

*CRIMEWATCH UK was broadcast for the first time in June 1984 and has built and retained an enormous popular appeal. The critical attention paid to it has been based on allegations that the programme's core of real crime reconstructions panders to sensationalism and possibly engenders an unnecessary fear of crime amongst the most vulnerable viewers. That debate goes on, but there is no doubting the programme's strengths. It makes*

*violence and wickedness of real life. But it is clearly providing a window that helps us to empathise with the plight of a variety of victims of crime and possibly to do something about it - to speed up the detection process. In a wide-ranging interview, Nick Ross, the programme's presenter since that first live broadcast over 13 years ago, gives us an opportunity to consider this genre of programme and some of the claims that it supports, and others that it may possibly undermine, criminal justice. Or perhaps we just agree with him that it represents "... a jolly good watch".*

# Crimewatcher

**Nick Ross talks to David Kidd-Hewitt.**



David Kidd-Hewitt

*possible a unique interactive relationship between the viewer, the broadcast media and the police in aiding the identification of the perpetrators of crime, particularly serious and violent crime. Can this form of media presentation therefore, help the criminal justice process or perhaps act in some small way as an antidote to the undermining of justice elsewhere? There remains an uneasy tension for some between Crimewatch's mission to entertain whilst bringing before the viewer, the*

*Crimewatch UK has become a teenager - 13 years old last June. What do you think is the basis of its popular appeal?*

Crimewatch is interactive. On the whole, there is nothing much you can do about the television that is beamed at you, except froth and foam or sit there like a couch potato and take it in or maybe switch channels. But with Crimewatch there's always a chance - and it's actually a reasonable chance - that there is something you might recognise, even if it is only a part of the countryside that you know. But it's quite possible you know somebody who's rung the programme, and there is always that little frisson to it that maybe you'll be able to participate.

I think it gives a genuine sense of being on the side of the angels, of being able to do good. To many people the world is made up of goodies and baddies, although of course we are all a mix of goodies and baddies. Everybody, whatever their own behaviour and however much they are despised by others, has their own standards. If you are a safebreaker, you don't necessarily put up with paedophiles attacking children. And if you attack young children you don't necessarily put up with bank robbers for instance. So almost everybody has a sense of being able to do something about what they perceive as justice.

As a second issue, I think it's just a jolly good watch. The idea that there is a difference between information programmes and entertainment programmes is true. If the information isn't entertaining, nobody will watch.

*I wondered about that because in your book about the programme there was this concern that it really shouldn't be as entertaining as perhaps it's turning out to be. Are you worried that people enjoy watching it - is there the edge of a worry there?*

I'm really not. As for whether it's a good thing that people enjoy Crimewatch - yes I think it is. I'm not at all ashamed that we make popular television. I would be ashamed if we made populist television. In other words if we had to degrade standards in order to improve the audience. I think it's condescending, it's patronising to believe that going down market - actually abandoning morality - is what drives you into bigger audiences. I don't think it does.

I think there was an awful lot of misunderstanding at the beginning by some of the critics of Crimewatch, particularly those who didn't see it and certainly didn't analyse it, who felt that we would be driven to get a bigger audience by being more and more violent. They just didn't understand that actually that's not right. When people go to bed immediately after a programme which they know is factual, the last thing they want to see is a lot of violence on the screen. They won't go to sleep.

In fact there were far fewer conflicts than we first imagined in that respect. Our interests and the audience's interests are very closely aligned. Our prime aim is to be faithful and honest to the victims that our producers and directors go out and meet and to make sure that the people who have hurt them don't re-offend. It's honestly the biggest issue in the office.

*In the early days your producer, Peter Chafer, made a clear distinction between what he called a documentary reconstruction and a drama documentary. He was very keen to emphasise that Crimewatch was not engaged in drama. Is this still the case?*

I think this was the nomenclature of the time. What I would say is that we are not involved in fiction, and whenever we get something wrong we always try to point it out. Sometimes it's laughable. For instance, one particular bank raid

happened in June but when we reconstructed it, it was snowing. We couldn't wait for three or four days until the snow stopped. So we just had to say in the introduction 'that's wrong'. Or if we get the colours of cars wrong it's very, very important. Firstly for the appeal, secondly we don't want to prejudice the trial by having something wrong, and thirdly just for the integrity of the thing. People trust the BBC and they will only trust us if we continue to tell the truth and we continue to be meticulous about getting it right.

Incidentally, when we come back and report what's happening and how well things have gone, we always say to the officers, 'if the response is bad, if you are getting nothing, say so' because people won't believe us if we say the response is good unless we also sometimes say it's bad.

*It was originally suggested that you might get witnesses to believe they had seen something that they didn't really see, because the enactment can add a bit of a gloss to reality. Has that dilemma gone away?*

It has, actually. We set out in uncharted territory so we felt our way at first and with hindsight we got a lot of things wrong. We portrayed things we would never portray now. We hadn't understood what you might call the Hitchcock shower sequence effect: that cutting before the violent scene actually leaves more to the imagination. We found that viewers thought we had actually shown them scenes that we hadn't.

But might we contaminate the judicial process? That theoretically remains a danger, but after 13 years it's never been seriously raised by anybody as an issue. Most witnesses seem to be pretty robust.

*In your book you recounted how difficult it was in the early days to find three cases suitable for reconstruction per programme. Is this still a problem.*

There are a lot of things that have to come together to make a reconstruction - one of which is of course that the public can help. Now the public can help with quite a lot of crimes, but not all: perhaps the police have got pretty much all the witness evidence they want, or they are awaiting forensic evidence, or all sorts of other things. So that narrows it down.

Once you've got issues with which the public can help, then you have to ask: does it warrant a reconstruction? In other words is there a story there, in which we can show things which will jog people's memories?

Reconstructions can do two things I suppose. They can stir people's emotions to ring in when they wouldn't otherwise have done so, or they can jog people's memories about things they had not otherwise connected with a crime. It's quite rare that you get that combination. We can go through 30 or 40 or 50 cases and you think, there's nothing much to show.

Take offences which are very grave, where people have been injured or sexually assaulted: how do you get a relative who has had a fleeting thought - 'Oh God, could that have been Jerry?' - to the point where they become so emotionally involved that they are prepared to contact the police?

Then there are the ethical issues about intrusion. Take the one we've just done with the Russell family. Josie Russell had got sick of media attention, for heaven's sake, and her father managed to get away from Kent and up to North Wales - did he want Crimewatch to come and bring more? Do the police want you? Do the victims want you? Do the witnesses? Sometimes if a witness is absolutely adamant - they are frightened of someone for example - that's a very good reason not to do a reconstruction.

In fact there are only around 600 homicides a year. That's not much more than a dozen a week - and most of those are pretty much open and shut, and where they are not open and shut they are very unlikely to be ones with strangers, real strangers, involved. So our involvement with that sort of crime is quite limited, I'm happy to say.

*Are we denying the possibility of looking at more complex cases - fraud for example, would be a difficult one - because they are not entertaining?*

Fraud is a difficult one for only one reason: what sort of witnesses are we going to get? Was the fraud done at 80 miles an hour drawing attention to itself down the M4? In fact I think we have got more arrests for white collar crime than any other single category. But if you are talking about the sort of frauds that go on in a bank, committed by staff or by directors, you can't expect Crimewatch to help. We can't expose a Robert Maxwell

- that is not how a general public appeal programme works. But if you really thought that a public appeal would help solve one of these multi-zillion pound frauds in one of the great financial institutions of the City - great! Bring it to us.

*Ever since they began, newspapers have wanted to get what they can from the police about any kind of murder or dramatic event. You have this lovely phrase in the Crimewatch UK book about persuading police officers to "unlock all their secrets". Do you think you are succeeding?*

Actually it's not strictly true, certainly not as far as the broadcast media are concerned, that journalists have always attempted to get the police to tell them everything. Radio and television have always had a rather hands off approach to the police unlike the crime correspondents of newspapers. When Crimewatch started, the police were rather sneered at by television and radio. We regarded them as just another part of the crime industry.

So, when Crimewatch started, only three police forces wanted to have anything to do with us. Most of them wouldn't touch us with a barge pole. It was pretty mutual, I have to say. But over 13 and a half years the image of the police has improved enormously. I think Crimewatch has helped to contribute to that: it's been a cause as well as an effect of that change.

My experience of the police is that you get a pretty normal distribution curve. Most are in the middle, some are so bright and sharp you wonder what on earth they are doing in the police and why they aren't running a big company and making lots of money, and some are so dim you wonder how they are holding down their jobs. But isn't that true in television? Isn't that true in academia or anywhere else? And on the whole, yes, they will divulge to us.

*The power relationship is an important one. Do you still retain overall control?*

We do, we must. We're less prissy about this than we were thirteen and a half years ago, when we would say: editorial control rests with us - we're the BBC - that's it. But the truth is, now, that if a police officer doesn't want me to say something because it is sensitive in his or her inquiry, it doesn't get said. Now, am I doing a disservice to the public by withholding

that? I am a journalist as well as presenting Crimewatch. If I felt there was something underhand going on, that I was being asked, say, to protect the police from charges of corruption, that would be a different matter. That's never arisen nor have we come within a thousand miles of it.

We will often argue with them but only when we honestly think it is in their own interests. There is a true symbiosis here. If they don't catch their people through the programme, then the programme has failed. And if the programme failed it wouldn't continue.

*That seems rather a dramatic conclusion. You could have stimulated people to be more aware of situations so that other people might find it more difficult to commit that type of crime.*

I don't think people learn much about how to avoid crimes through Crimewatch. Whereas people may underestimate the chances of being involved in a road accident - actually the likeliest way of dying between the ages of about 4 and 45 - people tend to exaggerate their likelihood of being the victim of a violent crime. And so rather than teaching people how to avoid these circumstances we tend to shy away from that because we don't want to increase fear of crime. On the contrary, we want to say 'come on don't be ridiculous, when you walk out in the street don't watch the shadows and dart from doorway to doorway, going around with a shriek alarm and heaven knows what. Act as though the streets are yours'.

The only justification for Crimewatch is that it reduces victimisation. And it does that by catching people who are likely to re-offend - and we tend to look for crimes where there is a likelihood of re-offending. But it does it in another way too. There are two victims of crimes - there is the person who is the immediate victim because they are assaulted, they are robbed whatever, and then there is the person who has gone into crime and gets their life screwed up as a result of it. I hope that we have some deterrent effect, albeit a very minor one.

We go out of our way to show crime not paying, but in a grown-up way rather than in a trite, Superman-type way. For example in the August programme there is a blackmail. Now we can say honestly blackmail is a crime that almost never succeeds in the UK. We know for a variety of reasons that there is a very high reporting rate for blackmail. We also know there is a very high clear-up rate. So



here is an opportunity to put in a little crime prevention message.

### **A**re you ever accused of encouraging copycat crimes?

Oh yes, although the accusations never come from people who are in the 'crime business' - the criminologists, police and prison officers, and judges. They come from people who intuitively feel we are showing people something which they wouldn't otherwise know. I'm terribly reluctant to sound goody-two-shoes about it all, but you do have to think very carefully about what you show.

So often a car-theft is involved, for instance. There are good reasons to show how cars are stolen, to stop people being so reckless about their vehicles, but actually we never do. Another example would be how to disable an alarm system. Anybody who works in the business knows it's a pretty straightforward thing, but we wouldn't dream of showing it. Where security is at stake, for instance a security van robbery, we'll change details. Where we can point out the dangers of you trying things out yourself, we will. If the smoke canister contained in the cash box didn't go off, we will point that out, making the point that otherwise they'd all be covered in permanent dye. We also talk down activities. We talk about people 'running away' rather than 'escaping', 'fleeing' rather than 'making off'.

**Y**ou are obviously meticulous about the reconstructions shown on *Crimewatch*? Is there a worry that justice could be undermined by less scrupulous media coverage?

I think crime programmes will have to get it right, otherwise they will get into trouble. There has always been a danger that people

who don't come from a factual programme background are what journalists regard as cavalier. There have always been reconstructions and drama documentaries and there always will be - and some pay scant regard to the truth, others are meticulous. Even to the point of saying 'it could have been a red car, it could have been an orange car. No-one's quite sure'. But I think that recklessness about facts will always be there.

**D**o you think the media have a place in the criminal justice process, in exposing the difficult edges or corners that would be overlooked otherwise?

Well, inevitably, the media are going to be used for the difficult bits. If somebody is sent to prison when the evidence is absolutely overwhelming and he or she has admitted the offence, you are really not going to get a 'Rough Justice' programme made about it. It's where you get a stranger murder, which appears to be motiveless, or somebody sent to prison for a murder where there is that real nagging doubt about whether they did it - that's where there is room for the *Crimewatches*, and the *Rough Justices*.

I think it is natural that the media should look at the more difficult cases. Their role is pretty self-evident: to galvanise public opinion, to get us to focus on things where we can help or where public pressure can help.

**W**hat impact do you think *Crimewatch* has made on the criminal justice system?

I think it has made very little impact on the criminal justice system

as a whole, very little indeed. It has been part of a process in which the police have been perceived to be more generally acceptable, although I personally think there is a long way to go. As far as the courts are concerned I don't think we have had any impact at all - I really don't. As regards the probation service, the prison service and so on - I suppose what we have done is to provide a bulletin board to allow for an interchange of information. Numbers of cases are solved because a police officer, a prison officer or a forensic psychologist recognises somebody.

**I**f you could re-design *Crimewatch* for the millennium and you had a pretty good budget, would you do much differently?

Yes, I would spend the money on talking to the police more. There is a problem in direct access to the police. The police are used to working through press officers and press officers are mighty jealous of their power. And the press officers tend to see *Crimewatch* as just another media outlet. I don't see us as that at all. I see us as an instrument, a tool for the police to use for detective work. I am quite unapologetic about that, I think we are all on the same side. Whereas if press officers give anything to any newspaper or most other programmes, they can't really control what happens, with us they really can.

I'll give you an example. They held a press conference on the Russell case at 10 o'clock that morning which ran big in the evening papers, and in the newspapers the following day. It was on all the news bulletins, both radio and television. I think they had between 50 and 100 calls. From *Crimewatch* they had 800 to 1000 calls - now why? It was because the others ran it as a news story and we ran it as an appeal.

To come back to what I would spend my money on: I would try to get police officers to come to us first. Don't wait until the case is 18 months old. So often they come to us just as they are closing down the incident room, when a huge amount of money has been spent, a huge number of people have been interviewed and heaven knows what has been done. Whereas if they had come to us earlier we could have told them maybe we can't do it, but maybe we could have helped them solve the case much earlier.

I would also spend the money explaining to detectives what it is that we need from a public appeal: what the elements are that a reconstruction requires. It has got to be more than just an interesting story.

*Crimewatch* is at its best, actually, where you've got lots of individual elements that may all seem unimportant but which somebody close to the offender will recognise. They may not know the make of car but that it's red, brown or orange, that it hasn't appeared since January, that most of these crimes are committed on a Thursday or Friday and for some reason they are all after 6pm - just things like that which may not mean very much to anybody else but will lock together if you've already got a vague suspicion. Now getting that across to police officers: that's what I would spend the money on I think.

**D**on't have nightmares. Do sleep well. Is this a hollow cliché?

Let me tell you how that came about. When we did the pilot programme we had sat in the cutting room and looked at all these things, and thought we had been very careful about it, then we went into the studio and we recorded them. We did the programme live, in fact we didn't even have a chance to rehearse it. And it was only when we were assembling the script that we realised it just seemed to be an enormous catalogue of crimes. We thought we were going to raise fear of murder and rape and mayhem. So I just thought at the end, we ought to say - and I'm not even sure that it wasn't ad libbed in the first one - 'Don't have nightmares, do sleep well'. And we got a lot of letters about the nice, reassuring bit at the end. Somebody said, 'you must say that next time' and I said 'Oh no, it'll become a cliché if we say it again'. Anyway the decision was taken and we said it a second time and once we said it a second time it sort of stuck.

On the 10th anniversary I was determined we would drop it. Eventually I managed to persuade everybody we should drop it and we did. And literally, we got two sackfuls of letters. People talk about a sackful of letters but when you see one, it's amazing. And to cap it all, an ITV programme which was a sort of rip-off of *Crimewatch*, closed the following week by stealing our catchphrase. That was too much for us, so it came back.

*Nick Ross is a journalist and presenter of the BBC TV programme *Crimewatch*. His book, *Crimewatch UK*, co-authored with Sue Cook, was published in 1987 by Hodder and Stoughton.*