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The University of Texas at Austin
Center for Media Engagement
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SPRINTING TOWARDS PUBLICATION
THE ETHICS OF RACING FOR BREAKING NEWS

Now that social media sites like Twitter allow news to spread like wildfire, journalists have been feeling more pressure than ever to get their stories published in accordance with stricter deadlines in an effort to compete against other media organizations. However, many wonder whether this competitive race to be the first outlet to break a story is compatible with other journalistic principles, in particular, the need to be accurate. Media critic Jack Shafer writes that "News stories, especially the early reports of breaking news events, are very likely to be inaccurate" (Sullivan, 2012). While mistakes will always happen to some extent, with the added pressure of trying to be correct as well as the fastest, even the most reliable journalists and institutions are likely to slip up more often.
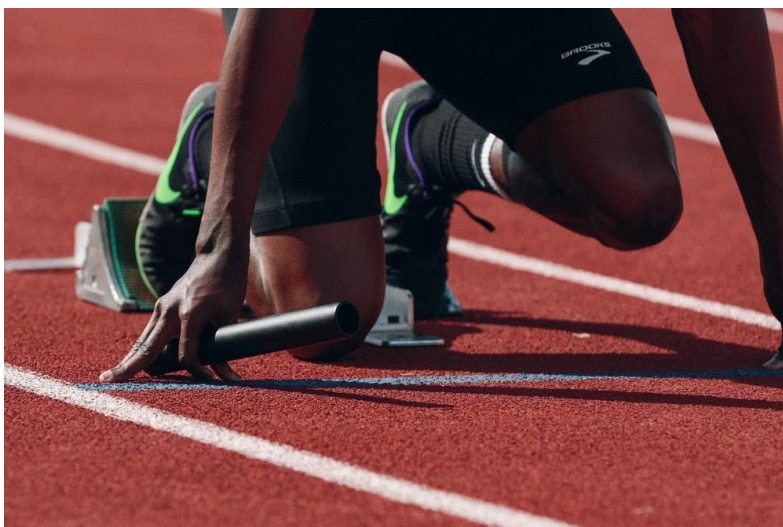
For example, in 2012 after the Sandy Hook massacre in Newton, Connecticut, *New York Times* reader Gail G. Abrams wrote to the newsroom and told Margaret Sullivan, the Public Editor at the time, that one of her daughter's god-children was a victim in the shooting (Sullivan, 2012). In her correspondence, Abrams expressed disappointment with the *Times'* fixation on getting the story out first before making sure all of the information was accurate, writing:

> My daughter's godchild was one of the 6-year-olds murdered in Connecticut on Friday. We believed that *The New York Times* was more interested in getting it right than in getting it first. We don't believe that anymore (Sullivan, 2012).

Her comment stems from a slew of mistakes the publication made regarding the story, including naming the wrong gunman, how the gunman entered the school, and the gunman's connections to staff at the school (Sullivan, 2012). These types of mistakes could have been prevented had the necessary steps been taken to verify the information in the story. Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel's book *The Elements of Journalism* outlines "the essential principles and practices of journalism," one of which states that journalism's "essence is a discipline of verification" (Kovach and Rosenstiel, 2021). Nowhere does it mention journalists must be the fastest or strive to be first to break a story.

However, errors in a breaking news story aren't always the fault of the journalist. For example, the author of the article critiqued by Abrams said that many of the mistakes made were attributable to "wrong information from the police" rather than carelessness of the news staff (Sullivan, 2012). Indeed, law enforcement has a

history of withholding information from journalists as well as giving information that is incomplete, misleading, or presented for strategic reasons" in an attempt to keep public information from interfering with investigation proceedings (Kilgo, 2021). Moreover, modern journalism tends to focus more on "publishing information and confirming it along the way" (Tenore, 2011). American author and journalist Kathryn Schulz explains that it is "an intrinsic part of the field" that journalists "do the best [they] can with limited time, put it out there, and go back and adjust" (Tenore, 2011). Schulz also mentions that "with the accelerated pace of journalism, there's this new culture whereby it's totally fine to put half-baked ideas up there" (Tenore, 2011).

With new modern-day journalism accelerating deadlines but the processes of verification remaining slow, it is easy to see where journalists can make mistakes with breaking stories. However, this does not excuse them. Scott Maier, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Oregon's School of Journalism and Communication, argues that "The media needs better mechanisms to make it easier to report errors, large and small" (Tenore, 2011). In this sense, the journalism industry has an opportunity to compete against social media platforms like Twitter not by trying to be faster, but by being more accurate. Failing to do so can result in publications losing readers, as mentioned earlier with *The New York Times*, or accidentally spreading misinformation. In the end, speed and accuracy are both important factors in retaining public trust with journalistic institutions, but the balancing act required to uphold both is significantly more complicated than it might appear.

Discussion Questions:

1. What ethical values conflict in journalists' desire to be the first to break a story?
2. As a consumer of news, would you prefer journalists get information out as quickly or as accurately as possible? Why?
3. What creative solutions might be possible for news staff to better balance their speed and accuracy?
4. Aside from issues of accuracy, what other consequences might occur when journalists race to publish a story first? Aside from issues of working with whatever incomplete information may be available from sources at the time of reporting, what other causes might pressure journalists to publish the fastest?

Further Information:

Kilgo, Danielle K. (2021 April 19). "When It Comes to Police Sources, Journalists Do Not Always Display Appropriate Skepticism." *The Wire*. Available at: https://thewire.in/media/police-sources-journalist-appropriate-skepticism-adam-toledo

Kovach, Bill, and Tom Rosenstiel. *The Elements of Journalism*. New York, NY: Crown, 2021.
Sullivan, Margaret. (2012, December 22). "Getting It First or Getting It Right?" *The New York Times.* Available at: https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/23/public-editor/getting-it-first-or-getting-it-right.html

Tenore, Mallary Jean. (2011, March 4). "Why Journalists Make Mistakes & What We Can Do about Them." *The Poynter Institute*. Available at: https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2010/why-journalists-make-mistakes-what-we-can-do-about-them/

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