

Integrity on Deadline: ABC News and the Duke Lacrosse Photographs

Abstract

This case describes ABC News and its early coverage of an alleged rape by members of the Duke University lacrosse team in 2006. The narrative stops at a point in mid-April when the ABC News Vice President for Editorial Quality, Kerry Smith, had to decide whether or not to broadcast photographs from the party at which the alleged rape took place. NBC News had already scooped ABC with the photos, but only on the East Coast; ABC could still match NBC on the West Coast morning news shows. ABC, however, had a strict policy about identifying a rape victim—and to publish the photos, even blurred, could be interpreted as “naming” her. Moreover, the pictures were ambiguous: it was hard to tell whether the alleged victim was smiling or grimacing. Finally, Smith judged the photos “tawdry.” But the ABC reporting team was anxious to use the photos. Smith had to make the call.

This case is a useful prism through which to examine the history and complexities of covering sex crimes in the US. It also provides insight into the evolution of Standards and Practices units at television news divisions, as well as the pressures of making nuanced editorial decisions on deadline. Students will be asked to consider what constitutes balanced coverage of a sex crime. In their discussion, they will have to weigh competitive pressures as well as the prevailing cultural norms. Students should begin to develop sensitivity to the most common journalistic errors in covering alleged sex crimes, with a view to avoiding them in the future.

The case can be used in a course about covering gender and race; about deadline writing; about broadcast news; or on the ethics of journalism.

Credits

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