In Search of Annie: A Study of Viewers' Feedback to the Crime Documentaries Highlighting Famous Irish Murder and Missing Persons

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Abstract The purpose of this study is to offer some data to answer the question of who responds to media requests for assistance to help in solving major crimes, why do they, how opinionated are they, and how useful is the process? Six one hour documentaries were commissioned by an Irish national television station and presented by Mary Aiken and Mike Berry and broadcasted as “Crime in Mind” in a prime time slot. Five cases were identified for analysis including the case of Annie McCarrick, an American student, who disappeared from Dublin. All were cold cases where most avenues of investigation had been exhausted. A 'confidential web line’, a new Forensic Cyberpsychology online reporting medium, was employed to encourage viewers to add any new information or express views about the cold case(s). Initial analysis of the data is very promising; results are being actively pursued with the relevant authorities. This study has explored the characteristic and value of requesting help from the public, leveraging academic expertise, media and technology tools that may facilitate recall of material that could lead to the solving of serious offences. Findings including a breakdown of demographics, suspects and location of bodies.

Keywords Ireland, Murders, Missing People, Viewers' Responses, Cyberpsychology, Documentaries

1. Introduction

Have you watched a television programme on a serious crime and been asked to provide information (however small and apparently insignificant) to help the police solve the case, and wondered whatever happened? Did anyone respond, write, email, phone to help solve the case or even sent the police on wild goose chases? The focus of this study was to ascertain who responds to media requests for assistance to help the police in crime solving. Who responds to requests for the public’s help, why do they do so, how opinionated are they, and how useful is the process?

As a result of a great deal of public interest in various high profile missing persons and suspected murders in the Irish Republic, a series of six one hour documentaries were commissioned by TV3 (a major private television station serving the Irish Republic). The series was presented by Mary Aiken and Mike Berry and broadcast as “Crime in Mind” in a prime time slot (9-10pm Monday night), repeated on Wednesday nights. It should be noted that Irish Republic's population is approximately 4 million with a low homicide rate of less than 1.5 per 100,000 population with an average rate of less than 60 homicides a year and has a solution rate of around 80%. Often the gangland killers are known but cases cannot be proceeded with usually because of a lack of evidence. Nevertheless homicides and disappearances are of high news value and cases are often revisited by the media on anniversaries etc.

For the benefit of this study, five cases were identified for analysis to cover a wide range of cases rather than concentrate on one particular style of cases; all were ‘cold cases’ where most avenues of investigation had been exhausted because it is difficult to continue long standing cases. The sixth case was a rather unusual family murder/suicide of a man and his wife and their two daughters following visits to a funeral home in April 2007, to arrange their own family burial Berry and Cliff [1] briefly explored the reasons for it.

The five cases were: Annie McCarrick (aged 26), a 5’8” tall athletic American post-graduate student, studying education at the National University of Ireland (N.U.I.) in Maynooth, a university town 13 miles west of Dublin. Annie had recently returned to Dublin against her parents’ wishes. On Friday 26th March 1993, the day before her birthday, she appears to have rushed from her shared flat to make an unplanned journey and took two buses to Enniskerry (a
Dublin), and phoned a friend from a public phone box at the village of Moone in County Kildare (some 50 miles from being dropped off at a crossroad on the old main road leaving west of Dublin). She was off work for a few days so was planning to return to her family home. She was recorded as a bus to Naas and then hitchhike the rest of the way to her home in the peaceful prosperous Dublin suburb. She died 4th September 1999, in the laneway some 50 yards from her home in the village south of Dublin). She was later reported being isolated from Dublin.

Josephine (a.k.a. JoJo) Dullard (aged 21); a 5’4” medium built female who went missing on Thursday 9th November 1995. She missed her late night bus home, so decided to take a bus to Naas and then hitchhike the rest of the way to her family home in Callan in County Kilkenny (95 miles south west of Dublin). She was off work for a few days so was planning to return to her family home. She was recorded as being dropped off at a crossroad on the old main road leaving the village of Moone in County Kildare (some 50 miles from Dublin), and phoned a friend from a public phone box at 11.37pm., saying she was about to get a lift. She was never seen again. The car driver who picked her up has never come forward. All previous drivers who gave her a lift have been identified and eliminated from the investigation.

Phillip Cairns, (aged 13), a 5’2” schoolboy, who after eating his lunch at the family home, on the Friday 23rd October 1986, left the house to make the 15 minute walk to his near-by school in Rathfarnham in Dublin; along a route heavily populated by other boys returning to school. He did not arrive at school and was never seen again. Six days later, his schoolbag (with some books missing) was found in a nearby lane, a well known shortcut to the local river and park, and regarded as a haunt for truants and children in general. No arrests have been made even though a reward of 10,000 euros has been offered (15,000 at today's value). We would argue that it was an act of assault and was more likely to be anger driven because of the nature of the stabbing. The wounds were of an insignificant depth indicating a small bladed penknife or bladed cutter. It was the random slashing that caused an artery to be severed. We would argue that it was an act of anger rather than a serious attempt to kill. Although thousands of statements have been taken and a number of arrests have been made, no conviction has been achieved.

Sophie Toscan du Plantier (aged 39), a well known French T.V. producer; who was found brutally killed in the drive of her holiday home in County Cork, where she been staying just before Christmas 1996. On Friday 20th December 1996, she arrived alone at Cork airport and drove to her remote holiday home in West Cork, with the intention of a brief break after a heavy workload before going home as indicated by a return plane ticket to Paris for Christmas Eve. On Sunday 22nd December, after a day out meeting friends locally, she returned home at 5.30 pm., and made a number of phone calls that evening including making a long call to her husband in France at 11.10pm. Shortly after 10.00 am the next morning (Monday 23rd December 1996), a neighbour found her body in their shared driveway, Sophie had sustained severe injuries to her face and head with a blood stained cavity block nearby being the likely murder weapon. Her husband Daniel (61) died in 2003 and both are buried in France.

Ironically, the State Pathologist was working on a case in the north west of the Republic, which led to Sophie's body being left exposed in-situ for over 24 hours, merely being covered by tarpaulin, thus the site was contaminated by neighbours, police officers, journalists, and others which has major implications for any criminal case.

2. Method

While producing insights and possible profiles into the five cases above, we have relied heavily on behavioural analysis, the profiling literature, geo-profiling and available data to generate insights into the cases. None of the cases has resulted in a conviction and none of the missing bodies have been found, even though the cases have been in the public domain for many years. For example in the case of Annie McCarrick, the Gardai (Irish Republic police service) assumed at the time that she had gone to Enniskerry for a walk. However from our review of the available behavioural evidence such as her wearing cowboy boots, not suitable for walking in the countryside, her non walking attire, the urgency to get there (she appears to have left her shopping unpacked indicating she left her flat in a rush); rather than going for a walk along Sandymount Bay (a long stretch of beautiful beach just down the road from her flat). We were able to establish that it was likely that Annie was on her way to a quickly arranged meeting or date (with the possible intention of protecting his profession, identity such as married man, or an inappropriate date on religious, political, or criminal grounds). Although seen in the pub she was not

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1 A famous quaint Irish character pub well loved by tourists and set in some isolation from Dublin.
2 mobile phones were not in common use in 1995.
anticipating staying overnight away from her flat. She would have been dependent upon someone to get her home as the public transport finished earlier in the evening. We also noted the importance of the date of her disappearance, the day before her birthday with her expectations for the next day. This new hypothesis was broadcast, and viewers were encouraged to reconsider the case according to the new hypothesis and to post information and comments online.

This contrasted with the standard formats for reporting information to police such as visiting a Gardaí/Police station, writing a letter or calling a confidential hotline such as the Australian crime-stoppers anonymous phone line (2), all of these mediums potentially leave evidence that may inhibit individuals reporting information. The Crimewatch B.B.C. television series offers a confidential hotline and a web reporting interface however comes with a caveat that “the B.B.C. will not use your details for any other purpose without your consent and will not transfer your details to any third party (except the relevant police force), without contacting you first. The police may contact you once they have received the information”. However, technology increasingly affords new opportunities to report new material and impressions, especially as altruism (Adar & Huberman [3]) and disinhibition (Suler, [4]) are well established online behavioural traits. Joinson, McKenna, Postmes and Reips [5] point out that regardless of what media is used to communicate, basic human motivations and emotions remain, in the case of unsolved crime arguably the public for the most part are interested in resolution. Joinson’s [6] landmark study regarding anonymity and computer mediated communication found that anonymous participants disclosed significantly more information about themselves than non-anonymous participants, this research is supported by Turkle [7] who found that on the Internet secrecy around identity allows people to express themselves more freely since the are not subject to normal social rules and norms. Therefore the present study was designed to leverage anonymous reporting methodology and thereby facilitate information disclosure. In terms of similar reporting forums, the National Centre for Missing and Exploited Children (N.C.M.E.C. [8]) has utilised an online ‘cyber tip line’ to generate leads regarding suspected crimes of sexual exploitation committed against children. This is a successful reporting forum, as more than 1.9 million reports of suspected child sexual exploitation have been made to the cyber tip line to date.

In terms of reinactment of crime, utilisation of expert input and subsequent public online reporting, the US Australian and New Zealand television show “Sensing Murder” [9] offers some basis for comparisson. Alleged psychics are asked to act as detectives, along with private investigators to help provide evidence that might be useful in solving famous unsolved murder cases in each country by communicating with the deceased victims. The non-scientific psychic approach clearly raises credibility and reliability issues; however the format is nonetheless interesting particularly in the context of the findings of this study.

A web page was designed according to principles of Cyberspsychology (the impact of emerging technology on human behaviour) and online usability interface models for persuasive design (Fogg, [10]). The aim being that the website should work in conjunction with the television programme. Therefore a new reporting forensic cyberpsychology medium was conceptualised as a ‘confidential webline’, to encourage viewers to add ‘any new information’ or express views about the cold case(s).

At the end of each programme, viewers were given a web page (crimeinmind.ie) to upload information with a guaranteed confidentiality that we would not contact them unless they so wished and provided phone/contact details. The home page design was simple and inviting, consisting of a large photo of the featured victim and a simple content entry box in which to ‘drop’ information. The invitation was designed to be empowering reading as follows “You can help solve this case, by entering any relevant information below”. Surveys of Internet users report that trust is an important issue (Joinson, [4]), therefore building trust is critical in online environments, therefore the following text featured below the content entry box “This is a confidential web line - no IP addresses will be retained”. Self-presentation and self-revelation are known variables online (Joinson, [4]). Therefore only 50 characters were visible at any given point, effectively designed to counter efforts to recheck or censor information. It was considered that a ‘virtually enabled stream of consciousness’ may allow for greater flow of information, a view supported by Fenichal [11] who has highlighted free association aspects of the Internet. Participants were informed of the nature of the study and were advised that they could withdraw at any time if they so wished, additionally we posted support links should they be needed. The web page was available after the first programme, Annie McCarrick, was broadcast on Monday 10th January 2011 and remained open until four weeks after the last programme on Monday 14th February 2011. (The programmes were also repeated on Wednesday nights). It is of note that the series has been repeated on TV3 in 2013, although we are not in a position to comment on any recent feedback.

3. Results

At the time of writing, a total of 47 email messages had been left on the web page. This consisted of 41 individuals (several had left more than one message). It was independently reported that the series averaged over 250,000 viewers in the Irish Republic 3; this would be the equivalent of 4 million viewers in the U.K. and 600 contacts/hits, and was generally regarded as a successful series for Irish television. Twenty-one males (51%) and 20 females (49%) contacted the webpage. While many responded quite quickly after the programme was aired; 15 (32%) on the night,

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3 The total population for the Irish Republic is 4+ million.
another 6 (13%) responded by the next day, and some 66% (31) had responded within four days. We were unable to identify if they responded to the Monday or Wednesday night broadcast. Ten (21%) appeared to respond over a week later, although this included repeat visitors. Thirty-six (88%) individuals made one contact, four (10%) contacted on one further occasion and one (2%) made three contacts. Males were more likely than females to make more than one visit (4:1).

Sixteen viewers (39%) requested that they be contacted, but only 10 (21%) left contact details; eight for contact by mobile phone, four by landline and one via home address (not mutually exclusive). When they did not leave contact details, we were unwilling to breach the issue of confidentiality by using their email address to reply. It was not clear if the viewers realised this or just assumed we would automatically reply to their email address.

Five cases were commented upon, Annie McCarrick in 14 (29%) contacts/e-mails, Phillip Cairns 11 (23%), Sophie Toscan du Plantier 8 (17%), JoJo Dollard 5 (11%), Raonaid Murphy 3 (6%), while 4 (9%) were general comments and 2 (4%) did not comment on the cases but on the programme. We feel that Annie McCarrick’s case is the most famous case and this was reflected in the high contact level, although Sophie Toscan du Plantier’s case has received considerable interest over the years. A local suspect Ian Bailey has been arrested in the past but not convicted for Sophie’s murder and in 2012 successfully resisted a request for an extradition order by a French magistrate Judge Patrick Gachon. French law exists on the premise that the accused has to prove his/her innocence unlike Irish law which assumes innocence until proven guilty. Mr. Bailey successfully sued the national papers for labelling him as a killer.

3.1. Contacts’ Suggested Location

A suggestion of possible location sites for the missing bodies from the scene of the crime (s-o-c) was mentioned in 10 e-mails. Several respondents suggested areas nearby for the hidden body; and others because they lived or worked in the area. Consistent with the pioneering work of Canter and colleagues regarding mental maps. For example; Canter & Youngs [12] indicated that individuals operate mental maps for work settings, socialising and offending leading to the possible identification of the perpetrator’s home base. This will relate to the above cases.

In two cases it was not possible to extract the reasons for suggesting the site. Five (11%) contacts proposed paranormal explanations including possible disposal sites including one contact using line segmentation to identify a potential site. Six contacts (13%) suggested possible sites for indentifying the location of any of the three missing bodies, this included individual’s back gardens and public spaces (e.g. parks and golf course), if correct a search may be undertaken. The exhumation of a hidden body is very difficult to arrange, expensive to undertake and may not be able to conclusively identify the victim, so is unlikely to be legally sanctioned without valid grounds such as a confession. With the long time period that can elapse since a disappearance there are difficulties in recalling details. Hypnosis is a possibility, however Berry, Robinson & Bailey [13] reported on the difficulties of the use of hypnosis to help offenders to recall the location of their victims’ bodies. Searching for missing children is a worldwide problem for example in the U.K. the Madeline McCann disappearance in Portugal has constantly been in the news. In Australia the media are heavily involved in the finding of the body of Daniel Morcombe (aged 13) who disappeared on 7th December 2003; a million dollar reward was offered up to 2009. In August 2011, Brett Cowan was charged with his death. Several of Daniel’s personal items have been found. While in America there have been many cases of disappearing children who are found dead and a number recently who have been discovered years later.

3.2. Details of Participant’s Contact with the Webpage

We examined the contacts’ backgrounds to identify if they had a professional interest or were generalist; 4 (10%) had a professional background; one each from clinical, forensic, counselling and the Gardai (police).

As to the length of their comments: 12 (26%) were under 50 words; 14 (30%) 51-99 words, 12 (26%) 100-199; 2 (4%) 200-299; 4 (9%) 300-399 and 3 (6%) were over 400 words. Eight (20%) contacts were worried that the information they provided; 2 (5%) might waste the experts’ time; in two cases (5%) raising false hopes for the victim’s family; and 4 (10%) were worried about generating incorrect hypotheses. All eight were concerned about identifying the wrong suspect, although several others were happy to name individuals who appeared to be in the teaching profession but all were dead!

Only 4 (10%) contacts appeared to be concerned about the issue of confidentiality and this centred on us not disclosing their names to a third party such as the Gardai, the media or potential suspects. Seven (15%) reported that they had previously contacted the Gardai to express their concerns. Generally they felt that their reported concerns regarding the case(s) had been dismissed by relevant authorities. Four (10%) had discussed their feelings with an advisor (however defined).

3.3. Information Provided on Potential Suspects

Eight (20%) contacts suggested actual names for suspects, while 17 (41%) suggested details of the suspects’ likely employment/professions such as teacher, builder, police officer, a well-known convicted rapist and priests. One convicted criminal has been regularly linked, albeit based upon circumstantial evidence in the media to the disappearance of two females but has consistently denied any involvement; the other killer who had been functioning in the 1980s has also denied any involvement right up to his death. Seven contacts stated that they knew the suspect, although none appeared to have been in an emotional
Serious Crime Review Team [15], a police force established in 2007 to review unresolved homicides and other serious crimes, have presented some of our hypotheses to the Gardai, who understandably do not discuss crimes within the State. We have presented some of our hypotheses to the Gardai, who understandably do not discuss crimes within the State. We have no knowledge of any publication in the Republic or the U.K. that has reported the details of anonymous respondents to a webpage dedicated to an expert led investigative t.v. programme, additionally our search of law enforcement websites has not revealed the use of a similar ‘confidential web line’ as a reporting mechanism. In the United Kingdom, B.B.C. One broadcasts a popular monthly television crime programme ‘Crimewatch’, which reviews several serious cases including robberies, rapes/sexual assaults and homicides, in which after a reconstruction of the offence, serving police officers make a direct appeal on camera to the general public asking for their help in providing information to track down the perpetrator(s). Viewers can phone into the studio, phone a hot line or fill in an e-form. Officers and researchers are seen answering the phones and do so for up to an hour afterwards, when the presenter reports on that night’s appeals in a short slot in the evening’s schedule. Crimewatch presenters are somewhat cagey about the number of responses received and often use terms such as “a good response” or sometimes “a disappointing response”. They did not respond to our request for more detailed analysis of their responses from viewers.

We were concerned that we might be subjected to hoaxes and malicious comments to confuse or divert our attention. It would appear that we did not receive any obvious attempts to sabotage the programme.

There is always a risk families being contacted by psychics to help them find relatives’ bodies, for example in the Ben Needham case4 in Greece and more recently in the Madeline McCann’s disappearance, her mother writes bitterly of her frustration with psychics in her book (McCann [14]).

“Was it worth it?” A question we are still not able to fully answer due to ongoing police/court involvement. We assessed the data and have delivered a report to the Irish Serious Crime Review Team [15], a police force established in 2007 to review unresolved homicides and other serious crimes within the State. We have presented some of our hypotheses to the Gardai, who understandably do not discuss

4 A famous case of a 21 months old English toddler, who mysteriously disappeared on 24th July 1991 from the Greek island of Kos and has been subject to numerous unsuccessful sightings around the world. A documentary “Somebody know” by Richard Belfield of Fulcrum Television Ltd (London) followed the story of Ben’s uncle being subjected to five days of hypnosis in 2001; in an attempt to help him recall details of his nephew’s disappearance. The case had received considered media attention in the light of hypnosis in 2001; in an attempt to help him recall details of his nephew’s disappearance...
In Search of Annie: A Study of Viewers’ Feedback to the Crime Documentaries
Highlighting Famous Irish Murder and Missing Persons

We received positive response from the media; the series was selected as t.v. critics viewing choice on separate occasions in national newspapers, such as the Sunday Independent, Daily Herald and Sunday Mirror etc.

We were surprised about the intensity of many Irish people in general who feel a collective sense of guilt and embarrassment that two visitors (Annie McCarrick from America and Sophie Toscan du Plantier from France) to the Irish Republic should be treated so badly. The cases have remained in the public’s consciousness long after the cases would have ceased to be newsworthy in other countries; maybe this is an Irish phenomenon? Cynics may argue that perhaps being good looking, white, middle class victims makes good iconic media images. The majority of recent missing people on the list published by the An Garda Síochána [16] display pictures of ethnic minorities individuals and not white Irish faces; and appear to have attracted a lot less media attention.

A reward might work where potential individuals in say a gang situation are reluctant to ‘grass-up’ a fellow gang member but in these cases it could be argued that knowledgeable individuals would be motivated to help as there is no obvious risk to such disclosures. It is of note that the introduction of a reward for information in the past appears to have had little influence on the cases. Sometimes people who have details only disclose them after their death or that of the perpetrator when they are free of any incrimination and leads to a sense of closure. Nevertheless we feel that we have produced data that will be useful for other researchers and police forces in their search for missing persons and homicides. Nobody has suggested that the missing Annie, Phillip or JoJo were still alive and living elsewhere, it was not clear why this was the case but all assumed they were dead. If they were alive in 2014; Philip would be 40; JoJo 39 and Annie 48 years old.

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