

1 TALE OF 2 DOUBLE SLAYINGS : WAS THE NEWS COVERAGE FAIR? MAYBE NOT, SOME IN MEDIA ADMIT

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On March 8, twin sisters on Detroit's east side were stabbed to death and died in each others' arms, leaving behind two motherless toddlers and a stunned and grieving family.

The story appeared on Page 1 **of** the Free Press and Page 3 **of** the Detroit News, and was reported by the city's three major TV stations. After that, except for a plea from WXYZ-TV (Channel 7) for witnesses to come forward, it vanished from television and got only brief and perfunctory notice, on the inside pages, from the newspapers.

On May 21, elderly twin sisters were shot to death in their east side Detroit home. The story was Page 1 news in both papers, made the newscasts on five local TV stations and continued to be the subject **of** stories and commentary for more than a week.

Why the difference?

Detroit's Mayor Young said last week that it was because the victims in the first instance were black, in the second white. He also accused the news media **of** assuming at first -- wrongly, as it turned out -- that the white sisters were slain because they stayed behind in a racially changing neighborhood.

"We have to guard against the perception that every time someone gets killed in the city **of** Detroit, it's by blacks, or that when blacks kill blacks, it ain't no big story," Young said. "But if blacks kill whites, that can be hyped for several weeks."

NEWS EXECUTIVES at newspapers and TV stations deny Young's charges that race consciously influences their coverage **of** crime stories. They say many factors go into news judgment -- the selection process that makes **one** person's killing front-page news and another's worth merely a mention.

But some conceded that in this case, in the words **of** Mort Crim, anchor at WDIV-TV (Channel 4), "We got caught with our sensitivities down."

Kent Bernhard, executive editor **of** the Free Press, said, "I think the fact that the story **of** the black twins' deaths was on the front page, with the other important news happening that day -- tax reform, bombings in South Africa, the discovery **of** the remains **of** the shuttle crew -- does show it was a story we felt was important."

But neither Bernhard nor Ben Burns, administrative editor at the Detroit News, had a ready explanation **of** why the papers didn't do a "second day" story on the black twins, as both papers did on the white twins -- a story that might have explored more thoroughly the black twins' lives, the reason they were slain and the reactions **of** their friends and neighbors.

"I don't know why we didn't," Bernhard said. "I wish we had, because it was a dramatic story."

Burns said he thought it either was an oversight or that the black twins' story had been elbowed into obscurity by other breaking news. Major stories in the Detroit papers the next day included tornadoes in the Midwest, approval **of** the Michigan tax amnesty, a **slaying** by terrorists in Beirut, U.S. Supreme Court decisions and a court battle over public access to judicial records in Michigan.

"That comes down to the question, is there a traditional mental set which did not see the story **of** the black twins as important a story as the other?" said Burns. "I don't know the answer to that. I think it is something both newspapers are concerned about.

"I don't believe either newspaper is racist in its coverage. But after the mayor's remarks, I was concerned enough to think about it for some time -- whether, if we had as many black editors as we would like to have, would we have pushed the (black twins') **slaying** harder?"

IF IT ISN'T RACISM that influences the coverage **of** particular crimes, then what is it? News directors and editors cited several factors that influence their decisions:

* Timing: If you're killed in Detroit on a weekend -- as the black twins were -- your passing is less likely to be noted on television than if it happened on a weekday, when the TV stations have more reporters and cameramen at work and more newscasts.

"The major difference was the visibility **of** the crimes at the initial stage," said Bill Vance, news director at WJBK-TV (Channel **2**). "With the white twins, we had much more original information, we had more video to go with, whereas with the black twins, we had no video to use for follow-up stories, we had minimal initial information to follow up on."

* Unusual angles: In a town where more than 600 people were slain in 1985 and 168 were killed through April this year, homicide gets humdrum. It takes an unusual twist -- extreme brutality, the prominence or number **of** victims -- for the daily mayhem to make the news.

* What's happening elsewhere: "Play," the term for the prominence a story is given, depends on what else is happening -- disasters, tragedies, revolutions, local sports triumphs. A **double** murder gets more attention on a slow news day than on a busy **one**.

* Police co-operation: The more information police provide, the more attention the story will get. But Detroit police, on orders from Mayor Young, have shut the press out, editors and TV news directors say. "The mayor can't tell us we can't have the information, then cuss us out because we don't," said Vance.

In response, Lt. Fred Williams, head **of** the Police Department's public affairs section, said too many reporters think they're policemen and get in the way **of** investigations. "When we say, 'no comment,' we have a darn good reason for it," he said. "We're in the business **of** solving these crimes, not tantalizing the public with little bits and pieces **of** what we've learned, and not trying the cases in the media."

* Lights, camera, action: For TV, the availability **of** film showing action -- police cars arriving, neighbors gathering outside the scene **of** a tragedy -- dictates what gets airtime. Again, because the black twins were slain on a weekend, stations didn't have film to illustrate follow-up stories.

* Perspective: Greg Neubacher, news director at WKBD-TV (Channel 50), and Dow Smith, news director at Channel 4, said they are consciously trying to limit crime coverage to give a fairer perspective on the city and on what is important in viewers' lives. "Does the mayor want us to report every murder?" asked Smith, alluding to Young's frequent charge that the news media sensationalize crime in the city.

* Unfolding events: Coverage **of** the white twins' death was reignited by the dramatic news, a week later, that a son **of one of** the victims had been arrested and charged with the crime. In the case **of** the black twins, days and weeks went by with no new developments. No **one** is currently charged with that crime.

* Herd instinct: When **one** news organization pursues a story vigorously, others are likely to follow. Conversely, if no **one** gives a story big play right away, chances are everyone will continue to ignore it.

SOME EDITORS said the mayor himself made the white twins' death seem important by telling reporters the next day, in response to a question, that it was a "particularly heinous crime." Dow Smith, Channel 4 news director, said it was the black neighbors who talked about crime and vandalism on the block where the white twins lived and died.

Crim, the Channel 4 anchor, was **one of** those who assumed the white twins were slain because "they refuse(d) to get out **of** the neighborhood," as he phrased it in an interview with Mayor Young after the killings.

"I regret that," said Crim. "I think the tragedy is that it was a logical assumption," he added, citing youth gang violence in many city neighborhoods and the number **of** crimes committed by young people against the elderly. "It may have been unfair, premature, wrong, but it was not illogical."

In a radio broadcast the day after the white twins' killings, George Cantor, a Detroit News columnist and commentator on WWJ Radio, chided the police for blaming most homicides in Detroit on the family and acquaintances **of** the victims. A few days later, after the son **of one** victim was arrested for the murder, Cantor apologized on the air -- and urged that a reward program set up by some businessmen in the wake **of** the white twins' murder be continued to help find the killers **of** black victims.

"Although I disagree with most **of** the mayor's charges **of** racism, I think he's right on the money with this **one** ," said Cantor. "I think the murder **of** a white person is going to get more play in all organs **of** the media than the murder **of** a black person. I think they're responding to implicit assumptions among their readership. You're talking about the horrible fantasies among the readers. Their worst suspicions about Detroit become real."

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