



## Swipe Right to Expose: Journalism, Privacy, and Digital Information



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In a world where LGBTQ people still often lack full protection and equal rights, it can be a challenge for someone to be public about their sexuality. Some have taken to dating apps such as Grindr, Tinder, and Bumble, which allow for a more secure way for people to chat and potentially meet up outside of cyberspace. On such apps, one's dating profile can often be seen by anyone who is also using the app,

illustrating how these services blur the line between private and public information.

Nico Hines, a straight and married reporter for news site, *The Daily Beast*, decided to report on the usage of dating apps during the 2016 Rio Olympics in the Olympic Village. Relying upon the public and revealing nature of profiles—at least to potential dates—Hines made profiles on different dating apps and used them to interact with a number of athletes. Most of his interactions were through the Grindr app which is a dating app for gay men. This app works through geotagging so that people can match up with others who are geographically near them. Profiles include information such as height, ethnicity, and age which can often be used to identify a person even if a full name isn't given. He eventually wrote up his experiences in the article "The Other Olympic Sport in Rio: Swiping."

To preserve the anonymity of the individuals with whom he was interacting, Hines did not use specific athletes' names in his story. He did reveal details about those seeking dates including their physical features, the sport they were competing in, and their home country. Readers and critics found that it was relatively easy to identify which athletes he was talking about using the information he provided. Since many of these athletes were not openly identified as LGBTQ, critics argued that he was "potentially outing" many of the athletes by describing them in the course of his story. Amplifying this concern was the fact that in some of the home countries of men who were potentially outed, it was dangerous or illegal to be openly gay.

In his defense, some pointed out that Hines didn't intend to out or harm specific vulnerable individuals in the course of his story about the social lives of Olympic Athletes. His published account didn't include the names of any male athletes he interacted with on Grindr, and he only named some of the straight women who he found on the Tinder app. *The Daily Beast's*



Editor-in-chief, John Avalon, stated that Hines didn't mean to focus mainly on the Grindr app but since he "had many more responses on Grindr than apps that cater mostly to straight people," Hines decided to write about that app. When Hines interacted with the athletes on the various dating apps, he didn't lie about who he was and, as Avalon noted, Hines "immediately admitted that he was a journalist whenever he was asked who he was."

The controversy eventually consumed Hines' published story. After the wave of criticism crested, *The Daily Beast* first removed names and descriptions of the athletes in the article. But by the end of the day, the news site had completely removed the article with Avalon replacing it with an editor's note that concluded: "Our initial reaction was that the entire removal of the piece was not necessary. We were wrong. We're sorry." Regardless of the decisions reached by this news site, difficult questions remain about what kinds of stories—and methods—are ethically allowed in the brave new world of digital journalism.

### **Discussion Questions:**

1. What are the ethical values or interests at stake in the debate over the story authored by Nico Hines?
2. Hines tried to preserve the anonymity of those he was writing about. How could he have done more for the subjects of his story, while still doing justice to the story he wanted to report on?
3. There are strong reasons why journalists should ethically and legally be allowed to use publicly-available information in their stories. Is the information shared through dating apps public information?
4. How does Hines' use of dating profile information differ, if at all, from long-standing practices of investigative or undercover journalism?

### **Further Information:**

Frank Pallotta & Rob McLean, "Daily Beast removes Olympics Grindr article after backlash." *CNN*, August 12, 2016. Available at: <http://money.cnn.com/2016/08/12/media/daily-beast-olympics-article-removal/index.html>

John Avalon, "A Note from the Editors." *The Daily Beast*, August 11, 2016. Available at: <https://www.thedailybeast.com/a-note-from-the-editors>

Curtis M. Wong, "Straight Writer Blasted For 'Outing' Olympians In Daily Beast Piece." *Huffington Post*, August 11, 2016. Available at: [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/daily-beast-grindr-article\\_us\\_57aca088e4b0db3be07d6581](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/daily-beast-grindr-article_us_57aca088e4b0db3be07d6581)



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