

Included `fact' not necessarily useful information
By Adam Pertman
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Newspaper readers regularly see such stories as: A local man was charged yesterday with shooting his wife and daughter. Unnerving human behavior is all too routine, and it elicits predictable reactions. Most commonly, we wonder what could have happened in the aggressor's life to make him act so abominably.

What no reasonable person thinks is, "Look what happens when people get married and have children!" Because we know better than to draw such sweeping conclusions.

Yet that is what many people, including journalists, do with adoption. The latest example is the story of Earnest Lee Hargon, who was recently charged with murdering a Mississippi couple and their son. A majority of news reports on the case "explain" that Hargon is the adopted cousin of Michael Hargon, the father in the slain family. Readers and viewers assume the adopted is there for a reason, so many of them "understand" the not-so-subtle implication: The problem stems from the adoption.

So far, though, the stories don't show Hargon's adoption had anything to do with the crime. It's reminiscent of the time, not long ago, when journalists regularly referred to the color of a criminal suspect's skin -- a practice they stopped because it was stigmatizing, undermining and simply unfair. Information should go into crime stories because it is relevant -- whether it's about people's race, gender or any other part of who they are. Reporting that someone was adopted, without showing why that fact is included, implies something is wrong because of the adoption. It is stigmatizing, undermining and simply unfair. Without any information about an individual's experience, the inclusion of adoption information reveals nothing.

Yet many people believe it does for an unfortunate reason: Adoption in America was so secretive for so long that misconceptions and negative stereotypes remain prevalent, even as adoption itself becomes increasingly prevalent and embraced.

I do not preclude the possibility that some adoption-related issue may have played a role in the Hargon story and, if so, it should be presented in a way that makes its significance clear. Even then, however, we shouldn't draw expansive conclusions.

In a country with 80 million to 100 million residents who have adoption in their immediate families -- mine included -- ignorance is anything but benign. Its repercussions extend far beyond what people assume they know about Earnest Hargon or any other newsworthy adoptees. When people believe they understand cases like this one simply because the person involved was adopted, I shudder to think what they must "understand" about my own son and daughter.

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