

Report on guns turns a newspaper into a target

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WHITE PLAINS, N.Y. -- Local newspapers across the country look for stories that will bring them national attention, but the Journal News, a daily nestled in a wooded office park in a suburb north of New York, may have gotten more than it bargained for.

Two weeks ago, the paper published the names and addresses of handgun permit holders -- a total of 33,614 -- in two suburban counties, Westchester and Rockland, and included an online map of their locations. The article, "The Gun Owner Next Door: What You Don't Know About the Weapons in Your Neighborhood," was accompanied by an interactive map that received more than 1 million views on the website of the Journal News -- more than twice as many as the paper's previous record, about a councilman who had two boys arrested for running a cupcake stand.

But the article, which left gun owners feeling vulnerable to harassment or break-ins, also drew outrage from across the country. Calls and emails grew so threatening that the paper's president and publisher, Janet Hasson, hired armed guards to monitor the newspaper's headquarters in White Plains and its bureau in West Nyack, N.Y.

Personal information about editors and writers at the paper has been posted online, including their home addresses and information about where their children attended school; some reporters have received notes saying they would be shot on the way to their cars; bloggers have encouraged people to steal credit card information of Journal News employees; and two packages containing white powder have been sent to the newsroom and a third to a reporter's home (all were tested by the police and proved to be harmless).

"As journalists, we are prepared for criticism," Hasson said, as she sat in her meticulously tended office and described the ways her 225 employees have been harassed since the article was published. "But in the U.S., journalists should not be threatened."

She has paid for staff members who do not feel safe in their homes to stay at hotels, offered guards to walk employees to their cars, encouraged employees to change their home telephone numbers and has been coordinating with the local police.

The decision to report and publish the data happened within a week of the school massacre in nearby Newtown, Conn. On Dec. 17, Dwight R. Worley, a tax reporter who had previously covered business and education, returned from trying to interview the families of victims in Newtown with an idea to obtain and publish local gun permit data. He discussed his idea with his immediate editor, Kathy Moore, who talked to her bosses, according to CynDee Royle, the paper's editor.

Many of the threats, Hasson said, were coming from across the country, and not from the paper's own community. But local gun owners and supporters are encouraging an advertiser boycott of The Journal News.

Scott Sommovilla, president of the 35,000-member Westchester County Firearm Owners Association, said 44,000 people had downloaded a list of advertisers from his group's website. But he emphasized that his association would never encourage any personal threats and would not even participate in protests outside the paper's offices. Appealing to advertisers, he said, is the best way for gun owners to express their disapproval of the article.

"They're really upset about it," Sommovilla said. "They're afraid for their families."

The paper's decision has drawn criticism from journalists who question whether The Journal News should have provided more context and whether it was useful to publish individual names and addresses.

Journalists with specialties in computer-assisted reporting have argued that just because public data has become more readily available in recent years does not mean that it should be published raw. In ways, they argued, it would have been more productive to publish data by ZIP code or block.

"The Journal News, I personally think, should have rethought the idea as actually going so far to identify actual addresses," said Steve Doig, a professor with an expertise in data journalism at Arizona State. "This particular database ought to remain a public record. Just because it's available and public record doesn't mean we have to make it so readily available."

Worley disagrees.

"The people have as much of a right to know who owns guns in their communities as gun owners have to own weapons," he said.

The Journal News' features editor, Mary Dolan, said that while she was not involved with the publication of the article, her home address and phone numbers were published online in retaliation. She has had to disconnect her phone and has "taken my social media presence and just put it on the shelf for a while." She has also received angry phone calls from former neighbors in Westchester whose gun information was published.

She said she was especially concerned about the part-time staff members who write up wedding anniversary and church potluck announcements who have been harassed. But she supports the paper for its decision.

"It sparked a conversation that needed to occur in this country, and it revealed tactics that will be employed when gun owners feel their rights are threatened," she said.