



## TV Stalkers

*In an age of TV news "personalities," stalking is a problem no one talks about*

BY [MARK FRANCIS COHEN](#)

It was on a Monday in May when a mentally ill man began to menace George Kessler, a meteorologist for Channel 6 in Duluth, Minnesota. "I came in to work that day, and my voice mail box was full," Kessler, thirty-four, says now, two years later. The caller, a one-time inmate of a psychiatric institution, believed that Kessler was belittling him during the 10 p.m. weather report. For one thing, he imagined that the weatherman was peppering the live forecast with remarks that the caller was homosexual.

"If I were you, I would not have said what you said about me on TV," the man growled into the phone. "If I were you I'd start using your head, not only for the weather, but for your own personal life, too, or you're going to find out the hard way, my friend. I can definitely do something about it and God bestowed upon me the power to do so . . . . You ain't getting away with what you done to me."

"One of the hazards of being in the public eye"

Kessler, like many television reporters, had received his share of odd phone calls before — there was the man who believed the government was keeping him from getting the weather report, and the woman who thought the news coming from her television was being broadcast only to her. Still, it had never occurred to Kessler, a light-hearted, prone-to-joking kind of fellow, that there was a chance a viewer might hurt — or even kill, as the stalker threatened — him, his wife, and their two children. After all, he worked in a small television market and lived in a small town. Duluth's population is less than 87,000. When asked to do on-air promotions featuring his whole family, Kessler didn't think twice about it; those spots, incidentally, beamed into thousands of homes a few weeks before the harassment started.

As it happens, the stalker originally was fixated on the station's female evening anchor, and he used to leave her phone messages describing his

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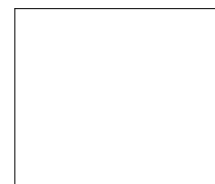
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love for her. The woman didn't give the calls much attention. The stalker grew angry and turned on Kessler. In the stalker's mind, Kessler was ruining his chances with the woman by saying disparaging things about him on TV.

"This is a widespread problem that people in the business don't like to talk about," says Bob Papper, a professor of telecommunications at Ball State University. "I'd take this stuff very seriously because you can't distinguish between the harmless crackpots and the dangerous ones. And television stations are magnets for crackpots — harmless or otherwise."

Local television reporting is increasingly becoming a dangerous occupation. Experts say a confluence of factors has made the job more perilous even as the industry has been reluctant to confront the issue in any meaningful way. That's not to say station managers don't deal with the threat once someone is targeted. In fact, many local television stations are fitted with better security systems than they had a decade ago. But the safety problems in the business — a business that packages its journalists as personalities and is dominated by crime coverage — aren't addressed by the professional organizations or academic journalism programs.

"There are so many holes in the system, it's a wonder more women aren't hurt and killed," says Ann S. Utterback, a voice specialist and author of the *Broadcast Voice Handbook*, which, in its latest edition, includes a new section on stalking. She notes that some of her clients have vocal problems because they are riddled with anxiety caused by delusional fans.

"It's rare for me to talk to a female reporter who hasn't experienced this," Utterback says. "They can't breathe, they can't stay focused, they look awful. It clearly affects their performance."

In recent years, reporters working in small markets throughout the country have been killed, attacked, threatened, and driven into hiding by stalkers. In 1995 Jodi Huisentruit, an anchor in Mason City, Iowa, disappeared one morning on her way to work. She has never been found, but the police believe she was abducted by a deranged viewer. Mason City's population is 35,000. Kathryn Dettman, a television reporter in Temple, Texas, a town only slightly bigger, was murdered by a stalker. He stabbed Dettman repeatedly in her apartment one morning in 1998.

Kam Carman, a reporter for Fox 2 in Detroit, received weird letters and phone calls from a man named Bill Morrison for two years before she began to worry about her safety. "I never said anything about it because I knew I couldn't do anything unless he threatened me," she says. That changed in June 1998 when Morrison left an astonishing message on her voice mail: "Listen, you fucking whore, I'm going to blow your fucking head off!"

Morrison apparently became unhinged as Carman continued to ignore his

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overtures. What's more, Carman was about to get married — a process she shared with viewers by doing stories on, for example, choosing her wedding flowers. The stalker probably read Carman's impending marriage as a personal rejection.

Immediately, Carman notified her boss. He contacted the police, but, Carman says, because she didn't have a restraining order, they "couldn't do anything unless he hurt me." Things were quiet for a few weeks, but in October, Carman got another phone call at her office from Morrison. He told her he was in the station's parking lot waiting for her. "We called local police, and sent cameras out there."

Carman used the footage of Morrison's arrest to produce a series titled "My Stalker" for the evening news. The audience flocked to their TV sets to see what happened to Carman. In Detroit, the report holds the record for the highest ratings for a series. "It turns out we've had several people at our station who've been stalked," Carman says. "It's probably going to happen to me again. It's something you accept. It's not fun, but there's nothing you can do to prevent it."

Not everyone agrees with that assessment. Local television stations now put reporters in a position where they are more likely to be targeted, argues Valerie Hyman, a newsroom consultant and trainer. In 2000 Hyman led a panel called "Stalker Dos and Don'ts" at the national convention of the Radio-Television News Directors Association. "It's a very rare station that has policies in place or information available on how a reporter should react to phone calls, letters, or a visit from a stalker," she says.

Among the suggestions made to journalists at the conference were to report all suspicious mail to a supervisor, keep your home address off all checks, and give out as little personal information as possible on the air. "You can still project a warm personality without revealing details about yourself," says Hyman, who was stalked when she was a television reporter.

Even so, personalizing anchors and reporters is the currency of TV news, whether it's NBC's Katie Couric bringing cameras into the operating room as she undergoes a colonoscopy, or Kam Carman revealing details of her wedding planning. Since the 1980s, local television reporting has become a conversational medium in which reporters are encouraged to develop a relationship with their audience. Camera angles are tighter. Head-to-toe body shots are common. Anchors smile and laugh. Reporters appear pained when a crime story is delivered. At the same time, journalists in small markets are usually young, attractive, and paid small salaries. And the number of news programming hours has ballooned. More journalists are on display more often.

To sell the personalities of the journalists, news directors like to rely on

cross talk — those select moments of impromptu banter after a news story. During these moments, anchors and reporters, whose life-sized faces are being beamed into people's bedrooms, are encouraged to trade jokes or offer brief commentaries about their weekend plans. Reporters' personal lives are also conveyed through TV advertisements and live appearances at, say, a parade or a charity event. Needless to say, such exposure can nourish a stalker's outrageous fantasies.

Stations also rely on the Internet to hawk their newspeople. On Fox 2's Web site, Kam Carman, in her own voice, reveals: "I am married to David Kramer, and I now have a stepson, Courtlandt, and twins, named Kellan and Jacquelyn. In my free time, I enjoy being part of an adult precision ice-skating team, and I love to travel."

Such information isn't just fodder for potential stalkers who live nearby. At [www.newsbabes.com](http://www.newsbabes.com), which links to the biography pages of dozens of women reporters, you can view information and pictures of journalists from all over the country. Ali Meyer, one of the women on [newsbabes.com](http://www.newsbabes.com), is a twenty-four-year-old reporter for Channel 4 in Oklahoma City. "It's a little disconcerting," Meyer says. "But this is one of the hazards of being in the public eye."

As for George Kessler, the barrage of vicious phone calls wore him down. What made him especially uncomfortable was that the stalker had a history of violence. He also knew Kessler's schedule because the weatherman was always on TV live at the same times every day. That meant the stalker knew when his family was alone.

Kessler began cutting back his work hours. And he refused to do live shots outside the studio. Eventually, Kessler moved his family into a new house and quit his job. Now he works as a marketing director at a technology company in Duluth. As for the stalker, he was finally arrested last year after he violated a judge's restraining orders. He was caught on a crowded street — not far from the station — ranting about how he was going to assault Kessler.

"The guy turned my life into a paranoid hell," says Kessler. "He made me afraid. He disrupted my life, and he took a lot of the joy out of my career."

As small as Duluth is, a second stalker surfaced and began intimidating another reporter at Channel 6 even as Kessler was dealing with his own predator. A man pursued one of the station's weekend anchors last year with tenacity. He telephoned her, visited her while she was reporting on location, and dropped in on her at her apartment. The police ultimately confronted him, and the anchor went to court and got a restraining order.

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