

PRIVACY

Publication of pictures raises ethics issues

Media under fire after using images of three men whose actions were found to be 'completely innocent' by police

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It was around 8:45 p.m. Thursday that the photographs appeared on Twitter.

They showed three dark-skinned, bearded men walking through Pacific Centre mall in downtown Vancouver, snapping photos.

It was local website Vancity Buzz that first posted the photo on the social media site with a link to a story that read: "Vancouver police searching for 3 Middle Eastern men videotaping Pacific Centre mall."

The story said police were looking for help identifying men who had been seen on security footage taking video of the mall's entrances.

Less than 24 hours and tens of thousands of shares and comments on social media later, police deemed the men's actions to be "completely innocent."

While newsroom decisions to run the men's pictures may have been made with the public interest in mind, that came at the expense of privacy rights, say some experts.

When the Vancity Buzz post came out, reporters around the city hustled to determine the source of the information and test its veracity.

While reporters waited for information from police, Farhan Mohamed, the editor-in-chief at Vancity Buzz, explained in a tweet how they got the story: "We got a tip. We called VPD who confirmed said tip. We posted about it."



DARRYL DYCK/THE CANADIAN PRESS

'It's a pretty serious thing if we are going to be releasing photographs to the public ... when in fact there may be perfectly reasonable explanations for what these people were up to,' says Vancouver Police Chief Adam Palmer.

Mohamed later told The Canadian Press his team chose to publish the story because it was in the public interest. "I don't think it's fearmongering. I think we're just being factual that this is happening and this could be something," he said.

Randy Fincham, a police spokesman, sent a brief email to The Sun at 10 p.m.: "The information is accurate. I will have something out shortly."

By that time, The Sun and other news agencies had obtained the internal police bulletin that included the information and

photos that had been posted to the blog. Global News aired the photos in a segment on their 11 p.m. broadcast. Shortly after, nearly every media outlet in the region had posted versions of the story, along with the photographs.

At 11:22 p.m., Fincham issued the first police news release: "There is no information to believe that these men have committed a crime. Nor do we have information to believe that the public is currently at risk." While police wanted to speak to the men about the "suspicious

incident," Fincham said the photographs were not being released.

The Sun chose to omit the photographs from its story (they were later posted for about two hours early Friday).

On Friday morning, Police Chief Adam Palmer asked people not to jump to conclusions.

"It's a pretty serious thing if we are going to be releasing photographs to the public, when someone's job could be affected, when their neighbours may think they are up to something they are not, when people jump to conclusions when in fact there may be perfectly reasonable explanations for what these people were up to," Palmer told a news conference.

He said police routinely receive calls about suspicious activity, and an internal memo would have gone out no matter the race of the people engaged in suspicious activity.

At 3:06 p.m. Friday, police spokesman Brian Montague issued a news release saying that officers had identified the men.

"All three men were co-operative with investigators and they had a very logical explanation regarding their behaviour. The investigation has conclusively determined that their actions were completely innocent," Montague said.

Subsequently, Vancity Buzz and most other news outlets wiped the photos from their websites. CBC left them up, but blurred the men's faces.

Josh Paterson, the executive director of the B.C. Civil Liberties Association, said the men's privacy rights were clearly violated when media outlets ran their photos.

"I think there can be a rush on these things," said Paterson in an interview. "One can only hope these individuals won't have some negative implications ... as a result of this ... essentially it's a violation of their rights as citizens and their privacy rights."

Retired Langara College journalism professor Ross Howard, who specialized in media ethics, said "some of the media who ran it could argue ... that it was in the public interest to be aware the police were looking into this."

There's no clear rule, said Howard. "The media runs leaks from government reports, whatever they can get their hands on under the general argument that it's in the public interest."

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