

Bex Law

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The Truth About Journalism

Trying to pick the color of the heart emoji is the hardest part. Should it be the color of the most recently attacked school? Is a standard red heart too forward? The two swirling pink hearts are too whimsical, given the circumstances.

Journalist Taylor Hartz returns to these thoughts every time there is a major school shooting in America as she considers what to send to the parents of the victims of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School. She has covered almost every anniversary of Sandy Hook since graduating college in 2014.

Hartz has formed relationships with the parents of the victims at Sandy Hook. She can no longer see them as sources for information. After years of interviewing them about the worst day of their lives, asking them to go through the trauma of losing a child year after year, she has to view them as friends.

“I will text them and say ‘thinking about you,’ or just send them a heart emoji. I think it’s important for them to know I am more than a journalist, that I am here for them,” Hartz said.

The truth about journalism is that journalists are people with thoughts and empathy. “It’s kind of beat into your head in journalism school that you have to be objective and completely unbiased to be ethical,” Hartz said. “But to live with integrity you have to acknowledge that you are human. Telling both sides of the story and being factually accurate doesn’t mean you don’t have opinions. You just don’t write them down,” Hartz said.

The Society of Professional Journalists' Code of Ethics is a list of standards journalists should hold themselves to, and is frequently referenced in journalism schools when teaching students how to write ethically. Under the umbrella of "seek truth and report it," the SPJ Code of Ethics says to journalists that they must "support the open exchange of ideas, even views they find repugnant" (Spj).

Student reporters at Marshall University's newspaper The Parthenon, when asked if a core lesson in journalism school was to learn to be objective and unbiased, both as a writer and as a person, the five students gave a resounding "yes," with even a "I would hope so" injected by a non journalism major. The lessons have transcended writing objectively- journalists must learn to remain neutral in their personal and professional lives.

However, nowhere in the SPJ Code of Ethics is the word "objective" mentioned. Dr. Rob Rabe, a Marshall University journalism professor, said objectivity goes against human nature. "A journalist has a duty to report on the human experience from every angle, but to claim you are unbiased in life as well is ludicrous," Rabe said. "Even decisions on what is and is not newsworthy carries some amount of objectivity."

When learning about journalism, students are taught that they are ultimately the deciding factor on what is reported on or "newsworthy" and what is not. According to the PBS NewsHour Student Reporting Lab, there are five criteria to make a story qualify as newsworthy: timeliness, proximity, conflict and controversy, human interest, and relevance (pbs.org). Why do journalists and journalism teachers focus so much on objectivity?

Journalist Dave Lavender says the focus should be less on objectivity and more on integrity and accuracy. "It's a really powerful medicine, being a journalist," Lavender said.

“I think a journalist is someone who has the core value of truth, and also has a sense of justice. I think it’s important journalists know their inherent biases and they combat those by being honest with themselves about who they are and what lens they may see the world through. But the foundation of a great journalist is being as accurate as possible, and representing people as factually as possible. Being ethical means being as accurate as possible. Being accurate is better than being fast,” Lavender said.

“It’s important to be a human first, and to be in service to your community. And I think people appreciate that,” Lavender said. “There are very few people who care about a community more than their journalists.”

Hartz echoed the same ideas, that to be an ethical journalist one has to hold themselves to a certain standard of honesty. “If you lie in life, even just white lies, you aren’t going to be successful in journalism,” Hartz said. “You have to be honest in all aspects of life and really value honesty.”

Hartz commented on the things she had to “relearn” after going through journalism school. “I had to relearn how to keep my values and my morals and my own beliefs, and be strong in them. But to never let it bleed into my work,” Hartz said.

One way of doing that, according to Hartz, is acknowledging there are boundaries journalists can gently push back a bit, and others they absolutely cannot cross. One boundary Hartz pushes is the idea of inserting the journalist into the story. Hartz lost her father many years ago, and many people in her family struggle with drug addiction.

“If I’m covering a double homicide and the person I am interviewing had their mother and father murdered, and the kid is talking to me about how hard it is to grapple with the grief of losing a parent, I’m not willing to not tell them I have a dead parent,” Hartz said. “This kid is

sitting here trying to explain to me the grief, the least I can do is tell him I understand that pain. And every time I do I can see this flood of relief come over someone's face and they're like 'ok, I don't have to explain the basics, so I can now go deeper.'"

A boundary Hartz thinks cannot be crossed is the attempt to be neutral in public spaces. Hartz said she won't discuss political matters with her family and friends. "They'll say 'well, Taylor, you're not at work, it's just us,'" Hartz said, "but staying as neutral as possible in bigger public situations and not engaging in heated debates has allowed me to walk into situations that can sometimes be really hard morally, for example if I'm at a protest and I walk up to someone I disagree with and say 'hi, why are you here today?' I can get those people to actually talk to me."

Charlie Bowen, another journalism professor at Marshall University, agreed with this sentiment, saying he won't display political signs in his yard, no matter how much he agrees with one candidate or disagrees with another. Both journalists felt it would be unfair to their readers to allow themselves to be known for having a certain political opinion, which might close certain sources or opportunities off to them.

It is important to ensure that every angle of the story is published, and published accurately. Bowen said that journalists are passionate people, about community and civic engagement among other things, and passionate people have opinions.

This is where truth, and a passion for truth, comes into full effect. An ethical journalist reports accurately on every story, and a great journalist with great integrity finds the truth, especially regarding matters that could be harmful to the community, such as reporting on the COVID-19 vaccine.

The Center for Countering Digital Hate released a study on "The Disinformation Dozen," a group of anti-vax social media influencers who caused up to 65% of the shares of anti-vaccine

misinformation on social media platforms (Bond). When journalists report on the COVID-19 vaccine, it would be inaccurate to publish what the Disinformation Dozen said about the effects of the vaccine on a person's health. But publishing the scientific facts of the matter along with the disinformation sources may put forth can allow readers to form their own opinions.

"You can't respond to people who say things like 'the vaccine causes autism' and say 'you're a crazy person,'" Hartz said. "You have to learn how to delicately have these conversations where you're respecting other people's opinions and sharing them in a responsible way." It is the duty of the journalist, in service to their community, to find the truth and publish that. According to Marshall University's newspaper The Parthenon's content editor Rafael Alfonso, journalists publish other people's opinions, not their own. But if a journalist can provide evidence to prove a source's quote to be mis- or disinformation, they can lead people to the truth.

If we are to believe that to report ethically and objectively, one must present a quote and a fact and let the reader come to their own conclusions, what does this say about a journalist's personal integrity? Connor Woodruff, a journalism student at Marshall University, brought up that journalism is an industry where the product (the written articles) and the staff members (the journalists and editors) are both meant to be objective, according to common societal opinion. Is it ethical for the industry to censor the contributors? If journalists cannot post what they want on social media, attend protests, or openly display political opinions, can they still say they are the biggest advocates for the First Amendment? "It's weird, we're the only industry that doesn't allow its contributors the same freedoms we demand our customers have," Woodruff said.

Matthew Schaffer, another Marshall University journalism student, takes a different approach to this conundrum: he views journalists as educators. "Journalists have an extremely important role in society," Schaffer said. "Their job is to relay information to the public, to

confront power, ultimately question everything, then tell a story about it...we are educators and it's our duty to educate people." To become the journalist that people find "perfect:" accurate, honest, curious, passionate, objective, and educational, Schaffer says he disassociates when interviewing people he disagrees with. "I have my own set of morals, anyone who knows me knows I lean pretty far left. But it's my job to be objective, so I lean on quotes, letting people explain their side of the story, and I basically disassociate to remove myself and any of my biases," Schaffer said.

There are two troubling things about all of these sentiments. The first being that there is no quibbling with the truth, something that should be a journalist's highest priority. The consensus among Woodruff, Schaffer, and Alfonso is that it is a journalist's job to present the reader with the opinion of a source and the facts that provide context to the opinion, and let the reader come to their own conclusion. However, if a source says they were in a specific bar on a specific Tuesday at a specific time, and the facts according to their credit card statements and several witnesses place them in a specific grocery store on the same Tuesday at the same time specified, this cannot be argued. There can be no "own conclusion," only recorded truth. If presenting this truth is considered biased reporting, how is society ever going to be educated? Freedom of thought is an inalienable right, but where is the line between opinion and truth one finds displeasurable? And how is a journalist meant to find it while also finding success in the industry?

The second concern being, how can a journalist claim a moral high ground if they are unable to openly express their core values? A journalist's job is to report neutrally. That may mean reporting on some views they find repugnant, but if they feel it is the morally right thing to march in a Black Lives Matter march, who is the public to stop them?

Journalists are passionate people with firm beliefs, who value curiosity, integrity, and justice. There may be times when having a transparent belief system may cost a reporter an interview. But if that is the price a journalist must pay to remain morally upright, does that not speak to their character or moral fiber more than not speaking out when it is imperative to do so?

Media literacy in America is currently not at its peak, and readers often get opinionated editorial pieces confused with standard news reporting, which contributes to the distrust of the media and the complaints of unfair reporting. Neutrality, or objectivity, in news reporting is a necessary evil. Every side of a story deserves its chance to be heard, so long as it is not harmful. When discussing the philosophy of modern journalism, Alfonso said “objectivity is often viewed as a synonym for fairness, which it isn’t. Always remaining fair is the job of a reporter.” Replacing “objectivity” with “fairness” in the list of core competencies in a journalist will not only make the field more approachable to people looking to enter the industry to make a difference, but it will also allow journalists to retain agency over their own moral character.

The truth about journalism is to expect neutrality in a journalist’s personal life is irresponsible. To train a future generation of reporters to not speak out for what they believe in is to deny them the freedom of discovering who they are, how they vote, and the freedom of decision on what is right and what is wrong.

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