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Editorial

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Perceptions in Forensics

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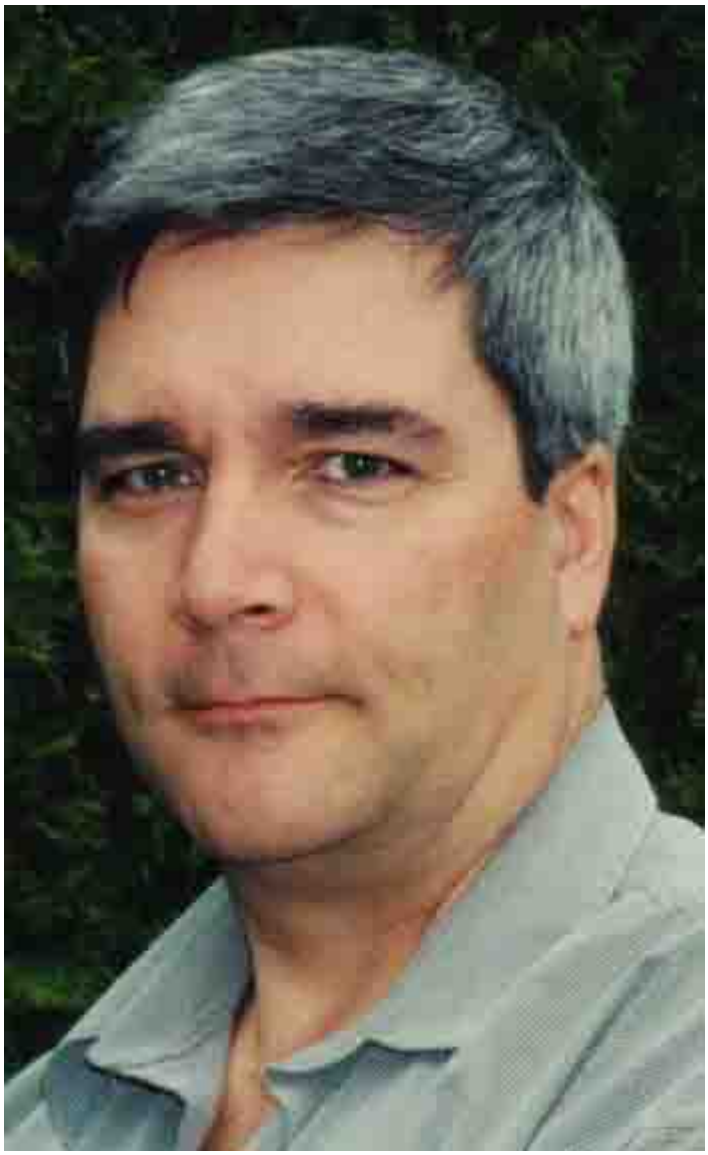

The media plays a large role in the every day life of the forensic investigator, possibly to an extent that we do not even perceive. People are fascinated by stories and especially videotape images of death destruction and chaos. Drawn like moths to a flame, people can be consumed by the need for facts about a given topic. The public is fed a constant diet of rehash and commentary about the topic from persons "in the know" and pundits that have informed opinions about everything. This type of reporting and broadcasting then filters to the print media, by reporters who are "on the ground" searching for the truth. The print media then scrums with the radio and television media to arrive at the short list of the most plausible stories to send to the waiting public.

This media circus is taking place, every day in every jurisdiction. In most cases, the media is already present and speculating even before the forensic team arrives on the scene. Television and print media crews record and track every move of an investigative team as they work through the scene. In some jurisdictions there is more photography and video taken by the press than the police.

The story holds the headlines until the next crime of the week occurs, new victims, new twists, and new variations of the theme. Next comes the grand jury or preliminary trial coverage with the litany of experts who profusely expound on their views of the truth as they see it, based of course on the facts that the media has uncovered, not the still confidential forensic evidence. One must be

careful not to confuse the popular local myths with the facts. Then comes the trial coverage, the Las Vegas bets on the outcome and the re-kindled public appetite for the truth, again.

After the trial, the sentencing, the interviews with the affected family members and jurors, comes the public debriefing. Depending on the outcome of the trial, the influence of any race, age, sex, creed or religious matters, the media will re-hash the trial and presented evidence, pick out the best sound bites and then attack who ever is the losing party.

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The next facet to the case will be the appeal, with public interest fueled by the television documentary and re-enactments of the event. If the case warrants, there will be the TV movie of the week or the big screen movie, based on the "true events" of the case. Several years or decades after the incident, journalists and historians will then pour over the case files and try to uncover the missed facts and improper conclusions of a misinformed jury.

One does not have to look too far to see examples of this type of incident or case that "will not go away". Jack the Ripper, the JFK assassination, OJ Simpson and now even the Oklahoma bombing are all examples of historical rewrites. Future generations are allowed to look back at the files though new eyes and perceptions and possibly, but rarely, new actual evidence. This historical course is the cross all police, lawyers, judges, jurors and crime scene investigators must bear. We will always be judged on every aspect of every case we work on. We must train ourselves to be independent finders and recorders of fact.

The public is presently inundated with programs and print coverage of crime reporting. Certainly, we are in a new world of instant live images of events from around the world. The public has graduated from a level of careful reasoned thought, based on the review of all the facts before a supportable informed opinion can be made. The new level is a voracious need for information only. The conclusions reached may be based on the information that can be skewed by an articulate pundit who chooses to take a certain position based only on the facts he likes.

...Many examples of case skewing exist and possibly the most widely known is the OJ Simpson incident. This was a horrible crime inflicted upon a wife and mother who did not choose to die in such a fashion. Mr. Simpson promised to the courts that he would not rest until he finds the real killer. Based on all of his work he now feels that the killer or killers are avid golfers who are hiding in Florida. He reportedly gets closer to finding them with every round he plays...

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During this case, the media circus reached a high level. The lawyers, the judge and the jurors all became national figures. Ironically, the police and criminalists of the day became the evil accusers of the national sports hero. How could this happen, what can the public do to insulate ourselves from such a blow to the national psyche. The only answer is that the forensic evidence must be

wrong and therefore attacked from every angle. Every micro liter of blood must be accounted for; the media will scrutinize every photograph and every frame of every videotape, as they have been sanctioned by the public to be the true finders of fact.

Indeed, this case did unravel largely in part to the personalities and conduct of the police members. Things took place in that case that were plainly wrong. However, what took the most abuse was not the field of forensic science, but the public perception of the members working within that field. Several careers were lost and everyone who followed the incident will still be able to give you their rendition of what went wrong and how. This case has become a double-edged sword to practitioners of forensic science. We will always be held to the public's OJ bias perception of did we do it right and our own perception of correctness.

...As a result all forensic cases must be fully documented, transparent and each examination considered a true finding of fact. There can only be one truth. That truth must stand the test of time. It is up to the courts to decide the weight and context of those individual facts. They will become the stepping-stones of all future evaluations of the incident. Do not allow the media and historians to re-write your work by taking un-documented short cuts...

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The field of forensic science has evolved significantly since the turn of the century. The scientific community has risen to the challenge given by the police to assist us in our pursuit and lawful conviction of the perpetrator of the crime. There are thousands of public and private agencies around the world that are engaged in the pursuit of fact finding in criminal cases. There are also dozens of larger umbrella organizations that act to control the activities of the members, to ensure they are practicing their crafts in a prudent and proper manner.

...In Canada, the primary forensic scientific organization is the Canadian Society of Forensic Science. In the United States it is the American Academy of Forensic Sciences. The international bodies are linked through agencies such as Interpol and the United Nations. Every organization publishes Journals or some type of documentation compilation of their meetings and casework. Each organization has an executive and council with committees. The committees usually cover a subject topic or generalized topic group...

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Reputations of individual members are enhanced by membership in and acceptance by the most highly regarded organizations. Those members that have the time, financial where will all and permission from their employers to belong to these organizations generally command the respect of others in the field.

However, it is still the individual work performed by each member that will ultimately elevate his or her position in the field of crime scene investigation. Solid work over a long time frame is the only real protection any practitioner has. One never knows when they may be asked to participate in another OJ type case. It is incumbent for all members to understand their own duties, do them well and maintain a dialogue with the team to discuss any matters of concern within the investigation. Crime scene examination is a team effort. The reliance by the police and courts on strong forensic evidence has never been higher.

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