

Crimewatch UK then, that in his efforts to get *The Secret Policeman* withdrawn, Chief Constable Todd's most petulant shot across the bows was the threat that the police would withdraw their co-operation from the BBC's *Crimewatch UK* (*Observer*, 26 October 2003).

Crimewatch UK

The threat of the police retracting their support for *Crimewatch UK* was deemed significantly shocking to make headline news in the week following the transmission of *The Secret Policeman*, attesting to the place of *Crimewatch* in the television establishment and in the cultural identity of Britain. Still – after 30 years of transmission – pulling in audience shares of 17–18 per cent (around 4 million viewers), the show uses both dramatic reconstructions and surveillance footage of crimes to try to gain information from the public. *Crimewatch* is frequently singled out as being a significant contributor to false ideas about offending and victimization, and its format adheres closely to the 'news values' (discussed in Chapter 2) which skew public ideas about crime.

This final section of this chapter will explore this proposition, paying particular attention to the programme's constructions of offenders, victims and the police.

Crimewatch UK was one of the forerunners of 'reality television' and although shot conventionally in a television studio, was one of the first television programmes to include dramatic reconstructions of crimes and footage from CCTV, and also among the first to rely on audience participation. The series, which is broadcast monthly for 10 months of the year, began on BBC1 in 1984, a time of increasing political focus on issues of law and order, and mounting public concern that victims of crime were getting a raw deal (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). *Crimewatch* itself became the subject of media attention when, in 1999, its presenter, Jill Dando, was violently murdered on the doorstep of her home. The show's producers took a concept that already existed in the form of *Police Five* (an ITV show that ran from 1962-90) and added the 'magic ingredient' of audience participation (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994: 253). They looked to the phenomenally successful *America's Most Wanted* but rejected the overt dramatization favoured in this show, where reconstructions of crimes were filmed in slow motion and accompanied by dramatic music in order to heighten viewers' sense of suspense and excitement. They also studied the German programme *Aktenzeichen XY ... Ungeklärt* (*Case XY ... Unsolved*), which had already been running for 17 years, but decided against the German method of filming reconstructions from the perspective of the offender, especially in relation to sexual offences such as rape (1994: 253).

The formula of *Crimewatch UK* has remained virtually unaltered since it first aired in 1984. There are three or four reconstructions, usually of very serious crimes such as murder, armed robbery or rape; a segment which reveals CCTV footage of offenders with an appeal to anyone who can identify them to come forward; photographs of suspects whose names are known, but whose whereabouts are not; and updates on cases previously featured - a device that has the three-fold purposes of congratulating the audience for helping to secure convictions, making them feel absolutely integral to the show, and further giving the (inaccurate) impression that *Crimewatch* is largely responsible for solving serious crimes in the UK. There have been only three significant changes in content since the first broadcast nearly three decades ago. First, the show has come to rely increasingly on CCTV footage, which is more common and of better quality than was the case in the 1980s. Accordingly, stills and moving images from CCTV cameras form a much greater part of each programme, sometimes being used to supplement dramatic reconstructions of a crime, as well as being used as free-standing items in other sections of the show. The second major new innovation is in DNA testing, which has enabled the police to reopen old files and work with the producers of *Crimewatch UK* in reconstructing cases that might otherwise have been consigned to history.

Reconstructions of crimes from the 1960s and 1970s have added an interesting new element to the programme, requiring *Crimewatch* researchers to reflect the period in which the offence occurred with authentic cars, fashions and hairstyles, which also have the benefit of appealing to audiences through discourses of memory, nostalgia and loss. The third innovation since the very earliest days is that the programme is now supported by a website (<http://www.bbc.co.uk/crimewatch/>) which carries details of the cases covered and facilitates audience response. Otherwise, the only variations in the programme's content have reflected commensurate changes in patterns of offending, with decreasing numbers of armed robberies on banks and building societies featured and an increase in appeals for information about terrorists and paedophiles.

Dramatized reconstructions are the trademark of *Crimewatch UK* and are the elements that have drawn most vehement criticism. The writing and filming of crime reconstructions are governed by guidelines intended to guard against them being used to attract, entertain or disturb audiences and to minimize the potential distress caused to victims of crime and their relatives. As we shall see through the remainder of this chapter, these guidelines are interpreted somewhat loosely by the producers of *Crimewatch UK*. The tension between information and entertainment that lies at the heart of *Crimewatch*'s audience appeal is a source of anguish for the programme's producers – or so they claim. Angela Holdsworth, former editor of the show, says that crime is kept in context:

We don't only focus on violent crime, but we are trying to help the police catch the more serious criminals, and a lot of serious crime involves violence. We agonise over everything we put in. We don't choose items for their entertainment value. But clearly we couldn't do something where television wouldn't help, where there's nothing to film. A journalistic sense must come into it. (*Guardian*, 3 September 1990)

But it is precisely this 'journalistic sense' that concerns many. Schlesinger and Tumber reflect on the fine line between documentary and drama that the programme makers have to tread, and the remarks of the show's original producer, Peter Chafer, that the emphasis is firmly on the former rather than the latter are arguably not as true in 2010 as they were in 1984 (Schlesinger and Tumber, 1994). For example, in an episode broadcast in October 2003, a reconstruction of what is described in the voice-over as an 'unprovoked ambush on a woman which could easily have killed her' starts with the sound of high-pitched screams which are then revealed to emanate from a group of women enjoying a hen party at a house in Blackpool, but a grisly impression has already been conveyed and the audience's appetite for vicarious violence has been whetted. As Sparks (1992: 156) notes, it is no coincidence that these 'crime scarers' employ the 'same syntax of depiction, narration and editing as crime fictions do',

and excitement, suspense and fear are the intended objectives of these techniques. In fact, it could be argued that the success of *Crimewatch* is dependent on its very capacity to frighten its audience and to give them a visceral thrill as they watch a serious crime unfolding.

Although intentionally dramatic, the crime reconstructions are defended by the programme makers and the BBC on public service grounds. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) observe that, by featuring human-interest-based tales of misfortune, *Crimewatch UK* has much in common with the popular press, and indeed nearly all the crimes selected will conform to journalistic news values. Like the popular media more generally, then, *Crimewatch* prioritizes crimes of violence and may amplify public fears that crime is spontaneous, random and indiscriminate. One of the unfortunate consequences of a television programme that relies on audience ratings, not only for its commercial success, but also to justify its self-proclaimed role in the business of crime detection, is that the producers actively seek out stories that will capture the public imagination and prick the consciences of any potential informants sufficiently to encourage them to pass on information. According to the Executive Producer in charge of BBC crime programmes (cited in Weaver, 1998), this justifies their steadfast adherence to a tried-and-tested formula that concentrates on the most violent and serious crimes, such as murder and rape, perpetrated on the most vulnerable victims; young women, girls and elderly women.

The preoccupation with danger, risk, fear, reassurance and retribution which underpins the reconstructed cases on *Crimewatch UK*, and the pleasure with which those emotions are experienced by the audience, inevitably raises ethical questions regarding victims' rights and the feelings of bereaved families. Actors' dialogue is frequently used to convey a sense of reality and encourage the viewing public to empathize with the victim, but it might be construed as titillating and taking unnecessary liberties with the truth. The BBC is a public service broadcasting company, but it still operates in a commercial environment and must produce attention-grabbing television in order to attract audiences. Barry Irving, then Director of the Police Foundation, alluded to this tension when he remarked:

A show like *Crimewatch* is too attractive to programme makers to be evaluated properly. It has everything. It panders to the British taste for a modicum of violence and nefarious activity, it's cheap to make, it promotes a whizz-bang action view of the police and encourages viewer participation. And over it all is a halo, because it is so evidently A Good Thing (*Guardian*, 3 September 1990).

Crimewatch UK is also viewed as A Good Thing because it has become a flagship for the BBC; an integral part of the broadcasting establishment, snuggling alongside *The Antiques Roadshow* and *Eastenders* in terms of longevity and audience familiarity. The possibility that it could start to be seen as 'cosy' and 'safe' may have encouraged its producers to 'up the ante' with increasing use

of ploys designed to encourage viewers' inquisitiveness and maximize their loyalty. One favourite tactic to try and keep viewers watching this thirty-year-old programme is to include 'new' information about ongoing, unsolved but highly newsworthy crimes. For instance, in 2014, both the Madeleine McCann inquiry and the ongoing investigation into the disappearance of York University chef, Claudia Lawrence, have been featured on *Crimewatch*, seven years and five years respectively after they went missing. On the days following each broadcast, the new revelations brought to us by the *Crimewatch* team were, themselves, headline news items (e.g. 'Claudia Lawrence: *Crimewatch* appeal leads to "hugely significant" lead in hunt for missing chef', *Mirror*, 20 March 2014).

Crimewatching victims

Another innovation is the use of home video footage, showing the victim in 'happier times'. Like all photographic images, video footage speaks of a moment frozen in time, but may be all the more compelling because – to borrow a phrase from Paul Willis (1982: 78) it gives us 'real, solid, warm, *moving*, and *acting* bodies in actual situations'. Moving images of murder victims in the prime of life, smiling, laughing, fooling around for the camera, are a particularly poignant reminder of the fragility of life. A common device used to convey the wider impact of fatal crimes is the 'triangulation' of presenter, victim and victim's close relative (Jermyn, 2000: 185). In an openly emotional interview a bereaved