

COMMENT

Dan Walker: TV can still be a powerful tool to make a difference

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Programmes which touch people's lives are public service broadcasting at its finest

I have never worked on a programme like *Vanished: The search for Britain's missing* before. At the end of the show on Wednesday several members of the crew were in tears. We had just interviewed the parents of Lisa Pour, a mum of three who has been missing for over a decade. Her mother Linda, had just spoken publicly for the first time and it had taken a lot out of everyone. Linda remains convinced that, without a body, there is a chance she might get to see her daughter again. That is what she is holding on to. It's all she has.



Dan Walker

As I walked past the green room to thank all our guests and have a bit of a debrief, everyone was hugging. Normally, microphones are removed, pleasantries are exchanged and everyone goes home but, this isn't a normal programme. It stays with you.

We only have *Vanished* because of the tragic disappearance of Nicola Bulley. When the Lancashire mum went missing in January, we did an exclusive interview with her partner, Paul Ansell. The programme had a huge

response but lots of people contacting us to ask about their own missing loved ones. The team at ITN Productions started looking into it and found that someone goes missing every 90 seconds in the UK. A tiny fraction of those cases get media attention. Thousands of people are affected by this every day and Channel 5 chief, Ben Frow, quickly commissioned a series.

We have met some amazing individuals in every episode. I will never forget the pain on the face of Joan Lawrence when she was talking about her daughter Claudia, missing for almost 15 years. I often think of Sandra Flintoff who told us that she had cancer and she was desperate for answers about her missing son, Craig Hetherington, before she died and Nicki Durbin said she talks to a photo of her missing son, Luke, at the top of the stairs every time she walks past him. That is her way of keeping him alive and keeping herself going.

The whole team at Vanished are invested in taking care of the people who come on the programme because we know how emotionally draining it can be. Producers spend hours talking to contributors each week and the same amount of time researching new cases and working alongside police forces around the UK.

What makes it special is that we all feel we are working on a programme that is genuinely making a difference and you don't get many opportunities like that in TV. We have really seen that this series with a record number of calls to Missing People – the charity we have partnered with since we started Vanished. What the team at Missing People find so encouraging is that they are getting calls from all sorts of people each week: about the cases we are covering but also from people who are missing and need help, people who are thinking about going missing and need to talk and loved ones of missing people who need support.

The feedback each week has been incredible and, obviously, the whole point of Vanished is that we find some of the people we talk about and that's why the [news this week](#) about two of the teenagers we featured being found safe and well was so wonderful. 15-year-old Daniel Wawrzynczak from Warwickshire apparently saw the appeal and went to police and is now back with his family and we had loads of sightings and calls about 16-year-old Grace Fisher from Gillingham who was found safe and well in Camden in London.

There is often so much negativity about television and, like any job, it's easy to get lost in the fog of churning out work without it really affecting you. Vanished isn't like that. You can feel the buzz in the office this week after the news about Daniel and Grace and reading some of the emails from

viewers and messages of thanks from people who have been on the show makes you realise what a privilege it is to make a programme that not only connects with the audience but is actually doing some good. As one contributor said this week: “There should be more of this thing on television. It is a perfect example of public service broadcasting”. We are all very proud to work on it and hope you can join us next Wednesday at 8pm on Channel 5.

- **The final two episodes of *Vanished: The search for Britain’s missing* air on Wednesday 15 and 22 November at 8pm on Channel 5**