

Editorial Ethics



What We Don't Use

Reporters always are on the lookout for facts and details that make their stories come alive. However, that doesn't mean they will or should use every fact they record in their notebooks, or every bit of video or audio they have captured for a story.

Most news organizations are careful to observe common standards of decency when it comes to reporting on crime and crime victims. For example, many news organizations do not print the names of juveniles accused of crimes unless the accused are tried as adults. And authorities — police and the district attorney's office — often don't release the names of juveniles until they are charged with a crime.

Many news organizations continue to make it their practice not to name victims of rape, despite a legal right to do so. They believe that publishing victims' names discourages women from reporting the crime. In recent years, with the occurrence of cases where high-profile men accused of the crime were named in news reports but the women who accused them were not, some news organizations have been rethinking that practice.

The National Center for Victims of Crime developed voluntary guidelines for the media. One guideline advises that the media notify and ask permission from victims and their families before using photographs. The center also suggests that the media refrain from publishing unverified or ambiguous facts about the victim.

Journalists generally are careful to avoid sensationalism, or exaggerating stories just to hook their readers. They avoid using material their audience might find obscene or in poor taste, particularly photographs and video. Deciding the standards of good taste, however, may be tricky. Editors should ask themselves first if the story is newsworthy, and then how their readers will react to the story, to the language in the story and to other elements that help tell the story — photographs, video or audio.

THINK Critically

1. Do you think journalists should name juveniles accused of a crime? Why or why not?
2. How would you determine whether a story meets common standards of decency?