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For Bill Kurtis, a life of crime is the berries

From CBS News to 'Investigative Reports'

By David Everitt

In a way, the decline of TV news was one of the best things to happen to TV newsman Bill Kurtis.

In the mid eighties, the future "Investigative Reports" producer was itching to create long-form documentaries.

But as long as he was an anchorman for CBS Network News there wasn't much chance of that happening.

The Edward R. Murrow days were long gone, and the network couldn't have cared less about boosting its prestige with nonfiction programs that actually spent more than seven minutes on any given subject.

Kurtis knew he was going to have to look elsewhere.

The two possibilities were PBS and cable. He tried both. In the end, cable made more sense. It all came down to money.

"I did a program called 'The New Explorers' for PBS for about eight years and I just ran out of gas," Kurtis says. "It was tiring to go out and continually make presentations to foundations asking them for two million dollars."

His work for A&E provided a much more practical opportunity. "For cable, we're able to target, let's say, two million viewers – sure, we'd like more, but within that two million we want to appeal to a high demographic, high education, so we can deliver to the advertiser a more focused and a more narrow audience. That makes it easier for me because I don't have to think about all that. We can just carve out a definition of a show like 'Investigative Reports' and – bang – we go do it."

Between his "Investigative Reports" and "American Justice," Kurtis now has a documentary airing nearly every night of the week. He's escaped the broadcast networks' fixation on sound bites and the lowest-common-denominator, but he finds that maintaining his nonfiction success requires some juggling between ratings and social relevance.

Not too surprisingly, his most popular shows tend to deal with the subject of crime (the highest rated "Investigative Reports" are the "Cold Cases" installments). Kurtis' crime shows tend to emphasize forensic science and detection, but he still keeps hankering for more serious-minded subjects.

"I would say three nights out of five our audience has to be served what they expect to see. We have to be loyal to our family, our tribe. And then for the other two we can branch out."

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When it comes to nonfiction cable programs in general, Kurtis sees crime documentaries as something that should be scaled back. He praises the high-minded "New Detectives" on Discovery, but some other shows deserve the docu-lite label, as far as he's concerned. "One docu-lite would be 'E! Hollywood Mysteries and Scandals'. They present the commission of the crime and then stop. 'American Justice' picks it up from there – what happens after the crime is committed, the moral lesson."

A bigger concern of Kurtis' is the sheer amount of documentaries on cable these days. On the one hand, he calls this the Golden Age, when television presents more nonfiction than it ever did before. But there's a limit to everything.

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One new avenue Kurtis is exploring is history, using an "Investigative Reports" approach to tell stories from the past. In June, he'll premiere a two-hour program on cowboys for the History Channel. Another direction he'd like to take would perhaps best be called a longer-long-form documentary, a mini-series on a single subject lasting an entire week.

He has tried out this idea twice for A&E this past year, first with "Guns in America," then "Children at Risk." He wasn't satisfied with the audience response.

"We've learned a couple of things. One, people won't watch just because it's five nights a week, there's no secret in that. Second, you have to choose the right topic, something that's big enough. And each night has to stand alone, interesting in its own right, and then earn an audience the next night.

"With 'Guns in America' we were just a little too loose. It was a lot of material on one subject. We came to believe these installments might have been stronger alone, spread over a month." He adds, "It's not dead yet. It's still a work in progress."

-David Everitt covers television, writing from Huntington, New York.