3. An Uneasy Alliance: The Symbiotic Relationship between the Media and Law Enforcement

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AN UNEASY ALLIANCE

The Symbiotic Relationship between
the Media and Law Enforcement

On a number of occasions, I reached out to the media to interview journalists and editors to hear their side of the issue regarding racially biased coverage. I sought to ascertain what factors make a story newsworthy. Furthermore, I wanted to understand how editorial decisions are made with respect to which homicides are covered and whether the race of the victim plays a part in which stories receive more prominent coverage. My first attempt at contacting members of the media was through phone calls, followed by a standard email:

Hello X,

My name is Dr. Cheryl Neely and I am a professor in Sociology at Oakland Community College. I graduated from Wayne
Chapter Three

State University in May of 2009 with my PhD in Sociology and I am currently writing a book based on my dissertation topic—media’s coverage of African-American women as victims of homicide. This is an often talked about, but rarely written about topic in academia, and I am interested in getting members of media (actual reporters and instructors in the field) views on this issue. I have formulated 6 questions for a brief interview and I would very much like to interview you for my book. If you’d like to discuss this further (and I hope that you are), I can be reached at (office) or by (cell). I can interview you face-to-face over coffee (my treat) or over the phone . . . whichever is convenient for you. I look forward to your response to this request.

Sincerely,
Cheryl Neely, PhD

The questions I developed for the interview were designed to gauge the perspective of the journalist on accusations of biased reporting for female victims of homicide:

1. What in your opinion makes a story about homicide “newsworthy”?
2. Does race play a part in determining newsworthy coverage either directly or indirectly?
3. How do you as a journalist respond to criticism about media’s apparent bias in covering stories related to minorities that are missing and/or murdered?
4. In your experience/opinion, which type of homicide victim receives prominent coverage?
5. What is your opinion regarding media’s power in increasing police response in investigating/solving of homicides involving “prominent” victims (prominent victims are those receiving extensive, top news coverage)?
6. Does racial/ethnic diversity among reporting/editorial staff impact how stories are written about minority victims? Does it make a difference?

Unfortunately, despite a plethora of emails, phone calls, and even sending reporters previews of the questions I wanted to ask, it seemed that my efforts were rebuffed time and time again. In one case, I called the editor of a local newspaper on at least four different occasions, even speaking with his secretary, imploring her to let him know the nature of my call. Instead of returning my call, the editor told his secretary to advise me to speak with an associate editor, who then told me that the person I should be speaking with was the very editor I was attempting to interview! Nevertheless, the associate editor asked that I forward her the questions, which I did promptly; I never heard from her again. I began to suspect that the sensitive nature of this topic and trenchant criticism of the media regarding apparent racial bias in their coverage of stories contributed to their reluctance to go on record. I was unable to obtain direct answers to my inquiries, and thus I turned to literature and media studies research to answer my questions.

NEWSWORTHINESS AND VICTIM DISCOUNTING

In August 2011, Robin Barton, a legal journalist and former assistant district attorney, wrote an article entitled “Missing White Women Syndrome” and explicitly stated that race “is the biggest factor in determining how much interest journalists seem to show in a missing person’s case.”¹ She pointed out that when white females are missing, journalists act as though these cases are deserving of prominent news coverage, and she quotes Eugene Robinson, from the Washington Post, as describing white female victims as “damsels.” Robinson suggests that the common denominator for these women, besides gender, is that “of course the damsels must be white.”² It is disheartening to consider that a female who is a victim of violence is only viewed as vulnerable and deserving of rescue (hence the term “damsel”) when she is white. The
terror, frustration, and faltering hope felt by the family members of Romona Moore, Chanel Petro-Nixon, Alicia Chanta Moore, and Michelle Jackson (among many others I did not mention) as they begged law enforcement and the media to find their “damsels in distress” was met with indifference and insensitivity. Perhaps it is because these victims were black and, as Robinson suggested, therefore did not meet the criteria of a female in peril.

It appeared that Barton, herself a journalist, was critical in her ability to extract honest answers from media colleagues about the role race plays in news coverage, and she cites several of her sources by name. Their candor was unexpected and refreshing. For example, Kevin Drum, of the *Washington Monthly*, revealed that ratings and advertisement dollars are tied to white female victims being more newsworthy because they get more viewers. Kristal Brent Zook, a Columbia University professor of journalism, argued that white females receiving more coverage is as much an issue of class as it is of race: “The virginal, pure, blond princess is missing. . . . It has a lot to do with class, sexuality, and ageism, not just race.” However, I would challenge Zook in her claim of class having a significant impact. In my research on this topic, I have encountered victims who were young, attractive, educated, and middle class who were also African American, yet the media attention was not there or was minimal at best. Class may indeed be a factor, but when other things are equal, race often trumps class in the United States. There is no shortage of research to support the discriminatory impact of race. Even in stories where white female victims were economically disadvantaged and, as such, were suspected of having a history of prostitution and/or drug use, there were attempts by reporters to provide a positive view of these victims despite their unsavory past. In my research, I recall more than a few stories that illustrated this pattern of reporting. In one case, the murdered and burned body of twenty-one-year-old Anke Furber (a white female) was found in a vineyard near Atlanta in 2006. According to the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Furber had “been struggling with a drug problem” but was looking forward to being jailed for a bond violation to “get away from drugs.” Further, the reporter wrote: “Furber went to Sprayberry High School in Marietta, but began to get off course after she graduated. . . . [Her mother] remembers her daughter as a sweet girl who was a talented painter and who dreamed of being an artist.”
The article also included a number of interviews with family members and friends, and descriptions of Furber’s cat, Suki, and her “stuffed animals, paintings and poetry.” It was as though the writer sought to humanize the victim to offset a scornful public that would attribute the victim’s death to her own culpability given her drug-addicted lifestyle. In yet another story about a white female victim, an article on the brutal murder and dismemberment of seventeen-year-old Jennifer Chambers in October 2007 begins, “By the time she was 17, Jennifer Chambers had already made a lifetime’s worth of mistakes. Unlike most kids, she will never have the opportunity to undo them.” Despite her young age, Jennifer already had a history of crack cocaine abuse and prostitution, and the writer of the article describes her descent into self-destruction and a troubled history of foster care homes, drug use, and prostitution. The journalist states explicitly, “It was a sad, violent, end to a tumultuous life.” Even the detective investigating her murder, Steve Rotella, took a sympathetic view of Chambers’s death, declaring that “she didn’t have a chance to correct her mistakes, and that’s not fair. . . . Everything else is of no consequence to us.” While I agree that the senseless murders of these two young women were shocking and abhorrent, and that their past salacious history should not have precluded public sympathy or a rigorous investigation into their deaths, I submit that stories about murdered women of color who were drug addicts and/or sex workers are also worthy of the same humanization and dogged law enforcement attention.

Unsurprisingly, a reporter’s willingness to provide a compassionate view of the victim may be directly related to the race of the reporter, as I discovered in my own doctoral dissertation research. Robin Barton also confirmed the importance of diversity in newsrooms. She argued that when reporters are white, they are tempted to feel more empathy for victims similar to themselves, and having a racially and ethnically diverse reporting staff increases the likelihood that news coverage will more accurately reflect the larger community.

The broadcast news adage “if it bleeds, it leads” suggests that violent crime ranks high on the list of priority news. As such, violent crimes such as homicide are often reported as newsworthy based on both perpetrator
and victim characteristics. Stories featuring women and children as murder victims have increased not only the number of viewers of evening news programs but also the sales of newspapers, as viewers and readers have visceral reactions to crimes committed against these groups.7 Additionally, in many cases, the media may devote more time to crime stories based on characteristics of the victim that will provoke a greater level of public shock or disbelief. Homicides with female and child victims are seen as crimes that deviate from the norm and are thus considered important stories for newspapers to cover.8 In other words, the greater the social status of the victim or the deviant nature of the crime, the more likely the story is considered newsworthy and gets attention from the media. Research indicates that homicides most likely to get coverage are deviant in terms of the infrequency of occurrence (a phenomenon known as statistical deviance), the high status of the victim, the shock or “perversion” of the crime, and whether the killing violates formal norms of a society.9 Typically, murders of children or young females, particularly those committed by strangers, are reported as headline news, yet the brutal murders of victims such as Alicia Chanta Moore and Chanel Petro-Nixon, who were presumably the victims of stranger homicides, received little press coverage.

Moreover, since female victims of homicide are rare compared with male victims (statistical deviance), but have lower social status than men (referred to as low status deviance), these cases may not be considered newsworthy when one combines both types of deviance. However, I observed that when the female victim (low status deviance) is white (statistical deviance) and of a middle-class background (high status deviance), these factors in combination act as powerful predictors of newsworthiness by editors.

The act of determining which victims are salient enough for media attention essentially entrenches the belief that some victims have less value. Victim discounting (the act of not giving particular victims of violent crimes the same level of concern as other victims of violent crimes)10 is perpetuated by the news media’s omission or the underreporting of black homicide victims, particularly females. When one compares the actual number of homicides of black women with the proportion of coverage this group receives from the media (as I have done in this research), the conspicuous inequity begs
explanation. Moreover, when black victims are contrasted with their white counterparts, the imperceptible status of black women is difficult to deny. Laci Peterson, Michelle Young, and Tara Grant were all white female victims of suspected intimate-related homicides, and each case received extensive nationwide coverage from major broadcast and print journalism outlets. Yet for every Laci, Michelle, and Tara, it is more probable that minority women will be murdered by intimate partners yet receive little media attention in comparison.\textsuperscript{11}

Indisputably, when the media concentrate on particular issues, the public follows suit. The focus on blacks as criminals (particularly males) is very common. Evening news programs are replete with minorities over-represented as perpetrators of violent crime, but more rarely as victims.\textsuperscript{12} In particular, crimes involving white victims and black assailants receive the most extensive coverage. In doing so, the media are reinforcing long-standing stereotypes of black males as criminals and capitalizing on whites’ fears of victimization by minorities.\textsuperscript{13} Despite repeated denials by the media that race is a determinant in decisions regarding newsworthy coverage, research on this issue refutes their assertions. Essentially, racial stereotypes perpetuated by repeated coverage of black males as criminals increase whites’ concerns about crime as well as support for more severe punishment for these offenders.\textsuperscript{14}

Additionally, politicians (especially conservatives) exploit these fears and suggestively make white fear of black crime a platform for election. George H. Bush’s use of an African American murderer named Willie Horton during his 1988 presidential campaign against Michael Dukakis helped to catapult him into the White House as he ran on the platform of being tough on crime. Horton became a symbolic representation of the type of black male criminal whites feared most.

The sociologist Richard Lundman points out that not all murders make the news, and of those that do, only particular murders become major news stories. Since local news stations are under pressure to bring in high ratings (which in turn increases advertisement dollars), stories most likely to receive prominent coverage are those that reflect the concerns of white society.\textsuperscript{15} This is not to suggest that most whites do not care about crimes that
happen to victims of other races; however, people in general tend to identify with victims from similar social categories. Since whites are the dominant group in the United States, the media tend to placate this group in an effort to increase ratings and newspaper subscriptions. Both print and broadcast journalism are highly competitive in a race to provide breaking news coverage and garner a larger share of the market's subscribers and viewers.\textsuperscript{16}

To facilitate quick reporting of current news, it has been found that journalists report stories based on typifications or stereotypes that reflect the existing social structure.\textsuperscript{17} By doing so, not only do they provide stories that the general public can identify with, but they also reinforce inequalities and racial and gender hierarchies.\textsuperscript{18} With such pressure to show blacks as criminal offenders, there tends to be less interest in showing them as victims of crime. Murders with white victims and black assailants are more likely to get newsworthy status and prominent coverage since they are rooted in white fear of blacks and white racism.\textsuperscript{19} The “scripts” for these stories exist and have for centuries. Likewise, murders of women by men also confirm assumptions about male dominance and female vulnerability. However, not all murders of women by men make the news—slain women of color do not receive the level of media coverage that white females get, especially when the killer is most commonly a black male.

As several studies indicate, these crimes do not strike a chord of fear in the heart of white Americans (since the victims are racially different), and therefore might be dismissed as a common occurrence and/or reflective of a minority group’s perceived cultural shortcomings. While searching Boston newspapers online for more information about a series of serial murders of black women that occurred in the city in the 1970s, I stumbled upon an article from the \textit{New York Times} from the year 1971. The article, titled “Police Seek Clue to Stamford Murders,” covered the killings of five black women in Connecticut; their bodies were dumped in an affluent, mostly white area of the city. The reporter wrote: “The killing [referring to the last victim found, Alma Henry] seemed to have evoked interest but little fear and no panic among the residents of the predominantly white city of 108,000.” Several local residents were interviewed, and one man stated that if the killings had been similar to the Boston Strangler murders of the early
1960s, “everybody would have been scared . . . but don’t you see it’s not that type of killing.”

Most of Albert DeSalvo’s (the accused killer in the Boston Strangler murders) victims were white females, with the exception of one black female, twenty-year-old Sophie Clark. The neighbor’s use of the term “everybody” seems to imply that whites are representative of most people, and because the Stamford killings were of black women, victims who also had a history of prostitution and drug use, their deaths were insignificant. Another resident, a married woman with children, expressed her concern about the homicides, but fear was not the basis. “We don’t like being made a dumping ground,” she said. “I just hope the next body doesn’t turn up on my stone fence or in the pool. It would scare the daylights out of my children.”

Incredibly, this woman’s worry was not about the fact that a possible serial killer had been murdering victims of her sex. These victims were neither of her race nor her class, and therefore she did not believe her personal safety was in jeopardy. She simply didn’t want the bodies (like trash) dumped on her property where her children might find them; her attitude demonstrated a callous disregard for human beings who had been brutally murdered.

COLLABORATING FOR JUSTICE—THE MEDIA AND LAW ENFORCEMENT

The relationship between the media and law enforcement presents an interesting, yet ironic dichotomy. On the one hand, the media act as an ally to police by bringing crimes to the attention of the public in the hope that doing so will generate tips that will help solve the homicide. However, on the other hand, the media’s relentless quest for “breaking news” can result in a premature or erroneous leak of information that compromises the crime investigation. Therefore, the two entities form an “uneasy alliance”—one needing the other to be effective while simultaneously viewing each other as a hindrance. However, when it comes to getting justice for a victim, the beneficial consequences of media attention in the clearance of homicide
cases by police cannot be underestimated. This point was reinforced several times in interviews I conducted with members of law enforcement, which included homicide detectives. I interviewed four members of law enforcement, specifically officers who actively investigated homicides in the Detroit and Detroit metropolitan area. The questions I formulated for the interview were as follows:

1. To what extent do you believe media plays a role in which homicides are a top priority to investigate?
2. Have you ever felt pressured by media officials or members of a community to solve a violent crime? If so, please describe.
3. Have you ever been assigned to a violent crime case or taken off of a case by a commanding officer against your own personal objections? If so, do you believe personal characteristics of the victim played a role (class, race, sex, etc.)?
4. In your personal experience/opinion, to what extent does race and sex of victim play a part in homicide investigations?

When asked what role law enforcement thought the media played in murder investigations, Brandon Harris, an administrator with the Detroit Police Department, explained:

I believe the media plays a significant role in homicide investigations and law enforcement investigations in general, but most specifically homicide investigations. Due to public pressure from certain communities such as the business community, [these are] the people who seem to get priority in certain investigations as far as media coverage and the desire to get some type of closure. I was just remembering there were cases in the past where certain high powered people within the city or the city government had some type of affiliation or connections with the media and were able to have a lot more pressure.

Lieutenant Robert Grant, of Brownstown Township Michigan, was the chief homicide investigator in the Lizzie Mae Collier-Sweet case. When I
interviewed him in November 2013 regarding his view of the media and victims of homicide, he expressed a positive view of journalism, primarily at the local level:

I’m a firm believer in media helping law enforcement rather than going after police officers. A lot of law enforcement officers have different opinions on the media. I’ve been doing this for 28 years and I’ve had nothing but good luck with the media and especially even in the Lizzie Mae Collier-Sweet case. The local media was just exemplary, they were fantastic . . . from channel 2, 4, 7 . . . they were fantastic through this whole thing.

According to Lieutenant Grant, the media’s ability to get information to the public provides a very necessary resource when police are trying to gather information to solve a homicide. Even though some people would hold a disdainful view of reporters’ aggressive tendency to press individuals for information, including family members of victims, Grant saw the value in this approach. In many cases, it provokes possible witnesses to notify the police with information that might be helpful in finding the perpetrator. He explained, “You know some people say, ‘look at them sticking a mike in that poor family’s face.’ A potential witness might say I can’t let this go on. . . . I need to do something even though I wasn’t going to say something.” He did, however, concede that not all members of law enforcement hold a favorable view of the media and may see their intrusion as an impediment in homicide investigations. Yet Grant believed it best to maintain collaborative and respectful relationships with members of the press: “I don’t think that they [media] push to solve. . . . I think they push to want to know. And basically to do their job. . . . The media is like any job that anyone else has. And . . . they’re going to push and I think the more you handle them delicately . . . give them a little bit of what you can, I think it goes a long way. Like I said . . . that’s repaid in dividends in what the media can do for you.”

While Sergeant Kenneth Gardner, a homicide investigator with the Detroit police department, concurred with the opinion of both Officer Harris and Lieutenant Robert Grant that the media have some beneficial consequences
in generating public interest and action for victims of homicides, he also sug-
gested that the media’s relationship with law enforcement can potentially
damage a murder case:

I believe that media has a strong impact on the way that homicides are
investigated. It is actually two-fold. What I mean by two-fold is that it
can play a negative as well as positive role as far as the crime itself goes.
Positively, they can put specific information out there and get a plea out
to the public that will help people to know about the story and generally
may stimulate someone’s heart to get involved and to take action in their
community. But they can also be very negative in that aspect, too. They
could put information out there that works directly against the solving
of the crime.

Gardner added that the media might at times intentionally leak information
to the public or make implications about the background of a victim that
could complicate the case, stating: “Sometimes they [media] might put a
particular person or theme out there that they know is detrimental to the case
or they might give out too many clues or they may show some uh . . . I’m
trying to think of a way to put it . . . a person of the community that people
don’t readily accept.”

The latter part of Sergeant Gardner’s statement refers specifically to
the way the media “construct” an image of the victim. Again, notions of
undeserving victims (the victim did not deserve or provoke his or her
death) versus deserving victims (he or she shares some of the blame for
his or her victimization) are a consequence of the manner in which the
media cover the news.22 I asked Sergeant Gardner to explain further what
he meant by the media putting “someone out there that the community
might not readily accept.” Was he suggesting that the media at times
provide an impression of a victim that makes the victim less sympathetic
to the public? As Gardner explains: “Correct . . . correct . . . and because
of that negative connection, people are less likely to get involved in aid-
ing the police in apprehending the person responsible. In other words,
you know, in a negative form, it can be to the point where people will say
'that person deserved to get killed!' In my opinion as a homicide detective, I don’t care what you were doing in life . . . you don’t deserve to get your life taken. Drug dealer, or whether you killed people yourself . . . if it’s an illegal killing, it’s an illegal killing!"

The fact that members of law enforcement see the media’s ability to make the public pay attention to victims and thus possibly move viewers to action in providing tips reinforces the point of why the press is so important. While trying to determine the whereabouts of Lizzie Mae Collier-Sweet, Lieutenant Grant described to me how he repeatedly reached out to the media at the national level to find the missing woman: “That was my heartburn about the investigation. I needed the national attention to make sure that she wasn’t out there somewhere . . . because we were getting no help from the husband. And that’s why I wanted to reach out. She had family in Florida . . . she had family in Atlanta. And I wanted that national media attention. And for whatever reason . . . I would simply say that it was because it was just a missing person in the city of Detroit area. I think if it would have been some other big city . . . I think it would have garnered [sic] more media attention. I have no idea . . . but nobody wanted to help. Nobody wanted to touch that.”

Lieutenant Grant’s frustration was palpable, but he stopped short of attributing the national media’s (specifically Dateline NBC) reluctance to cover Lizzie Mae Collier-Sweet’s disappearance to race (despite the fact that they provided extensive coverage of Tara Lynn Grant’s homicide). As a homicide investigator for almost thirty years, Grant denied ever allowing race to hinder his commitment to getting justice for murder victims. In fact, after reading in the Detroit Free Press a comment he made about being frustrated that there was not enough attention from the media to Collier-Sweet’s disappearance, I was very interested in interviewing him for this book. Nevertheless, when I asked him if he thought that race played a role in the lack of attention Collier-Sweet received as a missing person, he seemed to have difficulty believing that such was possible: “God . . . I’m sure there are people out there who will argue with me, but I would not even want to fathom or think that that would ever happen in this day and age and especially in law enforcement. I don’t want to believe that . . . I have never seen it in the more
than 20 years. . . . I don’t know if it’s out there. . . . I don’t think that media would run that way. And I just . . . cannot . . . we are a terrible society if that even would perceive to be happening.”

What I found interesting about Lieutenant Grant’s comment was that close to the end of our interview, he again expressed his disappointment in Dateline NBC’s refusal to come to Michigan to cover Collier-Sweet’s disappearance, but immediately provided coverage to a story about a nine-year-old girl who drove the family van from a liquor store because her father was too drunk to drive. Grant stated that he could not recall the exact reason why the news program said it would not cover Collier-Sweet’s disappearance, but he believed the excuse was related to time constraints. He explained:

There is something else I found interesting. I had called uh . . . Dateline NBC . . . this is interesting to me just to show you the way this happens. I had called Dateline to ask them to work me and do something [in regards to Lizzie Collier-Sweet] because it was a very important story. Detroit Metropolitan area . . . house burned up, lady missing, husband’s arrested. . . . All of that . . . but they said they couldn’t run the story because of . . . time. But remember a couple of years ago when a nine-year-old girl was driving the van for her dad? He was drunk so he let her drive . . . and boy . . . they came from New York and they set up there and they came in and they did a big story with us about a nine-year-old child driving a car, but they didn’t have enough storyline or timeline to do a story about a . . .

I finished the statement by adding “a missing and possibly murdered woman.” He agreed emphatically, “Yes!” While it is highly unusual for a preadolescent child to be forced to drive for her intoxicated father, it was not lost on me that the little girl in question was Caucasian. It is highly questionable, in my opinion, that Dateline found this story to be more worthy of national coverage than a woman who went missing and whose home was burned down on the day of her disappearance, and when the suspect was her estranged husband who was also being charged in the death of his first wife. While Lieutenant Grant found it to be incredulous that the
race of the victim would be a determining factor in media coverage, I countered that based on empirical research, facts confirmed that race is not only a factor in deciding which victims get prominent coverage but also in law enforcement’s attention to certain victims. Officer Harris made this point clear during our interview when I asked him if he believed race played a role in the way homicides are investigated by police. “Uh . . . unfortunately yes . . . I do believe that race has some type of role in or have [sic] something to do with how certain homicides are investigated. I won’t say priority, but I will say a little bit more attention is given to possibly white women and then of course, following that would be white males, and then of course um . . . blacks and others would follow after those two, but I believe those, especially white women, would have a greater sense of urgency and some type of investigative desires.” Harris’s “pecking order” or racial hierarchy of victims was echoed by Officer Frank Gregory, who agreed, “I would say, probably Caucasians would have just the higher priority . . . particularly white females.”

A point I have made several times in this book is that reporting staff that encompasses racial and ethnic diversity is critical to ensure that news reflects a larger, diverse community, not just whites. It appears that the same is true for law enforcement, as Sergeant Gardner pointed out that he has observed white officers being less vigilant with minority victims compared to their response when victims of crime are white. The following is part of an exchange during my interview with him:

Me: To what extent do you feel the race or sex of the victim play[s] a part in homicide investigations? Do you believe that race has a role in priority investigations . . . or even if sex does?

Gardner: Unfortunately . . . yes . . . I have experienced that . . . it’s harder for certain races to get involved to the degree that they should be involved in their cases when it’s not a person of their race. Uh . . . in my experience they have a tendency to not adequately investigate the case. Now . . . why do I feel that is part of race? Because I have seen people of their race or of another race (I guess you could say) be murdered and every resource that they can pull together is used to
investigate that case . . . more time . . . more people are dedicated. So yes, race plays a part. 

Me: Now to be specific, are you seeing this more with white or black victims? 

GARDNER: I see this with um . . . white victims. And let me clarify . . . I can only speak for Detroit. That I see that when a white victim . . . not all the time . . . but I have seen where a white individual has been murdered and everybody is jumping to resolve it more quicker than if you had found an African American that had been killed in that same circumstance. Those same resources have not been dedicated.

Lieutenant Grant’s personal and deeply felt commitment to solving violent crimes irrespective of the race of the victim appeared to be the primary reason why he could not imagine that certain victims would be ignored by the media, yet alone by homicide investigators. However, Sergeant Gardner’s observation further confirmed a pattern of indifference that was apparent in the murders of many of the victims in my research, including that of my friend Michelle Jackson.

CONCLUSION

It is certain that media attention is a critical resource for law enforcement when it comes to solving homicides—especially murders committed by a stranger to the victim. News coverage acts as a conduit to provide awareness of a killing to the public. The media’s ability to convey stories in an empathetic manner arouses the passion of individuals who might then channel their outrage into action. Even Grant made this clear in his interview when he discussed his efforts to contact national media outlets for help in solving the disappearance of Lizzie Mae Collier-Sweet. Further, Romona Moore’s family beseeched media in New York to broadcast her disappearance but to no avail, and tragically, her death came after several days in captivity.

Since victims of color rarely get the level of media coverage that white
female victims do, it can be tremendously advantageous to know someone who can influence the media. This was evident in the murder of thirty-two-year-old Rosaline Ransom-Lee in May 2013 in Pontiac, Michigan. The African American mother of three was abducted, raped, and then strangled by Bobby Lee Taylor, forty-two, a sex offender who was a stranger to the victim. Rosaline’s sister Richelle is a close friend of Star Jones, a former prosecuting attorney and former cohost of *The View* and a contributor on *The Today Show*. Jones was able to reach out to her media colleagues through a series of emails (according to news reports, 180 were sent), asking them to broadcast the story of Ransom-Lee’s murder, and the homicide was featured on Nancy Grace’s program.  

When the national media covered the story, tips rolled in to the Oakland County sheriff’s office, and within weeks, Oakland County detectives and the FBI interrogated Taylor. The police subsequently arrested and arraigned Taylor in the rape-homicide. According to the *Oakland Press*, Star Jones used her influence as a celebrity because she believed the murder of Ransom-Lee “could’ve otherwise fallen by the wayside.” Furthermore, she disseminated an email statement to the press about the case and argued that murders by strangers are more difficult to solve, “but this time, most of the cards were on our side.” Had Ransom-Lee’s sister not be acquainted with an influential celebrity, would this case—the murder of a working-class, black single mother—have gained national exposure? I believe it is highly improbable that such would have been the case. Neither does Star Jones, who expressed her frustration about the lack of media attention to black female victims in a live interview with the Huffington Post. She stated that she thought it necessary to “scream from the rooftop” for the media to pay attention to murdered African American women if that is what it takes get the level of attention needed to solve the case. Jones has also appeared on Nancy Grace’s show discussing her observation of biased media coverage that favors white female victims over murdered women of color. Jones used Ransom-Lee’s murder as a platform to make black women aware that in the event of their being victimized, they need to be prepared for the aftermath. She stressed that as common victims of violence and, in many cases, the primary caregiver for their children, it is urgent that they prepare
themselves and loved ones for the possibility of an unforeseen tragedy or violent death and plan accordingly. Jones collaborated with several colleagues to create a list called “Rhonda’s Rules,” which was named after Rosaline Ransom-Lee (also known as Rhonda to her family and friends), who left behind three small children, including a ten-month-old daughter. Star Jones thought it important that women (especially single mothers) engage in estate planning and create a detailed inventory of their desires regarding personal belongings, financial affairs, and custody matters in reference to their children.27 Jones continues to speak out on behalf of African American victims and is a strong advocate for the media to exercise balanced coverage for all victims, regardless of race.

I cannot stress enough that the purpose of the book, again, is not to devalue the lives of white female victims to advance attention to women of color. It is simply to demonstrate that all women, regardless of race, should be afforded the indispensable “capital” of the media when they fall victim to lethal violence. When the media work in collaboration with members of law enforcement, victims and their families have a better chance of obtaining justice against the perpetrators of their untimely deaths.