

You are here: LAT Home > Articles > 2005 > August > 05 > Entertainment

Archive for Friday, August 05, 2005

Not only Natalee is missing

By Anne-Marie O'Connor

August 05, 2005 *in print edition E-1*

As one of America's new breed of media critics, Philadelphia blogger Richard Blair watched for weeks as the media devoted intense coverage to the story of the May 30 disappearance of Natalee Holloway while on a high school graduation trip to Aruba.

Then, on July 18, another young woman went missing, this one in his hometown. Photos of LaToyia Figueroa, 24, show the kind of smiling, attractive young woman whose disappearance has become a staple of television news coverage, particularly cable news, in recent years.

Except for one thing, a growing chorus of critics say: Figueroa, five months pregnant and the mother of a 7-year-old, comes from a lower-income black family, while the missing women regularly portrayed on television are overwhelmingly white. Her frustrated family had resorted to picketing on a busy street corner to draw attention to her disappearance when Blair and other Philadelphia bloggers took up Figueroa's case.

"Certainly Natalee Holloway's story is tragic in its own right," Blair said. "But what makes it more newsworthy than a five-month pregnant mother?"

"I think this is part of a larger discussion: Who's news, who's newsworthy, and who's making these decisions," Blair said. "I think race is a factor, as well as economic status."

Criticism of the media disparity has increased with the growth of the news genre focusing on missing women. While the media seem to focus on a parade of attractive disappeared white women – from Laci Peterson and Chandra Levy to "runaway bride" Jennifer Wilbanks, the scores of missing black and Latina women garner little or no national attention, critics say.

The decapitated body of Evelyn Hernandez, 24, who was nine months pregnant, was discovered in the San Francisco Bay a few months before Peterson, but she did not touch off a firestorm of coverage. Nor did the disappearance of Ardena Carter, 23, a pregnant black graduate student who was last seen alive on her way to the library in Georgia in 2003. The remains of Carter and her unborn child turned up in the woods two months later.

"I don't think a media director is sitting around saying, 'Hey, there's this black woman in Philadelphia and she disappeared and we don't care,'" said Todd Boyd, USC professor of critical studies. "It's an unconscious decision about who matters and who doesn't."

"In general, there is an assumption that crime is such a part of black and Latino culture, that these things happen all the time," Boyd said. "In many people's minds it's regarded as being commonplace and not that big a deal."

Mark Efron, vice president of MSNBC News Daytime Programming, disagrees. Efron said the stories of missing women typically bubble up from local network affiliates who are covering the stories based on the public outcry they generate in their home communities.

"It's not like there's a kind of cabal where MSNBC and CNN and Fox get together and say, 'Boy, this is a good one. That's not a good one,'" he said. "Usually, there's an involved family that tends to be sophisticated in how to use the media.

"I'm not disputing numbers. What I'm telling you is that we have never, ever, ever turned down a story based on race or any of those factors."

This week, he said, the network has devoted daily coverage to Figueroa's disappearance.

However, he said, since the controversy began, "we have had discussions with our staff, [saying] 'Let's just make sure. I know we're not doing anything purposely or maliciously or based on any kind of racial or age profiling, but let's just make sure,'" he said.

Concern over lack of attention to some cases is not just an issue of fairness. Early coverage of abductions can be crucial to finding the victims alive – a factor that the Philadelphia blogger said promoted his campaign.

"I have a daughter that's not much younger than LaToya," said Blair, who posted the news on his blog. "In this kind of thing, every minute's crucial."

To some analysts, this gets to the heart of the media's failure to fulfill its public service duty in the case of many missing minority women.

In California, for example, nearly 7,500 Latinas are missing – almost double the number of white women – but they are far less likely to receive attention.

The disparity even extends to abducted children, the critics say. While the sexual assault and murder of JonBenet Ramsey in her Boulder, Colo., home made her a nationally known symbol of a parent's worst fears, no corresponding black girl has become a household name, says author and political analyst Earl Ofari Hutchinson.

"When you raise the issue, people say, 'This is a tragedy and we should do more,'" Hutchinson said. "But it only lasts a hot minute. It doesn't leave any lasting imprint in the newsrooms."

One media-savvy relative says her efforts to draw attention to the disappearance of her niece, 24-year-old Tamika Huston, failed to win the attention of local media outlets whose stories might be picked up by national news. The African American woman didn't come home one day in June 2004 in South Carolina. Rebka Howard, her aunt, is a Miami public relations executive, but her media contacts and family news conferences failed to generate the kind of immediate attention they had hoped for.

Controversy over the disparity has grown in recent months as cable news formats seem to have adopted stories of the missing women as a staple news item.

"If there's a void in developing news stories, these things become the fodder for keeping ratings up on cable news networks," said Andrew Kohut, executive director of the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. "They go for cases that attract tabloid audiences. And tabloid audiences are traditionally more interested in what happens in the lives of rich people than middle-income people and especially poor people."

Kathleen Fitzpatrick, an associate professor of English and media studies at Pomona College, said the issue is more complex. The fact that media icons of missing women tend to be attractive white women is just one manifestation of American cultural myths about race and gender that have created a very specific archetype of the kind of woman who is considered a damsel in distress, she said.

"I'm not accusing anybody of conscious racism in telling particular stories," Fitzpatrick said. "If the public were clamoring for stories about the abuse of African American women and how they're damaged by it, probably CNN would be happy to give us that story."

Some analysts also blame a lack of newsroom diversity. Twenty-two percent of the staff of TV newsrooms are minorities, according to the Radio-Television News Directors Assn. An estimated 13% of newspaper journalists are minorities, according to the American Society of Newspaper Editors.

It is simply less likely that a reporter will hear about a story emerging in a community that has less representation in the media, said Maria Len-Rios, an assistant at the Missouri School of Journalism at Columbia and the author of a recent study about the underrepresentation of women in the media.

"I think that when you look at the composition of the newsroom and the people that people in the newsroom know, there aren't many people from underrepresented communities," Len-Rios said. "We don't pay as much attention to someone missing from a community we don't know or are not familiar with."

Erin Bruno, the lead case manager for the National Center for Missing Adults in Phoenix, said her office sends out press releases daily on the 47,828 cases of missing adults they are tracking. They are a diverse pool: 29,553 white or Latino, 13,859 black, 1,199 Asian and 685 American Indian.

Yet "what we're seeing in the national media is a lot of young Caucasian females," Bruno said. "I've heard reporters sometimes look for stories that they can identify with, perhaps they themselves are Caucasian"

And the reporters' search for the "damsel in distress" leaves another huge group ignored – men, she said. Some 25,447 missing males are being tracked by the Phoenix group, compared with 22,379 females – a gap roughly mirrored by California statistics. Said Bruno: "Women are seen more as victims than men are."

Bruno said the Holloway disappearance has generated a new demand from the media for information on a greater diversity of missing women.

Media criticism over the coverage gap is growing. "When black women disappear, the media silence can be deafening," said a July 2005 article in Essence magazine. In a poll conducted last week by Black Entertainment Television's website, BET.com, 71% of respondents said they did not believe that the belated flurry of media attention to Figueroa's disappearance meant that minority women were "finally getting as much attention as whites."

Several media organizations asked for comment on the issue declined. CNN spokeswoman Laurie Goldberg said news executives were unavailable. Barbara Cochran, the president of the Radio-Television News Director's Assn., said in an e-mail she was unavailable. Fox News spokeswoman Dana Klinghoffer said that "a lot of people are out and unavailable. I just think it's one we're going to have to sit out."

To Marty Kaplan, the associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication, the silence on the issue "suggests they don't have any good answers and they're a little embarrassed. What are they going to say?"

"It does suggest that it is seeping into their consciousness how blatant it is that only white women are covered. News directors apparently believe the public is interested in every lurid tale about a white woman and not about the bad things happening across the country every day to people who are less photogenic and not Caucasian."

Related Articles

- On Smart Story, Iraq-Weary Media Embrace 'Good News for a Change' Mar 14, 2003
- Levy Case Places Modesto at Center of Media Storm Jul 18, 2001
- The Condit Saga: To Cover or Not to Cover? Jul 13, 2001
- The Condit Saga: To Cover or Not to Cover? Jul 13, 2001
- Media Targets 'Trivial Issues,' Cheney Says Sep 14, 2000

More articles by Anne-Marie O'Connor

More articles from the Entertainment section

California and the world. Get the Times from \$1.35 a week

Copyright 2008 Los Angeles Times