



# “DON'T HAVE NIGHTMARES....”

## A look at *Crimewatch* UK

*Crimewatch UK's selection criteria put it firmly in the camp of popular journalism and relate closely to the need to hold a large audience. The programme has broken new ground in British television's co-operation with the police. This article is based on a much more detailed account entitled **Fighting the War Against Crime: Television, Police and Audience**, published in the *British Journal of Criminology* Vol. 33 No. 1 Winter 1993 pp.19-32 which we hope you will be interested to consult after reading this abridged account. Grateful thanks are extended to the authors Philip Schlesinger and Howard Tumber for their permission to use their work and to the Editor of the *British Journal of Criminology* for permission to reproduce these extracts.*

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Apart from a two-month summer break, *Crimewatch UK* is broadcast monthly on the BBC's main channel, BBC1. Since 1984, when the programme was first launched, it has regularly attracted an audience of between nine million and thirteen million viewers - with no signs of falling popularity - and has enjoyed a very high audience appreciation rating.

Each month a selection of crimes is portrayed using a variety of televisual techniques including reconstructions, photofits and security videos of robberies in progress, and the audience is invited to assist the police with their inquiries by providing relevant information. In September 1990, *Crimewatch* was claiming 251 arrests as attributable to the programme, with 171 convictions out of 686 cases covered in the first six series.

### Justifiably afraid?

*Crimewatch* has, however, periodically attracted critical attention, usually in the form of accusations of sensationalism and concern about its alleged contribution to the creation of fear of crime (Dunkley 1988a, b; Sweeney 1992). The findings of a study commissioned by the Broadcasting Standards Council suggest that over half the women studied felt that some media, especially television and the tabloid press, increased their fear of crime and that over three-quarters thought crime-reporting might increase women's



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fear of being attacked. *Crimewatch* was said by over half of the respondents to 'increase' their fear of crime, with one-third saying that it made them 'feel afraid'. The attempt by the presenter to reassure at the end of the broadcast by stressing that the crimes shown are unusual and urging viewers not to have nightmares was sometimes viewed with derision and dismissiveness, (Schlesinger, et. al. 1992 39-40 & 69).

An earlier BBC study found that eight out of ten viewers watch *Crimewatch* and that some three-quarters of the audience find it interesting. Respondents drew attention to both its social function in crime-fighting and its individual function of raising personal awareness of crime. The researchers detected ambivalence about the use of reconstructions; in particular, among some respondents, concern that these might gratuitously show violence, increase fear of crime, produce 'copycatting' and encourage voyeurism. However, such worries were evidently far outweighed by audience members' acceptance of the logic of the television producers' programme values: namely, that reconstructions were essential for jogging witnesses's memories, for heightening awareness and for capturing a large audience. The vast majority of the BBC's sample (82%) found that the level of televised violence in the programme was acceptable. However the study did acknowledge that the programme was held to cause fear among female viewers, especially those living

or viewing alone (BBC Broadcasting Research 1988:18). The more recent study mentioned above (Schlesinger et. al. 1992) further discovered that the idea that such programmes may generally mobilize audiences against crime and criminals was challenged by the ways in which respondents carefully distinguished between crimes against property and crimes against the person. The women identified strongly with the dangers of personal physical attack but could be quite detached from frauds or confidence tricks, which might be seen as amusing or worthy of admiration (Schlesinger et. al. 1992: 55-6).

### Fact not fiction

Despite the varied programme menu, the 'reconstructions' occupy centre stage, they are the longest items by far, running for up to ten minutes each. The programme's 'founding father', Peter Chafer, has stressed that *Crimewatch* engaged in 'documentary reconstruction' as opposed to 'drama-documentary': "the word 'drama' is considered to be rather a filthy word down in the *Crimewatch* office". The directors were all initially recruited from within the documentary tradition, and it was only after the programme's format had become well established that Chafer "allowed one or two guest people to come in who had done a bit of drama". A firm line is therefore drawn between 'fact' and 'fiction'. In Peter Chafer's words "*Crimewatch* is about a ... rather un-



# ...DO SLEEP WELL!

pleasant reality, and therefore, I do everything I can to remind people that this is not cops and robbers à la Dempsey and Makepeace, Cagney and Lacey, The Bill (or) The Sweeney”.

## Not just murder

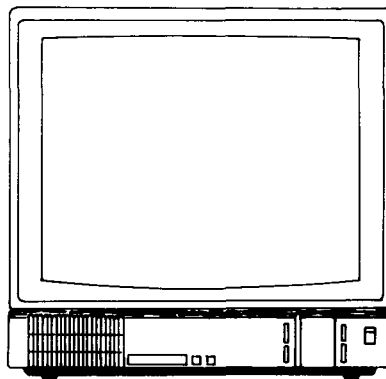
Crimewatch actively seeks out stories appropriate to its popular audience-holding goal, with researchers routinely calling each police force about ‘major unsolved crimes’. In addition, press reports in both the national and local press are used to select cases to be followed up. As the programme presenters observe, “... any crime that has hit the headlines is followed up, for though the motive may not be entirely virtuous, we believe it is in the programme’s interests to be seen at the centre of the crime detection business” (Ross & Cook 1987:29). In other words, Crimewatch capitalises on existing media attention as part of its audience-building strategy.

One major televisual criterion at work in *Crimewatch* is variety: “We need a spread of different types of cases, not just murder, in different places, not just Liverpool or London, and we need different types of action, not just high-speed chases through city streets. Some cases are too trivial to contemplate, others have only a local interest or point of appeal”. (Ross & Cook: 29). The reference to ‘not just murder’ is noteworthy, given the programme’s tendency to select instances of murder, armed robbery with violence and sexual stories as the main stories for reconstruction. The *Crimewatch* book, accordingly, selects the following tales to be recounted in detail: a violent robbery in Essex, a murder in a Scottish village, a violent pub raid in Merseyside, a double murder in Wales, an armed building society robber’s activities in Essex, the murder of two young boys in Essex, a series of antiques robberies, and the murder of a shopkeeper in Bristol. These crimes against the person and against property are typical of the popular news story.

However, where *Crimewatch* holds itself apart from down-market tabloid journalism is in the producer’s concern to try to avoid prurient interest in sexual detail. There is also concern with how violence should be represented.

## Editorial control

*Crimewatch* has a privileged relation with its source of information, the po-



lice, who have complete control over access to evidence and a determining voice over the possible uses to which this might be put. It is clear that the police as source, broadly define the terms of reference within which *Crimewatch* may operate.

Thus although the production team exercise editorial judgement over how the cases that they reconstruct are to be presented in televisual terms, their decisions take place within a well-defined framework. The producers also exercise judgement as to which cases they wish to pursue. But it is within these limited professional spheres that ‘editorial control’ functions. The BBC team has a symbiotic relation of exchange with the various police forces. Each needs the other. But clearly, although the police would continue to pursue criminals without television, without the active co-operation of the police no programme such as *Crimewatch* could exist. In terms of a power relation, it is plain that control over access is decisive, and that is where power ultimately lies.

The benefits of this bargain for the BBC lie in the winning formula of socially useful popular television, uncriticised by the police and law and order lobbies, although occasionally reservations on grounds of good taste and possible adverse effects are expressed by some television critics and academic researchers. As for the police, apart from undoubtedly achieving some results (though obviously on a minuscule scale in terms of the total incidence of crime), the main benefit, at a time of mounting public concern about crime lies in the widely diffused sense that something is being done about the problem.

## Crime pays

*Crimewatch* offers a generally useful

public relations context in which the police are portrayed in an unambiguously positive and sympathetic light.

What will become of this form of ‘responsible’ tabloid journalism as market conditions change significantly? Some believe that it might follow the explicitly violent and graphic model of the Fox network’s *America’s Most Wanted*. Although extrapolation from the very different system and circumstances of the USA is not to be undertaken without caution, the impact of the Broadcasting Act 1990 in changing the parameters of competition in British television is beginning to become clearer, with a general shift down-market now underway. It is increasingly evident that crime pays in audience terms, in attracting large numbers for both fictional and factual programming. At the time of writing, *Crimewatch*, *Crimestoppers* and *Crime Monthly* have been joined by *Crime Limited*, *Cops* and *Michael Winner’s True Crimes*, all dramatising real-life incidents from robbery to rape, and increasingly important as popular television. With traditional public service goals in broadcasting being increasingly marginalised, the sensationalist temptation may prove impossible to resist.

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