Innocent or Guilty? : An exploration into what extent the filmmakers of *Making a Murderer* use specific techniques to advocate innocence of the convicted killers, and how these have influenced audience's reactions in popular culture

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Abstract

This research project explores how the filmmakers of Netflix's true crime documentary series *Making a Murderer,* use techniques that suggest that it is controversially framed in favour of the suspected killers, Steven Avery and Brendan Dassey. This research is combined with further analysis, into how this parallels with audience reactions towards Avery and Dassey. Currently, existing literature is concerned with how serial killers are represented in the media through print news outlets, but not through television or film. This research therefore adds to current literature by questioning 'Netflix's most significant show ever' (Tassi, 2016), yet surprisingly does not have the literature to reflect it.

Following a conclusive literature review, visual analysis of *Making a Murderer* offered an evolving insight into how true crime documentaries have the ability to frame its narrative in a certain way, thus provoking significant audience reactions. Further qualitative research using online content analysis, explored how Twitter empowered audiences to respond in a certain way to the documentary. Drawing on the research findings, this research was able to examine not only how *Making a Murderer* used specific techniques and structures to advocate innocence, but also how media platforms can play such a significant part in larger online and offline conversations (McDonald and Smith - Rowsey, 2016).

Findings revealed that through specific techniques and narrative constructions presented in *Making a Murderer,* the documentary is framed as an advocacy

piece for Avery and Dassey. This is mirrored in reactions, specifically online, with content analysis revealing that audiences actively reacted in favour of Avery and Dassey, and negatively to the corrupt justice system.

The themes of guilt or innocence, positive and negative perceptions of the justice system and campaigning, proved to be indicative of the favourable reactions towards Making a Murderer and those involved in Avery and Dassey's defence. These themes presented the specific techniques that showed how the filmmakers exploited Avery and Dassey's family sufferings, their working class background and used voiceovers in order to advocated their innocence throughout *Making a Murderer* and in reactions online. Therefore, *Making a Murderer* proved to be a significant series to analyse, in the wake of Netflix true crime documentaries.

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Introduction

No documentary broadcasted in recent memory has created more attention, acclaim and controversy than the Netflix series *Making a Murderer* (Smith, 2016). Completed over the course of 10 years, it follows Steven Avery, an American convicted murderer from Manitowoc County, Wisconsin, who had previously been wrongfully convicted of sexual assault and attempted murder in 1985 (Schulz, 2016). After serving 18 years of a 20 year sentence he was exonerated by DNA testing and released, only to be convicted again in an unrelated murder case two years later (ibid). He is currently serving a life sentence for the murder of Teresa Halbach, along with his nephew Brendan Dassey who was also convicted for his part in the murder (Tobin, 2018). Part one of the docuseries, released in December 2015, won four Emmy's including outstanding documentary or nonfiction series (Frost, 2016). From its success, the filmmakers Laura Ricciardi and Moria Demos released part two in October 2018, which follows Steven Avery and his nephew Brendan Dassey through the post conviction process (Lewis, 2018).

The true crime documentary has captivated audiences from across the world. It has leading to global online conversations surrounding legal corruption, and an apparent miscarriage of justice that had not been presented in such a significant format before. Filmmakers Laura Ricciardi and Moria Demos claim to be impartial. They maintain that the principal goal of the documentary was to simply 'expose a side to the American criminal justice system that we haven't seen before' (Birnbaum, 2018). There are accusations however, that the producers of *Making a Murderer* have been 'consistently lead(ing) its viewers

to the conclusion that Steven Avery is innocent', and was framed by officers from the Sheriff's department (Schulz, 2016). This makes the series seem 'less like investigative journalism, and more like highbrow vigilante justice' (ibid). Global conversations emerged from this 'guilt or innocent' dichotomy, turning *Making a Murderer* into a 'bona fide cultural phenomenon' and arguably the most significant true crime documentary of all time (Mahdawi, 2018).

We cannot know for certain the true intentions of the filmmakers. However, with conversations that have spread across all corners of popular culture (Nyman, 2016), the way in which *Making a Murderer* has been framed proves to be indicative of the reactions towards it. This research project argues, that the documentary is framed as a potential advocacy piece for the convicted killers.

Research Questions and Objectives

The aim of this research is to explore through visual analysis, how the filmmakers of *Making a Murderer* use specific techniques to frame it as an advocacy piece for Avery and Dassey's innocence. Online social media analysis, further aims to showcase how audiences have reacted to Making a Murderer. In order to do this, two research questions have been asked:

1. **To what extent do the filmmakers of *Making a Murderer* use specific techniques and constructions to frame the convicted killers, Avery and Dassey, as innocent?**
2. **How have these techniques and constructions influenced how audiences have reacted to *Making a Murderer*?**

Research question one will be answered by analysing the specific techniques and constructions that were used to advocate Avery and Dassey's innocence. This is through episodes one and ten of part one, and episodes one and ten of part two. Research question two will be answered by examining audience's reactions towards *Making a Murderer.* Using a Twitter analysis of 141 tweets, these are categorised into common themes that occurred throughout the multi-method research.

There is an abundance of literature on the representations of infamous serial killers in popular culture, with a particular focus on how they are sensationalised (Kass - Gergi, 2012) or glamorised in the media (Jarvis, 2007). Through the lens of *Making a Murderer,* this research contributes to the field of media discourse, analysing and discussing audience reactions to true crime in popular culture.

There are other examples of crime documentaries having significant impacts online, and the use of online communities for campaigning is not entirely new. Throughout the years, true crime has become a prevalent part of everyday culture, with the rise of audience interest in true crime reflected in the popularity of the podcast *Serial* (Mahdawi, 2018). Launched in 2014, it followed the case of Adnan Syed who was convicted of killing his ex girlfriend Hae Min Lee, and broke all podcast records with the first season downloaded more than 211 million times (ibid). The third podcast has now been turned into an HBO show, *The Case Against Adnan Syed,* highlighting the normalisation of convicted

killers in popular culture. *Serial's* popularity which fuelled new modes of participatory interactions towards the program through online platforms (McCracken, 2017, p.1), parallels similarities with the overwhelming impact that *Making a Murderer* has had online.

The HBO documentary *Paradise Lost* also displays similarities with *Making a Murderer,* through its significant impact on popular culture and its campaign for justice. In 1933, Damien Echols, Jason Baldwin and Jessie Misskelley were wrongfully convicted for the murders of three eight year old boys in Arkansas, with Echols sentenced to death at the time of his arrest and the others to life in prison (CNN, 2011). The film was released in 1996 and documents the 'West Memphis Three' fight for freedom, and is regarded among the 'standouts of the true crime genre' (Stokes, 2018). The presentation of the police investigation in *Paradise Lost* is not dissimilar from what we see in *Making a Murderer.* Echols himself has seen *Making a Murderer* and wrote that he was 'haunted by the parallels' to his own life, claiming that both *Paradise Lost* and *Making a Murderer* 'uncover the corruption and the failures of the justice system' (Echols, 2016). He praised the filmmakers for shining a light on the case, and claims that 'there is absolutely no doubt that the pressure from supporters had a big impact on their (the states) actions' (ibid). Ultimately *Paradise Lost* successfully generated and sustained an activist media culture, by 'unifying and politicising viewers through viral online networking' (Aguayo, 2013, p.233). This highlights similarities found in this research, towards the corrupt American justice system, campaigning for justice and the fight for innocence.

Although the popularity of true crime documentaries has been building with the success of *Serial* and *Paradise Lost,* the overwhelming trend in conversation after the release of *Making a Murderer* was not was expected (Hammerstien, 2016). Therefore, this cements its significance as an influential program to research within the true crime genre.

This research will explore the techniques used by the filmmakers that suggest that *Making a Murderer* has been framed towards Steven Avery's innocence, and how this is indicative of audience's reactions. This research will also examine the framing and reactions towards Steven's learning - disabled nephew Brendan Dassey, who recanted his alleged coerced confession during his trial (Freeman, 2015). Having outlined the research questions and objectives, the following section will locate the research within existing and current debates.

The next section of this research project will be the literature review. It will begin by exploring the rise of Netflix, a platform that has acted as a catalyst for the growing audience interest in the true crime phenomena (Johnson, 2018). This section will also look at documentary filmmaking as a genre, in order to establish *Making a Murderer's* relationship with this field. Following on, the current arguments surrounding *Making a Murderer* will be discussed. In particular the controversies surrounding how the documentary bypassed key pieces of evidence in the case, which may have framed Avery and Dassey as guilty (Schulz, 2016). Some of these arguments are made by past prosecutors of the case such as Ken Kratz, detailing how the documentary has impacted

them since its release. This research will evaluate the current literature on the practice of online communities throughout, specifically referring to the work of Jenkins (2006) and the concept of convergence culture, in response to media globally.

The methodology will outline the chosen methods for the research project. It will follow a close visual analysis of four episodes of *Making a Murderer,* followed by an exploration into how audiences have reacted to the documentary through a Twitter content analysis. It will draw on the limitations of the research along with improvements and recommendations for future research. Following this, the findings will be presented and discussed in, expanding on the debates and theories outlined in the literature review.

<u>Literature Review</u>

This section aims to contextualise this research, by examining how *Making a Murderer* fits within current debates.

The Transformation of TV On-Demand and the Rise of Netflix

The rise of subscription services such as Netflix, and the transformation of traditional TV to on-demand, proves to be an important emerging topic to explore in the digital age.

In a period where viewing figures matter, new formats of content distribution have enabled audiences to access content they want, on more devices than ever before (Oliver and Ohlbaum, 2017). Technology and entertainment are merging at an increasing rate in the 21st century (McDonald and Smith - Rowsey, 2016), and the rise of Netflix suggests that convergence is altering traditional relationships between the production and consumption of media (Jenkins, 2006).

Convergence culture is defined as the 'circulation of media content across different media systems, competing media economies and national borders (ibid, p.244). Increased competition for viewing has driven investment into high quality content (Oliver and Ohlbaum, 2017), something that Netflix has adopted in its emergence into popular culture (Novak, 2017).

Starting out as a rent and sell business, Netflix has transformed to a subscription-only model which we are most familiar with today (McDonald and Smith - Rowsey, 2016). The service has added to significant contributions towards all media becoming available on demand and across multiple platforms (ibid). Therefore, Netflix has positioned itself as a global leader in the entertainment sphere.

Netflix has now caught up with companies such as Comcast and Disney (see fig 1), showing its success as both a subscription service and an emerging studio in its own right. As a platform that currently has more subscribers than traditional pay TV services in the UK (PwC, 2017), Netflix is at the forefront of television on-demand. With revenues from Netflix predicted to overtake UK theatrical box offices by 2021 (ibid), the subscription service is committed to producing high quality media content. Therefore, it's similarity to that of Hollywood studios and major TV Networks (McDonald and Smith - Rowsey, 2016) has enabled a breadth of original content to be produced.

This next section will explore how Netflix has capitalised on the documentary film genre, and more specifically true crime. There are a plethora of articles available that detail how Netflix has exploited the true crime genre, with little academic literature to support them. This research aims to fill the gap by examining how Netflix has succeeded in dominating the true crime genre, through the lens of one of its most significant series *Making a Murderer.*

Netflix and True Crime

True crime documentaries are now a part of the common everyday TV discourse, with Netflix in particular capitalising on the popularity of the genre over the last couple of years (Pirnia and List, 2019). The idea that audiences are fascinated with true crime and the psychology of murder is nothing new, and there is much debate surrounding the over-glamorisation of serial killers (Briant, 2018), with media often branding them as celebrities (Schmid, 2005).

The film industry, broadcasters and subscriptions services such as Netflix have 'fed off' documentary filmmaking and the nations obsession with true crime (Murley, 2008), emerging as an important part of modern cinema (Paget, 2013). This has enabled documentary to adapt crime news stories into entertainment products (Bonn, 2014), hence how documentaries are widely perceived as a 'core pillar' of Netflix's service (Sharma 2016, p.144). Alongside *Making a Murderer,* documentaries such as the recent release of the *Ted Bundy Tapes* have caused controversy surrounding the sensationalisation of serial killers in popular culture (Baggs, 2019). Therefore this proves to be a contemporary issues within the media industry, one that *Making a Murderer* also concerns with.

Now a studio in its own right, Netflix has a production budget to challenge the likes of HBO, Sky and the BBC in the 'golden age of TV', with hits like *Making a Murderer* helping to bring Netflix more Emmy nominations than HBO for the first time (Bakare, 2018). Netflix has utilised the true crime genre, capitalising on its popularity to produce an influx of true crime documentaries, which dominates the platform. Therefore, it is important to look at documentary filmmaking as a genre, and how *Making a Murderer* sits within this field.

Documentary Filmmaking in True Crime

According to DeBurgh (2008), documentary filmmaking prides itself on exposing something that has only been touched on in news media, in an

attempt to discover the truth and identify lapses through new altitudes of documentary filmmaking.

Documentary filmmaking gives credibility to filmmakers' exploration of current or historical events. It works in the public's interest to expose audiences to issues and subjects that they are interested in, but do not know much about (Rosenthal, 1999). By using the techniques and conventions of journalism combined with dramatisation, the genre can portray news and events in a more empathic and engaging way (Kilborn, 1994). Therefore, it has blurred the boundaries with traditional documentary through an 'imaginative way of seeing' (Paget, 2013, p.78). Advances in the cultural and technological landscape have broadened public receptivity to the documentary filmmaking genre, with the democratisation of new technologies such as streaming services, indicative of an outpouring of blockbuster documentaries (Higgins, 2005).

Although a complex and controversial genre, specific techniques such as hidden cameras, reconstructions of events and hidden identities are necessary and justifiable if they provide evidence of wrongdoings and are in the individual's interest (Goddard, 2006). *Making a Murderer* in particular, uses many of the conventions of documentary and film, arguably in favour of the convicted killers. The complexities of this hybrid genre have also resulted in debates surrounding the television viewing experience (Arnold, 2016). Traditional documentary prides itself on breaking stories, and uncovering significant material that was not already in the public domain (Goddard, 2006). However, the amalgamation of entertainment and factuality has the potential to

affect the 'realness' of the program, therefore giving audiences a false impression that the primary aim of Netflix documentaries are above just being profit driven (Sharma, 2016).

Despite these contradictions, the genre allows documentary filmmakers to not only expose audiences to significant material, but also to bare their personal signature and authorial personality on their work (Higgins, 2005). This enables the producers to become auteurs just as much as those operating in fiction film (Kilborn and Izord, 1997). Therefore, the documentary filmmaking style of *Making a Murderer* has allowed it to become one of the most successful and controversial true crime documentaries on Netflix, pushing the boundaries of traditional documentary discourse.

This next section enables me to explore the controversies and challenges that *Making a Murderer* has faced since its release. It details how the documentary has had a negative impact on those involved in the case, thus cementing its significance as an important program to analyse.

Making a Murderer vs. The Justice System

Making a Murderer recounts a tale of social injustice and a corrupt law system, with its significance inducing much controversial debate worldwide as to the men's guilt or innocence (Birnbaum, 2018).

Although Netflix do not publically release their viewing figures, Nededog (2016) claims that 19.3 million people worldwide watched it within the 35 days of its first release. However, despite it being praised by some as Netflix's 'Most significant show ever' (Tassi, 2016), criticisms remain. One of these criticisms was that the documentarists minimised evidence that would have proven Avery and Dassey's guilt. Despite this claim, both filmmakers insist that they do not have an opinion on the men's guilt or innocence, and that they remain impartial (Birnbaum, 2018). Ricciardi herself stated that they are 'not prosecutors or defence attorneys', and that their main objectives were to examine the criminal justice system. (Smith, 2016). The filmmakers further claim that it would have been impossible to include every piece of court evidence (ibid).

They continue to argue that they chose Avery and Dassey as their main subjects, to actively encourage people to get involved so that the 'justice system delivers verdicts that we can rely on' (ibid). This proved to be the underlying cause on the outpouring of online and offline campaigning. Audience's initial response to *Making a Murderer* resulted in over 500,000 citizens signing two petitions (Nyman, 2016), and a rising resentment amongst audiences against those who disagreed with the documentary (Kratz, 2017). As Fiske (1992) argues, through participatory actions audiences become engaged in varying degrees of semiotic productivity, producing meanings and gratifications within a commercial narrative or performance (Grandinetti, 2017). Therefore, with the expansion of the internet across a variety of platforms, audiences can easily extend their media experiences beyond just the simple reception of a text,

becoming dedicated and potentially emotional invested (ibid). This is clearly evident through the impact that *Making a Murderer* has had in media discourse.

The overwhelming reactions in favour of Avery and Dassey, has resulted in further criticism towards the filmmakers at their 'frustratingly obtuse and dismissive' lack of acknowledgment towards the impact that their documentary had on public perceptions of law enforcement and the justice system (Stokes, 2018). Despite this, Ricciardi and Demos both believe that their documentary provides a window into the American justice system (Birnbaum, 2018), in a more fresh and exciting format than traditional documentary.

Part two presented its own particular set of challenges. Riccardi and Demos did not want to become 'subjects in the story' (ibid), however they have become celebrities in the own right, something, which can pose challenges for documentarists (Willis, 2010). Whether the public perceived them as unbiased reporters or in favour of Avery and Dassey, their status could have 'contaminated' the issue (ibid). Schulz (2016), expressed her concern towards the filmmakers, in turning 'peoples private tragedies into public entertainment', thus questioning the documentary on its sensitivity towards the victims loved ones.

While the documentary has encountered challenges from both audiences and critics, it has received and generated negative comments from the law and those who have been involved in the case from the beginning. This is evident in books released by prosecutors in the case such as Ken Kratz (2017) and

Michael Griesbach (2017), who detail how the documentary has impacted their personal lives. New media technologies have extended the limits of cultural fluidity through the availability of multiple digital platforms (Steven, 2017). Platforms such as online petitions, blogs, forums and other social media have enabled public participation and engagement (ibid). Consequently, these communities enable people to relate to others who share their interests, with audience research able to reveal how individuals engage with cultural texts and what effects they are having on everyday life (Dines and Humez, 2003).

In *Making a Murderer's* case, the online community may see themselves as martyrs of justice for Avery and Dassey. They may be willing to go against the law, conduct their own research, and become detectives and lawyers in their own right, thus resulting in campaigning skills that are beyond the remits of most lawyers (Owen, 2016). Therefore, *Making a Murderer* presents a unique opportunity to look at how a specific program, and how media platforms, can play such a significant part in larger online and offline conversations (McDonald and Smith - Rowsey, 2016).

The Offline Affects from Online Conversations: Ken Kratz and Michael Greisberg

Before exploring the literature on how *Making a Murderer* has impacted the law online, it is important to expand on previously discussed arguments surrounding how the role of digital convergence has transformed the way audiences consume media. This is due to its significance in how it has enabled

audiences to respond and engage in wider conversations towards *Making a Murderer*, through online media platforms.

Referring back to Jenkins (2006), convergence has altered the relationship between production and consumption of media, which tends to lead to more active participation in audiences. He suggests that fans of specific media texts can be 'protective, possessive, celebratory and critical', highlighting the impact digital convergence has as opposed to oral communication (Pearce and Weedon, 2017, p.179). This convergence of media production and consumption can also be characterised by significant audience participation, going deeper than just your usual fan community (Jenkins, 2006). In recent years 'virtual communities' have linked people together in order to pursue a common cause (Steven, 2017), further creating opportunities for establishing and sustaining social networks on a global scale (Williams, 2009). Whether this is to oppose an elite, authoritative force or attempt to be effective agents of change, online community support provides a potential cause for social movements and revolutions (ibid). Therefore, exploring the current debates on audience participation and conversations in the digital era, provides an understanding into the evolution of the communal television experience, 'in a binge watching paradigm fostered by online platforms' such as Netflix (Grandinetti, 2017, p.13)

As stated, convergence has had a significant impact on audience participation, with 'virtual communities' (Stevens, 2017) having the potential to revolt against those with authority (Williams, 2009). This has proved to be evident in *Making*

a Murderer, through the impact on those involved in the case. Lead prosecutors from the first Avery trial, have written books about their time working on the case. Ken Kratz and Michael Griesbach outline answers to questions not resolved in the series, present missing evidence that has been left out, and defend themselves from the backlash the documentary caused for them.

Griesbach (2017) claims that troubles began almost immediately after the documentary aired. Although he was not involved in the most recent trial, he still believes it was fair, and that the jury followed where the evidence objectively led. He also claims that he wrote his book because he believed that the first trial is the best example of what can go wrong, when police and prosecutors seek convictions instead of justice (ibid). Despite his efforts for justice reform, which included presenting at conferences on wrongful convictions, people still believed he was part of a corrupt law enforcement that convicted an innocent man twice. After finding out about an online campaign to sabotage his book and receiving personal threats, his own confidence in Avery's guilt is now faulted, showcasing the impact that the documentary had on those involved.

Ken Kratz, who is featured throughout parts one and two, has also received abuse following the program, referring to himself as the 'chief villain' of the docuseries (Kratz, 2017). Kratz has been particularly vocal about the documentary series, even going so far as to claim that he was not contacted for comment or interview until after the documentary was completed, something that the filmmakers have strenuously denied (Turner, 2018). Kratz (2017) claims that the Internet had a lot to do with the success of the documentary. In

the era of fake news and internet journalism, online forums and social media have birthed a 'virtual family', in which different versions of the truth represent true crime as it stands today, with real world consequences (ibid). Subsequently, Kratz had to shut down his twitter feed and close his office in April 2016, further highlighting the impact of online communities in the real world. In the wake of the second series, Kratz was quick to tell people about the misfortunes that he had encountered following the documentaries release, and his thoughts about the new series. He told Mahdawi (2018) that he had '4000 death threats since *Making a Murderer* first aired'. I've had packages explode in my office. I've had my car shot at'.

Although Kratz refused to be interviewed in part two of *Making a Murderer*, archive footage is used throughout of him appearing outside court cases and on various talk shows. There is footage of him in episode six part two, telling people that his book is better than Jerry (Butling's) after he commandeers a courthouse (see figs 2 and 3). In season two episode seven there are snippets of Kratz talking about the case on various talk shows, suggesting a fixation to create a narrative about himself from his time working on the case. Kathleen Zellner, Avery's lawyer who is referred to as 'true crimes new star' (BBC, 2018), claims to have found thirteen flaws in his new book. These include the time at which Halbach was pronounced missing, as well as other parts of the case that have been determined false by law enforcements (Ferak, 2017). Therefore, Kratz has arguably used the publicity from his involvement in Avery's case to pursue his own narrative, and construct himself in such a way that he knows will evoke audience reactions. He has continued to utilise his fame from the

documentary to self promote himself through books, TV appearances and newspaper interviews, regardless of his lack of involvement in the current case. Evidently, *Making a Murderer* has enabled those involved to capitalise on its success, by constructing their own personal narratives through the way they are presented in the documentary.

Having evaluated the literature surrounding the current research and debates associated with *Making a Murderer,* the documentaries impact on global conversations online and offline is unavoidable. Therefore, this research aims to prove that the specific techniques and structural elements within *Making a Murderer* have been framed as an advocacy piece for the convicted killers, and how this has proved to be indicative of the favourable reactions towards them online.

<u>Methodology</u>

This section outlines the combined research methods used to answer research questions one and two.

Visual analysis of four episodes was conducted, in order to investigate how *Making a Murderer* was framed as an advocacy piece for convicted killers Avery and Dassey. Further research through a content analysis of 141 tweets on Twitter, explored how the techniques and constructions used by the filmmakers

in *Making a Murderer,* has impacted the ways in which audiences have reacted to the series.

There is much value to multi-method work, with studies such as D'Acci (1994) emphasising the need to analyse a TV programmes development in order to establish the significance of audience reactions. Therefore it is useful to combine more than one type of research, which is situated within television and audience analysis.

Visual Analysis

The first strand of the multi-method approach was a visual analysis of the techniques and constructions used throughout four episodes of *Making a Murderer.* Visual analysis is a method that has been commonly used by communication researchers to describe and interpret the characteristics, content, structure and functions of visual messages (Frey et al, 1999). Visual analysis is important in cultural studies and communication research, as it reveals how audiences construct meaning and engage in practices 'in critical and subversive ways' (Dines and Humez, 2003, p.16). It is important to note that each chosen text or program is unlikely to have 'one true meaning'; therefore work in this area is bound to be interpreted and contested with different meanings (Hall, 1997, p.9).

Analysing television specifically through visual analysis, illuminates the impact of a specific program on the way that audiences understand and engage with

media through everyday popular culture (Bignell, 2013). With television widely believed to influence the development of social attitudes and behaviours (Huston et al, 1992), visual analysis therefore examined the aesthetic conventions and visual content that lead to the suggestions of the preferred framing in Avery and Dassey's innocence. Therefore, this method was used to help answer research question one.

This research analysed specific techniques such as camera angles, dialogue, settings, music etc., in four episodes of the documentary. These were the first and last episodes of part one and two. Written notes were taken in a casual home environment, in order to establish immediate reactions and recreate a potential setting used by audiences of *Making a Murderer.* By analysing multiple episodes, this research was able to interpret the different techniques and messages the filmmakers chose to convey which framed Avery and Dassey as innocent. This linked to additional research, which explored how this particular framing impacted how audiences reacted to the series.

Online Content Analysis

The second strand of the multi-method approach was a content analysis, which was used to reinforce the visual analysis research. Analysing the codes and categories of 141 tweets, established how audiences explicitly reacted to *Making a Murderer.*

The studies of online forums have been extensively used, as evidence of fans expectation and fulfilment towards a film or program (Pearce and Weedon, 2017). Twitter in particular offers global reach, endless connections and thoughts to be positioned in 'genuine, valid and interesting ways' (Fitton et al, 2014, p.172). It can show us new measures in which media audiences are interacting and engaging with media (Deller, 2011). Therefore using Twitter for audience research, proved to be the most effective platform to collect results on the impact of *Making a Murderer* because of its global and accessible reach.

Tweets were analysed using an online content analysis. A content analysis is a research technique for the 'objective, systematic and quantitative description of communication content' (Berelson, 1952, p.55), which combines qualitative approaches with powerful quantitative analysis (Duriau et al, 2007). It enabled this research to pick out common words and establish the tone of specific tweets, further categorising them into common themes found within *Making a Murderer.* This method enabled me to analyse the significant impact on audiences, following the analysis on the documentaries framing. Thus, online content analysis proved to be an effective method to answer research question two.

Three different time frames were used in this content analysis; the first four days after the release of the first series, the four days prior to release of the second series and the four days after the second series. The tweets were gathered using the hashtag #MakingAMurderer. Tweets were collated by using the Twitter advanced search archive, which holds an extensive list of all past

tweets. When searching for relevant tweets the hashtag #MakingAMurderer was used, in order to get a wide breadth of tweets from different individuals. Due to the vast amount of Tweets there were, this research looked at the top section of the advanced search in order to condense the amount of tweets that were analysed. When analysing the tweets, they were first categorised by producing a coding manual (see fig 4). These were categorised based on the 141 tweets that were analysed, and the common themes among them. Specific words and phrases such as 'guilt', 'innocent', 'law', 'wrongfully convicted', and 'false' were explored, as well as looking at the emotional sentiment and use of certain words such as 'sad', 'bad', 'hate', 'sorry', 'angry' and 'outraged'. These chosen words enabled this research to gauge how explicit reactions were. Therefore, it gave further insight into the common discussions and arguments that individuals were voicing on Twitter, based around the content of *Making a Murderer.* Other categories that were explored were word count, images used, the framing and the tone of tweets. Tone and framing proved to be extremely important to analyse. It indicated how significant people's reactions were about certain aspects of the documentary, throughout different stages of its release.

Therefore, this research was able to gain a wide understanding of how audiences reacted to the documentary and specific individuals, based on the techniques and constructions used by the filmmakers in *Making a Murderer.*

Limitations of the Research Project

The research into *Making a Murderer* could have been expanded by comparing it with other crime documentaries mentioned in this research such as *Paradise Lost*, another documentary film, which advocated convicted killers innocence. However *Making a Murdere*r was chosen for its relevant and contemporary significance, due to its overwhelming impact indicting online and offline reactions.

Due to the time period, limited interpretations could have been missed. Therefore, online discourse analysis may have enabled me to collect a wider sample and explore a larger data set of audience's reactions more explicitly. However, the time frames chosen for this research gave enough breadth of material to analyse.

By excluding all other conversations that occurred about *Making a Murderer* on different social media platforms and forums, may have prevented an understanding of how reactions travelled across the Internet. Furthermore, only looking at top tweets with the hashtag #MakingAMurderer, also meant that relevant tweets may have been missed. Exploring conversations on other sites such as Reedit threads, may have given additional results to *Making a Murderer's* online reactions. However, Twitter provided enough material to answer the research questions in depth, because of its accessibility and global reach.

Ethics of the Research

The main issue surrounding ethics in social media analysis, is the accessing of private or public data online (James and Busher, 2015). Using people's opinions without their permission can be seen as an invasion of privacy (ibid). This can be countered however, as the names and handles of the Twitter users were removed and were made anonymous. Moreover as with most online social platforms, their opinions, thoughts and judgements have been put on these sites with the intention of being read and received by others. Therefore, although accessed without their specific permission, the open availability of Twitter enabled the collection of these findings without breaking any form of online ethical conduct. The signed ethics form can be found in the appendix (see fig 5).

Having outlined the methodological process this research undertook, this next section will state its findings and how this correlates with previous and wider discussed debates towards how *Making a Murderer* sits within popular culture.

Findings and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the visual analysis and the Twitter research, alongside discussions and wider debates surrounding *Making a Murderer*. Findings from both methods answer the research questions, whilst referring back to previously discussed literature.

Four key themes emerged from the multi-method approach. These were; guilt versus innocence, the presentation of the justice system and the defence, campaigning and social activism, and reactions to *Making a Murderer* and Netflix specifically. Firstly within these themes, the visual analysis is divided to reveal the specific techniques and constructions that were presented within *Making a Murderer*, which were ultimately used by the filmmakers to present Avery and Dassey as innocent. These are then justified alongside findings from the content analysis, presenting the Twitter responses, which further highlight how these specific techniques have helped to advocate in favour of Avery and Dassey. Within each of these themes, the wider debates and links to the literature are discussed.

Guilt vs. Innocence

The guilt vs. innocence debate made up a significant portion of online conversations. The coding manual for this can be found in the appendix (fig 4). These findings proved to be a reflection of the filmmaker's specific framing of *Making a Murderer* in favour of Avery and Dassey. Within this theme, this research established three prominent techniques that were used to present them as innocent; working class backgrounds, voice-over footage and exploitation of Avery and Dassey's family.

Presentation of Avery and Dassey's Working Class Background

All episodes analysed in *Making a Murderer* begin with a montage of images that depict Avery's environment and background. In Episode one part one, the filmmakers use shots of the desolate area and the run-down Avery trailer park

paralleled with intense non diegetic music, providing a chilling and tragic atmosphere. An anonymous women states 'Manitowoc County is working class farmers' (see fig 6), further signifying a secluded working class area.

Episode ten part one also signifies Avery's struggling background, with long shots and low-key lighting of Avery's desolate trailer home further portraying the labouring class, which he lived in. Close-ups of items in the trailers such as an empty wardrobe and dirty sink create an eerie and forgotten atmosphere. A bird's-eye tracking shot of the greenery surrounding the simplistic looking town juxtaposes Avery and Dassey's struggles, showcasing the apparent class differences within the town. Dull lighting, and bird's-eye view shots of the Avery and Dassey family home and Manitowoc County are often used throughout the series, suggesting their uneducated backgrounds and the struggles of growing up in a working class family.

These images chosen by the filmmakers present a narrative for audiences by positioning the storyline in favour of a man who has suffered, through the lens of his background. The documentary has been criticised for consistently tarnishing Manitowoc and its citizens as 'forlorn, judgmental and unfriendly', when the town notable for its sense of family and community belonging (Kratz, 2017, p.7). These techniques can be read as semiotics to reveal whom Avery and Dassey are based on their family, background and personal life, therefore lending to their presentation of innocence based on their struggling lifestyle.

The visual techniques that capitalise on Avery and Dassey's working class background parallel the online reactions from audiences. Although the tweets did not explicitly refer to their backgrounds, the general tone suggests that these techniques were successful in advocating their innocence. Of the 141 tweets that were analysed, using the top tweets with the hashtag #MakingAMurderer, only two stated that they thought Avery was guilty. One claimed that there was no doubt that 'Steven Avery killed Teresa', while another branded him a 'monster', stating that if you think he is innocent you are 'easily influenced by the media' (see figs 7 and 8). As a result, it can be inferred that through the way *Making a Murderer* is framed towards Avery and Dassey, the global majority advocated their innocence. One tweet also referred to Avery and Dassey as 'victims', reinforcing how the techniques in *Making a Murderer* have encouraged audiences to advocate their innocence.

By positioning the narrative of *Making a Murderer* towards the struggles of both Avery and Dassey's background, links back to the wider ethical issue of 'turning people's private tragedies into public entertainment (Schulz, 2016). As Netflix has 'fed off' this documentary style and the public's obsession with true crime (Murley, 2008), what would have been a private state affair has turned into a global entertainment product (Bonn, 2014).

By focussing on the struggles of working class life, the filmmakers have failed to illuminate the criminal activity prior to the murder of Teresa Halbach. Episode one, part one details Avery's past 'petty' convictions with the law such as setting a cat on fire, which Avery claims he did when he was 'young and stupid'. In his

book, Ken Kratz's (2017) detailed that Avery had many more serious convictions that were not mentioned in the documentary. The filmmakers therefore purposefully left out certain information in order to portray him as an immature individual rather than a serious criminal. Kratz's argued that *Making a Murderer* left out both physical and scientific evidence that was presented in court to go against Avery, 'twisting certain aspects of the investigation' to make it seem as though the police had facilitated it (p.8). Elements that were left out of the documentary (including phone calls detailing how Halbach did not want to go to the Avery family scrap yard, reinforcing how the filmmakers 'consistently lead(ing) its audiences to the conclusion that Steven Avery is innocent and was framed by officers from the Sheriff's department' (Schulz, 2016).

Voiceovers of Avery and Dassey Promoting their Innocence

Another technique that emerged was the filmmaker's inclusion of non-diegetic voiceovers from both Avery and Dassey, inside their respective prisons. The filmmakers include shots of the prisons, accompanied by voiceovers of Avery talking about how he has 'got to prove his innocence again'. The confidence in Avery's voice implies the belief that he must be innocent. Episode one part two involves Dassey's voiceover reading a letter that he wrote in prison, where he states 'I am innocent [...] I hope to have a family of my own one day' (see fig 9), which normalises his character and emphasises his hope for freedom.

At the end of Episode ten part one a tracking shot moves across the Avery scrap yard, accompanied by Avery's voiceover stating 'when you are innocent

you keep on going [...] the truth will come out sooner or later'. The episode ends with smiling photos of Avery and Dassey alongside their families, with Dassey's voiceover thanking his supporters, stating his innocence and that his confession is false. The content from the voiceovers suggest confidence in their own innocence, emphasising how the filmmakers have intended to manipulate audience's emotions through the inclusion of personal voiceovers. Therefore, framing them both as innocent victims.

This is mirrored in the emotionally charged words used in the twitter reactions. 18% of the tweets used emotional words such as outraged, shocked, frustrated and angry, with Avery's innocence making up 14% of the tweets analysed, and 8% for Dassey's innocence. In both cases, words such as 'justice' and 'innocent' were used together in all tweets framed in this manner, showcasing the significant impact that *Making a Murderer* had on facilitating emotional reactions in favour of Avery and Dassey.

The techniques shown by the filmmakers (representations of working class struggles and voiceovers pledging innocence), offer significant evidence as to their attempts to influence audience reactions in favour of Avery and Dassey's innocence.

Exploitation of Avery and Dassey's Family

Another technique that the filmmakers used to drive the guilt vs. innocence debate, was exploiting the impact of the case on Avery and Dassey's families. While Avery and Dassey were the main subjects of innocence in *Making a*

Murderer, the documentary consistently exploited their families suffering. This aided in the intended portrayal of Avery and Dassey's innocence, and subsequent online reactions.

From the outset the audience are made aware of the wider impact on Avery's family, with close-up shots of his parents getting upset in episode one part one, detailing how they lost everything. Episode ten part one further exemplifies the family's misfortunes through a close-up interview with Avery's father Allan Avery. He claims that they (the state) 'ruined our business', alongside an extreme close-up interview with Dolores stating that 'this is worse than the first one / we don't have no family anymore' (see fig 10).

The documentary also focuses on the impact on Dassey's family. In Episode one part two, Brendan's father Peter states in a close-up interview that 'he (Brendan) wouldn't even pull wings off of a fly', highlighting his innocent demeanour through the lens of his family. In contrast, episode one part two focuses on other suspects involved in the case, detailing how Kathleen Zellner has come to suspect Brendan's brother Bobby Dassey. This results in a phone call between Brendan's mother Barbara Dassey and Avery, who angrily criticises Zellner. Brendan's stepfather Scott shouts explicitly at Steven using names such as 'Dumb Fuck', 'motherfucker' and 'Cocksucking Loser', which highlights the emotional impact on the family. The phone call ends with Barb emotionally stating that 'you're gunna have a dead sister', which further emphasises the families struggles.

The filmmakers also choose to show how audiences have supported the families. At the start of Episode one, part two Dolores states that supporters refer to her as 'Mama Avery', with a close-up interview showing all letters and albums dedicated to the family (see fig 11). Barbara Dassey also talks about 'her boy' and the support letters that they received, thus highlighting the major impact that *Making a Murderer* had on how audiences reacted favourably towards Avery, Dassey and their families.

By positing the families as innocents, the filmmakers clear intentions for audiences to relate to the families struggles, ultimately play a key part in creating audience empathy for Avery and Dassey. Close-up interviews enable audiences to see the personal sufferings of the family members from their perspective, which is again indicative of the emotional reactions online. Furthermore, with the audience being made aware of other individuals involved in the murder, it suggests that Avery and Dassey are not the only suspects thus enforcing their innocence.

Although the majority of tweets focused on Avery and Dassey specifically, one tweeted stated 'it's so sad watching Mama and Papa Avery', before going on to blame the American state system for 'stealing the life of this man not once but TWICE' (see fig 12). This showcases how audiences have become emotionally invested in the case and the convicted killers families. The filmmakers also chose to include the suspicions towards Dassey's brother as part of the documentary. By doing so, *Making a Murderer* illuminates other potential suspects, thus taking the attention away from the primary suspect Brendan Dassey. Findings showed that Bobby Dassey was mentioned unfavourably in

five tweets, specifically referencing his suspicious personality and actions in court. Therefore by including the suspicions towards other individuals, audiences have also become suspicious, thus aiding in Brendan Dassey's innocence.

The interviews that showcase fan material sent to Avery and Dassey's families, suggests how audiences have become emotionally invested in the lives of the convicted killers (Grandinetti, 2017). Therefore, with the current influx of true crime documentaries dominating Netflix, a criminal's status as a celebrity in society has been resurrected (Schmid, 2005). Through this multi-method approach, the findings in this theme highlight how *Making a Murderer* has defined Avery, Dassey and their families as innocent celebrities, through the exploitation of their sufferings.

The 'real' victim that *Making a Murderer* fails to portray equally is Teresa Halbach, and the impact the case has on her family. Throughout the episodes analysed, there were less than five instances that the audience hears statements from Halbach's family and friends, signifying the documentary as primarily situated towards Avery and Dassey. When images of Halbach's life are included (archive footage of her talking about her love for photography), the documentary quickly switches back to images of Avery and Dassey, reinforcing the documentary in favour of them.

Presenting *Making a Murderer's* narrative from the perspective of Avery and Dassey's families constantly reminds audiences of their lifelong suffering at the

hands of the 'corrupt' law and the American justice system. Therefore aiding in the portrayal of their innocence, and thus the reactions in their favour due to the hardships ensued by the law. The next theme explores the positive and negative representations of the law and the justice system, and how this has aided in the way Avery and Dassey are portrayed as innocent.

Corruption, The Justice System and the Defence

From the outset there has been a significant level of conversation surrounding the corrupt justice system and the particular individuals involved in Avery and Dassey's case. Through the multi-method approach, findings revealed that the filmmakers portrayed the prosecution and the American justice system negatively, whilst the defence team are portrayed as a positive force. This was mirrored in the negative reactions towards the justice system, and the positive reactions towards the defence on Twitter.

Negative Portrayal of the Justice System

Findings revealed that two members of the justice system, Len Kachinsky (Dassey's old defence lawyer) and Ken Kratz (the prosecution's self-branded 'villain'), were purposely presented by the filmmakers in a negative light, ultimately with the intention to highlight Avery and Dassey's innocence.

Kachinsky is shown to have manipulated Brendan into admitting his guilt. Episode two part one presents interviews with Brendan's new defence team, Steven Drizen and Laura Nirdier detailing how Kachinsky broke client loyalty

by coercing him into admitting guilt, which led to them replacing him. We then see Brendan calling his mother Barbara stating that his lawyer thought he was guilty, with his new lawyers stating that 'Kachinsky's behaviour is intolerable' and that he 'damaged Brendan's chances' (see figs 13 and 14).

Ken Kratz is the face of the prosecution in Avery's case, and the much-hated 'villain' of *Making a Murderer* (Kratz, 2018). In episode one part two, the filmmakers show news footage of him reading out hate emails, and stating that he had death threats from Avery supporters saying they were 'coming after him' (see figs 15). He also speaks on multiple talk shows about his opinion on the case, despite the fact that he is no longer working on it because of sexual misconduct that forced him to resign. He repeats this throughout the series in order to pursue his personal narrative and continue his involvement in the case.

As with the previous theme, these ideas parallel reactions online. Audiences reacted negatively to Kachinsky for his manipulation of Dassey in *Making a Murderer, shown in* the four tweets that mentioned Kachinsky negatively. One tweet stated that although Brendan is not the main focus of *Making a Murderer,* it's a good reminder of how individuals with intellectual disabilities get 'screwed and abused by the law' (see fig 16.), thus emphasising Kachinsky's manipulative actions and the corruptions within the justice system.

Similarly, 17% of tweets mentioned Kratz unfavourably, reflecting the way that he was negatively portrayed in *Making a Murderer.* Many of the tweets criticise his appearance, demeanour and things he mentions in court appearances, with

one viewer stating 'Kratz's disgusts me' (see fig 17) and another stating that 'Kratz is the most vile human on the planet' (see fig 18). Therefore, audiences have reacted unfavourably towards him, and more favourably towards Avery, suggested through the way that he has been negatively framed.

Moreover, 28% of tweets used the words 'corruption' and 'lies', alongside references to the law, the state and Manitowoc County. This shows that the way in which the prosecution has been negatively framed, directly mirrors the negative reactions online. These tweets also had the most significant reactions via comments, likes and retweet's, suggesting that audiences tended to agree with other audience members who criticised those against Avery and Dassey. Therefore, these findings suggest that the presentation of the corrupt law has thus influenced the reactions in favour of Avery and Dassey, and against the justice system.

The clear hierarchical differences between Avery and the justice system suggests that he did not stand a fair chance of defending himself against the court, thus positioning him as innocent from the outset. Moreover, the way that the documentary has represented individuals who were against Avery and Dassey unfavourably further highlights how representations are 'incomplete and narrow', resulting in producers manipulating certain individual representations in order to gratify audiences (Croteau and Hoynes, 2014 ,p.188).

Despite *Making a Murderer's* negative portrayal of the justice system, a new docu-series is in development called *Convicting a Murderer*. It is said to approach the Avery case from the perspective of the law enforcement officers who convicted him. This approach will attempt to tell a different side of the much criticised 'one sided story' clearly intended to benefit accused murderer Steven Avery' (Evangelista, 2018). Documentary filmmaker Shawn Rech claims that the documentary will have 'unprecedented access' to major players in the State vs. Avery case (ibid), including 'chief villain' Ken Kratz (Kratz, 2017). Therefore Kratz in particular, continues to capitalise on his past involvement on the case, thus empathising how Avery and Dassey's have been manipulated by the corrupt law.

Positive Portrayal of the Defence

Part two's narrative is presented through the lens of Avery and Dassey's new defence teams, ultimately eliciting to the men's' innocence through the positive representation of their lawyers. Whilst the first series framed the law in a negative way, in the second series the filmmakers highlight the positive aspects of the law and the individuals working to gain justice for Avery and Dassey. This is presented through interviews and live footage of Avery's defence lawyer, Kathleen Zellner and Dassey's defence lawyers Laura Nirdier and Steve Drizen.

Audiences are introduced to Avery's lawyer Kathleen Zellner in Episode one part two, the juxtaposed 'hero' of the second series. Her narrative emulates power, through bold facts about her seventeen wrongfully convicted

exonerations, implying that she is the one who will prove his innocence. The filmmakers have used a montage of shots of Kathleen looking powerful, highlighting her as the 'real deal'. Moreover, the filmmakers show screenshots and over the shoulder shots which explicitly show her using Twitter to address supporters, followed by news reports of how she is using Twitter to defend Avery's innocence (see figs 19 and 20). Therefore, this constructs her as a relatable and likeable character, through her use of online platforms to plead Avery's innocence.

Part two goes through the post conviction process, with an abundance of interviews and live action footage of Kathleen and her team testing out evidence. In Episode ten part one, there are long shots of the team testing evidence, alongside jump cuts to a close-up interview with her talking about what they have found that 'would have changed everything in trial' (see fig 21). These images chosen by the filmmakers, suggest that Kathleen is confident she has uncovered evidence that could prove Avery's innocence. There are also many interviews conducted with Laura Nirdier and Steve Drizen, with medium shots of them talking about having 'faith' in their client, which also shows their confidence towards Dassey's innocence.

The positive framing of the defence teams can be read as the filmmakers intentions to manipulate audiences into favouring them over the justice system. Therefore audiences are more likely to believe in Avery and Dassey's innocence through the individuals fighting for their freedom.

The positive representation of Zellner in particular was depicted in the reactions online, with nine tweets referencing her throughout part two. The majority of the tweets praised her work and persona, with one tweet calling her the 'coolest headed most fabulous women' (see fig 22), with another saying how 'in awe' they were of her (see fig 23). These imply how audiences have come to idolise her, based on the way that she is portrayed in *Making a Murderer.*

Nirider also used Twitter, tweeting that she was 'Proud to represent #BrendanDassey with @Sdrizen and @cwcyouth', going onto thank the global support they have had (see fig 24). It was also the most liked and retweeted tweet out of the 141 tweets analysed, with 1,000 likes and 103 retweet's. Therefore, this suggests that audiences respond more favourable towards those specific individuals who advocate in Avery and Dassey's innocence online. This links back to Jenkins (2006) and the convergence culture, as the availability and access of multiple digital platforms has enabled individuals to engage in public participation (Steven, 2017). Zellner has used Twitter to create a positive persona of herself as the martyr for the Avery case, thus emphasising his strong support network online and offline. With the Internet having birthed a 'virtual family' (Katz, 2017), it is implied that the global impact of *Making a Murderer* has altered the changing perceptions of the law in order to lend itself in Avery and Dassey's innocence.

Showcasing a contrast between the positive and negative perceptions of the law, can be read as a way of reassuring audiences that there are trustworthy individuals who are fighting for justice for Avery and Dassey. This is further

implied though campaigning, which made up a lot of the online and offline conversation. This next section will explicitly showcase the ways in which campaigning has aided the portrayal of Avery and Dassey's innocence.

Campaigning and Call to Activism

Through the visual analysis, findings found that the filmmakers explicitly showed the wider impacts that *Making a Murderer* had on popular culture, within the documentary itself and showcased in online reactions. Therefore, further influencing Avery and Dassey's innocence. Campaigning and calls to activism can be split to offline and online reactions.

Campaigning Offline

Part two includes multiple footage of campaigning, highlighting the support for both Avery and Dassey. Episode one jump cuts to news footage of protests, with voice-overs saying that 'people love him (Steven)'. In Episode ten part two, there is a medium shot interview with Steven's cousin Kim Ducant stating the she 'has hope for them both'. We then see handheld camera shots of her and other supporters at a worldwide rally, with a women stating how the documentary 'opened up everybody's eyes' (see figs 25 and 26). The Banners and posters connote a community feel, and the confidence that people have in their innocence.

Contrastingly, anonymous individuals shout 'I got two bullets for them', and 'guilty', which suggests that there are still those who do not think that they are innocent. Offline campaigning highlighted within *Making a Murderer,* presents

Avery and Dassey as innocent celebrities. Therefore, this theme further presents the global offline reactions that the documentary has had, in advocating their innocence. However, some contrasting offline reactions that have been included by the filmmakers, remind audiences that not everyone believes they are innocent.

With the popularity of the true crime genre which is unlikely to hinder (Nyman, 2016), it is becoming more important for services like Netflix to be aware of the impact of using true crime for entertainment purposes (Schmid, 2006). However, this theme has established that there are the majority of those who believe strongly enough that Avery and Dassey did not commit Halbach's murder, therefore reinforcing the support of *Making a Murderer* in their innocence.

Campaigning Online

Whilst the offline campaigns have a significant influence in aiding Avery and Dassey's innocence, online campaigns formed the majority through petitions and twitter reactions. In episode one part two, a newsreader states that Petition.org had 'the most activity the site has ever seen' and that signatures 'continue to grow' (see fig 27), highlighting the overwhelming impact that campaigning had on how audiences reacted in favour towards Avery and Dassey.

This is mirrored in the Twitter reactions, with a petition to 'free' Avery and Dassey mentioned in five tweets, in the time frame of the first series (see fig

28.). This suggests that the initial response from the documentaries first release, encouraged people to sign a petition in order to gain justice for Avery and Dassey, through the facts presented in their favour. Moreover, there were three tweets where audience members referenced themselves as lawyers, with one comparing their interest in being a lawyer since watching *Making a Murderer,* to Legally Blond (see fig 29). This showcases the impact of *Making a Murderer* on the ways in which audiences also attempted to involve themselves in the case, and in advocating Avery and Dassey's innocence.

This theme that emerged through the multi-method approach, highlights the overwhelming impact that online campaigning had an advocating Avery and Dassey's innocence. Through convergence (Jenkins, 2006), twitter has formed an online community that has enabled audiences to voice their opinions as detectives and lawyers in their own right. This has resulted in campaigning skills that are beyond the remits of most lawyers (Owen, 2016). This further relates to Jenkins (2006) description of online fan communities and how active audiences can become 'protective and possessive', therefore reinforcing *Making a Murderer's* significant impact online and offline. As discussed previously, existing literature highlights how audiences use social media as a form of online activism, producing meanings and gratifications from a narrative (Grandinetti, 2017). Contemporary research recognises that the real and virtual are connected, and form integral parts of our contemporary social world, which cross boundaries of inequality and power relations (James and Busher, 2015). Through the shift towards media convergence across multiple channels (Khamis et al, 2017), audiences have become active (Hackley and Hackley,

2015) and empowered agents (Hesmondhalgh and Pratt, 2005), thus proving to be indicative of the emotional narrative intended by the filmmakers of *Making a Murderer.* This convergence between popular culture and media technologies, have enabled the audience of *Making a Murderer* to engage in significant audience participation, that goes deeper than your usual fan community (Jenkins, 2006).

Evidently, the global conversations from *Making a Murderer* emphasise how new media technologies have extended the limits of cultural fluidity through the availability of multiple digital platforms, enabling public participation and engagement (Steven, 2017). Therefore, the theme that emerged from this multi-method approach, which empathises the favourable reactions towards Avery and Dassey, aids in their filmmakers portrayal of their innocence. Audience participation and controversy is further portrayed in the way that audiences and others such as the law, have reacted to the documentary and Netflix, which this next section will explore.

Reactions to *Making a Murderer* and Netflix

The final theme to emerge from the multi-method approach was the reactions towards *Making a Murderer* and Netflix specifically. *Making a Murderer* generated a majority of positive reactions from audiences online, whilst also invoking negative reactions from members of the justice system who involved in the case, within the documentary itself. Therefore, this theme showcases the overwhelming impact that the filmmakers framing of *Making a Murderer* had on

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advocating Avery and Dassey's innocence. This is evidenced through the specific reactions towards the documentary and Netflix.

Positive Reactions to *Making a Murderer* and Netflix Online

Episode one part two opens with a montage of overlaying social media posts, signifying the overwhelming response towards Avery, Dassey and the documentary. These social media posts showcase the amount of individuals worldwide that believe them to be innocent, based on what they believe in *Making a Murderer.*

The favourable tone towards the documentary and with reference to Netflix explicitly, is mirrored in 11% of tweets. One tweet thanked Netflix personally for 'shining a light' on the corrupt justice system (see fig 30), linking back to the similar comments made by Echols (2016) who was also affected by the justice system. This highlights how the platform has been able to create content that has capitalised on wider cultural issues (Pirnia and List, 2019), which have aided in Avery and Dassey's innocence.

Another category of the Twitter content analysis examined tweets that referenced *Making a Murderer's* similarities with the podcast *Serial.* These focused particularly on how *Serial* encouraged individuals to engage in new participatory modes of interaction (McCracken, 2014), paralleling how audiences reacted to *Making a Murderer* online. Six tweets mentioned the need to watch *Making a Murderer* if you were a fan of *Serial*, with one comparing their frustrations with *Serial* with their frustrations towards the case of Avery

and Dassey in *Making a Murderer* (see fig 31). Therefore, an additional response was to compare it to another true crime series that had overwhelming reactions (Mahdawi, 2018), thus cementing *Making a Murderers* significance in popular culture alongside *Serial.*

Contrastingly, highlighting its popularity within the first few minutes of part two alludes to a sense of arrogance, suggesting that they are proud of the widespread reactions that the documentary has had towards justice for Avery and Dassey.

Negative Reactions to *Making a Murderer* and Netflix Offline

Whilst the majority of reactions have been positive towards the documentary and Netflix, there is also evidence of negative reactions within the documentary.

In episode one part two there is a close-up interview with the state governor Scott Walker, who openly criticises the documentary calling it 'one sided'. He personally attacks *Making a Murderer* for not being balanced, therefore it is 'not really a documentary' (see fig 32). He proceeds to direct his criticism to the audience of *Making a Murderer,* stating that they should not be calling for a pardon without knowing key pieces of information. In episode ten part two during one of the campaigns to free Avery and Dassey, one man angrily shouts 'don't let Netflix tell you what to think!' (see fig 33). Therefore, these findings, which showcase some of the negativity towards *Making a Murderer*, reiterate how the framing of the documentary has implicated the overwhelming reactions against the 'corrupt' law and towards 'innocent' Avery and Dassey. There were no twitter reactions that favoured against the documentary or Netflix in the 141

tweets analysed, which further highlights the global consensus in favour of the series and platform.

As previously argued in the literature review, the crossover between entertainment and factuality has the potential to affect the 'realness' of a program (Sharma, 2016). This proves to be indicative of the majority of positive reactions in favour of *Making a Murderer,* and in advocating Avery and Dassey's innocence. Therefore, findings from this multi-method approach links back to the issue of encouraging individuals to get involved in campaigns that they do not know everything about, affecting the validity of the program. This proved to be most relevant for M*aking a Murderer*, through the outpouring of favourable offline and online reactions in favour of Avery, Dassey and the documentary itself.

While the filmmakers have denied portraying the documentary in favour of Avery and Dassey, (Birnbaum, 2018), officials closely involved in the case are implying that there are more facts and evidence to the story than the filmmakers have chosen to incorporate in the series, such as those similarly argued by Kratz (2017). Whilst we can not know the true intentions of the filmmakers, by presenting two-sides suggests that the filmmakers know that there are mixed reactions towards *Making a Murderer's*, despite continuing the rest of the series favouring Avery and Dassey. This links back to criticisms towards the filmmakers, at their 'frustratingly obtuse and dismissive' lack of response to the impact that their documentary had on public perceptions of law enforcement

and the justice system (Schulz, 2016), and its potentially damaging impact on the public's perceptions of the justice system (ibid).

Summary of Findings and Discussions

Overall, findings showed that guilt versus innocence made up the majority of *Making a Murderer's* narrative and conversations online. Techniques used by the filmmakers which capitalised on Avery and Dassey's working class background, use of personal voiceovers and exploitation of their families sufferings, have portrayed the intended emotionality of the program in advocating Avery and Dassey's innocence. This is subsequently mirrored in favourable audience reactions, making up 22% of the 141 tweets that were analysed. Their innocence was also established in the filmmaker's negative perceptions of the justice system, contrasted with the positive portrayal of the defence. Techniques such as court footage and interviews, outlined the corruptions of the justice system. These parrelled Twitter reactions with 28% against the 'corrupt' law, and nine tweets in favour of the defence. Therefore, this can be read as audiences having been manipulated into idolising the defence over the untrustworthy justice system, thus aiding in the portrayal of Avery and Dassey innocence. Campaigning also suggests how Avery and Dassey have been presented as innocent, showcasing the effects of online and

offline campaigning. Whilst there were some negativity towards the 'one sided documentary', the majority of reactions towards Netflix and *Making a Murderer* proved to be favourably. Therefore highlighting the success of the documentary, in advocating the innocence of the convicted killers.

Ultimately, the visual analysis which presented the techniques and constructions used by the filmmakers in *Making a Murderer,* has helped to prove how it is framed towards their innocence. This is further justified in the overwhelming reactions in Avery and Dassey's favour, confirming how *Making a Murderer's* framing has proved to be indicative of audience's reactions.

<u>Future Research</u>

Although this research has provided exploratory results, which have added to existing audience research, audience effects remain a complex and difficult topic to measure (Bogart, 1995). While *Making A Murderer* clearly reinforces the significance of analysing audience reactions in media discourse, further research can be done comparing additional programs that have had a significant impact in popular culture. No matter the ethical arguments surrounding true crime and its capitalisation by media platforms, its popularity seems unlikely to hinder any time soon (Nyman, 2016). Therefore, true crime will remain an important genre to critique, as services like Netflix continue to capitalise on it.

Moreover, as the findings show, *Making a Murderer* is clearly framed in favour of the convicted killers, with little mention of the actual victim at the heart of the case. Therefore, while audiences are more interested in the actual killers of crimes there is not only a lack of awareness for victims, but there is little research to reflect this. Donley and Gualtieri's (2015) research on the 'Homeless Killer' could be further expanded towards the media's portrayal of victims, or lack of.

Lastly, with the release of Netflix's the *Ted Bundy Tapes* and the film about his life staring teen icon Zac Efron (Cooper, 2019), contemporary research can be added to existing literature surrounding the sexualisation and glorification of serial killers in popular culture. While there is much research on this, it will be an important topic to aid future research, having resurfaced in the recent serial killer phenomenon and influx of true crime documentaries.

Conclusion

This research has established how the techniques used by the filmmakers in *Making a Murderer,* have aided in the presentation of Avery and Dassey as innocent. Evidenced through close visual analysis and online content analysis, this research has demonstrated that this advocated innocence has had a significant impact on the way audiences reacted to them favourable online, therefore answering research questions one and two. The global reactions from *Making a Murderer* have presented a unique opportunity to not only look at conversations that have spread across all corners of popular culture (Nyman, 2016), but also how media platforms can play such a significant part in larger online and offline conversations (McDonald and Smith-Rowsey, 2016). Therefore, reinforcing it as one of the most significant true crime documentaries (Tassi, 2016).

This research suggests that common themes such as the corrupt justice system, innocence vs. guilt, and campaigning online and offline, have ultimately fuelled how audiences have reacted favourably towards *Making a Murderer*. Despite the filmmakers claiming impartiality (Birnbaum, 2018), it has impacted audiences changing perceptions of the law, thus proving to be indicative of the negative reactions towards the corrupt justice system. This research project has found that the documentary frames in favour of Avery and Dassey through

techniques such as capitalising on their working class background, exploitation of both their families, and non-diegetic voiceover's of both claiming their innocence. Ultimately, this has been mirrored in positive audience reactions online towards Avery and Dassey, presenting an unexpectedly poignant trend in media discourse (Hammerstien, 2016). Consequently, *Making a Murderer* begs a moral and ethical question as to how involved Netflix should be in ensuring that they produce impartial content, without capitalising on people's private tragedies by turning them into public entertainment (Schulz, 2016).

Whilst *Making A Murderer* has provided exploratory results that have helped to reinforces this research with combined television and audience studies, further research can be done by comparing *Making a Murderer* with additional programs, which have had a significant impact in popular culture.

Ultimately, with technology and entertainment merging at an accelerating rate (McDonald and Smith – Rowsey, 2016), this research has clearly emphasised how convergence is altering traditional relationships between the production and consumption of media (Jenkins, 2006). No matter the ethical arguments surrounding true crime and its capitalisation by media platforms, through the recent influx of true crime documentaries, its popularity seems unlikely to hinder any time soon (Nyman, 2016). Therefore, *Making a Murderer* has proved to be a significant program to analyse, on a platform that has transformed the conventions of TV on demand (Paget, 2005). The clear focus on the allegations of misconduct and foul play, have provided an exploration into reactions and debates constructed using online platforms surrounding guilt, innocence and

corruptions within the justice system. Consequently, this proved to be indicative of the global conversations that advocated Avery and Dassey's innocence, thus cementing *Making a Murderer* as a '*bona* fide cultural phenomenon' (Mahdawi, 2018).

Nevertheless, Schulz (2016) argues that no matter what the reactions are to the Avery case, or how many signatures a petition calling for their pardon gets, it is going to take much more than new evidence for Avery and Dassey to have the slightest chance of exoneration. The future for Avery and Dassey remains elusive, with the dichotomy towards the men's guilt or innocence unlikely to alter despite *Making a Murderer's* overwhelming reactions in popular culture.

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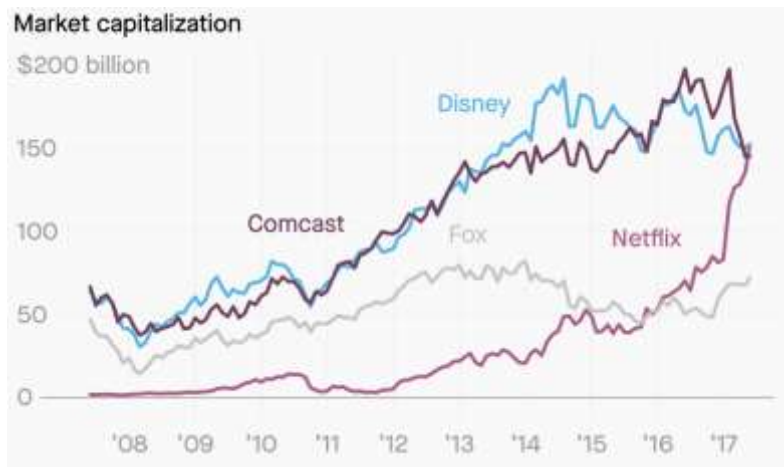
Appendix

Fig 1

Market capitalization

Fig 2

Is your book better than Jerry's?

Fig 3

[Ken] Yes, much better.

Fig 4

Coding Manual

Date:

Tweet or Reply:
T = Tweet
R = Reply

Likes / Comments / Retweets on the Tweet:
Number of Likes
Number of Comments
Number of Retweets

Word Count of the Tweet:
1-50

51-100

101-150

151-200

201-250

251-280 (max)

Words Mentioned in Tweet:
1. Guilty
2. Innocent
3. Law / Police
4. Wrongfully convicted
5. True
6. False / lies
7. Framed
8. Victim
9. Corruption
10. Free
11. Justice / Injustice

Emotion Words:
1. Angry
2. Sad
3. Happy
4. Good
5. Feel bad
6. Frustrating
7. Outraged / shock
8. Bad

Tone Towards Steven Avery:
P = Positive
N = Negative

Tone Towards Brendan Dassey:
P = Positive
N = Negative

Tone Towards the Law / Individuals Involved in the Case:
F = Favourable
U = Unfavourable

Tone Towards the Documentary:
F = For
A = Against

Images / Videos / Gifs / Emoji's Used:
I = Image
V = Video
G = Gifs
A = Angry Face
C = Curious Face
L = Laughing Face
S = Sad Face
D = Disgusted Face

Framing of the Tweet:
1. In favour of Avery
2. In favour of Dassey
3. Against Avery
4. Against Dassey
5. Against the law / particular individuals
6. Against the documentary
7. In favour of the Law / particular individuals
8. For the victims family
9. Against the Victims family
10. For the documentary
11. For Steven's family

Individuals Mentioned:
1. Kathleen Zellner
2. Steven Avery
3. Brendan Dassey
4. Ken Kratz
5. Dean Strang
6. Jerome Buting
7. Len Kachinsky
8. Denis Vogel
9. Michael O'Kelly
10. Mike Halbach
11. Michael Greisberg
12. Dr Eisenberg
13. Bobby Dassey

Sign Petition Call Out:
Y= Yes
N= No

Reference to Serial Podcast:
Y = Yes
N = No

Fig 5

Fig 6

[woman] Manitowoc County
is working-class farmers.

Fig 7

As bad a stitch up as the first case against Penny was, there is zero doubt
Steven Avery killed Teresa. And yes, he is stupid enough to leave evidence on
his own land and expect to get away with it. Notwithstanding he should've had a
fair trial. Case closed. #MakingAMurderer

♡ 3

Fig 8

If you think Steve Avery is innocent your mind is easily influenced by the media
🤭
The documentary was were I got most of my facts on the case&set a biased
opinion that he was innocent.after I looked at more of the details I made up my
own mind
He is a monster.
#MakingAMurderer

💬 3   🔁 3   ♡ 8

Fig 9

I am innocent of the rape and murder of Teresa Halbach.

Fig 10

I don't talk to hardly nobody anymore.

Dolores Avery
STEVEN'S MOTHER

Fig 11

This Album is Lovingly Dedicated to The Avery Family

Albums Provided by, Emily McCarthy
Provided by. Tobie Glory
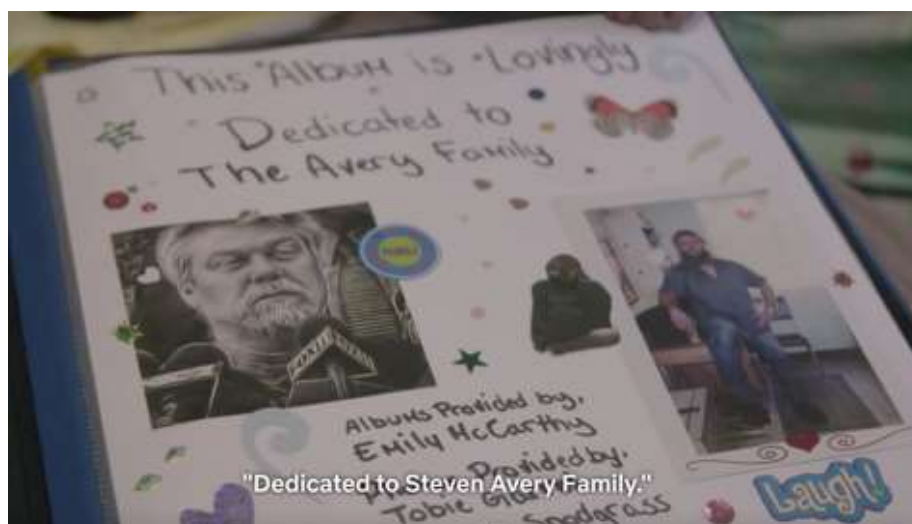"Dedicated to Steven Avery Family."
Snodgrass

Fig 12

It's so sad watching Mama & Papa Avery on #MakingAMurder2 How is state gonna explain stealing the life of this man not once but TWICE? They CAN'T that's why state will fight every lie they told b/c what they did to this man is criminal. The state is THE CRIMINAL!#MakingAMurderer
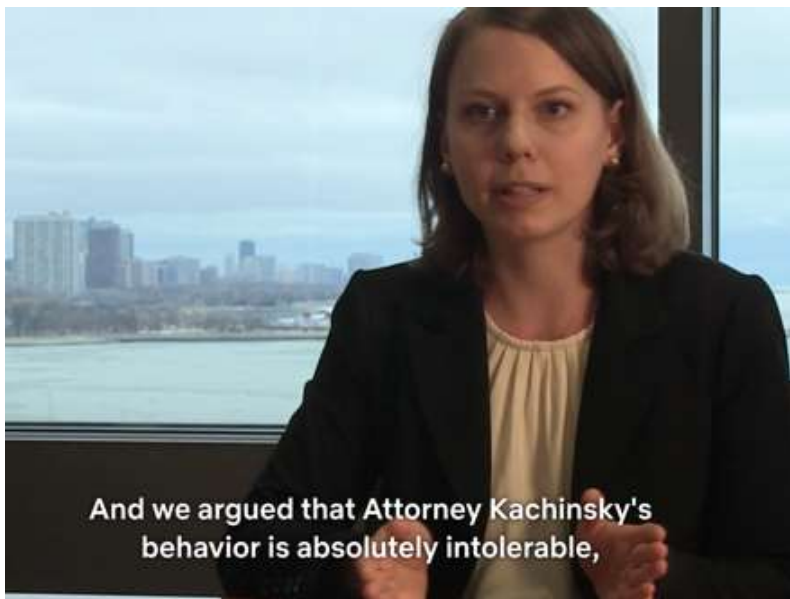
💬 2   🔁 9   ♡ 63   ✉

Fig 13

And we argued that Attorney Kachinsky's behavior is absolutely intolerable,

Fig 14

while at the same time damaging Brendan's chances.

Fig 15

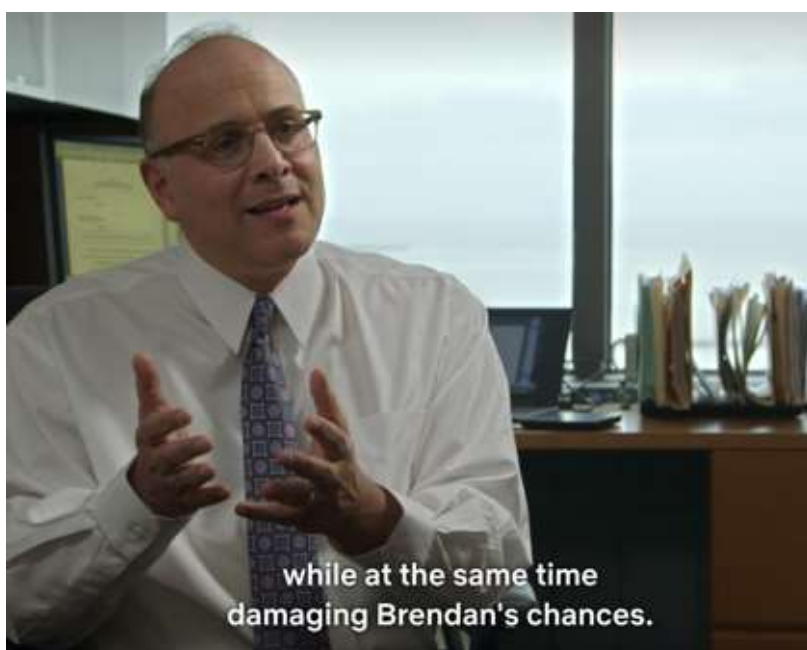[newscaster] Viewers made death threats against Kratz and his family.

Fig 16

Brendan Dassey may not be the main story of #MakingAMurderer, but it's a good reminder of how people with intellectual disabilities get screwed and abused by the law.

💬 2   🔁 2   ♡ 9   ✉

Show this thread

Fig 17

I've never wanted to punch a person so much after watching a Netflix series. Ken Kratz disgusts me. #MakingAMurderer

💬   🔁 18   ♡ 81   ✉

Fig 18

Ken Kratz is the most vile human being on this planet. Keeps selling this story hes conceived on his own head. No evidence to back it up, just a sick imagination. Ri freaking diculous #MakingAMurderer
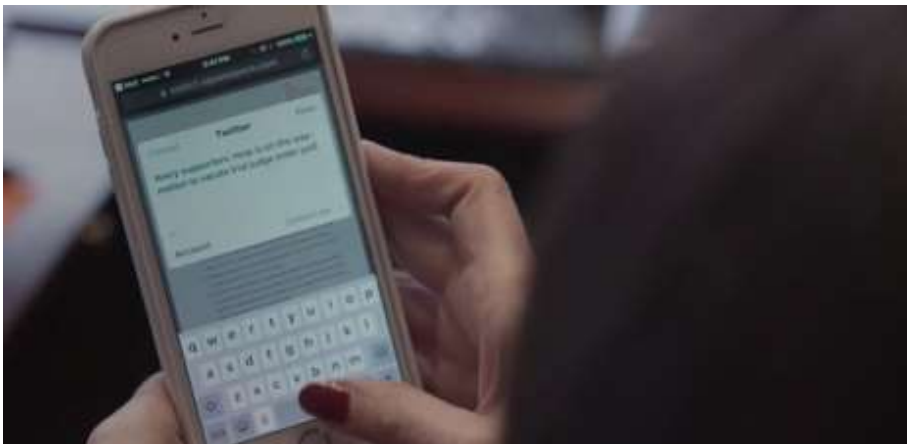
💬   🔁 7   ♡ 37   ✉

Fig 19

Fig 20

Fig 21

it did not occur the way
Mr. Kratz told the jury it occurred.

Fig 22

Is Kathleen Zellner @ZellnerLaw possibly the coolest headed most fabulous women you ever did see? #MakingAMurderer

💬 1   ⟲ 1   ♡ 15   ✉

Fig 23

Spent the last 2 days binge watching @MakingAMurderer and feel totally in awe of @ZellnerLaw - what an incredibly intelligent, inspiring woman! #MakingAMurderer #KathleenZellner

💬 17   ⟲ 37   ♡ 503   ✉

Fig 24

Proud to represent #BrendanDassey with @sdrizin and @cwcyouth. Incredible messages of support & strength rolling in as people around the globe are starting to watch Part Two of #MakingaMurderer. We're still fighting for Brendan. Glad to see the world is too!

💬 53   ⟲ 103   ♡ 1.0K   ✉

Fig 25

Fig 26

[woman] The Netflix documentary
really opened up everybody's eyes.

Fig 27

change.org
Petitions calling for the release
of Steven Avery continue to grow.

206,685

There is a documentary series on Netflix called "Making a Murderer".
After viewing it, I am outraged with the injustices which have been
allowed to compound and left unchecked in the case of Steven Avery of
Manitowoc County in Wisconsin, U.S.A. Avery's unconstitutional
mistreatment at the hands of corrupt local law enforcement is completely
unacceptable and is an abomination of due process.

Steven Avery should be exonerated at once by pardon, and the

Fig 28

Sign this petition and help get justice for #StevenAvery!
petitions.whitehouse.gov//petition/inve... @MakingAMurderer @netflix
#MakingAMurderer

💬 11   🔁 4.2K   ♡ 200   ✉

Fig 29

I'll stop talking about #MakingAMurderer soon but I haven't wanted to be a
lawyer this much since I first watched Legally Blonde.

💬   🔁 4   ♡ 5   ✉

Fig 30

Kudos to @netflix for shedding light on Steven Avery's case. What a web of lies and coercion by Manitowoc Police. #MakingAMurderer

💬   ⟲ 2   ♡ 9   ✉

Fig 31

If the case of #Serial's Adnan Syed made you mad, then Steven Avery's in #MakingAMurderer will make you effing livid youtu.be/qxgbdYaR_KQ
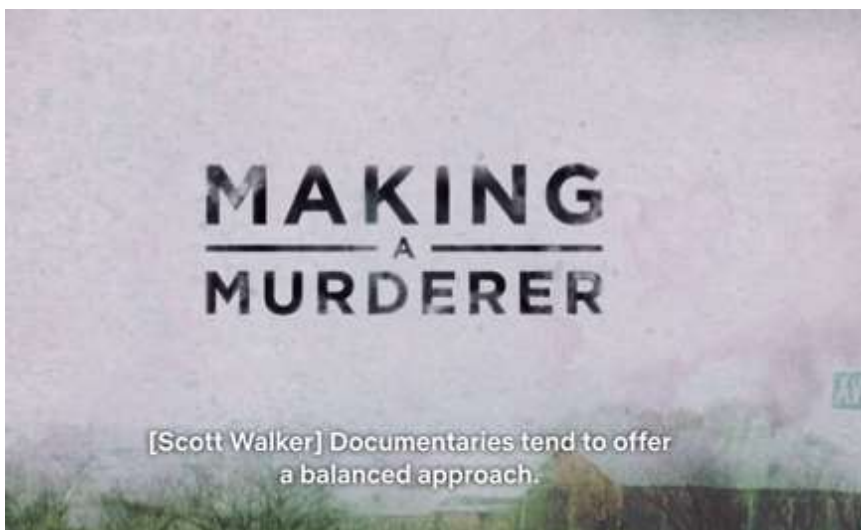
💬 2   ⟲ 10   ♡ 38   ✉

Fig 32

MAKING
— A —
MURDERER

[Scott Walker] Documentaries tend to offer
a balanced approach.

Fig 33

Don't let Netflix tell you what to think!