

# **SERIAL KILLER COMMUNIQUÉS: HELPFUL OR HURTFUL\***

by

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## **ABSTRACT**

For centuries serial killers have plagued society. These social deviants cunningly meander through communities murdering the most vulnerable: women, children, the homeless, and the elderly. Often, the serial killers avoid capture because they are highly mobile, tend to leave little evidence, and keep their thoughts and deeds to themselves. Occasionally, serial killers communicate with police or the mass media. It may be a poem or a random telephone call. This analysis focuses on selected serial killer cases in which the killer or someone professing to be the killer communicated with police or the news media during the killings. The examination seeks to ascertain whether communiqués help or hurt investigations into serial killers.

## **INTRODUCTION**

History is fraught with criminal cases in which the perpetrators caught themselves, not only by carelessly leaving clues at the crime scene, but by opening their mouth. Too often, criminals have spoken of their crime to relatives or friends, sometimes to seek advice on avoiding police or prosecution and other times to just “brag.” Whatever the motive, it is common knowledge in police and criminal justice circles that solid investigative work to identify a suspect frequently is bolstered by the perpetrator’s own incriminating words. There is one type of killer, though, who seems to contradict this phenomenon: A serial killer. Law enforcement and social scientists who study serial killers point out that serial killers tend to speak to no one about their crimes prior to being caught, if they are ever caught (Cross, 1981; Ressler, Burgess, & Douglas, 1988). They tend not to confide in relatives, spouses, friends, or strangers. Their propensity for psychological isolation is one of the reasons why law enforcement agencies have trouble conducting successful serial killer investigations. Other reasons include: Jurisdictional jealousy; linkage blindness; and the complexity of serial cases (Egger, 1985; Hickey, 1997). When law enforcement has had success solving serial cases, they have done so with such tools as forensic examination of trace evidence, multi-agency investigations, and psychological profiling (Brooks, Devine, Green, Hart, & Moore, 1987; Keppel, 1989; Hickey, 1997).

While serial killers appear to have an innate ability to refrain from discussing their crimes before a case is solved, there have been sporadic cases in which serial killers communicated anonymously with police or news organizations during the murders. This analysis focuses on selected serial killer cases in which the killer, or someone professing to be the killer, communicated with police or news organizations. It aims to ascertain the communiqués’ investigative value, whether the communiqués helped or hurt the investigations. If the communiqués were helpful, how? If they hurt the investigation, how? For this analysis a communiqué was defined as any anonymous message intentionally left at a crime scene by the killer or intentionally sent by the killer to law enforcement or news organizations prior to a case

being solved. Communiqués could come in any form: A poem, a letter, or a telephone call. A communiqué was deemed to be of investigative value or helpful if it advanced the investigation, particularly if it provided: Clues that helped investigators better understand the serial case; evidence to directly identify the killer; or information that helped to obtain a conviction. A communiqué was deemed of low investigative value or hurtful if it failed to advance the investigation or it disrupted or misdirected investigation.

This analysis is not intended to be an exhaustive review of all cases in which serial killers communicated with investigators or journalists. It would be virtually impossible to identify all such cases in police, prosecutor, or court files nationwide. The serial cases examined here are: “The Lipstick Killer” of Chicago; “Zodiac Killer” of San Francisco; “BTK” of Wichita; “Weepy-Voice Killer” of Minnesota; “Happy Face Killer” of Oregon; and “Zodiac Killer” of New York. Each case fits the criteria to be classified a serial killer case: A series of murders committed over weeks, months, or years in which there is a cooling-off period between killings. The cases were identified through an extensive search of newspaper databases, periodical indexes, academic journals, books, and internet sites. The basic facts of the cases were culled from local and national journalism articles, academic studies, and books. Most of the articles or books quoted the communiqués and offered interviews with various participants of the cases, including criminal investigators intimately familiar with the communiqués. For the analysis of the “BTK” case, the author obtained copies of several written communiqués, unedited and unmediated. To better understand the significance of the “Happy Face Killer” communiqués, the author corresponded with the serial killer who sent them to police and the news media. The “Case History,” “Communiqués,” and “Investigative Value” of each case studied follows.

### "THE LIPSTICK KILLER" OF CHICAGO

**Case History:** On Jan. 7, 1946, Suzanne Degnan was kidnapped from her home and strangled. The 6-year-old was dismembered and parts of her body were put in sewers near her home. Her death turned out to be strikingly similar to the murder of two Chicago women in separate attacks: Frances Brown, 33, and Josephine Ross, 43. Both were mutilated after being assaulted in their homes. On June 26, 1946, William Heirnes was arrested for the three murders (Morrow, 1946). At the time, Heirnes was a 17-year-old sophomore at the University of Chicago. Surgeons’ tools were found in his university room. Eventually, Heirnes was convicted of all three murders and was sentenced to three consecutive life terms.

**Communiqués:** Heirnes is credited with the notorious lipstick communiqué: “For heaven’s sake, catch me before I kill more; I cannot control myself” (Kennedy, Hoffman, & Haines, 1947). That message was scrawled on the wall in the home of victim Brown. Heirnes also sent Degnan’s family a ransom letter. The letter threatened: “Get \$20000 Redy And Wmt Forward...Do Not Notify FBI or Police...Bills in 5’s & 10’s...Burn This For Her Safety” (Morrow, 1946).

**Investigative Value:** The lipstick communiqué possessed little investigative value. While the message pointed toward a killer out of control and begging to be caught, it failed to advance the case toward a resolution or lead to the identification of the killer.

The ransom note originally misled police into thinking they were dealing with a kidnapping, rather than a slaying that should be compared to unsolved killings. Sexual perversion, not money, motivated Heirnes in his assaults in residences. For several years the youth had successfully burglarized homes and stolen women's undergarments. He liked to put on the undergarments and experience sexual excitement (Kennedy, Hoffman, & Haines, 1947). The ransom note eventually was of value in linking Heirnes to the serial case.

Heirnes was arrested on June 26, 1946, breaking into an apartment. The victim was in the kitchen and her 10-month-old daughter was in the bedroom. A neighbor saw Heirnes sneak into the home and called police. As Heirnes fled, a janitor walking through the area tried to stop him, but Heirnes brushed him away with a gun. When a police officer arrived, Heirnes fired a handgun twice at the police officer, but he missed. The officer fired back and there was a struggle. Heirnes was finally subdued when a passerby smashed flower pots on Heirnes' head. A routine fingerprint check revealed a match to prints on the Degnan ransom note (Morrow, 1946). His prints also tied him to an assault of another woman. The FBI confirmed Heirnes' prints were on the ransom letter (Scott, 1946).

### "ZODIAC KILLER" OF SAN FRANCISCO

**Case History:** San Francisco residents were in the midst of the Christmas holiday season in 1968 when David Faraday and Betty Lou Jensen were slain just north of the city in Vallejo. As the young couple talked in a remote lovers' lane, a stocky man pulled out a .22-caliber handgun and shot Faraday behind the ear at close range. Jensen ran out of the car and the killer illustrated that he was an excellent marksman. He shot the woman five times in a tight pattern in the upper-right portion of her back (Graysmith, 1986). Seven months later, the killer struck again in Vallejo, killing a young woman and seriously wounding her date with a .9-millimeter handgun. Police dubbed the assailant the "Vallejo Killer." The killer next assaulted a couple in September, 1969. In that attack he used a gun to get control of the couple. He then tied them up and stabbed them repeatedly. The woman, Cecelia Ann Shepard, died while her companion survived. In the assault the suspect donned a hood over his head and shoulders. There were slits for his eyes and mouth. The killer was renamed the "Cipher Slayer" after he sent a letter to a San Francisco newspaper with a cipher message composed of arcane symbols. Eventually, he began signing his letters the "Zodiac Killer." Officially, the Zodiac Killer is known to have murdered six people, but some investigators believe he killed many more. The slayings attributed to the killer have not been solved.

**Communiqués:** The Zodiac's dialog with investigators and the media involved telephone calls and many untraceable letters that teased police and the public with cipher messages. At least twice the killer telephoned police to report the slayings. In one of those phone calls he stated: "I want to report a murder...no, a double murder. They are two miles north of park headquarters. They were in a white Volkswagen Karmann Ghia. I'm the one that did it" (Graysmith, 1986). In his phone calls and letters he often revealed facts about the murders that only the killer would know. To further prove he committed a slaying, the Zodiac included in his letter a piece of blood-stained clothing taken from the victim. Sometimes, the killer displayed a morbid sense of humor. In one letter he sent a greeting card with a drawing of a dripping wet fountain pen hanging by a string. The card carried the caption: "Sorry I haven't written, but I just washed my

pen...PS could you print this new cipher on your front page? I get awfully lonely when I am ignored, So lonely I could do my Thing!!!!!!” (Graysmith, 1986). The Zodiac sent most of his communiqués to the *San Francisco Examiner*, the *San Francisco Chronicle*, and the *Vallejo Times-Herald*. Once, he went four years without communicating with the news media or police. After the lull, he wrote in April, 1978: “Dear Editor, This is the Zodiac speaking I am back with you.” The short missive taunted police: “SFPD – 0” (Graysmith, 1986).

**Investigative Value:** Often, there is a delay in starting a comprehensive investigation specifically to apprehend a serial killer since the slayings are committed in different police jurisdictions and investigators are reluctant to link cases without indisputable evidence there is a connection. The Zodiac’s phone calls and letters expedited the linking of seemingly unrelated murders and the formation of a special investigation into the case. During one phone call, the killer stated: “I want to report a double murder. If you will go one mile east of Columbus Parkway to the public park, you will find kids in a brown car. ..I also killed those kids last year. Good-bye” (Graysmith, 1986). At the scene of one slaying, the killer wrote on a vehicle door: “Vallejo 12-20-68, 7-4-69, Sept. 27-69-6:30 by knife” (Graysmith, 1986). The dates corresponded to Zodiac slayings. The killer’s distinct communiqués served another valuable role: To weed out letters by “kooks” or false confessors. Eventually, the FBI gathered the estimated 20 letters sent by the Zodiac and asked a psycholinguistics expert to develop a psychological profile. While the communiqués helped investigators link the various San Francisco-area murders and the profile provided a variety of psychological traits the killer might possess, they failed to help identify the killer. In the end, the communiqués proved mostly frustrating and of little investigative value since the letters publicly taunted police and repeatedly pointed out the inability of police to solve the case. Federal and local investigators were particularly embarrassed when they could not decipher a coded message sent by the killer to the news media. When the media printed the coded message, a husband and wife broke the code. Part of the code said: “I like killing people because it is so much fun...” (Graysmith, 1986).

## **"BTK" OF WICHITA**

**Case History:** On the afternoon of Jan. 15, 1974, residents of the quiet town of Wichita, Kansas, began hearing media reports of the brutal murder of a local family. Killed were Joseph and Julie Otero and two of their children. All four had been strangled. The 8-year-old son was discovered with a hood over his head. The 11-year-old daughter was nude and hanging from a rope tied to a pipe in the basement. None of the victims were sexually assaulted, but police found semen all over the house and on some of the victims. Three months later on April 4, 1974, a woman named Kathryn Bright was found stabbed to death in her home. Police were unaware a sexually-motivated serial killer was operating in the city or that the Otero and Bright murders were related until the killer sent a communiqué in October, 1974 (BTK, 1974; Johanning, 1974; Thimmesch, 1986). The writer claimed responsibility for both incidents in a letter. For three years the killer was silent, killing no one and communicating with no one. In 1977 the killer surfaced again to strangle Shirley Vian and Nancy Fox in separate slayings in their homes. All the murders had occurred within a 3 ½ mile radius. The active search for "BTK" ended in the early 1980s. In 1984 police reopened the case with a small task force to use new technology to try to crack the case. The task force operated for several years before closing the case for a second time. The case remains unsolved.

**Communiqués:** In this case the killer's communiqués included letters, poems, and a telephone call. His first communiqué in October, 1974, consisted of a lengthy, single-spaced typed letter. It was found in a mechanical engineering textbook at the Wichita Public Library. At the top of the letter were the words: "OTERO CASE." The killer detailed how he killed each member of the Otero family and in what position he left them in the house. He ended the Otero letter with: "Since sex criminals do not change their M.O. or by nature cannot do so, I will not change mine. The code words for me will be...bind them, torture them, kill them, B.T.K..." (BTK, 1974). He ended his second letter with: "P.S. How about some name for me, its time: 7 down and many more to go. I like the following. How about you? 'THE B.T.K. STRANGLER', 'WICHITA STRANGLER', 'POETIC STRANGLER'" (BTK, 1978). The second communiqué came in the form of a short poem about victim Vian. The poem, sent to the newspaper *The Wichita Eagle-Beacon*, was patterned after a "Curley Locks" nursery rhyme. The third communiqué was a telephone call on Dec. 9, 1977. That day the killer used a public phone booth to report the Nancy Fox slaying. When police arrived at the phone booth, the phone was dangling from the receiver. Later that month the killer sent a poem about Fox. The poem was accompanied with a letter claiming responsibility for a total of seven murders. The poem "Oh Death to Nancy" was patterned after a poem called "Oh Death" that was published in a textbook used in a Wichita State University American Folklore class. The letter detailed how Vian and Fox were brutally murdered. The letter to the media was traced to Wichita State University library copiers. On February 10, 1978, the killer sent another letter, this time to KAKE TV Channel 10 in Wichita (BTK, 1978). Attached to the letter was a drawing of the Fox murder scene, so detailed it could have virtually matched a lab photo of the crime scene. The letter said, in part: "I find the newspaper not writing about the poem on Vian unamusing. A little paragraph would have enough. I know it not the news media fault. The Police Chief he keep things quiet..." (BTK, 1978). The killer's final communiqué was found in the Wichita home of a 63-year-old woman. The April 8, 1979, note simply informed the woman he left her house after getting tired of waiting for her in the closet.

**Investigative Value:** On the surface BTK's many communiqués appeared extremely helpful to the investigation. They revealed the killer would kill again and provided leads that normally proved fruitful in a routine murder investigation. Unfortunately, in the end, the communiqués were of little value and misdirected the investigation, leading investigators to devote precious hours and money to dead ends.

The Otero letter had been left in an engineering book at the Wichita Public Library. Police obtained a list of people who checked out the textbook, but hit a dead end. Detectives took the Fox letter to Xerox headquarters in Syracuse, New York. Technicians there determined that the letter was a fifth-generation copy of the original, making it hard to trace to a specific typewriter. The letter appeared to have been copied at the Wichita State University Library. Police obtained lists of people who lived in the area between 1974 and 1979, but could not develop any leads. The Vian poem was patterned after a nursery rhyme that had appeared in a puzzle magazine called "Games." Police obtained a list of subscribers to the magazine but, again, to no avail.

After one slaying, police received a phone call from the killer. Police provided a copy of the taped call to broadcast stations. About 110 callers contacted a special police phone number, but the calls did not provide the identity of the killer.

The communiqués also hampered the investigation because many of them were sent to the news media, which added pressure for police to solve the case. In the communiqués the killer painted police as inept since they could not catch him.

### "WEEPY-VOICE KILLER" OF MINNESOTA

**Case History:** New Year's Eve, 1980, ushered in a series of brutal beatings and murders that terrified Minneapolis residents for two years. The attacks began with Karen Potack. On New Year's Eve Potack was beaten savagely on the head with a tire iron after leaving a New Year's Eve party. She survived. The second victim, Kimberly Compton, 18, was not so lucky. On June 3, 1981, she was stabbed 61 times with an ice pick south of St. Paul. Next came Kathleen Greening, 33, who was drowned in her bathtub in her home on July 21, 1982. The fourth victim, Barbara Simons, 40, was stabbed more than 100 times in Minneapolis. The final victim, Denise Williams, 21, was stabbed several times with a screwdriver after she accepted a ride. She survived. Eventually, Paul Michael Stephani, who grew up in Austin, Minnesota, where his stepfather worked as a meatpacker, was arrested and convicted for murdering Simons. It was not until 1997 that he contacted police while in prison and confessed to the attack on Potack and murdering Compton and Greening (Brown, 1997).

**Communiqués:** The communiqués in this case began with the assault on Potack. The man telephoned police at 3 a.m. to report the attack. In an emotional voice he asked police to hurry to some railroad tracks, then said: "There is a girl hurt there" (Brown, 1981). After stabbing Compton on June 3, 1981, the killer contacted police pleading: "God damn, will you find me? I just stabbed somebody with an ice pick. I can't stop myself. I keep killing somebody" (Brown, 1981). Two days later the killer called police to say he was sorry for stabbing Compton and would turn himself in. He didn't. Instead, on June 6 he called to say newspaper accounts of some of the murders were inaccurate. His fourth communiqués came June 11. In a whimpering, barely coherent voice he cried: "I'm sorry for what I did to Compton" (Brown, 1981). There were no communiqués after Greening's death, but the "Weepy-Voice Killer" contacted police on the murder of Simons: "Please don't talk. Listen. I'm sorry I killed that girl. I stabbed her 40 times. Kimberly Compton was the first one over in St. Paul" (Brown, 1981).

**Investigative Value:** The serial killer contacted police so often investigators felt there was an excellent opportunity someone would recognize his voice on the communiqués. On several occasions media broadcast stations aired recordings of the phone calls from the Weepy-Voice Killer. Police received over 150 calls from the public, but the recordings were so short and distorted with emotion that they failed to provide the identity of the murderer. Several times his phone calls were traced by emergency operators, once to a bar near a bus station depot and once to a downtown phone booth. When police arrived, he was gone.

How did police link Stephani to some of the Weepy-Voice Killer murders? The chain of events began on August 21, 1982, when a 21-year-old woman named Denise Williams

picked up by Stephani, who stabbed her several times with a screwdriver. During the attack, Williams clobbered Stephani on the head with a soft drink bottle. When he returned home to his apartment, he noticed he was bleeding badly and sought medical help. This action linked him to the Williams attack. Routine investigative work connected Stephani to the murder of Simons. In the end, Stephani was convicted of killing Simons and assaulting Williams. During Stephani's trial in the Simons murder case, Stephani's ex-wife, sister, and a woman who lived with him testified that they believed the hysterical caller revealing the attacks was Stephani. Those observations, alone, were not enough to identify Stephani as the Weepy-Voice Killer since the hysterical crying distorted the voice. Stephani's confession in prison almost 20 years after the first slaying allowed police to officially link the slayings and telephonic communiqués. In brief, the communiqués were of no investigative value during the investigation.

### "HAPPY FACE KILLER" OF OREGON

**Case History:** This case surfaced in January, 1990, when a woman named Taunja Bennett was murdered in the Portland, Oregon, area. The slaying seemed an isolated, single murder since there had been no other similar slayings in the area. In fact, Bennett was part of a serial case, but the killer's propensity was to find his victims in a number of cities while working as a long-haul truck driver. Early in the Bennett case police focused their investigation on a couple after the woman claimed her male friend killed Bennett and then implicated herself. Although that investigation was full of unanswered questions and dubious evidence, the couple was convicted and sentenced to life in prison. They were not the "killer."

**Communiqués:** The first sign something was amiss in the case came in April, 1990, when a message was scrawled on a wall in Umatilla, Oregon. The message read: "Killed Tanya Bennett in Portland. Two people got the blame so I can kill again (Cut buttons off jeans – proof)" (Painter, 1995a). A second message was found scrawled on a restroom wall at the Greyhound Bus Depot in Livingston, Montana. It said: "I killed Tanya Bennett Jan. 21, 1990 in Portland, Oregon. I beat her to death, raped her and loved it. Yes, I'm sick, but I enjoy myself too. People took the blame and I'm free" (Painter, 1995a). Even though one of the missives contained information unknown at the time to the public, police in the Portland area paid little attention to the note since the author was unknown. The mystery deepened on March 29, 1994, when a letter postmarked in Portland arrived at the Washington County Courthouse. The anonymous writer claimed the couple was innocent. At the time, the female suspect was on trial. A short time later, a six-page, letter handwritten on blue paper arrived at *The Oregonian*. The writer complained that the letter sent to the courthouse was never in the newspaper. He then claimed responsibility for the Bennett slaying. Not only that, he took responsibility for several other slayings around the country. The writer wrote: "All 5 of 5 I would like to tell my story! I am a good person at times. I always wanted to be liked. I have been married and divorced with children..." (Stanford, 1994a). The writer, who claimed to be a long-haul truck driver, then provided details of the Bennett murder that had not been released by police. The writer signed the letter with a "Happy Face" at the top of the first page. A columnist for *The Oregonian* felt the "Happy Face" letter was genuine and in May, 1994, wrote a five-part series analyzing the letter and pointing out the details of the murder that only the killer probably knew. Police remained dubious. One police captain told reporters: "All police agencies in the country get letters from people. A lot of them have mental problems. You can read through the letters and

see they have no credibility” (Stanford, 1994b). Prosecutors stated that it would not shock them “to find out that somebody talked to somebody who talked to somebody” (Stanford, 1994b). One serial killer expert sided with *The Oregonian* in thinking the letter came from the killer. That expert was Robert Ressler, formerly of the FBI. He stated: “To be a hoax, a person would have had to learn a great deal about the case” (Stanford, 1994b).

**Investigative Value:** It was not until 1995 that investigators took the communiqués seriously (Painter, 1995b; Jespersion, 1999). The pieces began coming together on March 11, 1995, when the body of Julie Ann Winningham of Camas, Washington, was found. On March 22, 1995, investigators interviewed her boyfriend about Winningham’s death. He was a Canadian long-haul trucker named Keith Hunter Jespersion. The following day, while on the road in Arizona, Jespersion telephoned an investigator and confessed over the phone to killing his girlfriend. That same day, Jespersion wrote a letter to his brother in which he said that in the past five years he had killed several women. The Multnomah County District Attorney’s Office finally decided to take a new look at the Bennett murder case after Jespersion was returned to Oregon and he wrote the media that he was the author of the “Happy Face” letter sent to *The Oregonian* a year before. Handwriting experts concluded the same person wrote the restroom missives, the “Happy Face” letter, and the letter to Jespersion’s brother. Fingerprints on a letter also tied Jespersion to the crimes. Although the communiqués did not help in the identification of the killer, they were of investigative value in positively tying Jespersion to several killings. Jespersion is serving three life sentences in Oregon for three murders in Oregon and Washington. Other jurisdictions would like to put him on trial.

## **"ZODIAC KILLER" OF NEW YORK**

**Case History:** Twice during the 1990’s New York City was terrorized by a man who dubbed himself the "Zodiac Killer" and promised to methodically murder a person for each of the 12 signs of the Zodiac. The Killer’s first spree began in 1990 with Mario Orozco. At 2 a.m. March 8, 1990, the 49-year-old disabled man was shot in the back. On March 29 about 3 a.m., 33-year-old factory worker Jermaine Montenesdro was shot in the back six blocks from where Orozco died. The third victim became Joseph Proce, 78. He, too, was shot in the back as he walked with the aid of a cane. The assailant’s fourth victim turned out to be Larry Parham, a 30-year-old homeless man shot in the chest while he slept on a bench in a park. Suddenly, the killings stopped. Between 1992 and October, 1993, two persons were killed and two others wounded in assaults. Police were not aware those attacks were related to the Zodiac Killer until the Killer sent a communiqué claiming responsibility for the recent string of attacks (Kleinfield, 1996). The murders and communiqués came to a halt on June 18, 1996, when police arrested a Brooklyn loner obsessed with guns and religion. The man was named Heriberto Seda. A day after his arrest he confessed to being the Zodiac Killer. He could not have been the San Francisco Zodiac Killer, though, since he was an infant at the time. On June 24, 1998, Seda was found guilty of three killings and wounding one person.

**Communiqués:** Seda turned out to be a prolific writer of communiqués. His first letter of November 18, 1989, to the 75<sup>th</sup> Precinct stationhouse in Brooklyn warned police of his intentions. He planned to kill someone for each of the Zodiac signs. Police took the threat seriously, but they were jaded by the frequent odd crimes and letters sent to that particular precinct. It wasn’t until the third victim had been killed that the first communiqué was linked to

the murders. After shooting Proce, Seda left a handwritten note containing astrological symbols in a paper bag near the murder scene. On June 6, 1990, Seda sent letters to the CBS News program *60 Minutes* and to *The New York Post*. The letter named the three first victims and provided details probably known only to the Killer. The letter included the threats: “No more games pigs. The 12 signs will die when the belts in heaven are seen” (Kleinfield, 1996). An examination of the letter revealed that the handwriting matched that on the note left at the Proce shooting scene. A folded note with astrological signs was under a rock on the bench where Parham was sleeping when he was shot. The fifth communiqué to *The New York Post* threw investigators for a loop. The writer claimed to be the New York Zodiac Killer *and* the San Francisco Zodiac Killer. Up to this point the Zodiac Killer was only thought to be responsible for the attacks in 1990. The August 4, 1994, communiqué to *The New York Post* made investigators realize the Zodiac Killer had returned and was responsible for a string of attacks in 1992 and 1993. He wrote: “Hi, I’m back” (Kleinfield, 1996). Some people thought the letter was a hoax and the string of attacks in 1990 and those in 1992 and 1993 were unrelated. Detective Joseph R. Borrelli informed the media that the letter was not a hoax because it contained “intimate knowledge” of assaults. For six years the Zodiac Killer taunted police on their inability to catch him.

**Investigative Value:** Despite the many communiqués, the letters did not directly lead police to Seda and identify him as the Zodiac Killer. No one came forward and said they recognized the writing in the letters or the symbols in the letters as belonging to Seda. The communiqués did, however, contribute to solving the Zodiac case. Seda virtually jumped onto the lap of the police department, and his communiqués proved critical in police obtaining a confession. The happenstance capture came on June 18, 1996, when police responded to a disturbance and shooting at a home in Brooklyn. Seda lived at the home with his mother and his 17-year-old half-sister. So devoutly “religious” was Seda that he objected to his sister associating with drug dealers. Seda had, in fact, warned drug dealers about their evil ways and the fate that would befall them in hell. In this particular dispute Seda went berserk and shot his sister in the back. When police arrived, a gun battle ensued. After Seda’s arrest, a detective recognized similarities between his signed confession to the shooting of his half-sister and some of the notes signed by the Zodiac Killer (Toy, 1998). The most incriminating symbol was what became the Zodiac Killer’s signature, a circle with an overlapping cross and three 7’s that surrounded the cross. Prosecutors likened the symbol – scrawled on letters sent to the media in the early 1990’s – to the crosshairs of a rifle sight. Initially, Seda denied being the Zodiac Killer. His confession came only after he was confronted with physical evidence from the communiqués: The crosshairs symbol; Seda’s fingerprints fit those left at the 1990 attack in the park and on the 1994 letter mailed to *The New York Post*; and Seda’s DNA matched DNA in saliva found on an envelope used to send a communiqué.

## CONCLUSION

It is evident from examining some of the most notorious serial killer cases involving communiqués that the communiqués failed to lead directly to identifying a perpetrator. Although these killers injected themselves into cases, sometimes repeatedly for years, with poems, letters, and telephone calls to investigators or the news media, the communiqués did not lead to enough investigative evidence or clues to put an immediate end to a series of slayings. The communiqués, however, played a pivotal investigative role in helping police convict the

perpetrators in serial cases. Once the serial killer had been identified, the communiqués provided strong physical evidence – fingerprints, DNA, and handwriting samples – for conviction. The communiqués also assisted investigators in linking the suspect to specific cases and ascertaining which cases were part of the serial case. Judging from this evidence, the communiqués in the unsolved cases should solidly link a suspect to a string of murders and ensure a conviction if an arrest is made eventually.

Communiqués appear so rich in evidence – clues that can eventually help link a specific individual to a series of murders – that law enforcement officials should make communiqués more of a priority in serial cases and make it a point to reveal their content soon after the communiqués are received. That would allow the public to assist more in the investigation. Citizens who may suspect an individual or be familiar with the perpetrator’s handwriting are apt to make a connection when the case is fresh in their minds during the slayings. Currently, police practice and culture is to keep communiqués secret. This comes from a long history of trying to keep secret something only the killer would know for use in polygraphs. That tended to be the pattern in the cases evaluated for this study. Although police allowed release of some information in communiqués and the broadcast of some telephonic calls, for the most part police advocated hoarding the content of the communiqués. Sometimes the content of communiqués was not revealed to the public for years after the slayings.

There are other reasons why investigators should seriously think about changing their investigative approach in serial cases involving communiqués. Traditionally, investigators conduct investigations out of the public eye. Evidence and witness statements usually reveal the relationship between the victim and suspect, which assists police in identifying the suspect. That approach has worked well in traditional murder investigations, but it appears to falter in serial cases since often the victims are picked randomly by a person unknown in the victim’s circle of relatives or friends or coworkers. Since communiqués possess clues that can link the crimes to a specific individual, investigators should release their content with the hope that someone close to the killer will recognize the clues. Although in the cases studied the communiqués did not directly lead to the perpetrator, revealing details of communiqués to the public offers rich potential for a quicker resolution of the case. There have been criminal cases in which investigators identified the suspect by publicly revealing handwriting samples.

In 1992 an Ohio mother and her two teenaged daughters were raped, murdered, and dumped into the bay in Tampa Bay, Florida. One of the few clues was a brochure on which the suspected killer had written directions to a boat dock. After a county commissioner suggested the handwriting sample be made public, it was plastered on five billboards within two miles of the motel where the victims were staying. Someone recognized the handwriting as belonging to 45-year-old Oba Chandler, a suspected serial rapist. Chandler was convicted in the triple murder.

The Unabomber case was another investigation that argues for investigators to reveal communiqués. For over 18 years the FBI hunted for the Unabomber, the individual who sent letter or package bombs to professors and people involved with technology (Stolberg & Gladstone, 1996). The FBI had stored 22 million pieces of information in computer databases in their attempt to identify the killer. The Unabomber, Theodore Kaczynski, 53, eventually was

identified and apprehended in 1996 as a direct result of his writings, but only because his manifesto was published by major newspapers. For years, the FBI hoarded Kaczynski's communiqués. Kaczynski fits the broad definition of a serial killer – an individual who kills repeatedly with a cooling-off period between murders – but law enforcement and social scientists primarily view him as a revolutionary who sought to get his philosophy circulated to the masses. They do not generally consider him a serial killer as the term is mostly used today in association with sexually-motivated murders.

Investigators often argue that encouraging the media to publish communiqués might simply spawn copycat writers. That appeared to be what happened in the “Jack the Ripper” case of 1888 in England. Investigators agree that some of the communiqués to police were sent by the Ripper, but handwriting experts identified several hoax letters, which made the investigation more difficult (Rumbelow, 1987). That same scenario was replayed in the “Yorkshire Ripper” investigation of the 1970's in England. Someone claiming to be the Yorkshire Ripper contacted police, who then dedicated resources to trying to identify the voice. Among other things, officers visited “working-man's clubs” to play the Yorkshire Ripper tape (Cross, 1981; Burn, 1985). When Peter Sutcliffe was arrested for killing 13 women, his voice did not match the phone communiqué recordings. Serial killer cases are fraught with so few clues, though, that investigators should favor revealing the communiqués and find a way to deal with the task of sifting through false confessions and “kooks.” In fact, the authenticated communiqués themselves are a useful tool for handwriting experts and psycholinguistics expert to assist investigators in weeding out imposters.

Since investigators usually have no viable suspects in serial killer cases, it would behoove investigators to use their only obvious link to the identity of the killer: His or her communiqués. Investigators should seek to exploit this type of killers' weakness, a propensity to communicate. Investigators in the BTK case made a cursory attempt to communicate with the murderer. After the killer sent the Otero letter, police asked a columnist for *The Eagle-Beacon* to write a column in an attempt to get BTK to begin a dialog. The killer did not respond. In 1978, again at the request of police, KAKE-TV tried to contact BTK by appealing to his subconscious mind in a news report. Using a technique called subliminal communication, employees at the station spliced its news broadcast and inserted a few frames of film with the message: “Contact the chief” (Stephens, 1979). Police and the news media made a more concentrated attempt to communicate with the Zodiac Killer of San Francisco. Early in the killings a police chief doubted a letter sent to the *San Francisco Examiner* came from the killer and publicly asked the killer to provide more details. The killer did in a three-page letter. The killer wrote: “Dear Editor... This is the Zodiac speaking. In answer to your asking for more details about the good times I have had in Vallejo, I shall be very happy to supply even more material” (Graysmith, 1986). Off and on, the Zodiac Killer of San Francisco responded to statements made by police and occasionally wrote to an attorney and newspaper columnist. Once, the Sunday *San Francisco Examiner* wrote across the top of the front page: “We ask that you give yourself up to *The Examiner*... Call the City Editor of *The Examiner*, any time, day or night. The telephone number is (415) 781-2424. Call Collect” (Graysmith, 1986). The Zodiac Killer never wrote to *The Examiner* again. Although efforts to communicate with the killer in the BTK and Zodiac Killer case of San Francisco failed to lead to the killers' apprehension, this avenue should not be de-emphasized since it is a direct link to the killer. Law enforcement agencies on the local and

federal level should study this area to develop the best strategy to entice the killers to keep communicating. The more these killers communicate, the more chances investigators may have to identify him-her or get fingerprints or other evidence that can lead to solving a case or obtaining a conviction once there is an arrest. Fingerprints belonging to the killer were found in several of the communiqués discussed in this analysis. They appeared to be careless in writing and handling their communiqués. The Zodiac Killer of San Francisco seemed to be the only killer to systematically attempt to conceal his fingerprints. In one of his letters, he revealed he coated his fingertips with airplane cement. The longer the conversation continues, the greater the chances that the killer will make a mistake and provide a vital clue.

Law enforcement should encourage experts in psychology and psychiatry to conduct research geared toward helping investigators better understand the killers' mindset and behavior when sending communiqués. Is there anything police can say that would convince these type of killers to turn themselves in or provide a clue that would reveal their identity? The study of these killers revealed evidence – a pattern of commonalties – that the killers appear psychologically weak and vulnerable when communicating. They seem to want to be caught. That was the opinion of experts at a California medical facility, who stated in the San Francisco Zodiac Killer case: “And the taunting notes and phone calls may be a plea to be found out, exposed, perhaps cornered, in which event a grandiose paranoid quite likely might take his own life, as a grand gesture, to punish the world for its neglect of him in life” (Graysmith, 1986). An attorney who received letters from the San Francisco Zodiac Killer told reporters: “I believe he wants to stop killing. I have carefully studied his letter... and feel it was written at a time when he calmly and rationally was considering the future... That is why he is crying out for help” (Graysmith, 1986). In his letter to the attorney, the Zodiac Killer wrote: “The one thing I ask of you is this, please help me. I cannot reach out for help because of this thing in me won't let me. I am finding it extremely difficult to hold it in check... I am afraid I will loose control again... Please help me I am drowning” (Graysmith, 1986). Similar pleas are found in communiqués of the other serial killers included in this study. Wrote BTK: “It hard to control myself. You probably call me ‘psychotic with sexual perversion hang-up’. When this monster enter my brain I will never know. But, it here to stay... Maybe you can stop him. I can't” (BTK, 1974). The Weepy-Voice Killer begged to be caught, but he could not turn himself in. In one of his phone calls, he cried: “I couldn't help it. I don't know why I had to stab her. I'm so upset about it. I keep getting drunk everyday and I can't believe I killed her... I can't think of being locked up (Brown, 1981). The same was true with the Happy Face Killer. He told reporters he wrote to *The Oregonian* “because I wanted to be stopped.” The Lipstick Killer wrote: “For heaven's sake, catch me before I kill more; I cannot control myself” (Kennedy, 1947). After his arrest authorities learned that the Lipstick Killer tried to keep himself from going out to kill by taking off all his clothes. That failed to quell his urges and he got dressed and went looking for victims. When doctors asked the Lipstick Killer what he meant when he wrote, “Catch me before I kill more,” his response was: “That was George and I could not help what I was doing, and he was myself” (Kennedy, 1947). After his arrest he wrote to his mother and father, telling them he wanted to commit suicide to get rid of “George.”

If the serial killers in this study were on an emotional roller coaster when communicating with police or the news media, they would seem to be vulnerable to having their identify discovered. Yet because investigators tend to keep the communiqués secret, this vulnerability

may pass without detection. A systematic, investigative approach that better utilizes communiqués in serial killer investigations would better serve the public and law enforcement.

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### ENDNOTE

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