

February: 911 tapes: Public access helps assess emergency response

Written by By Dee J. Hall

"I just came home, the door was bashed in and my girlfriend has been shot."

Those were the words of Jordan Gonnering, speaking to a 911 dispatcher last April after he found the body of Brittany Zimmermann in the downtown Madison apartment that he shared with her.

Increasingly, the media use transcripts and audio of 911 calls as part of their coverage of public safety, a strategy that some applaud but others fear harms crime victims and violates their privacy.

Last May, several Wisconsin media outlets sued Dane County to force release of information about the response to the Zimmermann murder after Isthmus, a Madison newspaper, revealed that officials had kept secret a 911 call from Zimmermann's cell phone prior to her death. Dane County Circuit Judge Richard Niess subsequently ordered the release of reports showing that a dispatcher failed to hear reported sounds of distress and didn't send help until Gonnering reported finding his fiancée's body 48 minutes later.

Last month, Niess issued a mixed ruling - allowing a redacted call from Gonnering to be released while blocking, for now, release of a call that came from Zimmermann's cell phone. In his decision, Niess agreed with police who said that releasing the recording might impede efforts to find a suspect or elicit a confession.

So why do the media want 911 tapes? No doubt there are some, especially on the national level, that seek merely to sensationalize crime by airing and publishing often emotionally charged calls for help. But most have sought the tapes to help evaluate the performance of a community's emergency response system.

"We now routinely request audio files of 911 tapes as part of our reporting on major crimes," said Teryl Franklin, Wisconsin State Journal managing editor. "We think it's important to do that in order to make sure that police and other public officials are doing their jobs well and that they are telling the truth about what happened."

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In the Brittany Zimmermann homicide, says Franklin, "public officials offered conflicting accounts of a call placed from her cell phone around the time of her stabbing death. That deepened the public's right to know what can be heard in that call and what went wrong when the dispatcher answered that call."

In a Feb. 9 column, Al Tompkins of the Poynter Institute, a nonprofit training organization for journalists, summarized recent cases in which publicly released 911 tapes exposed problems with community emergency response. For example, the Detroit News revealed last month that it took three 911 phone calls over two days to get Detroit police to investigate a frozen corpse in an abandoned building. In a Jan. 30 editorial, the News asked, "If a dead body doesn't get the attention of police, what will?"

Franklin noted that her newspaper doesn't routinely publish transcripts or post recordings online: "We use the same balancing test with 911 calls as we do with material published in print -- weighing the public's right to know against issues of taste and sensitivity." When all is working, public scrutiny of these records can help build confidence in emergency responders. And when the system fails, public review can help compel officials to avoid similar errors in the future.

Wisconsin State Journal reporter Dee J. Hall is a member of the Wisconsin Freedom of Information Council (www.wisfoic.org), a nonprofit group dedicated to open government. Your Right to Know is a monthly column distributed by the FOIC.