

Opinions

Consequences of interference

Questioning the heart of journalistic altruism

A journalist covering a story about an insane asylum witnesses a male patient escape. Should he stop him? A fundamental rule of journalism prohibits interference.

Journalists are taught to keep a separation from sources, to not befriend them or become emotionally attached to those they cover. This constitutes a conflict of interest. Physically intervening in a story is also strictly off-limits.

When Anderson Cooper came to visit Elon last year, no one could predict he would be traveling to Haiti in 2010 to cover a devastating earthquake, reporting in the throes of looting and dangerous riots.

During a video shooting for CNN on Jan. 18, a looting began in the streets, and one boy was hit by a concrete block and thrown off the roof. Cooper dropped his video camera and rushed to pull the boy away from the chaos. Away from the looting and violence, Cooper and medical personnel laid the boy down to stop the blood flow.

Response to Cooper's act has been mixed. Some call his actions heroic, while others claim he disregarded journalistic principles.

David Douglas, Elon alumna ('05) and television reporter in Wisconsin,

cites the number one rule in television reporting: "You (the reporter) are not the story."

In 1993, photojournalist Kevin Carter snapped a photograph of a severely malnourished child in Sudan crawling to a nearby UN food camp. A vulture was watching nearby, waiting to eat him. After the photograph was taken, Carter moved on quickly to cover other stories and pictures in Sudan.

The picture won the Pulitzer Prize in 1994, and Carter committed suicide soon after winning the award. Carter had done a journalist's job. He had not interfered in the story, perhaps to the Sudanese boy's demise. It is not known what became of the boy.

Journalists are human, even though they are constantly held accountable for remaining objective and free of bias. Cooper's sense of justice and morality came into play in his situation. There comes a point in any job when a person's humanity is called upon. If it is for the good and well-being of another person, an action should not be reprimanded.

But, there is a fine line between altruism and acting to get higher ratings. Michael Skube, Elon Communications professor, said, "My impression is that CNN's Haiti coverage as a whole, even with Wolf Blitzer, has gone a little overboard in (the emotional aspect)."

Skube does not think that Cooper was in the wrong for wanting to help the hurt child. In fact, he expressed sympathies. "But, for God's sake, do it off the air,"

Skube said. "When it's part of the on-air coverage, the subject becomes Cooper's compassion more than the child's misfortune. AC360 bears witness. This is transparently disingenuous."

Television is first about ratings and second about journalism, Skube said.

"Cooper gets good ratings, and that is something CNN sorely needs these days. He gets them, in part, because he conveys the image of the on-air counselor at large," he said.

But insincerity in the name of ratings poses an incredible threat to the craft of broadcast journalism. It is the story that should provide the emotional pull, and news of the earthquake involves enough emotional quality on its own without the distracting qualities of Cooper's heroic actions.

Communications professor Janna Anderson describes Anderson Cooper as an international humanitarian first and a journalist second. Anderson encourages students to observe and report "unless there are lives in the balance," she said. "Journalists should not step in when others who are more capable can do the job of saving lives and making that difference."

In the case of human rights and extreme situations such as Cooper's, these essential journalistic rules can be broken a bit. The focus of a piece should never be solely on ratings, but if it is the case of saving a life or remaining objectively behind the camera, saving others trumps one's journalistic obligations.



Marlena Chertock
Columnist

EDITORIAL

Individual choices aid to halt sexual violence on campus

Every September, freshman college students begin to discover the personal decision-making processes involved with their social lives. But when issues arise within those areas, the consequences can be dire. Conflicts between the aforementioned aspects often result in sexual violence cases.

Smith Jackson's recent e-mail pertaining to the young woman assaulted on College Avenue raises a significant amount of alarm. While walking in the darkness alone that evening, she could have been abducted, raped or worse. Though it is common knowledge that this world is inhabited by innocent and sinister characters alike, it is devastating that private campuses have become settings where corrupt deeds take place.

There is a line between chance encounters with strangers in remote off-campus locations and the sexual violence that occurs in the context of social outings on campus. The latter often occurs when alcohol is present and in the possession of underaged drinkers.

In a study conducted in 2009 by the Journal of American College Health by four major universities, results indicated 20 percent of undergraduate women experience sexual assault in college.

Most of the assaults occurred after the women had consumed alcohol and could not give their consent.

Our generation — despite the

intrinsic value of messages sent by American media and the lack of alcohol education and tolerance within American culture — has proven time and time again that it can't handle the substance responsibly.

Though people who consume alcohol in moderation are completely capable of making decent decisions, there are those who are not cognizant of what moderation is. Situational evidence continues to prove that alcohol perpetuates the instance of danger involved in basic human interaction.

With an increased sense of self-control comes thorough, quality decision-making, neither of which are present in alcohol-saturated scenarios.

To attempt a solution to an issue, primary dialogue must be facilitated among those directly affected. It seems the first steps towards resolution are beginning to take form.

Sophomore Jonathan Conner is the founder of the Facebook group 'Sexual Violence on College Campuses' and has this to say about his motivation to engage the Elon community in public dialogue about the subject: "I feel as though this Facebook page was necessary because it's just like any problem in the U.S. today — people recognize it as a problem but do nothing to help solve it."

Connor capitalized on the popularity of Facebook to stimulate what he views as much-needed conversation.

"I felt as though sexual violence on college campuses was a problem that needed to be talked about ... especially within the community that it is affecting (i.e. college students)."

Sophomore Sophie Marie Nielsen-Kolding joined the group to include her viewpoints on the topic.

"I think that we need to do something to change people's opinions about drunken sex being acceptable. I think it's an issue that people are uncomfortable discussing, but it should be discussed more on campus, not just with the incoming freshmen."

Of decision-making while under the influence, she added, "If you wouldn't do it if you were sober, don't do it when you're drunk."

After posting a YouTube link of Asher Roth's "I Love College" music video, Conner asked if students saw a cultural link between the subject matter and the images and lyrics presented. Even on Elon's campus, the debate about pop culture fueling present-day social concerns presses on.

Elon provides multiple forums to discuss sexual violence; the "Consent is Sexy" campaign does much to enliven Elon students to participate in the non-violent cause. Additionally, the Facebook rapport that has begun is helping to promote discussion. Still, individual choices will greatly impact the way this issue is handled by our generation in the future.

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