

Copyright 1998 Suzanne Shell

A social worker was recently murdered in Michigan. She had removed a woman's children from her home due to unclean conditions. The mother tried to find out where the children were, and naturally the social worker refused to disclose their whereabouts. The mother and her sister beat the social worker to death.

A week later, another Michigan social worker was assaulted.

In the press accounts of these incidents, we are told about the state's side of the story. Nobody spoke with the parents, nobody got their side of the story. We don't know how dirty the house was, or why the mother killed the social worker. The reports have the prosecutor stating the mother was jealous of the social worker, that she was everything the mother wasn't. Couldn't possibly have been that the mother was desperate to get her children back and she acted irrationally?

Newspaper accounts of crimes and other reports on government agencies often leave you with only one side of the story if they even deign to tell the story.

Case in point: My last column about the trespassing case where the landowner was arrested instead of the trespasser.

This was a questionable incident in and of itself. What adds another dimension to this is the fact that my entire column was not printed as it was submitted. Some of the actions of the sheriff's deputies were edited out before publication.

I can understand certain editorial concerns about liability, especially when the actions I scribed could evoke a lot of negative publicity for the department involved, and possibly even trigger an attempt at a lawsuit against me and the paper (who publishes my column). I wasn't worried about being sued, I've been threatened with that before and nothing has ever materializes. Besides, I had always understood that the truth was an absolute legal defense against libel.

But when does the concern over liability outweigh the public's right to know all of the facts related to the story?

I will admit my last column was 'prickly' as submitted but that's because the situation was pretty offensive to a freedom-loving American. There were some very aggressive and questionable actions on the part of law enforcement that were unwarranted and possibly illegal which I described and which were edited out for publication. I verified these actions with the witnesses before writing the piece. Perhaps these actions were so offensive that the 'powers-that-be' decided they were too volatile for public consumption. Or maybe it was too impossible to believe. Or maybe they were concerned about the ramifications of printing it. I don't know.

It is worthy to note that this practice is not limited to any one paper. These decisions are made all the time, and often the safer, censored choice wins out.

What do you expect when you pick up your paper? Do you expect the unbiased truth? I certainly hope no one out there is so naive as to think that's what they get. I have rarely seen any news report where the alleged 'bad guy' got the same coverage as the 'good guys' got; either in how the story was covered or in the amount of coverage either party got.

If the media will not publish a verified story for whatever reason, then how will the citizens of this great land ever know when their public servants run amok? We have a right to know what our law enforcement departments are up to, and if there is a questionable incident, or a number of questionable incidents, and the media knows of it and censors it, they are setting it up

to happen again . . . and again. . .aren't they?

We, as citizens, also have a responsibility. If we know that this type of abuse is employed against us or someone else, we should inform the paper. If they get a number of complaints pertaining to the same person or department, they will print the story. After all, if they don't know about these things, they can't publish them, can they?

Let's resolve to keep our local paper informed about the happenings in our county and be prepared to provide proof of your claims. That way, there will be no cover-ups of questionable government practices, and the responsible parties will be held accountable to the citizens of Elbert County. It's not too much to ask for protecting your rights, is it?