



Crime & Punishment

James Alan Fox on criminal behavior and the justice system

SEX CRIME

Elizabeth Smart: Smart, but no expert

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ABC News announced last week that it was signing Elizabeth Smart as a special contributor who would be called upon to weigh in on cases involving missing and abducted children. The 23-year-old college student is well-known, of course, for having been kidnapped from her home at the age of 14 and repeatedly raped by a homeless religious extremist, and lucky enough to live to tell about it. However, ABC is looking for Smart to speak about much more than her own victimization. Apparently, the network believes that her harrowing ordeal qualifies her as an expert on the general topic of kidnapping. Her name may be smart, but she is hardly an expert.

I will resist the temptation to judge whether such a role is healthy for someone who endured nine months of sexual assault and servitude, with the psychological effects lasting well beyond her rescue. More to the point, what insights can Smart bring to the table or the set of *Good Morning America*? She may possibly be introspective about her own reactions to the abduction, but not all victims respond in the same way and not all kidnappings are of the same character.



(AP Photo)
Elizabeth Smart speaking to the media

Smart may have had an up close and personal, albeit untrained perspective of her abductor, but most kidnappings are for very different purposes than hers. Wouldn't viewers learn much more from an analyst who has specialized in the study of kidnapping -- from celebrity stalking/abduction to kidnapping for ransom, from baby-snatching to child custody battles? Obviously, hiring Smart is much more of an attention grabber.

To be fair, ABC's decision to feature Elizabeth Smart as their kidnapping specialist reflects a fairly common practice in what could be described as the mass media version of it takes one to know one. □ John Walsh made a career on the shoulders of having been the father of a 6-year-old abduction/murder victim. Although his efforts in hosting *America's Most Wanted* may have contributed to bringing certain criminals to justice, was he really the best person for the job? What is it about having his son grabbed and killed that qualified him as an expert on law enforcement investigation?

There are countless other examples of activists who turn their victimization into a credential for instant expertise. After surviving a mass shooting at a crowded Texas restaurant, Suzanna Gratia Hupp became the darling of the NRA, was elected to the Texas state legislature and published a book -- all on her experience-based advocacy for right-to-carry laws. Closer to home, Donna Cuomo gained the limelight as the aunt of a teenager once murdered by furlough-absconder Willie Horton, and eventually gained a seat in the Massachusetts House of Representatives predicated largely on her tough-on-criminals agenda.

It is not just victims who are called on by the media to offer their insight and opinion on crime issues. Perpetrators -- murderers, rapists and other ruthless assailants -- are often granted an audience on TV or through print to speak not only about why they committed the crime, but why others do so as well. Rarely do they have sufficient awareness and understanding of their own behavior, much less that of others.

At the extreme, two rival newspapers in Detroit once bid for the "privilege" of publishing a serial killer's 24-page open letter to the public that expounded on contemporary social and cultural trends, despite his not having a shred of training in social and behavioral science. There were, of course, countless readers who would devour whatever the serial killer had to say on whatever topic, straight from the horse's mouth. Of course, this murderer had little more ability than an equine to opine on such matters.

One can always argue -- as industry folks often do -- that the media is only giving the public what it wants. Sure, the public may choose its news and entertainment from a diverse buffet of options, but the mass media are responsible for designing the menu. It is one thing to shed light on vicious crimes, but quite another to give the spotlight to those who commit them. And whether it involves victims or perpetrators, let's distinguish personal experience from professional expertise.