

Has The White Media Persecuted Bob Walton?

By Jalyza Strong
Post Staff Writer

The way in which Charlotte area white media handled news about County Commissioner Bob Walton during the time Walton's ordeal with sex charges lasted has led many members of the black community to cite the press for persecuting Walton for reasons of race.

In the three and one half months that elapsed from the day 18-year-old Charles Edward Jones alleged he was sexually assaulted by Walton to the day Walton was convicted and sentenced on the charge of sexual assault, Charlotte's daily newspaper, The Charlotte Observer, ran over 30 articles detailing the case. A sum which does not include the cartoons and editorial comments the newspaper also printed about Walton during this time.

During the same time frame, Charlotte's three local television stations devoted the majority of their lead stories on the evening and night news to the Walton case. Middle of the day news breaks centered on Walton. His face became a daily fixture on the television screen. Regular programming was interrupted to bring the latest developments on the Walton case.

So intense and prevalent was media coverage of Walton during this time, Walton's lawyer Averill Harkey pointed out in Superior Court, "In a capital murder case you've got less publicity than in this case. The Charlotte area is saturated with this case."

A similar observation was made by members of Charlotte's black community and it fueled the charges of media persecution based in racism. Blacks accused the white media of overplaying the subject of Walton because Walton is a black man.

Media representatives from The Charlotte Observer and from one of the city's local stations deny these charges, claiming racism played no part in the way coverage of the Walton case was handled. "The most important factor was that Walton was a public figure," maintains Observer Editor Richard Oppel. "As a public figure, he is subject to more intense scrutiny in the case of a crime."

Bill Walker, managing editor of Channel 9 WSOC news states, "The fact that (Walton) is a public official made it a 'must cover' story. When there is misconduct in public officials there is a strong obligation to make sure the story is covered and covered well."

Walker and Oppel's positions are reinforced by Dr. Schley Lyons, Dean of UNCC's College of Arts and Science, full professor of Political Science and political analyst, who notes, "I'm not buying into the premise that the media is trying to run Walton off. That is just a smoke screen. In this case, we have an elected public official caught up in a circumstance that was really unusual. Any newspaper in the U.S. would make it newsworthy."

"In our society, public officials are fair game," continues Lyons. "One can enjoy the right to privacy as a private citizen but not as an elected official."

Did Walton's position as a public official actually warrant the type of coverage that was maintained over those months? And at the same time, does the fact that he is a public official negate the possibility that racism played a part in media's scrutiny of Walton?

"Anytime predominately white press is reporting on black subject matter it is laying the groundwork for criticism of racism," assesses Walker. "As for myself I have made a dedicated attempt to be color-blind in covering the story."

But the black community found this incredulous given the type and scope of the coverage on Walton. The fact is, Walton was ultimately accused of a misdemeanor and when it is known that a misdemeanor offense receives as much or more publicity as a capital offense that gives rise to accusations that something else is being played out. Blacks maintained it was racism.

Blacks cite racism was the determining factor in not only the amount of coverage given to the story but also in the content of coverage devoted to the case. Most blacks were taken back and alarmed by the explicit language printed in The Charlotte Observer describing the sexual assault. Many believed accounts of the sexual encounter reprinted continually over a three month period was nothing less than prejudice inspired sensational-



Bill Walker
Managing editor, Channel 9



Richard Oppel
Charlotte Observer, Editor



Dr. Schley Lyons

continual dialogue about Walton and the news media will keep up with the story.

"News about Walton will keep coming up as long as he is in public office," says Lyons. "That's what the public should expect and that's how it should happen."

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ism.

But Oppel defends his newspaper's position claiming, "When you're dealing with a serious charge against a public official it's important to be precise and exact so there will be not guessing as to what occurred. If you attempted to be vague, that might lead to the thinking that the crime is more serious than alleged."

Admitting that WSOC received some negative feedback concerning the stations decision to air sexually graphic court testimony, Walker says, "It was something we don't usually do. But it was necessary for us to leave no question in the mind of viewers and voters about what happened. If we spoke in generalities or euphemisms about what occurred, people would be left wondering if (Walton) had done anything terrible at all."

Lyons points out, "Walton himself could have controlled the size and scope of the news coverage by removing himself from public life. The media made it a long term story and Walton shared in the process by staying in public life after participating in sexual conduct that is counter to normal."

Walker agrees with Lyons in principle. "I don't criticize how Walton handled the case," says Walker. "However, the quickest way for him to have gotten rid of the media coverage on the criminal charge would have been to admit guilt up front and resign quickly. The story would have been much less demanding."

Walton is scheduled to be released from Mecklenburg County jail tomorrow having served 15 days of the 30-day sentence he received on the sexual assault charge. He has yet to resign from public office. North Carolina's state law does not require an elected official convicted of a misdemeanor to resign. And reports from Walton's friends are that the County Commissioner has no intentions to resign.

With Walton's imminent release, the black community's attention is focusing again on the white media with anticipation of how it will handle further coverage on Walton. Now that Walton has served his time for the offense, in a sense he has paid his debt to society, if the white media continues to dominate its news stories with reports on Walton it could again give rise to accusations of media persecution.

"We don't want to beat the matter to death," relates Oppel. "Though the Observer editor concedes the Observer will continue coverage on Walton 'if there is a continued public debate' on the subject. Walker predicts, "When Wal-

ton gets out, the story about the criminal offense is over. He has been tried, charged and has served his time. The story then becomes how effective is Walton as a public servant. There will be definite fallout. But if he does resign, the story is over."

Lyons concludes, "What will happen is the Black Caucus will meet, as will the Democratic party---organizationally different parts of the community will have

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