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How to handle suicide threats

No journalist wants to be responsible for a suicide – but neither does he/she want to be manipulated into withholding news by a suicide threat. What factors should be considered?

By Deni Elliott

Author bio information is from the time of article submission and may not be current.

More than 13 years after Norman J. Rees carried out his threat to commit suicide upon publication of a story about his spying activities, reporter Hugh Aynesworth remembers feeling angry that the source would attempt such manipulation.

“I was willing to give him time to tell his wife, to move, and the editors agreed to give him time as well,” Aynesworth said recently. “At that point, he said that if you use it, I will have to kill myself.”

Aynesworth said he left the Dallas Times-Herald conference room in disgust and had no more dealings with Rees, who had just admitted to having sold secrets to the Soviets during World War II and had later worked as a double agent for the FBI.

Rees, after failing to persuade the editors to pull the story, returned to his home in Connecticut. He shot himself on the day the article was published.

Aynesworth said he was upset by Rees’s act, but said such threats can’t stand in the way of publication. If newsworthy information was withheld “every time somebody said that, what would we have in the papers?” Aynesworth asked.

Judgments that a fact should be published should be made independently from the source's reaction. But suicide threats, or less dramatic statements, can be taken into consideration in making the multitude of decisions that exists between the two poles of publish and withhold.

It doesn't have to be a choice between a story and a life.

Judge Gary Little didn't tell Seattle Post-Intelligencer reporter Duff Wilson that he planned to kill himself upon publication of the story exposing him as a pedophile in August 1988, but Wilson wishes that he had.

Wilson says he would have argued for holding off publication long enough "to get him help or get him committed," or would have called a crisis center or Little's friends. "I'm not for publishing [and] damn the consequences," Wilson said.

WTMJ-TV in Milwaukee withheld the name of the ex-police officer who had molested boys. That newsroom decided that the story fulfilled its purpose without inclusion of the name; the man had said he would kill himself if it was broadcast.

Other news organizations might have argued that the pedophile's name was indeed newsworthy. Publication of his name may have resulted in

victims coming forward to press charges (thinking that they finally would be believed); other victims might have sought counseling after having the horror of their experience affirmed by the newspaper story.

Wilson observed that in Judge Little's case, "All along, the victims had been ignored because of the judge's power or because victims of sexual assault are often seen as consenting. They were carrying scars for 10 or 15 years."

Reasonable reporters and editors may disagree on whether information is in the public interest. But, once the fact is judged newsworthy, threats of any sort don't change that. A news organization that withholds newsworthy information is simply not doing its job.

Threats of bodily harm cannot be ignored, however. If their lives were at stake, most journalists would let the police determine whether the threat was serious. In a like manner, reporters and editors should not take it upon themselves to decide that a suicide threat is nothing more than a desperate attempt to censor the news.

In making the publish-or-withhold decisions, journalists might ask:

How should the newsworthy fact so worrisome to the source be played?

A change of emphasis or the inclusion of clarifying information important to the source may prevent the loss of a job, or a reputation, or a life.

How quickly does the information need to get out?

It's rare that information can't be held long enough to give the source (or those close to the source) time to prepare for publication.

How can the troubled source feel less powerless?

Threats of suicide are "extreme examples of what happens when sources feel that the newspaper isn't treating them fairly," said Laurence Jolidon, who as metro editor of the Dallas Times-Herald was the last person from the newspaper to talk to Norman Rees.

It is up to those in the newsroom to let sources who threaten suicide know that their interests are being taken into account, he said. "You have to keep the dialogue going."

Journalists don't need to be heartless to protect the integrity of their work, said Kerry Sipe, public editor for The Virginian-Pilot and The Ledger-Star, in Norfolk. Sipe's approach with a half-dozen suicide threats over the last three years has been to listen to the sources' concerns and to urge further communication between the source and newsroom before publication.

"It makes a newspaper more human if we can respond to each other's sensitivities and still gets out," he said.

- Home