



CRIME TIME

Complex storytelling and an embrace of timely topics are helping true-crime titles find a wider base of support. *By Joel Marino*

As it turns out, crime *does* pay. Factual distributors the world over are gradually boosting their true-crime catalogues in order to meet swelling demands from consumers and broadcasters for content delving into the darker side of life. But run-of-the-mill whodunits and weekly capers covering open-and-shut cases, which for years defined the genre, are no longer enough to satisfy an increasingly sophisticated audience. These savvy armchair sleuths are on the lookout for fare that cuts through the police tape, delivering behind-the-scenes footage and morally ambiguous storytelling in the vein of recent hits such as Netflix's *Making a Murderer* and HBO's *The Jinx: The Life and Deaths of Robert Durst*.

DRAMATIC APPEAL

"People are fascinated with crime, especially murder," says Paul Heaney, the CEO of TCB Media Rights. "However, like any universally attractive unscripted [genre], you have to be able to offer more than just shock value. These days at least, there has to be some amount of empathy."

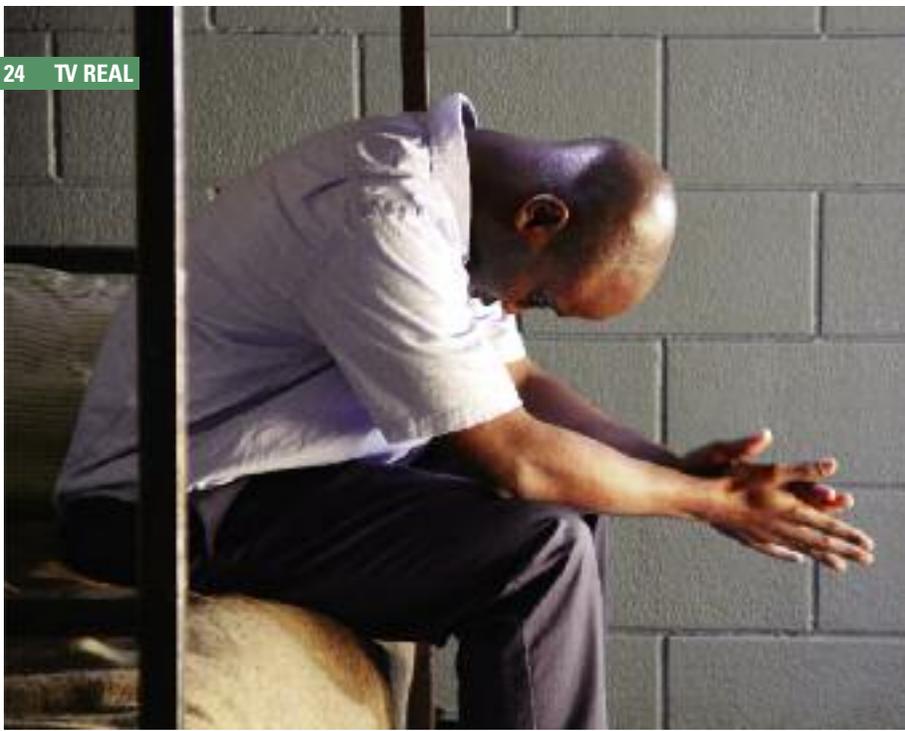
Though Heaney acknowledges that the popularity of *Making a Murderer* and *The Jinx* has changed the way true crime is

produced, he says those specific titles and the genre in general are actually taking a page from dramas when it comes to storytelling choices.

"We had a lot of really good crime-related scripted appear a few years ago, like [HBO's] *True Detective*, which became one of the finest pieces of TV," Heaney says. "These shows had ginormous budgets and felt like movies. So now true crime is being produced like this, except they manage to keep the cinematic feel while being made on [smaller] budgets."

As an example, he points to his catalogue's *Copycat Killers*, a Story House Productions title for REELZ Channel about murderers inspired by blockbuster movies and TV shows. The series was filmed to look less like a documentary and more like a film, "so it has that glossy, movie-like feel that is currently doing very well."

"I do think there is a link between the rise of top-quality drama and this reawakened interest in the darker side of things within true-crime programming," says Elin Thomas, the director of global sales for Passion Distribution. "There has always been a demand and appetite for true crime, but now you also have productions like *The Bridge*, *The Killing* and *Broadchurch*, and this has all lit a match under it."



I Didn't Do It is among the crop of crime series in the Tricon catalogue.

Thomas explains that this shift toward dramatic complexity has fundamentally changed the way the genre is viewed. "I think the trend is for more engagement, where the audience can actually follow a story and become invested in it," she says. "People can get behind a case because it's true, and that adds a layer of fascination over and above drama, which, at the end of the day, is a made-up story."

Thomas says that the two seasons of *Passion's Mind of a Murderer*, produced for Investigation Discovery, have proven successful precisely because of this dynamic.

"The show follows criminal psychologist Dr. Michelle Ward as she secures face-to-face access to convicted murderers," Thomas explains. "She only has 90 minutes with these felons to use her research into predatory criminals to uncover the real truth about what drove them to commit the crime. So you're placing the viewer right in the middle of this faceoff between the criminal psychologist and the murderer."

In fact, having a host or lead steeped in the grit of the most heinous of crimes can go a long way in fostering audience engagement. "You have to have someone the viewer can follow on a weekly basis," says Jon Kramer, the CEO of Rive Gauche Television. Among his top true-crime titles is *Homicide Hunter*, which tracks veteran investigator Joe Kenda and his team of specialists as they recreate some of his biggest cases.

"This guy has solved some 387 crimes, and in the show he takes you through how he solved those crimes," Kramer says. "It's not serialized, since it's still one murder per hour, but he's serialized, in that the audience tunes in to follow him."

Karthiga Ratnasabapathy, the VP of worldwide sales and acquisitions at Tricon Films & Television, also believes that a guide is important when it comes to ushering the audience through the underbelly of the criminal world. "It always helps to have someone familiar with the topic, especially if it's somebody that the audience knows," she says.

Ratnasabapathy adds that a title such as *To Catch a Killer*, which originally aired on OWN Canada, has met with success mainly on the strength of lead investigator Mike Arntfield's commitment to solving cold cases, as well as his knowledge and use of the most recent forensic technology. However, she states that that element alone isn't enough to guarantee viewer approval.

"*To Catch a Killer* makes use of reenactments and expert testimonials, which are storytelling methods that have always done well, especially in this genre," Ratnasabapathy says.

According to Munia Kanna-Konsek, the head of sales for Beyond Distribution, "reenactments, exceptional production values and gripping story lines make for a deadly combination."

Citing as an example Beyond's *Deadly Women*, which has already shot more than 130 hours, Kanna-Konsek says expertly produced storytelling is what's needed to hook a viewer in an ever more cluttered true-crime field.

DEADLY TALES

"*Deadly Women* uses reenactments as well as interviews with real-life criminals and experts," she says. "It does help you to visualize what would have taken place. If you can't show something real like a trial, or if you don't have the perpetrators right there, then you need to make sure the audience can see something else. The audience then becomes mesmerized by all these elements."

But as with all tools, it's important not to overdo specific narrative shortcuts. "Reenactments are very important parts of the market, but there's a certain level of cheesiness they have to avoid," says TCB's Heaney. "Sometimes these shows don't have the budgets you'd expect, but they're able to put together a style of reconstruction that makes it look big budget. They just have to make sure to avoid being slightly too dark or too gritty or too local in tone, otherwise they're not going to sell as well."

The narrative heft and moral complexity of newer true-crime titles are also helping push the genre beyond its traditional niche-channel association.

GRB distributes *On the Case with Paula Zahn*, which airs in the U.S. on ID.





Homicide Hunter is one of the top-selling crime titles for Rive Gauche.

“There’s always been an interest in true crime, but productions like *Making a Murderer* have forced the programming to branch out, so now there’s this incredible popularity and interest in it,” says Mike Lolato, the senior VP of international distribution at GRB Entertainment. “Now you don’t have to be a fan of just Investigation Discovery or a similar channel to enjoy this type of show. People are taking a very personal interest in these series, especially with issues of injustice currently at the forefront, and I think that’s why these types of shows are no longer constrained to one specific genre.”

At the start of the year, GRB introduced the one-off documentary *Nelson Serrano: I’m Innocent*, which takes a *Making a Murderer*-type approach to the case of an Ecuadorian citizen currently sitting on death row after being convicted of a Florida slaying nearly two decades ago. Lolato says growing interest in that title has led to talks of using leftover footage (and taking advantage of the fact that the highlighted case is still ongoing) to produce a new multi-episode series.

“There is definitely a bigger audience for something like *Nelson Serrano*, and not just a specific demographic,” Lolato says. “There was always an idea that these types of shows tended to be more female-skewing, but that’s changed. I don’t think there’s a male or female skew because these stories are real life. That crosses all demographics.”

MARKET DISTINCTIONS

Despite the mounting broad appeal of true crime, distributors say that specific markets still request some tailoring in order to reach local audiences. Central and Eastern European and Asian audiences, for example, are averse to talking heads and prefer reconstructions. Meanwhile, crimes of passion are popular go-to’s in Germany, says Passion’s Thomas.

Kramer of Rive Gauche agrees that Germany is a country where true crime is currently making headway, though he stresses that the genre remains particularly strong in English-

speaking territories. “It’s much more a phenomenon in the U.S. because we’re a gun culture,” he says. “From a distribution standpoint, crime has not spread in every territory around the world for very different reasons, but slowly and surely it will.”

DIGITAL FRONTIERS

One area where distributors agree true-crime has made fewer inroads is OTT, despite *Making a Murderer* launching as a Netflix original.

“We don’t want to get a title on SVOD just yet, unless it’s a world player, because enough of the big traditional delivery services want the show,” says TCB’s Heaney. “So unless something comes in early on the SVOD side, we’re looking to traditional methods first, and then SVOD is something we’ll fit around it.”

Figuring out exactly what a digital platform wants in terms of true crime can be difficult.

“Streaming services have always been the type to say, ‘Come to us

with a great idea or a great show,’ but they don’t necessarily tell you what it is they’re looking for,” says Tricon’s Ratnasabapathy. “This is something that we do get from traditional broadcasters. Since they are airing it on a specific network, they need to be sure the content they’re programming aligns with who they’re programming for.”

However, despite the hurdles in trying to deal with non-traditional platforms, distributors aren’t completely leaving them off the table.

“OTT is something to watch for the future,” says Passion’s Thomas. “Clearly the big players are commissioning, and I’m imagining that has something to do with the success of Netflix’s *Making a Murderer*. The genre is on the map now.”

No matter the platform, though, distributors say that producers must align the right storytelling tools with a timely focus in order to guarantee the broadest viewership possible.

“I think the police shootings over the last few years have caused society to reevaluate what is going on in our justice system,” says Kristen Eppley, the senior VP of international distribution at New Dominion Pictures, whose *The New Detectives: Case Studies in Forensic Science* airs on ID and Justice Network in the U.S., plus Hulu, Amazon and Netflix. “It [also] comes down to great storytelling, keeping the audience on the edge of their seats and not revealing too much too soon.”

Kanna-Konsek of Beyond stresses that as long as factual productions can tap into that natural human curiosity, the genre will continue to flourish.

“I don’t know if it’s a terrible reflection of our society that we’re so immersed in crime and that we are so intrigued by it,” she says. “People want to see really good, powerful documentaries. You want to see high production quality values and something that’s going to keep the viewer involved and really intrigued. The more they want, the more we can produce and distribute. It’s the circle of crime life.” ■