

CASES

CASE 8-A

KILLING A JOURNALIST ON-AIR: A MEANS/ENDS TEST

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On Aug. 26, 2015, broadcast journalist Allison Parker and cameraman Adam Ward of Roanoke (VA) CBS affiliate WDBJ were shot while filming a live television interview with Roanoke Chamber of Commerce Executive Director Vicki Gardner. In an instant, Parker and Ward were dead, shot by a disgruntled former employee of the station who caught the event on his cellphone as he perpetrated it.

The shooter was Vester Lee Flanagan, a former reporter at the station. He had been fired for “disruptive behavior” after working at the television station for a year. On a personal video Flanagan made of the shooting, he approaches the live interview holding a handgun and his phone. He shows himself walking up behind Ward. On the video, he raises his gun and unloads his clip on the three. He then went home and posted the video to Facebook. He would later shoot himself during a car chase with police and die in a local hospital.

After posting the video shot from his perspective, Flanagan faxed a document to the news station using his on-air name “Bryce Williams.” In it, he expresses his growing anger because of the racial and sexual discrimination he claimed to have endured at WDBJ. He also included his admiration for other killers who have gone on killing sprees, including the shooters from Columbine High School. On the day the news station had fired Flanagan, police had escorted him out of the building. After investigating the killings, police concluded that Flanagan had been planning this attack for two years.

Soon, other media had to decide how to handle the video—both the video that aired live on WDBJ and the video posted by Flanagan. CNN’s coverage is typical of how many outlets handled the delicate footage. At the top of their online news story was the live broadcast with a label at the beginning warning people of the graphic content. In the video, everything is normal until gunshots are heard. Parker stumbles backward as she screams for her life. The camera falls to the ground as Ward is shot in the back. More shots are heard on the audio as the camera lies on the ground until the broadcast cut back to the station.

CNN chose not to post the personal video made by Flanagan. A search on the internet shows the video from the shooter's point of view available on several websites. This video is much more graphic and shows the gun in the frame as Flanagan shoots the journalist and cameraman.

Critics of the story expressed concern that the video was posted. They felt the video was not needed to successfully tell the story. The video shows a woman screaming as her life comes to an end. Some critics posted that this video goes beyond a graphic image and becomes a form of voyeurism.

Others countered that hearing and seeing this woman at the end of her life, and seeing the camera fall to the ground, is much more powerful and captures the horror more than any story or still photo could. They feel that the warning graphic at the beginning of the video is enough to warn anyone who does not want to watch it. Still others say the video by Flanagan was significant enough to the story that it should have been put in the coverage too.

Micro Issues

1. Does the decision of CNN to post the video matter because it was already broadcast live when it happened and quickly became available online?
2. Did the use of a warning graphic before the video starts make a difference?

Midrange Issues

1. Did the end of telling a tragic story justify the means of showing the live video as the journalist gets shot?
2. Does the public have a need to see graphic content that happens in the world they live in or should they be sheltered from it? What ethical reasoning supports your view?
3. Parker and Ward were the seventh and eighth US journalists killed while doing their jobs since 1992, according to statistics from the Newseum. In light of this, should incidents such as this make stations rethink how many live shots they do and how they handle their reporters in the field?

Macro Issues

1. What do you see as the difference, if any, between the live video and the shooter's personal video? Do you air one? Both? Neither? Justify your decision.

2. Flanagan applauded previous mass murderers in his posting. Address the criticism that airing video such as this might possibly give motivation to others considering violent acts. If the news outlets show these graphic videos, are they giving the killers what they want?
3. About eight children are shot somewhere in the United States each day. Would your decision be different if the victim of a shooting captured on video was a juvenile? What are the ethically relevant distinctions and the philosophical theory that support your decision?

CASE 8-B

REMEMBER MY FAME: DIGITAL NECROMANCY AND THE IMMORTAL CELEBRITY

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In 2013, Universal Pictures put the production of its film *Furious 7* on hold after Paul Walker, one of the film's stars, died. Two years later, the movie was released to solid reviews while grossing more than \$1 billion worldwide. To complete Walker's scenes, Universal asked Walker's brothers to fill in the role, using computer-generated imagery (CGI) to fuse Walker's facial image over body doubles. Walker's brothers provided voiceover for the character.

This concept actually wasn't new. Universal began using celebrity images posthumously in 1966 when the corporation sold merchandise depicting deceased actor Bela Lugosi in his portrayal of Count Dracula (Petty and D'Rozario 2009). In the 1990s, Coca-Cola used a variety of dead celebrities such as Cary Grant and Groucho Marx to promote Diet Coke and dance onscreen with a living Paula Abdul. That commercial generated a Nova episode to explain how computers were used in the effort.

Digital necromancy is the term used to describe the use of a deceased celebrity's likeness in many kinds of mediated messages. Films such as *Furious 7* and the *Star Wars* "backstory" *Rogue One* successfully resurrected the images of deceased actors, in those cases Walker and Peter Cushing, respectively. In 2013, an ad for the whiskey brand Johnnie Walker Blue employed the image of Bruce Lee, more than 40 years after his death, to promote the product. Marilyn Monroe's image is widely used in ads.