

EDITORIAL

Responsibility in the media

by Karen Burgess

Responsibility in the media is an issue brought to the forefront of popular discussion recently by the doctoring of collision test footage of GMC trucks by an NBC news team, and by the coverage of controversial issues such as the Kennedy rape trials. Now, more than ever, society and the media are both taking a closer look at what can and cannot be expected and tolerated by journalist in pursuit of a story.

At *the Brunswickan*, these same ethical issues, though thankfully on a much smaller scale, are addressed repeatedly with the paper's weekly publication. Whether or not to cover student suicides, professors' legal infractions, harassment and discrimination on campus and the multitudes of other sensitive issues involved in this university's daily functioning is not the most momentous of the problems faced by student journalists. Once the decision to cover a story has been made, the task of determining whether or not to use names, quote unnamed sources, or to continue with a story after meeting with resistance from those involved must be dealt with.

Granted, student journalists have more leeway in the production of stories than do professional journalists as they join student papers in the hopes of learning about journalism, not with the pretense of knowing all there is to know; however, professional journalists have the benefit of knowing what ground they may hold in the face of difficulties. In speaking with students taking professional journalism courses, I was surprised to learn that the first lesson they

had been taught was that the concept of "off the record" does not exist in professional journalism; in other words, once a reporter has identified her or himself as a journalist, all comments made by the interviewee are considered acceptable for printing. Obviously, this poses no substantial ethical problem because journalism is, undeniably, a tough business. If you tell an interviewee that information they tell you will be taken in confidence and then print it, you will not be trusted, and therefore will not be an asset to your employer. In practice, it is easier to specify to the interviewee, if they attempt to make comments off the record, that they must practice discretion in the comments they make. Increasingly important in the Journalist/interviewee relationship then is the interviewee's responsibility to only voice opinions or facts which he or she intends for public consumption. The press is the voice of the people it represents, and has the responsibility to fully disclose any relevant information it possesses to those people.

Obviously, intentional misrepresentation of the facts is inexcusable, but it is also unacceptable to represent unbalanced reports on an issue. Often, a journalist can attempt to ensure fairness in an article by contacting members from opposing sides of an issue, and then attempt to get the opinion of an objective, but indirectly related party. In the case of student journalists, often this unrelated opinion could be that of an "average" student. Unfortunately, if the third party comes down conclusively on one side of the other, the party

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with the minority voice may feel unfairly persecuted. This, unfortunately is the risk one takes when speaking with someone from the press. No where is it written that those interviewed must be portrayed favorably, only fairly.

Is it possible to have news reporting completely free of any angles or emphasis? No. As journalists, it is only possible to continue functioning within standards which ensure that both sides of the story are told. Uncooperative or evasive interviewees and "no comments" serve to bias an account more than any responsible journalist's reporting by ensuring that one side of the story cannot be told.

Journalists naturally depend on the public for their livelihoods, and in return, the public has the right to expect that the institutions set up to watchdog societal problems will be responsible, and not overly sensational or alarmist in their reporting. However, responsibility in that sense also implies the need to convey negative facts as well as positive ones. There is obvious harm in journalists' becoming ambulance-chasers, or creating mountains out of molehills, but ignorance of problems has proven itself to be equally, if not more, detrimental to society.



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