

IOL ZA article – ‘Bad Joke’ or Brilliant Journalism?

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It may have made for gripping viewing, but was it good investigative journalism, as it was purported to be?

Carte Blanche's Sunday night documentary on the possible discovery of bones linked to the missing Van Rooyen girls has created a controversy, and probably not in the way it was intended.

The documentary has been both slammed by media critics and hailed by viewers as offering hope.

Comments on the programme's website range from "good stuff, guys" to people vowing never to watch the programme again.

Professor Anton Harber of Wits University's journalism school described the piece as "a bad joke told at the expense of the families involved".

The hour-long piece, produced by award-winning journalist Susan Puren, was the result of two years of investigation, but does not come to a definitive conclusion.

"Months of meticulous research and investigation have culminated in a story so dramatic that details will only be divulged during the broadcast," the programme claimed ahead of the show.

The piece, presented by acclaimed journalist Ruda Landman, detailed how the unexplained disappearance of Tracey-Lee Scott-Crossley, Fiona Harvey, Joan Horn, Anne-Marie Wapenaar, Odette Boucher and Yolanda Wessels had remained in the minds of the public for 19 years.

The disappearances were all linked to Pretoria paedophile Gert van Rooyen, who shot dead his girlfriend Joey Haarhoff and killed himself when they were cornered by police.

The Carte Blanche team then linked up with former Free State policeman Danie Krugel, who claimed to have developed technology in which he is able to find the "master body" of something, using a sample consisting of the same DNA.

Once the sample is tested, Krugel's machine is said to pinpoint the main body containing the sought genetic signature using global positioning system (GPS) technology.

Krugel claimed his machine readings, after tests done on hairs from two of the missing girls, pointed to a vacant plot of land situated six blocks from the Van Rooyen house.

Krugel's equipment was unable to pinpoint an exact location, narrowing down to a search area the size of two football pitches. Carte Blanche then contacted the owners of the land and were granted permission to conduct a forensic excavation on the property over the period of a week.

As days passed and no skeletons were found, Carte Blanche called on clairvoyant Marietta Theunissen.

Theunissen appeared to be engaged by the voices of the missing girls, and confirmed that they were telling her they had been held at the site pinpointed by Krugel. But she was ultimately unable to refine the search area any further.

Carte Blanche then took the bone fragments they had gathered from the excavation to Unistell Medical Laboratory in Cape Town, where DNA testing was done. The tests confirmed that the remains were indeed human and linked to four men and two women.

This was as far as Carte Blanche took their investigation before presenting their findings to relatives of the missing girls. Some claimed the programme had given them some closure and relief.

But the documentary has elicited a massive response from viewers.

Executive producer George Mazarakis said the bones and test results had been handed over to the police for further investigation.

"We've had an enormously positive response from our audience, and some criticism from scientific people. I had a call from a superintendent from Brandfort police to say thanks for airing the story because Danie had helped him find the body of a missing child within an hour of being called on for help," Mazarakis said.

"The bottom line is we did what we could. We hired a forensic archaeologist and anthropologist to do the dig, we took the evidence to a police-accredited laboratory and there it was proven beyond dispute that we had found human remains. It was not a case of us purely believing Danie; we did the story in as responsible and efficient a manner as possible," he added.

The police were not involved in the investigation, he said, because "we had no idea what we were going to find and we did not want to waste police time and resources on something that may not be real".

"If we were wrong, how is it that we found bodies and what does this mean?"

Gauteng police spokesperson Director Govindsamy Mariemuthoo said the police had taken possession of the evidence handed to them, and high-profile investigator Superintendent André Neethling had been assigned to the case.

"We are taking this matter seriously and realise it is in the public interest. As soon as there are any developments we will make them known," Mariemuthoo said.

But media experts have criticised the Carte Blanche story.

Harber said: "I am not sure what Carte Blanche was doing in this story, but it is not journalism. They base their report on two dubious characters - a clairvoyant and an ex-policeman with a mysterious super-machine - who led them to a patch of ground where they found a few unidentified bone fragments. This stuff belongs in a superhero comic, not in journalism."

Dr George Claassen - a former head of the Stellenbosch University school of journalism and director of Sceptic South Africa - has been equally scathing in his analysis of the story.

He has publicly challenged both Krugel and Theunissen to allow their claims to be scientifically tested under controlled scientific circumstances in front of the Carte Blanche team.

"The abracadabra Theunissen speaks at the scene is so funny one would have thought Landman and Mazarakis had ventured into a new field of comedy writing.

"That any serious journalist could make her viewers believe that Theunissen has any credibility, is astonishing," Claassen claims.

He had already issued an invitation to kykNET, broadcaster's of Theunissen's show Die Ander Kant (The Other Side), to scientifically test her claims that she is able to speak to the dead. This, he said, had never been taken up.

A glance at the Carte Blanche website, where viewers' comments on the show are posted, shows that many people are now calling for Krugel to use his machine to find four-year-old Madeleine McCann, who went missing in Spain in May.

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