

Brandon Foster

Ethics essay

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I still have the email.

“I’m actually really unsure about this one,” it read. “I think it might walk the line a little bit and I don’t want to be offensive or tasteless.”

I was working as editor of MOVE Magazine, the local arts and entertainment insert of the University of Missouri student newspaper, The Maneater. The email was from the magazine’s romance columnist. She had been writing an anonymous column all semester called “Kissless in Columbia,” about her quest to land her first kiss. It was probably the magazine’s most-read column, in part because of its intriguing premise and also because the columnist was such a crafty writer. This column in particular was bemoaning the lack of courtship in society, and the gay dating app Grindr was her vehicle for criticism.

The column’s beginning was the stickiest part. She started it off with a few gay generalizations and transitioned to the crux of her column: “Too many GBFs means overexposure to Lady Gaga, taking about seven pictures every time you go out until one is deemed acceptable and embarrassment at Starbucks when your ‘date’s’ coffee order is so complicated the barista has to write it down. The worst secondhand gay experience, though, is the possibility of exposure to the dirty world of Grindr.”

I knew this young woman had gay friends and, as far as I knew, harbored no ill will toward the gay community. I appreciated her concern, but I felt safe in whatever judgment led her to include these stereotypical examples in the first place. I told the

columnist that I was fine with running the column, though I would sleep on it. However, I based my reasoning more in the paper's policy — per my editor in chief, was that we do not censor columnists — than in any ethical evaluation of her column's content.

“Technically columnists aren't representative of the Maneater (I assume it works the same with MOVE...),” I wrote, “so I would say in the end it's up to you because you can't get us in trouble (I think... and I don't think this would, anyway).”

Boy, was I wrong — and not just in my indulgence in parentheses. The column elicited 42 mostly negative comments, numerous letters to the editor and countless social media complaints. It became readily apparent that we should not have run the piece, regardless of the paper's stance toward columnists. We ran an apology that stressed that columnists' views were independent of the paper's, but in retrospect we missed the larger point. In our process, we had failed in two regards. We failed to respect a writer's conscience, and we, to a certain extent, failed to take the necessary steps to avoid deceiving our readership.

Both of those points are stressed by Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel in their book “The Elements of Journalism.” There is an entire chapter in the book devoted to the idea that “Journalists have a responsibility to conscience” (226). It is not an easy task, the book says. It gives the example of NBC “Dateline” reporter Michele Gillen. She disagreed with the program's decision to air reenacted footage of car explosions in her story about General Motors trucks with allegedly explosive gas tanks. This footage was not entirely consistent with Gillen's reporting, and she expressed concerns with the piece. Eventually her executive producer convinced her to narrate the story, which included the questionable footage. The story was poorly received and the blowback was heavy. The

example is used to illustrate how consciences can be ignored within the hierarchy of a newspaper organization.

I don't believe that it was the columnist's duty to make sure her reservations about the column were heard by every level of the organization. She was a columnist, I was the editor, and I believe that the journalistic responsibility fell on my shoulders. I spoke with my editor in chief about the column before publication, and he said we would be fine in printing the story, because columnists' opinions are not *The Maneater*'s opinions. Though I went to my editor, I fear that I was part of a problem that often occurs in journalism.

"Conscience is not something to be assuaged, as it was in the 'Dateline' case," Kovach and Rosenstiel write. "It is something to be revered" (233).

Essentially, I was assuaging the columnists' conscience in the same way the "Dateline" reporter was told to ignore hers: "Thanks for the concern, but don't worry about it," I might as well have said. "Your editors know what to do." As the backlash to the column and to the "Dateline" story illustrate, an individual's conscience can often be prescient. I would have saved the paper a lot of trouble if I had taken more heed of the columnist's concerns and the same can be said for "Dateline" and NBC. But having to write an apology to the readers was not the only negative. It is important to consider the stakeholders in a story, especially one that deals with sensitive topics like sexuality. Sure, this was a column, not an article, but it was nonetheless a piece that could insult and dismiss the demographics the columnist was writing about. When weighing her conscience, the editor and chief and I should have valued the way readers would be affected more than the potential for us to get in trouble. We should have told her to trust

her gut and either re-write the piece with more sensitivity or perhaps write a new column altogether — today, I lean toward the latter.

Secondly, we failed to avoid deceiving our readers, especially if we were going to take the stance that columnists can say what they want because they are independent of the publication. It is perfectly reasonable that they could have interpreted that opinion as the Maneater's opinion. There is a section in Kovach and Rosenstiel's chapter on verification titled "Do not deceive" (91).

"Do not deceive means that if one is going to engage in any narrative or storytelling techniques that vary from the most literal form of eyewitness reporting, the audience should know," the book says (91).

Whether or not the editor and I should have settled on the "not our opinion, not our problem" resolution, can be argued. Given the previous sentiments expressed on valuing conscience, I would not have let the columnist's views run unfiltered if I had done it again. But we did use that reasoning, and we did it poorly. The publication failed to ensure that readers did not confuse columnists' opinions with The Maneater's opinions. They were labeled as columns, but they were mixed in with the other content, and should have had a disclaimer attached. At the very least, I think we should have had each column finish with a sentence or editor's note that reminds readers: Columns are not the opinions of the publication. Transparency and straight-forwardness are crucial parts of journalism, and in failing to embrace those elements, we hurt our readers and harmed the paper's reputation.

It's much easier to look at this situation in retrospect and see what should have been handled differently, but it's not always so simple in the moment. This is why I

believe conscience to be so important. Those voices in our heads are the little reminders that we might be straying from our mission. But not everyone is going to get the alert from that shoulder-riding angel. That is why it is so important not to ignore an individual's conscience. It could save you some trouble in the long run and, more importantly, keep you from doing harm to the readers you are trying to serve.