

Educator's Column

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Sometimes you can be in the right place at the right time...Or the wrong place at the wrong time. But thanks to the Fox News Channel, poor Troy Stanley was not even present when he was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Let's flashback...

The drama began to unfold just after 12 p.m. CST on Friday, November 30, 2007. A distraught, middle-aged man with what appears to be a bomb strapped to his chest walks into Hillary Clinton's Rochester New Hampshire campaign office and says he wants to speak with the candidate. The man then orders people onto the floor but lets a mother and her baby leave. The two remaining hostages are campaign volunteers.

It was the kind of story TV loves and hates... breaking news but with only two minutes of compelling video. But Producers and managing editors won't want to break away from the coverage on the off chance something will unfold while advertisers are pitching room air fresheners to their audience.

4:30 p.m. CST: One of the hostages is released, while the other walks out of the campaign headquarters at 5:15. At roughly the same time, police arrest the hostage taker...End of story.

So what do you do if you are a reporter and a network and you want to keep your audience from flipping channels until the situation is resolved? The first thing you do is try to find out about the hostage taker. The problem is the law enforcement authorities aren't cooperating. Captain Paul Callaghan of the Manchester, NH police department, releases a statement saying, "it is a fluid and dangerous situation and that it would be highly inappropriate for anyone to publicize the name of the suspect or his condition." Enter FOX news...Fox reporter Carl Cameron goes on the air and reports, "We were told by an eyewitness that the suspect is named Troy Stanley. The eyewitness reporting this to Fox News is Cody Bennett. Cody Bennett is friends with Troy Stanley's son, Troy Stanley Jr. According to Troy Stanley Jr, his father went to a hardware store earlier in the day and bought road side flares to use as fake explosive devices. Witnesses reported that the assailant had flares, not a bomb as he claimed, strapped to his body. Federal law enforcement officials monitoring the situation from Washington confirmed to FOX that the suspect had flares in his possession that were purchased earlier at a local hardware store."

4:16 CST: Carl Cameron of Fox News reports he has spoken to Troy Stanley's exwife. She says Stanley is "a diagnosed paranoid schizophrenic who has not been taking his meds." His medicinal regimen includes lithium, but he has not been taking it recently. Stanley's ex-wife also said she had been married to him for 20 years and he experiences delusions that there is a chip implanted in his head. For more than an half hour, Cameron would report SWAT team movements interspersed with details on Troy Stanley and his life, even going so far as to report that his family was at the scene.

While this was going on, a blogger went online and reported that he visited Stanley's apartment and found him home. He even wrote that he had a brief conversation with him.

4:40 p.m. CST: MSNBC and CNN identify the hostage taker as Leeland Eisenberg, NOT Troy Stanley. (4:41 p.m. CST: Edward R. Murrow rolled over in his grave.)

FOX News mistakenly identified an innocent man as a hostage-taker and a paranoid schizophrenic. For more than 30 minutes they aired out Stanley's personal life before a national audience, pandering to their audience's lurid curiosity.

To their credit Fox did eventually refer to the suspect as Leeland Eisenberg. Albeit after he was handcuffed and put into a squad car. Their online wrap-up even made this back-handed correction on their website... "A woman earlier told FOX News that the man's name was Troy Stanley and he was a paranoid schizophrenic who wasn't taking his medication. It was unclear whether Stanley and Eisenberg were one and the same, and police wouldn't confirm whether Stanley was the assailant, or an alias used by him."

The situation resolved peacefully so Fox's faux pas would make for a funny story to tell at the bar or in classroom except for one thing--the Fox account strikes at the core of the broadcast news industry's credibility.

The essential false "fact" in all this: the "eyewitness" didn't witness with his own eyes what he said he saw. That one error started a cascade of misinformation. Cameron forgot one of the basic journalist rules--test the accuracy of information from sources and be careful to avoid inadvertent error.

It is easy to be critical, so in fairness, it is possible that the Fox coverage was just holding up a mirror that reflects how cynical Americans have become. We seem to have reached the point where anybody can accuse anybody of anything and be believed. Even worse, we then go out of our way to prove the accuser is probably right.

So, all you reporters and aspiring reporters out there--remember what every teacher and parent already knows, just because someone says it, that doesn't make it factually accurate.