



REPORTING ON THE NIGHT STALKER: THE ETHICS OF CRIME JOURNALISM

In times of crisis, the general public turns to officials and the media for information. This is especially true when an active serial killer is on the loose, as fearful citizens question how they can keep themselves and loved ones safe from harm. Richard Ramirez, also referred to as “the Night Stalker,” murdered and/or assaulted at least 25 people in California between the years of 1984 and 1985. His victims varied in age, gender, ethnicity, neighborhood, and socioeconomic status, making him difficult to track down since he lacked a distinct profile (Mustafa, 2021). In the eyes of the public, no one was safe from attack.

As the search for the Night Stalker progressed, television reporter Laurel Erickson discovered that investigators found a specific shoe print at multiple crime scenes. In fact, the shoe brand was so rare that police believed there was only a single pair in the Los Angeles area. This information had not been released to the public and investigators discouraged Erickson from reporting on the find (Tiller, 2021). Instead, they offered to do an on-camera interview with her if she did not broadcast it. Erickson agreed to the interview and did not publish the information about the shoe print. However, the question remains: Did Erickson make the most ethical choice?



According to the Society of Professional Journalists (2014), there are two ethical principles that Erickson should follow, ones that appear to offer conflicting guidance: (1) The duty to seek truth and report it and (2) the duty to minimize harm. In terms of the first principle, it is a journalist’s responsibility to gather, verify, and publicize accurate information. Particularly in cases such as this where the stakes are literally a matter of life or death, withholding relevant news from the public seems like an unwise course of action. If Erickson were to report on the shoe print, it could lead to a community member recognizing the shoes and potentially lead to the capture of the perpetrator. Additionally, many would argue that due to the level of danger posed by Ramirez, citizens have a right to know as much information as possible in order to best protect themselves from attack.

On the other hand, the second journalistic principle of minimizing harm stresses the long-term consequences of reporting such information to the public. Here, disregarding investigators’ wishes and releasing news of the shoe print could severely hinder the investigation. If Ramirez became aware that his crimes were being tracked via the shoes he was wearing, he would likely dispose of them and authorities would have more difficulty finding him and linking his crimes together. Losing such an important piece of evidence would



allow Ramirez more time to kill more people as investigators would be left at square one. From this point of view, reporting on the shoe print would be deemed unethical because it increases the chances for further harm.

On August 24, 1985, Ramirez attacked a couple in their home. However, the victims survived and were able to provide investigators with a detailed sketch of the Night Stalker. Additionally, police found a fingerprint at the crime scene that they were able to match to Ramirez. With this damning evidence now in hand, an old mugshot of Ramirez was released to the press. He was finally caught on August 31 after a group of civilians recognized him and worked together to chase, beat, and detain him until police arrived (Tiller, 2021). It is unclear what the impact of Erickson's decision to not publish the information regarding the shoe print had on this case—it could have either shortened or lengthened Ramirez's reign of terror.

The ethical complexity of the situation is the only thing that's clear. There was another concern in the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics that could further muddy the waters: the principle of remaining independent of potentially interested sources that might bias or limit one's reporting. Perhaps deferring to the police on the value of this piece of information and when it should be disclosed sacrificed Erikson's ability to convey facts to an interested public. As helpful as the SPJ Code of Ethics is for journalistic practice, the case of Night Stalker highlights the conflicts that journalists can quickly become involved in while covering homicides.

Discussion Questions:

1. Do you think Erickson made the right choice in deciding not to publish the shoe print? Why or why not?
2. Think about the three principles brought up in this case from the SPJ Code of Ethics. If two or more ethical principles are in conflict, how should reporters decide which to prioritize?
3. How might media reporters and police officials work together to ensure the public is both informed and safe without endangering the progress of investigations?
4. Do the ethical guidelines that journalists ideally operate under help or hinder their activities in an environment saturated in digital information and social media?

Further Information:

Mustafa, Tanyel. (2021, January 14). "Who Were 'Night Stalker' Richard Ramirez's Victims?" *The US Sun*. Available at: www.the-sun.com/news/2132378/night-stalker-richard-ramirez-victims-who/

Society of Professional Journalists. (2014). "SPJ Code of Ethics." *Society of Professional Journalists*. Available at: www.spj.org/ethicscode.asp

"Richard Ramirez." *Encyclopædia Britannica*. Available at: www.britannica.com/biography/Richard-Ramirez

Tiller, Russel, director. (2021). "Night Stalker: The Hunt for a Serial Killer." *Netflix*. Available at: <https://www.netflix.com/search?q=night%20stalker&jbv=81025701>



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