

Yeates murder: There is no excuse for the wholly unbalanced media reporting

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The murder of Joanna Yeates over Christmas has, understandably, attracted massive media coverage. Ms Yeates – white, female and professional – was an "ideal victim". "Yeates's professional and personal life immediately had resonance with people watching television or reading newspapers." Unfortunately, her landlord, Mr Chris Jeffries, seems to have been the "ideal suspect".

On his arrest, the media seized upon his background and appearance to make their views about him clear. The Sun, the Daily Mail and the Daily Mirror have described him, respectively, as "Professor Strange", "The Strange Mr Jeffries" and a "suspect peeping Tom". The Enemies of Reason blog summarises the coverage as follows:

"His photograph has appeared on the front page of national newspapers 11 times. He was described as "weird", "lewd", "strange", "creepy", "angry", "odd", "disturbing", "eccentric", "a loner" and "unusual" in the course of just one article.

*That the former English teacher should have liked the classic Oscar Wilde poem **The Ballad of Reading Gaol** was described by one article as "Chris Jeffries' favourite poem was about killing wife". That the teacher should have taught pupils about the horror of the Holocaust and a classic novel by Wilkie Collins was described as him being "obsessed with death".*

He was accused of being a 'peeping tom' by people who never made a complaint to police about his activities. One front-page headline asked of the landlord "Could this man hold the key to Joanna's death?" and the next day asked "Was Jo's body hidden next to her flat?" next to a picture of him".

This was all before Mr Jeffries was released by the police without charge after being questioned for an extended period. The combination of the "ideal victim" and the apparently eccentric suspect is a powerfully poisonous combination which has led to wholly unbalanced media reporting. Prejudice to a fair trial is only one issue in cases of this type. There has been large scale media intrusion into Mr Jeffries' private life and sustained defamatory attacks on his reputation.

It is difficult to see how any of this is properly justified as part of the reporting of a murder investigation. "Enemies of Reason" puts the point well,

"There are arguments about the public interest when it comes to a murder case; there are counter arguments about speculation and lurid intrusion into anyone's private life, especially when they haven't been charged with any crime.

As a number of commentators have pointed out "media lynching" of a suspect is not an unusual phenomenon. There is, of course, immense pressure on the press to come up with something which catches the attention of its readers in cases of this kind but this is no excuse for this kind of reporting.

Any remedies which Mr Jeffries chooses to pursue through the civil courts will provide very limited redress for the intrusion and character assassination which has taken place.

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PPC: Press Complaints Commission Code

1. Make a presentation of the document.

2. What is it about ?

3. Find out as many informations as possible on the people talked about. What was their relationship?

4. What event happened to them ? When ? Where?

5. How did the media react?

6. How fair was it? Explain why.

7. How did they try to justify such a reaction?

8. What is the main goal of this article?