

New generation of journalism creates opportunities – and responsibilities – for crime laboratories

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Forensic science laboratories in the United States are slowly taking back control of how they are perceived by the public. This comes after two decades of turmoil created by activists who were often enabled by willing accomplices in the media. But now there appears to be an up-and-coming generation of journalists who are stubbornly eager to get their stories straight.

Crime Lab Report's managing editors first discovered this phenomenon when they traveled to New York City to speak at a convention of journalists hosted by the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in January 2009. Following their presentation during the 4th Annual Guggenheim Symposium on Crime in America, they realized that a fresh and energetic brand of journalism is percolating through the ranks of many news rooms.

To some extent, this brand is being established by an inquisitive generation of reporters who were born after 1978. These *Generation Y* reporters were raised in the age of information overload and are, by necessity, more skilled at filtering out the junk that they know is continually saturating the public record. Furthermore, because of their age, their loyalties to the intense ideological battles that were fought in the 1960s and 1970s are not as strong as those of their mentors. Many do not view themselves as activists and are therefore more likely to view journalism for what it is supposed to be – a search for the truth, not an instrument to promote social causes.

According to Sommer Kehrli and Trudy Sopp writing in *HR Magazine* in 2006, these blossoming professionals are notorious for asking “why” questions of their superiors. “They weren’t even born when President Richard Nixon was impeached and never had to get off the couch to change the television channel. These ‘kids’ can be annoying, especially when they seem to grasp so easily the latest iPod technology and have all sorts of opinions about how to better run your company.”

Although they can confound their bosses from time to time, Generation Y professionals have a strong value system and aren’t willing to compromise those values just because of someone’s authority.

As Kehrli and Sopp added, “they recognize authority but do not succumb to it automatically. They instead respect credibility, which is established through pitching in, sharing experiences, and being consistent with stated values and mentoring.”

Another interesting perspective was offered by Jill Geisler, a leadership and management consultant writing for *Poynter* in August 2005. As Geisler observed, Generation Y has some specific characteristics that influence how it often sees the world. As a result, its reporting in the media is likely to be shaped by them:

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High self-esteem and don't tolerate intimidation. Their teachers and their Boomer parents focused on positive reinforcement. Boomers grew up with teachers who could smack them . . . and parents who were likely to side with the teachers. But in the lives of Gen-Yers, corporal punishment was discouraged at home and forbidden at school. They were told that if anyone bullied them or made them uncomfortable, they shouldn't endure it. They should speak up or report it. And in a newsroom, you can expect they will.

Success-oriented.

They often come from dual-career families with parents who knew the ropes about college and achievement. Those parents didn't want their kids to have to learn from the school of hard knocks, as they might have.

Accustomed to quality as consumers.

Those two-career families had disposable income, and the kids became discerning customers, brand- and quality-conscious.

Accustomed to immediacy.

Cell phones, e-mail, instant messaging, faxes, overnight mail, digital cameras and microwave ovens have all reduced the waiting time in their lives.

Tolerant of differences.

They grew up in schools that mainstreamed students with disabilities, strove for racial and ethnic diversity, had Gay-Straight Alliance clubs and women in leadership roles.

Volunteer in their communities.

Their religious organizations encouraged it, some schools even built it into curriculum and it was likely a requirement for entry to the National Honor Society.

Value work-life balance.

They may have been latch-key kids and children of divorce. They watched parents devote long hours to their careers, only to see those jobs disappear during downsizing.

Work around, not against, authority.

Unlike the young people of the '60s who rebelled against authority, the Gen-Y approach when opposing authority is more passive than aggressive.

For crime laboratories in the United States, these developments present strategic opportunities to establish a better rapport with journalists. And fortunately, these opportunities come at a time when the forensic sciences are becoming increasingly comfortable with transparency and effective in their communication with stakeholders.

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Crime labs may be wise to expand on this trend. Offering periodic workshops for local journalists and developing more robust systems for keeping them informed on a regular basis could pay long-term dividends. Although all professions have bad apples in their barrel, the rising stars in journalism today seem less prone to back-stabbing - especially when they are given accurate and useful information.

With these new opportunities, however, come new responsibilities. Generation Y tends not to tolerate misinformation. As mentioned earlier, they respect credibility and therefore want to be credible as well. Blindly promoting the social agenda of activists is not their preferred style. This is good. But they are likely to direct their ire toward any individual or organization that they believe is unreliable or dishonest.

Admittedly, forensic science does not have a long history of public-policy excellence. Its interactions with the press have been awkward to say the least. But now is the time to build new relationships in the press and find ways to help today's journalists report accurately on the stories they value most. Caution and discretion must certainly be exercised in this endeavor, but unlike what was witnessed in the previous two decades, Generation Y journalists are more likely to keep information – both good and bad – in proper perspective.

One reporter for whom *Crime Lab Report* has developed a growing respect is Ben Protesse who writes for *ProPublica*, the largest investigative news organization in the country. His coverage of the National Academy of Sciences report on forensic science was, in our judgment, one of the most fair and reasonable published by any media source.

“It’s imperative that journalists shelve their own opinions and take an objective, honest look at crime labs--flaws as well as successes,” Protesse recently explained to *Crime Lab Report*. “It’s our job to accurately portray what happens in labs so that the public is not misled by rumors and popular TV shows.”

On May 12, 2009 an article authored by Henry Fountain for the *New York Times* presented another perspective on the NAS report that was refreshingly fair and objective. Despite the use of some enticing opening sentences, the article was mostly a straight-forward look into research that is currently taking place to establish a more firm scientific basis for the most commonly practiced forensic disciplines.

In his report, Fountain did a few things that should serve as a model for his fellow journalists. For example, he included thoughtful comments from experienced forensic experts. Barry Fisher, former crime laboratory director of the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department, was quoted as saying “I have no doubt that fingerprint evidence and firearms evidence, once looked into by the appropriate research entities, are going to be shown to be very reliable and good.”

Similarly, Dr. Lawrence Kobilinski, chairman of the department of sciences at the John Jay College of Criminal Justice in New York, explained that “people should not jump to the conclusion that forensic science is bad science. There’s a lot of experience and knowledge that

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goes into somebody's expertise. It's not junk science. But that doesn't mean it shouldn't be improved."

If we continue to see these improvements in journalism covering the forensic sciences, and if crime laboratories can learn to work collaboratively and honestly with reporters, the future of forensic science will be shaped by good information and wise public policy decisions.

As *Crime Lab Report* predicted, the days of forensic science being mischaracterized by activists armed with unchecked rhetoric may finally be coming to an end. * * * * *

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