

Fineline™

The Newsletter On Journalism Ethics

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Colorado media's option play Most passed; did they also fumble?

The alternative weekly's story was called a "despicable" invasion of privacy. But it was the area's hottest topic.

by Sue O'Brien

Westword, Denver's brash alternative weekly, gave it full front-page play: "CU Coach Bill McCartney keeps the faith — and gets a grandson fathered by his star quarterback."

But University of Colorado quarterback Sal Aunese and McCartney's 20-year-old daughter, Kristyn, were not married.

And the young Samoan football star was dying of cancer.

Talk-radio telephones buzzed with outrage. The story was the topic of loud debate in every newsroom. But few Colorado journalists were writing.

The university confirmed that Aunese was the father of McCartney's grandson on Aug. 30, the day the *Westword* story broke. But *The Denver Post*, *Rocky Mountain News*, *Boulder Camera* and two of Denver's four commercial television stations maintained silence, refusing to chase

a story they'd all known about for months.

The tone of the *Westword* story, which depended exclusively on unnamed sources, was ugly. Aunese came across as an uncaring lout, Kristyn as little more than a tramp. But the harshest treatment was of McCartney.

"They tried to make it a story by putting an angle on it that Bill McCartney, a very Christian-type fellow, can't control the team, or even his own daughter," said *Rocky Mountain News* Sports Editor Barry Forbis. "That's a pretty weak peg."

For *Westword* writer Bryan Abas, Kristyn's pregnancy proved his central contention: "McCartney has lost the respect of his players, and some are retaliating in one of the most humiliating, intensely personal ways imaginable."

Denver Post Managing Editor Gay Cook called that "cheap-shot journalism."

"I don't think the thesis of the article was substantiated by the reporting," she said. "And I think it came very close to a gross invasion of Kristyn McCartney's privacy."

The mainstream media boycott of the story continued even after the 21-year-old Aunese died Sept. 23. Only the *News*, in Aunese's obituary, noted that he had left "a 6-month-old son, Timothy." No last name. No further identification.

But on Sept. 25, before 2,000 mourners at a campus memorial service, a somber Coach McCartney addressed his daughter and resolved a dilemma for worried editors who still hadn't decided how to cover the story.

"Kristy McCartney, you've been a trooper. You could have had an abortion, gone away and had the baby somewhere else to avoid the shame, but you didn't. ... You're going to raise that little guy and all of us are going to have an opportunity to watch him."

The photo of Kristyn standing with Timothy by the casket was played prominently in all three dailies and on all TV newscasts.

The *News* included an excerpt from a little-noticed June interview in which

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P.S./ ELLIOTT

Doing your own ethics audit

Here are the questions to ask as you look at stories about your coverage area.

by Deni Elliott

If I had spent Sept. 11-15 locked in a Cleveland hotel room with only the local evening news and *The Plain Dealer* to tell me about the city outside my door, I would have come to know Cleveland as extraordinarily white and male. I would have come to know a city either preoccupied with or besieged by crime.

Ethics audits, like the one I recently conducted in Cleveland, can help news directors and editors take a critical look at the city they hope to represent through their coverage.

The tools for conducting an audit are few — a week or two of coverage and a

sharp eye for noticing both what appears and what doesn't. The questions for a rudimentary audit are simple. The answers are sometimes surprising.

1) How many men and women appear as subjects or sources in news photos or footage? What is the racial balance? What are those people doing?

In answering this question I am leaving out sports and weather because my focus is on the people who are presented as setting and carrying out the city's agenda.

Aside from the Cleveland city council president, who was also a candidate for mayor, every judge, lawyer or law-enforcement officer pictured as the subject or identified source in the Channel 3 (NBC)

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Colorado media pass

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Aunese had proudly discussed his son with his hometown paper, the Oceanside, CA, *Blade-Tribune*.

But Aunese consistently refused or ignored requests to talk with Denver reporters. He never explained his reasons.

Except for *Westword*, Denver editors decided not to go with the story unless Aunese and the McCartneys were willing. McCartney opened the door at the memorial service. Until then, "he didn't talk about it and we didn't write it," said Forbis. Few felt they needed to confirm what was widely accepted as truth.

Most editors' reservations revolved around issues of taste and privacy. For some, the clincher was that Aunese was dying. Others refused to violate Kristyn's privacy, rejecting the Abas argument that the daughter of a public figure is, per se, a public figure.

In conversation, some criticized *Westword* for playing to racial stereotypes by emphasizing Kristyn's relationships with black and Polynesian players. Others

objected to an implied double standard of conduct for men and women students.

All worried about how the community would react to a distasteful story.

"If I were maybe 20 to 25 years younger, I'd say, 'Oh, my God, we've got to do this story now,'" Barrie Hartman, executive editor of the Boulder *Camera*, said last month. But "Good sense for a paper of my size in a community like this says you put the brakes on it for a while."

Denver Post Editor Chuck Green, who hadn't participated in daily news decisions on the story, criticized his colleagues for failing to aggressively pursue *Westword's* allegations that McCartney's religion had intruded into the locker room.

At KMGH-TV, News Director Mike Youngren observed that a tendency to take the easy way out seems to prevail in Colorado newsgathering. It took *Sports Illustrated* to fully report the off-field problems of CU football players, he notes.

Westword Editor Patricia Calhoun speculated that the boycott had much to do with the area's fondness for football.

It remained for the state's most idiosyncratic daily to take the most independent

path. Editor Clint Talbott of the *Colorado Daily*, which is based on the CU campus but has no formal ties to the university, decided Kristyn's pregnancy was a private matter.

Even after McCartney's memorial service remarks, Talbott refused to join other newspapers in the rush to print the story. "It didn't matter that it wasn't news," he wrote in an editorial on Oct. 6. "It just mattered that the story was a good read, and the papers pounced on the first legitimate excuse to put it in print."

McCartney says he hadn't planned his memorial service remarks. But his daughter had been publicly attacked and deserved public validation. He apparently decided the story would be handled right.

"The mainstream media had this story before that magazine," he said last month. "Obviously it was a tasty story, one that would have certainly garnered headlines, and the fact that they left it alone spoke volumes to me."

Sue O'Brien, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Colorado in Boulder, is a former Denver television news director and Denver Post assistant city editor.

Do your own ethics audit

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coverage was a white male. Except for candidates, the adult black men who appeared as subjects or sources were either the NAACP president or a preacher reacting to an alleged racial incident or people accused or convicted of crimes.

On Channel 8, the CBS affiliate, 10 white men appeared as subject or source for every black woman. About 85 percent of the men presented were active: authority figures, business owners, or people arrested for or convicted of crimes. Less than 20 percent of the women pictured on the evening news were seen in active roles. They were victims or relatives of victims, residents, and consumers. They were people who were acted upon.

2) What words are being used to describe the people in the news?

This was the week of a sensational rape trial in Cleveland. One woman, identified at her request, was referred to most often as a "rape victim."

However, Channel 8 called her a "courageous survivor" on one newscast; Channel 5 (ABC) once introduced her as someone who "says she was raped."

One murder victim referred to during that week was called the "Lakewood widow" by all but one news organization. If the victim had been male, would he have been known as the "Lakewood widower"?

3) What gets most attention? What counts as news? Are readers/viewers given context for events?

Of the 30 local stories that appeared those days on Page 1 or the metro front of *The Plain Dealer*, about half related to crime. The crime stories in *The Plain Dealer* and those on the local evening news broadcasts were presented as episodic events.

So what does this have to do with ethics? Everything.

For example, although the trial of the "West Side Rapist," who had pleaded not guilty by reason of insanity, and the stories told by his accusers dominated the local news, no news organization brought notice to the irony that, in the same week, residents of Brooklyn, a Cleveland suburb, were petitioning the court for the early release of a sex offender.

Only one station included any information in the rape trial coverage that went beyond courtroom process. A rape crisis coordinator spoke briefly for Channel 5 about the long-term damage of rape.

But President Bush's speech on drugs to the nation's young people brought the predictable reaction-from-local-students story from all the news organizations.

Channel 8 also used the speech as a springboard for a story about a drug education and prevention program provided in local schools by law-enforcement officials.

The exodus of East Germans that week spawned a story, also on Channel 8, that provided comments from local residents of German birth or descent.

4) Who's missing?

No Asian faces appeared except those of Chinese demonstrators holding a 100-day memorial service for those killed in Tiananmen Square. The demonstrators showed up in newspaper photos and on one of the stations. Based on what appeared in the background as well as the foreground of news photos and footage, no people with disabilities live in the area; and there are no homeless.

So what does this have to do with ethics? Everything.

News media mirror their coverage area. It's important to know where the image is distorted and where the accurate representation is troubling. For example, if more than 90 percent of the people in power in the Cleveland coverage area are white and male, that fact in itself might be deemed newsworthy. As well as holding a mirror to the coverage area, news media magnify aspects that warrant community notice.

P.S. Elliott is a monthly column written by consulting editor Deni Elliott. Elliott is executive director of the Ethics Institute, Dartmouth College.