DEARBORN, Mich. -- He was one of the most powerful men in town -- Dearborn’s longtime police chief. She was a beautician’s assistant less than half his age, without money or connections.

And when she charged in January that Ron Deziel had raped her in the basement of her hair salon, it made headlines across the state, and led local TV newscasts.

Everybody used the police chief’s name. And, in what is close to the only remaining bastion of privacy in journalism, nobody in the media printed or spoke the woman’s name. “The theory, which goes back to Victorian times, is that sexual assault is so heinous a crime, the stigma (of having suffered it) permanently damages any woman’s reputation,” said Ben Burns, a former editor and publisher of several newspapers who is now director of journalism at Wayne State University in Detroit.

Within days, Ron Deziel -- who was already under fire both inside and outside his police department for other matters, abruptly resigned. Most in the media concluded the sexual assault charges were the final blow, if not the sole reason.

But there was a problem. It was all a lie.

Tammy Divetta, the beautician’s assistant, made the whole story up. We know this because she admitted it in a bizarre confession after prosecutors announced they could find no basis for filing charges against the former chief. “There was no sexual intercourse, not that I know of,” she said tearfully.

Her motives for the false charges are unclear, though prosecutors think she might have been trying to ward off her husband’s wrath after he caught her drinking that day. Her motives for confessing her falsehood are even more murky, and have brought the full wrath of the law down on her. Wayne County Prosecutor Mike Duggan has filed false rape charges against her, and she could face four years in prison.

Mr. Deziel was cleared. Yet it is hard to totally recover from any smear. And if it hadn’t been for the beautician’s bizarre confession, nobody in the media ever would have named her, even though no charges were filed. Undoubtedly, most who saw or read the stories would have concluded he was guilty.

Do the media need to drastically change their reporting standards?

Nancy Kaffer, the news editor of the Dearborn Press and Guide, thinks so. "I was very uneasy when I was writing some of these stories - I mean, whatever happened to innocent until proven guilty?” she said. Possibly, she said, neither name should be used until the legal process has worked itself out.

Mr. Burns also thinks it is time to change the way they report such things - but thinks we need to tell the readers more, not less. “Our job is to provide information, not withhold it. I think when someone makes such a charge, especially against a public official, we should use both names,” Mr. Burns said.

“We beat up on our public officials all the time; they should at least have the right to be publicly confronted by their accuser.”
He also believes there is a practical reason to report names of those who accuse prominent personalities of misdeeds. “Sometimes someone will come forth and reveal that there has been a pattern of such behavior.”

Yet not everyone agrees. Jacquelyn Headapohl, an editor with InfoAlly, an Internet marketing firm in Troy, Mich., has no sympathy for Ms. Divetta, but still believes “rape is such a horrible thing that no woman wants it known that she was raped.”

Most rapes go unreported now, and she feels that even more would be if the women knew they would be publicly identified - especially when a powerless woman is taking on a powerful public official. Indeed, less than two years ago, neighboring Macomb County had a sensational case in which another young woman claimed she was raped by that county’s longtime sheriff, William Hackel.

But that case was different; video cameras caught the sheriff leaving her hotel room, and there was DNA evidence. The sheriff was convicted and sent to prison. The voters, in an odd twist, then elected his son to replace him.

Nor do all women agree that women who accuse men of such crimes should have their identities shielded. “I first had this argument 28 years ago when I was managing editor of the Lansing State Journal, and my city editor, who was a woman, thought the feeling that we needed to ‘protect’ women in such cases was sexist,” Mr. Burns said.

The city editor, Beverly Hall, convinced Mr. Burns. He in turn convinced her to marry him. She went on to law school and is now managing partner of Miller Canfield Paddock and Stone, one of the city’s most prominent law firms.

She is, clearly, superb at winning arguments. But the argument over whether to name suspects and their accusers in sex cases is likely to continue, without any simple or comfortable solutions in sight.

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