

Reporting the news: why the media gets it wrong



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Mass media has become a tool for news, information sharing, advertising and entertainment and has often had an influence on national and even world history. The media acts as the key informant in disaster situations by relaying information from the scene of the disaster to those who are affected, the curious general public, and policy makers alike. In fact, The media plays such a large role in disseminating information about disasters that Dynes claimed that the media “ defines” a disaster by what is reported and what is not (Rodriguez, Diaz, Santos, and Aguirre, 2006).

What does get reported forms a frame—a lens that shows the audience one part of the larger picture—that is then often interpreted as the truth behind what happened at the scene of the disaster. However, sometimes these frames, or underlying themes, are exaggerated, misrepresented, or completely false, which results in a general misunderstanding of the disaster by the media’s audience (Barsky; Dynes and Rodriguez, 2006). Media History Mass media is defined as any form of communication which is designed to reach a large audience (24/7 Media Group).

This can be print media such as newspapers and magazines, radio, television, film and radio, photography and more common today, electronic, especially with the introduction of social media. Advances in technology to the American Public have greatly advanced the way society receives information. In the last few decades the media has expanded from community newspapers to multinational corporations. Few people argue that the media has a large influence on society. The way we get information may also affect the way we process and understand information.

With fewer and fewer companies controlling more and more media outlets, the influence of the mass media is important and needs to be understood. The mass media of broadcast, print, and the internet significantly affect the way we process information. Through the twenty-first century the power of the media has shifted away from newspapers, radio and television, to the internet. The internet has surpassed television as the main news source for American young adults between the ages of 18 and 29 years old.

The report found that, among this generation, 65% cited the internet as their main news source, a value that almost doubled since 2007 when it was at 34%. Television fell from 68% in 2007 to 52% in 2010, now in second place. Among the next generation, aged 30 to 49, television still reigns but has been steadily losing ground to the internet. In 2007, the television was cited by 71% as this generation's main source of news, yet fell to 63% in 2010, while the internet was 32% in 2007 and rose to 48% in 2010.

And this year, for the first time, the internet surpassed radio as the main source of news for Americans aged over 50, including the over 65 demographic. (Mourato, 2011). With viewers come ratings and advertising and advertising pays for airtime. The advertisers in turn can cause a game of politics to occur in the decision of selecting stories to air. Instead of local news stories that may affect someone's area, the story actually aired may be shows that are doing well on CBS, or American Idol updates on FOX.

If advertisers are getting more business due to viewers watching or listening to this type of programming, those are the ongoing types of stories that will continue to take precedence. The demographics of the audience affect the

stories that are covered in certain regions. Media outlets pay special attention to the race, age, social and economic class, and political tendencies of their audience. This is used not only to generate stories that would be of interest to their public, but also to find advertisers who wish to sell to specific groups of consumers.

The expansion of the internet has changed every other form of media. Newspapers are now available online for free. Many television networks offer clips or resources online to view videos for free or subscription. Bloggers and message boards have changed the very definition of the word journalist (Hauger, 2008). Given the nature of today's society where people want everything faster, it could be that we, as a society, are responsible for putting these reporters under more pressure to get information out more quickly than ever before.

This pressure is forcing a reporter to possibly take shortcuts by turning to social media sites to get information. Given the amount of information people are revealing about themselves, their families and friends, despite the warnings of personal security, reporters have an easy chore of simply typing in a person's name and pulling up a Facebook page. The reporters can learn more about victims and/or perpetrators of crimes in a lot less time than when they had to put boots-to-the-ground and do investigative work to get even the most basic information.

Ethics in Journalism Journalism is the timely investigation and reporting of events to a broad audience (Univ. of Western Ontario, 2012). As has been seen time and again, the standard media cannot function on its own but

must rely upon journalists, reporters, editors and writers to get the word out. In some cases, for whatever reason, the media, in an attempt to get that word out, will release information that is incorrect due to the haste and the effort to get the news out before any other station or newspaper.

Ethics is not just about what to report or not to report but it also deals with maintaining objectivity. The more objective a report or information is, the higher the credibility of that information. To be objective means to be express or deal with facts or conditions as perceived without distortion by personal feelings, prejudices, or interpretations (Websters, 2012). For example, an objective news report will present all sides of the issue whether helpful or detrimental to the issue. A biased report may show an unfair preference for one side.

The Society of Professional Journalists has a code of ethics that journalists are expected to follow. While the list is quite extensive, the first code on the list reads “ test the accuracy of information from all sources and exercise care to avoid inadvertent error. Deliberate distortion is never permissible” (SPJ, 2012). What this means is that a journalist is expected to get the facts of a story before releasing it to the public and that those same facts should be verified prior to release.

A journalist also may not release a story of facts while enhancing those facts with their own personal opinion, unless it is clear the opinion is that of the journalist based upon the facts, and not changing the facts to suit the journalist’s own ideas and releasing those as the truth. The SPJ Code of Ethics is voluntarily embraced by thousands of journalists, regardless of

place or platform, and is widely used in newsrooms and classrooms as a guide for ethical behavior. The code is intended not as a set of “ rules” but as a resource for ethical decision-making.

It is not — nor can it be under the First Amendment — legally enforceable” (SPJ, 2012). Reporters and their news organizations are frequently accused of exploiting people who are vulnerable, or in the grip of personal tragedy. This has been seen many times outside a courtroom where the journalists, reporters and cameramen are standing by in large clusters, ready to pounce on anyone and everyone involved in a particular case, shouting questions and speculations in the hopes of some juicy tidbit they can send to their editor just in time for the next broadcast.

While most law enforcement officials and lawyers are well used to these tactics and can ignore or bypass the questions, the unsuspecting victim in the wake of a community or personal disaster may not be able to think clearly and could say something to a reporter that is not proven fact. Still, the reporter takes this as a “ first-hand” account and is likely to send the information out. One of the most dangerous phrases a reporter can utter is the phrase “ off the record. One thing I was always told in training to deal with the media; never agree to anything “ off the record. Once you say it, even if the camera is off, it is on the record. . The best advice here would be, if you don’t want the information to be made public, don’t verbalize it. The media also has a tendency to take the best sound bites that do not tell the whole story, leaving the public to make up their own minds as to the actual facts of the issue being reported. This raises the question: is it the role of journalists to give people what they want, or should journalists make the

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effort to give people the information that they actually need to know? How much information is too much? Research Results

We know from historical records, and then first-hand accounts from victims, that what was reported by the media was not always the entire story. News reporters, journalists, writers and anyone else who may report the news do not always report everything. They use their own interests, experiences and ideas to write or speak on a story with the possibility that what a viewer/reader may consider important is not necessarily the same thing the reporter will consider important. The public relies on information and when sent or received, are going to assume that information is accurate.

Once stated in the news, it is very difficult to get people to change their minds when a correction is later sent unless incontrovertible proof is shown that the initial information was incorrect. During the response to Deepwater Horizon, many reports were received about the severity of oiling in different locations. Due to the massive response efforts to mitigate the event in the earlier days of the response, initial response actions following these reports, such as boom deployment, were done with only minor verification of the information received.

Once more on-scene responders were available to do a more thorough assessment, it was found that several reports were either overinflated in the severity or were completely inaccurate. It was found that people in the general public who had interests in the oil spill area would send in these false reports in an effort to gain protective measures (MSTC J. Robbins,

personal communication, March 7, 2011). It is dangerous and irresponsible for the wrong information to be passed just as much as no information.

The media has an enormous amount of newsworthy stories to choose from in a disaster situation. Since media is a business that operates through attention and funding from their audience, they are required to sift through stories and choose which ones they believe will catch the attention of the largest audience. Since time is money in the media business, the media often only takes a snapshot of the overall story, trying to get as much quality information as possible into smaller chunks of broadcast.

If the audience is not interested in the stories that are published and/or broadcasted, then the media source is forced to re-evaluate the information and possibly revise the story to make it more appealing to the intended audience. Our own experiences show that dramatic news is the news that gets the attention of the audience. It seems that bad news or news about an accident or horrific crime or even better, catching an official out in some lie or crime, can rivet an audience for days and even weeks as events unfold.

This puts considerable pressure on media agencies to find the most “dramatic” news at the fastest rate possible to get the initial story and coverage. If the real information is not dramatic enough to keep the attention of viewers/readers, it is possible that the media ends up skipping fact checks and basing their report on unreliable or “read between the lines” type information; which is done in order to save time in correcting or modifying the content of the information going out.

In a most recent event, the Trayvon Martin shooting, NBC News did some word editing on the 911 tape recorded on the night of the shooting. The resulting edited “ recording” that was sent out on the wire, and later relayed by several other stations, was not a correct representation of what was actually on the tape but was a careful chop and reintegration of a few sentences to make what was on the tape seem like more damaging evidence of an alleged racial angle to the shooting, thus increasing the dramatic effect (Huff Post, 2012).

Another example of media irresponsibility was the broadcast made from CNN on the anniversary of 9/11 in 2009, regarding alleged shots fired at a vessel by the US Coast Guard, during a routine training exercise on the Potomac River (Simpson, 2009). CNN was listening to radio traffic, picked up a transmission indicating a verbally stated indication of live fire, “ Bang, Bang” and the information that “ 10 rounds were expended”, but missed the standard warning “ this is an exercise” at the start of the transmission.

CNN contacted the Coast Guard National Command Center (NCC) at Coast Guard Headquarters for verification, but, the response given was that no reports had been received and that the Office of Public Affairs and the Coast Guard NCC was gathering information. Rather than waiting for confirmation, CNN broadcast the “ breaking news. ” Within an hour, all major media outlets broadcast the same misinformation which had many in the public worrying about a possible attack. (PA1 L. Roberts, personal communication, March 3, 2011).