

**Table 2.** Summary Table of Overarching Themes for Select Major Categories.

<b>Major Categories</b>	<b>Overarching Themes</b>
Portrayal of Victims	Description of murder victims; objectification of victims by media and killer; inaccuracies of victims' information; females are intended victims; motivations for murders
BTK as Killer	Evolving descriptions of killer; fantasies, sexual fetishism; use of deception with victims, media, and police; highly communicative; desire for celebritization
BTK as Human	Descriptions of Rader; model citizen; trustworthy, dependable; good father and husband; notable Christian
Law Enforcement Portrayals	Descriptions of investigators from the Wichita Police Department; responsibility to protect their families and the public collaboration with media; strategic communications with killer via media; advancements in technology
Media Portrayals	Collaboration with the police; killer provided with celebritization; communication with killer; responsibility to public

*RQ1: How are the police, serial killer, and victims represented? How are the first two reported as using news media, and what are they reported as getting out of it?*

To address the first part of the research question, the researcher first read through the 120 articles, re-read them, coded them into associated themes or concepts, and sorted them by category with overarching themes. The representations of victims, killer, and police all differ drastically, and their sections below will discuss examples of these representations. These sections also will discuss the representations of how investigators and the serial killer use the news media, and what they get out of the engagements.

**Representations of the Victims in the Media**

As represented in the assessed articles, 10 victims are known to have been murdered by Dennis Rader between 1974 and 1991, with the majority killed between 1974 and 1979. These 10 individuals are his only known murder victims to date. The descriptions of who the victims were as people when they were alive—as represented in the analyzed articles—are showcased in Table 3. As a note: Kevin Bright, brother of Kathryn Bright, will not be included in the table of murder victims because he was not the intended victim and ultimately survived BTK’s attack.

**Table 3.** The Known Murder Victims of Dennis Rader.

<b>Victim Order</b>	<b>Date of Murder</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Description of Victim</b>
1	January 15, 1974	Joseph Otero	38	A burly, retired Air Force Master Sergeant technician and flight instructor; had air commando training; during his Air Force service, he served primarily in the Panama Canal Zone and his native Puerto Rico before retiring in 1973; family was most important to him
1	January 15, 1974	Julie Otero	33	Worked on a Coleman assembly line, terminated due to layoffs; described as a good employee; she knew judo and saw to it her kids learned self-defense; wanted to die peacefully in her sleep
1	January 15, 1974	Joseph Otero II or Joseph Otero Jr.	9	A 4th-grade student; described as handsome; adored by girls; “knew how to throw a grown man down with a judo move;” a good student

<b>Victim Order</b>	<b>Date of Murder</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Description of Victim</b>
1	January 15, 1974	Josephine “Josie” Otero	11	A 6th-grade student; described as beautiful and thin with long hair. She drew, painted and wrote poems; could be emotional; trained in judo; a good student
5	April 4, 1974	Kathryn Bright	21	Worked on the same assembly line at Coleman as Julie Otero; killer described her as a “sweet kid;” just co-signed for a house loan with brother; no other descriptions given
6	March 17, 1977	Shirley Vian Relford	25	Mother of three young children; she had been feeling ill the morning of her murder; no other descriptions given
7	December 9, 1977	Nancy Jo Fox	25	Worked full time as a secretary at a construction company, part time as an office worker at Helzberg Jeweler’s; described by neighbors as a “loner” who seldom entertained friends; described by a coworker as witty, friendly, and good with children; she lived alone; described by killer as feisty, intriguing
8	April 27, 1985	Marine Hedge	53	“A real cute little woman” who played Bingo; neighbor of Rader who lived six houses away from killer; enjoyed gardening; she worked at Wesley Medical Center; a grandmother; physically small in stature
9	September 16, 1986	Vicki Wegerle	28	A wife and mother; volunteer babysitter at St. Andrew’s Lutheran Church and Asbury United Methodist Church; played piano;
10	January 19, 1991	Dolores “Dee” Davis	62	Aside from her age and how she was killed, no other descriptions given about the victim

In journalism, it is the role of a reporter to assemble and verify facts, and thereby serve as an authenticator of information (Kovach & Rosenstiel, 2014). However, in several of the articles (Potter & Laviana, 2005; “Police: BTK is arrested,” 2005; “Rader used scouts,” 2005), information as critical as the surname of the Otero family and first name of Dolores Davis were misspelled—for example, the Oteros were referred to as the “Otters” and Dolores as “Delores.” Additionally, Vicki Wegerle’s first and last names were misspelled in separate articles as “Vickie” and “Wagerle” (“BTK Author,” 2004; Potter, 2005b). Reports of the ages of Julie Otero, Josephine Otero, Joseph Otero II, Shirley Vian Relford, and Dolores Davis were incorrect in several articles—Relford, for example, was listed as ages 24 and 26 when she was, in fact, 25 (Sylvester, 2005b; Finger, 2005a; Gruver, 2005), and the two Otero children’s ages were

swapped (“BTK case unsolved,” 2004) or were the wrong ages altogether. Lastly, the victims’ dates of death also sometimes varied from story to story.

In the assessed articles, the victims appear to be mentioned most frequently in the context of how they were murdered, that BTK murdered them, and how the killer represents the murders taking place in his communications as detailed through the Wichita Police Department. The most in-depth report (“Victims’ Children,” 1974) about who some of the victims were as individuals was one of the earliest published articles about the Otero family back in 1974—before the media announced the BTK serial killer was stalking the area. While the article did discuss information about their murders, it also focused on discussing who they were when they were alive with information about their backgrounds and what they were like as individuals. Table 2 includes some of that information. Some of the victims’ limited identifying information also included their residential addresses.

In addition to his 10 victims, Rader spoke about targeting and stalking dozens of other victims—or what he referred to as “projects” or “hits” (“Dennis Rader’s testimony,” 2005; Wenzl, 2016a). One such potential victim, Anna Williams, a 63-year-old widow, reportedly received an envelope containing a poem, drawing, clothing, and jewelry stolen during a recent break-in at her home. Rader, portrayed as intending for Williams to become his eighth victim, broke into her house while she was out and waited for her to return home (Laviana, 2004b; Laviana & Woods, 2004; Finger, 2004a). When she did not return, the newspaper reported that the killer said he became bored and left, electing to mail her the envelope and its contents six weeks later. Rader also is portrayed as enjoying the harassment of the surviving relative of unrelated murder victims. Mary Fager, whose husband, Phillip, and two daughters were murdered in the area while she was out of town, received correspondence from Rader via his

moniker BTK (Laviana & Woods, 2004; “Excerpts,” 2005). The analyzed articles showcased Rader as writing to the widow about the killings without claiming responsibility for them. The articles represent Rader’s letter as praising the victims’ killer for the murders, and that with the letter he went as far as to send drawings of how he envisioned their murders occurred (Laviana & Woods, 2004; “Excerpts,” 2005). The articles report the letter stating, "I didn't kill your family but I admire the work" (Laviana, 2005a), further underscoring the depravity and dehumanization of murder victims by the killer.

### **Reported Suspected Motives and Victim Selection**

Based on information provided by law enforcement, the media published a number of speculated motives that spanned the gamut, often changing or contradicting previously published information from story to story. Some of these motives are as follows: the killer’s motives are unknown; the crimes may or may not have related to a robbery; the first victims may have been a case of mistaken identity, or that the Otero family’s past in Puerto Rico may have led to their deaths; and that the killings are random or, later, are not random (“Police baffled,” 1974, “Readers still want,” 2005; “Victims’ children,” 1974). As the articles progressed, the published potential motivations changed to portrayals relating to sexual pleasure, fantasies, power and control: the killer seeks control of victims and to engage in sexual fetishism and fantasies through bondage, dominance, sadism, and masochism (BDSM); the killer found Latina women attractive; some of the women were chosen and stalked for months; and others were merely alternative targets when a chosen target was not home (Laviana & Woods, 2004; Potter, 2005a; Potter, 2005c). The killer also credits something he refers to as “factor-X” for compelling him to kill, the same factor he says motivated other serials like the Son of Sam or Jack the Ripper (Laviana & Woods, 2004).

In one of his communication packages (Laviana, 2005b), Rader detailed what he referred to as the “BTK PJ Codes.” Essentially, these codes were what he considered guidelines for victim selection:

- Victim could be found alone
- Victim had a routine
- No males were present most of the time
- Victim was cute and of a preferred age; she had “the BTK Victim profile look”
- Killer could “blend in” in the neighborhood
- Victim appeared controllable under duress
- The home could be entered without someone noticing

The males who were killed or attacked by Rader—Joseph Otero, his youngest son, Joseph Otero II., and Kevin Bright—were later discovered to have merely been victims of circumstance: essentially, they were at the wrong place at the wrong time. They were road blocks to the killer achieving his goals of controlling his intended female victim or victims (Potter, 2005b).

The killer also would assign roles in his sexual fantasies to most of the victims—what he envisioned as his version of the afterlife. For the Otero family, Joseph would serve as his bodyguard; Julie would be his female bathroom servant who would bathe him; Josephine would be his “star young maiden” to whom he would teach sex and bondage; and Joseph Jr. would serve as his boy servant or sex valet (“Rader used scouts,” 2005; Sylvester, 2005d). Kathryn Bright would serve as his sex bondage girl (Sylvester, 2005d). Shirley Vian Relford would serve as his house servant to clean his home (“Police turn quiet,” 2004; Sylvester, 2005d). Nancy Fox would be his primary mistress (“Rader used scouts,” 2005) and Vicki Wegerle would be his



bondage slave woman (Sylvester, 2005d). The articles did not represent Marine Hedge and Dolores Davis as having assigned fantasy roles in Rader's vision of the afterlife. Sexual deviants are not uncommon among serial killers. Killing to achieve sexual fantasies or gratifications is one of the categories outlined as the primary motivations of serial killers during the Federal Bureau of Investigation's Behavioral Analysis Unit's San Antonio Symposium in 2006 (Hickey, 2010).

### **Representations of the Killer in the Media**

The representations of Dennis Rader—BTK initially—in the media have changed over time. Representations of the killer began in seemingly inflated or elevated ways—a monster or boogeyman preying upon Wichitans; someone who is playing God and outwits the police; someone who is highly methodical, organized, confident, and elusive to capture (Potter, 2004a; Wenzl, 2004). A commonality between many serial killers is that there often is a pattern to their crimes, such as the types of victims selected or the method or motives for the murders (Hickey, 2010). In Rader's case, he never stuck to one typology of victim—his victims spanned genders, ages, and races (Wenzl, 2016a). Nor did he follow the same approach to murder, varying his methods by hanging, strangling, and stabbing victims, and dumping two of the victims' bodies at other locations, which made it difficult for investigators to connect him from one murder to the next (Wenzl, 2016a). It also framed him as being intelligent (Wenzl, 2004).

These representations began to evolve over time, becoming less flattering frames or representations of Rader by the police and media. As the timeline of the articles progressed, he was portrayed in a variety of ways, both as narcissistic and egotistic, yet also as clumsy and making mistakes, and lacking the idealized control he sought with his victims (Wenzl, 2016a). In two cases, unexpected males were present when he attacked his intended female victims;

female victims that he thought he could easily control fought back; and unexpected phone calls or notifications from victims that people were coming to their houses altered his plans (Laviana & Woods, 2004; “Rader used scouts,” 2005; “Shirley Vian Relford,” 2005; Sylvester, 2005d). He provided the police with evidence linking him to the crimes through a voice recording of a 911 phone call, DNA evidence left at several crime scenes, and a computer floppy disk that contained properties data identifying him (Potter, 2005b; “Rader used scouts,” 2005; “Tape of BTK call,” 1979). Some articles portray Rader as showing no remorse for his crimes and being proud of them, even boasting about the murders in his communications to the police and media, in his court testimony, and in a book he assisted in creating (Sylvester, 2005b; Sylvester, 2005d; Wenzl, 2016a; Wenzl, 2016b; “Wichita Police Detail,” 2005). In others, he portrays himself as comforting some of the victims, bringing one a glass of water after she vomited, and by allowing a man who had recently been in a car accident to place a pillow under his head before tying him up and eventually strangling him to death (Finger, 2005b).

One representation of Rader is that he ceased killing for a few years after murdering five people in 1974 because he was preoccupied with family life and work (Wenzl, 2016a). However, his attention to his family or other responsibilities did not prevent him from continuing to stalk and later kill more victims. Additional representations include Rader using his own family’s photo as part of a ruse to trick the child of one victim before murdering her (Sylvester, 2005d). He also used his role as a Boy Scout volunteer as a cover for murder, slipping away from an event to murder a victim and return later with no one realizing he was gone (“Rader used scouts,” 2004). He stopped committing murders all together around the time he became a compliance officer for Park City—when he got a position of relative power within the

community (“Paula and Dennis Raders’ divorce,” 2005). Other descriptions of Dennis Rader, as reported in *The Wichita Eagle*, are included in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Representations of Dennis Rader as Described in *The Wichita Eagle*.

Name	Location	Roles	Other Descriptions of Dennis Rader
Dennis L. Rader, aka BTK (Bind, Torture, Kill)	El Dorado Correctional Facility; he used to live at 6220 Independence in Park City	<p><b>Family:</b> Husband; father/dad to a son and daughter; he also is a son, brother, and grandfather</p> <p><b>Community:</b> Lost his job at Cessna; worked at the Coleman factory; worked as an animal control officer and code compliance officer in Park City; served as church congregation president; former Boy Scout volunteer and leader</p>	<p>Oldest of four brothers; son of William and Dorothea Rader; grew up in the Wichita area but was baptized at a church in Pittsburg; described by a surviving victim as 5-foot-10 white man with a mustache and dark brown or black hair; now balding, thin and frail; enjoyed hobbies, including gardening and stamp collecting; enjoyed watching the serial killer-themed movie “Red Dragon” and reading Stephen King books; married Paula Dietz on May 22, 1971 when at age 26; committed his first known murder at age 29; killed last known victim at age 45; arrested at age 60; a church leader his minister could always count on; spent 31 years living in Park City; sounded cold, official and “brazen;” was someone upon whom the Christ Lutheran Church leaders could rely; qualities: quick-witted, organized, highly detail-oriented, arrogant, egotistical, self-confident, depraved, unfeeling, polite; lived two houses away from another convicted murderer; was eager to help police with an unrelated murder investigation; a subscriber to <i>The Wichita Eagle</i>; kept personal items and other collectibles as possible souvenirs for “murderabilia” sales (his hair clippings, razor, socks, other personal items); displayed cognitive dissonance; portrayed himself as caring about his family</p>

During his 30-year reign of terror in the Wichita area, Rader reached out nearly 20 times to several media organizations—most frequently to KAKE-TV and *The Wichita Eagle*. Table 4 showcases more detailed information about those communications. During one of his earliest letters, he communicated that he wanted to be identified as BTK—for variations of “bind them, torture them, kill them” or “bind, torture and kill” (“City’s ‘BTK Stranger’,” 1978; “Excerpts,” 2005; Laviana, 2005c). He also would sign some of his communications with an identifying symbol that consisted of the letters “B,” “T” and “K”—and sometimes the “B” would be designed to resemble women’s breasts (Potter, 2005b), showcasing his grotesque sense of humor and blatant sexual motivations. The first time he decided to make his BTK alter ego known, he

reached out to *The Wichita Eagle* (“City’s ‘BTK Strangler,’” 1978), which remained his primary media connection throughout the years. The articles analyzed showed that Dennis Rader, whom *The Wichita Eagle* reported to be a vigilant follower of the local news media and later turned out to be one of their news subscribers, was fixated with news coverage about his crimes and took a strong interest in other serial killers’ crimes as well (Potter, 2005c; “Still more answers,” 2005). He desired for the Wichita public to be afraid and not know if they were safe or where the killer could next strike (Tobias & Wenzl, 2005; Wenzl, 2004).

The newspaper reported that Rader had detailed knowledge of other serial killers (“BTK delivers,” 2004). Several articles represent Rader as looking up to several serial killer “heroes” that included Ted Bundy, John Wayne Gacy, H. H. Holmes, and Jack the Ripper—and that he wanted to achieve the fame of Bundy and planned to be like Jack the Ripper and remain uncaptured by authorities (Green, 2016; Wenzl, 2016a). Rader sought to control his victims and the police investigations of his crimes, sending false information to the media and police in an attempt to misdirect investigations (“Excerpts,” 2005; Laviana & Woods, 2004; Wenzl, 2004).

### **Representations of the Police, Investigators in the Media**

In addition to the Wichita Police Department, some of the other key organizations involved in the investigation and prosecution of Dennis Rader included the Kansas Bureau of Investigation, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, and the Sedgwick County District Attorney’s Office (Laviana, 2004a; “Letter—Possibly from BTK,” 2004; “Police turn quiet,” 2004; Sylvester, 2005d; Tanner, 2012). The analyzed articles represented the Wichita police in a variety of ways, including being stumped by the murders, fearful of the killer, uncertain about his motives, as being collaborative with the media in some articles and withholding information in others. Moreover, later representations of the police highlighted their highly strategic

approaches to the killer, scripting press conferences and briefings, information releases, and holding any questions from media during briefings. The Wichita Police Department created several task force teams, including one called the “Ghostbusters,” as part of their efforts to stop Rader from committing more murders and to bring him to justice (Finger, 2004b; Wenzl, 2006; Wenzl, 2012; Wenzl, 2014a;). Among some of the members of the original task force, and who was chosen to lead the final task force responsible for apprehending Rader, was Wichita Police Lieutenant Ken Landwehr (Wenzl, 2014a). Landwehr is discussed in a many of the articles and frequently is represented in a positive light as both a person and a professional investigator who cared deeply about the victims in every case he investigated. He, along with other key members of the task force, are portrayed in the sense of being heroes within the Wichita community for bringing Rader to justice (Wenzl, 2006; Wenzl, 2012). Multiple generations of police are represented in the articles as well, sharing the struggles and challenges they faced along the way, how the crimes haunted them throughout the years, and their eventual triumph as they celebrated Rader’s capture and arrest (Gruver, 2005; Tobias & Wenzl, 2005).

With regard to his capture, DNA technology played a significant role. Although DNA technology at the time of the murders in the 1970s was unknown, the police meticulously collected evidence that included Rader’s DNA from semen samples. As part of their strategy to capture BTK, Landwehr held onto the DNA evidence left at one of the crime scenes and waited to turn it over for testing until DNA technology had improved. Once the technology was suitable to Landwehr and a test was run, the completed test linked the serial killer to a cold case previously thought to be unrelated. Afterward, once they had a major break in the case via the delivery of a floppy disk from the killer that identified Dennis Rader as the editor of the disk. This realization led the task force to secretly use the killer’s daughter to achieve their goals of

determining whether her DNA matched that of the DNA left by BTK at crime scenes (Potter, 2011). Without her knowledge, they got a subpoena to access a sample of her DNA from a medical clinic in Wichita and were able to link Rader to the murders (Potter, 2005b).

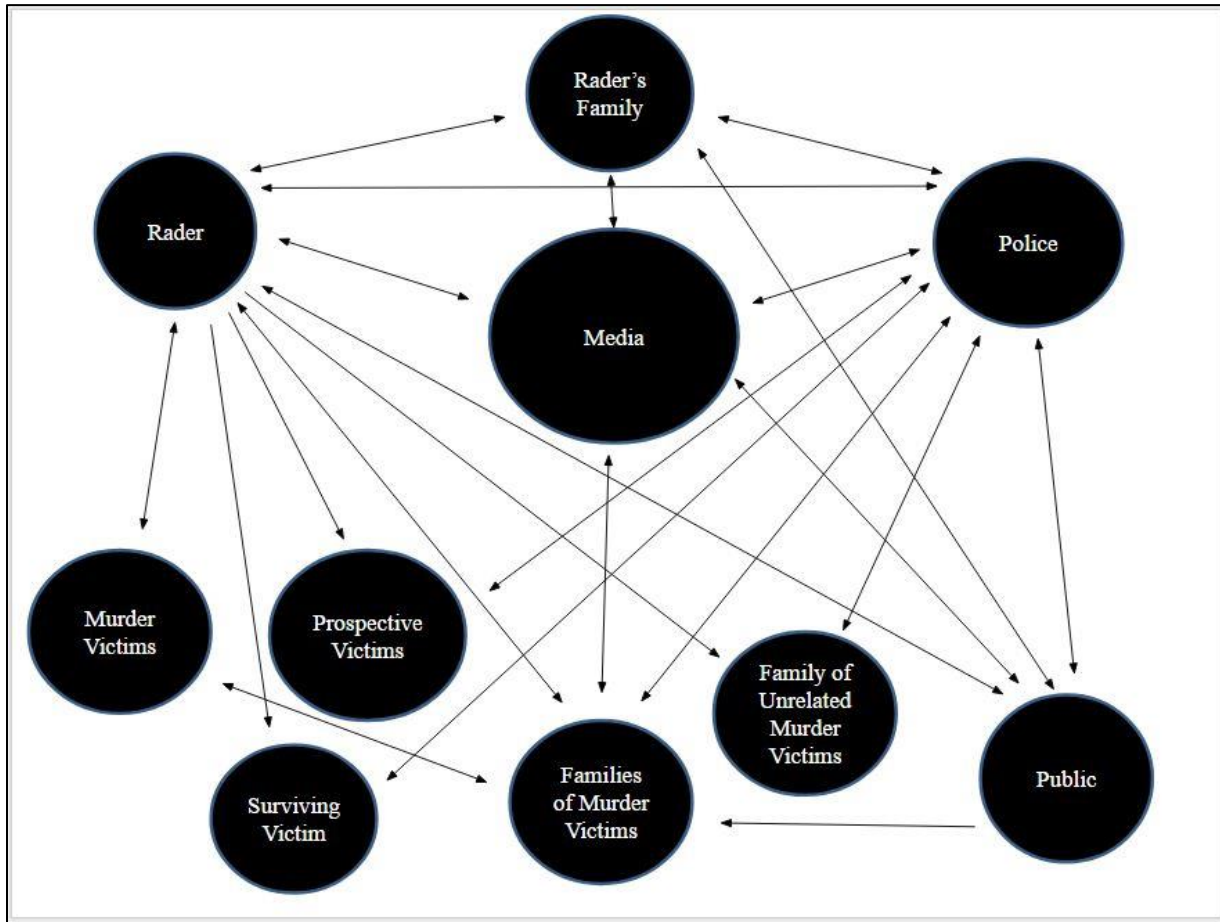
The police also are represented as being caring and compassionate toward the families of Rader's victims. And, unlike some of the public, they were kind to Rader's wife and two adult children, treating them with kindness and sympathy during the time they were trying to cope with the truth about the man who had been their husband and father for more than 30 years (Wenzl, 2015).

### **Communications and Interactions as Represented in the Media**

*RQ2: In what ways do news media report the interactions between the police, serial killers, media organizations, and the public?*

Throughout his 30-year reign of terror, the analyzed articles represent Dennis Rader as reaching out to various parties through multiple forms of communication: letters and drawings, phone calls, packages, a postcard and, lastly, a floppy disk. His communications were not limited to the police or media. As shown in Figure 1, the communications included conversations with the murder victims and their children who were present, and written communications to the public, prospective and surviving victims, and the family of unrelated murder victims. The articles represented Rader as leaving packages in public libraries, parks, parking lots, and alongside roadways for the public to find for them to report to the Wichita police ("BTK Author," 2004; Eagle Staff, 2004; Potter, 2004b). Figure 1 includes prospective victims and the families of unrelated murder victims because Rader reached out to prospective victim Anna Williams with his poem "Oh, Anna Why Didn't You Appear" and shared his salacious vision of how he thought Mary Fager's family met their deaths at the hands of another murderer. The researcher also included the murder victims in the graphic because the killer

shared numerous times with the media and police in his communications, confession, and court testimony that he would speak with his murder victims during the time he had them under his control before ultimately killing them (Sylvester, 2005d).



**Figure 1.** Killer’s Communication Channels as Represented in the Sample Articles.

Rader communicated with the Wichita Police Department directly and would use various Wichita area media organizations, mainly *The Wichita Eagle* or KAKE-TV, to attempt to make headlines and to see his preferred name, BTK, in the media. He used the media as a means through which to communicate with the police, public and to get his name out for the purpose of self-celebritization and glorification.

Table 5 includes a full list of Rader’s communications leading up to his February 2005 capture and arrest. These communications primarily include letters, phone calls, poems, and

packages that were mailed to the media, to the police, prospective victims or unrelated murder victims’ families, or left in public locations. A note about Rader’s phone calls: In addition to the calls listed in Table 4, he claims to have made calls to local media outlets KAKE-TV and *The Wichita Eagle* after mailing or delivering each of his correspondences since his reemergence. However, he said that when he would announce himself as BTK at the beginning of the calls, the media representative would hang up on him thinking he was one of the many hoax phone calls received (“Wichita Police Detail,” 2005; “Excerpts,” 2005). Because there are no specified dates or information relating to those calls, the researcher did not include them in the list.

**Table 5.** A Breakdown of Communications Received from Killer Prior to Capture.

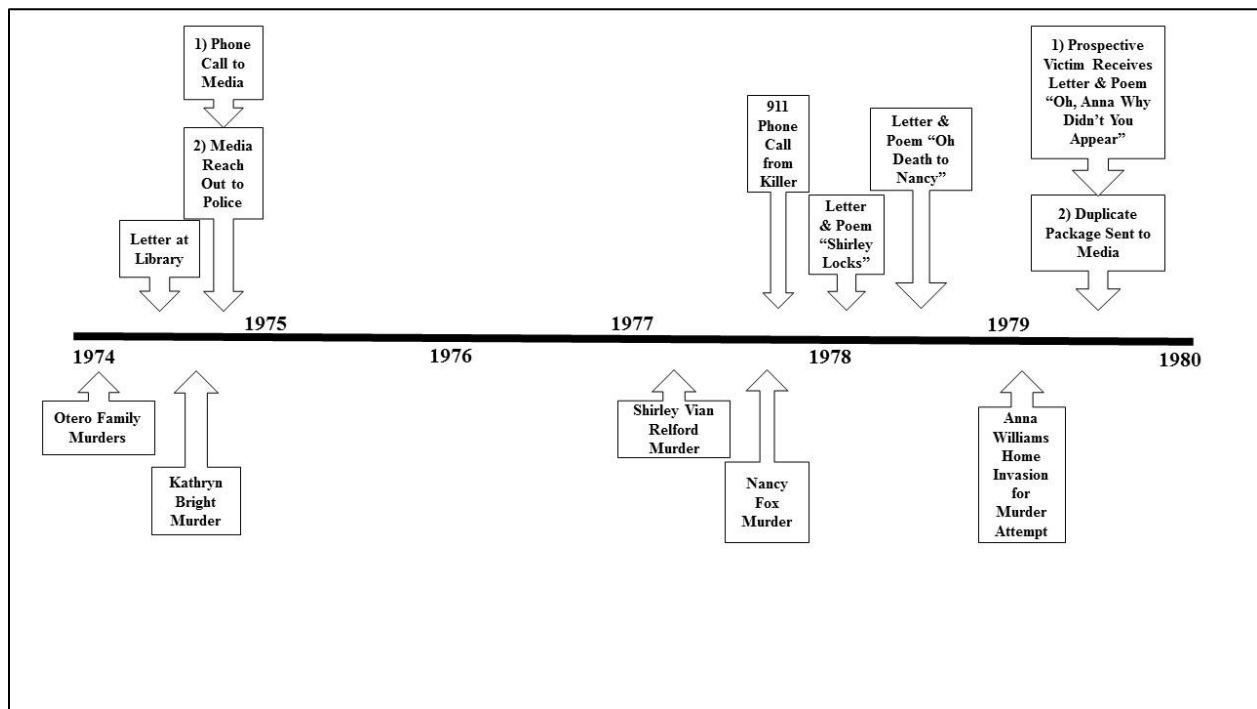
No.	Date Received	Location/Recipient	Communication	Description of the Correspondences
1	October 1974	The Wichita Public Library – intended for the <i>Wichita Eagle-Beacon</i>	Letter	The letter claims the Otero family as his victims; killer refers to himself as BTK for “bind them, torture them, kill them”
2	October 1974	<i>The Wichita Eagle-Beacon</i>	Phone call	A phone call to Director of Community Affairs Don Granger
3	December 8-9, 1977	911 – Wichita Police Department	Phone call	Reporting murder of Nancy Fox
4	January 31, 1978	<i>The Wichita Eagle-Beacon</i>	Letter and poem “Shirley Locks”	A letter lamenting a lack of publicity about killer’s first communication; a 3-by-5 index card with the poem “Shirley Locks”
5	February 7 or 10, 1978	KAKE-TV	Letter and poem “Oh Death to Nancy”	A two-page, single-spaced letter claiming victims Shirley Vian Relford, Nancy Jo Fox, and another unnamed victim; a poem titled “Oh Death to Nancy”
6	June 14-15, 1979	Anna Williams	Letter and poem “Oh, Anna Why Didn’t You Appear”	An 8 ½-inch-by-11-inch manila envelope containing a 19-line poem, a sketch, clothing, and jewelry stolen during a break-in
7	June 16, 1979	KAKE-TV	Letter and poem	An identical envelope containing similar items as the June 15 communication
8	January 5, 1988	Mary Fager, wife of murder victims Phillip Fager and their two daughters	Letter	A letter talking about the murders of Phillip Fager and his two daughters; killer did not claim credit for killings
9	March 19, 2004	<i>The Wichita Eagle</i>	Letter	Photocopies of three photos of Vicki Wegerle lying on the floor and her missing driver’s license.



<b>Table 5 (Continued)</b>				
<b>No.</b>	<b>Date Received</b>	<b>Location/Recipient</b>	<b>Communication</b>	<b>Description of the Correspondences</b>
10	May 4, 2004	KAKE-TV	Letter	Photocopied ID cards of employees of Southwestern Bell and Wichita school district; a list of chapters for "THE BTK STORY," and a word-search puzzle
11	June 13, 2004	Found at First and Kansas	Letter	"The BTK Story," with Chapter Eight (the word puzzle) crossed out; Chapter One described the Otero murders in great detail; drawing of a nude female, bound, gagged and hanging from a rope
12	July 17, 2004	Downtown Wichita Library	Package	A letter attempting to misdirect police about an unrelated suicide case. The letter also contained note about an implied threat against a prospective female victim killer was targeting
13	October 22, 2004	UPS box, Second and Kansas	Letter	A letter of deceptions with "bits of truth" interspersed and a photo collage of photos of children with bindings drawn across their bodies and faces
14	December 14, 2004	Murdock Park	Package	A package containing Nancy Fox's driver's license, an account of her murder, and a bound doll among its contents
15	January 8, 2005	Home Depot on North Woodlawn, in the bed of a pickup truck (later found in the trash)	Package	A package, in a Special K serial box labeled "bomb" and "BTK," containing a letter stating the killer lived in a three-story house with an elevator and had a bomb in the basement rigged to explode if investigators arrived. The letter also listed information about several other potential victims from past years.
16	January 25, 2005	On North Seneca near 69th Street	Package	Among the items contained within a Post Toasties cereal box was a bound doll tied with rope to a piece of plastic pipe representing Josephine Otero
17	January 2005	KAKE-TV	Postcard	It provided a location as to where the previous package could be found and asked whether the Special K package was found
18	February 3, 2005	KAKE-TV	Communication No. 10 (not specified)	Killer stated he used "plastic glove and plastic bag to protect fingerprint marks" while leaving the Post Toasties package.
19	February 16, 2005	KSAS-FOX TV	Package	A locket, letter, and a diskette labeled "Test Floppy for WPD review"

Figures 2-4 provide timelines showing the progression of communications between Dennis Rader, media, police, the public, Rader's prospective murder victim, and the family of unrelated murder victims. The communications began in 1974, as shown in Figure 2, with Rader

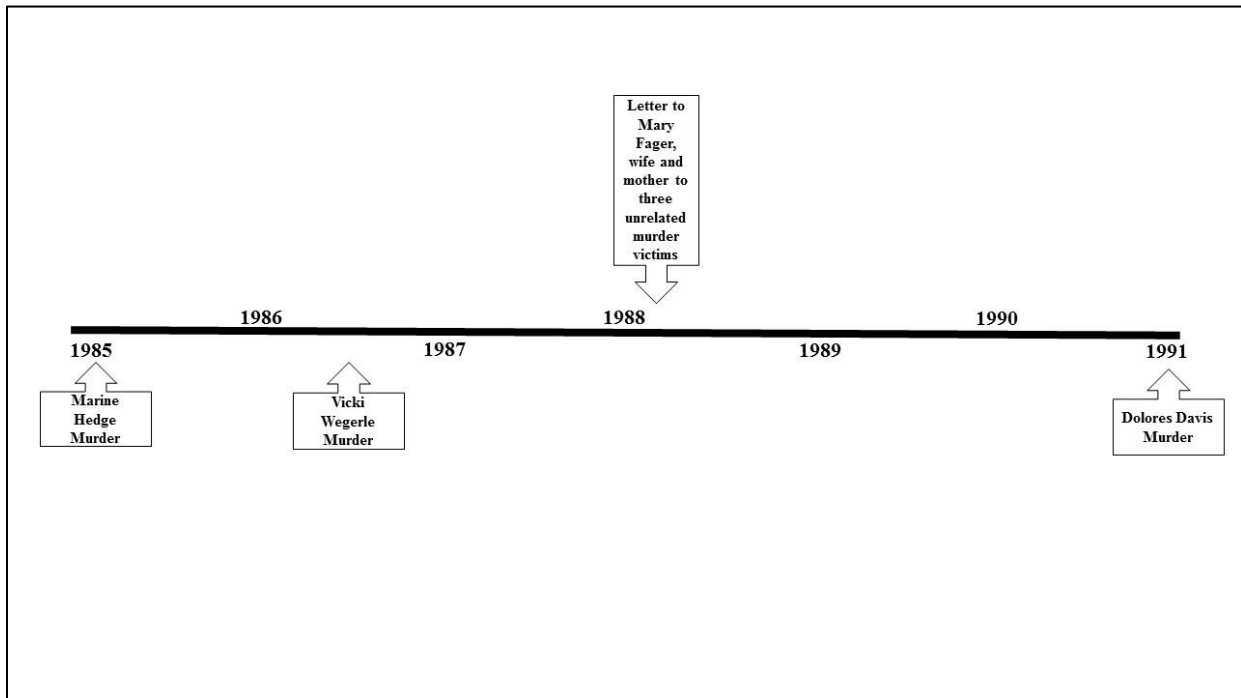
reaching out to a member of the media, Don Granger at *The Wichita Eagle*, to report a letter he left at the Wichita Public Library that claimed the murders of the Otero family. Granger reached out to the Wichita Police Department to inform them about the message. The killer’s next communication took place in 1977 in the form of a phone call, when he called 911 to report the murder of Nancy Fox. In 1978, letters and poems about two of the murder victims, Shirley Vian Relford and Nancy Fox, followed. The following year, he sent a letter and poem to a prospective victim, Anna Williams, lamenting that she did not return home during the time he was waiting to kill her. The communications channels used by the killer are representative of the primary methods of communication that were available at the time in the late 1970s. It also showcased Rader’s progression in contacting the media, police, and eventually a prospective victim.



**Figure 2.** A Timeline of Murders, Killer’s Communications in the 1970s.

Figure 3 shows the lack of communications from Rader between the late 1980s and early 1990s. During that time, Rader committed three murders—those of Marine Hedge, Vicki Wegerle, and Dolores Davis—but he did not reach out to the police or media to claim the victims

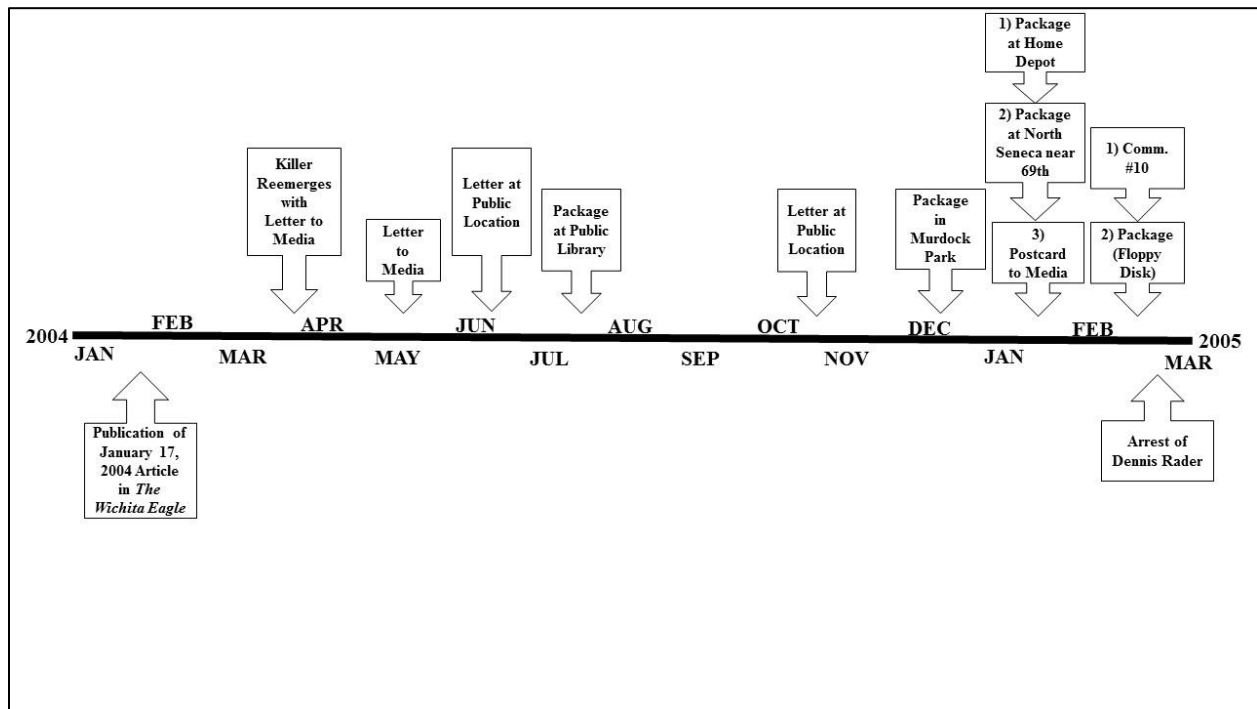
at that time. He did, however, reach out directly to the surviving family member of unrelated murder victims to share his appreciation for the murderer of her husband and daughters and to share how he envisioned the crime scene. By him reaching out to the family member of a murder victim completely unrelated to murders he commits, it shows a progression from reaching out only to people or organizations that have a vested interest in his murders, such as the police, media, and prospective victims.



**Figure 3.** A Timeline of Murders, Killer’s Communications in the 1980s, 1990s.

Figure 4 showcases the final evolution in his communication methods, as he progressed from letters and poems to delivering larger packages. Not only did the communications themselves physically increase regarding the content, but they also increase in frequency. The timeline displays the greater emphasis on involving the public in his communications, leaving messages primarily at public locations that include the library, along roadsides, and in the bed of a truck in a Home Depot parking lot. As Rader got older, he sought out more convenient means of communication and resorted to a digital format. The final communication showcases his

expansion into the realm of digital communication via a computer floppy disk that ultimately helped to identify the killer as Dennis Rader.



**Figure 4.** A Timeline of Murders, Killer’s Communications Leading to His Arrest.

However, Dennis Rader is not the only one who used the media to achieve his goals. The Wichita Police Department also used the media as a means to not only inform the public but also to communicate directly with the serial killer. On October 24, 1974, the Wichita Police Department placed an ad in *The Wichita Eagle* asking the killer to call a specified phone number to get help (Laviana & Woods, 2004). The following week on October 31, Don Granger, director of community affairs at the publication, wrote a column directed to the killer, asking him to call a phone number any time—day or night. Neither the ad nor the column received a response from Rader (‘BTK’ made first contact, 2004; Laviana & Woods, 2004). On August 15, 1979, the police repeatedly aired a recording of the killer’s 911 phone call on television and radio stations across the area—also to no avail (‘Tape of BTK Call,’ 1979). Representatives of the Wichita Police Department began to use a more strategic approach to their interactions with

media organizations and members of the public. They utilized scripted media conferences, briefings, press releases, and other strategized opportunities to communicate to the killer via the media in an attempt to play to his ego, build his trust, and help him develop a form of relationship with task force leader Lt. Ken Landwehr. From the first letter sent by the killer, the Wichita Police Department and several media organizations, namely *The Wichita Eagle* and KAKE-TV, have collaborated in a various ways. Throughout the rollercoaster of Rader's period of terrorizing the Wichita area, *The Wichita Eagle* found itself in the unusual position of serving as both "a provider of evidence and chronicler of the news" (Strupp, 2005). Don Granger, an employee at the newspaper, contacted the police when he received a phone call from someone claiming to be the killer of the Otero family, telling him where to find a letter at the Wichita Public Library (Wenzl, 2004). While working with the police, the newspaper agreed to not publish specified details and information about the communications from the killer to assist the police investigation (Laviana, 2004a). In addition to police department's work with the media, the police also are represented as interacting with the families of the murder victims, the general public, the Kansas District Attorney's office and other law enforcement groups.

The public itself is represented in the analyzed articles as interacting with the police, media, families of victims, and even with the killer himself. Over the decades Rader remained at large, Wichitans feared BTK would target them or their loved ones, changing their daily routines based on information presented by the police and media. Some used the fear as an opportunity to torment their fearful neighbors and community with prank phone calls (Kelly, 2004). Representations of other members of the public included those who reached out to Rader as fans after he was arrested and locked up in prison, writing letters, adding money to his prison

commissary account, and seeking to work with him to write books about his life (Green, 2016; “Topekan sees Rader,” 2005; Wenzl, 2014b; Wenzl, 2016a).

### **Media Coverage of the Victims and Killer Before, After Killer’s Arrest**

The media played an integral role in the study, capture, arrest of Rader (Sylvester, 2005c). The existence of the BTK serial killer operating in the Wichita area was not made public by *The Wichita Eagle* until after the murder of his seventh victim in 1978 (“City’s ‘BTK Stranger,’” 1978). In a letter, his third written communication, he mentioned six of the victims by name and a seventh unnamed victim (City’s ‘BTK’ Strangler, 1978). Before *The Eagle’s* report, the first media story that mentioned BTK’s first communication—which took claim for the murders of the Otero family—was published by the *Wichita Sun*, a startup weekly newspaper in the area in the mid-1970s, in 1974 (Mann, 2004). The letter from the killer had been a secret from the public until the *Sun* published portions of it in its 10th issue of the newspaper. It was the publication of that letter than led the police chief at the time, Floyd Hannon, to call a news conference to confirm the existence of the letter and the serial killer (Mann, 2004).

*The Wichita Eagle* reports that over the next 15 years, BTK-related publicity subsided (Laviana & Woods, 2004). But on January 17, 2004, the newspaper published an article talking about the 30th anniversary of the Otero family murders in the context of an upcoming book that was in production about BTK by a local lawyer who had studied BTK for years (Laviana & Woods, 2004; Finger, 2005c). This article, which is reported to have spurred Rader to reemerge in March 2004 after years of silence, has led the way to the publication of dozens of other articles in *The Wichita Eagle*. Rader has continued to draw international media attention nearly every year since his arrest 13 years ago (Wenzl, 2016a).

Of the 120 articles reviewed from *The Wichita Eagle* for this case study, 43 were written before Rader's arrest in February 2005. Within those articles, his murder victims were mentioned 5.6% more frequently than "BTK" or variations of his moniker in the news coverage in *The Wichita Eagle*. In the articles written after his arrest, at which point he was identified by the police, "Dennis Rader" and various combinations of his first and last name are mentioned 65.6% more frequently than his alter ego "BTK," and the 10 murder victims are mentioned 58.5% more frequently than "BTK" as well. However, the variations of "Dennis Rader" are mentioned 20.5% more frequently than all 10 murder victims, and the "BTK" and "Dennis Rader" variations together are mentioned 61.9% more frequently than the 10 murder victims combined. What these numbers indicate is that *The Wichita Eagle* more focused on Dennis Rader/BTK in its coverage than the 10 murder victims. In other words: more emphasis and coverage are prescribed to the murderer than those he killed.

In the coverage of the crimes themselves, the victims are represented most frequently in the context of details of their murders, or how the killer represents the murders as taking place in his communications as detailed through information releases and briefings from the Wichita Police Department. Regarding representations of the killer in headlines in the 120 sample articles, 51.6% included Rader's preferred moniker, "BTK," in their headlines. Of the 43 articles published before Rader's arrest, 31 included "BTK" in the headlines—a total of nearly 72.1%. Of the 77 articles published after his arrest, 31, or 40.3%, included "BTK" in their headlines. Only 24 of those 77 post-arrest articles—31.2%—included his given name, "Dennis Rader" or "Rader," in the headlines. The analysis indicates that the media coverage also provided him with a spotlight and a voice. Nearly 50% of all the articles analyzed—59 of 120—either paraphrased or directly quoted Dennis Rader. Speaking in terms of a theoretical stage, *a la* media framing,

through their increased focus on the killer, media shine a spotlight on Rader and hand him a microphone to make his voice heard while leaving the victims in the wings. While they are still present, they are not as much in focus or the limelight. The articles represent investigators, district attorney office representatives, and Rader's daughter, Kerri Rawson, as believing that media attention feeds the killer's ego and helps him stay relevant even while behind bars ("Letters on Lawmaker," 2016; Wenzl, 2016a; Wenzl, 2016c).



## CHAPTER SIX:

### STUDY LIMITATIONS, IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH, AND CONCLUSION

#### **Study Limitations**

The study is limited in scope in that the researcher only focused on one serial killer and publication for the purpose of this manuscript. This study could expand by examining the representations of other serial killers, such as David Berkowitz and *The New York Times*, and their communications or interactions with police and the media. Another limitation is that the sample articles for this study were gathered using only one database, *The Wichita Eagle* website Kansas.com, as the articles were not available through LexisNexis.

Likely the most constraining limitation of this study was not being able to gain access to original or scanned copies of *The Wichita Eagle* newspaper that showcases the publication's layout for issues containing stories relating to Dennis Rader or the BTK investigations. The researcher attempted to gain access to some printed or scanned copies of some specific issues of the publication through the University of South Florida library and also by leaving voicemails for staff at *The Wichita Eagle*—to no avail. The researcher elected to purchase an online subscribership to the news publication to retrieve text copy of some of the stories posted on the publication's website. But by having a textual analysis of the content, potentially important information may be missed in the research by the author not being able to analyze the presentation of content among story headlines, photographs, advertisements, and other copy.

Another substantial limitation is that the crimes themselves were committed decades ago and the publication's articles span more than 40 years. Many of the people who were integral to the murder investigations—and the subsequent arrest and conviction of Dennis Rader—have retired or are deceased.

Lastly, not having the time, funding, or direct access to travel to Kansas to speak with reporters involved with the BTK murder investigations or Dennis Rader himself at the El Dorado Correctional Facility is another limitation of this study. In addition to needing to abide by strict Internal Review Board policies and guidelines at the University of South Florida, seeking the appropriate approval from the correctional facility would have required more time than was available to the researcher for the completion of this study.

### **What Can Be Learned From Studying Representations in Media Coverage**

This researcher believes that there is much media professionals can learn by studying the representations and contexts of Dennis Rader's coverage in *The Wichita Eagle*. The media provided some excellent information about the crimes. However, they did not always take the time to stop to verify some of the most basic—and important—facts, such as double-checking the spelling and ages of some of the murder victims to ensure their accuracy. Additionally, by paying more attention to the victims to portray who they were as individuals while they were alive, this researcher argues that the public would be better served than by having media play into the glorification of a serial killer who seeks to achieve the same celebrity of other famous serial killers. Essentially, it is not the job of the media to provide a serial killer with the fame he seeks. Responsible journalists should report what needs reporting and do not step into the realm of sensationalism or feed the megaspectacle of violence and murder in the media, even though these topics lend themselves to juicy headlines.

By studying the coverage of Dennis Rader, journalists can begin to seek ways to understand 1) how to not be manipulated by a serial killer or the police, 2) the ethical standards and practices utilized by media professionals during the coverage of serial killers, and 3) the tense but amicable relationship between the police and media with regard to news coverage of serial killers. This study also provides the means through which to study the interplay of communications and human personalities, particularly regarding narcissistic personalities and the need for control, which also may be beneficial to mass communications professionals and those engaging in similar areas of research in the fields of criminology or psychology.

### **Future Research**

Potential areas of future research could include seeing how the coverage of Dennis Rader compares to that of other known serial killers. This area of research regarding the representations of media, police, and serial killers with a focus on what they get out of their interactions with the media and each other is largely unexplored. Studying the coverage of other serial killers in larger publications, such as *The New York Times* or *Los Angeles Times*, from the perspective of a uses and gratifications theory in conjunction with frame analysis would likely provide strong insight as well regarding how media represent some other serial killers and the police as using the media and what they get out of it.

The media environment has changed over the years, particularly with regard to the framing of media coverage and news stories. A future area of research would be to compare the news coverage of a serial killer and his victims from the same period of murders as Dennis Rader—primarily the 1970s and 1980s—to that of a serial killer from the current decade—2000s and 2010s. This analysis may help to identify any potential differences in coverage and identifications of any political affiliations, race, gender, or other hot-button issues. If Dennis

Rader committed a series of murders today, how would the murders, victims, killers, and other stakeholders be represented in coverage by news media?

Additional areas of quantitative research could include seeking in-depth interviews with news media professionals and former investigators about their experiences and the decisions to publish or withhold certain information in reporting on serial killers, and their rationale as to why they did or did not choose to interact with the serial killers via the media. This study could include their ethical considerations they make as media professionals. This research could include the interviewing of incarcerated serial killers to understand their motivations for choosing to interact with or use the media—or not interact or use them—and what gratifications they received from the engagements. The results of the research could be published with the serial killer participants remaining anonymous so as to not give them individual celebrity.

Because the study of this manuscript is a primarily qualitative textual analysis of the news articles, it only can assess and describe the included content and cannot infer effects. However, conducting in-depth interviews with various stakeholders regarding media coverage of serial killers and their victims may provide new insights into how media exposure of news coverage relating to these topics may affect different groups, including members of the public.

## **Conclusion**

This study showcases the importance of media and news coverage in the case of serial killer Dennis Rader. The media played an integral role in reporting on his crimes, serving as a communications point for the killer and Wichita police, and eventually assisting in his capture and arrest. For a man who was determined to hold the attention of the media and police, his plan backfired through the very communications channels he set out to create because it led to his

capture. And in the end, Rader demonstrated that he was not as smart as he—and many others initially—believed himself to be. However, it is that same media coverage and interaction that also allows him to remain in the media spotlight more than a dozen years after his capture, arrest, and sentencing. The analyzed articles show Rader conducted television and radio interviews while in prison and later wrote letters to *The Wichita Eagle* and responded to their inquiries years after his sentencing.

Based on the research conducted for this case study and thematic analysis, this researcher believes that there are several ways in which news and entertainment media provided—and continue to provide—Dennis Rader with celebrity treatment. These primarily include the intense local, national and international media coverage he received when he resurfaced in 2004. In addition to news coverage, Rader and his crimes have been the focus of numerous subsequent books—some of which were written by staff writers from *The Wichita Eagle* in collaboration with some investigators—short stories, murderabilia content, movies, and documentaries. Rader’s celebritization achieved such levels that the articles reported that Park City found it necessary to demolish the Rader family house to prevent gawkers and fans from stopping by the site where he planned his murders. Another mentioned that when the authorities led Rader into prison, the inmates began repeatedly chanting his chosen name, “BTK,” and he raised his hands and smiled in recognition of the celebratory reception he received.

Based on the data showing that Dennis Rader and BTK are mentioned more than 60% more frequently than his 10 victims demonstrates where the focus of media professionals is located instead of on the victims. Portrayals of the victims predominantly represent them in the context of being Rader’s victims and usually include descriptions of how they were murdered or how their bodies were positioned or discovered. By and large, the focus was not on discussing

who the victims were when they were still alive before Dennis Rader set foot inside their homes. This researcher would argue that this representation of Rader as a sensational monster, or what Schmid (2005) refers to as the “ultimate deviant,” indicates that he is viewed as having a more premium value than his victims (p. 25).

Many of the articles often are framed so that they focus on the killer and the police who have been unable to catch him for 30 years. Part of this may have been the result the planned strategies police used in their news briefings and press conferences to try to appeal to the killer’s ego—to give him an ego boost and to motivate him communicate more often—as well as to not upset him in a way that would motivate him to kill again. However, knowing that Dennis Rader and his serial killer alter ego BTK are still making headlines at the time of this study in Fall 2016 and Spring 2017, this researcher argues that the media served—and continues to serve—Rader’s sought-after desire for celebrity. By continuing to publish stories and articles more than a decade after he was sentenced to serve 10 consecutive lifetimes in prison, it is only enabling him to continue to strive to achieve the same fame as his serial killer heroes.

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