

The Boston Marathon’s Media Frenzy

I am a certified news junkie, but even I had to step away from the oversaturated media coverage of the Boston Marathon bombings. Anyone who has covered crimes on a smaller scale than the twin explosions in Boston knows that investigators don’t have instant answers for everything and it’s ridiculous to think that in a frenzied atmosphere, accurate information will be available in abundance. But that did not prevent news outlets and social media from rushing to be first rather than calmly waiting to be accurate.

The result was a string of embarrassing mistakes that did little to comfort a nation on edge, a nation that still hadn’t gotten over the shock of the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre in Newtown, Conn.

Of course, this is not to suggest that everything reported by the media was wrong. The news media helped disseminate photos of the two bombing suspects that eventually led to their being identified. The media was able to pass along instructions for people to remain in their homes until the suspects were captured. And most of us learned what had happened in Boston by watching television, going to the Internet or social media.

Ironically, on the day the Pulitzer Prizes honoring excellence in journalism were announced – The Denver Post won the award for breaking news for its coverage of a mass shooting in a movie theater in Aurora,

THE CURRY REPORT

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Colo. that left 12 dead and 58 injured – news outlets were making major blunders while covering the Boston bombings.

Among the most egregious: The New York Post gave an inflated death count, saying there were “at least 12 dead.” At the time, three people had been killed.

The Wall Street Journal reported that police had discovered five additional explosive devices in addition to the two that been discovered, a statement that was later retracted.

In what it called a “world-beating scoop,” the New York Post reported that a Saudi national was a suspect in the case when, in fact,

ed last Wednesday: “I want to be very careful about this, because people get very sensitive when you say these things. I was told by one of these sources who is a law enforcement official that this is a dark-skinned male.”

PBS anchor Gwen Ifill tweeted, “disturbing that it’s OK for TV to ID a Boston bombing suspect as a

executive, said: “Well, now that the FBI has released photos of the two men who apparently carried the bombs, I’m puzzled. Perhaps there’s a problem with the contrast on my TV, but they don’t look dark skinned to me.”

The Associated Press, Fox News, and the Boston Globe also mistakenly reported that a suspect

an arrest had been made in the case.

In view of the grievous errors made in covering high-profile crimes, news outlets should spend less time showing yellow police tape, flashing police lights and hyping their own reporters and more time explaining to the public that in an ongoing investigation, they will not get the facts before the next commercial break.

We should have learned this lesson from the experience of covering Newtown, Conn., when there were conflicting accounts on everything from whether Adam Lanza had forced his way into Sandy Hook Elementary School or had been buzzed in to whether he or his brother, Ryan, was the shooter.

As President Obama said, “In this age of instant reporting and tweets and blogs, there’s a temptation to latch on to any bit of information, sometimes jumping to conclusions. But when a tragedy like this happens, with public safety at risk and the stakes so high, it’s important that we do this right. That’s why we have investigations. That’s why we relentlessly gather the facts.”

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‘Perhaps there’s a problem with the contrast on my TV, but they don’t look dark skinned to me’

‘dark skinned individual.’”

King’s description of the so-called suspect sparked a lively discussion on the National Association of Black Journalists listserve.

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he was a witness and a victim. At 1:45 p.m. on Wednesday, April 17, John King reported on CNN that a suspect had been taken into custody. That was false. King also erred when he report-

radio host, wrote, “How did they know that sand n—er was a suspect? He must have been wearing a towel on his head.”

Roger Witherspoon, a veteran journalist and public relations

had been arrested in the case. The reporting was so inaccurate that the FBI issued a statement that said:

“Contrary to widespread reporting, no arrest has been made in connection with the Boston Marathon attack. Over the past day and a half, there have been a number of press reports based on information from unofficial sources that has been inaccurate. Since these stories often have unintended consequences, we ask the media, particularly at this early stage of the investigation, to exercise caution and attempt to verify information through appropriate official channels before reporting.”

The Boston Police Department scooped journalists when it announced Friday, via Twitter, that

CNN’s John King: Why Blame a Dark-Skinned Man?

I don’t know where CNN’s John King got the information that a suspect in the Boston bombing was “a dark-skinned male,” but beyond apologizing, he needs to explain himself. How many sources gave him the false tip? If it was fewer than two, then he violated a basic journalism rule. Who were these sources (if you don’t want to out them publicly, tell your editor)? Did King understand that he used the kind of racial/ethnic coding that once got people, even uninvolved and innocent people, lynched?

Remember Charles Stuart? He was riding through Roxbury (used to be the ‘hood) when he says a Black man, wearing a jogging suit with a stripe on the sleeve, shot him and his wife in an attempted carjacking. Pregnant Carol Stuart lived for just a few hours, and their baby, delivered by C-section, lived for only 17 days. Stuart’s report of the alleged incident sparked a national outpouring of sympathy of him, and an excoriation of “Black criminals” who do such senseless things.

The police were going door to door looking for a suspect, and several Black men were interrogated. Stewart identified one man in a line-up, and police were building a case against him when they discovered that



BENNETT COLLEGE

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Stuart’s wounds were self-inflicted and that his brother had helped him slaughter his wife. Meanwhile, Stuart collected at least \$100,000 from an insurance policy on his wife, using the money to pay for a new car in cash, and to buy jewelry. Unable to face the consequences of his actions, Stuart committed suicide by jumping off a bridge.

Stuart was too much a coward to be judged by a jury of his peers, but hundreds of Black men could

community was traumatized by the results of Stuart’s lies. Innocent men were questioned, many spending time at police stations in an effort to clear themselves. Those questioned and detained included students, professional men, the unemployed, and everybody in between. When in doubt, blame a Black man, any Black man, and let the chips fall where they may.

In 1994 Susan Smith, a South Carolina housewife, said that a Black man stole her two children. Later, she confessed to killing her own children. Again, dozens of innocent Black men were stopped, frisked, and taken to police sta-

she wasn’t so broken that she didn’t know that blaming her children’s disappearance on a Black man gave her lies more credibility.

The Stuart and Smith cases made headlines in the late 20th century. Now, our feet are firmly

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planted in the 21st century. Does this kind of racist stereotyping still take place? While these kinds of cases no longer make headlines, I wouldn’t be surprised if any of these occurrences continue to be. When in doubt, blame a Black man.

So here comes CNN’s John King, a heretofore respected newsman, who repeatedly said that a “dark skinned man” was a suspect in the Boston bombing. Here we go again. This kind of false reporting makes every dark-skinned man in Boston a suspect, reminds Bostonians of the Stuart hoax, and sends a shudder through those African Americans who remember police officers going

door to door in housing projects rounding up the Black men.

Thanks, John King. Your job is to report the news, not make it. I wonder if you will apologize as many times as you said “dark-skinned man” or if you will ever explain where you got your false information. I’d hate to think that you transitioned from journalist to creative writer when you shared this information.

Some will say no harm was done because there was a correction. No harm was done if you don’t know the history. If someone described an alleged criminal as a White man with brown hair, it is unlikely that the police would go door to door looking for a White man with brown hair. That’s the basic racism that is the foundation of our nation’s history. John King’s erroneous reporting reminds us how easy it is to blame a “dark skinned” man.

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not escape the injustice of the Stuart accusations. The Roxbury

tions for questioning. Clearly Susan Smith was mentally ill, but