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## Spotlight skips cases of missing minorities

By Mark Memmott, USA TODAY

Tamika Huston's family reported her missing a year ago this week.



Tamika Huston has not been seen since June 2004. She disappeared from the Spartanburg, S.C., area.

Family photo

When police in Spartanburg, S.C., began investigating the 24-year-old woman's disappearance, her loved ones swung into action. They distributed fliers, held news conferences and set up a Web site. Huston's story became a cause célèbre in the local media. (**Related story:** [Aruban police search home of Dutch teen](#))

Huston lived alone and obviously hadn't been home for days, if not a week or two. Her dog, Macy, had given birth to puppies.

Rebkah Howard, Huston's aunt and a public relations professional in Miami, tried to get the national media interested in the case. "I spent three weeks calling the cable networks, calling newspapers — even yours," Howard said this week.

Not much happened.

Last August, Fox News Channel's *On the Record with Greta Van Susteren* briefly noted Huston's disappearance. Fox network's *America's Most Wanted* did a story about the case in March (it will be repeated this Saturday). National Public Radio did a report last month that, like this story, focused on the lack of interest in Huston's case.

Now, the disappearance of Alabama high school student Natalee Holloway, 18, in Aruba is getting lots of airtime on the cable news networks and morning news shows. Those networks, which drive such stories, are being asked a tough question: Do they care only about missing white women?

Holloway, like "runaway bride" Jennifer Wilbanks, murder victims Laci Peterson and Lori Hacking, kidnap victim Elizabeth Smart and several other girls and women whose stories got significant airtime in recent years, is white.

Tamika Huston is black.

Cable news executives say they don't pick stories based on the race of the victims. "The stories that 'go national' all have a twist or an emotional aspect to them that make them interesting," said Bill Shine, senior vice president of programming at Fox News.

"When the Aruba story broke, I didn't know if she (Holloway) was white," said Mark Efron, vice president of

news/daytime programming at MSNBC.

He said he saw a story about "a parent's worst nightmare."

### **'Victims of a certain type'**

Others say race has to be at least a subconscious factor:

- "Something is at work here, at a conscious or at least subconscious level, that leads them to choose victims of a certain type" to report about, said Eugene Robinson, syndicated columnist and associate editor at *The Washington Post*, who recently wrote about the issue.
- "Sometimes we become advocates for their families," said Philip Lerman, co-executive producer of *America's Most Wanted* and a former editor at USA TODAY. "It's stunning sometimes how hard it is to get the national media interested when it's a minority."

Why would national media ignore minorities? Among the most important reasons is a lack of diversity in newsrooms, say Robinson, Lerman and Keith Woods, dean of faculty at the Poynter Institute, a school for journalists.

"I'm not complaining about the story out of Aruba. I'm complaining about the stories that don't get told" because many reporters, editors and news producers identify more with people like them, who are white, Woods said.

The American Society of Newspaper Editors estimates 13% of journalists at newspapers are minorities (including Hispanics). In TV newsrooms, minorities make up about 22% of the workforce, according to the Radio-Television News Directors Association. About 32% of the U.S. population is non-white or Hispanic.

Woods and others say the media mislead the public about "typical" victims. FBI statistics show that men are slightly more likely than women to be reported as missing, and that blacks make up a disproportionately large segment of the victims. As of May 1, there were 25,389 men in the FBI's database of active missing persons cases, and 22,200 cases of women. Blacks accounted for 13,860 cases, vs. 29,383 whites.

The media spotlight can distort news in other ways, too. Other international destinations are more dangerous than Aruba. The State Department warned in April that 30 U.S. citizens had recently been kidnapped or murdered in Mexico.

### **Media influence**

Media attention can affect how local authorities handle a case.

Detective Dwayne Baird, spokesman for the Salt Lake City police, has been through two rounds with the national media. Local teenager Elizabeth Smart, missing since November 2001, was found alive in March 2003. Last year, Lori Hacking, 27, was murdered by her husband. Both stories brought hundreds of journalists to the city.

Did the attention spur local police to request help from the FBI?

"Probably," Baird said. "We typically would ask for help from the FBI if they have resources that we don't have access to. But national attention can drive that issue. You can't stand before the public on a national story and say, 'We've got three guys dedicated to this, and sooner or later, we'll figure it out.' "

The FBI does not offer to get involved in missing persons probes because they're getting national attention, said spokesman Joe Parris, a supervisory special agent. The bureau "will get involved only if we have original jurisdiction or if we're invited in by a state, local or international partner," he said.

Howard conceded it's unlikely her niece is alive. This year, Huston's blood was found in an acquaintance's apartment. No suspect has been charged. National attention might generate clues, however. What Huston's family is asking for, Howard said, is balance.

"If you were dropped on to this planet you'd think there's a strange thing going on, where only young white women are missing," Howard said. "That's not true."

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