Ethic Issues in Journalism: How Much is Too Much to Report?

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Journalism Ethics and Values
Rachel Healy, Kelsey Kramb, Tyler Jones
Annette Taylor
Difficult Subjects

Privacy and Social Media

Thesis: Social media has challenged journalists to determine what information about a private person, especially a victim of assault or a tragic incident like a school shooting or natural disaster, is news worthy and relevant for the public interest.

Summary: Social media has played a big role in making people's lives public. Even if a person considers himself or herself a private person, if they post on social media for the world to see, it is public information. As social media has risen in popularity throughout the years, the amount of information that has become public has risen as well. Many people, however, do not realize that this information is now considered public information for anyone to use.

Below are some examples showing how social media has changed the way reporting is done.

Christine Fox, a recent United States Deputy Secretary of Defense, was reported on for tweeting about assault victims by re-posting their tweets. This information was verified by the survivors, and was approved by them as well to be re-blogged; but only by Fox. Later, Buzzeff also reposted this information about the victims, which was then posted on many other Facebook profiles. This information is private in the eyes of the victims, however Fox’s social media was a public platform, and was seen by many. Therefore, the information was public. “Yes ‘twitter is public’, but that’s a sentence that would have been entirely meaningless just 10 years ago. Fox that private information is not as private because of social media how has changed the way people report, and the way the public finds out information. As times change, definition of privacy changes. This is an example of when the victims did, not view information that was in fact public, as public, however it was to use.

The Society of Professional Journalists, or SPJ, privacy checklist goes through questions journalists should ask them before posting information about a private person. “How would I feel?” and “What can I do to minimize the privacy and the harm” The questions get hard to answer when victims of assault, have shared other information on social media platforms. These questions go along with the relevance of the information of social media to the public, and what should and should not be used when considering emphasizing this.

Mass Shootings and the Media Contagion Effect by Jennifer Johnston, Ph.D. and Andrew Joy, BS, states that media coverage of mass shootings has implemented copycat shooters. Most of this information was shown through different platforms of social media. Although the coverage of the shootings were public, and the knowledge of the shootings spread fast, the amount of media coverage and social media posts reported by news stations caused other people to take the same actions, bringing a gun to school.

“The media and the Klan” by WNYC Studios explores the fact that social media can make an event explode because of the coverage, even if it is a controversial event. This is relevant because the members of the Klan, although marching publicly, may not want information about their involvement go viral.

How Much is Too Much to Report?

Thesis: Live reporting under any conditions requires careful thought to the individuals directly involved, as well as the public interpretation of the information presented.

This research project examined the specific codes and how they must be considered in a variety of circumstances in live news reporting.

Introduction

When reporting on tragic events in the news “journalists must be responsible both in how they gather and present the information in words and photos” [1]. Because news stories involving personal tragedy are reporting on events that are highly significant in the lives of individuals, they are extremely sensitive, must be handled with respect for the individuals, and should never result in additional harm or emotional stress to the victims of the tragedy [2]. Journalists must not release information too soon, before an appropriate response to the tragedy has been determined, or in the case of incomplete information release false statements resulting in a public reaction that can cause additional harm.

Analysis

The recent mass shooting at Parkland High School resulted in a grassroots movement demanding tighter gun control. The movement has utilized both social media and public protests to voice their concerns to the public [3, 4]. The survivors of the shooting have personally spoken out to the media to emphasise their personal loss as a result of the shootings, and to demand a stop to future attacks [5].

During the Parkland shooting, the news coverage of the victims was difficult for outsiders to view as a live report. Livestreams of local reporters broadcasting the event across the street from the school provided live interviews from witnesses as they were happening in real time [6]. These reporters were highly professional in how they conducted the interviews and how they made sure not to say anything on live TV that would not be ethical. For example, a reporter who was interviewing a young lady who was in the school during the shooting and was able to escape [6]. He asked her if she had any idea of who did this. She answered with “Yes, we all know who did it.”

The reporter made sure the girl did not give any names. They did not want any of the interviewees to say names in fear it would be wrong information.

Conclusion

Report live can be challenging, requiring quick reactions from the reporter, and experience in highly emotional situations. Experience in a variety of news situations allows the reporter to provide responses and reactions quickly that are consistent with the SPI code of ethics.

Balancing Military Secrecy and Journalism

The American people have a right to know as much information as possible about their government and military, and journalists aim to give them that information. However, some secrets must be kept in order to secure information for all involved. Past abuses of government power have established a need for guidelines to aid journalists in making decisions on how to publish sensitive information regarding the government and military.

Ethical Considerations:
The journalists who release these government secrets to the public believe that the public has a right to know what is going on in their government. They are correct to a certain extent. According to the Society of Professional Journalist’s (SPI) Code of Ethics, the primary principle of journalism is to seek truth and report it. That is what these journalists are doing. Two lifelong journalists and authors of Elements of Journalism, Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel, agree that “journalism’s first obligation is to the truth.” They also write that journalists have an obligation as watchdogs over the powerful of society. That does not simply mean monitoring government action, but also to expose and explain when necessary.

On the other hand, journalists have a responsibility to minimize harm, in this case the harm that might come to military personnel due to the information released. The danger must be real and life threatening, not just danger to a person's reputation or position. Minimizing harm in the SPI Code does not refer to a politician’s popularity, but rather actual physical harm that can come upon a human being.

Background:
Pentagon Papers: The Pentagon Papers were a secret history of the United States military actions in Vietnam. The Papers were first obtained by Daniel Ellsberg, a military analyst for the RAND corporation, who stole the information and controlled the release to The New York Times. The documents demonstrated that the US government had lied to the public, and President Johnson had lied to Congress. Desert Storm Mortuary: Jonathan Franklin believed that the military was misreporting the death toll from Operation Desert Storm in 1991. A freelance journalist, Franklin went undercover at Dover as a mortician and talked to employees. He discovered that the Pentagon underestimated casualties and incorrectly categorized friendly fire deaths as "training accidents." Franklin exposed governemt lies and changed the American public's outlook on the war.

My Guidelines for Journalists and Editors

All government and military information should be released except in these circumstances:

1. Military information should not be released if the information provides a real, credible, and justified threat to national security.
2. Personal and medical files of military personnel unless a formal investigation is opened.
3. Information on current military operations can be withheld if that information compromises the success of an ongoing operation or endangers the life of a military operative.

Sources: