

13 The Problem of Compassionate Journalism

Deni Elliott
University of Montana

Like Mom and apple pie, no one can find fault with the ideal of compassion. But, if compassion involves acting in the interest of a particular individual in need, compassion is an ideal only for individuals who are working on their own time. Acting in the interest of particular individuals in need is not morally acceptable for a social institution or for an agent working on behalf of a social institution.

Here I will discuss how compassionate action on behalf of particular individuals creates ethical problems for the social institution of journalism and how that action can keep news organizations from delivering the news.

Moral Responsibility Defined

What it means for one to act in a morally responsible way is that the person or institution meets the minimalistic moral dictate: "Do your job and don't cause unjustified harm." This dictate threads through the major Western moral theories regardless of their subtle distinctions; it also binds major moral traditions of the East and West.

"Do your job" means one should meet all role-related responsibilities. Every legitimate role carries with it definable responsibilities and privileges. This is true for formal professional roles such as journalist, professor, or lawyer. The journalist has the special role of providing citizens with information they need to know for self governance; the professor has the special role of teaching thinking skills and a body of knowledge to post-secondary students; the lawyer has the special role of serving as a knowledgeable advocate for individuals who encounter the judicial system. The special privileges of journalists include being able to ask questions of individuals that would be, by convention, out of line if others asked the same question; the professor can judge the quality of students' work and can significantly impact students' lives through evaluation; the lawyer can keep secrets on behalf of the client that would be illegal for others to keep.

"Do your job" also means that one should meet all role-related responsibilities within informal, non-professional roles, such as parent, life's partner, friend, student, or citizen. "Do your job" is some of what is found in the deontological precept that morality is based on one's intentionally acting out of a sense of duty.

The second half of the moral dictate required for minimal moral responsibility, "Don't cause unjustified harm," is consistent with the deontological moral tradition as well in that when harm is caused, it can often be justified that one acted as one's duty required. The law enforcement officer who causes pain to a suspect and deprives him of freedom through a legitimate arrest is undoubtedly doing the right thing from a perspective of duty ethics.

The consequentialist would not disagree about the correctness of the law enforcement officer's actions. The officer has acted in a way that promotes social utility. As long as the principles of justice were upheld—the suspect has been awarded due process—then the arrest, while harmful to the individual, is consistent with acting in regard for the greatest good for the greatest number.

The moral dictate, "Do your job and don't cause unjustified harm," is also consistent with virtue ethics. Of course, virtue ethics would expect more than this minimalist morality. But, a good person doing well, from a virtuous perspective, would, at least, be morally required to meet his or her moral responsibilities and do so in a way that did not impinge on others in an unjustified way.

This statement of basic moral responsibility is also in line with Eastern philosophies. The sense of persons acting appropriately when they are acting in harmony with self, the spirit, and nature (a basic tenet of Buddhism), fulfills their mission in the world (do your job) and does so in a way that keeps forces in harmony (does not cause unjustified harm).

From an examination of the moral dictate within virtue and Eastern theories it becomes clear that one may, and often should, do more than that which is dictated by minimalist morality. Doing more makes a person morally praiseworthy. But, persons are morally blameworthy if they fail to meet their moral responsibilities. They are morally blameworthy if they fail to do this, regardless of the good things that they may be doing in addition.

The Moral Dictate Applied to Journalism

The job of the journalist in democratic societies is to tell people what they need to know so that they can participate in self-governance. Some justified harm is necessarily caused by journalists doing their jobs. People—including innocent people—are harmed when journalists ex-

pose corrupt public officials. But this harm caused is justified by the citizens' need to know important information about their government. However, harm caused becomes less justified the further the story is from the job of journalists. For example, a feature story on how a child genius

fared as an adult may well cause harm if the publicity is unwanted. This harm cannot be justified by appeal to the social mission—the job—of journalism. Citizens do not have a need to know the fate of a private individual, except in extraordinary circumstances. The harm, in that case, is unjustified.

Unjustified harm can also be caused when a news organization promotes the cause of an individual in need. The harm is caused to others in like situations who cannot get like assistance.

The harm is also caused to the consumers of news. Compassionate reporting results in unjustified harm when news organizations participate in the same kind of institutional unfairness they are often seeking to expose. Consumers are harmed—indeed deceived—when they are led to believe that such cases of need are extraordinary; citizens are harmed when they are given dramatic stories of individual distress rather than the stories that could lead to changes in public policy. In this respect, compassion gets in the way of journalists doing their jobs.

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Examples of Compassionate Reporting

A cute, White, 6-year-old girl from the suburbs of Portland, Maine, Norma Lynn Peterson, was introduced to the community as she prepared for a fund-raising potluck supper on her behalf (Elliott *et al.*, 1991). Norma Lynn needed a liver transplant; she was on the list as a candidate at the Pittsburgh transplant center. Relatively speaking, she was in pretty good shape.

As a result of coverage by the three network affiliates and the newspaper, the Portland community opened its hearts and checkbooks to Norma Lynn. Five months after the initial coverage, Norma Lynn had a new liver, more than \$100,000 in private donations, free air ambulance service to and from Pittsburgh, a camcorder, and a purebred puppy.

A Dartmouth biology professor, Christopher Reed, needed a bone marrow transplant to combat leukemia. News media were quick to respond with front page and top of the hour stories about the popular professor's desperate search for an unrelated donor. Several hundred people showed up to be tested for the possibility that their marrow might match that of the sick professor, each with the \$75 in hand that the commercial marrow bank required to check for a suitable match. No local match was found for Christopher Reed, who soon died from his illness, but the marrow bank had hundreds of new potential donors to add to its computer list.

The Burlington (VT) *Free Press* covered the story of Sue Jackman, a vivacious 30-year-old wife and mother who needed a bone marrow transplant to combat breast cancer (Elliott *et al.*, 1991). Finding a donor was no problem in this case, as this was to be an autologous transplant: Jackman would be both donor and recipient. The problem was a balky insurance company. Her insurer, Blue Cross/Blue Shield of Vermont, called the treatment "experimental" and refused to pay. Within two months of the news coverage, Sue Jackman had received \$20,000 in private donations and the insurance company had been pressured into becoming the first in the Blue Cross/Blue Shield family to cover bone marrow transplant for the treatment of breast cancer.

A *Houston Chronicle* reporter, Dianna Hunt, wrote an article on the problems that pregnant women have accessing drug treatment. In the process of doing the story, Dianna championed the case of "Bridget," a cocaine addict in her eighth month of pregnancy. Repeated calls by Dianna Hunt to hospital administrators, social workers, and a judge resulted in an inpatient placement for the pregnant addict (Elliot, 1990).

On the surface, these sound like success stories, the kind of stories that news organizations like to point out to prove that they do more than publish just the bad news. But, each of these stories is problematic. Each is an example of compassion getting in the way of journalists doing their jobs.

The journalistic job is to fulfill the unique role that news media play in society. In the United States, as well as in other democratic countries, citizens are given the opportunity to take an active part in running their country. So, the news media's primary social function is to tell people what they need to know for self-governance.

News media can do many things besides meeting their social function. They can supply the comics and advice columns and human interest stories and the sports pages. But no matter how good a job they are doing at these tasks, if they're not telling people what they need to know for self-governance, they're not a mass market news publication or program. The basic moral responsibility for news media is that they do this unique job.

News organizations meet their social function well or they meet it badly. How well they're doing their jobs can differ from day to day and

from story to story. But getting clear on the primary moral responsibility for news organizations makes it easier to see what is wrong with compassionate journalism.

Norma Lynn Peterson's Liver Transplant

Citizens need to know some things about solid organ transplantation, about when it is indicated and when it is not. Voters need to understand the kinds of problems that result in children's livers dying at such a young age, particularly as many of those problems are genetically based and discoverable prior to birth.

Citizens need to know about how and why extraordinary health-care procedures like organ transplants are funded. They need to know why they are so expensive and need to understand the intense competition among health-care centers that have resulted in 164 heart transplant centers and 114 liver transplant centers nationally, with three or more competing transplant centers in the same city in some instances. Citizens need to know that transplant centers consider financial as well as clinical factors in determining if someone is a suitable candidate for transplantation. People need to know that people who would be candidates for transplant, clinically speaking, are excluded because they lack funding for such extraordinary care.

Citizens need to know how and why allocations of the limited resources of organs are made as they are. Stories are needed to show what can be done to encourage donation at the time of death and they need to know how candidates for transplants use politics, money, and the news media to jump ahead in line and, thus, decrease their waiting time for an organ.

These weren't the stories told in Norma Lynn Peterson's case. In fact, in 2 1/2 hours of television time and several hundred newspaper column inches, readers weren't even told that Norma Lynn's parents had insurance that paid 80% of her medical costs. Nor were they told that when Norma Lynn was recovering from transplant surgery under the glow of television lights and public attention, a 24-year-old woman from Portland became Maine's first recipient of a heart-lung transplant. After the heart-lung recipient died during surgery, her husband prepared to hitchhike home to their 4-year-old daughter. He didn't have the money for bus fare.

Christopher Reed and Bone Marrow Donation

Citizens need to know how bone marrow donation differs from solid organ donation. They need to know that bone marrow donors need to be living donors and that bone marrow, like other blood products, replenishes.

Citizens need to know that unlike the single government-regulated net-

work relating to solid organ transplantation, there are several bone marrow registries internationally, and at least two unrelated registries in the United States. They need to know that potential recipients are charged to search their computer indices for a possible matches. They need to know that bone marrow registries charge between \$45 and \$75 for potential donors to be typed and added to the computer list and that most of these donations come from media-led community appeals to help a local, needy individual. They need to know that these searches rarely turn up a donor for the local person in need.

Stories of human need tend to be reported in a way that is ultimately one sided and heroic rather than critical and thoughtful.

These, again, were not the stories that New Hampshire audiences were told during the futile fight to save Christopher Reed's life. Like natural disaster stories, the stories of human need tend to be reported in a way that is ultimately one sided and heroic rather than critical and thoughtful.

Sue Jackman and The Insurance Company

Citizens need to know that all medical payers, whether insurance companies, state Medicaid systems, or the federal government, work from a set of limited resources. Some medical care is provided; other medical care is not. Citizens need to know the criteria by which this rationing is done and how to have input to influence those criteria. If insurance companies or other third-party payers are pressured into providing extraordinary need for one person, other people with less visible or public need will be quietly neglected. Some needy people will give up something to help other needy people.

The readers of the Sue Jackman stories weren't told about this. According to the medical director of Vermont Blues Cross/Blue Shield (personal communication, January, 1992), at the current rate that health insurance costs and salaries are rising, by the year 2004 it will cost employers in the state of Vermont more to provide health coverage than it will cost them to pay their workers. That is, the benefits package will be more than 100% of the salary rate. The medical director said that he felt that he had no control over the rising medical costs and an ever-growing list of expensive procedures to cover. Yet, he had the continuing responsibility to keep paying the bills. Consumers of news and medical services

need to know that changes in how we fund health care are required by sheer economics. They need to know how to add their voices to the decisions being made.

Bridget, the Pregnant Cocaine Addict

Citizens need to know why treatment is so difficult to access by pregnant cocaine addicts. As with transplantation, they need to know how priorities in social services are determined, why some people get assistance and others do not. As many of these organizations receive funding through United Way or other charitable groups, citizens need to know how well their philanthropic dollar is used when they are approached for the annual fund raiser.

Telling the policy story is the moral responsibility of the journalist.

This isn't the story *Houston Chronicle* readers got. Instead, they learned what can be achieved by one person in need if a news organization throws its weight behind her.

It's obvious in each of these cases that these "policy" stories would have detracted from the human drama stories.

But, telling the policy story is the moral responsibility of the journalist. The death-defying medical miracle stories are the easy stories to tell. They see one sided and narrow in scope. And, they are not part of what it means for journalists to be meeting the primary social function of journalism.

Stories of Compassion and the Problem of Justice

Even if journalists did tell citizens the necessary policy stories, journalists should not tell the stories of individual need. The problem is one of justice.

News organizations can't provide the same kind of coverage for every person in similar need. Even if news organizations were willing to help fund raise for every case, it wouldn't work. Eventually, the philanthropic dollar is used up. Sooner, rather than later, people tire of hearing the same story and stop shelling out. Also, not every ill person or family is constituted to fund raise on behalf of his or her life. That makes death the price paid for privacy.

Individuals need to be compassionate; institutions, like news organizations, need to be fair. There's a subtle irony created when news media act

for the benefit of a single individual. In both the Sue Jackman vs. Insurance Company story and in the pregnant drug addict story, journalists were appalled that institutions didn't help these individuals in need.

This journalistic instinct to hold a corporation and a social service system accountable was in line with journalists doing their job. It is hard to justify a government or an agency denying treatment without compelling evidence that the denied treatment differs in kind from that which is being provided.

The journalists' demand for accountability asks, "How can these powerful institutions care for some and leave others to die?"

In a similar way, when news media do the Sue story and the Bridget story and ignore the Luther story because Luther is not an attractive story subject and turn down the Nancy story because a story like that was done last month, the news organization becomes just one more of those powerful institutions that care for some and leave others to die.

Stories of Compassion and Moral Theory Based on Care

There is a danger that such stories of misplaced compassion might be confused as consistent with a moral theory that is based on care rather than justice. The morality of care is thought to be a morality of relationships between specific individuals as contrasted with the morality of rights competing among strangers. But, morality of care does not imply paternalism (or maternalism). According to Gilligan (1982):

In women's development, the absolute of care, defined initially as not hurting others, becomes complicated through a recognition of the need for personal integrity. This recognition gives rise to the claim for equality embodied in the concept of rights, which changes the understanding of relationships and transforms the definition of care. (p. 166)

Caring does not imply an abdication of professional duties. For example, in speaking of a lawyer who construes her job within a morality of care, Dana and Rand Jack (1988) wrote, "Recognizing her lack of power to control what happens to other people, Carol places boundaries around her feelings of personal responsibility. Her limitation of responsibility allows her to feel care without guilt and pain each time a negative result occurs" (pp. 283-284).

One can legitimately care in the process of doing one's job without interpreting that care as a need to take responsibility for the needs of individuals encountered in the process of doing one's job. Institutions can express care and compassion by going beyond their social function to offer

special assistance to everyone in like need.

Unique disasters that affect the community at large like earthquakes and floods give news organizations opportunities to rally behind a community cause and to broadcast need and deliver assistance in special ways. Every person affected has an equal chance of reaping the benefits of newsroom intervention. But rallying around an individual's cause produces questionable reporting and lousy public relations. It leads the community ultimately to seek that the news organization is no less unfair than the system it seeks to expose.

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In other words...

Davis Merritt of the *Wichita Eagle* has described the public newspaper's niche as being "a fair-minded participant in a community that works."

Arthur Charity. (1995). *Doing public journalism*. New York: Guilford, p. 150.

Critics of public journalism . . . believe that . . . if a newspaper starts setting agendas, framing issues, forcing candidates and experts to explain themselves in different ways, promoting forums, and spelling out what "the public" wants, it may think it's speaking for ordinary citizens but it will really end up speaking only for itself. Journalism's one protection against arrogance—its one claim on the public trust—is its refusal to get involved. Giving that up, it will inevitably careen down the same slippery slope as demagogues and spin doctors. It will end up speaking only for citizens it agrees with, and cheerleading civic action in which it's improperly involved.

Actually, public journalism has a golden rule—an ethical line—every bit as sharp as mainstream journalism's rule, and just as easy to elaborate into a code book of professional norms: *Journalism should advocate democracy without advocating particular solutions* . . . public journalists could well argue that the mainstream's rule of noninvolvement is the one that realistically threatens the public. . . . Which form of journalism is really more flawed and dangerous in a free society: the one that sits passively by while people grow divided, or the one that finds ways of bringing them together?

Arthur Charity. (1995). *Doing public journalism*. New York: Guilford, pp. 144, 146-147.

As most of them realize, journalists do more than furnish us with facts. They frame and narrate the story of our common life. This story needs to provoke and challenge as much as it informs and entertains. In every community and about the nation as a whole, there are disturbing and depressing tales to be told. If the press does not commit to telling them, well and often, its demise will be deserved. But there are ways of facing even the darkest facts that leave us open to the task of remaking them. As storytellers, jour-

nalists find their deepest challenge here. Without relinquishing their stance as observers and critics, they can try to nourish a particular understanding of American society: not an audience of savvy spectators nor a class of information-rich consumers, but a nation of citizens with common problems, an inventive spirit, and a rich participatory tradition.

Jay Rosen. (1996). *Getting the connections right: Public journalism and the troubles in the press*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, p. 5.

What ought to be discussed is not whether the press should be "involved" or "detached," but the best kind of involvement, the nature of the press's legitimate influence, the values that lie beneath its own agenda. There is considerable room for debate on these issues, and those experimenting with public journalism welcome the exchange. Not, however, if they have to establish what should be an acknowledged fact: journalism is no daily mirror of events but a story with themes chosen by journalists.

Jay Rosen. (1996). *Getting the connections right: Public journalism and the troubles in the press*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, p. 14.

Public journalism is controversial, I believe, not because it demands that journalists get involved, but because it lifts their involvement into public view, acknowledging what everyone already knows: the press is a player. It then proceeds to ask: *For what for for whom* should the press be playing? The answers offered are certain public values: civic participation, deliberative dialogue, politics as problem solving, and the cultivation of "democratic dispositions."

Jay Rosen. (1996). *Getting the connections right: Public journalism and the troubles in the press*. New York: The Twentieth Century Fund Press, p. 69.

The proper formulation . . . is not detachment on the one hand or a Hearst-like meddling on the other. That is a false frame. Between the line of total noninvolvement and the line of Hearst's famous "You supply the pictures, I'll supply the war" is a huge and promising middle ground. Public journalism operates in that ground, retaining neutrality on specifics and moving far enough

beyond detachment to care about whether resolution occurs.

If journalists are smart enough and professional enough to define some razor-thin line of objectivity and adhere to it, we are also smart enough and professional enough to define a slightly different line without tumbling all the way into the abyss of inappropriate involvement.

Davis "Buzz" Merritt. (1995). *Public journalism & public life: Why telling the news is not enough*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, p. 116.