

# **Boston events demonstrate media power to help, hinder criminal investigations**

*Editor's note: [This article](#) first appeared in the St. Louis Beacon.*

The unprecedented events in Boston – the lockdown of a major U.S. city during a manhunt for a terrorism suspect – demonstrated the amazing power of the media to help and sometimes hinder a criminal investigation.

The manhunt for the Boston Marathon bombing suspects also demonstrated the way in which the media can contribute to, and heighten the frenzy and sense of, danger in a community.

Cameras – some placed for security, others used by bystanders to capture the race – led to the identification of the suspects in Monday's bombing. Within 12 hours of publication of the images in the media, the suspects had been cornered, one had been killed and military helicopters were circling over a city that was under a "shelter in place" order.

As police searched for the surviving suspect, the media sometimes got in the way. Police posted a notice Friday morning insisting that the media not report the location of police searches. And the Cambridge police shut down their Twitter account, fearing that the suspect might be reading it and getting ideas for how to elude them.

Meanwhile, Chechnya's president, Ramzan Kadyrov, himself a frequent poster on social media, defended his country on Instragram, pointing out that the brothers suspected of the bombing "grew up in the U.S., their views were formed there."

The identification of the bombers as from Chechnya disproved

much of the original media speculation about the bombers being right-wingers or from Saudi Arabia.

Even though reporters, commentators and politicians frequently warned against speculation in the days after the bombing, many of them went on to speculate.

One example was former California Rep. Jane Harman, president of the Woodrow Wilson Institute, who appeared the day after the bombing on National Public Radio's "[The Diane Rehm Show](#)" and said she suspected the bombers would turn out to be homegrown right-wingers. Just after saying it was "way too premature" to link the bombings to terror groups in the Mideast, she speculated it could be "disaffected Americans" because it was "Patriots Day" and a big gun vote was looming in the Senate.

Politicians, police and journalists will have a lot of questions to ask themselves once the events play out in Boston.

Was the close embrace of law enforcement and the press too close? I'm inclined to think not, but I'm not sure.

Was it a good idea to publish the photos of the suspects? I'm inclined to say yes, in that it led to the quick location of dangerous terrorist suspects. On the other hand, it also led to the unprecedented lockdown of a major American city and a panicky, militarized atmosphere.

Is the press obligated to block reporting of information about the location of searches in order to avoid alerting a suspect about where police are looking? One might analogize this kind of information to reporting on the location of troops in a war, which the press avoids putting in stories.

Is it impossible to educate reporters and commentators to avoid speculation in the days immediately following an attack such as this one. The commentators should remember they are

almost always wrong.

Is there a way for the media to cover a huge news event like this in real time without panicking an entire city? I have to admit that I don't know that it is.