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Fairness

A casualty of the anti-drug crusade

Just say “no” if tempted to publish photographs of people suspected of drug crimes.

By Deni Elliott

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A picture is worth a thousand words, the saying goes. A “mug shot” of an alleged offender under the caption “Drug Watch” speaks volumes. For people who see the photos, those pictured are forever linked to drug use.

It doesn’t matter if The Standard-Times later prints that charges against the photograph’s subject have been dismissed or the person has been found not guilty — the damage has been done. And what are the chances that everyone who saw the initial photo will see the follow-up telling how the case was disposed of?

Like the teacher who has been falsely accused of molesting a student, the person falsely accused of drug use may lose his or her job, home and reputation. The newspaper cannot evade responsibility by claiming that such things shouldn’t happen. They do.



They're just casualties of the drug war, I suppose.

I worry about news column crusades and the arrogance of editors who think they can know the bad guys.

James Ragsdale, editor of The Standard-Times, said (see "Newspaper joins war against drugs") that drugs were the cause of so many of New Bedford's social ills; others might well argue that drugs are only a symptom of the problem. The drug story is a myriad of political, economic and societal factors that goes far beyond what happens in court to a particular individual on a particular day.

Citizens don't need to know what people in court look like; they need to know why they are there. Why haven't law enforcement attempts been successful in New Bedford? What works in other communities? What educational and social service facilities and workers have failed to meet the needs of those at risk for drug involvement? Why not list those agencies and run pictures of those failing to do their jobs?

Citizens need all the information that they can get to understand the drug problem. They can't get the story when journalists turn vigilante.

Newspapers that print pictures of alleged drug offenders give the court a good opportunity to tell its story. Even without such journalistic cooperation, it's easy for the powerful institutions to get their word out. Judges, lawyers, detectives and politicians move in the same social circles as journalists. They speak the same language.

Voices of the powerless are less easy to get and more urgently needed. The system won't tell us what is wrong with it; but those harmed by a troubled system can. Those dependent on social services may not be as savvy as those who dole those services out. But, these voices won't be heard at all if newsrooms act to destroy their trustworthiness with those who have the most reason to be suspicious.

Whether or not there is direct cooperation between police stations and newsrooms in these types of stories, the appearance of collusion cannot be overcome. How is someone with a story of abuse by the system to trust that the newsroom buddy won't pass the word on to a police station buddy?

Getting drugs off the streets and out of the schoolyard may be the most noble of causes, but journalists can't do their job and the police department's too.

Newsrooms shouldn't take on drug dealers and prostitutes; they shouldn't urge readers to return coupons describing suspicious characters.

The police officer's job is to get the bad guy off the street. The journalist's job is to help people understand why this is or is not happening. News column crusaders fail at both; printing the pictures of those arraigned doesn't help do either job.



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