



# Journalism Ethics: News Coverage of the Trayvon Martin Shooting

## and Death of Robin Williams

Dawnn Fann and Anna Lagattuta

Annette Taylor

### Summary:

The world lost one of its most beloved actors to suicide, Robin Williams. With Williams a figure in the entertainment industry, his death was considered news worthy. With reporting on suicide, numerous ethics are at stake. Journalist worked unethically on numerous accounts to attract an audience.

### Dilemma:

The SPJ Code of Ethics state, Journalist should, “Balance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort.” Multiple news outlets vividly revealed how and why Williams took his life, journalist failed this ethic. Revealing such graphic details may incline those who are vulnerable to this type of news to partake in copycat behavior.

### Solution:

Graphically describing how Williams took his life was a careless action to attract an audience. How a suicide, was done sparks an interest in the public. However, a journalist needs to ask themselves, ‘is the information potentially harmful to the public. News outlets, should have simply stated, William’s committed, “suicide.” You redirect the public’s attention onto the bigger issue, mental health.

**Summary:** When George Zimmerman fatally shot Trayvon Martin, NBC dramatically misreported the events. Transcripts of the 9-1-1 call between Zimmerman and police proved NBC rearranged relevant dialogue, implying Zimmerman had racially-inclined motives. NBC reported that Zimmerman said, “He looks like he’s up to no good; he looks black,” without being asked to describe Martin. But the dispatcher asked, “Is he white, black or Hispanic,” and Zimmerman responded, “He looks black.”

**Ethical Failure:** The edits violated the SPJ Code of Ethics, which says journalists should “Take special care not to misrepresent or oversimplify in promoting, previewing or summarizing a story.” NBC misrepresented the conversation between Zimmerman and police by rearranging and removing parts of the dialogue.

**Solution:** Upon gaining access to the tapes, NBC should have released them as they were. The public had the right to know what happened before the shooting that night, but NBC provided misleading, edited dialogue, causing the network to appear incredible.