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The Hunt with John Walsh

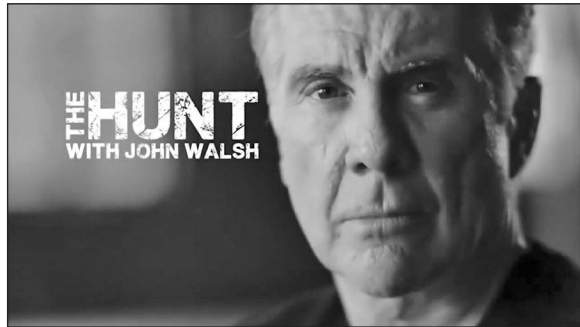
True Crime Storytelling

AMANDA KEELER

Abstract: In her analysis of *The Hunt with John Walsh*, Amanda Keeler explores the public service function of true crime television programs that feature unsolved or unresolved cases. Through an investigation of visual style and narrative elements, Keeler examines the multiple intentions of television programs that seek to entertain audiences and simultaneously help solve crimes.

True crime storytelling is a popular, nonfiction genre that spans a broad range of programs with different subjects, purposes, and outcomes. It encompasses “closed-case” television programs, such as *Forensic Files* and *Homicide Hunter: Lt. Joe Kenda*, which re-create previously solved cases to communicate that even the most difficult investigations can be resolved through cooperation among police, district attorneys, and forensic scientists. Another type of true crime program instead interrogates already-prosecuted criminal cases. These “reinvestigation” programs, such as the podcast *Serial* and *Making a Murderer*, frame their individual case studies as flawed and, in doing so, invite viewers to reexamine the validity of the original evidence and subsequent criminal trials. The popularity of these programs has brought attention to what many viewers see as fissures in the criminal justice system, although critics of these programs acknowledge the difficulty of revisiting criminal cases through an alleged selective presentation of evidence. True crime reinvestigation programs share some commonalities with what Richard Kilborn calls “collaborational” programs, which typically showcase unsolved or open cases.¹ These programs, such as *America’s Most Wanted* and *Disappeared* crowdsource detective work, explicitly asking the audience to divulge any pertinent information that might help solve the crime or locate missing persons. Such programs recognize that in certain cases, the

FIGURE 23.1.
True crime TV veteran
John Walsh appeals di-
rectly to audiences to help
police resolve cases.



audience's assistance can help to solve open cases, situating the audience as a “television member” of the police.²

While the form and purpose of true crime programs varies, in their own way each attempts to perform a public service. The public service of a closed-case program such as *Forensic Files* demonstrates the effectiveness of social institutions—particularly the police and the courts—that have successfully investigated cases and prosecuted the perpetrators. Conversely, reinvestigation programs like *Making a Murderer* attempt to perform a public service by focusing a critical lens on these same institutions. These programs serve the public by locating and analyzing perceived flaws in the criminal justice system in order to remedy miscarriages of justice. Finally, collaborational true crime programs seek to provide a public service by eliciting tips from the audience in an attempt to identify and capture perpetrators who have evaded law enforcement. This essay focuses on the collaborational CNN program *The Hunt with John Walsh*, which reconstructs unresolved crimes and their investigations to fuse television entertainment with a public service mission.

While each different type of true crime storytelling seeks to serve the public differently, the notion of using radio and television as a public service has shifted over time. According to media historian Paddy Scannell, this concept emerged in the 1920s from the BBC director-general John Reith's vision for broadcasting. Reith defined the BBC's mandate to create programming not merely “for entertainment purposes alone.”³ In both the United States and the UK, public service broadcasting was later tied to the “uplift” of audiences through “high culture” programs designed primarily to educate, and secondarily to entertain.⁴ More recently, Peter Lunt writes that reality and “lifestyle” programs challenge traditional notions of public service broadcasting because they “aim to help people improve their lives rather than raising them to the higher plane of knowledge, experience, and consciousness.”⁵ Lunt suggests that the reconceived notion of public service broadcasting has created “shifts in the nature of expertise” whereby the audience becomes a participant in, rather than a mere viewer of, the information presented.⁶ Within

the context of true crime programs, many reinvestigation and collaborational programs offer a mechanism to help people who feel left behind by the police and/or the criminal justice system, implicitly shifting the onus of solving difficult cases onto the viewer. Concurrently, these programs demonstrate the power and possibilities of participatory, amateur detective work as they attempt—sometimes successfully—to bring closure to seemingly unsolvable cases.

As a collaborational true crime program, *The Hunt with John Walsh* presents cases in which the individual allegedly responsible for the crime is known yet remains free in unknown whereabouts; less frequently it features cases that do not have a clear suspect. *The Hunt's* first season highlights the breadth of the program's cases, from a father on the run after the murder of his family to the abduction of a young boy by an unknown perpetrator. Using reenactments, archival news footage, home video, and interviews with the victims' friends, family members, and law enforcement, *The Hunt* appeals directly to audiences, suggesting that only with the cooperation of the viewer-as-amateur-detective can the police resolve these cases. It seeks to ameliorate the perceived failures or loss of trust in public institutions that citizens turn to for safety and justice. Within this public service, however, are basic expectations for garnering an audience and sufficient television ratings. In this regard, *The Hunt* must attract viewers in order to compel them to participate in the collaborational, public service process. Furthermore, with an abundance of true crime programs currently available across television and streaming services, *The Hunt* must set itself apart from its competitors. To do this the program experiments stylistically with its reenactments and its slow, methodical presentation of the facts of each featured case. Its experimental form seeks to bring an audience to fulfill its public service mission.

The Hunt is not the first television program that seeks to simultaneously entertain audiences and provide a public service. It owes its format and purpose to programs such as *America's Most Wanted* (*AMW*), which was originally conceived as an "interactive," "participatory" television forum to present open and unsolved criminal cases to audiences.⁷ In the late 1980s *AMW* producers worked closely with the FBI and other law enforcement officials to create a program that would inform audiences and solicit their help in capturing criminals, asking viewers to call a toll-free number with tips or information. While law enforcement officials had some reservations about the program, they were nonetheless enticed by the idea that a television program might help to capture known criminals—which it accomplished after its first airing. In his promotional tour for the debut of *The Hunt*, John Walsh remarked that throughout its run *AMW* was responsible for "the capture of 1,231 fugitives and the recovery of 61 missing children."⁸ It proved the possibility of providing a public service through the presentation of unsolved cases, while also entertaining millions of viewers each week.

The Hunt represents John Walsh's successful return to hosting a true crime television program. Perhaps the best-known and most trusted public figure in true crime storytelling, John Walsh's initial connection to the genre came as a result of his own personal history dealing with the long-unsolved abduction and murder of his son Adam in 1981. In the aftermath of his son's murder, Walsh worked to change the way that local police and the FBI investigate missing persons cases and has continued to advocate for victims' rights. Executive Producer Michael Linder notes that when he was seeking a host for *America's Most Wanted*, he and several other producers felt that Walsh was ideal because he was "an everyman, an ordinary guy who had been hit hard by crime."⁹ On *The Hunt*, John Walsh explicitly invokes his own personal narrative as the defining purpose of his involvement in the program. In the opening sequence Walsh looks directly at the camera and tells the audience,

Back in 1981, I had the American dream—the beautiful wife, the house in the suburbs, and a beautiful six-year-old son. And one day I went to work, kissed my son goodbye, and never saw him again. In two weeks, I became the parent of a murdered child, and I'll always be the parent of a murdered child. I still have the heartache. I still have the rage. I waited years for justice. I know what it is like to be there waiting for some answers. And over those years I learned how to do one thing really well, and that's how to catch these bastards and bring them back to justice. I've become a man hunter. I'm out there looking for bad guys.

As his opening statement suggests, Walsh puts himself at the center of *The Hunt's* public service mission, which is deeply rooted in his own personal mission to fight crime. He employs his experiences as a victim of crime to address the powerlessness of other families who find themselves in similar situations. His status as a "parent of a murdered child" invokes his qualifications in this quasi-law enforcement position. As Walsh looks directly into the camera, he implies that anyone in the audience who is faced with a similar life-altering crime can rely on him to be "out there looking for bad guys." As Brian Lowry notes in his review of *The Hunt*, Walsh is "once again acting as the audience's surrogate avenger."¹⁰

As noted earlier, to be successfully collaborative, a public service television program must find ways to stand out from similar programs in order to attract an audience. In its dual mission to draw an audience and to elicit clues by revisiting unresolved cases, *The Hunt* relies on storytelling elements found in many true crime programs. Much like *America's Most Wanted*, *The Hunt* continually chooses to refocus attention on the suspect, reminding the audience of their role in apprehending fugitives and solving these open cases. At every commercial break the program displays the information about the known or unknown perpetrator,

with a photograph and details regarding any known information about the suspect's hair color, age, and height. At the end of each sequence, Walsh implores viewers to share any pertinent information: "If you have any information relating to this crime, please go online at cnn.com/TheHunt. You can remain anonymous. We'll pass your tip along to the proper authorities and, if requested, will not reveal your name." At the CNN website, viewers can electronically send a tip or find a toll-free number to contact the proper law enforcement officials.

While *The Hunt*'s storytelling parallels some true crime programs, it diverges from many of its contemporaries in important stylistic ways. Each episode focuses on only one or two cases, providing time for each crime and its investigation to unfold methodically, noting the leads, clues, and dead ends that have stumped the police. This slow pacing seeks to correct a perceived problem with *America's Most Wanted*, as Walsh notes that in an effort to include as many cases (and therefore captures) as possible, *AMW*'s reenactments became rushed: "We would have recreations that were two minutes long. You never got a sense of the victims. You never got a sense of what was going on."¹¹ *The Hunt*'s use of narrative slowness allows it to elaborate on the intricate details of the crime, its aftermath, and the complex web of clues unearthed in the subsequent investigation—clues that might lead viewers to realize they have information to share with law enforcement. This slowness connects to the program's public service mission, as concentrating on one case for a longer period of time reveals the case's minute details gradually in a way that could more effectively trigger a viewer's memory. This deliberate pacing also metaphorically parallels the slow and lengthy investigations connected to these featured cases, representing years of waiting for justice.

The Hunt also employs a significant amount of reenactment footage. Though re-created scenes are a staple of true crime storytelling, the program uses several deliberate aesthetic choices to differentiate its reenactments. Rather than distracting from the program's public service, the reenactments incorporate stylistic flourishes in an attempt to attract an audience to participate in its collaborative objective. For instance, the program does not overtly label its reenactment sequences. In other true crime programs, such as *Deadly Women*, reenactments are prominently marked on screen as "Dramatization." Instead, *The Hunt* uses its own unique style to demarcate when and where these re-created scenes appear between interviews and other footage, including speed manipulation. This effect occurs throughout "Justice Denied," which presents the missing person case of Jacob Wetterling, who was abducted on October 22, 1989, in St. Joseph, Minnesota. The re-creation of Wetterling's abduction plays out in slow motion, with images of three boys riding bikes on a dark rural road as a masked man with a gun approaches them. The chronological manipulation of this depiction draws out the gravity of the situation, mimicking how it might have felt in the midst of this

crime unfolding—like a moment in which time nearly stops. “Justice Denied” also uses time-lapse cinematography to represent the complicated passage of time as Jacob’s mother Patty Wetterling deals with the aftermath of her son’s abduction. Time-lapse cinematography depicts the actress playing Patty as she sits in a chair in her living room, remaining motionless while dozens of people approach her, talk to her, and interview her. As the mass of people slowly thins, the emptiness around her visually conveys the often-discussed aftermath of media attention in the weeks after a child is abducted in the United States. Walsh tells the viewer,

In the beginning, there’s this initial surge. The media’s fascinated. People try to help you, strangers you never met try to help you in some way, police are really on top of the case. But then that reality sets in that, if your child is missing for a certain period of time, a couple weeks, sometimes a month, now your child drops from being the hottest case, the top of the news, to just another poster of a missing child.

This time-lapse reenactment uses conventions of fictional, dramatic storytelling to evoke the emotional intensity of the crime, in turn further engendering audience sympathy for this family’s loss.

The Hunt’s reenactments also manipulate color saturation, making some colors more vivid while desaturating others. In the episode “Trafficking in Death,” the police are investigating the mass murder of eleven individuals who sought to immigrate to the United States illegally, facilitated by human trafficker “coyote” Guillermo Madrigal Ballesteros. One of the reenactments in this episode portrays the victims as they succumb to high temperatures and dehydration while locked in a train car, as the footage visually shifts. The images begin in muted red colors, suggesting the unbearable heat of the train car, and slowly fades to black and white, signifying the deaths of the eleven victims.

The Hunt’s use of reenactments that visually manipulate the color and speed of the footage challenges Richard Kilborn’s dichotomy that suggests that crime program reenactments can or should only function as “factually enlightening” or “dramatically entertaining.”¹² The reenactments discussed here break from this schema in their attempt to innovate the genre in subtle ways. Despite the stylistic choices depicted in these reenactments, they nonetheless strive for authenticity rooted in the remaining fragments of information about a crime committed decades in the past. As the program’s host, John Walsh forgoes the voiceover narration that frequently accompanies reenactments on true crime programs. He appears only briefly, breaking away from the current crime case study to interject a comment or an opinion about the case. Instead, the program frames the reenactments with commentary by firsthand accounts, when possible. For example, in “Justice Denied,” as the reenactment of Jacob Wetterling’s abduction unfolds on



FIGURE 23.2.
The Hunt uses stylistic conventions of dramatic storytelling to evoke emotional intensity.

screen, the only sound heard is one of the original 911 calls. Accompanied by the on-screen notation, “911 Recording,” the viewer hears Trevor, Jacob Wetterling’s brother who was present at the time of the abduction, detail the perpetrator’s appearance. This slow-motion reenactment, combined with Trevor’s description of the man who abducted his brother, creates a powerful moment in which the program most reflects John Grierson’s infamous description of documentary as “the creative treatment of actuality.”¹³

As one of the objectives of *The Hunt* is to seek the audience’s collaboration in solving these open cases, we need to contemplate how, or if, the public service they attempt to provide can be measured. The two episodes of *The Hunt* discussed here present two possible outcomes that occurred in the wake of their airdates. Despite the program’s intervention, the families affected by the murders in “Trafficking in Death” continue to wait for Guillermo Madrigal Ballesteros’s capture. However, other episodes have demonstrated that the public can be served by crowdsourced, amateur detective work. Following the airing of “Justice Denied,” the FBI decided to reopen Jacob Wetterling’s abduction case.¹⁴ This episode prominently features Joy Baker, a freelance writer and blogger, who in 2010 began reinvestigating the Wetterling case. In a long segment, Baker traces a number of crimes that occurred in neighboring towns in the years before Wetterling’s abduction, uncovering several related cases that the police had never connected. Using DNA from the case of Jared Scheierl, a young man who had been kidnapped and sexually assaulted in a nearby town several months before Wetterling’s abduction, authorities arrested Danny Heinrich, who later confessed to Wetterling’s abduction and murder, and led police to his body. While Heinrich will not be tried for this crime per a plea deal, he is now serving a twenty-four-year sentence for possession of child pornography. However, the credit here cannot entirely be bestowed upon *The Hunt*. While “Justice Denied” prompted the FBI to reopen the case, it was partially Baker’s research and the reinvestigation of Scheierl’s assault, not tips or information received from viewers, that led to the resolution of Wetterling’s abduction case.

The Hunt frames its overall purpose as providing a public service when the police and the FBI have not been able to solve certain crimes. Although it has demonstrated its value in this regard, some questions remain, particularly in the complex intersection of true crime storytelling that seeks to pursue justice and entertain audiences simultaneously. Does the series need to solve crimes as a service to the public, or does it merely need to entertain viewers? Should its delivery of cautionary tales of an unsafe world be considered part of its public service to viewers, or is this perhaps a disservice by stoking fears and distrust? Although no television program must necessarily accomplish anything other than drawing an audience and advertisers, the ongoing fascination with true crime programming and the proliferation of these programs across television networks, cable channels, and streaming services suggests that questioning the responsibilities, expectations, and methods of these programs remains an important endeavor.

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NOTES

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