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Critical and Ethical Issues in Journalism

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In the early hours of November 13th, 2022, 4 students at the University of Idaho, Kaylee Goncalves, Xana Kernodle, Madison Mogen and Ethan Chapin, were mysteriously stabbed to death in their beds. This case shook the world and to this day has millions in a choke hold. But this choke hold has proved detrimental in many ways, raising many unethical journalistic concerns. Conspiracy theories flooded social media, damaging many innocent people with unsubstantiated accusations and the extensive releasing of non verified information transformed this case into TV entertainment rather than ethical journalism. This case has proved evident that there needs to be more responsible journalism especially when dealing with such a high profile and sensitive situation. I argue that in order to protect the people within the case, social media content creators would have had to be aligned with the same standard as professional journalists are held to.

Who killed the four students? What was their motive? Were the other roommates involved? These questions stormed the internet, with thousands of TikTok content creators posting in depth conspiracy theories, tugging at far reaching strings to grab attention. Ashley Guillard, a tarot card reader from texas posted an extensive TikTok series in which she claimed in the videos that Idaho professor Rebecca Scofield “ordered the execution of the four students.” Guillard’s videos attracted millions of viewers, leading to Scofield filing for defamation.

According to the lawsuit, through threats from online comments she “fears that she or her family will be the target of physical violence.” The lawsuit continues to say that Scofield has “suffered extreme emotional distress” based on her name being inaccurately associated with the murder of the students, establishing a solid foundation for a defamation case. TikTok user *@spilltheteawithmira*, a popular account for news and gossip posted a video titled, “the 2 surviving roommates planned and plotted it!” a video that received a lot of attention yet was very harmful to the survivors. The Daily Mail posted a video claiming that the parents of the current suspect in custody, Bryan Kohberger, had “suspicions of his involvement” and went on to say his father was “on edge” after the killings, statements that could be very harmful to the senior Kohberger. In a video posted by the Moscow Police, Capt. Roger Lanier said in relation to the spread of misinformation in this case, “it just revictimized folks who have already suffered this terrible trauma.” Through these examples of harmful coverage we can see just how fast conspiring and hasty journalism can manifest into hurtful action. If there were more stern guidelines, many innocent individuals could have been spared scrutiny and backlash.

Guidelines such as the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics, a code of four principles that are declared as the “foundation of ethical journalism.” Though all four principles are important to keep in mind with regards to the reporting of the Idaho murders, the first two hold key prevalence; Seek Truth and Report it, and Minimize Harm. The code states that journalists should verify their information before releasing it, but also to gather information “throughout the life of a news story.” Professional journalists and credible news outlets did uphold these principles fairly well in their coverage of the murders, consistently posting updates and making sure to clarify fact versus rumor amidst frenzies of speculation. After the release of

the original 911 phone call audio and text message receipts between the two surviving roommates, CNN posted an article detailing the “hours of terror” inside the house. Using the phone activity and court documents, CNN was able to accurately lay out a timeline of what went down and where everyone was situated in the house during the murders. Following the code of ethics, CNN was able to report while leaving out any speculation, where it would have been easy for social media sleuths to use that opportunity to launch into any discrepancies within the text messages and further question the roommates' reasoning behind waiting so long to phone the police. This demonstration of professionalism, reporting accurately on the truth and attributing, also minimized harm to those mentioned in the article. By using verified information and avoiding “pandering to lurid curiosity,” no one was harmed in the publishing of the article while still keeping people informed.

The Idaho murders ongoing case has shown an excellent spectrum of examples of what ethical journalism looks like and what unethical journalism looks like. It demonstrates how crucial it is to uphold ethical values when involved in journalism and has exemplified what happens when rumors are allowed to be taken so far that they are presumed truths. Social media reporting played a huge role in this case. Moving forward, it is crucial to adhere to ethical journalism, as stated in the Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics; the society recommends the code be followed “by all people in the media.”

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