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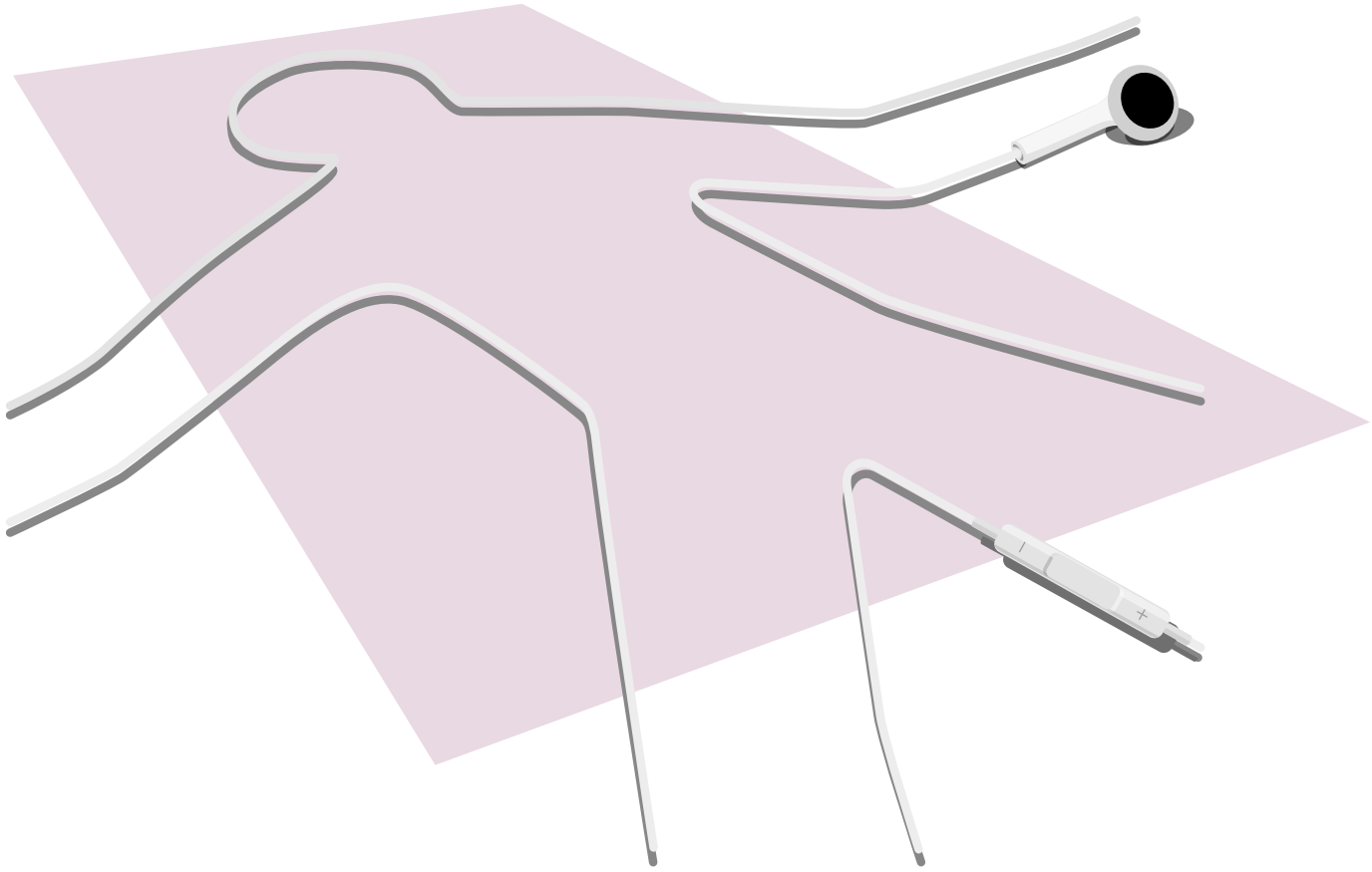
WEISSER RING
Wir helfen Kriminalitätsopfern.

Forum Opferhilfe

A magazine by WEISSER RING



TRUE CRIME

Crime as a commodity

Table of contents

Focus topic: True crime

P. 4 **The seven most important findings from our true crime research**

P. 5 **Thrown off track**
More and more reports on true crime also mean there are more and more victims of crime to be reported on. A situation report

P. 12 **Fascination with murder**
WEISSER RING's data analysis of true crime

P. 14 **How the editorial department conducted research**

P. 15 **A murder story**
Where does true crime come from and why does it fascinate audiences so much?

P. 20 **"True crime formats satisfy a rubbernecking mentality"**
Interview with someone affected by crime: Johann Scheerer

P. 24 **How do successful true crime formats deal with those affected?**
A survey among journalists

P. 28 **True crime: meaningful or voyeuristic?**
Christiane Fernbacher looks back on her true-crime past

P. 30 **What are true crime formats allowed and not allowed to do?**

P. 32 **"The victim's rights fall by the wayside in true crime"**
Opinion piece by Christian Schertz

P. 34 **"I need the public"**
Interview with someone affected by crime: Ingrid Liebs

P. 38 **An unusual request**
How two filmmakers strive to inform those affected about their true-crime project

P. 39 **Roaming dark corners**
Interview with Daniel Müller, editor-in-chief of the magazine "Zeit Verbrechen"

P. 47 **Column: "We man-eaters"**
Author and TV critic Torsten Körner on true crime

P. 50 **"Objectivity is the killer of entertainment"**
Interview with a psychiatrist: Nahlah Saimeh

P. 52 **The popular podcast format**
Vincent Kittmann examines a growing market

P. 54 **A change of perspective**
How the makers of the podcast "Mordlust" came to look at true crime from a different angle

P. 57 **True-crime tips from the editors**

Sections

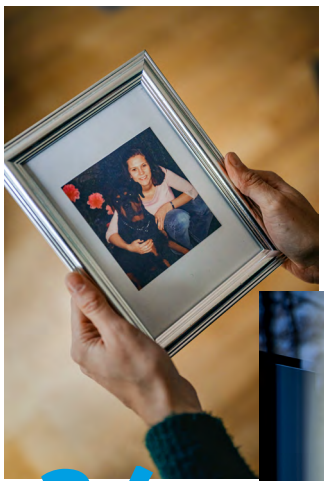
P. 58 **Thank you**

P. 60 **Editorial information**

Inside:

Ehrensache:

The magazine within the magazine



34

39

Photo: Angelika Stehle

Dear Readers,

Imagine the following situation: You're sitting on the couch, leisurely zapping through the TV programme, and suddenly, without warning, you come across a re-enactment of the horrific murder of your child 20 years ago. How would you feel?

This is what happened to the relative of a murder victim who contacted the editorial team of WEISSER RING. She said: "Everything that happened at that time immediately came back to me, causing me great distress."

The danger of crime victims or their relatives experiencing something like this is steadily increasing because true crime programmes are all the rage. New formats with true crimes are constantly appearing in the media market, as podcasts, TV programmes and crime magazines. WEISSER RING, too, is receiving an increasing number of requests from journalists seeking contact with victims in order to tell their stories to the public.

We at WEISSER RING have mixed feelings about this boom. On the one hand, it can be helpful if well-made journalistic formats sensitise the public to crime and its consequences. On the other hand, we see that true crime formats often focus on the perpetrators and do not give enough attention to the perspective of the victims. Even worse: Those affected may be unintentionally confronted with the suffering inflicted on them a long time ago and might even be traumatised by it again. The law and the press code do little to protect them from this.

Our experience has shown that true crime makers often give insufficient consideration to the question of what their work does to the people affected. With this issue of our magazine "Forum Opferhilfe", we would like to help to change this situation. After months of research, our editorial team has compiled a kind of situation report on true crime in Germany, the #TrueCrimeReport.

I hope that we will achieve three things with it:

1. Encourage victims to say "no" to journalists whenever they wish. They still have this right even if they have long agreed to the interview and it is supposed to start in five minutes.
2. Ensure greater awareness and self-reflection on the part of the media. Before every publication, journalists should ask themselves: Is there really a public interest in this piece – and what harm might I do to the people concerned?
3. Give all listeners, viewers and readers a moment's pause. It's perfectly fine to like true crime. But please never forget that the formats are not only about real crimes but also about real people.

Best regards,
Dr Patrick Liesching
Federal Chairman of WEISSER RING

The seven most important findings from our true crime research

#1 True crime is booming.

True crime is also increasingly being produced locally. According to a survey conducted by WEISSER RING's editorial department, more than half of all local newspapers already offer regular content or plan to do so in the near future.

#2 Millions of people listen to, watch or read true crime.

A few examples according to information provided by true crime producers: the videos on the *Insolito* YouTube channel have been accessed more than 55 million times, the *Verbrechen von nebenan* (Crime next door) podcast reaches "several million" listeners every month, and the *Stern Crime* newspaper launched in 2015 with a circulation of 150,000.

#3 Media are making a killing with true crime.

Media companies sell advertising blocks with true crime, the most famous true crime podcasts such as *Mordlust* (Bloodlust) are going on tour, and renowned brands like *ZEIT Verbrechen* also offer merchandise such as doormats and Advent calendars.

#4 "True crime" is a broad term, but tends to refer to murder and manslaughter.

Data analysis conducted by WEISSER RING reveals that 75 per cent of German true crime podcasts focus on homicide and that other crimes such as robbery (three per cent), white-collar crime (two per cent) and domestic violence (0.33 per cent) are rarely covered.

#5 True crime is occasionally made (too) quickly.

Newspapers and publishers can extend their reach with true crime, and it's relatively simple to research and produce closed criminal cases. The necessary texts and images can be found in the archive, whilst members of the editorial department interview each other and share their memories in podcasts.

#6 Victims and their interests rarely play a role in true crime.

When journalists report on past criminal cases, they rarely involve the victims and their family members, as confirmed by true crime producers in a survey conducted by WEISSER RING. It's not uncommon for those affected to encounter "their" case when reading the morning newspaper or watching TV in the evening. Very few editorial departments responded to a survey of local newspapers conducted by WEISSER RING – however, the majority of those who did respond indicated that they make no attempt to contact those affected for true crime formats.

#7 Perpetrators often have more rights than those whose life has been taken.

Murderers who are released from custody must provide their consent to a report that identifies them, whilst the rights of the victims they have killed virtually expire after ten years. Media attorney Christian Schertz refers to that as "highly unacceptable" in his opinion piece for *Forum Opferhilfe*.

Illustration: Alexander Lehn

Thrown off track

The more true crime formats there are, the more victims of crime there will be whose story is told on a public stage, potentially resulting in injury a second time. A report on true crime in Germany.

She didn't think the *Aktenzeichen XY* podcast would be an issue for her. After all, it had been nearly ten years since the robbery. The reporter would join via video. She was well prepared and would have her notes next to her during the recording. There were issues with the sound at the beginning. No big deal – these kinds of things happen.

For just a moment, she wondered, why am I so nervous? Do I even want to do this?

The reporter appeared in the frame. He was friendly and empathetic and asked his questions with sensitivity.

And she wondered, why am I stuttering all of the sudden? Why can't I think of the right words?

After recording the true crime podcast for *Aktenzeichen XY … unvergessene Verbrechen*, she realised she wasn't doing very well. She spent the day lying listlessly on the sofa and couldn't sleep at night. She had a headache that just wouldn't go away. And that's exactly how she felt after the robbery at the Lidl supermarket in Flensburg.

For Claudia Gerds, the podcast brought back all the emotions she thought she had already overcome. It wasn't the feeling she had during the robbery – the fear when the robbers covered her mouth and eyes with tape, when her hands were bound with duct tape, when her heart was beating faster than ever before. No, it was the feelings after the robbery, when she saw the article in the *BILD* newspaper and broke down. When she was ill for months. Her diagnosis: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

"The podcast wasn't a good idea, was it?" her worried husband asked her.

1. A Google search for "true crime podcast" provides 1,440,000 results. For "true crime" (without podcast), it's 59,400,000 results. True crime is available in audio, video and reading formats – on ZDF and Netflix, in local newspapers, as magazines found at kiosks and as non-fiction books at train station shops. True crime is booming, with new options released on a daily basis.

But the more true crime formats there are, the more victims of crime there will inevitably be whose story is told on a public stage and who could be injured a second time by true crime, which is what happened to Claudia Gerds of Flensburg. "From a media ethics perspective, true crime assumes a great deal of responsibility", says media scholar Jan Harms, who researches true crime at the University of Düsseldorf.

How do media deal with this responsibility? The WEISSER RING editorial department examines this question in its true crime report and publishes its findings in the *Forum Opferhilfe* magazine, which is almost 60 pages long, and online at www.forum-opferhilfe.de/truecrimereport. Our reporters also collected data, spoke to scientists, legal experts, psychologists, true crime producers and, of course, victims of crime, and asked prominent authors to contribute guest articles. The aim was to create a mosaic-like situational picture of true crime in Germany.

The family members of a murder victim shared their experience with true crime in a message to WEISSER RING: "Imagine sitting comfortably at home and enjoying a cup of coffee with the TV on in the background, and suddenly you see [...] pictures from the murder case that you had worked so hard to forget. All the memories come flooding back and with them all the pain." Whilst everything she saw in her case was presented "factually and truthfully", "this difficult period consumes your thoughts for weeks on end and you experience everything over and over again."

Johann Scheerer, son of millionaire Jan Philipp Reemtsma, who was abducted in 1996, and author of the book *Wir sind dann wohl die Angehörigen. Die Geschichte einer Entführung*, describes it in much the same way. "Not many people know this, but those involved in the case are not informed (media coverage) in any way in advance. Every few years there's a report – for example, one of the perpetrators appears in court for something else – and then the entire abduction case is rehashed. You're drinking your coffee and reading the Sunday paper, and suddenly you're looking into the eyes of this person and the horrible face behind the crime. I don't want to get into retraumatisation, but it does throw you off track for just a moment."

Flensburg in the spring, a lively basement cafe at Südermarkt. Seated in a booth, 56-year-old Claudia Gerds has short grey hair, red glasses and a winning smile on her face. "You just have to try this delicious Spanish coffee!" she says. The *Aktenzeichen XY* podcast was recorded five months ago. "I'm doing well again", she says. She no longer works at the till at Lidl. "I didn't want to deal with that anymore." She has a new position, now working with people with disabilities. "It's an amazing job."

She has never listened to the podcast. "And I never will either", says Claudia Gerds.

2. Media companies are making a killing with true crime. True crime – stories about crime, perpetrators and victims – sells magazines and advertising blocks. True crime podcasts sell tickets for true crime tours, whilst publishers sell merchandise such as doormats and Advent calendars with cases you can solve yourself. True crime is booming for German media companies because it sells so well.

WEISSER RING's editorial department sent a questionnaire to 305 local and regional newspapers in Germany. Of the editorial departments that responded, 42 per cent indicated that they already offer regular true crime content, whilst eleven per cent stated that they have corresponding content in the pipeline.

It's impossible to count how many true crime films and podcasts there are. In her show a year and a half ago, comedian Carolin Kebekus assumed a more serious tone when she began talking about the murder of women and speculative true crime podcasts. "If you enter 'true crime' into Spotify, you'll find more than a thousand podcasts. Entire podcasts, not individual episodes! That means there are twice as many true crime podcasts on Spotify as Rolling Stones songs!"

3. There are victims of crime who are themselves interested in true crime. "I need the public", says Ingrid Liebs, whose daughter Frauke was murdered in 2006. Because her child's murderer is still on the loose 17 years later, she carefully considers every media request. "What good will it do me? Can I turn it into a win-win situation? I don't take part in these productions because I enjoy the public attention. It's important to me that my case be solved." Even the perpetrators that robbed Claudia Gerds at the Lidl market in Flensburg ten years ago have yet to be apprehended. She hopes that they'll be caught and wants to do her part to help, which is why she spoke to *Aktenzeichen XY*.

The US podcast *Serial* even helped to overturn a murder conviction. The podcast *Your Own Backyard* sparked new police investigations into a murder case that resulted in arrest.

But how often is true crime about resolving the case? Most podcasts, TV shows and texts recount criminal cases that were closed long ago. Media researcher Harms refers to that as "sensationalist rehash". He's also critical of the trend of podcasts pulling old criminal cases from the archive. "There's a high risk that excitement and the storytelling itself will take centre stage."

Some journalists also emphasise that true crime reporting can be a preventive measure or teach us lessons. But if that were the case, wouldn't true crime need to focus primarily on those crimes that listeners, readers and watchers are, statistically speaking, more likely to encounter? For example, domestic violence, fraud or sexual assault. But an assessment of German-language podcasts conducted by WEISSER RING shows that 75 per cent of the episodes focus on cases of violent death. According to the Federal Criminal Police Office's crime statistics, criminal offences against life account for just 0.1 per cent of recorded offences.

"Today's episode is crazy. Enjoy!"

Greeting in a German podcast

4. Dramatic music, a police siren in the background. Episode 21 of the true crime podcast of a local daily newspaper in northern Germany available on the Spotify streaming service. It centres around the death of eleven-year-old Lena, who was murdered ten years ago. Two journalists, one of whom reported on the case at that time, discuss the details. They also talk about how difficult it still was for the parents of the little girl when the journalist had the opportunity to speak to them five years after the crime. He was the first journalist in Germany to do so. Listeners don't learn how the parents are doing today, ten years after the crime, as the parents don't have the chance to speak.

But first the advertising. A cruise giant advertises "highlights on the polar seas" on Spotify.

Names of true crime podcasts include *Mord auf Ex* (Murder cases that go down easy), *Mord im Osten* (Murder in the east) and *Mord im Pott* (Murder in the Ruhr region). Names of true crime shows on TV include *Morddeutschland* (Murder Germany), *Mördern auf der Spur* (In hot pursuit of murderers) and *Mordmotiv Liebe* (Murder for love). Newspapers tend to name their true crime content based on the area of coverage: *Tatort Celle* (Crime scene Celle), *Tatort Niedersachsen* (Crime scene Lower Saxony) and *Tatort Deutschland* (Crime scene Germany).

According to its own advertising, *Tatort Berlin* (Crime scene Berlin), the podcast produced by daily newspaper *Tagesspiegel*, delivers "the capital city's most exciting criminal cases". "How about a little murder?" cheerfully asks a successful Austrian podcast in its title (*Darf's ein bisserl Mord sein?*). "Today's episode is crazy!" announces a German podcast. And time and time again, the hosts tell the audience to, "Enjoy listening!" The reach of true crime content is enormous. In fact, the videos of the YouTube channel *Insolito* have been accessed 55 million times.

Claudia Gerds of Flensburg was the victim of a robbery ten years ago. She spoke about it with *Aktenzeichen XY*.

Photo: Karsten Krogmann

Interest in true crime is a "phenomenon of prosperity", suspects Daniel Müller, editor-in-chief of the true crime magazine *ZEIT Verbrechen*. "I think that true crime is only successful where crime is not that successful. I can't imagine there's a market for true crime in countries rife with violence like Mexico and El Salvador."

Based on user data analyses, it's primarily women who are interested in true crime. These data reveal that woman account for up to 80 per cent of *Mordlust* podcast listeners. "Women are much more interested in psychology and the motives behind human actions", says forensic psychiatrist Nahlah Saimeh. "A few forms of violence, such as sexual offences or violence within a relationship, affect them more often than men, and they are also more receptive to emotional themes such as the victims' suffering"

WEISSER RING's editorial department asked Instagram users for their opinion on true crime.

"I personally find the way in which most of the formats talk about actual violent crimes very troubling and disrespectful", answered one female user. "Family members are traumatised and don't want to hear how 'exciting' a 'case' is. No. It's about the true story of a person and their family and friends."

"I reject true crime formats because I find them to be too voyeuristic", wrote a second female user. "They exploit the stories of real people for commercial purposes. And I don't think it's right to report on someone who's dead and can no longer provide their consent. I don't think that human dignity ends with death."

But there are also answers like this one from a female user: "I myself am a victim of violence, and *ZEIT Verbrechen* was very helpful for me. I now have a better understanding of justice, the stories of other victims and perpetrators, and ultimately myself."

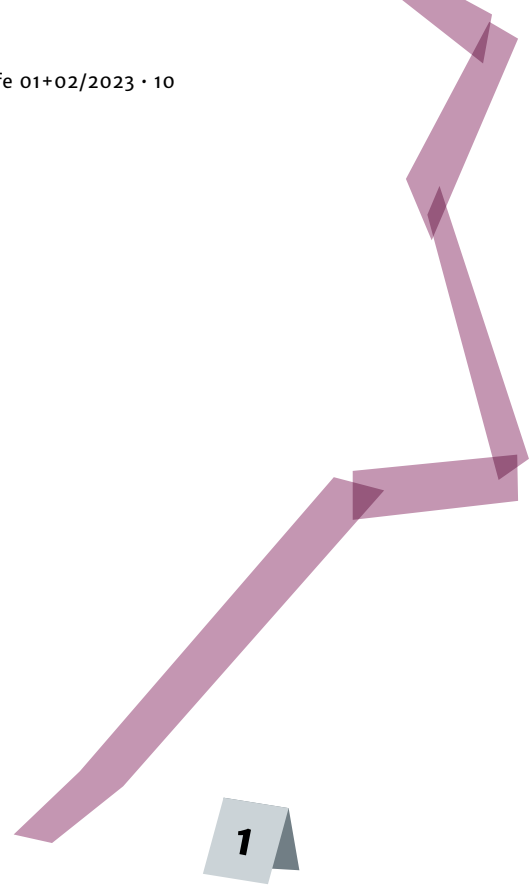
Another: "I just happened to come across my story in a podcast. But they got the story so wrong that I wasn't sure anymore it was mine", reports a fourth female user. "I felt a great sense of relief and I didn't feel so alone anymore. I was quite certain that no one would be able to tell that it was my story …"

5. A voluntary WEISSER RING victim supporter from Hesse says he has "only had bad experiences" anytime media have got involved in criminal cases. The victims were not incorporated and often not even questioned once. That is, of course, just one statement. The few responses that WEISSER RING received from the editorial departments of regional daily newspapers that offer true crime on a regular basis are not representative. Only six editorial departments responded to the question of whether they make contact with those affected prior to publication of true crime content. Four of them do not speak to those involved in the case, whilst one does occasionally. Only one of them stated that they make contact on a regular basis.

This could be an indication that some of the editorial departments responsible for true crime content really do just access archival materials. In podcasts, journalists often interview each other, and research outside of editorial departments is not necessary. True crime is attractive to media companies not only because it sells so well, but also because it can be produced cost-effectively.

But there is another way. For Daniel Müller, editor-in-chief of the *ZEIT Verbrechen* magazine, there's "nothing more difficult and strenuous than reporting on criminal cases. No one wants to talk to you. And anyone who does speak to you wants to monopolise your time. You can't believe everything." Of course, even *ZEIT Verbrechen* is interested "in the story", says Müller. "But not at any price."

So what is true crime allowed and not allowed to do? The framework is initially defined by laws – most importantly, the victims' and perpetrators' general personality rights – which don't align with the general public's need for information. The German Press Code, which is a voluntary commitment to self-regulation, also prohibits "inappropriately sensational portrayal" by journalists.



Professor Tanjev Schultz is a media ethicist at the Journalism Seminar at the University of Mainz and himself an award-winning journalist. He believes that true crime "may have gone off the rails". According to the German Press Code, journalists should re-examine the purpose for recounting a case from the past before publishing a true crime report. "Is there a public interest?" asks Schultz. "Perhaps an interest in apprehending the perpetrator? But if the case is drudged up again just for the purpose of rehashing the story, just for entertainment value, that's a problem. True crime is booming. Is there now a social demand for it that didn't exist 30 years ago?" According to Schultz, it's ultimately about a business model more than anything else.

"It may have gone off the rails."

Prof. Tanjev Schultz on true crime

A local newspaper in northern Germany published a full-page article about the murder of eleven-year-old Nelly. The reporter recounted the story chronologically, describing the white coffin and the child's favourite song, which was played in the church. Ten photos showed the newspaper headlines from back then, and the article ended with the judgement against the murderer in 1999.

The newspaper headline revealed the occasion for the article: "25 years after Nelly's murder". An anniversary.

Three guidelines for true crime journalists can be derived from press law, the German Press Code and Tanjev Schultz's observations:

1. Make sure there's actually a public interest in recounting the case to the general public!

2. Get very well acquainted with the topic. Do not exploit it or engage in sensationalist journalism!

3. Incorporate those affected with sensitivity!

WEISSER RING not only wrote to local newspapers, but also asked successful national true crime producers how they approach reporting and if they incorporate the victim's family members. Five of them completed the extensive questionnaire. There was a wide variety of answers to the question about interacting with those affected. For example, *Stern Crime* "usually" makes contact, *Verbrechen von nebenan* only "in individual cases". "No!" writes YouTuber Kati Winter. "I want to protect the privacy of the victims and their family members, rather than causing additional pain with my questions. […] I'm well aware of the power of my reach, and it's very important to me to present the facts responsibly and respectfully. […] My comments are therefore carefully monitored to prevent retraumatisation, insults to victims' families, etc., as I'm well aware that family members could see my videos at any time, especially when it comes to German cases."

It's clear that simply speaking to those affected can cause further damage. That applies to true crime, current reporting on crime and WEISSER RING's editorial department when representing victims' perspectives in their publications.

"For me, proper interaction with those affected begins with how you approach them", says Daniel Müller of *ZEIT Verbrechen*. "I don't think crime reporters should ever contact the victim out of the blue. It would be even worse to show up at their door and say, you're the woman whose husband was killed. Would you like to talk about it?" He recommends "the good old practice of writing a letter".

6.

At the basement cafe in Flensburg, Claudia Gerds lists the three recommendations she has come up with based on her experience with the *Aktenzeichen XY* podcast:

1. Reporters should speak to those affected in person, not by video or phone.

2. Reporters should send potential questions to those affected in advance, so that they can prepare for the conversation.

3. If those affected have the feeling that they'd rather not take part in the conversation after all, they can cancel at any time. Reporters need to accept that regardless of how late the person cancels.

Just one last question, Ms Gerds. Do you listen to, watch or read true crime yourself? Claudia Gerds laughs. "All the time!" she says. "I watch documentaries on Netflix, read books and enjoy crime thrillers. I don't understand why people do such bad things to other people."

Christian J. Ahlers, Christiane Fernbacher, Karsten Krogmann, Nina Lenhardt, Marius Meyer

Fascination with murder

There is very little data on true crime, which is why we have attempted to collect some ourselves – with AI-supported analysis of podcasts and with a survey of newspapers. What we have discovered is that true crime podcasts tend to focus exclusively on murder and manslaughter and that editorial departments clearly have little regard for the victims' point of view.

Everyone knows what love is, but no one can really explain it – and the same could be said of true crime. Anyone who has heard the term has an idea of what it means, but there is no generally binding definition – no good foundation for data analysis.

But we're still keen to discover just how big the hype is in the area of true crime podcasts and what topics they explore. And that's why our first step on 1 February was to download the metadata (title, description, keywords) of nearly 10,000 German-language episodes which are at least five minutes long and listed in the true crime category on platforms such as Spotify, Podimo and Apple. Due to the lack of a binding definition, we examined the podcasts that publish these episodes based on the following three elements, which we believe characterise true crime:

1. A "true" crime that was actually committed takes centre stage. For that reason, we have disregarded any podcasts which focus on mystery stories or Greek gods. We have also excluded any formats that centre around cooking or conversation, but are advertised by their makers as true crime for reasons we do not understand.

2. They have nothing to do with current reporting or substance of historical value. Even Caesar's murder is offered as a true crime story, but has not been incorporated into our dataset for the aforementioned reasons.

3. The format has elements of storytelling, which is why news reports do not fall within the true crime genre.

Around 40 per cent of the episodes examined did not feature true crime content as defined in the aforementioned criteria, and were therefore removed from our dataset. We ultimately considered 5,914 episodes from 283 formats. On average, every podcast of that genre has published around 20 episodes. That's quite a lot and suggests that these podcasts are successful in retaining the audience over a longer period of time. True crime podcasts are captivating.

In the second step of our examination, manual evaluation of a random sample of more than 600 episodes from the dataset revealed that the crimes most commonly covered are homicides: 451 cases of murder, serial killing, manslaughter, euthanasia, murder suicide and the like (around 75 per cent). For comparison, current police crime statistics for 2022 reveal that "criminal offences against life" account for 0.1 per cent all recorded crimes. After homicides, the most common crimes in the sample were abduction and missing cases (around eight per cent), rape and child abuse (each around three per cent).

The third step entailed using data from the sample to train artificial intelligence (AI) to examine the content of all the episodes in the true crime dataset. This analysis confirmed that the results of the sample also applied to the entire dataset: 75 per cent of all the episodes focus on cases in which people were killed. True crime podcasts are captivating – with murder and manslaughter.

Marius Meyer

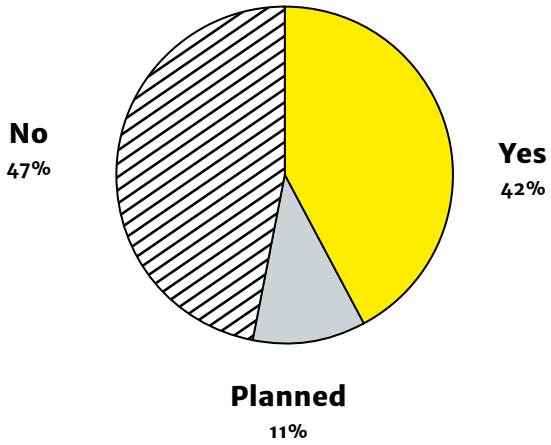
True crime in traditional media: survey of local and regional newspapers

Does the hype surrounding true crime, which is evident from the abundance of content available nationally, also extend to traditional media? We investigated this question by inviting all local and regional newspapers throughout Germany to take part in an unrepresentative survey at the end of 2022. The rate of response was very low. Of the 305 newspapers contacted, just 53 answered the question of whether they currently offer a regular true crime format such as a series of articles or a podcast. A total of 22 answered yes, whilst six indicated an interest in launching a corresponding format this year.

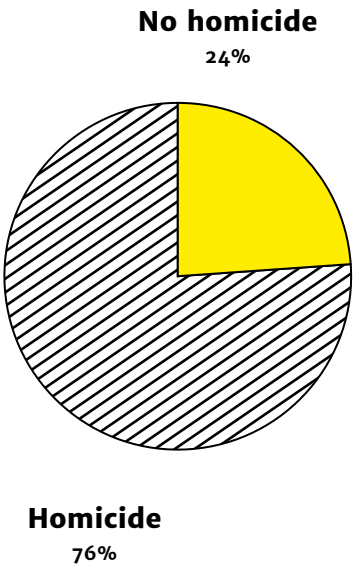
We were most interested in how journalists treat victims or their families during production, which is why we asked editorial departments which, according to the first survey, already publish true crime content and had provided contact information to take part in a second survey. We only received responses from six of them. One participant indicated that they contact those involved during the research stage, whilst another stated that they only do so on occasion.

The other four participants do not think it is necessary to make contact. Nor do they make the effort to inform those involved prior to publishing the report, as this is not legally required or they do not have the contact information.

Does your newspaper regularly publish true crime content?



What are German-language podcasts all about?



How we went about generating statistical data on German-language true crime podcasts with artificial intelligence

The true crime phenomenon is difficult to represent comprehensively and in figures. There are very little scientifically sound surveys. Because podcasts are essentially the "traditional medium" in the true crime segment and easily accessible metadata is available, we focused on this format for collecting statistical data with artificial intelligence (AI) in the form of a neural network.

In addition to audio files, podcast hosting sites such as Spotify and Apple also supply titles, descriptions and keywords. Because these texts are much easier to evaluate than the podcasts themselves, we created a dataset featuring metadata on thousands of episodes of German-language true crime podcasts. To train our AI with as little data as possible and in a relatively short period of time, we adapted an existing neural network for our dataset to be used for classifying social media comments. Because the language style in social media and the podcast metadata is very similar, the result is correspondingly good.

In multiple tests, our AI correctly identified between 70 and 84 per cent of the test data. The result is much better for the dataset as a whole. Cases in which a homicide was incorrectly identified ("false positive") or not identified ("false negative") cancel each other out to some degree, placing the statistical errors at around four per cent.

How the editorial department conducted research

As the number of true crime formats increases, so too does the number of victims of crime whose story is told on a public stage, which is why WEISSER RING's editorial department takes a critical look at the topic in this issue. For the sake of transparency, here we reveal our intent as well as our approach to conducting research.

1 WEISSER RING's editorial department is made up of journalists who have gained professional experience in a variety of positions, including film director, book author and police and court reporter. Before joining Germany's largest victim support organisation, they themselves had published articles that fell under the true crime label.

2 Also on behalf of WEISSER RING, we publish *WRstory* articles that can be labelled as true crime and occasionally are because they examine actual crime cases. These appear in the *Forum Opferhilfe* magazine, on the website www.forum-opferhilfe.de, on social media and in our audio content. It is the editorial department's responsibility to present the victim's perspective in all this content.

3 The growing interest in true crime can be measured in its increased presence at the WEISSER RING's press office, which receives many requests for victims' contact information from producers of true crime podcasts, films and texts looking to make contact. At the same time, those involved in the cases talk to WEISSER RING about their uncertainty and their experiences with true crime formats.

4 There is no consistent definition of true crime. According to our observations, the distinguishing qualities of the genre are as follows:

- Rather than fictional ones, true crime formats examine criminal cases that actually occurred.
- They rely on storytelling.
- True crime does not take the form of current reporting on crime, but instead tends to focus on older cases, with legal proceedings often completed.

5 There is a lack of statistics and scientific research on true crime, which could have something to do with the fact that there is no clear definition. That is why we have attempted to collect data ourselves. We used artificial intelligence (AI) for a quantitative survey of 305 local and regional newspapers in Germany to find out whether they regularly produce true crime content. We also used AI to analyse offences that are examined in German-language podcasts. We included a qualitative survey for newspapers, but received very few responses.

6 We also conducted a qualitative survey targeting selected true crime producers. The results of both surveys are by no means representative, but they do allow us to draw conclusions and identify trends.

7 We evaluated posts and comments on social media related to true crime and asked Instagram users about their experiences with true crime in a survey.

8 During our research, we spoke with numerous victims of crime, the majority of whom had already been in contact with WEISSER RING.

9 We made contact with those affected whenever possible via the WEISSER RING victim supporters assigned to them. Most of those affected did not want to talk to us about their experiences with true crime reporting. They often informed us that they didn't want to go through everything all over again and that they preferred to avoid public attention.

10 For the purpose of journalistic preparation, we enlisted the expertise of legal experts, scientists, psychologists, true crime producers, TV critics, the German Press Council and WEISSER RING's victim supporters. The aim was to create a situational picture of true crime in Germany based on numerous mosaic stones that highlights both negative and positive aspects.

A murder story

Where does the fascination for true crime come from? Our report shows that the media boom follows historical role models, whose traditional narrative style is still current to this day, and that media benefit twofold from true crime. On the one hand, content like this serves a highly popular trend for high click rates, quotas and circulation. On the other, covering solved cases after the fact significantly reduces the amount of research required.

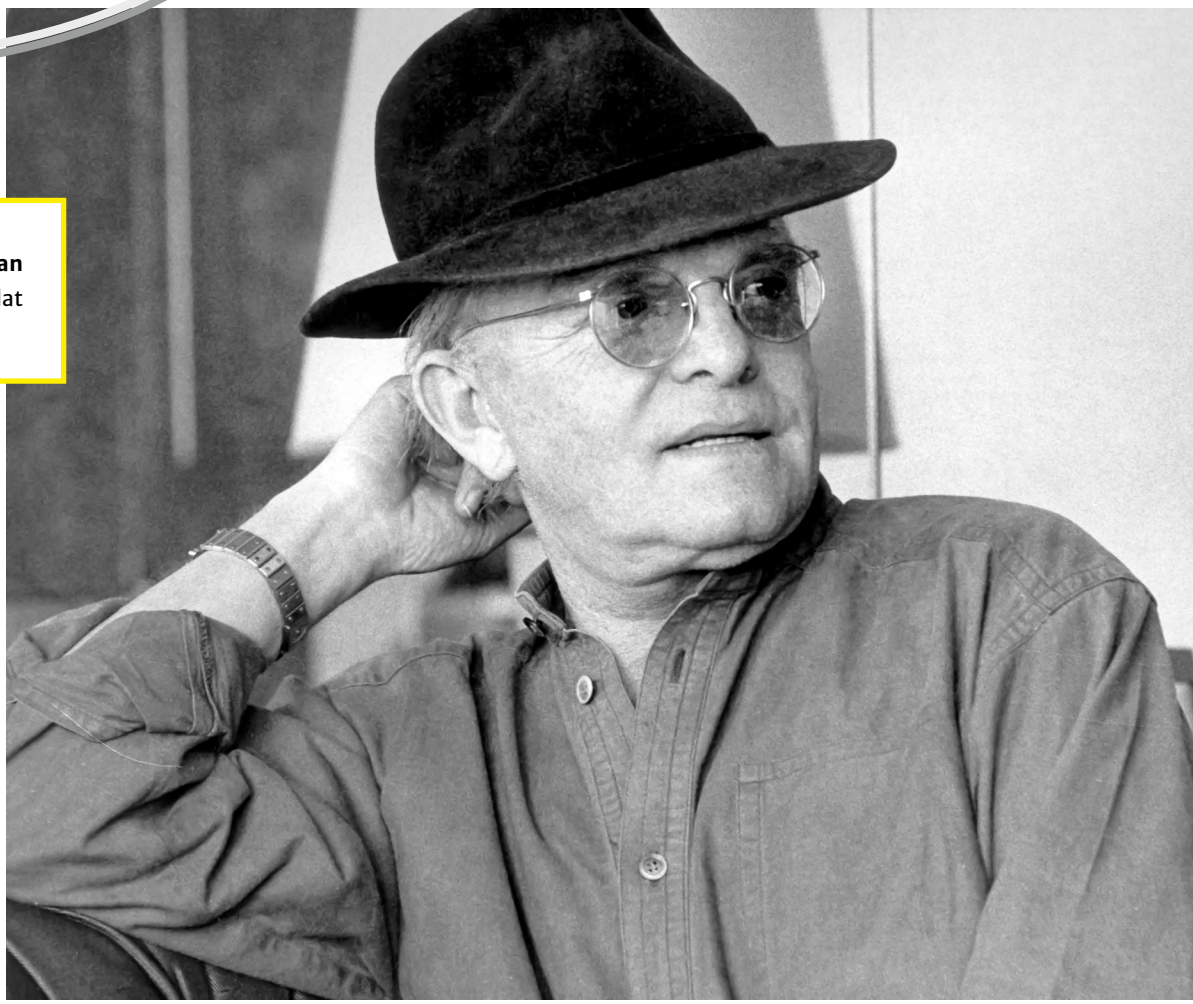
A horrendous murder occurred in the quiet town of Holcomb in the US state of Kansas on 14 November 1959. In the small community surrounded by wheat fields, a mother and father and two of their four children were killed at their farm. There were no leads in the case to start with.

The young Truman Capote meticulously investigated the sensational murder case at that time and turned his findings into a non-fiction novel, *In Cold Blood*, which resulted in his breakthrough as a writer in 1966. Using various narrative perspectives, Capote shed some light on the lives of the victims and discussed the decisive lead provided by an inmate at the Kansas state penitentiary, who had told his cell neighbour Dick about his job with the wealthy farming family, with fatal consequences. The author describes the plan of criminals Dick and Perry, who wanted to kill the family and then start a life of luxury in Mexico with the wealth they assumed they would find in the farm safe.

The writer allows his readers to delve into the criminal investigation – with horrific details such as the bloody shoe prints at the crime scene. Rather than a large sum of money, the book reveals that the murderers found just $50 – and then killed their victims to avoid capture. The book follows the criminals to Mexico, where their place of refuge devolved into a personal hell. The two of them were arrested after a wild odyssey to Las Vegas, as the informant had since approached the prison authorities. The two men ultimately confessed to the crime.

For his non-fiction novel, Capote examined countless documents such as diary entries, witness statements and letters, creating a multifaceted mosaic that serves not only as a crime thriller, but also as a psychogram and milieu study.

With his literary classic, which transforms a real murder case into a nightmarish story, Truman Capote is more than just a pioneer in “new journalism”, with a subjective narrative voice that generates mind movies for readers. *In Cold Blood* is also a milestone in the true crime genre and continues to be a source of inspiration to the media industry to this day. Astonishingly, one of Capote’s key stylistic devices, meticulous reconstruction, continues to shape the genre today – a detailed, largely chronological account of the crime or murder investigation. Even the montage technique he used, which creates a mosaic-like story on the basis of dozens of sources and statements, continues to be a key element of the standard repertoire.



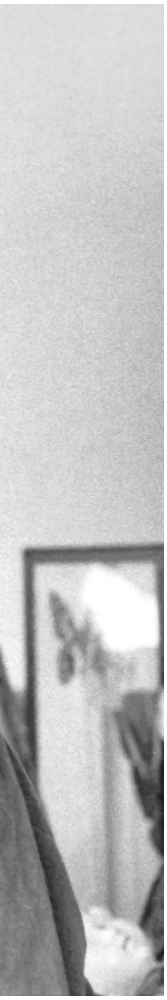
American writer **Truman Capote** in his New York flat on 24 July 1980.

Photo: dpa/UPI

The current hype surrounding real criminal cases, murders and murder investigations is largely stoked by media transformation processes. Without digitalisation, there wouldn't be any streaming services like Netflix, which further fuels the cult status of serial killers with series such as *Dahmer*. A cult which incidentally is also rooted in global book success. Take, for example, *Helter Skelter: The True Story of the Manson Murders* from 1974, in which Vincent Bugliosi, the lead public prosecutor at that time, meticulously reconstructed the search for the serial killer Charles Manson with a co-author.

Without the digital revolution, there wouldn't be any podcasts today which recycle historical criminal cases in a conversational tone of voice. Whilst the medium may change, the original form of the genre described is still current to this day. "The conventionally recounted true crime thriller, which private channels have been broadcasting on German TV for years now, is just one of many narrative styles", says Jan Harms, who researches true crime at the Institute for Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Düsseldorf. Nonetheless, it is "still a dominant narrative form".

A Hessischer Rundfunk (HR) production from the *ARD True Crime* series, *Auf den Spuren des eiskalten Szenewirts*, is just one example of how typical true crime thrillers work to this day in all media and on TV. The opening sequence shows drone images captured from above the treetops. Cut. "A butchered body in the tall grass", says a man in an interview. Cut. "Who is the young, blonde



woman found in Niddapark in Frankfurt?" asks a news anchor. Cut. "We could see multiple stab wounds", says a police officer. Later, a photo from the case files showing the feet of a woman's body is inserted. The homicide detectives explain in interviews what conclusions they were able to draw from the unusual blood spatter at the crime scene and how they went about searching for the perpetrator. You find out that the female victim was a co-owner of a bar in Frankfurt. The three-part series then introduces the murderer – a barkeeper and the murder victim's partner. Authentic filming locations, original photography and interview sequences with those involved in the murder investigation, who talk about interrogations and working hypotheses, are all assembled to create a true crime thriller that is highly professional, but also conventional in its style.

The three-part series is complex and produced with modern camera work and fast-cut editing. Nonetheless, implementing film content like this is a breeze for editorial departments. What makes true crime so appealing to media is not only its attractive, popular content, but also the fact that it can be produced with little effort. That's because case files like those provided by the litigators offer researchers all the facts they need for a detailed account, served up in a compressed form as if on a silver tray: information about victims and perpetrators, sequences of events, locations, evidence, the results of forensic investigations, and witnesses.

> **"It's worth mentioning that true crime has always blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction."**
>
> **Jan Harms, media researcher**

So media benefits twofold from true crime. On the one hand, content like this serves a highly popular trend for high click rates, quotas and circulation. On the other, it reduces the amount of time necessary for research, a continuously diminishing editorial resource.

When it comes to producing this content, the standard practices of the security services can be quite helpful for media. When investigations are still ongoing, public prosecutor's offices and the police tend to provide very limited information to the public to improve their chances of apprehending suspected criminals. But for closed cases, editorial departments and production companies can much more easily secure interviews with homicide detectives. The dramatisation of these mass-produced media is also largely successful due to the common thread of the content and generally follow the murder investigation chronologically, much like in an episode of ARD's *Tatort* series. "It's worth mentioning that true crime has always blurred the lines between fiction and non-fiction", says media researcher Harms, adding that, in this respect, true crime is a loosely defined category encompassing investigative research and documentation as well as dramatised film and series content such as *Dahmer* on Netflix. It's no coincidence that the production of fictional crime thrillers exploded at a time when true crime stories were so successful. Regardless of the form of media, heinous crimes are a huge market.

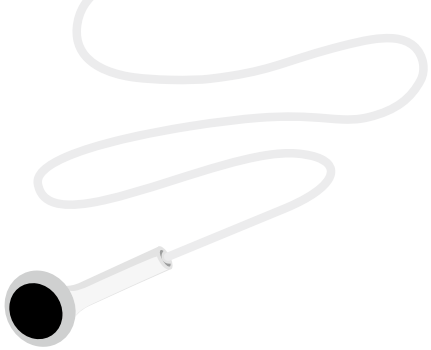
Incidentally, the origins of true crime go back much further than Capote's non-fiction novel, *In Cold Blood*. Media researcher Harms dates historical predecessors back to the early 19th century. Fast, cheaply produced newspapers – so-called penny press newspapers – were published in the US as early as the 1820s, with tabloid-style leaflets recounting spectacular crimes. Magazines such as *True Detective Mysteries* followed a hundred years later, in the 1920s. "With their detective stories based on true events, these can be viewed as early precursors to today's formats", says Harms. "The term 'true crime' was also coined during this time." Capote's must-read book *In Cold Blood* was joined by additional literary successes such as Ann Rule's *The Stranger Beside Me* in the 1970s and 1980s. Over time, this successful crime literature had to compete with ever-expanding television programming.

American TV series *Unsolved Mysteries* sparked a real boom at the end of the 1980s. "Reconstructions of real criminal cases have dominated the genre ever since", says Harms. The combination of re-enacted scenes and interviews with neighbours and family members was mass-produced for the first time. These were inspired by the format of fictional police series, something that felt familiar to the audience. Channels were able to create content from an inexhaustible pool of solved murder cases. The basic structure of individual episodes is always identical: What led to the murder, how was it committed, and how was the murderer charged and convicted? "But a new trend has emerged in recent years – namely, taking a critical look at official narratives and, if possible, disproving them", explains Harms. A classic example of this new format is the Netflix production *Making a Murderer*. According to Harms, convictions have even been overturned in some cases, which is what happened after the *Serial* podcast. Investigative research like this is extremely complicated and therefore expensive, as it re-examines the case rather than rehashing it, which is what makes it an exception to the rule.

Jan Harms · Photo: Leyli Sahin

However, the genre often fails as a result of its own journalistic standards, says Harms. He is critical of the recent trend of many local newspapers producing their own podcasts based on old criminal cases taken from the archive. "There's a high risk that excitement and the storytelling itself will take centre stage." The media scholar describes that as a "sensationalist rehash". This begs the question, what is the appeal today of recounting past cases if it's just about reconstructing the crime and investigation? "From a media ethics perspective, true crime assumes a great deal of responsibility", he emphasises. According to Harms, it's up to the editorial department to question if and when it is justifiable to use the names of family members or people not connected to the case in current media reports for cases that were closed long ago. "Despite high-quality formats, there is still questionable content that could rightly be accused of trivialising brutal violence", says Harms. All too often, media simply turns brutal murders into successful entertainment.

The *Schwarz-Rot-Blut* podcast series reveals that there is another way and that true crime can even expose social injustices. The radio format is produced by WDR, Radio Bremen and RBB. The individual episodes take a look at criminal cases in Germany in which the motive of racism was concealed during the investigations and in court. One example is the 1987 case of the Iranian refugee in Tübingen whom a supermarket employee wrestled to the floor and strangled to death. For the seven-part series, investigative journalists such as Lena Kampf spent a year conducting research to uncover how family members and security services can have such different assessments of the same crime. After all, victim advice centres and those affected frequently complain that even clear cases of racism are ignored or rejected during investigations. The podcast series focuses on an ongoing scandal and is therefore highly



topical. “Approaches like these – for example, investigating racism in criminal prosecution – have been observed over the past five or six years”, explains Harms.

Critical research into questionable investigation results fulfils the journalistic watchdog function and ideally helps to increase social sensitivity. In other words, true crime can be more than just a calculated thrill with horrific ingredients taken from real life. Media now even use the popular label to highlight complex issues beyond murder and manslaughter with public appeal. For example, the *Handelsblatt* business newspaper is adapting the scandal surrounding financial services provider Wirecard into an economic crime thriller with its *Handelsblatt Crime* podcast – to reach those who otherwise view the topic of business as dry and too complicated.

This genre has increasingly distinguished itself in recent years. On the one hand, chronological accounts of true crime remain a lasting success both in printed magazines such as *Stern Crime* and in podcast and TV series. On the other, trends related to murder and the hunt for murderers are constantly changing. According to Harms, there was a “forensic boom” around the turn of the millennium. With their presentation of modern forensics, educational formats such as *Forensic Files*, which explained how forensics works based on concrete cases, as well as fictional series such as *CSI* paint a picture of an infallible form of evidence which often does not exist in everyday crime investigation. As a result, DNA evidence has been credited with an objective power, says Harms, in which there is no room for doubt or error. “True crime absolutely has an impact and effect on society.”

The media scholar firmly believes that the genre has become a permanent facet of media culture. For the time being, criticism of the phenomenon is primarily limited to cultural debates. In contrast, the fans of podcasts and TV and streaming series don’t seem to take exception to the horrendous depiction of serial killers or the publication of the names and photos of victims of spectacular murder cases and their family members. “Audiences are largely uncritical of true crime”, says Harms. He ventures a prognosis: “The genre has proved to be so diverse and adaptable that it will continue to accompany us for many years.”

Michael Kraske

> **“From a media ethics perspective, true crime assumes a great deal of responsibility.”**
>
> **Jan Harms, media researcher**

“True crime formats satisfy a rubbernecking mentality”

Johann Scheerer is the son of Jan Philipp Reemtsma, heir to millions. Scheerer was 13 years old when his father was kidnapped and released for a high ransom in 1996. True crime formats continue to dramatise the case decades later, though the family refuses to cooperate in any form. The father revealed what had happened to him in a book published the year after the crime. The son published an autobiographical account of the story in 2018 entitled *Wir sind dann wohl die Angehörigen* (*We Are Next of Kin)*, which was also made into a film released in 2022. Scheerer is a writer and musician and founded a music label, under which he produced a solo album by the British rock star Pete Doherty. The 40-year-old lives with his family in Hamburg.

Photo: Gerald von Foris

Johann Scheerer didn't speak about the crime perpetrated against his family – the abduction of his father, Hamburg millionaire Jan Philipp Reemtsma – for the first 20 years or so. A conversation about a story which continues to attract maximum public attention to this day, taking back control of the narrative and the need for a new journalistic genre.

Mr Scheerer, you and your parents categorically refuse to participate in any true crime productions that recount your father's abduction. What do you think of these formats?
They generally satisfy a rubbernecking mentality, like when there's an accident. You slow down on the motorway to gawk and might even see some blood. Once the car has been towed away and the lane has opened up again – to stick with the accident and crime analogy – that's the point in time when most true crime formats end.

You mean when the perpetrators have been caught, the court case is over, and the criminal case is closed?
Yes, that's one of the key issues I have with true crime formats – when they say the crimes have been solved. I don't believe that crimes have been solved once the "active" part of the crime is over. They carry on! With the victims or family members processing what has happened. It sounds like common sense, but there are obviously many people who haven't quite grasped that yet. And that's why I have a problem with these formats. They end at the point where it becomes quite critical for society – when it comes to the question, what are the consequences and aftermaths of this crime? Sticking with the analogy of the accident, you drive off and don't spend much time thinking about who was actually in the car, what happened to them, or if they'll be able to or want to drive again. Whether the person had children and what will happen to them.

What does that mean, applied to the space occupied by the victim's perspective in true crime?
The victim's perspective is still largely disregarded. In many respects, there's a major deficit in terms of those affected, their care and how they're treated. One example is the hierarchy applied to the affected groups, when talking about first or second-degree victims. I find it disconcerting because no one is in a position to determine whether someone's a victim or not. No one but those who were involved themselves know how or the degree to which the crime has affected them. Categorisation may be justifiable in criminal law, but it's absolutely useless when it comes to dealing with trauma. The victims' stories are more complicated and, more importantly, less public, which is why it's easier to focus on the crime and the perpetrators in formats like these. But you always have to wonder, do these perpetrators deserve a stage?

If it's actually the victims who deserve the stage, why don't you want to be involved in formats like these?
I didn't talk about my father's abduction for around 20 years. In part because I felt like it was my father's story, not mine. I felt all the emotions of a victim, but didn't know I was a victim. Society had taught me that you're not a victim if you're not the one who bears the visible injuries. It took many years of healing to understand that that was wrong. It takes a lot of work to admit to yourself that you're a victim. And a self-determined healing process also requires you to cast aside this status again at some point down the road. The crime itself – the act and the perpetrator – reduces the victim to a marginal figure incapable of taking action. And that's also how victims are treated in true crime formats. So it should come as no surprise that I'm not interested in appearing as a marginal figure in a format like that after my personal healing process.

Does the focus of perception need to shift in true crime narratives, but also in society as a whole?
Society benefits from the fact that we now discuss, for example, the degree to which violent experiences in childhood can affect people later in life. It's only natural for trials to focus on the perpetrators, and a connection is often identified between violent experiences and future crimes. We as a society have come a long way. But wouldn't it also make sense to take a closer look at the many victims and their stories of life and suffering after the crime as well as ensure that they're doing as well as possible? That's so important to me, but it has always been overlooked – both by society as a whole and in formats like these.

Decades later, the media continue to rehash your family's story, often teased as "one of the most spectacular abductions" in Germany. How do you deal with that?
I have no choice but to ignore it. I don't watch it, and it doesn't even interest me because it's always the same. Right after the abduction, some of the media coverage was simply untrue. At least there's less of that today. That's something.

Is there a justification for true crime?
I do see justification occasionally, of course. Even I think it's interesting to read about the Red Army Faction case sometimes. Or a crime might have social and historical significance. Reports like these are important for understanding how an event came about, so we can learn from mistakes. That's okay. But there are limits, of course. When I was younger, two years after the abduction, I came across a magazine ranking that listed the case as one of the ten "most successful" abductions in Germany due to the high ransom. I was shocked, of course. Finding yourself in a tasteless ranking is yet another moment imposed on you by someone else.

If those involved in the case refuse to participate, "experts" such as investigators, psychologists and legal experts are often enlisted to describe what it must have been like for the victims. Is that another line that is crossed?
I can give you an example. I was invited to a WEISSER RING event in Hamburg, where I would have the opportunity to read from my book and then have a conversation with a child and adolescent psychologist who specialises specifically in anxiety and trauma. The idea was to examine what it's like to be a young victim of a crime. That sounded promising and I accepted. If the event had happened that way, but without me on the stage, what would have been the point?

Speaking of stages, you're a musician and music producer. Are you often asked for interviews related to your career or – as in this case – your father's abduction?
I was 17 years old when I started making music. Magazines like *GALA* wanted to interview me, but not because of my music. Fortunately, word spread that I always refused. Now that I've achieved a certain position over the years, I regularly receive requests in a purely musical context. I spoke publicly about the case for the first time in 2016. A *DIE ZEIT* journalist interviewed me about producing Pete Doherty's solo album and said it would be professional to at least mention my family background. It appeared in half a sentence or so in the interview, which was fine for me.

What was it like when your autobiographical book, *Wir sind dann wohl die Angehörigen*, was published?
I spoke about that with the media, but for me that's something different than talking about the abduction itself because now I have control of the narrative. You know, the fact that my family's story is so public and has taken on a life of its own and that you no longer have any control over it – that's part of the trauma. Healing is always about recovering control, autonomy. And I wouldn't have that if I'd participated in the true crime formats. I wrote the book to say exactly what I wanted and how I wanted to say it. When the book was published, I did readings that allowed me to engage in conversation with the public. That's much more interesting than any true crime documentary. Also because you can gain more insight.

"It should come as no surprise that I'm not interested in appearing as a marginal figure in a format like that."

Johann Scheerer,
son of Jan Philipp Reemtsma, who was abducted and released for a ransom in 1996

What made you decide to write the book?
A publisher approached me to ask if I'd be willing to write about producing Doherty's album *Hamburg Demonstration*. I was flattered. It had never occurred to me that anyone would be interested in what I had to say in a book. But then I realised, regardless of what I write in my life, I first need to write about the abduction and get it out of the way because much of my biography is shaped by this experience. I worked hard and finished the book in just a few weeks – however, I spent 20 years preparing for it.

You could've just kept a diary for yourself. Why was it important to you to share your personal perspective with the general public?
Well, the story was already as public as is possible. I didn't make it happen. I was put in this situation through no fault of my own. I wanted to take back control of the narrative. And you can't do that simply by giving interviews. It's all about self-determination. You need to find your own words and take them to the public sphere. You need to seize the story on the public stage and make it your own.

Does self-determination exist in current media coverage?
Not many people know this, but those involved in the case are not informed in any way in advance. Every few years there's a report – for example, one of the perpetrators appears in court for something else – and then the entire abduction case is rehashed. You're drinking your coffee and reading the Sunday paper, and suddenly you're looking into the eyes of this person and the horrible face behind the crime. I don't want to get into retraumatisation, but it does throw you off track for just a moment. Not even large, respectable editorial departments like those of *DIE ZEIT* or *DER SPIEGEL* seem capable of writing a brief email to say, just to let you know, there will be an article in the Sunday paper on page five. I think it's only fair to think about those affected and inform them, so that they can decide to avoid that page entirely or simply throw the whole paper or magazine away. I'm aware that this is probably not feasible for editorial departments, but it's still a nice idea.

When there's advertising in podcasts and merchandise for other true crime productions is sold, you can get the feeling that they're commercialising the suffering of victims. What do you think about that?
It's not a question I've really ever thought about because I don't consume those formats. It is tasteless when you imagine that the producers earn money with the stories of those involved in the case. There are plenty of charitable options to choose from, such as donating the income or collaborating with organisations such as WEISSER RING.

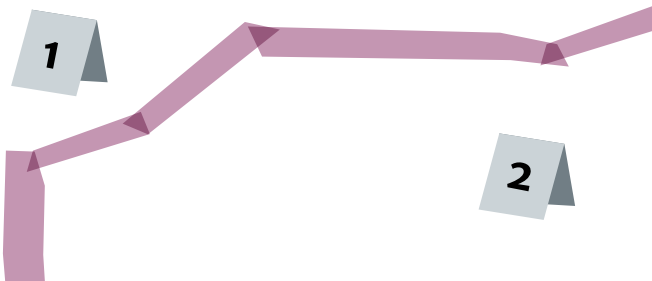
You, too, earn money with your book and its adaptation into a film.
Which isn't reprehensible because it's my story and my family.

Can you understand why other victims would take part in true crime productions?
It's understandable and justifiable if those affected feel like it's part of their healing process and they can have an influence on the story. Whether you're interested or not is a question of personality and individual preferences. That's why it's not fair to judge from the outside. But there's another point. It's the responsibility of each and every journalist to first assess whether the person is in the right state of mind to participate or if they need to be protected instead. It's often very difficult to watch interviews with victims that are conducted right after the crime, which is where journalistic due diligence comes in. My appeal to media producers: whatever you do, do not drag everyone in front of the camera and, if in doubt, make the decision not to broadcast a report even if it's finished.

In a recent *DER SPIEGEL* interview, your father was asked if there has ever been a situation in which he has asked you for forgiveness. His response: "I never looked at the situation through his eyes. More than anything else, that was a huge mistake." Is that something media producers also need to take more to heart? Do they need to consider the perspectives of those affected and make space for them?
Yes, of course. But I fear that true crime is simply the wrong genre for that because it serves as popcorn entertainment. It would appear that producers lack the creativity to develop equally spectacular productions that focus more on the victims. The filming of my book, for example, was an attempt to talk about a crime without rehashing it, represent the family's point of view and provide insight into the family dynamic. There may be some who don't consider the result to be spectacular, but that's too short-sighted anyway. The film is supposed to show what effect the crime had on the mother and son and their emotional state of mind. That kind of thing is rare because it works differently, goes much deeper than true crime.

Does that mean there needs to be a new genre of media that focuses on the story after the crime and the victim's point of view?
Absolutely. The more you think about it, you realise just how inconceivable it is that there's nothing like that despite all the journalistic crime formats. In my opinion, the story that begins after the crime is much more interesting and, from a journalistic point of view, more emotional than the crime itself. The fact that formats like these do not exist underlines my point that the victim's perspective is underrepresented in society as a whole.

Nina Lenhardt



How do successful true crime formats deal with those affected?

Stern Crime magazine, the _Mord auf Ex_ podcast and YouTuber Kati Winter all report on real criminal cases with great success. WEISSER RING's editorial staff wanted to ask the producers of popular true crime formats the following questions: How do you deal with victims and their families? When do you contact those affected and when do you not? To what degree are victims involved in the development process?

WEISSER RING's editorial staff sent a questionnaire to some of the most popular true crime formats in Germany. Five of them responded. You can read a selection of their answers here:

What are the most important sources in your reporting? ↗

"We use a variety of sources, including court rulings, expert opinions, case files and, in many cases, court visits. Of course, we also talk with those involved in the case such as investigators, attorneys, witnesses and family members."

Bernd Volland ***(Stern Crime)***

"We primarily work with secondary sources, meaning we research newspaper articles, podcasts, interviews and books and use these to create a script. If it's a case in Germany, Austria or Switzerland, we also occasionally work with the families."

Patrick Temp ***(Insolito,*** **YouTube)**

"For my reporting, I use a combination of newspaper archives, online articles, reference books/magazines and documentaries to ensure the two-source principle. I also take a look at court rulings and occasionally the case files."

Philipp Fleiter ***(Verbrechen von nebenan)***

Do you contact victims and their family members when you conduct your reporting? ↓

"No! I want to protect the privacy of the victims and their families, rather than causing additional pain with my questions. […] I'm well aware of the power of my reach, and it's very important to me to present the facts responsibly and respectfully. […] My comments are therefore carefully monitored to prevent retraumatisation, insults to victims' families, etc., as I'm well aware that family members could see my videos at any time, especially when it comes to German cases."

Kati Winter (YouTube)

"I generally don't get in touch with the family members, especially when the reporting says that they do not want to be contacted by the media. In individual cases, I send questions by email. But family members often get in touch with me and ask me to report on 'their' case."

Philipp Fleiter ***(Verbrechen von nebenan)***

"Usually, especially when it comes to German cases. I often make contact through their attorneys. It's usually more difficult for older cases because the family members have often died or can no longer be found. If any of our authors followed the proceedings, we also incorporate the perspectives of any family members who appeared in court."

Bernd Volland ***(Stern Crime)***

"That's very important. We're more interested in telling their story than that of the perpetrators, which is why we occasionally also work with those affected and investigators during the reporting phase. Some of our listeners have shared their traumatic experiences with us, which is why we want to offer hope and encouragement with our episodes."

Leonie Bartsch, Linn Schütze ***(Mord auf Ex, Die Nachbarn)***

"The perspective of the victim/family members takes priority in our format, which is why our channel almost exclusively covers unsolved cases for which there is still hope for justice. We don't want people or their cases to be forgotten."

Patrick Temp ***(Insolito,*** **YouTube)**

"The perspective of the victim/family members is important to us, which is why we also view them as potential readers when preparing the cases for journalistic and storytelling purposes. Crimes and the resulting suffering should not be trivialised, or the perpetrators idolised or romanticised."

Bernd Volland ***(Stern Crime)***

How important is the perspective of those affected to you in your format? ↑

What do you do to prevent potential retraumatisation of those affected? →

"If those affected maintain contact with us during the reporting process, we're more than happy to offer them the opportunity to listen to the interview again and veto anything they're not happy with."

Leonie Bartsch, Linn Schütze ***(Mord auf Ex, Die Nachbarn)***

"We send the script to all the family members we work with in advance. But that's not entirely true. We didn't do that in Frauke Liebs' case. I posted the video shortly after I started *Insolito*. I didn't have much experience at that point. Ms Liebs saw the video and contacted me. We later we communicated with each other. I changed inaccurate information (which I had found in secondary sources), uploaded the video again, pointed out this inaccurate information and provided context.

Patrick Temp ***(Insolito,*** **YouTube)**

"I don't think there's any way to avoid retraumatisation entirely, even if we try to be as sensitive as possible and work with trigger warnings. But I also believe that people who are looking for their loved ones are reminded of them daily in one way or another. A video that draws new attention to the case in the general public could possibly even have a consoling effect. At least I hope it does."

Patrick Temp ***(Insolito,*** **YouTube)**

"Even when we ask someone for an interview, we make it clear that, if they don't feel comfortable talking to us, we will, of course, respect that and no longer contact them. If they agree to an interview, we send them our questions in advance, so that they have the opportunity to veto any questions and prepare for the other questions."

Leonie Bartsch, Linn Schütze ***(Mord auf Ex, Die Nachbarn)***

"During the contact process: Because we're not working on current events, we can take our time and be more thorough. We usually talk to the attorneys first because they generally have a good sense of whether the family members or victims are willing to talk to us or feel comfortable doing so. […] If those affected don't want to talk to us personally, they often allow their attorney to share their story from their perspective. On occasion, family members or victims are happy to share their side of the story. We also often write letters in which we explain our intentions and provide them with the opportunity to get in touch with us directly without any pressure and make a decision.

"During the interview: With high sensitivity when conducting the interview, transparency in the direction of the reporting, and acceptance of the victims' or family members' personal boundaries."

Bernd Volland ***(Stern Crime)***

Do you involve those affected when developing your story? ↑

Have you ever received reactions from those affected after publishing your content? ↓

"Yes, I've often had contact with the family after the podcast was released. And it has always been positive. [...] I kept in contact for a long time with the family of a woman from Bremen who was murdered. After many phone conversations, it became clear that they were still struggling with the crime. At that point, I offered to delete the episode if that's what they wanted. And that's what I did shortly thereafter."

Philipp Fleiter ***(Verbrechen von nebenan)***

"Since we began releasing our episodes, multiple victims/family members have got in touch with us to ask us to examine and share their stories. We keep in close contact with them."

Leonie Bartsch, Linn Schütze ***(Mord auf Ex, Die Nachbarn)***

"Yes. The family members of a victim once asked me to take an older video offline because the perpetrator was about to be released. [...] That was fine with me. I've been contacted a few times by the family members or acquaintances of victims, or they've commented on my videos, thanking me for covering the case with respect."

Kati Winter (YouTube)

Leonie Bartsch and Linn Schütze form the true crime duo *Mord auf Ex*. The two journalists have been recounting murder cases once a week on their podcast since 2019. For each case it covers, the investigative podcast *Die Nachbarn* examines whether the right perpetrators are behind bars.

Philipp Fleiter is the radio journalist behind the *Verbrechen von nebenan* podcast, which is released every other Monday. Since 2019, Fleiter has been discussing true crime cases from the neighbourhood and the stories behind them with alternating guests, including experts and those involved in the case.

Patrick Temp launched his true crime YouTube channel *Insolito* in 2019, which has nearly 300,000 subscribers. His videos have been viewed more than 55 million times. On his second channel, *Insolito Crime News*, he provides case updates and calls attention to urgent missing person cases. (As of May 2023)

Bernd Volland is Head of the Editorial Staff at Gruner + Jahr's true crime magazine *Stern Crime*, which has been published bimonthly in print and digital form since 2015. According to the magazine, the publication does not focus on the crimes themselves, but rather the people involved in them.

Kati Winter is also a YouTuber and has been producing YouTube documentaries on true crime for three and a half years. She has also been active on TikTok for two years and has offered her own podcast for a year. Her YouTube channel has nearly 200,000 subscribers. (As of May 2023)

Survey: Christiane Fernbacher

True crime – meaningful or voyeuristic?

Christiane Fernbacher was a writer and director of true crime documentaries for public service television. In this report, she explains why she decided to quit her job and join the press team of WEISSER RING.

It was in the spring of 2020 that a young woman told me about how her father had killed her mother. Over coffee and cake, she talked about the worst thing that had happened in her life – quietly and reflectively. The woman sitting there in front of me was eloquent, tough and emotional at the same time. She impressed and moved me. She was the ideal protagonist. I was with her because my employer back then, a film and television production company, was planning a documentary about the crime in her family; we had already sold the film to a public broadcaster at that time. The case was unusual, with unexpected twists and turns and an ending that made everyone shudder.

As a filmmaker, I naturally wanted the young woman to be part of the documentary. I knew that she was the only one who could tell her story in this special way. But after about two hours she told me she didn't want to take part. She had met with me because she wanted to know what we were planning and why we wanted to retell the case. Another TV broadcaster had already made a film about her story. She had been involved in that one, so that she could express the viewpoints that were important to her. "So why do it again now?" she asked. Good question. I didn't have a good answer.

She explained that, on the one hand, she felt she ought to take part so that there wouldn't be a film about her family in which no one from the family had a say. On the other hand, there was the stronger feeling that she didn't want to be involved. She had moved to a new town after everything that had happened and was enjoying her new-found anonymity, which she didn't want to jeopardise under any circumstances. In the end, that was her reason for turning me down. I understood exactly what she meant and asked myself: Who am I to try and persuade her to do this project?

After our meeting, I got into the car and thought about this special encounter for a very long time. That was the moment I started to question true crime – and with it myself as part of the genre. Who benefits from the films we make? Is true crime somehow meaningful or is it just voyeurism? The case about the young woman's family was already the tenth episode of our true crime series, which I had worked on from the beginning.

At first, I found true crime exciting. I had great fun researching these various criminal cases, especially historical ones: I was allowed to rummage through archived police records, got to see photos that hardly anyone else was allowed to see and filmed in places that are not accessible to most people, such as the forensic medicine department in Frankfurt am Main. I met many police commissioners, many impressive individuals – people who (like me) were passionate about their job and made me feel that through their stories.

Christiane Fernbacher (33) worked on reports and documentaries for public service television for over ten years. She headed the investigative editorial department of a production company before joining the press team of WEISSER RING in July 2022.

Photo: Christian J. Ahlers

But especially in those first years as a true crime writer, I didn't worry too much about the victims and their relatives. Of course I wanted them to be comfortable, to feel good about the project, but in part that was because I wanted them to participate. Because I wanted to make a good film. Prior to filming, we usually visited the protagonists. We took our time and listened to them. That was important to all of us. We were, after all, confronting people with what was probably the worst time of their lives. That was something we were always conscious of. And yet I overlooked quite a few warning signs.

For example, I once met a man who had survived an attempted murder. We had a pleasant conversation. At first we talked about everything under the sun, as if we were acquaintances meeting up for a cup of coffee. But then we had to talk about the case. Today I can say: I've never seen anyone tremble so much. The man told me he had never had therapy. Apparently he had never really come to terms with what had happened. Nevertheless, he agreed to the filming – and "functioned". No trembling, no faltering, nothing.

On another occasion it was the other way round. The preliminary talk went well: A woman told me about her sister who had been killed. There were no tears or discomposure. Both only overcame her when the camera started rolling on the day of the shoot. After the interview I accompanied her outside. She liked us, I think. We liked her, too. But without the crime against her sister, we would probably never have met. Only when she pulled out of the parking space and hit a post did I realise just how much the situation and the memories had shaken her up. I didn't feel good about letting her drive home alone at the time. Fortunately, she arrived safely.

I noticed these situations and they worried me somewhat, but they did not yet prompt me to reconsider. I was too euphoric about telling these thrilling criminal cases. It was only this meeting in spring 2020 – with the woman whose mother had been killed by her father – that showed me: I don't want this any more. After that story I did two more episodes, then my time as a true crime writer was over. It was a very deliberate decision.

But, as they say, it wasn't all bad, of course. On the contrary. We got a lot of positive feedback from our protagonists. My main concern was that the participants be the ones who were satisfied with our films. And true crime certainly has its own power: With these stories we were able to illustrate the terrible things that can happen. We could warn viewers about how far violence can go. We were able to show how accurately investigators can deduce what happened and how sophisticated forensic technology is. And above all, we could commemorate those people who had lost their lives.

So is true crime meaningful or pure voyeurism? It can be both. Speaking for myself, I reached my personal limits after more than five years. But the genre is neither black nor white for me. It was only through my work at WEISSER RING that I truly understood how much media enquiries can stir victims up. I see the victims' perspective of such projects every day now. Therefore, my opinion today is that victims and relatives should be much more involved in the creation process of a true crime format, and that the makers of such formats must listen to their wishes and needs. After all, it is their story that is being shared with the public.

What are true crime formats allowed and not allowed to do?

When do photos need to be pixelated? When is it acceptable to mention names or cities and when is it not? Anyone who follows true crime formats closely knows that the producers do not have a consistent answer to these questions. However, regulations are quite clear. The well-known attorney and media law expert Christian Solmecke explains what is legal and what is not.

Photo: Tim Hufnagl

As an attorney and partner at the media law firm, Wilde Beuger Solmecke based in Cologne, Christian Solmecke specialises in advice on issues related to the Internet and IT. The 49-year-old also supports media professionals and writes non-fiction books on the topic of Internet law. Before becoming an attorney, he spent several years working as a journalist, including for Westdeutscher Rundfunk.

1 *Victims of crime have clear rights*

"General personality rights apply to everyone and may not be violated. Cases may be reported on only if the public's interest in information takes precedence, in which case interests need to be carefully weighed. In addition, no one has to tolerate inaccurate factual claims – however, statements of personal opinion are permitted", Solmecke says.

"Despite the rights of victims – whether living or deceased – and their family members, it is the responsibility of the press to report on current events and criminal offences. However, victim protection is always important."

Ehrensache

From the organisation, for the organisation

WEISSER RING is the people who dedicate their time and effort to the organisation. In this issue of "Ehrensache", we are introducing you to volunteers from Brussels, Bremen and Bremerhaven as well as North Rhine-Westphalia.

Content

Brussels
p. 2

Bremen and Bremerhaven
p. 5

North Rhine-Westphalia
p. 8

Science Award
p. 11

Regional news
p. 14

Interview: 45 years in full-time office
p. 16

The globetrotter

Only one ring, and then Linn Sommerhoff appears on the laptop screen. We talk to her via Facetime, because the business lawyer has been living in Brussels for close to two years. For her, moving away was certainly no reason to give up her commitment to WEISSER RING in her home country. On the contrary: "The online environment makes it easy to work together, even from abroad." In 2021, the 28-year-old joined Tobias Petrulat as a youth officer for the North Rhine-Westphalia/Rhineland regional association. She is the go-to person for young workers up to the age of 35 and is mainly involved in prevention projects. For these young volunteers – all of whom are very committed and active, according to Sommerhoff – it is quite natural to coordinate the work via the Internet.

Linn Sommerhoff first arrived in the Belgian capital after graduating from law school in Germany. In Brussels, she went on to do a Master's degree in international relations with a focus on foreign policy. The hub of European politics was the ideal place for this, of course. Afterwards, she got a job at a think tank for a few months and realised: This is where I want to stay. Very modestly, almost in passing, she mentions her current job. "Since September 2022, I've been working for an NGO, as a policy assistant – in other words, in an absolute entry-level job", she says with a smile. She helps with the NGO's strategy development, attends and reports on meetings of the EU institutions and keeps an eye on how the social policy issues her employer advocates for are developing.

The young woman's office is right at the heart of the European Quarter, in a building that is typical of Brussels: old, somewhat run-down, with a Flemish clinker brick façade and a large gate. Occasionally, she sees a diplomat's car with tinted windows driving over the cobblestones in front of the entrance. Directly opposite, a stark architectural contrast

projects into the sky: a huge modern glass building of the European Commission. It is a neighbourhood full of MEPs, lawyers, lobbyists and ambitious interns. The jobs here are fiercely contested, with people from all over the world hoping to make a difference and influence European politics – including our volunteer from the Ruhr district, who says: "Social justice matters a great deal to me."

Sommerhoff's interest in other cultures and their social situation was sparked in 2004. At that time, most Germans were no longer concerned with the Chernobyl reactor accident; new disasters had long since shaken the world. Not so in Mülheim an der Ruhr: When Linn Sommerhoff was just ten years old, her parents took in a girl of the same age from Chernobyl for what might be called a recreational visit during the summer holidays. "My parents both work in social services and have always been committed to helping others, both at work and in their private lives", Sommerhoff says. There was a language barrier, of course, "but we somehow managed to communicate." The then ten-year-old learned that there are people who are not as well off as she is. Soon after, she and her mother travelled to the area near Chernobyl as part of an aid transport. There she saw the conditions under which people were living – the consequences of the accident. And these first encounters probably laid the foundation for Linn Sommerhoff's professional career.

The 28-year-old has an alert, open expression. At first glance she seems younger than she actually is, but that changes as soon as she starts talking: eloquently, seriously and emphatically. Her words are accompanied by much gesticulation, especially when she speaks about matters that are close to her heart. And what matters most of all to her are people. She has spent a lot of time travelling over the years, but she always combines the enjoyable – seeing the world – with the useful: taking notice and helping out. At 16, she travelled to the USA for the holidays. While other students her age went sightseeing in the big cities, Linn Sommerhoff helped disadvantaged children in the poorer neighbourhoods of Philadelphia. In 2014, she spent two months in Vietnam supporting local aid projects.

Linn Sommerhoff lives in Brussels. She manages her commitments to the young workers in the association quite naturally via the Internet.

Photo: private

"Social justice matters a great deal to me."

Linn Sommerhoff

Chernobyl, Philadelphia and finally Vietnam: Doesn't it weigh on her when she is directly confronted with people's poverty? Pensively, Linn Sommerhoff brushes a strand of hair out of her face. "Not really, no. You notice the differences and problems, of course. But you're there to help and improve the situation. And the people appreciate that very much. They never complain, but simply make the best of their situation."

There was also a stay in a small town in Belarus during her studies. "The water supply there is simply turned off for two days, for example", Linn Sommerhoff recounts, her voice growing a little louder with indignation. "Without notice – and not just once a year, but again and again. The people who live there are used to that and don't make a big fuss about it." But you can tell that the situation made a lasting impression on the business lawyer, because this trip once again brought home to her the conditions under which people have to live in other countries. She wasn't going to just accept this and do nothing about it, so she decided to do a Master's degree in international relations. She also says: "The decision-makers in the EU are usually up on the tenth floor. So it's good when people down below keep reminding them what the situation is really like outside their parliamentary bubble."

Despite her great interest in foreign countries, aid projects and life abroad, Linn Sommerhoff has close ties to her home country. She regularly visits her parents and friends. And then there is her voluntary work in Germany, which she began in 2018. "Like all law students, I quickly realised how dry and theoretical studying can be and started looking for opportunities to apply my knowledge in practice – however, not as a part-time job, but on a voluntary basis." Googling, she came across WEISSER RING's Bonn branch, applied and went through the training. "After that, things progressed relatively quickly and I was able to help a victim for the first time. I was very happy about that." During this time, she often met victims for a walk or a coffee – personal conversations create more trust than, say, a phone call, and people simply talk more openly, she finds. Her voluntary work again demonstrates Linn Sommerhoff's pragmatic side as well as her self-protection: "Of course, there are always cases that affect you more than others, especially if you accompany a person all the way to court." However, as a student at the time, she had a work mobile phone that she could turn off in the evenings and at weekends so that she could have some time for herself and get away from it all; and she also took time out during exam periods.

One might assume that after her work commitments and the additional online appointments with volunteers from her regional association, Linn Sommerhoff likes to close the door behind her and enjoy a quiet evening alone. But she is just as active in her private life as she is in her professional life. She enjoys doing sports as a way to unwind from the long meetings and days of research. And she has formed an international circle of friends in Brussels: "Many of my friends are from South and Central America, so I'm trying to learn some Spanish on the side." They often cook together and exchange traditional recipes from their countries.

Linn Sommerhoff has no idea how long she will stay in Brussels. Her position is limited to one year. Even now, she can tell what a difference she could make from here. "This proximity to the EU Parliament and the Commission has made me realise how relevant EU policy is for Germany and the work of WEISSER RING. You only have to look at the current directive on combating violence against women. What is being decided here also decisively influences the laws in Germany in this area." It is a topic that is very close to her heart The contract she signed in Brussels expires in autumn. She is not yet sure where she will continue to advocate for this topic. But one thing is certain: She will carry on fighting for socio-political issues somewhere in the world.

Julia Zipfel

Ehrensache

The witness counsellors

The parquet floor creaks and the hallway smells eerily like an old brick fortress, perhaps with a hint of incense: The "Altes Gerichtshaus" in Bremen, which houses the district court, was completed in 1895 and is now a listed building. Not only is it old, it is above all awe-inspiring for all those who enter. For those who walk towards the stained glass Lady Justice above the staircase and have to heave open the heavy oak door to the jury courtroom. For those who have to take their seat in the witness box beneath an imposing chandelier and between the elaborately panelled walls, and who are likely to feel somewhat small and lost if only due to the imposing design of the room.

Photo: Nina Lenhardt

Unless the witness carefully read the letter from the court with the summons to testify – because in Bremen and Bremerhaven the envelope always mentions the witness support service offered by WEISSER RING: a special element in the association's structure that only exists in the state of Bremen. The units belonging to the "Zeugenbetreuungszimmer" (witness support rooms) – or ZBZs for short – have a different set of tasks than the local branch offices: Here in northern Germany, the branch offices are responsible for dealing with victims' cases, whereas the ZBZs work exclusively with witnesses who have to appear at a trial. And that also includes sitting between the witness and the accused in the courtroom if they so wish – like a kind of buffer: "Many witnesses feel better just knowing that they are not alone", says Marion Schild.

She knows her way around the Bremen district court building very well. During a tour of the building, Schild quickly strides down the long corridors, points here and there, and organises a brief visit to the huge courtroom 218. She had been in and out of this place throughout her legal traineeship, and so the retired lawyer gladly returned here in 2018 when the association was looking for witness support staff via the Internet.

In 1998, the state of Bremen established the special preconditions for the ZBZs, a hitherto unique institution in Germany: Lawmakers decided that victims of sexual violence need to be treated with particular sensitivity. That is why, since 2002, the courts in Bremen and Bremerhaven have each provided a room in their buildings, and WEISSER RING in turn has provided the staff, to advise and accompany not only witnesses who are themselves victims but all other witnesses as well.

Doris Meyer reports that it doesn't always have to be a face-to-face conversation; many things can be explained over the phone because most people call the ZBZ first of all. In Bremerhaven, they then end up talking to Meyer

Marion Schild knows her way around the Bremen district court building.

Photos: Nina Lenhardt

and her colleagues at the district court. People who drop by in person enter a red brick building that was erected between 1913 and 1916 as a Prussian government building and that has a simpler interior design, despite the stuccoed ceilings.

Unlike in the branch offices, ZBZ staff don't arrange financial assistance, but they do guide the witnesses in the right direction if necessary, for example to colleagues on site. The two women emphasise that, in the protected setting of witness counselling, volunteers do not ask about the crime, neither at the ZBZ nor in the courthouses. "We believe the victims and witnesses. Here they are accepted as people who need help and support", says the retired Meyer, who used to work as a social counsellor, among other things, and has been volunteering at the ZBZ since 2014, when she discovered an advertisement in the newspaper.

Knowledge, empathy, the ability to listen: That's what it takes to become a witness counsellor, according to Schild. At present, Schild says, she has 14 colleagues at the Bremen location who "take their task very seriously". Every year, they receive around 150 enquiries from witnesses who would like counselling or support. Bremerhaven has a total of twelve staff who provide counselling to around 120 people. The number has declined somewhat due to the coronavirus, so that "much more support would be possible", says Meyer.

ZBZ coordinators Meyer and Schild agree that the work at the ZBZ is easier than at the branch offices. Those of their colleagues who handle victim cases have to get much more deeply involved with people's fates than they do. Schild might consider making phone calls for her voluntary work from home. For Meyer – who jokes with the court staff at the lock, as they know each other – this is out of the question: Working in an office at the courthouse makes it easier for her to dissociate herself and keep a professional distance. She wants her home to remain her place of retreat.

With regard to the court proceedings, it is often a matter of explaining to the summoned witnesses that they have a duty to testify and telling them who sits where in the courtroom. For this purpose, diagrams are available in both offices, and sometimes it is even possible to visit the courtroom in advance. The hearings do not always take place in large halls, but witnesses who have seen the room before are more at ease, says Marion Schild. Her colleague Meyer adds that their task is to provide reassurance, offer accompaniment for the hearing and reduce fears, for example of meeting the defendants.

"Many victims wonder why they are being summoned as witnesses and are nervous because they don't want to say anything wrong", reports Meyer. While waiting for the court to call someone to the witness stand, the main

> *“Many witnesses feel better just knowing that they are not alone.”*
>
> Marion Schild

focus is therefore on calming the person down: Once a young woman had to testify to an act of sexual abuse and during the wait she jumped up and didn’t want to testify any more. “It was difficult to catch up with her and explain the situation”, but everything worked out in the end, Meyer relates. She believes that by providing witnesses with information and support, the ZBZs relieve the courts of some of their workload. Schild adds: “I always wonder why other big cities don’t follow suit and set up witness support rooms.”

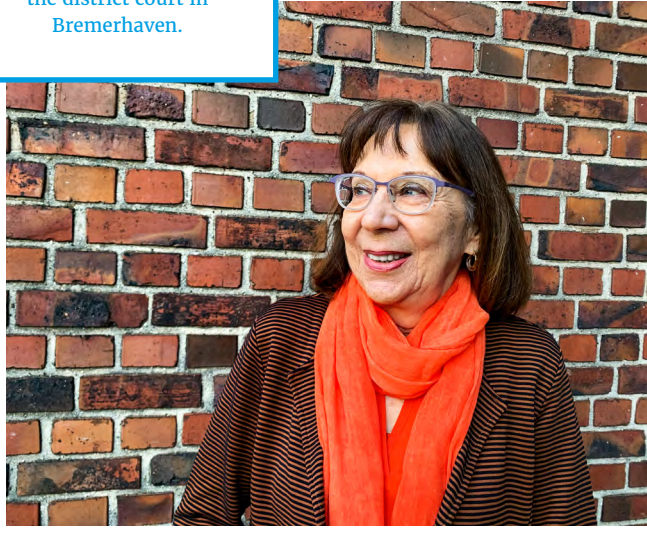
When witnesses are called into the courtroom, take their seat at the centre and all eyes are on them – what should they do? Marion Schild’s tip: “Keep eye contact with the presiding judge, even when the defence lawyer is asking questions.” That brings a sense of calm in her experience. “Afterwards, the witnesses often say that it wasn’t as bad as they had feared and that the court was very friendly.”

One thing the two volunteers want to point out: Counsellors do not have the right to refuse to testify – this means that, in theory, they could also be called to the witness stand and questioned about what the witness has told them. In practice, however, this has never happened. Nor have ZBZ staff been excluded from a hearing so far, which Schild interprets as recognition by the courts of their voluntary commitment: “The other parties involved – judges, prosecutors, barristers – have become accustomed to us.” Meyer confirms: “We get a lot of recognition, also from the police and politicians”, which she finds immensely important because “we all work on a voluntary basis here, so where else are we going to get our motivation from?”

Schild also shares an anecdote about the support they provide to victims: Once a barrister asked a ZBZ staff member about the legal basis for her being present in the courtroom. “My colleague’s quick-witted reply was that he, as a lawyer, must surely know that – and that was the end of the matter.” But the counsellors are not only at the witnesses’ side before and during the trial: “Some people need help and comforting after the verdict”, says Meyer. Like her colleague in Bremen, she emphasises: “We don’t leave the witnesses to fend for themselves then either.”

Nina Lenhardt

Doris Meyer assists witnesses at the district court in Bremerhaven.



The fraud expert

That would never happen to me" – Johannes Duda can only shake his head when he hears this sentence. And he hears it all the time. For example, from people participating in the prevention events he holds to raise awareness about methods of fraud and trickery. Since last year, Duda has had the best proof that you can never be sure that you won't fall for a scam – because he himself was fooled then.

The documents are spread out in front of him. Notes on which he wrote down which number called him and when. The Google Play cards he bought that are now worthless. The report he filed with the police. And the notification that the investigation had been dropped – with no result.

It was early 2022 when his phone rang and a certain Mr Lauterbach on the other end announced that Johannes Duda had won 49,000 euros in a sweepstake. The money was on its way, the nice man said, but the messenger would have to be paid. However, he was not allowed to accept cash, only Google Play gift cards. These can be bought at the checkout in supermarkets or drugstores, with a value of up to 500 euros.

Johannes Duda was told to get two such cards to pay the messenger. When the 74-year-old returned from the drugstore and spoke to the man on the phone again, the latter asked him to scratch free the code on the back of the cards and tell it to him. What Johannes Duda did not know at that time: With the code's letter-number

When **Johannes Duda** educates others about scams, he really knows what he is talking about: He has already been a victim himself.

Photo: Carolin Scholz

combination, the man on the other end of the line was able to redeem the gift card.

"It's quite an embarrassment that this happened to me – in my position", says Duda, shaking his head once again. The position he holds: For the past 16 years, he has been in charge of the WEISSER RING branch office in the Coesfeld district in North Rhine-Westphalia, where he has volunteered for a total of 36 years. Technically, he is familiar with all kinds of scams. He also knows that you have to be careful on the phone. And that scammers and fraudsters keep coming up with new ways of getting at their victims' money.

> ***"It's quite an embarrassment that this happened to me – in my position."***
>
> Johannes Duda

After such a long time, he says, there is hardly a scam he hasn't been confronted with. His commitment began with the true-crime programme "Aktenzeichen XY... ungelöst". He had always been interested in the presented cases and how they are dealt with – and also in the possibility of helping those affected. Professionally, he never had anything to do with crime: Johannes Duda is a trained wholesale and export merchant. Most recently, he worked for the medical archives of the district hospital and helped with the digitalisation of medical records. He has worked for 51 years, he points out. How many people can say that about themselves nowadays?

For someone who has moved to the area, Johannes Duda is just what you would expect a typical Westphalian to be like: orderly, dutiful, with a dry sense of humour. "Nobody home", he calls from inside when the doorbell rings, just before he opens the front door. Duda lives in a terraced house in Nottuln, a community of 20,000 inhabitants in the Coesfeld district near Münster. On the way to the attic, where he has set up his office, we pass by a special room: the one containing his music collection. Records and CDs fill several shelves on the wall. Among them are the Beatles, Abba, James Last – and the Amigos. "The most successful singing duo in Europe", says Johannes Duda, "and ambassadors of WEISSER RING!"

For him, music is the ideal diversion from his work as branch office manager. And from other voluntary work: He offers transport services for people with disabilities, driving them from their homes to the workshops where they are employed. "I wanted to see something different", he says. Something that has nothing to do with crime.

Because it's not always easy to put the things he learns during his work for WEISSER RING behind him. Time and again he has seen volunteers throw in the towel at some point because they couldn't let go of the victims' stories. "When I go home and close the front door behind me, I have to leave the day's happenings outside", he says. But: "That was a learning curve for me as well."

Even though he says that he manages not to let other people's experiences get to him too much, it seems as though they do affect him somewhat. At least that's the impression you get when you listen to him talk about cases in his neighbourhood. Again and again he points out of the window – not at a specific house, but in a general direction. It was back there, he tells me, where a boy was paid for sex. And there – somewhere in another direction – is a case of violence in a relationship, and one of the people involved doesn't know how to work things out. And then there was a woman who was abused by a caretaker in a nursing home. More and more shaking of the head. And the same sentence over and over again: "I just can't understand it." It seems like a learning curve that will never be fully completed.

> *"If you receive a call from an unknown number, never give your name, don't call back and don't say 'yes'."*
>
> Johannes Duda

He often prefers not to know the details of a crime. That helps him not to feel too emotional about it all, he says. Last year, he mainly dealt with victims of sexual offences. He expects that not all of them will report the crime to the police because that would "set a lot of things in motion" for them. Shame is also frequently an issue, which is understandable in Duda's eyes.

His own case, the Google Play card scam, is quite different: A few days after he had passed the gift card codes on to the unknown caller, the latter called again. Apparently there had been a mistake in the numbers. Instead of 49,000, he had won 94,000 euros. To get the money, he had to buy another 500-euro card. "That's when I realised something was wrong", says Duda. He went straight to the police – even though he was aware that there was little they could do in such cases.

Today he says: "I didn't know what Google Play cards were. If I had known, the whole thing might have struck me as strange earlier." Losing 1,000 euros had hurt. But he is pragmatic about his experience and doesn't keep it to himself. Instead, he talks openly about it – with his family, friends and acquaintances as well as at WEISSER RING events. He is concerned about the fact that elderly people in particular frequently fall victim to fraud.

There are no precise figures on how many of them do. In police crime statistics, telephone scams such as the grandchild scam, shock calls, fake police officers or false promises of winnings generally fall under "other fraud". Not every federal state records information on these crimes in detail. Moreover, many such crimes do not appear in the normal statistics because the perpetrators are often based abroad. And not every victim contacts the police. Police figures indicate that a large part of the offences remain attempts. However, the clearance rate is in the single digits and the losses are sometimes immense – in North Rhine-Westphalia alone, losses caused by "completed domestic and foreign offences to the detriment of elderly people", which includes telephone fraud, came to about 30.3 million euros in 2021.

The police gives out warnings and tips on how to protect oneself. Johannes Duda is familiar with these tips. He knows what to do if a debit card has been stolen: "Not only have it blocked by the bank, but also by the police." The bank merely blocks PIN-based card payments, but the police can disable the card entirely using what is known as a Kuno block. Kuno stands for "combating crime in non-cash payment transactions using non-police organisational structures"; the blocking of the card then affects all payments. Duda knows everything about the fake police officer scam: "The phone's display never shows the usual police emergency number, like 110 in Germany or 999 in the UK." The 74-year-old recommends: "If you receive a call from an unknown number, never give your name, don't call back and don't say 'yes'."

Now he is also familiar with the scam involving Google Play gift cards. Because of his own experience – and also because scams like the grandchild scam have been around for so long and people keep losing money – Duda is convinced: No one should be too sure that it won't happen to them.

Carolin Scholz

Crime costs the state more money than thought

WEISSER RING and the Federal Criminal Police Office award first "Victim Protection" Science Award

How costly is crime for the victims and for society? And how worthwhile is it for the state to invest in prevention and victim protection? Dr Anna Bindler, professor at the University of Cologne, investigated these questions. "We've shown that the costs for individuals who fall victim to crime are higher than we had previously thought", says Bindler. The costs incurred by the state when people become victims of crime run into the billions. WEISSER RING and the Federal Criminal Police Office (BKA) presented her with the Science Award for her research.

The award ceremony took place on 22 March 2023 in Mainz, on "Victims of Crime Day". The patron was Malu Dreyer, prime minister of Rhineland-Palatinate. "With the Science Award, WEISSER RING wants to send a message about how important independent research is for a functioning society", said Dr Patrick Liesching, federal chairman of the association.

The Young Investigator Award went to criminologist David Grasmann. In his Master's thesis, he examined how closer cooperation between the police and forensic experts can further improve both victim protection and the clearance rate of violent crimes whose victims are still alive.

The Science Award ceremony at the Kupferberg terrace in Mainz · Photo: Linda Deutsch

The awards are endowed with 5,000 euros ("Victim Protection" Science Award) and 3,000 euros (Young Investigator Award).

Interview with Science Award winner Prof. Anna Bindler

This year's "Victims of Crime Day" centred on research.

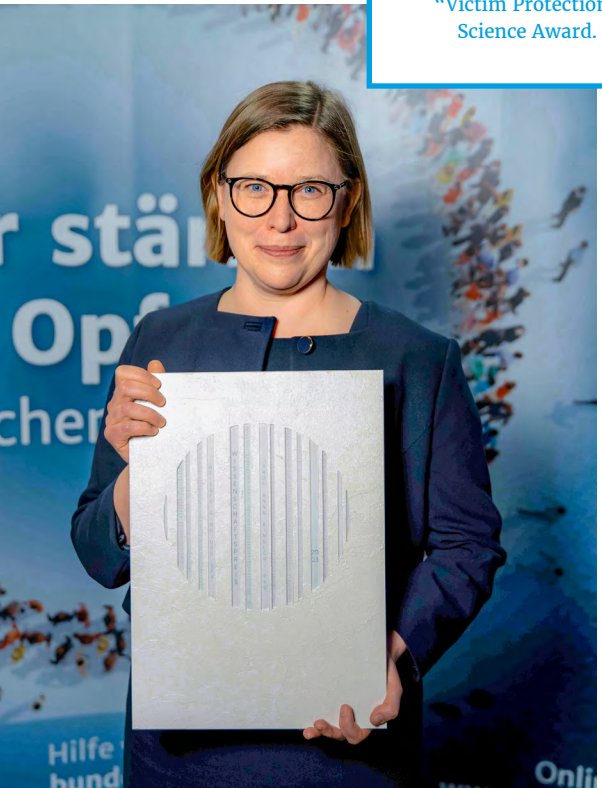
Anna Bindler calculated the costs of crime together with her colleague Dr Nadine Ketel. In our interview, she talks about her area of research, her work and her plans for the future. Bindler is a professor of economics at the ECONtribute Cluster of Excellence at the University of Cologne.

You were the first researcher to win the new "Victim Protection" Science Award – how does that make you feel?
I'm thrilled about this accolade. Being presented with the first "Victim Protection" Science Award is a very special recognition of our work.

Victim protection is not a classical field of economics. How did you decide on this topic?
That's right, my research area "Economics of Crime" is relatively young compared to other areas of economics. We look at the causes and consequences of crime from an economic perspective, but also at issues of unequal treatment and discrimination, for example in courts or in police work. I got to know this area of research during my doctoral studies at University College London. That's where I first became interested in looking at research questions from the perspective of the victims of crime – based on the observation that much of the literature to date had focused on perpetrators and causes of crime, while we knew less about the victims of crime.

Prof. Anna Bindler received the first "Victim Protection" Science Award.

Photos (3): Linda Deutsch



What are the findings of your work?
In our study we looked at the labour market consequences for people who have fallen victim to crime. For this we used register data from the Netherlands, which allowed us to look at all police-registered criminal cases from 2005 to 2016 and link them (in anonymised form) with labour market data and data on the health costs of the people affected. Using appropriate statistical methods, we then analysed the data for more than half a million crime victims. Our findings show an immediate decline in labour income, in line with job losses and the receipt of social benefits, accompanied by an increase in health care costs, especially after experiencing violence. At the same time, our findings point to long-term effects: On average, the victims' labour market income did not return to the pre-victimisation level after as many as four years.

The two awardwinners with representatives of the Federal Criminal Police Office and WEISSER RING (from left to right): Michael Kretschmer, Prof. Anna Bindler, criminologist David Grasmann, Dr Patrick Liesching · Photo: Christian J. Ahlers

Pascal Kober (centre), victim commissioner of the Federal Government, was also in the audience.

Why did you use Dutch data for your work rather than German data?

To be honest: Because a study like the one we conducted in the Netherlands is unfortunately not possible in Germany at the moment due to a lack of research data. I find that very regrettable and would be pleased if we as researchers could cooperate more closely with the relevant institutions in the future to change that.

Can the findings of your research nevertheless be transferred to Germany?

In principle, I would assume that the findings can indeed be transferred to Germany, as these two Western European countries have many parallels from a political, economic and social point of view. In other words, I would assume that the costs to the individual and to society in terms of labour market consequences are also quite considerable in Germany.

What conclusions do you draw from your research and what reaction would you like to see from policymakers and society?

One of the starting points of our work was the observation that the direct costs of crime – for example, costs related to the judicial system and the fight against crime – are relatively easy to measure, whereas the indirect costs – including the costs for injured parties – are much more difficult to determine. This is the focus of current research. With our study, we would like to contribute to a better assessment of the societal costs of crime. One element is understanding whether certain groups suffer particularly badly from the consequences. I would like to see the findings of current research being considered when looking at what measures can be used to effectively reduce crime and the costs of crime. It is also a matter of protecting victims and victims' rights, as well as addressing practical issues such as effective support programmes.

Will you be pursuing this topic further?

Without a doubt. I plan to continue exploring the topics of crime, crime prevention and victim protection in my research in the future – ideally also in the German context. In fact, I am currently working on some research projects that are directly linked to this study.

Christiane Fernbacher

Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania

Angela Straßburg has been in charge of the WEISSER RING branch office in the Uecker-Randow region in eastern Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania since 2010. Her tireless efforts as a volunteer have now been recognised not just once but three times. After receiving a distinction for her voluntary work from the city of Pasewalk, she was honoured for her special services by the district of Vorpommern-Greifswald. But the high point came when Manuela Schwesig, Prime Minister of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania, presented her with the badge of honour on Volunteers' Day. Angela Straßburg takes the awards as motivation to continue her work for WEISSER RING.

Photo: State Chancellery of Mecklenburg-Western Pomerania

Schleswig-Holstein

Werner Loges, a volunteer at WEISSER RING Schleswig-Holstein, and Jens-Peter Schrader, chief constable at the Kropp police station, are a well-established team. The two of them inform people about fraud in a series of lectures. In February 2023, Loges and Schrader made a guest appearance at Landfrauen Kropp und Umgebung e. V., a rural women's association, and spoke about con artists. More than 50 attendees received valuable tips on prevention.

Photo: Gesche Seifert

Lower Saxony

Joint commitment to an important topic: In Holzminden, four institutions joined forces to provide information about domestic violence on International Day for the Elimination of Violence Against Women. Sigrun Brünig (equal opportunities officer of the district) had extended the invitation and discussed the topic with Anita Hummel (from a counselling centre for women and girls dealing with bullying, stalking, threats and violence), Werner Friedrich (from WEISSER RING) and Silke Clerc (from a counselling and intervention centre for domestic violence) under the motto "In view – violence against women in relationships".

Photo: ESC

Brandenburg

Photo: Alina Gloger

The Youth Group of WEISSER RING Brandenburg used an unusual format to draw attention to the organisation's work. After an informative opening, youth representative Dominic Hake and Antje Geister, staff member at the Potsdam branch office, hosted a pub quiz at Bar Gelb in Potsdam. About 40 guests participated. Dominic Hake called the evening a "complete success" and thanked everyone not only for their interest but also for the numerous donations for the work of WEISSER RING.

Baden-Wuerttemberg

Photo: Günther Bubenitschek

How to confidently stand up to bar-room clichés and discrimination? A pilot project in Baden-Wuerttemberg addressed this question and provided concrete guidance for everyday life. Together with Yasemin Soylu and Dženeta Isaković from the educational association Mosaik Deutschland e. V., Günther Bubenitschek (regional prevention officer at WEISSER RING) developed a training programme to help people oppose hate and incitement with reasonable arguments. Bubenitschek praised the pilot project as "very good". Moreover, the argumentation training was awarded the 2022 Heidelberg Prevention Award.

Nationwide

Birthday next door: WEISSER RING Austria has been around for 45 years now. The non-profit association was founded on 16 January 1978, about 16 months later than its German counterpart. "It has always been important to me to stand by the unfortunate victims of crime and offer them advice, practical help and encouragement. I'm very glad that I'm still able to do that today", said President Udo Jesionek, the last living founding member, on the occasion of the association's anniversary.

"In awe of Ede" and a red typewriter

Normally, we introduce volunteers in our "Ehrensache" section, but this time we are making an exception – and for good reason: Marion Kollmann has been a full-time employee at WEISSER RING for 45 years. The accountant looks back at the founding period under Eduard Zimmermann – and tells us how the association has changed since then.

Marion Kollmann thinks it is important for full-time staff to "share a strong passion for the cause".

Photo: Christian J. Ahlers

How was it that you came to join WEISSER RING in 1978? How did you find out that this very young association existed at all?
After my training as an office clerk, I saw a very small, narrowly written job advertisement from WEISSER RING in the *Allgemeine Zeitung* newspaper in Mainz. They were looking for someone to join the office team, so I spontaneously decided to give them a call. I hadn't heard of the association before.

Do you still remember your first day at WEISSER RING? What was your initial impression?
Oh yes, I remember it very well. The first thing that impressed me were the offices in Mainz-Finthen, which were unusually bright and airy for the 1970s. The mountains of documents lying on the desks were just as impressive though. I also remember the red electric typewriter – a real sensation for me.

Where did you work and what was your function? Did your workplace change over the years?
At first, there were no functions as such. I had to sort through the mountains of mail and process the most important or urgent matters. That also included going through the vast amounts of bank statements. As the years went by, accounting came to be my area of work.

Especially in the early days, the association was strongly linked to the true-crime programme "Aktenzeichen XY... Ungelöst". Did you watch the programme back then – and do you tune in today?
XY was iconic in my youth. Like many other children, I was sent to bed when "Ede" – as presenter Eduard Zimmermann was affectionately called – appeared on the screen. But after secretly standing next to the door a few times and shuddering as I listened in, I lost interest. Later, when I started my job, it was quite an awe-inspiring feeling for me to see Eduard "Ede" Zimmermann and even work together with him. Since then, *XY* has been running on my TV again – to this day.

There are quite a few true-crime formats that recount real criminal cases nowadays, whether on television or the Internet. But their purpose is to entertain rather than to solve the cases. What do you make of those?
To be honest, I don't really like them. They're too staged and lurid for my taste. The formats from MDR and now also from SWR are quite okay, though.

Do you have any tips or advice for colleagues joining WEISSER RING today?
Whenever people ask me this, the same sentence comes to mind: Share a strong passion for the cause and take an interest in the association's themes and projects, but also in interdepartmental administrative workflows.

Christian J. Ahlers and Nina Lenhardt

2 *Stories in which the victim is identified are justified only in exceptional cases*

They are permissible only if the victim's identity is significant to understanding an incident and the proceedings are highly relevant to the general public.

Because publishing the full name would identify the person directly, this is not permitted as a rule. "But the person could also be identified if the surname were shortened and other characteristics were mentioned ('Erich H. of Oldenburg'). That could be the city they live in or the scene of the crime", Solmecke says.

3 *Media are not permitted to publish photos of victims without consent*

Photojournalism requires consent. An image may be published only in individual cases and must serve a general social interest. In the case of death, the victim's family must provide their consent for the use of images, Solmecke adds.

4 *True crime is generally subject to more stringent rules than current reporting*

"Unlike current news, true crime formats often report on cases from the distant past. This information is therefore unlikely to serve the public interest, so that identifying reports are justifiable in fewer cases", says Solmecke. Reporting that identifies victims and their family members is justifiable only in very specific situations. The rights of those affected and the general public need to be carefully considered on a case-by-case basis. "Even years after the case, an identifying report is justifiable only if the victim was a prominent figure or there are other factors dictating that public interest in information takes precedence."

5 *Sensationalist journalism frequently violates rights.*

"It is often high circulation numbers that embolden sensationalist journalists to violate personality rights", Solmecke says. "Unfortunately, the more shocking, outrageous and satisfying the sensationalism is, the higher the profit." The income generated by the reporting often exceeds the costs of court cases – particularly because some of those affected choose not to take legal action due to the associated costs and difficulties.

Christiane Fernbacher

What the German Press Code says

The German Press Council's Press Code defines guidelines for journalistic work and represents a voluntary commitment to self-regulation. Most German publishers claim to observe the principles outlined in the 16 sections. The Code references issues such as crime reporting and victim protection. Guideline 8.2 states: "Victims have the right to special protection of their identity." If the victim, family members or other authorised persons have provided their consent or if the victim is a public figure, for example, the name and photo could be published. However, there is no definition of what a public figure is. Section 11 of the Code addresses the form of detailed description: "The Press will refrain from inappropriately sensational portrayal of violence, brutality and suffering." It should report on violent crimes "in an independent and authentic way", but not allow itself to be "made the tool of criminals". The rules prohibit the publication of so-called criminals' memoirs "if crimes are justified or qualified with hindsight, the victims are inappropriately affected, and a detailed description of the crime merely satisfies the demand for sensation".

“The victim’s rights fall by the wayside in true crime”

Murderers have more rights than their victims. The current legal situation is highly unacceptable, says media attorney Christian Schertz.

True crime formats, presented as podcasts or television shows, are going through the roof. In recent years, serial formats under the true crime label have enjoyed extraordinary popularity in film and on TV and podcasts. Media portrayal of true crime has been a popular genre for quite some time now. But it is worth noting that, in recent years, public TV channels and high-quality newspapers and magazines such as *STERN* and *DIE ZEIT* in particular have been offering formats like these with their own brands such as *ZEIT Verbrechen* and *Stern Crime* and with podcasts like *Sprechen wir über Mord?! Der SWR 2 True Crime Podcast*. Countless true crime cases are available for streaming in the media library of the public broadcaster ARD under the heading “ARD Crime Time”, not to mention the numerous formats offered by private service providers, including paid streaming services. With the RTL+ website announcing the “RTL+ True Crime-Offensive”, you can only guess at the sheer success and the market for media marketing of true crimes.

But what about the suffering of the victims and their personality rights? They’re ultimately exploited for the purpose of entertaining the public and generating click rates and ratings, even though the victims could not even be asked due to the absolutely cynical fact that they are no longer living (otherwise, their story wouldn’t have captured the attention of the format in the first place). The answer is clear and unambiguous: The victim’s rights fall by the wayside in these formats. This is due to the legal situation as well as German case law, especially when it comes to post-mortem personality protection.

As long as the victims are fortunate enough to have survived and are still alive, the situation is relatively clear and simple. Victims, including victims of spectacular crimes, are not viewed as persons of contemporary history, which means they’re specially protected by the legal system. Victims’ pictures may therefore be shown only in very specific cases of special public interest. Victims of sexual assault, for example, are specially protected, meaning their photos may not be published without express consent under a ruling of the Superior Court of Justice.

The Hanseatic Higher Regional Court has also ruled that victims of attempted murder have the right to block portrayal of the crime in a TV film following conclusion of the legal proceedings and reporting in the press.

The legal situation is different if the victim dies, which would apply to most true crime formats, as they tend to focus on “spectacular murder cases”.

For the time being, the right to a person’s own image applies only to the living. No images may be distributed in media without the consent of the person portrayed as long as that person is still alive. Persons of contemporary history are an exception to the rule. This is not usually the case for victims. For the first 10 years after the death of the person portrayed, publication of an image requires the consent of the family members – either the spouse, the parents or the children. This means that the victims’ right to their own image and thus their rights to the visual portrayal of their story expire after a period of 10 years under current laws.

Particularly in light of the aforementioned developments – most notably the economic exploitation of cases like these by media companies – legislators need

to extend these periods. A brief review of the true crime formats currently available reveals that most cases are more than 10 years old, meaning consent from the murder victim's close family members is no longer necessary for visual portrayal – a situation that is unacceptable.

Especially when you consider that the personality rights of perpetrators – usually murderers – are protected by the highest authority, namely the German Constitutional Court. In the Lebach case of 1973, the German Constitutional Court ruled that, even in cases of particularly heinous crimes throughout Germany's criminal history, status as a so-called relative person of contemporary history shall expire after a certain period of time, giving perpetrators the power to block reporting that identifies them in word or image in the interest of the perpetrator's resocialisation. This means that murderers who are released from prison must provide their consent for the portrayal of their crimes in media and could potentially even ask for payment to do so, whilst the victim's rights have expired.

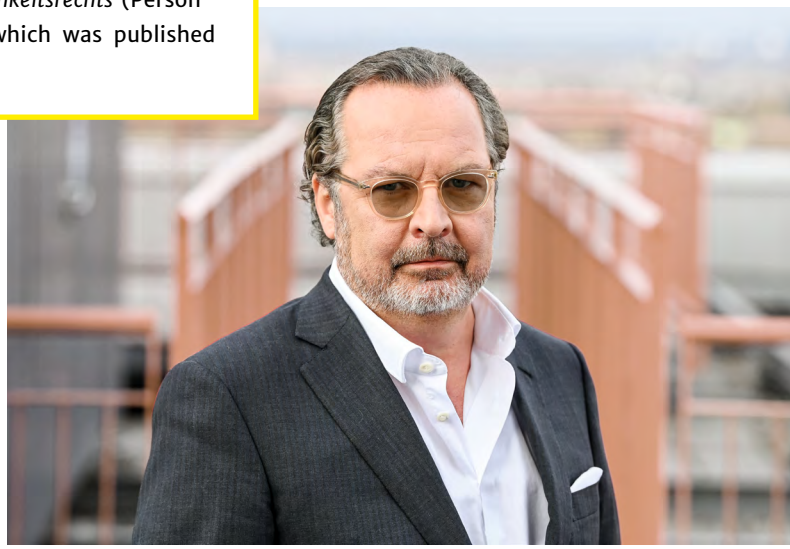
But it doesn't end there. Whilst the portrait right expires 10 years after death, the general personality right granted by the constitution to living persons ends only with death. The personality right protects the living from reporting that identifies them and covers their story, provided they are not persons of contemporary history. That means they need to be asked. But if the person dies, there is only one so-called post-mortem claim to respect based on human dignity, which only prohibits gross distortions of the person's biographical story and violations of human dignity in concrete cases of portrayal in film, TV, etc. This could be enforced only if the victim's case and suffering were presented in great detail, as was undoubtedly the case in the recent Amazon crime format *Gefesselt*, which is about Hamburg's acid barrel killer. Some of the scenes in the film were unbearable and portrayed the victims' suffering, which for good reason received criticism. But in most cases, the post-mortem claim to respect does not protect victims from the portrayal of their case in true crime formats.

There is no apparent reason why legislators and laws should not specially protect the personality rights of those who have died or why they allow them to expire. There's an absurd contrast between protecting perpetrators from identifying reports relatively soon after the crime for the purpose of resocialisation and the virtually non-existent protection of victims, especially those who have died, both in terms of visual portrayal and a recounting of the case, which comes across as cynical. Legislators therefore urgently need to strengthen the personality rights of victims both in terms of the right to a person's own image and the general personality right. The current legal situation is absolutely unacceptable. Victims have virtually no rights – but no lobby either – and they are unable to fight for themselves. That is simply not right.

Christian Schertz

Christian Schertz is one of Germany's most renowned media attorneys and has been representing the rights of those affected by crime for more than 30 years. He and Simon Bergmann founded their own law firm, Schertz Bergmann, in 2005. He also lectures as an honorary professor of press, personality and media law at a variety of institutions, including the Law Department at the University of Potsdam and the Technical University of Dresden. In addition, he has published and authored numerous non-fiction books such as *Handbuch des Persönlichkeitsrechts* (Personality right manual), which was published by C.H.Beck.

Photo: Jens Kalaene/dpa



“I need the public”

Ingrid Liebs lost her daughter Frauke to a murder which remains unsolved to this day. The 70-year-old has given interviews to multiple true crime formats and taken part in a TV documentary and, most recently, a podcast. What motivates someone to repeatedly entrust themselves and their story to strangers? Liebs talks about working with media as a win-win situation, being insulted on the Internet and a particularly positive experience with one media producer.

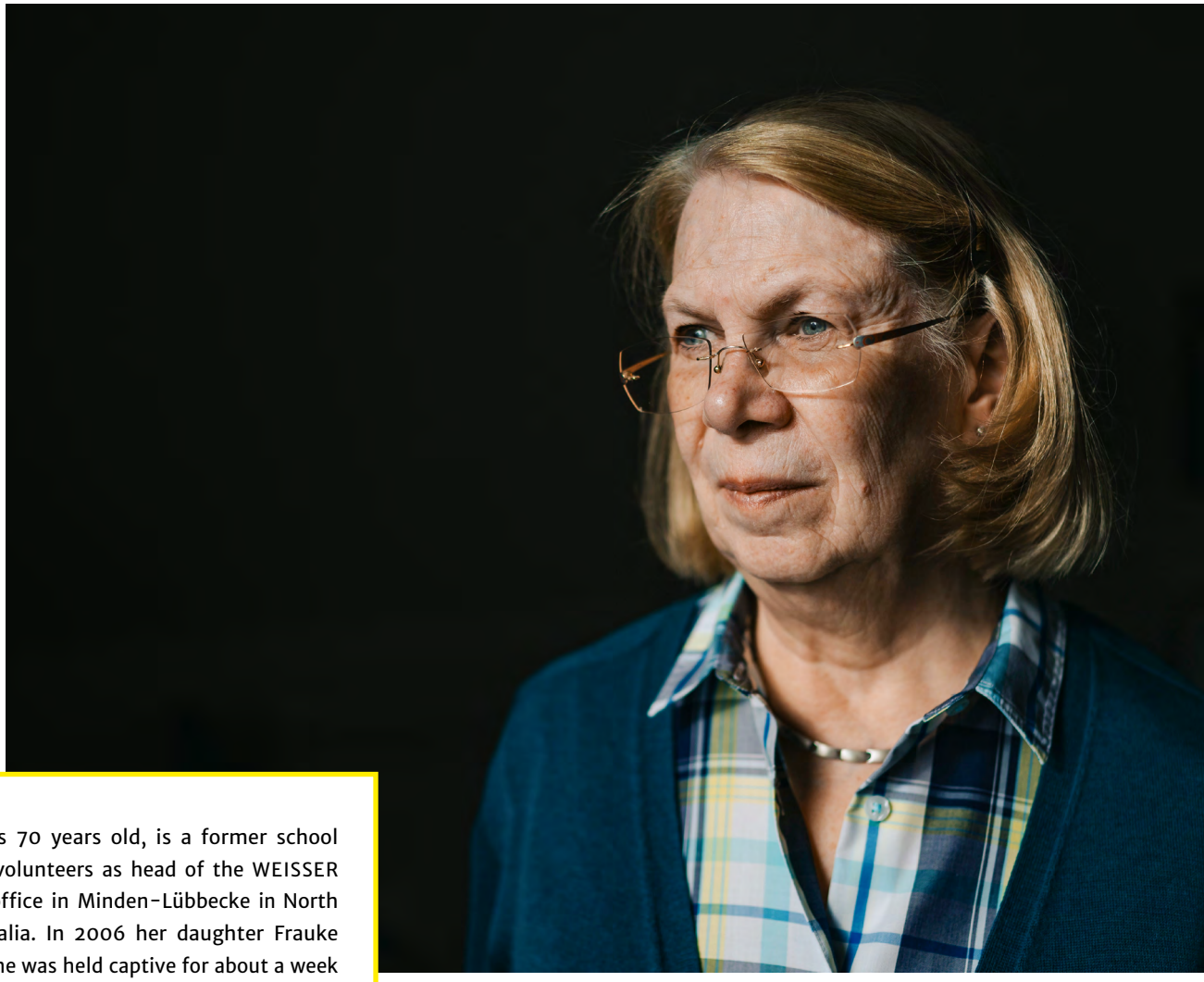
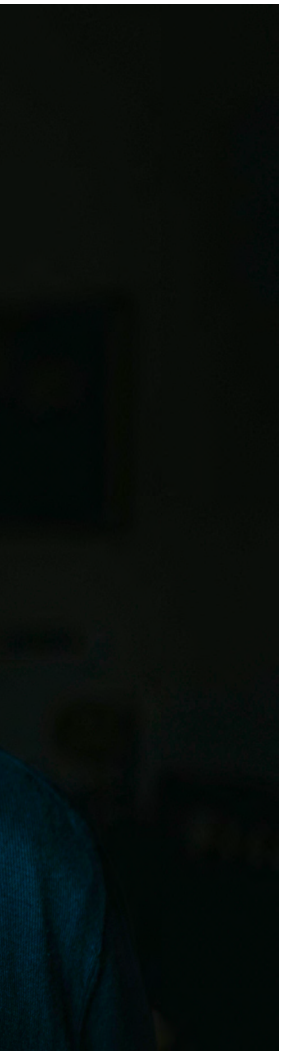


Photo: Marcus Simaitis/laif

Ingrid Liebs is 70 years old, is a former school principal and volunteers as head of the WEISSER RING branch office in Minden-Lübbecke in North Rhine-Westphalia. In 2006 her daughter Frauke disappeared. She was held captive for about a week and kept contact with her family through text messages and phone calls before being murdered. Her body was discovered months later, and the perpetrator is still on the loose. Seventeen years later, Frauke’s mother is still hoping for the case to be solved.



“In my daughter Frauke’s case, there were only conventional reporting means in print and television in the beginning. These could be considered part of the true crime genre in the broader sense in my opinion, because they cause similar reactions amongst viewers and readers. But something new came along over the years. Professional true crime formats have come about that always try to convey the information so that it doesn’t become boring. They are clearly designed to entertain the listeners and viewers. And the form has changed: there are podcasts on the Internet, for instance, which generally talk about closed cases, but also sometimes about cases that are unsolved – like with me.

If media pick up on criminal cases for true crime, then they primarily do so because they think that it interests their readers or viewers which, in turn, can be easily sold, and this then increases our circulation and therefore our revenue. This is what every medium lives on. As someone who is affected, you have to be aware that the people in front of you aren’t doing it out of pure goodwill when you’re talking about your case; their job is to make sure that their employer also has a reasonable financial incentive. You have to weigh the situation: what good will it do me? Can I turn it into a win-win situation? I don’t take part in these productions because I enjoy the public attention. It’s important to me that my case be solved. Simply because I want to know what happened and why. Why did the murderer ultimately decide that the only way out was to kill my daughter? And I need the public for this. I need clues and I need the justice system to go after these leads. At some point, both of these ran out once the news dried up after the crime: my case had disappeared from the public eye and the justice system wasn’t doing enough if you ask me. When I take part in true crime productions, I can change this and bring awareness to Frauke’s murder. Doing so allows me to use the information I receive from viewers, readers and listeners to create some pressure, because the police are forced to at least pursue these clues.

By now I’ve learned to take a more careful look at the people who send me requests for their true crime media. I research what they’ve done before, how good or bad it was and whether they have experience with similar cases. I am diligent in this process, so that I know whether or not I can work with this person. But this doesn’t completely protect me from disappointment, of course. I looked into one request from a regional broadcaster and had decided that it’s a public service broadcaster, so it should be fine. The result then wasn’t really bad, but I also wasn’t thrilled – it fell a bit flat and didn’t have much of an impact.

Sometimes journalists just gather some general information and then get to writing as though they were reporting about a sporting event. It really wasn’t clear to them ahead of time that they would meet people who had suffered a great loss and whom they should treat with a corresponding level of respect. In my opinion, a journalists craft should actually include informing themselves about what they’re doing. I get the feeling that some editors simply want to make money. They do get paid in part by the line, after all. But there are also some good, respectful journalists. Unfortunately there are also those who just want to use true crime stories to turn a profit and who don’t care at all how much human suffering is behind these stories. Getting involved with these people is an adventure.

I’ve also had situations where truly shoddy research was done and had to read some real rubbish in the newspaper. For print interviews, I now always try to read the article first and have an influence on what it says. You should take advantage of that opportunity. After all, I have the right to read my own quotes before they’re printed, if you ask me. If I find an error in the report, I mention it so that it can be corrected. In my experience, this is not always possible for the newer formats like podcasts or films. Although I have corrected podcasts after the fact and said that this could not stay online. Sometimes this works, but not always, because the producers aren’t always willing to make the changes.

But the producers should have the utmost respect for the victims, and they should take some time beforehand to reflect on what effect these productions can have on those affected. For me, this includes asking the victims whether they are allowed to produce a podcast, film or article. But this is not standard practice at all. I have experienced articles before that come out and consist of half-truths and misinformation and which justifiably cause anger amongst the victims because they feel ignored and that their concerns weren’t properly accounted for.

This was how I felt about a novel whose author had used Frauke's murder as the basis. I came across the book by chance. The case had been moved to another country, but – for example – the content of the first text message Frauke had sent after her abduction was used word for word. Then the author portrayed a scenario for which there is no evidence in reality. I was extremely upset about this. But I probably won't be able to prevent things like this.

I have also discovered that things have been published online without my knowledge. Podcasts which, although well intentioned, were not well made, all the way to insulting videos. I was insulted as a 'braindead mother' in one. Treating the suffering of other people like that is disrespectful. The makers of podcasts and other true crime formats should engage with the victims, let them have their say and give them the opportunity to say that they don't want it.

Every victim has the right to say no at any time, even if there have already been preliminary talks and a date set for the interview. Journalists have to accept this. Victims should not have a guilty conscience about saying no. They should look inside themselves if they feel that it's not what they want. But it takes strength, of course, to cancel something on short notice and to keep the journalists at a distance. The same goes for unannounced attempts at contact: When a major murder was discovered in the area years after Frauke's death, several local journalists called me one Sunday around lunchtime and asked if there was a connection between the two crimes. And they asked questions like 'Say, did your daughter still have hair when she was found?' That's much too intimate a question. I answered: 'Listen, I didn't look at the photos and I don't want to talk to you about this.' The next day, a TV crew from RTL wanted to interview me. I took some time to think about it, decided against it, and then had to throw them off my property. If you, as a victim, notice that the way that the media are approaching you is hurtful, then you can put on the brakes and say no. It takes a toll on you when people talk to you, write to you, call you in that way.

Before agreeing to work with the media, you should definitely carefully consider whether you can handle the emotional toll. There will be reactions from the public that can have a re-traumatising effect. I remember that from the time right after the murder when complete strangers would talk to me on the street: 'Are you Ms Liebs, Frauke's mother? Yeah, we wanted to see how you are, how you talk.' You have to be able to handle that. If you aren't stable enough, I would advise anyone to just stay away.

> **"Before agreeing to work with the media, you should carefully consider whether you can handle the emotional toll."**
>
> **Ingrid Liebs, mother of a murder victim**

I've also had a website about the case since 2020 that anyone can use to provide clues about Frauke's murder. These clues are then passed on to the police. I'm thinking about taking the website offline this year, because we get tips from more than just people who actually have information that can be verified and could therefore potentially help solve the case. Unfortunately, people often make contact via the website that simply have crude theories but no actual knowledge of the case. That's annoying, not productive and just a burdensome nuisance.

But I've also had one very positive experience. In 2015 I received a polite and empathetic letter from a journalist who wanted to write an article about the case for the magazine *Stern Crime*. Making contact in this way enabled me to take time and consider whether I wanted to respond. So I decided to get in touch and said that I don't know yet whether I'll do it, but I'm interested and we can get to know one another. He gave me time and we had several conversations. The journalist then used these conversations to write an article that I still find great to this day. He didn't make any commentary, he didn't judge, he didn't interpret anything –

instead, he simply provided those affected with a space to have their say, and the readers could form their own opinion, make their own judgement. I had also encouraged others who knew my daughter to talk to this journalist for the article, because in my experience he was trustworthy.

Years later, he came to me and said that he could imagine making a documentary about my daughter's case. It took nearly two years from the initial discussion to realisation. I also had the feeling with this project that I wasn't being talked into anything. It felt more like suggestions were being made. The whole thing was quite difficult, in particular when we filmed for several days in a row. When you agree to something like that, you have to let the journalists and the viewers in closer, because then there are questions like 'Do you have photos, or maybe even videos?' The trust between me and this journalist grew over the years, which is why I gave him videos and told him to choose what worked for the documentary. He then ran his selection past me before the material made its way into the film. I believe he also considered the other victims – not just me as a mother, but also Frauke's siblings, her roommate and her friends.

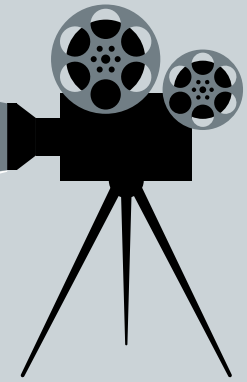
The next medium was then the podcast, and I agreed to work with the journalist on that as well, because I had the feeling that what he was doing was careful and well founded. It's not just about making a quick buck. He is genuinely interested in the background, and this of course means looking for the perpetrator. The first episodes of the podcast centre heavily on the factual side of the events, as well as on the question of what happened to the people who were affected.

With all the experiences I've gained with various true crime formats and producers, I can say there have been highlights as well as lowlights. I learned a lot over the years and I've taken time to reflect. Looking back, there are things that I can admit I shouldn't have taken part in. But those meant that I had become a little bit stronger each time, ready for the next time a request would come. The most important thing for me is that Frauke's case gets solved. Should that day ever come, I don't know if I will be involved with any true crime formats after that. I'll decide that when the time comes."

Transcript: Nina Lenhardt, support: Julia Zipfel

Photo: Marcus Simaitis/laif

An unusual request



Almost every day, WEISSER RING receives requests from journalists from all over Germany wanting to get in touch with victims of crime. They're interested in interviewing them for newspapers, television programmes or podcasts.

Two documentary makers from Munich who sent an email to WEISSER RING in October 2021 were also seeking contact with victims. And yet their request was different: Katharina Köster and Katrin Nemec were not looking to put someone in front of their camera and did not want to interview anybody – they just wanted to inform the victims about the film they are making.

"We didn't want the people concerned to find out about our project through the grapevine and feel insecure for lack of information. We didn't want to inflict new suffering", says Katharina Köster.

The project is a documentary film about the parents of serial killer Niels Högel, who is accused of killing well more than 100 patients in hospitals in northern Germany between 2000 and 2005. He was tried four times and convicted in a total of 91 cases. "We share an interest in topics that push us to the limits of our imagination, where you can't tell right from wrong at first glance", Katrin Nemec says in describing herself and her colleague Köster. That's how they, being mothers themselves, arrived at the question: Can you still love your child when he or she becomes a murderer?

Their film deals exclusively with the perspective of the murderer's parents – not that of the murderer himself ("when we accompany the parents on a visit to the prison, we turn off the camera before he enters the room"), or that of his victims and their relatives. But the filmmakers are not indifferent to the relatives. "This case affects so many people – you can't disregard that", Köster says. "There has already been a lot of coverage of the case, and the media's poor treatment of the victims' families has been criticised again and again", Nemec says. The two filmmakers intend to do better: They want to inform the affected individuals at an early stage, are willing to answer any questions they may have and would even organise an advance screening in a protected setting with psychological support if there is sufficient interest on their part.

The earliest public screenings of the film will be in 2024 at various festivals and in 2025 as part of the ZDF series "Das kleine Fernsehspiel". Filming is already under way and the grapevine could reach those who have already been affected. "Information like that can always retraumatise people", Köster fears. That's why the filmmakers wrote to WEISSER RING and contacted the police and the public prosecutor's office. For one and a half years now, they have been trying to contact victims as they work on the film.

In the end, neither the authorities nor WEISSER RING was able to help them – data protection laws stood in the way. However, in this particular case where so many people are affected, WEISSER RING sent a letter to the families who had contacted the association over the years asking for support. Petra Klein, deputy federal chairwoman and herself active as a victim helper in the Högel case, provided assurance to the recipients: "We are neither involved in the development of the film nor do we provide any financial support for the project. However, we expressly welcome the fact that the documentary makers are considering the possible consequences of their project for those who are affected and are reflecting on what this film could do to victims and their relatives." The letter also stated that anyone who would like more information, is interested in the advance screening or feels there is a need for further discussion can contact WEISSER RING at any time.

Karsten Krogmann

Roaming dark corners

Daniel Müller (41) has been editor in chief of the true crime magazine "Zeit Verbrechen" since January 2021. Before that, he worked as a crime and court reporter. What fascinates him about crime? Can true crime be entertaining? And where are the boundaries between good and bad journalism? – An interview in Hamburg.

Photo: Christoph Soeder

In a narrow office in Hamburg's Helmut Schmidt Haus, where the weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" has its headquarters, 124 colourful A4 pages hang on the wall: the current issue of "Zeit Verbrechen". Daniel Müller, the editor in chief, is standing in front of the 124 pages, looking relaxed in his casual clothes. The issue is finished, and you can see he is satisfied with it. But this is not his office; Müller lives and works in Berlin. He travels to Hamburg every two months for the final production stage of the magazine. For the next hour and a half, he sits at the small conference table to talk to us about the appropriate way to behave towards victims and about the necessity of sometimes writing texts that can hurt people.

Mr Müller, if you were a victim of crime, would you like to deal with the journalist Daniel Müller?
I've been involved in journalism for more than 20 years, and there's one question that just doesn't let go of me: Why do people even talk to us journalists? Why do they want to go public with their story? I've never found a definitive answer, but one thing is clear: A crime leaves a deep mark in everyone's life. And people have a need to talk about it – victims, perpetrators, relatives, experts, lawyers. Crimes always affect more than just two people. You can really fathom it only if you find yourself in this situation. But let's assume I were in that situation: I would rather deal with someone like me than with other journalists.

What is the journalist Daniel Müller like then?
I'd rather let others answer that. But I think I'm a genuinely interested, empathetic and not too demanding person. Someone who – hopefully – strikes the right note when dealing with others. It's important to me to have a conversation and not just ask a string of questions. Journalism is not a one-way street. I also share things about myself with the people I talk to. These people are confiding in me, so I want to give them something back and not just sit at their table sucking information from them like a hoover. But, above all, my journalistic principle is: "Be first but first be right." My aim is to report exclusive stories, but never at the cost of writing nonsense.

Is there right and wrong journalism when dealing with victims and perpetrators? Or are we already talking about good and bad journalism?
We see bad journalism every day. For example, when the "Bild" newspaper uses the word "Kinderschänder" (child molester) – because that's Nazi terminology. Or when it prints the face of someone – without pixelation – who has perhaps just been arrested but not even charged yet. Sensationalist journalism is bad journalism. And unfortunately I've experienced on various occasions that this kind of journalism makes it difficult for other, respectable colleagues to do their own research. Often we have to pick up the pieces that others have left behind.

Photo: Christoph Soeder/WEISSER RING

You'll have to explain that a bit more.
Let me give you an example A few years ago, we researched a dossier for "Die Zeit" called "Die weißen Brüder" (The White Brothers). It's about twin brothers Maik and André Eminger, both right-wing extremists. The latter was a co-defendant of Beate Zschäpe at the trial involving a string of racist killings blamed on a group called the National Socialist Underground. He was the NSU's most important helper. The two come from the small town Johanngeorgenstadt in the Ore Mountains in eastern Germany. Before the trial started, we wanted to know one thing: How did the two of them come to be what they are? We travelled to Johanngeorgenstadt, spent three days there – and found that practically every door was slammed in our faces. Why? Because the same thing happened that unfortunately happens all the time: Other reporters had left scorched earth in their wake. In this case, it was a TV crew that probably thought: We'll go to this Nazi village and find the insignia of Nazi gangs all over the place. And because they didn't find any, they simply smeared a swastika on the wall of a garage. They filmed that and included it in their piece. That's quite simply disgusting. Yes, journalism is a profession with constant pressure. We all have pressure – competitive pressure, time pressure, and with newspapers there's pressure in the final proof stage. But that TV crew betrayed the ethics of the profession.

So that's bad journalism. What about good journalism?
That's what we do here, I think. Good journalism means conducting balanced, fair and thorough research. It's journalism that is open to all sides and doesn't push through preconceived notions, that doesn't allow itself to be instrumentalised by any party, neither by the victim nor by the perpetrator. Journalism where reporters also obtain investigative files, if possible, so that they can present a complete picture of a case. Journalism where sometimes the reporter decides not to do a story, no matter how good it is, because publishing it could endanger someone, for example. We do that regularly.

In "Zeit Verbrechen", the magazine that accompanies the podcast of the same name, you report on "real criminal cases", as it says on the front page. Author Margarete Stokowski said in her column on "Spiegel Online" that the vast majority of true crime podcasts are "the nastiest filth to have been produced since the invention of recording and broadcasting technology".

> **"We're after the story, of course. But not at all costs."**
>
> **Daniel Müller**

How would you describe true crime?
I don't want to offend Margarete Stokowski, of course, but her line of business is all about noise and turmoil and permanent moral superiority. She may be a good author, but ultimately she looks out at the world from atop her balcony and comments on what she sees. Our business is to go out into that world, talk to people and find out things that weren't public knowledge before. And sometimes also to expose wrongdoing or to help put things right. First off, true crime is reality, hence the name. I can't think of a single argument why we shouldn't report on crime and how to fight it, because both are components of our society. That's why we have a page in "Die Zeit" that deals with crime every week.

If you can't think of any arguments against reporting on true crime, can you think of any good reasons why it should be reported on?
First, I believe that good, in-depth, analytical, well-researched reports on true crimes can have a preventive

effect. Second, they can encourage people to pay more attention and watch out for themselves. Third, we as humans strive to understand what it is that makes us human. And if we pretend that people who commit crimes are monsters, then we're fictionalising them. Then we're separating something from ourselves and pretending that crime has nothing to do with us, with humanity and being human. But it does! Aggression and anger are two of the most elementary feelings that all creatures have. I'm interested in these tipping points in societies and in human beings themselves: What causes them to suddenly become belligerent or perpetrators? And then, of course, it is of fundamental importance for the state how the police, public prosecutors' offices and courts work. That, too, makes up a large part of our reporting. The activities of investigative bodies must not escape the media's attention under any circumstances.

How much entertainment is there in what you do?
Of course, we also want our content to be interesting and enjoyable to read – we're not making an encyclopaedia, after all. So when in the current issue of "Zeit Verbrechen" we print a naked man's butt in a picture spread about a neighbourhood dispute, we do so with a twinkle in our eye. Crime is terrible, but sometimes it's also bizarre and funny, and that's what we want to show. No reader can stand nothing but horror for 124 pages.

Daniel Müller stands up and points to the wall, or to be more precise: to the page with the number 111. There is a black-and-white photo of a man with a side parting and moustache, and underneath a line that translates to "Robber driven by an addiction to advertising".

Take this story from the current issue. The text tells us something about what life was like in Berlin in the 1920s. It's a story about crime, yes, but it's also about the world as it was 100 years ago, a world many see as a precursor to the world we live in today. And that's educational, too.

Müller steps forward, pointing to page 73, then to page 76.

"I catch myself taking an almost childlike joy when I get to read an exciting file for my work."

Daniel Müller

We have an interview with a police officer who tells us why his agency is so racist. It's a political piece, but, of course it's also about crime: crime within the agency that was created to prevent crime. We also have this wonderful format called "Small crimes", where we show that true crime is not only murder and rape and violence against children, but also the small things that end up in the district court. Thousands of Germans stand trial every day. True crime is always an expression of society.

My first observation is this: You have no problem at all saying that "Zeit Verbrechen" is true crime – a term that has negative connotations for many people due to the various sensationalist formats that exist.
Yes, that's perfectly okay. True crime is even in our title: "Echte Kriminalfälle" – that is, real criminal cases.

Second, true crime follows a social mandate: It can be a form of prevention as well as a means of education and political awareness-raising. Does true crime also have a journalistic appeal for you?
My father is a lawyer, so I grew up with the mantra: Don't do anything wrong! You never know how quickly you can end up in court. This naturally meant that anything that was wrong, dark or somehow peculiar always held an attraction for me. What happened to the boy who went to football training five times a week and wanted to become a professional football player, who lived a healthy life and didn't drink alcohol and who then suddenly murders his girlfriend? How can it be that the Bavarian State Office of Criminal Investigations plants an undercover agent in a rocker group and then simply drops him after he has been exposed and even denies that he worked for the police, despite the opposite being proven in court?

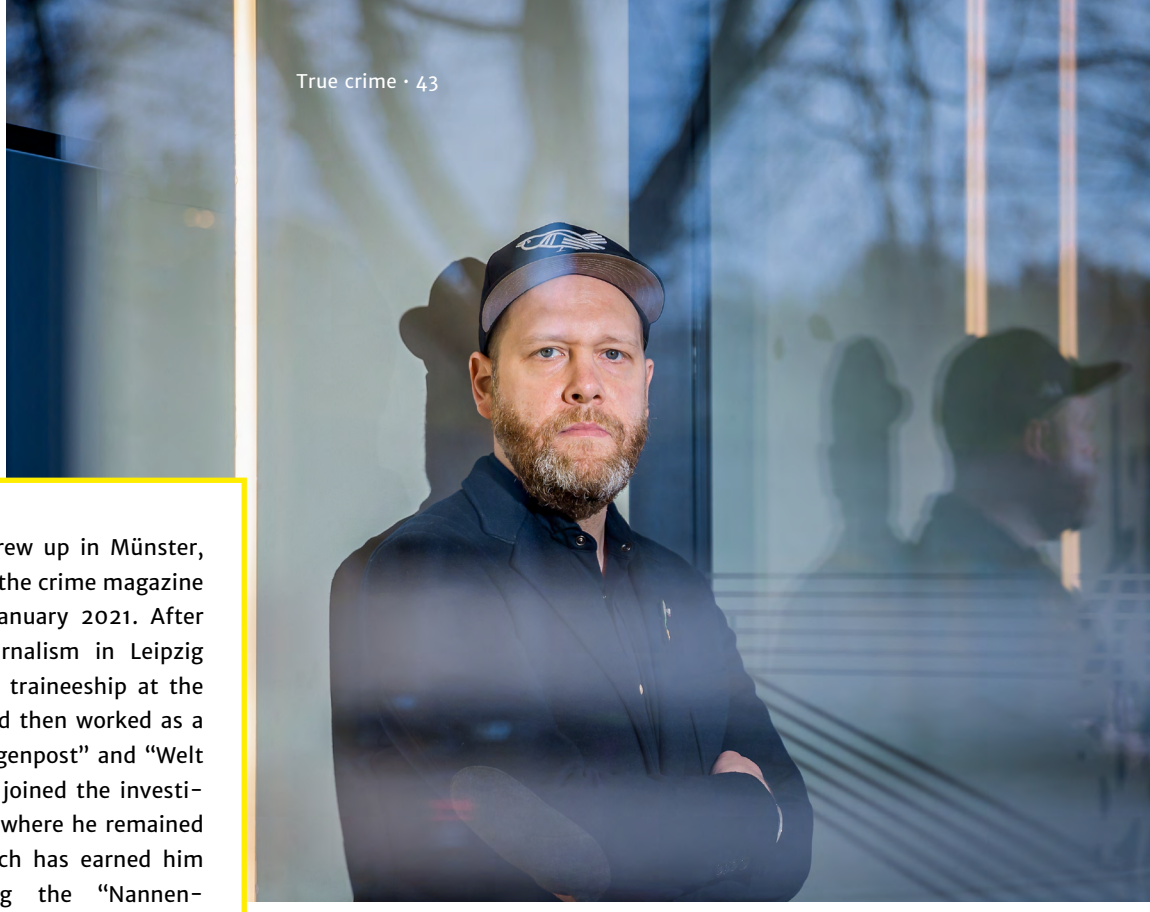


Photo: Christoph Soeder/WEISSER RING

Daniel Müller, 41, who grew up in Münster, has been editor in chief of the crime magazine "Zeit Verbrechen" since January 2021. After studying theatre and journalism in Leipzig and Oslo, he completed a traineeship at the Axel Springer Academy and then worked as a reporter for "Berliner Morgenpost" and "Welt am Sonntag". In 2012, he joined the investigative team of "Die Zeit", where he remained for nine years. His research has earned him several awards including the "Nannen-Preis", the "Deutscher Reporterpreis" and the "Wächterpreis".

When I asked about "journalistic appeal", I was thinking more of the professional level. There are few areas of journalism that provide as much material and information for the journalist as crime reporting – and especially true crime with its closed cases. Does that make it particularly attractive for journalists? Perhaps also particularly easy?

On the contrary, I believe there is nothing harder or more exhausting than crime reporting. Nobody wants to talk to you. And those who do talk to you want to take you in. Plus, often enough, seemingly objective police files contain nonsense or prejudices. It's true that hardly any other field is so well documented. But beware: You shouldn't believe everything you read. At "Zeit Verbrechen", we are grateful to the many committed readers and listeners who entrust us with their own stories. People who have experienced bad things themselves or know others to whom bad things have happened. Many police officers, defence lawyers, public prosecutors and forensic psychiatrists listen to our podcasts or read our articles, and some of them also contact us from time to time. We have worked hard to earn this trust through many years of reliable crime journalism, and I see it as my duty to reaffirm this trust time and again through well-founded research. And that also includes obtaining files and records. But a single file is not enough. You can read hundreds of pages of chat transcripts like a detective – but what do they mean? I grew up with "The Three Investigators" – in fact, I still listen to the audio plays when I go to sleep today – and I catch myself taking an almost child-like joy when I get to read an exciting file for my work. But it's far less glamorous than you might imagine; there's a lot of boring stuff. But there are often hidden clues that can lead to something big. For example, to your realising that the whole file is wrong. The investigators were barking up the wrong tree. Wolfgang Kaes uncovered a murder while working as a reporter for the Bonn "General-Anzeiger". And the deputy editor in chief of "Die Zeit", Sabine Rückert, in her capacity as a crime reporter, wrote stories that led to the release of several people from prison who had been wrongly convicted of crimes.

Uncovering crimes, solving cold cases, serving justice – these are often cited as arguments in support of true crime. But the truth is that this only happens very rarely. Practically speaking: Does true crime, with all those case files and court records, offer the chance to deliver particularly good journalism?

Indeed it does. That's why I don't understand it when some fellow journalists write a story containing incorrect information, even though they're familiar with the files. Either they haven't read the file properly, they don't even know how to read a file or they don't want to have their brilliant theory ruined. I'm not sure which is worse. At times, I miss the willingness to perceive shades of grey in the true crime business. I don't understand why everything always has to be black or white. Why someone can only be either good or evil. Perhaps the person is only a bit good, or only evil in a particular situation. And perhaps you could explain why that is. I like authors who dare to make uncertainty transparent.

We've now talked about the social and journalistic appeal of true crime. What about its economic appeal? Millions of people listen to the "Zeit Verbrechen" podcast, and the magazine has a circulation of around 55,000 copies. Why is true crime such a successful market?
True crime is only successful where crime is not so successful, I think. I can hardly imagine that there is a market for true crime in countries like Mexico or El Salvador where violence is rampant. Interest in true crime is also a matter of affluence. The better off we are, the more we like to be transported into dark corners. That was the case in ancient tragedies, too: We experience eleos and phobos, lamenting and terror, pity and fear. These are purifying emotions. That worked more than 2,000 years ago, and it works even better the more time and leisure people have to reflect on themselves.

But how far can you go in serving this need for entertainment and making money from it? To quote Margarete Stokowski once again: "The award-winning podcast 'Zeit Verbrechen' is in fact doing the same thing as all those trashy formats: It turns real suffering into entertainment and profit." "Zeit Verbrechen" uses the slogan "Fascination with crime" as its tagline. Is it okay to be fascinated by and sell crime?
First of all: Our podcast is award-winning but free. And second: Isn't it fascinating when a man pretends to his family that he is an engineer at Audi who dutifully drives to work every morning, but in reality he has been robbing banks for the past 13 years? We can argue about vocabulary, but as an inquisitive person, I find every area of social life and also every part of a newspaper fascinating: Otherwise, people wouldn't read or listen to the stories. I really don't do this job to appeal to Ms Stokowski. She's welcome to consider my work stupid, and so is everyone else who doesn't read or listen to our stories. I think crime reporting is very important for a country. Journalism is like a supermarket. You don't go there and buy everything that's on offer, but choose only what interests you.

> **"I believe there is nothing harder or more exhausting for journalists than crime reporting."**
> **Daniel Müller**

You appear at live events that charge an entrance fee – recently in Vienna, for example. There's a "Zeit Verbrechen" card game and a "Zeit Verbrechen" Christmas calendar. Crimes leave behind victims who experience suffering – is this a commercialisation of their suffering?
The question is absolutely justified, and we wonder about this ourselves, of course. Again and again with every product we release. And I can tell you one thing: We dismiss 90 percent of the ideas that are put to us. But what's objectionable about a Christmas calendar that tells the story of a giant gold coin being stolen from Berlin's Bode Museum in 24 steps?

You are the editor in chief. You have to answer for all products labelled "Zeit Verbrechen" in public.
I'm the editor in chief of the magazine. Ms Rückert runs the podcast. We can both vouch for our products because we proceed very carefully – and always decide anew. When we publish a book, it contains cases that we also discuss in the magazine or podcast. The book is an extension of the story, providing background material or excerpts from files for readers who want to delve deeper into the case. When we produce a

Christmas calendar that has the character of a game, we don't use any serious crimes. In our second Christmas calendar, we had six different cases, all of which were a bit mysterious, but where no one was harmed. That's important. Now you can argue about whether you need a doormat that says "Zeit Verbrechen" on it. Or a coffee mug bearing the words "Zeit Verbrechen". But why not? We have a very acute sense for not commercialising people's suffering.

What role do victims and their relatives play for "Zeit Verbrechen"?
A central role, of course!

I don't mean their role in the media coverage, but rather: How does "Zeit Verbrechen" treat the people whose stories you tell? How do you take these people on board, involve them, look after them?
That varies a lot. Take the case of the patient killer Niels Högel, who murdered almost 100, possibly even 200 people in two hospitals: The sheer number of victims and surviving relatives is so huge that it would be impossible to bring them all on board. For me, treating the people affected correctly begins with the way you address them. I think that as a crime reporter you

Photo: Christoph Soeder/WEISSER RING

should never call a victim out of the blue or – even worse – stand on their door step unexpectedly and say: You're the one whose husband was killed – why don't we have a chat? I recommend the good old letter-writing approach. A letter has the advantage of being very personal yet not too up-close and invasive. I always write letters to victims – unless I have an initial contact with a lawyer who then puts me in touch with someone. Sometimes victims seek the support of reputable media.

And what happens after the contact has been made and the victims have told you their story?
In the process of researching an article like this, I think it's a good idea to get in touch now and then and say: "Don't be surprised that nothing has been published yet. I know it has been six weeks since we talked, but it's a very long and time-consuming research process." It's best to explain honestly that this kind of research takes time and that it's even possible that nothing will come of it in the end. Transparency is key. When a story is ready to go to press, we look deeply into each other's eyes and ask ourselves: Can we publish it like this or will we hurt someone? Sometimes the answer is: We need to tweak it a bit. Or wait. But sometimes it's also: Yes, we will probably hurt someone, but we'll do it anyway. Because the interests of society as a whole are more important.

"Often we have to pick up the pieces that others have left behind."

Daniel Müller

Do you ever read out or hand over finished texts to the people concerned so that they can double check them?
No, that's something we never do. The author remains the master of the text, not the protagonist. But we do, of course, have verbatim quotations authorised.

Could you imagine providing psychologists or psychotherapists to particularly distressed victims of crime, as some people are calling for? For example, when a journalist returns to the crime scene with the victim for a story?
As journalists, we should not interfere in the lives of adults by bringing psychologists along. Every adult can decide for themselves whether or not to talk to us. But what you can do as a journalist is suggest to the people you are dealing with that they get help. I have sat with people several times and asked: Tell me, have you ever thought about seeing a psychotherapist? Most of them said: No, I don't need one. And then I said: I've been doing this for a while now, and I can imagine that it would be good for you. There are many places you can turn to, such as WEISSER RING, for example. Besides, I don't think it's very tactful to take a victim back to the scene of a rape, for example, only to have the journalist take a few photos. You really shouldn't do that.

But some journalists do it – because it's all about the story.
It does happen, but not with us. We're also after the story, of course. But not at all costs.

Karsten Krogmann

Note for transparency: The author and Daniel Müller have known each other for almost 10 years. Before Krogmann joined WEISSER RING, they worked together on the case of the hospital killer Niels Högel, among other things. Texts by Krogmann have also appeared in "Die Zeit" and on "Zeit online".

We man-eaters

He finds true crime both repulsive and ridiculous – and in any case questionable from a media ethics point of view. The thoughts of writer and TV critic Torsten Körner on true "butcher's platters for the mind".

Although true crime formats are booming – and have been for years now – this label, this promise of authenticity, seems somehow old-fashioned to me. Like it belongs to a different era. While the world around us is in flames, or at least seems to be, while the war in Ukraine confronts us with war crimes day after day and the media allow us to witness soldiers being shot, beaten to death or decapitated on camera, you can't help but wonder whether true crime narratives can still compete with real life. For war and other crises are transforming the planet into a global showroom of crime, making it difficult for the individual not to feel guilty, complicit or heartless.

Any person prepared to observe the course of time at least to some extent will inevitably be miserable.

Indeed, in the 21st century, the individual is often overwhelmed by the challenge of holding his or her own, asserting an identity and building a successful life. Everything feels unreal, so everyone craves realness, real time – as far as time allows. Those who have free time must kill it, and killing is a fascinating thing, at least for those who catch flies with their hand and then consider unclenching their fist to set them free. Against this background – in terms of the media and how people's mentalities have changed with the times – the boom in true crime formats becomes more understandable: In an age marked by a lack of authenticity, we want to feast on authenticity in our entertainment; in an age of global irresponsibility and chaos, we want to pin down a perpetrator without a doubt; in an age of multiple crises and wars, we want to reduce the complexity down to a serial killer. So serial killers are simpletons because they erase the overabundance of simultaneous diversity that plagues us.

True crime is always post mortem, which means the story has been put to rest and we can rest easy and let ourselves be captured by its unsettling nature – in other words, true crime is for cowards. Plus true crime is something you have to have the necessary resources for – and by that I mean not only free time and couch space but also financial resources. True crime is a mass media product of the 19th century that knows how to adapt to the structural changes taking place in 21st century media. Because the algorithms don't lie and blood flows all around the globe and back again.

Of course, it would not be very realistic to think that I can avoid the boom all the time, and one can hardly deny that the bloody criminal cases on Netflix and the like generate suspense, but that is precisely what – in the long run – makes them dull, questionable in terms of media ethics, at times annoying and also scandalous; ultimately, they are a symptom of decadence, collective insecurity and narrative exhaustion. What do true crime formats actually accomplish at this point

Photo: Rolf Vennenbernd/dpa

where our very existence and identity are being shaken to the max? Under a mass media regime that ultimately turns everything that happens into a form of entertainment, whether it be wars, epidemics, climate catastrophes or refugee dramas? True crime formats promise real cases, real blood, real life. At the same time, they narrow down the setting. There is the perpetrator and the victim or, more often, the perpetrator and a multitude of victims. This narrowing down or pinpointing, this Manichean order, banishes the inscrutability of the present.

The killer's first victim is reality, the first victim of the label "true" is truth, because true crime claims to have a monopoly on the truth. This claim of monopoly already contains distortion and violence – yes, also violence, because whether the format likes it or not, it almost always turns itself and the viewers into imaginary henchmen of the perpetrator. But therein lies the power of these narratives, because they invite us not only to enter the crime scenes as spectators, they also give us a sense of omnipotence, for we are meta-detectives outside of the case who carry out a post-mortem on the crime from our couch. We can see the perspectives of the perpetrator, the victim, the investigators and perhaps even the relatives, and have access to rooms that would otherwise always remain locked to us: crime scenes, interrogation rooms, private living rooms. Everything is retrospectively sorted, checked, compared, archived. And then we come and transform these chambers of horrors into tiny entertainment houses. We step behind the scenes and suddenly think we understand the world, because it's all real and actually happened, and we eat the people who were eaten, we man-eaters.

From a media ethics point of view, I always try to check myself: Who am I entering into temporary agreements with? What perspective am I adopting? Does my attention ennoble the murderer, who is more and more often, contrary to all reality, a powerful serial killer who is already – while he is still killing – transforming into a mythical all-time hero, a model student of the hyper-capitalist attention economy, a soft-power hero who doesn't own any factories, but who besieges and occupies our dreams and fantasies?

As a reviewer for Germany's voluntary self-regulation body for TV, I have to check these formats with a view to the protection of minors, but other than that, I have come to avoid such products because – there is no other way to put it – they disgust me. At the same time, their lurid theatricality makes them seen ridiculous. There may be cases where journalistic formats (such as "Serial") reveal that convicts were unjustly sentenced, but that is not the rule – and even these podcasts, documentaries and series do not do so out of a philanthropic sense of justice, but out of commercial considerations. The greatest cruelty of these media products is the promise that one can feel the thirst for blood, experience the fear of the victim and the rush to kill, yet at the same time remain concerned for one's own self. The advertising slogans for these killing machines always sound the same, whether on CNN, Netflix, Amazon, public service broadcasters like ARD, ZDF and the BBC, or wherever: The standard promise of horror simultaneously kills the promise

Dr Torsten Körner, born in 1965, is a writer, filmmaker, journalist – and chairman of the review boards of the German voluntary self-regulation body for TV (Freiwillige Selbstkontrolle Fernsehen, FSF). He has written books about German football legend Franz Beckenbauer, former Chancellor Willy Brandt and death, and made films about former Chancellor Angela Merkel, women in a men's republic and black players on the German national football team. His film "Schwarze Adler" won him TV awards such as the "Grimme-Preis" and "Deutscher Fernsehpreis". Körner lives in Berlin.

of individuality and authenticity. Blood is no longer a special type of liquid, blood is a uniform currency. And do we, as viewers and producers of such stories, really want to follow the logic of ever-increasing media productions? Do we – because we already know everything – want to see ever more gruesome murders, ever more inflated "heroes of darkness"?

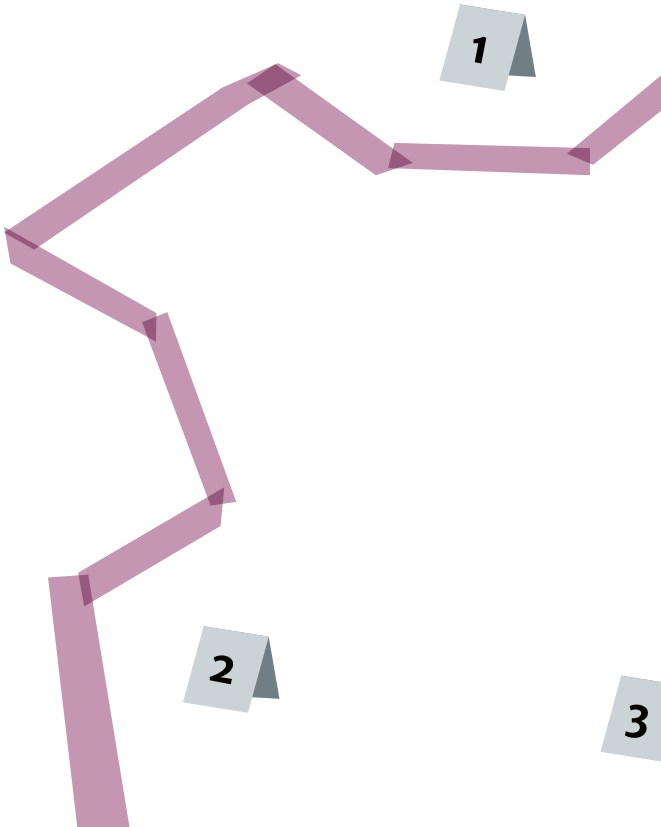
Moreover, the fixation on the killers' mental state, on their radius of action and their deeds is highly problematic, because that means the killers always remain the authors. Or do you remember a true crime case that was predominantly told from the victim's point of view? These formats engage in constant re-victimisation, and I fear also in the re-traumatisation of relatives and families affected by crime. How can it be that we supposedly live in an increasingly sensitive media culture, where practically no film gets by without a trigger warning, and at the same time there is a boom in true crime formats that ruthlessly fast-forward and rewind the suffering people have endured, re-enact that suffering, mythicise the perpetrators and once again wipe out the victims as individuals?

Stop, stop, some will cry, true crime formats, which are apparently watched predominantly by women, serve as imaginary emergency kits with which female viewers arm themselves against real everyday fears. Others say that true crime is already a collective coming to terms with individual crimes and a narrative taming of crime. But these cathartic interpretations seem rather weak to me, because they assume that we can separate the true from the false, the good citizen from the criminal, the real from the imaginary and the active perpetrator from us passive viewers. But is it really all so straightforward and obvious, so clearly and cleanly divided? Why should true crime formats, which have been set post mortem or rather post facto until now, wait for this moment to occur? Wouldn't true crime formats be even truer, more authentic, if they started ante mortem and viewers could follow the perpetrators in real time? Haven't many serial killers and spree killers long since chosen this option of fame when they film their crimes themselves and even broadcast them live on the Internet? At what point would the media become co-authors of the perpetrators? The film "Nightcrawler" (2014) tells precisely this story, with a crime reporter becoming a co-perpetrator with his camera and inciting sensationalist crimes. Okay, maybe we don't have to think in such dystopian terms just yet, but is the thought of living in today's age of cold curiosity any more reassuring?

I have little sympathy for public service media participating in these formats or even developing some themselves. But if they want to go down that road, they should at least develop programmes that enable the viewer to follow these formats with a critical eye. Transforming the victim back into the person before the crime, demythicising the description of the perpetrator, reflecting on violence in the media and shattering the seemingly safe couch perspective would be worthwhile tasks. And we should also ask ourselves, do I only watch true crime or do I also live my own life? What are we shutting our eyes to when we look into the victim's wide-open, horrified eyes? Don't all these dark shadows leave us blind? Sometimes it seems to me that we, as viewers of these formats, worship a pagan cult: Blood must be shed so that we ourselves will be spared, so that the harvest will be bountiful, the coming foray successful. As if we were offering a gift of appeasement to cruel gods. Life cannot be appeased. It is always true, and it needs our empathy, our ability to decipher matters beyond these butcher's platters for the mind.

I prefer crime in books and, when I'm looking for suspense, I read Jules Maigret stories. He, who smokes a pipe and tracks down clues, can also take me almost anywhere – completely without true crime or a perpetrator cult.

Torsten Körner



“Objectivity is the killer of entertainment”

Nahlah Saimeh’s work focuses on “the evil within”. The forensic psychiatrist assesses perpetrators of criminal offences, examining how dangerous they are and whether they are criminally liable. Thanks to her many years of expertise, she is a much sought-after interview partner in true crime formats. Here she explains why true crime fascinates so many people.

Whether in magazines and podcasts or on TV and YouTube: True crime is booming. Why do audiences find pleasure in other people’s suffering?
I don’t think the true crime community takes pleasure in people’s suffering. This is not about sadism; it’s a behaviour driven by sensation-seeking and emotion amplification, by wanting to experience something special, something extraordinary, through the fates of others – and yet being spared ourselves. Moreover, the formats allow us to rise above the evilness of the perpetrators or the supposed recklessness of the victims and thus feel superior to them. Above all, we feel a sense of personal safety in an otherwise unsafe world.

In your view, are there any differences within the genre?
Basically, I like to distinguish between true crime formats like “Aktenzeichen XY… ungelöst”, which aim to solve cold cases after all, and those formats that additionally aim to entertain – with more or less sophisticated information. But perhaps the informative part is ultimately only a way to legitimise the entertainment.

What distinguishes true crime from crime thrillers?
Well, the formats overlap to an extent. I know crime thrillers that are based on true stories, and true stories outstrip many a script by a mile. Real life is sometimes absolutely unbelievable.

What impact can true crime formats have on the audience?
I think the most likely effect is that the frequency of violent acts is overestimated.

It is said that the genre is particularly popular with women. Why is that?
Women are much more interested in psychology and the motives behind human actions. A few forms of violence, such as sexual offences or violence within a relationship, affect them more often than men, and they are also more receptive to emotional themes such as the victims’ suffering. Men are less interested in the emotional sensitivities of people they have nothing to do with, and they don’t identify with the victims’ stories.

On the other hand, do such formats have any merit?
I have asked myself the same question, because I too have to justify to myself why, for example, I give interviews on the subject or take part in true crime formats. For me personally, there is only one legitimisation: to explain, on the basis of real cases, what makes people prone to become violent. I want to help us recognise the potential perpetrator of violence, including within ourselves, as someone who is overwhelmed by life and fate.

That’s what true crime productions are often about; the focus is usually on the perpetrators. Are they more exciting than the victims?
Perpetrators break taboos. They do something that you wouldn’t dare do yourself and that you wouldn’t have

thought possible. In a way, they are antisocial on our behalf. That's why I insist on the approach of explaining the situation as matter-of-factly as possible and thus telling viewers: In principle, under different circumstances, you and I might do exactly the same. By the way, I suspect that in very violent communities there is no interest in true crime at all. Because people there have murder and manslaughter right on their doorsteps, as a real danger.

Do these kinds of formats have to give a voice to the people affected?
You don't have to "give" them a voice, because they have one – you have to hear their voice and take it seriously. If you "give" someone a voice, you make them look small. It's also important for those affected to regain their self-efficacy and to assert their points of view with self-confidence.

What should true crime creators not do under any circumstances?
Objectivity is the killer of entertainment. I'm not a fan of artificially evoking emotions, so I prefer formats that explain things in a precise and straightforward manner. And I'm certainly not a fan of telling other people – in this case victims – how they should feel. We all have different feelings and deal with strokes of fate in different ways because we have certain resiliences, certain previous experiences, certain personality traits. I find this normative view of how one should behave as a victim problematic.

How could media professionals best involve victims or their relatives in the process of creating such a format?
It's not my place to answer that question. Only victims and their relatives can answer that.

Christiane Fernbacher and Nina Lenhardt

Nahlah Saimeh, born in 1966, is a medical specialist for psychiatry and psychotherapy. She is considered one of the most reputable forensic psychiatrists in Germany. Her specialist areas are non-lethal and lethal violence as well as sexual offences. She headed the Centre for Forensic Psychiatry in Lippstadt, North Rhine-Westphalia, for about 14 years, and today she writes books such as "Kann jeder zum Mörder werden" (Can anyone become a murderer).

Photo: Ralf Zenker

True Crime

The popular podcast format

Photo: Podstars by OMR

Vincent Kittmann has been the managing director of "Podstars by OMR" since 2020. He started his career as a basketball player in Paderborn before moving on to the club's marketing department after two years. Prior to joining OMR, he played basketball for the Hamburg Towers in the second highest German league ProA.

Broadcasters, companies, public figures – they all make podcasts. The topics range from pure entertainment and news and educational formats to extensively researched investigative reports. The podcast format has become more established in Germany, as a recent representative survey conducted by "Podstars by OMR" shows. The agency is Germany's leading podcast network and offers a combination of advertising, production and consulting.

According to the study, 63 percent of the respondents listen to podcasts on a daily basis. They use the medium as a news source as well as for educational and entertainment purposes. Some 31 percent said they enjoy listening to true crime stories. "The genre of true crime ranks in the upper midfield", says Vincent Kittmann, managing director of Podstars. "It's a genre that requires more attention than a talk show format and usually lasts longer than a news podcast. So you need to actively make time for it. If you take a look at the top 20 podcasts, there are often several true crime formats among them, something that speaks for the genre's success."

As with all other media formats, there is no guarantee of success with podcasts. "While we can see that there's a lot of interest in true crime stories, the genre alone doesn't necessarily vouch for the next streaming success", Kittmann says. "As with any podcast, the concept is the be-all and end-all. True crime cases have to be well researched, and an arc of suspense has to be built up within the episodes. The topic of true crime is well suited for this, of course, because many stories innately have this arc of suspense. Nevertheless, it's not enough to just retell the stories. It's also important to convey emotions and create awareness."

While there is generally a very balanced gender distribution when it comes to podcasts, the genre of true crime is one that women in particular love. "The most popular German crime formats not only have women as hosts, but many of the listeners are female, too", Kittmann says. The general gender distribution this year shows that 54 percent of all listeners are men and 45 percent are women. Incidentally, the age groups that listen to podcasts the most are 26 to 30 years and 31 to 36 years. However, the age groups from 36 years onwards have also gained 10 percent compared to the previous year.

These figures show that podcasts are becoming more and more popular. But can you make money with them? "Of course, there are some podcasters who make a living from their podcast. But for many, their podcast isn't the only source of income. In general, you can make money with any podcast if you choose the right form of monetisation", Kittmann explains. "According to the Safe and Sound Report 2022, true crime fans are more tolerant of advertising than the average listener and tend to be particularly enthusiastic about adverts that support their favourite content."

So advertising works in a true crime podcast, too: "Listeners generally tune in to the formats for entertainment purposes. The makers are very much aware that their content can contain sensitive or violent segments. They therefore only insert commercials in places where they fit, so that the advertising partners are not integrated in an inappropriate context", Kittmann says. A study by "Seven.One Audio" from 2022 states: True crime podcasts are a good medium for commercials that address socially relevant aspects such as a product's sustainability (an approval rating of more than 80 percent).

In addition to advertising, more and more podcasts are going on tour and introducing their own merchandising. "Both these things are additional sources of income. But, above all, they are also good for community building. Live tours and merchandising help to turn the podcast into a brand", Kittmann says.

Christiane Fernbacher

Illustration: Alexander Lehn

A change of perspective

Paulina Krasa and Laura Wohlers have been running their successful podcast "Mordlust" for almost five years. They are familiar with the criticism of storytelling in true crime formats. In episode 61, they therefore introduced a change of perspective: They told the story from the victim's point of view.

It's a struggle for survival. A young woman has to defend herself against a strange attacker in her own flat. She is only just able to fend off the man's very serious attempt to rape her. She barely manages to survive – and now struggles with the psychological consequences. It's not unusual for Paulina Krasa and Laura Wohlers to talk about serious and true criminal cases like this. They do so every two weeks in their podcast "Mordlust".

But in episode 61, which deals with the case of the young woman, they take a different approach than usual: For the first time, they tell the crime story from the first-person perspective, from the victim's point of view – and thus set themselves apart from the usual storytelling in true crime, which critics often denounce as being too focused on the perpetrator. And which regularly recounts true cases without victims having a chance to say whether or not they want to see their story publicly explored.

Laura Wohlers and Paulina Krasa strive to be more sensitive towards victims. They have already told a few stories that victims of crime have shared with them. The journalists, both in their early 30s and close personal friends, became more aware of the perspective of crime victims little by little. "In the course of our work, we realised that the legal process is often very much oriented towards the perpetrators and that victims often don't see their interests represented enough", says Laura Wohlers. "Before the podcast, we weren't aware of that either, of course." Wohlers is joining the interview at the podcast management's Berlin office digitally from the UK; she lives in London and Berlin. Paulina Krasa lives exclusively in Berlin and is there for the interview in person. The "Mordlust" team works independently of location.

"Mordlust" has been around for almost five years. It's now one of the most successful true crime podcasts in Germany. In the episodes, of which there are 118 so far, the two hosts usually describe a criminal case to each other. Sexualised violence, murders, domestic violence: The crimes vary, but there is almost always an overarching theme. Experts are often called in to help interpret the events and provide further background information. In episode 103, for example, their guest was Bianca Biwer, federal director of WEISSER RING, who spoke about the German Crime Victims Compensation Act.

Paulina Krasa and Laura Wohlers began their careers as TV journalists. They launched their podcast "Mordlust" in 2018 and have since reached millions of listeners.

Laura Wohlers and Paulina Krasa started the podcast in 2018 after both of them had completed their traineeships at the breakfast TV show on Sat.1 – only a few months after the equally popular true crime podcast "Zeit Verbrechen" was launched. They had taken their inspiration from British and US formats at the time, Laura Wohlers recalls. And Paulina Krasa adds that there were no other formats like theirs in Germany back then. But the decisive factor for both of them was their fascination with true crime.

"What do crimes do to relatives, to victims? And why do people become criminals?" These were the questions they asked themselves, Laura Wohlers says. "We found those questions really exciting, and so we thought about how we could get a true crime format off the ground – alongside our jobs and without many resources."

At first they were independent, then they switched to "funk", the online youth channel of public service broadcasters ARD and ZDF, before finally becoming independent again. They simply preferred their independence, even though the decision was difficult for them because they had had three good years at "funk".

Their time in public service broadcasting helped them a lot in terms of content. “We came to see crime reporting in a whole new light”, says Paulina Krasa. “And we also learned to be more sensitive.” For example, you don’t have to mention how many times a perpetrator stabbed someone and how much blood was on the floor to make it clear that someone was stabbed. “With every case we recount, we ask ourselves: How would relatives or the victims themselves feel about it if they heard the story? So it’s important to present the story in an ethically and morally appropriate way.”

The first change of perspective in episode 61 came about for one reason in particular: “There’s such an abundance of true crime these days that I think you have to make a point of remembering that these stories really reflect people’s fates and lives”, says Paulina Krasa.

“And,” adds Laura Wohlers, “I also think it’s important that we do this every now and then because it’s a reminder that these are real people and that we have the opportunity for once to get really close to these people and introduce them properly.” They had tried to portray the people concerned as authentically as possible, to imitate their voice, to use their choice of words. “We wanted our listeners to understand what kind of people they are and what this crime has done to them.”

Laura Wohlers (left) and Paulina Krasa · Photo: Nico Wöhrle

She also believes that the stories real women have shared with them raise their listeners’ awareness of how to deal with victims. For instance, they learn what you can do when a crime happens in your own environment, such as asking yourself what the victims and their relatives might need.

In any case, these episodes with a strong focus on victims have been very well received. This is also demonstrated by a message from one of the people affected, in which the woman expresses her heartfelt thanks to the podcasters and tells them that their work and the many reactions had given her strength. “We’ve never had victims or relatives tell us that something had gone too far for them”, says Paulina Krasa.

“Mordlust” recounts only those cases for which there is already a court verdict. “Quite often we are contacted by people who have fallen victim to a crime that was never brought to justice”, says Paulina Krasa. “Unfortunately, we can’t recount these cases, because we would have no way to cross-check the information. We’d only be relying on the victim’s accounts.” They want to be able to substantiate their stories.

“Even though we don’t tell a story from the victim’s point of view in every episode, our general credo is that the victims and their relatives should be given a lot of space”, says Laura Wohlers. “We try to avoid putting the perpetrator at the centre of the story.”

As far as the choice of topics is concerned, however, they do not want to limit themselves. For some, the topic of child abuse is unbearable. They have been asked whether it’s really necessary to feature that in the podcast. But Wohlers asks: “If we don’t talk about child abuse, who will?”

They usually need the full two weeks between releases to properly prepare the episodes. “Of course, it always depends on how detailed the sources are”, Wohlers says. First they discuss the topic, then they write the stories and record them, before listening to the recording together. Never, Wohlers tells us, would they release a story they hadn’t both listened to and approved beforehand. Because they also make mistakes, of course. In the past, for example, they used terms they would avoid today because they are insensitive. They get a lot of good advice from their community in this regard. “We’re always open to constructive criticism”, says Wohlers.

Between 75 and 80 percent of their listeners are female according to statistics from analysis platforms. From

> **“Our general credo is that the victims and their relatives should be given a lot of space.”**
>
> **Laura Wohlers**

their own survey, they also know that many of their female listeners are very interested in the mental state of the perpetrators. On the one hand, because their lives are often so far removed from their own. And on the other hand, because many of them ask themselves how they can prepare for a potentially threatening situation. “We found that fascinating, because at first we were a bit puzzled by the idea of listening to crimes in order to glean tips on how to behave in such a situation”, says Paulina Krasa. “But this is actually a topic that preoccupies many women: When they go home alone in the evening, for example, there is always a thought in the back of their mind: Something might happen to me here any moment.”

Critics, on the other hand, accuse true crime formats of catering to voyeurism and being heard as entertainment. Krasa can understand this criticism. However, she says: “We don’t produce our podcast for people who listen to these stories to get the creeps on their couch.” She herself does not consume true crime podcasts in this way. “But I can’t change the reasons why people listen to the episodes”, she continues.

They also realise that the choice of cases can contribute to distorting reality. “I know that according to the statistics, men experience violence more often than women, mostly from other men”, says Laura Wohlers. She adds that they have also talked about this on the podcast on several occasions. In her opinion, the fact that violence against men is rarely discussed has to do with male victims having a greater sense of shame due to the prevailing image of masculinity and a fear of being stigmatised by society, which is why they are less likely to speak out in public.

Their work has not caused Wohlers and Krasa to develop a greater fear of crime. “Because we know the statistics and realise that it’s actually quite unlikely that we will be attacked by a stranger from the bushes while walking down the street at night”, says Laura Wohlers.

In any case, they plan to continue their work for a while. “We always used to say we’d do this for five years, and that time span ends this year. But we definitely don’t want that forecast to come true. I’d say we’ll continue for another five years now”, predicts Paulina Krasa.

Laura Wohlers comments that it is important to them to be able to point out where the legal system still has its flaws. However, the podcasters stress that they are generally very satisfied with the German legal system. Moreover, by making problems visible, they can give people the feeling that they can make a difference. Paulina Krasa notes that they often receive messages from people who only had the courage to report what had been done to them after listening to the podcast.

And as long as they feel they can make a difference with their podcast, they want to continue.

Christoph Zempel

BEST PRACTICES

True crime tips from the editors

Frauke Liebs – search for the murderer

On a summer evening in 2006, 21-year-old Frauke Liebs disappears in Paderborn. For seven days the young woman sends distressing signs of life, then there is silence. Months later, her body is discovered in a wooded area, but the perpetrator has still not been identified.

Podcast host Dominik Stawski wants to change that. To this end, Stawski spends months doing research and allows relatives and friends of the victim to speak at length on his podcast. The emotional high point: During the last episode, Frauke's mother Ingrid, who runs the WEISSER RING branch office in Minden, makes a moving appeal to the murderer(s).

www.stern.de/panorama/verbrechen/frauke-liebs/

KrimSchnack: Spotlight on the facts

What exactly is the routine activity theory? What's so bad about cat calling? How can victims of stalking defend themselves? Every two weeks, criminologists Annelie and Marie from Hamburg present a well-researched topic of their choice in the podcast "KrimSchnack". They always focus on the scientific perspective. Attentive listening is a must when the hosts talk about crime theories, prevention, victimology or prisons. A nice touch: Frequently, academic and practical experts are invited as guests to provide insights into their work.

https://krimschnack.podigee.io

"Mordlust" tells the stories of the victims

On the true crime podcast "Mordlust – Verbrechen und ihre Hintergründe", journalists Paulina Krasa and Laura Wohlers talk about true criminal cases from Germany. The special touch: The hosts introduce each other to a case that the other person doesn't know about yet. Their responses are thus unfiltered, but, in their own words, "never meant to be disrespectful". Interviews with experts on criminal law or psychological aspects add extra interest. Highly recommended episodes include "#61: Perspektivenwechsel" (A change of perspective) and "#100: Das Verbrechen, das mein Leben veränderte" (The crime that changed my life). These are empathetic accounts of the stories of female listeners who have been victims of crime.

https://mordlust-podcast.podigee.io

"Schwarz Rot Blut" – true crime podcast about racist violence in Germany

Racism as a motive for crime? What often seems obvious to survivors, victims and experts is not always recognised as such in court. How does this discrepancy between legal treatment and the reality of those affected come about? And what needs to be done to ensure that racist violence in Germany can be better recognised and prosecuted? The podcast "Schwarz Rot Blut" by WDR and Cosmo explores these questions in seven episodes. The discussion covers crimes from the early 1980s as well as others that have been committed in recent years.

www.ardaudiothek.de/sendung/schwarz-rot-blut-der-true-crime-podcast-ueber-rassistische-gewalt-in-deutschland/10530035/

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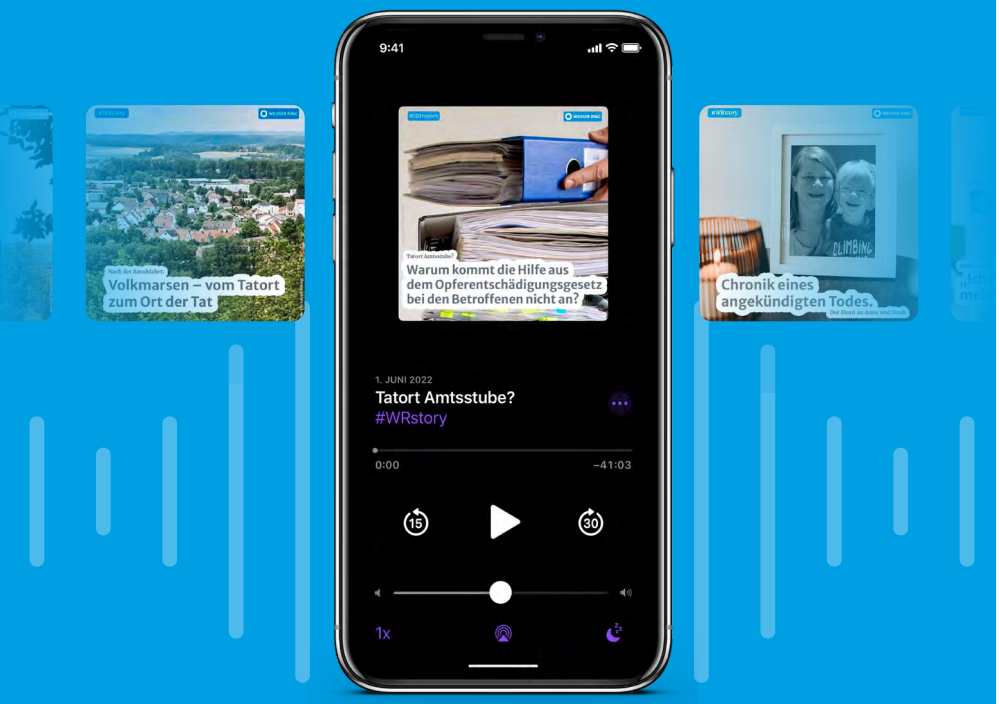

You can now also listen to the research and reports from the WEISSER RING editorial team: In our **#WRstories** we tell crime stories from the victim's perspective. They're available on all popular streaming services such as Spotify, Deezer and Apple Podcast or at www.forum-opferhilfe.de/hoeren. With our WRstories, we want to encourage a more sensitive treatment of victims and help improve their protection.

All #WRstory episodes:
www.forum-opferhilfe.de/hoeren

Spotify Apple Podcasts Deezer

We put relevant victim protection issues in the spotlight. In addition to our journalistic research (#WRstory) and portraits (#Ehrensache), we provide up-to-date information on new laws, statistics and news at forum-opferhilfe.de.

Thank you

Small amounts add up

Even seemingly very small amounts of money can have a big effect. The employees of Commerzbank and Commerz Real proved this yet again. As on previous occasions, they had the opportunity to donate the cent amounts of their monthly salaries to charitable causes. And they were also involved in distributing the money to the three organisations that were selected: The employees were able to choose a donation recipient via an online vote. At the end of the past year, the majority decided in favour of the "Help after Domestic Violence" project of WEISSER RING. Of the total amount donated, 50 percent went to our association – an impressive 13,422.34 euros.

Second hand

Every Monday and once a month on Saturdays, Edeltraud Lieder and her team of volunteers are at the second-hand shop "Tweede Hand" in Scheeßel. The non-profit association Tweede Hand Scheeßel e. V. offers donated clothes at very reasonable prices in its shop. And the people in charge also regularly donate money to other charitable associations. Recently, 500 euros went to WEISSER RING, for example. The Scheeßel branch manager Jürgen Schulz was pleased about the financial support for his team's voluntary work. "I myself once needed the help of the victim protection association and have been a member of WEISSER RING ever since because of the wonderful support I received", says Edeltraud Lieder.

A round sum for a round birthday

Reinhard Falk celebrated his 70th birthday last November. The retired police officer expressed a clear wish when he invited his guests: He asked for donations for the work of the Berlin branch of WEISSER RING. The result was quite impressive: At the office in Berlin, Reinhard Falk handed over 1,000 euros, artistically arranged in a picture frame. Christine Burck, deputy chair of the regional association, thanked Reinhard Falk for the generous donation and promised to use the money "to help victims of crime who are in need".

Reinhard Falk hands over his donation to Christine Burck, deputy chair of the Berlin regional association.
· Photo: WEISSER RING

Generous jubilarians collect donations

Gerd and Wera Schuster from Reiskirchen in Hesse had not one but two reasons to celebrate: The couple had their golden wedding anniversary, and Wera Schuster turned 70 years old. Instead of presents, the two jubilarians asked for donations for the WEISSER RING branch office in Gießen. "We've always been lucky in life", explained Gerd Schuster, "and simply wanted to help someone out who hasn't been so lucky." And so 600 euros were raised and handed over to branch manager Karin Skib and her colleague Doris Galesky.

Manhunt helps protect victims

Solving a crime and doing good? Sönke Busch and his team from "Lympselon Krimi Events" in Mainz have been combining these two things for some time. Fortunately, no real crimes are involved, but only fictitious ones in the context of a mystery dinner. The latest dinner for a good cause featured an online-only version followed by a face-to-face event on the next day, where 35 participants slipped into their respective roles. Besides the entertaining investigations, both days also offered various opportunities to contribute to the actual main cause: support for WEISSER RING. Auctions, raffles and other donations resulted in a total of 3,020 euros for the association. "With this money, we would like to support the employees and volunteers of WEISSER RING in their important work", emphasised Sönke Busch.

Around 35 participants helped to solve a case set in the USA in the 1920s.
· Photo: Katrin Valerie

Coffee for a good cause

When the employees of the company Reng Industriesysteme in Neustadt an der Donau (Bavaria) drink coffee on their working days, they simultaneously support a good cause. A small additional amount is donated for every cup, and the trainees then pick a charitable organisation each year for the annual donation. In 2022, they chose WEISSER RING. A grand total of 750 euros was collected and handed over to Josef Doni, branch manager in Kelheim. During a visit to the company, Doni not only expressed his sincere thanks, but also shared information about the organisation's work.

Trainees of the company Reng with Josef Doni, branch manager in Kelheim (centre), during the handover of the donations.
· Photo: Reng in Neustadt a.d. Donau

A partnership for over four decades

Humboldt Grammar School in Karlsruhe has stood by WEISSER RING's side for over 40 years. During this time, it has raised over 70,000 euros in donations for crime prevention and victim assistance. Each year, the highlight is the school's large Christmas market, whose proceeds are always donated – last year the total was 3,159 euros. Klaus Armbrust, who is in charge of the branch office for the city and district of Karlsruhe, provides information about WEISSER RING's work at these events. In addition to specialised education, Humboldt Grammar School attaches great importance to active social commitment – during the coronavirus years, it simply found new, creative ways to take action.

i

WEISSER RING would like to thank everyone for their donations! Unfortunately, the editorial team cannot publish all the fundraising campaigns.

You can find more donation stories at

spenden.weisser-ring.de

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Your donation helps us to help.

Photo: Christian J. Ahlers

Dear readers,

Anyone who falls victim to crime in Germany can rely on WEISSER RING – since 1976. Our volunteers undergo professional training and have supported several hundred thousand people through difficult times to date. We provide help in a variety of ways. For example, we refer victims to legal or therapeutic counselling centres.

We help when someone gets into financial difficulties after a crime. We serve as confidants who stand by the victims' side at court hearings, if they so wish. In a nutshell: We support victims on their individual way back into their lives and listen to them.

Our association also campaigns for essential improvements for victims and gives them a strong voice in the political arena, for example when it comes to issues such as the right to compensation or women being murdered by their (ex-)partners. We are only able to do this because WEISSER RING is independent and does not receive any state funding. That is why we need your support so that we can continue to work so intensively for victims of crime: Your donation helps us to help.

Dr Patrick Liesching
Federal chairman of WEISSER RING

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