

Chapter 12

Naming Crime Suspects in the News: “Seek Truth and Report It” vs. “Minimizing Harm”

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ABSTRACT

Whereas some news outlets fully identify crime suspects with name, age, address, and other personal details, other news outlets refuse to fully identify any crime suspect—or even people who have been convicted for a crime. News media from a variety of countries have accused and fully identified people of being responsible for crimes, although those persons turned out to be innocent. Yet, when someone types the names of those people in online search engines, for many, stories containing the accusations will turn up at the top of the search results. This chapter examines the positive and negative aspects from those practices by examining journalistic routines in a variety of countries, such as the United States, Nigeria, and The Netherlands. This analysis demonstrates that important ethical imperatives—often represented in ethics codes of professional journalism organizations—can be contradictory in these decision-making processes. Journalists need to weigh whether they would like to “seek truth and report it” or “minimize harm” when describing crime suspects.

INTRODUCTION

It is not a question whether someone got caught with meth or another controlled substance, but rather who it is this time. Readers of many local newspapers in the Midwest of the United States are used to receiving reports about drug busts in their communities. At times it almost seems to be a daily occurrence:

Three people were arrested on a variety of felony charges after a methamphetamine lab was discovered in their South Side home.

As common with these types of stories, thereporters dutifully add the names of the arrestees. The report would look like something like this if it would make the next day’s newspaper:

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John Johnson, 36, and Pete Peterson, 32, were arrested at their home, at 747 E. Sixth Ave., after city police went there about 12:30 a.m. Thursday. Also found at the house were Jane Jones, 33, 4100 N. Keller St., and three children, ranging in age from 3 to 12.

And, as a bonus, the readers usually get to see the mug shots of the suspects that were taken at the police station or county jail after the arrest. Or, if someone from the newspaper staff rushed in soon enough, some pictures snapped at the scene could be part of the publication as well. It is common practice for thousands of media outlets around the world (and not just in the United States) to release such types of information in local crime stories—from rural weeklies to daily newspapers in large metro areas, as well as broadcast stations, blogs, and other types of citizen journalism outlets of all sizes.

Regardless of whether the three suspects from the example above are eventually convicted or not, a simple Google or Bing query—even many years later—for John, Pete, and Jane will most likely pull up their arrest story at, or near, the top of the search results. That could lead to big problems for all three down the road. Potential employers or graduate school admission officers would, perhaps, be less inclined to invite them for an interview. Banks may not provide them mortgages or loans to start a business. And their children could become isolated when other parents in the neighborhood don't want their offspring to play at a house where there are potentially illegal substances lying around—even when charges are dropped soon after the arrest.

In this case, it would have been better if they were Johan, Peter, and Sjaan—while living in The Netherlands—when they were arrested. Or Jon, Pétr, and Janna in Sweden. Because then their identities and pictures would likely not have appeared in a local daily right away after their arrest. Johan or Jon would have been “a 32-year-old resident” or the “32-year-old J.” The identity would likely not be fully revealed at all, or only after conviction.

These reporting routines have been developed over a long time by journalists within their industries and could lead to the adoption of a “gold standard” of journalistic practices in individual media companies. In many cases (regardless of country), the “rules” on naming suspects is taught in journalism schools and in newsrooms as “the way we do things in our profession” without much thought about whether it is the best practice in *all* situations. As Fullerton and Patterson (2013) pointed out, “the most profound differences in press practices with respect to crime coverage result from ritualised, largely unexamined habits and from voluntary ethics policies – not from laws and formal regulation” (p. 124). Importantly, the authors also found that reporters have little knowledge about practices of colleagues and ethical codes in other countries. This probably applies to many journalists all over the planet.

It is certainly warranted to have larger discussions within media industries around the world as the digitalization of news could have large repercussions for many people who have digital footprints that they would like to—but can't—erase. Scientists warned about the influence of computers on people's daily life decades before the Internet became a household utility (see: Westin & Baker, 1972). Nowadays, social media messages float around the Twitterverse and other online repositories even when they are removed within minutes by their creators. Automatic Web crawlers or human Internet users have already captured and stored those virtual blips for eternity.

That becomes problematic when someone wants to forget some events from the past. “Since the beginning of time, for us humans, forgetting has been the norm and remembering the exception. Because of digital technology and global networks, however, this balance has shifted” (Mayer-Schönberger, 2011, p. 2). Social forgetfulness, the opportunity for a fresh start because no one can remember someone's particular history, is disappearing—as frustrating it may be for some (Blanchette & Johnson, 2002; Ban-

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