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Media malpractice in the Anderson case

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Walter Lippmann once said, “The theory of a free press is that the truth will emerge from reporting and free discussion.” He should have been more specific: Truth will emerge if the reporting is good and honest.

The news media have consistently distorted the facts surrounding the Martin Lee Anderson case. Citizens concerned about the tragic death of the teenager who died last year hours after his first day at the boot camp are being duped, and the former employees facing charges are being railroaded.

This journalistic malpractice prevents “public enlightenment,” which the Society of Professional Journalists upholds as the “forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy.”

The preamble of the SPJ states that the duty of a journalist is to seek truth and provide “a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.”

The Washington Post’s ethical guidelines sum up basis of objective reporting: “No story is fair if it omits facts of major importance or significance. Fairness includes completeness.”

The news media have failed to meet these criteria in the Anderson case.

Various media outlets reported that Anderson died after being “manhandled” and “roughed up.” The incident was described as “a violent struggle” and “brutal treatment by guards.”

The media have not informed the public about the “pressure point tactics” used by drill instructors to compel good order and discipline from hundreds of insubordinate detainees. Anderson was not singled out for a beating, as reportage has indicated. Responsible journalists are obligated to explain that pressure point tactics limit injuries to muscle bruises to the arms and legs, and call the technique by its name.

The Miami Herald has been especially negligent. Reporter Marc Caputo described the incident as “apparently criminal acts.”

Carol Marbin Miller reported in The Miami Herald that “guards punched the youth and shoved ammonia capsules up his nose when he said he could not run.”

The writer declares without attribution that ammonia capsules were shoved up Anderson’s nose. People following the case closely know this egregious accusation is false. Ammonia capsules are used by a majority of professional football players as a stimulant, and have never caused a single death.

The news media also have presented the first medical examiner as incompetent, and perhaps even corrupt. The Associated Press explained, “An initial autopsy report blamed the death on complications from sickle cell trait. A second autopsy, though, found Anderson died from suffocation from being forced to inhale ammonia.”

Get it? Bay County Medical Examiner Charles Siebert “blamed” the death on sickle cell trait, but Tampa Medical Examiner Vernard Adams “found” that Anderson died of suffocation. The writer uses these words to editorialize on the sly, and violates any standard of objectivity.

The Tampa Tribune marginalized Siebert as a lone quack, reporting that he was “sticking to his guns in spite of widespread criticism and ridicule over his finding that a teen died of natural causes at a Florida boot camp.” The paper reported that “the embattled Panhandle medical examiner” stuck to his opinion “even after a second autopsy placed the blame squarely on the guards.” Instead, reporters should explain how boot camp and hospital employees were unaware of Anderson’s sickle cell trait until Siebert discovered it.

The news media’s dismissal of sickle cell trait as a potential killer has been reprehensible. Four doctors have released medical reports on the Anderson case, and only Adams denies that sickle cell trait had anything to do with his death.

Recently in Tampa, a 12-year-old boy died of complications of sickle cell trait. There is confusion in the black community about sickle cell “trait” and sickle cell “disease.” The news media could provide valuable information about Martin’s condition that could save lives, but instead have ignored it.

Journalists are fond of a saying that gives them a sense of purpose: “Comfort the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable.” They would do better just reporting the facts instead of pursuing their vision of social justice.