



Fiasco in Lebanon: Biased Journalism, « Chasing a Story »

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The actions of a desperate mother are one thing; the extraordinary lapse in judgment and ethics of a crew of seasoned journalists getting involved in an international kidnapping scheme is another entirely. Ruby Hamad, *The Age*, Apr 17, 2016

Spittle-flecked journalism is something of a curse, an enterprise that muddies the fine lines between chasing a story and creating it. And the Nine Network of Australia, with its own variant of *60 Minutes*, is certainly of such inspiration, drawing its strength from the margins of investigative journalism and assuming a role in influencing events.

Ambulance chasing newscasters are the true parasites of the media scene, incapable of describing events they would rather invent, if not influence. They feed on the flesh of vulnerable causes and bolster the confidence of those they effectively groom. The instance of an Australian mother, Sally Faulkner, desperate to recover her children who were taken to Lebanon by their father, Ali Elamine, provided a spectacular instance of this principle at play. It involved another travesty of the international relationship scene. Boy meets girl; children issue; children are taken by one parent after a ruse and made inaccessible.

In this case, a virtual counter-abduction was being suggested, with the spear carrier being former Australian soldier Adam Whittington from Child Abduction Recovery International. A desperate mother had sought other avenues to attain her goal, having made a public plea in November to the Australian foreign minister Julie Bishop to assist in recovering her children. A media outlet volunteered the financial ammunition and some logistical backing. The result was a bag of deception, stupidity and farce.

Faulkner, in her effort to broaden the appeal of the operation, suggested that it was far more than a child abduction case. Her plight was an international one, a global problem of injustice. "It's not just about me and my children, there are hundreds and hundreds of families this has happened to." Faulkner was certainly right about one thing: states not signatory to the Hague Convention stipulating that children be returned to their "country of habitual residence" make that nigh impossible.

The hawks, in their desperation to grab the scoop, botched the operation. Footage of the event shows a vain effort by what was subsequently reported by Lebanese media as three gunmen who snatched the two children off a Beirut street in the area of al-Hadath south of the city. The children seem to be in the company of their paternal grandmother. As she subsequently noted, "The man came down and hit me on the head with something and I

was a little dizzy.”

Police immediately pounced. The mother and the entire “news” crew, including Tara Brown, producer Stephen Rice and a cameraman, ended up being detained. They spent some richly deserved time in custody, with some suggestion that they might spend an even longer time for their errors of judgment. Unfortunately for the world of genuine and credible journalism, Brown and her crew were permitted to return to Australia.

Brown’s initial justification was that the crew had been engaged in a humanitarian mission. Even on her return, an unrepentant Brown could insist with a deluded determination that, “We’re journalists, we’re doing our jobs.” Both observations must be seriously contested.

Critics saw another ploy at work, one of selfishness, self-assumption and privilege. Ruby Hamad, writing in *The Age* (Apr 17), summed it up best: “While it seems incredible that a major news organisation could be so irresponsible as to film a serious crime taking place, that they allegedly agreed to participate in a kidnapping to be later spun as a heroic deed simultaneously shows the heights – and limits – of white, Western privilege.”

The consequences of this failure have been incalculable, though Elamine, the Lebanese father, is certainly making a good fist of it, asking for a further \$US500,000 in addition to what already offered. Elamine felt emboldened, making his estranged wife sign away custodial rights. He has also taken to the propaganda front himself, posting images of his daughter, Lahela, 5, and son Noah, 3, on Facebook in response to Faulkner’s own pictorial efforts to win sympathy.

As for Whittington, abandonment has ensued. Having portrayed himself as a dedicated saint for the cause of family, he has also found himself the refuse of a journalistic stunt gone wrong. “I’m shocked (Nine) treated me in a selfish way, they didn’t care about me, they know I have a family to take care of.”

It would seem the producers of the program cannot help themselves, taking sides in a family dispute that has been opportunistically moralised. On April 27, it surfaced that another “child recovery” story produced but not yet aired was in the assembly line, dealing with a mother who successfully took her child out of Turkey. “It’s a completely different situation,” claimed a spokeswoman from the network. “There’s nothing similar.” As such a program shows, journalism can itself become the hideous story, inadvertently justifying the supposed monstrosities it is attempting to avert.

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