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Case Study: Which Critically Ill Person Should Get News Coverage

The dilemma in the case regarding which critically ill person should get news coverage is if news outlets do choose to report a story about a person who is sick, how do they choose which person or family gets the coverage and which does not? The ethical question of this case study is should the media report stories for people who are sick so their family can get more money and attention? To make this decision, a journalist must think ethically when deciding who gets the coverage and why.

Reporting a story about a critically ill person could bring a lot of attention and money to them and their families that they might need to pay for their medical bills. Some possible arguments for reporting or not reporting individual cases could be drawn from teleology and Sissela Bok’s method. The first step of Sissela Bok’s method is to consult your conscience. By consulting your conscience, you can remind yourself of your loyalties and morals as a journalist, while also keeping yourself grounded. The second step of Sissela Bok’s method is to seek expert advice. Seeking expert advice can be helpful in many ways. Talking to an editor or someone who has written a similar story can give insight as to how they would go about choosing a family, or how they did choose a family if they wrote a similar story. The final step of Sissela Bok’s method is to conduct a public discussion. This step would be the most impactful for when deciding which sick person to write about, if any at all, because you will get feedback from the citizens about if they want to read a story about a critically ill person or not.

Reporting a story about a critically ill person is right to do when they are well-known in the community or town, or if they have done good for their community. For example, Charlie Capalbo is a 20-year-old young man from Fairfield, CT who has been battling cancer for the last several years. Recently, he got put on the list for a bone marrow transplant, which was brought to the attention of several different local news outlets. Capalbo is very well-known in Fairfield and when he was growing up, he was a star hockey player and part of a family who is friends with just about everyone in the town. When the public got word that Capalbo’s younger brother, Will, was going to be his bone marrow donor, the amount of news coverage Capalbo’s story got went through the roof.

The story was not that the Capalbo family needed money or a donor, the story was that the Capalbo brothers fought and sacrificed together in order to beat Charlie’s cancer. In Deni Elliott’s article, he writes that the news directors from Maine’s three television stations said, “The news coverage caused the overwhelming community response… not the other way around,” in regards to the story about 7-year-old Norma Lynn Peterson from Winham, Maine. Although these cases are a bit different, both cases are about young, very sick people who needed their community’s support. For both of these cases, the news outlets decisions to cover Peterson and Capalbo’s stories were ethically correct. These news stories correlate with what Jeff Marks, news director at WCSH-TV said, “Our business is not to raise money… our business is to tell an interesting story.”

When making an ethical decision, it is important to consider important philosophies to help you come to a decision. In this particular case, J.S. Mill’s Utilitarianism is the most applicable when making an ethical decision on which critically ill person, if any, should get news coverage. This philosophy includes making the best decision for the best consequence for the greatest number of people. If you choose to give news coverage to a particular person and their family over a different person, the family that did not get coverage is at risk for suffering more than the family that did get coverage.

However, utilitarianism has a connection to Aristotle’s philosophy in that the best action is that which brings the greatest happiness or the least suffering. When thinking about Mill’s Valuational Hedonism perspective (pleasure is the only intrinsic moral end), it is important to keep in mind that if you choose to cover a member of a family who is sick, it could possibly bring attention to that particular sickness and inspire people and/or their community to donate to organizations for research, which could help the other families in the same situations who did not get the news coverage. Thus, reporting a story about a person who is critically ill can relate to Valuational Hedonism by creating no suffering or aiding the elimination of suffering.

This case in particular challenges journalists to think about priorities of the story and the people in the stories. For example, which sick person or family has the most money or the best insurance? Should you choose the person of the story based upon sex, age, or income? Should you choose the story based on the severity of the case, or in other words, how long they have to live? These priorities map out an insanely difficult dilemma and ethical decision for journalists because it shows that there is a lot to consider. Furthermore, after considering these priorities, it makes it acceptable to report an individual illness story because thinking with teleology, you weighed all of your options and came to the decision to write the story.

In Elliott’s article, he writes that if individual cases are reported, they should at minimum tell the readers how the money they donate will be used; such as how much money the individual really needs, if Medicaid or health insurance is covering part of the cost, if there has been a foundation set up to handle contributions, and what the limitations are on how donated money will be used. Including this information will help make clear which priorities should be taken into consideration when choosing which individual story to report.

When considering these priorities, it connects to how a journalist’s loyalties and principals are important when deciding which critically ill person should receive news coverage. A journalist’s loyalties are to the citizens, profession, employer, their self and their family. This relates to the fourth element of journalism which is that journalists must maintain independence from those they cover. When keeping your loyalties in mind for this case, it becomes evident that reporting a story about a child or young adult who is critically ill is deserving of news coverage if they want it. By reporting the story, you are staying true to all of your loyalties. By reporting the truth, reporting all of the facts of the case, and telling citizens all they need to know, you are making the right ethical decision to report the story about the critically ill patient.

The nine principles are very important when making an ethical decision. For this case in particular, the principles that apply the most are truth, making the significant interesting and relevant, and keeping the news in proportion and comprehensive. When you report the truth, you are also reporting all of the facts of the case which is crucial when writing a story so that citizens are properly informed. Making the significant interesting and relevant in this case is important because you are telling a story while stating the facts and also telling a story that is relevant to the community or town. Keeping the story in proportion and relevant is also an important principle. Proportional coverage means giving an event or issue the amount of attention it deserves relative to its importance and keeping it comprehensive means reporting the full story.

Taking all of the principles into consideration not only can help a journalist see that reporting a story about a critically ill person is OK, but it also helps the journalist decide how to write the story so that citizens are getting all of the information, while also being sensitive to the family and other families that may be struggling with the same illness.

When news outlets decide to report stories about people who are critically ill, the biggest dilemma they face is deciding which person gets coverage and which person doesn’t. Keeping in mind appropriate philosophies, methods, priorities, loyalties and principles, it can be found that in conclusion, the news outlets that did report these individual stories were right.