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Crime Journalism

Prof. Mukul Srivastava

Head

Department of Journalism & Mass Communication

University of Lucknow Lucknow (India)

sri.mukul@gmail.com

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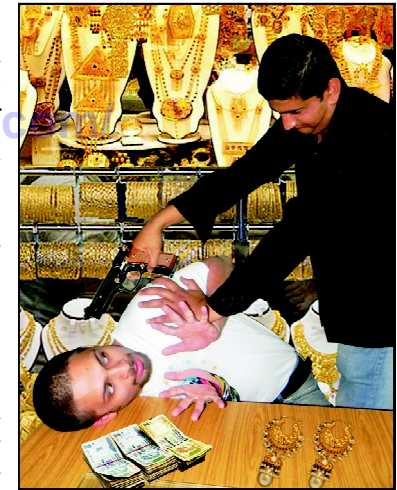
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Now-a-days crime news has become an important determinant of the structure of almost every newspaper and a large amount of space in newspapers is filled with crime news. General public takes huge interest in crime based news stories. Neither can any newspaper run without publishing crime news, nor can it boost its popularity and circulation. Several attempts were made to publish newspapers sans the crime news, but they were either closed down or were forced to change their policies.



If we take a close look at the history of crime journalism; we will find that crime and society have always had a hand in glove relationship. With the development of journalism, the tendency to bring forth various nefarious practices prevalent in the society also developed and this led to the growth and development of the trade of crime journalism. Although at the beginning, local newspapers focussed most of their attention on local news stories and crime related news seldom got any space in them, but in this age of specialization crime news has tremendously gained in importance and become one of the most sought after forms of journalism.

Crime is any act punishable under the law.

Field of Crime Journalism

Large cities such as Delhi usually have police control rooms and they form a very good source for crime based news stories. In the Capital of our country, we have a public information officer for the police, who generally is a member of the Central Information Service. Crime reporters can get almost all the information related to the crimes happening in the city and the functioning of the police itself from that officer. Police itself communicates the information about the crimes and mishaps that took place in last 24 hours through periodical news releases, but generally a crime reporter should endeavour to collect crime news by herself/himself. A lot of information can be gathered on the phone, but if crime news is collected through the phone only, then it becomes insipid and devoid of any vitality. A crime reporter should follow news in order to get a true picture of the events and bring out the truth of the claims made either by the police or the public.

Information received through news releases is not sufficient to write good and all inclusive crime news. This information should be treated as a pointer only. For instance, if a news release given by police asserts that an irate and rowdy mob of students incinerated the main market of the city today and police was left with no option but to open fire at them after all other means of controlling them were exhausted, then this cannot be published as it is. The correspondent should investigate this at her/his own level and write the news including the information given above as the official version of the police as one side of the story and accumulate all other pertinent information in it to give a balanced and unbiased account of the events.

1. Arson and Burglary: Complete description of incidents of arson and robbery should be given. Questions like, “Whether this was pre-planned?” or “What was the real purpose of the perpetrators of the crime?” should be answered in the news. The news about such incidents should also include the action taken by the police.

The information such as ‘the number of persons killed or injured during the arson’, ‘the amount of



property gutted in the fire’, ‘cause/s of the arson’, etc. should be incorporated in the final copy. Crime reporters should also take eye-witness accounts and try to inculcate them in their reports.

2. Murder: While reporting about a murder or murders, answers to following questions should be discovered and incorporated in the report:

- Who is the deceased?
- What would be her/his approximate age?
- Where did s/he lived and where was s/he at the time of the murder?
- When and where this crime did take place?
- Whether the culprit has been identified or whether some clues have been found pertaining to her/his whereabouts? If the answer to any of these questions is affirmative, then where is s/he at present?
- How did the murder take place and what was the motive?
- What action did police take?
- Who is arrested in the case?
- Has the criminal left any clues on the crime scene on the basis of which further investigation can be done?



3. Theft: Minor incidents of larceny do not always required to be converted into news. However, if there is a big theft or a series of minor thefts are continually recurring, then such incidents must assiduously be converted into news. Following questions should be answered in a theft based crime report:

- When and where did the theft occur?
- What was the modus operandi of the thieves?
- What was the approximate value of the property stolen?
- Did the police find any specific clues pertaining to the theft?

Another point that must be kept in mind while reporting such incidents is that they should not be glamourised or made sensational.





4. Robbery: Incidents of robbery always have some amount of dramatics involved. A crime reporter's job is to point that out in a manner that does not eulogize and present the dacoits as 'daring heroes' in front of the readers. To prevent crimes and to inculcate bravery and courage in the society to fight against the crimes as well as the criminals is

the professional as well as the moral responsibility of any crime reporter and is not something that is in the exclusive territory of the police and the administration. There are some important points which should always be mentioned while reporting a robbery such as 'the preventive measures taken by the police of that area to control such crimes', 'the level of preparedness of the police to prevent such crimes', 'role of police squad in context of the incident being reported', etc.

5. Rape: News stories based on rape are quite sensitive and must be approached very cautiously. Extreme caution should be taken while giving names of the accused, because even a minor mistake on the part of the reporter may lead to huge injustice for innocent people. Name of the victim or victims of such heinous crime should never be published. Also, complete address of the victim/s should not be given. However, if the victim was murdered after the rape or had committed suicide due to self-reproach and ignominy, then the complete name and address of the victim should necessarily be given. While giving the names of the accused or the victim, it should be kept in mind that the job of a newspaper is to report the truth and not to disparage or to disgrace anyone. Proper care must be taken regarding the words used in such reports and the tendency to sensationalize the report by going overboard should be avoided. For instance, a minor instance of eve-teasing should not be described as molestation or attempt to rape.

6. Prostitution: As opposed to rape news stories, it is completely acceptable to give names in case of prostitution related news stories. If



the girls working in the trade are minors, then their names should not be published. Nevertheless, complete names, addresses and modus operandi of the people running the brothels should necessarily be incorporated into the report in order to alert the public about these immoral perpetrators of one of the most egregious crimes against the women. If the prostitutes are also arrested, then their names can be given depending upon the policy of the publication or the media house one is working with. While writing prostitution related news stories, one should be conscious of the fact that some of the girls or women involved in the trade are not there by choice; they were forced by multifarious adverse societal circumstances and certain unavoidable compulsions of life to adopt prostitution as a mean of earning their livelihood. Therefore, one must sympathize with such girls and women. Do not use impolite language.



7. Abortion: Do not give news related to abortion under normal circumstances. If there is a really sensational story related to it that deserves to be made known to the public, then it should be published after meticulous investigation and the name of the women involved should not be given. It is appropriate to give the name of the women involved only when she has died during the operation due to the negligence of the doctor. Make the readers aware of the unusual circumstances related to the case.



8. Altercation: News related to altercations or quarrels among gamblers, alcoholics, anti-social elements and groups of delinquents should be absolutely accurate. Till the information related to the identities of the persons involved is not corroborated, do not publish any names. If the police discloses the names of the absconding persons or reveals the names of the persons involved in the quarrel, then those



names can be incorporated in the report.

Do not give biased descriptions of an altercation or quarrel. The report should include information regarding the beginning of the quarrel, events that incited the people and eye-witness accounts. Any such incident should be reported exactly in the same manner as that occurred without any prejudices or biases. Do not attempt to arrive at any personal conclusions. It is not the job of a reporter to pronounce judgements. If lethal weapons were used, then it is not sufficient to plainly state that lethal weapons were used by the culprits; description of the weapons used should also be given. Correspondents are dependent upon eye-witness accounts, official or un-official versions of the police and other persons in possession of relevant information to collect data pertaining to news of quarrels. The source/s from where a correspondent has received her/his information should be clearly identified in the report.

9. Communal Riots: While reporting communal riots, responsibility of a reporter increases tremendously because news stories based on communal riots can be quite provocative. Therefore, such news stories should be written with extreme caution and sensitivity. Nothing even remotely inciting in nature should be published or any content that can fuel the riots should be expunged immediately. Names of the communities involved are usually not published. The report should inform the readers about the circumstances under which the riot started, but the reporter should avoid pinning the blame on any one community. For instance, while writing the reasons behind a communal riot it can be written that the



people belonging to one community were doing some work and those belonging to another community tried to stop them. This led to a minor altercation between the two communities which soon snowballed into a full-fledged riot. However, this fact should not be written in a manner which makes one side appear to be guiltier than the other. Sometimes certain specific facts come to light which clearly indicate that which party should be blamed, but even under such circumstances it is not advisable to pin-point one party as the perpetrators of the crime, because this may lead to further worsening of the situation. Role of the police before the riot commenced; during the riot and after it ended should also be mentioned in the report. If attempts were made by one or both the communities or the police and the administrative machinery to restore peace in the area as soon as possible and re-establish cordial relations between the two communities, then diligently try to gather complete information about such attempt/s and give them special mention in the report. Such peace attempts should never be ignored while reporting about communal riots.

10. Bailable and Non-Bailable Offences

If an accused is arrested by the police, then, s/he may approach the court for obtaining a bail. Bail is the security amount deposited by an accused with the court in order to get released from the prison on conditions that s/he will cooperate with the court completely and will be present at the court whenever ordered to do so by it. Some offences are non-bailable. An accused arrested in connection with a non-bailable offence cannot get bail from the court and is sent directly to the penitentiary.





There are myriad types of crimes and consequently, the scope of crime reporting is quite extensive. Still, the accepted principles of writing crime news stories with regard to the crimes mentioned in the previous paragraph should be treated as guidelines for writing crime news based on any type of crime. Crime reporters should always keep in mind that their job is to inform the public or the readers about the nature of a crime and its deleterious repercussions and not to extol or glamorize an offender. This tendency, if not controlled by the reporters themselves, can prove to be apocalyptic for the future of any civilized society. Journalists are also known as the 'doctors of the society' and have a responsibility to fight against and eradicate various evils prevalent in a society. Therefore, as the 'doctors of the society' journalists should dutifully inform about various evils and egregious malpractices prevalent in the society and should dedicatedly endeavour to eliminate them for construction of a better society.

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