

Some names have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals discussed.

Ethical Journalism in an Era of Activism

For as long as I can remember, I have always had a fascination with journalism. From a young age, I would turn on the morning news as if it were a ritual and awe at the investigative stories being aired. Years later, I am now the executive producer of a university news program, and I am doing what I love. I have control over the content we create and choose to air on our live broadcast television program. Many individuals contact me with leads on situations and events that need to be investigated. Most recently, I was given the information of a young woman, Melanie, who was sexually harassed at her university and had her Title IX case mishandled. I was drawn to the story and contacted her immediately.

Melanie agreed to meet with me to discuss her story. She confided in me with tears in her eyes as she explained, “every day I have to go to class and face the man that sexually harassed me, yet my university refuses to do anything to help me. They are more concerned about their image over my safety.” She urged me to use my television platform to spread awareness about this situation, ultimately making her voice heard. She disclosed to me that she had secretly recorded her Title IX hearing and other interactions with members of the university administration who admitted off-the-record that her case was, in fact, mishandled. She insisted I utilize these sound bites in my reporting. Although I knew utilizing this “evidence” in my reporting was most likely unethical, the documentation she presented to me was hard to ignore.

I spent nearly four hours in a coffee shop with Melanie as she explained every intricate detail of this situation to me. I listened, empathized, and even cried with her as I felt myself

becoming enraged by the way in which her institution processed and mishandled her case. As a survivor of sexual assault, I was fully aware that this story would be hard to remain disconnected from before I even spoke to Melanie. When discussing her situation, it was clear I was becoming intertwined with her story and I began to project myself in it. When it comes to issues like these, I usually find myself becoming overly invested. I often utilize my personal social media platforms for activism, I attending events/protests, spend time educating myself, and speak out when I feel as though it is most necessary. Hearing Melanie's story, I immediately felt drawn to pursue it and give her a voice to speak out against her harasser and the institution that has wronged her. I felt a sense of obligation to give a voice to the voiceless.

I left this meeting feeling overwhelmed yet driven to expose the university for the way in which they mishandled this Title IX case. I could already hear the lead-in in my mind that I would soon write for the story: "university mishandles sexual harassment complaint, and the victim has a sound bite to prove it!" I was determined to uncover the mishandling of this case and take down those responsible.

Days later, I pitched this story to my associate producers. "This could be epic for our viewership," One of the exclaimed. "We could tease this story on our social media and it would spark a huge buzz. Oh, this is going to be great. This institution has no idea what is coming for them... and I can't wait to view our analytics once this story airs!" Hearing this, I felt as though I had just been punched in the stomach. I viewed this story as one that needed to be told because it was important. Unfortunately, the men I work with only viewed it as a story with "shock factor" that would generate views. They saw the victim as nothing more than an avenue to clickbait. In an era of "clickbait journalism," the need for professional journalism is crucial.

These individuals listening to my pitch completely missed the point and lost sight of their own journalistic values in the midst. It was in this moment I realized that I had already become overly invested in this story. Instead of investigating this story with the same journalistic integrity as other stories I was working on, I was focused on only one angle of the story and began to think as an activist. I was preoccupied with the constant thought of how I could impact viewers' opinions on this issue. This feeling of journalism bleeding into activism is not exclusive to my personal experience.

We are living in a polarized era in which the line is blurred between activism and journalism. Activism is campaigning to spark a political or social change. It always has an end goal, aims to convey a specific message with a desired outcome, and does not act in accordance to a set of ethical standards. Activists often aim to give a voice to the oppressed, and they will do so by any means necessary. Additionally, an activist often influences a debate according to their set agenda, rather than providing facts that create a well-informed debate. On the other hand, journalism is the act of gathering information and presenting all available facts in an unbiased manner for public consumption while allowing viewers to form their own opinions. Journalists must interpret and contextualize nuances within issues without manipulating any of the content to fit an agenda. Unlike activism which has an end goal, journalism should be means-driven and produce highly researched claims while simultaneously adhering to a set of ethical standards. Ethical Journalism is crucial to public knowledge and our democracy as a whole; which is centered around Truth, after all. Journalists are committed to objectivity and impartiality in their reporting, which often naturally sheds light on injustices throughout society. Bok's philosophy explains that we are unable to ever be

one-hundred-percent factual. Regardless, it is something we should all aspire. Informing rather than aiming to create an opinion or an emotional response is the heart of journalism. So, *is it ethical for a journalist to use their platform for activism?*

The answer to this complicated and heated debate is not simple. Journalists are told they must be objective and impartial first and foremost. Traditional journalists abide by these core pillars of journalism and are often able to separate themselves from the stories they are telling. A journalist is told to witness events unfolding from a sideline perspective, which means no interference whatsoever. When taking this position, one must also ensure they are viewing from a safe distance in order to ensure neutrality. If a journalist is unable to observe from an appropriate distance, they are often told they are too close to a story and are asked to step away from the story due to their objectivity already being compromised.

At the same time, many journalists struggle to be objective when reporting events or issues of injustices. Many struggle to find objectivity in such stories due to feeling as though providing an alternative source of information to an injustice would lead to moral ambiguity. Journalist Christiane Amanpour reported on the war in Bosnia which contained horrific acts of genocide plaguing the nation. Amanpour told Huffington Post that in this situation she believed that her moral obligation was to report in a manner that would create change leading to the ceasing of these acts of violence, rather than abiding to her journalistic obligation of objectivity. She felt as though the pillar of objectivity was far outweighed by the priority to shed light on what was taking place. To give a voice to those committing acts of genocide was viewed by her as morally unacceptable. In this case, her reporting led to the world intervening in the horrific acts taking place in Bosnia. Amanpour argues that “when there is a clear aggressor we must not put them

on the same level or playing field [in our reporting].” She exemplifies examining all moral obligations and acting in accordance to morality, rather than one’s ethical standards as a journalist.

This concept can be seen through Mill’s Act Utilitarianism which explains that moral virtue is created when an act results in an outcome that leads to the greatest good for the greatest whole. Instead of placing objectivity at the forefront in reporting by default, based on Mill’s Act Utilitarianism, some journalists determine how objectivity should be applied to a story after it is decided whom moral duty is owed. Anampour’s reporting is compelling and stresses the notion that reporting on Bosnia in a manner that would create change was of the utmost importance. Nonetheless, her reporting falls along the lines of activism rather than journalism. Activism involves fighting for a specific side of an argument that the individual deems morally justified. Many hold this journalist in high esteem for the change she created, while others hold firm to their beliefs that this is never an acceptable journalistic practice.

So, is it ethical for a journalist to use their platform for activism? My answer to this ethical dilemma is no. It is never ethical for a journalist to use their platform for activism, however, I believe it may be necessary in some cases. In doing so, it should be understood that the individual is abandoning their ethical obligations as a journalist to assume the role as an activist. The question of moral equivalence in Anampour reporting on genocide is not exclusive to this topic. Many journalists face this same ambiguity in cases of, for example, white supremacy, women’s rights, etc. In these examples, it can be difficult, or even impossible for some to morally justify giving a voice to counter arguments that praise white supremacy and condemn women’s rights.

Rawl's Veil of Ignorance explains that we should place all parties behind a veil and act in a manner that is benefitting to the weakest party. Generally, four parties can be assumed to be behind the veil in news reporting: the journalist, news outlet, public, and the subject(s) being reported on. In identifying all parties present, the weakest party can then be identified in order to determine whom should be the benefitting party. Traditional journalists will argue that the weakest party is always the public, thus, journalists should always prioritize objectivity and impartiality. For journalists like Christiane Amanpour, the weakest party were the individuals being killed in the horrific acts of genocide, which resulted in her placing the utmost importance on reporting in a manner that would ultimately benefit them and create change.

Although it may be necessary for journalists to extend moral duty to the weakest party, it is crucial that they do this in the most appropriate manner possible, since after all, they are still in the role of a journalist. Aristotle deems moral virtue as the appropriate location between two extremes: the defect and excess. The defect in this ethical dilemma of journalism versus activism may be choosing to avoid reporting on a story containing questions of moral equivocation all together. The excess would be reporting in a highly biased manner in an attempt to produce a specific end-result in the reader/viewer. By Aristotle's philosophy, it may be most appropriate to report on a story that has moral equivocation in a manner that does not aim to influence the opinion of the viewer while still highlighting an injustice the journalist deems morally unacceptable.

In Elie Wiesel's Nobel Peace Prize acceptance speech, he states,

"We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim.

Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must

interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the center of the universe.”

This quote leads me to believe that activism is crucial to sparking political and social change, necessary to a democracy, and is often the sole reason change is created. Regardless, it must not be mistaken for journalism. In some cases, using one’s journalistic platform as a means to spark change may be the only way to bring about it, but they must understand that this is activism, not journalism. Not only is it unethical, but it is also dangerous to call activism journalism. In the same way, it can be dangerous for a journalist to act in the role of an activist. It is crucial that every journalist ask themselves what is more important; journalism or activism? This is the harsh question I battled internally when trying to determine how I would proceed with Melanie’s story. I was overly invested and knew I was simply abusing my platform in an attempt to advocate for this individual while overlooking crucial pieces of information in order to create an objective piece. I contacted numerous individuals involved with this case from the institution asking them to provide a statement on their perspective of what happened. Each individual I contacted declined to provide a statement. The only information I had access to was Melanie’s side of the story. I had no counter arguments nor additional information to create an equally informed story. In proceeding with this story, I knew I would be able to highlight Melanie’s side of the story in a manner that would impact viewers’ opinions on her case and the institution. This is when I realized that I was assuming the role of an activist rather than remaining committed to my ethical obligations as a journalist. As the Executive Producer, I had authority to run this story

regardless of any bias or poor journalistic reporting present. I was fully aware of the impact running this story would have on the university community as well as our integrity as journalists and news outlet at large. That is why I made the soul crushing decision to cut the story.

In this situation, I so badly wanted to give a voice to someone I believed deserved justice that I was willing to compromise all of the ethics I was committed to as a journalist. I have made it clear to the journalists working on this television show that submitting stories that lack objectivity would not be tolerated. We are living in an era in which the integrity of journalists and their reporting is constantly being scrutinized and undermined by the public and other high ranking officials. It is my ethical standard and obligation to ensure that we act and report in a manner that will gain the trust of our viewership. In every story we report on, it is crucial that we allow as many voices as possible to be heard. In addition, the voice of a journalist acting as activist should never be present. With Melanie's story, I was only attempting to give a platform to one voice while inserting my own activist voice in determining how the story could be made compelling in order to create a specific end-result in the viewer. I believe Melanie's voice needs to be heard and activists should fight on behalf of the many individuals in her same position. It is of the utmost importance that this is done in an appropriate setting, not on a television news program that is ethically committed to providing objective and impartial information to the public. I cannot help but wonder what the result might have been if I chose to run this story and remained committed to my ethics as a journalist. Although I stand by my statement that an ethical journalist can not also be an activist, journalism can be a form of activism. Ronan Farrow exemplifies this idea in the ways in which he reported and uncovered the numerous accounts of sexual harassment committed by Harvey Weinstein. Similarly to my situation with Melanie, it

would have been easy for Farrow to report in a manner that only presented one side of the situation while attempting to persuade viewers' opinions, ultimately undermining the integrity of his reporting.

Ronan Farrow marks the gold standard of ethical journalism. His investigating was not rushed as he relentlessly pursues this case over the span of years. During this time, media outlets who aimed at protecting Weinstein's image, took every effort to silence Farrow through tactics of intimidation, direct threats, and much worse. Nonetheless, Farrow remained committed to his journalism. Through his pursuit to uncover the crimes committed by Weinstein and commitment to his ethical journalist standards, he was successful in telling a story that included thoroughly researched claims, numerous sources, and naturally sparked change. This piece of ethical journalism naturally became a source utilized by numerous activists to enact change.

The question of where journalism ends and activism begins is one that is sure to stay in the minds of many journalists. Although some may deem it morally necessary to abandon their obligation to journalistic reporting and assume the role of an activist, I believe true change occurs when we stay committed to the ethics of journalism. In doing so, high quality ethical reporting can, and will, naturally become a source of activism. In the case of Melanie, if I would have adhered to my journalistic standards and took the necessary steps to create a thoroughly investigated story, it could have enacted real change. Unfortunately, I allowed myself to join in on the game, rather than viewing it from the sideline. I became blinded by my own agenda, and the lines that were blurred were unable to be made distinct again.

Due to our rapidly evolving technology in which we have access to in any given moment, anyone can be an activist. It only takes one minute, 280 characters, and a one-sided argument

to assume this position. Conducting a full-fledged investigation and spending countless hours constructing a story is what takes real work, dedication, and grit. It is those journalists that remain committed to their reporting and ethical standards that have the biggest impact on society and create the most impactful changes.