

five... broadcast, the new... brought to us by the *Crimewatch* team were, them-
selves, 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, 2003: 185). In an openly emotional interview a bereaved partner or parent will be interviewed in the studio with a large photograph of the victim positioned in the background, between them. As the interview progresses the camera cuts back several times to a close up on the image of the victim, while the presenter describes them as primarily a good wife and mother, or loving son and father. Victims are seen at weddings, birthday parties, on holidays and at graduation ceremonies – all quintessentially 'family' occasions. By allowing us into aspects of a life usually kept private, *Crimewatch* invites us not only to relate to the victim and their family, but also to imagine ourselves in their tragic circumstances. The privileging of familial ties also underlines the conservative ideological framework that is at the heart of assumptions about a case's 'newsworthiness' and reinforces cultural stereotypes about 'deserving' and 'undeserving' victims (see Chapter 2). As Jermyn states: 'It is difficult to imagine a *Crimewatch* victim outside of the parameters of the family: to not be in a family would be to not be a proper victim' (2003: 185).

However, even 'deserving' victims who are portrayed within a loving family context are also open to censure, which implies that they were partly to blame for their victimization. In cases of sexually motivated murders of young women – one of the most commonly featured crimes on the programme despite its relative infrequency in real life – there is often implicit criticism of the victim's behaviour in both the reconstruction and narration by the studio

presenter. Furthermore, despite strenuous claims to the contrary by those responsible for making the programme, the reconstructed crimes are frequently presented in a graphic and sensationalized manner, and female victims are sexualized unnecessarily. C. K. Weaver (1998) describes in detail one *Crimewatch* reconstruction of the sexual assault and murder of a 17-year-old female hitchhiker in which the victim, played by an actor, is shown lying on a sunbed at a friend's house in her underwear. Its invitation to voyeurism is reinforced by the fact that the frame is shot from above with the viewer's gaze bearing down on her. The scene has no relevance to the case and does not in any sense move the plot forward, yet is pivotal in conveying to the audience an impression of the victim. Allusions to the girl's culpability in her violent end are made throughout the reconstruction: she refused a lift home from her mother, failed to contact her boyfriend who spent the evening searching for her on his motorbike, resorted to hitchhiking home from her friend's house after dark and accepted a lift from a stranger in a van. All these examples of her recklessness are crystallized in the scene where she lies on the sunbed in her bra and pants, giggling with her friend. Here we see connections graphically made between feminine vanity, the desire for an attractive body to solicit attention on her forthcoming beach holiday, and risk-taking behaviour as the audience already knows that she met her death when she left her friend without arranging transport home (Weaver, 1998).

According to Kidd-Hewitt (1995), *Crimewatch* is guilty of locking certain sections of the audience into a terrorizing world of fear reinforcement, a belief supported by Weaver who conducted focus group interviews with women who were shown the reconstruction of the hitchhiker's murder. A common response was that taking a lift in a car may have been preferable to walking all the way home in the dark - the 'lesser of two evils', as one participant put it (Weaver, 1998: 256). Respondents also praised the reconstruction for raising awareness of the dangers facing women who go out alone in the evening, and even the sunbed scene was endorsed by some who felt that its 'watch and beware' tone justified its titillating nature. Although Weaver's study illustrates the polysemic nature of media texts with several different, and often competing, interpretations of the reconstruction being offered by her interviewees, the overwhelming response from the women interviewed is an unproblematic acceptance of *Crimewatch*'s warning to other women against hitchhiking. Most welcomed the 'public service' element of the show and ingested the programme's implicit criticism of the victim for engaging in irresponsible behaviour. Few questioned the belief that it is women's individual responsibility to restrict and censure their behaviour in order to avoid being the victim of crime, and none criticized *Crimewatch* for failing to provide any alternative means of imagining how violent attacks on women could be prevented. Weaver concludes that her interviewees' unquestioning absorption of this gendered narrative suggests that women accept that they must live in fear and can never expect to achieve the personal freedom and independence of men (Weaver, 1998: 262).

The extent to which especially those central theme of broadsheet and Independent Broadsheet that *Crimewatch* has of being a potent fear was largely particularly unfavourable March 2003 broadsheet murder of 17-year-old

Murders of young women they're pretty ugly more people are there is something the appeals the

Ross then produced cases, all of which 12-month period of exposure to then strangers in urban areas the impression of the show low. Furthermore fears because where the police investigative murderer/rapist

A further problem is one which is of, or hostile to, ties. *Crimewatch* under-represents the role of the police, of the (www.bbc.co.uk) programme

The extent to which *Crimewatch UK* amplifies fear among its viewers - especially those least likely to be victims of serious crimes - has been a central theme of both media studies and criminology literature on the subject. Schlesinger and Tumber (1994) note that research carried out by the Independent Broadcasting Authority found that one in three viewers thought that *Crimewatch* had made them, and probably other viewers, feel more afraid of being a potential victim of crime. The BBC's own research claimed that fear was largely confined to female viewers, especially those living alone. A particularly unfortunate monologue by then presenter Nick Ross in the March 2003 broadcast followed the reconstruction of the sexually motivated murder of 17-year-old 'A'-Level student, Hannah Foster:

Murders of young women like Hannah make headline news for the very reason that they're pretty unusual. Two-thirds of Britain's murder victims are male and six times more people are killed each year in road accidents than in homicides. But of course there is something especially upsetting about the murders of women and these are the appeals that tend to get the biggest response from *Crimewatch* viewers.

Ross then proceeds to give updates on four similar yet unconnected murder cases, all of which occurred in the capital or surrounding area within a 12-month period. Despite apparently trying to reassure viewers, Ross's decision to then bring together reports on five young women murdered by strangers in unconnected, unprovoked, seemingly motiveless attacks, created the impression of a terrifying crime wave and made his cheery advice at the end of the show - 'Don't have nightmares, do sleep well!' - seem rather hollow. Furthermore, by its very nature, *Crimewatch UK* may amplify audience fears because it only reconstructs crimes that are unsolved; crimes, in fact, where the police have no significant leads and have reached the end of an investigative cul-de-sac. Hence, the viewer is denied a sense of closure - the murderer/rapist/ thief is still 'out there' and ready to strike again.

Crimewatching offenders

A further problem that has been identified in relation to *Crimewatch UK*, and one which it shares with the media more widely, is that it may generate fear of, or hostility towards, particular groups such as people from ethnic minorities. *Crimewatch* tends to over-represent crimes involving black offenders and under-represent black victims, especially males in both categories. For example, of the six 'Wanted faces' featured in March 2014, five were black men (www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b006ppmq/profiles/wanted-currentyear). The programme also frequently fails to distinguish between different ethnic and national groups, homogenizing offenders' 'otherness' with phrases like 'North African appearance', 'Mediterranean appearance' or 'Kosovan appearance'.

Female 'serious' offenders are rarely included and women more commonly feature as perpetrators of fraud and other financial crimes.

While victims are firmly located within family structures and are thus 'legitimized' as innocent and undeserving casualties, the same contextualization is never extended to offenders (Jermyn, 2003). Constructions of offenders are the antithesis to those of victims. While victims are shown within their family contexts, affirming their 'normality' and 'typicality', offenders are invariably anonymous, constructed as individuals and existing in isolation of social and familial ties. Because *Crimewatch* can show only cases where there are no significant leads or suspects (for fear of prejudicing a trial), the offender is frequently not seen in the reconstruction at all, or may be represented only symbolically as a figure in extreme long-shot, either walking or running near the scene of the crime or as a shadowy figure at the wheel of a vehicle. These representations-from-a-distance reinforce the impression of the offender as 'outsider' with no ties to domesticity or 'normality'. This is an important point in relation to public constructions of criminals, and contrasts with other television genres where knowledge about the background of offenders and the context of their crimes, elicits a very different response. For example, Gillespie and McLaughlin (2002) conducted a study which showed that, in group discussions of media narratives, respondents displayed shifts in opinion regarding offenders depending on what television genre was being discussed. In conversations about soap operas the overtly punitive opinions that many had previously expressed about offenders were challenged, and ultimately reconfigured, in line with what they 'knew' about the character. In accordance with early media studies which proposed that media content had a more significant impact on audience members if they could, in some way 'identify' with the character being portrayed, Gillespie and McLaughlin found that where respondents could empathize with the offender on the basis of what they knew about him or her, a less punitive attitude was adopted. This 'deeper knowledge' of the background of the offender and the crime is precisely what is missing from *Crimewatch UK* where sympathy, empathy or understanding are simply not options. In presenting offenders as 'others' and their crimes as senseless and random, programmes like *Crimewatch* stimulate sentiments of revulsion and repugnance towards offenders and reinforce populist ideas about punishment (Gillespie and McLaughlin, 2002).

Crimewatching the police

When the police were first approached about co-operating with the show's producers they were initially suspicious of the idea. However, *Crimewatch UK* has proved to be one of the most effective public relations exercises at

the police's disposal. In fact, the benefits to them in terms of the warm feelings induced by watching the police and public working together to solve crimes arguably outweighs all other benefits of the programme. This is a fact clearly understood by the police, despite the threat by Greater Manchester Chief Constable to boycott the show. The producers of *Crimewatch UK* are at pains to point out that they maintain their autonomy from the police (although ironically one of the current presenters, Rav Wilding, is himself an ex-police officer) but one of the main criticisms levelled at the programme is that they do not seek information from any other source and that the police have too much say in what gets broadcast. While this means that the production team have unique access to every detail of an investigation, and are privy to aspects of a case that may not have been revealed publicly, the flipside is that the police can determine the conditions under which knowledge is used. Each broadcast of *Crimewatch* includes around 30 police officers from all over the UK who appear on the programme in support of their respective cases. Typically, these will include senior investigating officers who will usually take part in a live interview with one of the main presenters. These personnel represent the human face of the police service and are there to inspire confidence in potential witnesses or informants to telephone the incident room. In this respect the programme is undoubtedly successful, although of the calls that come in during and after each broadcast (an average of around 1,000 according to the programme's website) only two or three may be of use.

In essence, then, editorial control is a trade-off between the police, who recognize that *Crimewatch* gives them unparalleled access to potential sources of information, and the programme makers who are in the business of entertaining their audience – however voyeuristically that might be achieved. It is the alliance between the media and the police that is the key to the programme's longevity. *Crimewatch* is a safe haven for the police: unlike other media genres they are not going to be criticized or challenged here. The success of the partnership is measured in arrests. Between 1984 and 2000, the *Crimewatch* team claimed there were 582 arrests as a direct result of the programme (cited in Leishman and Mason, 2003: 115) and they point to several 'mega-cases' that were solved after being covered on *Crimewatch*. While undoubtedly impressive, quantitative claims are impossible to substantiate: many of these arrests may have occurred anyway. Nonetheless, the programme functions as a vehicle for reinforcing the police's role as successful crime fighters and both *Crimewatch* and its spin-off *Crimewatch Solved* which, as the title indicates, reconstructs investigations that have resulted in a positive outcome and justice done, could hardly be more laudatory and less challenging in their portrayal of the police as heroic crime fighters (O'Leary, 2003).