

## ETHICS CASE STUDY

### **SUMMARY OF STORY**

The story I have selected for the ethics case study essay is the story of the current affairs television program, *Today Tonight* being duped by a cyber-bully group, Facebeef.

*Today Tonight* reporter, David Eccleston reported about a young woman, Jasmine Frost being bullied and harassed by Tristan Barker who is the leader of Facebeef, a Facebook page that has caused controversy for cyber-bullying. She emailed *Today Tonight* producers and was immediately responded to, called and interviewed. However shortly after it went to air, the producers discovered that Jasmine Frost was in fact Jasmine Vanmidde and she herself was a member of Facebeef. This was discovered after she appeared in a video alongside a fellow Facebeef member, revealing herself and mocking the program which she duped into making and airing a fake story. Once this was revealed, *Today Tonight* host Helen Kapalos was forced to make an on-air correction the day after. This was not the first time that Vanmidde duped a current affairs program, she previously appeared in a story on *A Current Affair* that was also on cyber-bullying, however after making the same discovery that eventually *Today Tonight* producers made, the producers pulled the story before it went to air.

### **ETHICAL ISSUES INVOLVED**

Clearly the ethical issue at play is the fact that producers took Vanmidde's account at face value without conducting the necessary research that they are not only required to do, but is also expected of them. They also presented a one-sided and biased story purely from Jasmine Vanmidde's side and also presented Tristan Barker in a clearly unfavourable light.

I believe that *Today Tonight* breached two key principles of the Australian Press Council's General Statement of Principles, whilst maintaining a third. *Today Tonight* breached General Principle number one by not doing the accurate research to make sure the story was accurate and by containing the bias against Tristan Barker and only Vanmidde's perspective, they were not being fair and balanced. By being biased and only getting one side of the story, they also breached General Principle number three by not ensuring fairness and balance and not providing an opportunity for a balancing response.

Despite these two breaches, *Today Tonight* did uphold General Principle number two as well as point number twelve in the Media Entertainment & Arts Alliance (MEAA) Journalists' Code of Ethics and point number five of the International Federation of Journalists (IFJ) Declaration of Principles on the Conduct of Journalists—correcting inaccuracies. *Today Tonight* host, Helen Kapalos made a correction on-air the day after the story was broadcast. However if *Today Tonight* conducted the research they should have in the first place, they wouldn't have needed to uphold these points and principles.

## DISCUSSION OF BREACHES AND WHAT IT MEANS FOR JOURNALISTS

Interestingly with this particular story, the subject of the story and the duper, Jasmine Vanmidde pointed out the ethical issue involved whilst mocking the program at the same time. In the YouTube video that the *Today Tonight* producers ultimately discovered too late, Vanmidde said that “all it took was an email titled ‘Tristan Barker cyber-bullied me’ and then a three minute phone call to convince one of the most watched and believed news programs in Australia that I was a poor bullied girl when in reality, I’m a member of the Facebeef team and have been for the better part of a year.” Vanmidde then went on to address *Today Tonight* by saying “it pays to do a bit of research.” Vanmidde said this and cited her appearance in the shorts of *A Current Affair* a few months earlier in which it was the exact same story with different names.

Despite the content and the questionable morals and methods of Vanmidde, she did make a reasonable point for journalists to consider—journalists should always check their sources as well as their facts. In a *Media Watch* episode that was broadcast about a week later regarding the story, it was mentioned that a *Today Tonight* producer texted Vanmidde asking her whether she had screenshots of Barker’s apparent bullying and Vanmidde replied that she didn’t and a *Today Tonight* producer told her not to worry about it and didn’t do any further digging.

The particular code breaches mentioned above that I believe *Today Tonight* made doesn’t necessarily abide by the code itself word for word. What I mean by that is that it partially breached the codes, for example:

***General Principle 1: Accurate, fair and balanced reporting:*** *Publications should take reasonable steps to ensure reports are accurate, fair and balanced. They should not deliberately mislead or misinform readers either by omission or commission.*

When I said that I believed that *Today Tonight* breached General Principle number one, I meant that they breached it because the producers didn’t take reasonable steps to ensure reports are accurate, fair and balanced. I believe this because they would have followed in *A Current Affair*’s footsteps and not aired the story if they had. I don’t think that the story necessarily breached the omission or commission part of the code.

***General Principle 3: Publishing responses-****Where individuals or groups are a major focus of news reports or commentary, the publication should ensure fairness and balance in the original article. Failing that, it should provide a reasonable and swift opportunity for a balancing response in an appropriate section of the publication.*

When I said that I believed that *Today Tonight* breached General Principle number three, I meant that they breached it because *Today Tonight* didn’t ensure fairness and balance, in particular with Vanmidde’s side of the story and with Barker. They also didn’t provide a reasonable and swift opportunity for a balancing response with Barker. Although one could say that Eccleston approaching Barker only to end up getting slapped was an opportunity for Barker to provide his side of the story.

**General Principle 2: Correction of inaccuracy**-Where it is established that a serious inaccuracy has been published, a publication should promptly correct the error, giving the correction due prominence.

12. Do your utmost to achieve fair correction of errors. (MEAA Code of Ethics)

5. The journalist shall do the utmost to rectify any published information which is found to be harmfully inaccurate. (IFJ Declaration of Principles)

Despite *Today's Tonight's* breaches and questionable methods, when they realised that they had been duped, they were quick to let their audience know by making the correction on-air the day after.

These breaches as well as upholding one of the most important parts of all of these codes of ethics that apply to journalists, this teaches a classic lesson for journalists that every single one of them MUST do their research before they go to air as well as to print. In this case, the reputation of the program more than the journalist would have been affected as the show itself would be more high profile than the journalist reporting on the story, that being said Eccleston could have possibly been affected since he was seen on-air. The regular viewers of *Today Tonight* would have most likely have been shocked that the producers and journalist were duped into airing a fake story, although if they already love the program and are regular and loyal viewers, they wouldn't necessarily stop watching it altogether. For those who do not watch the show and look down on it, they would most likely get a chuckle out of this error and would roll their eyes at it. That being said, this is just my general opinion, I actually can't speak for those people.

*"Knowing the source's motives is most important as it relates to the truthfulness or reliability of the information. Where a source's motive is not the public benefit of ensuring a free flow of information to the public (as the journalist's is) then the information needs special scrutiny. The information might be missing key details or be slanted in such a way as to advance the ulterior interests of the source, or to damage those of a rival. Scrutiny is essential if the source comes to the reporter, and even more so if the source seeks anonymity."* (Eds Tanner, Phillips, Smyth and Tapsall, 2005, p84)

Interestingly in this case, Vanmidde didn't not seek anonymity, merely the opposite, she wanted attention, although I don't quite understand the logic of her using a fake surname when she eventually and proudly revealed herself after the broadcast and also due to the fact that when she appeared on *A Current Affair* (again using a fake surname) the story was pulled because they did do their research. Vanmidde's motives was obviously to dupe the program, whether it was to make the points she later made or purely for her own fun is not made entirely clear, however the chances are that her motives fall into the latter category. Again this point wouldn't have had to have been proven if the *Today Tonight* producers had done their research.

Another example of this ethical case study is Ryan Holiday and the *New York Times*. On April 18<sup>th</sup> 2012, the *New York Times* published a story about vinyl records and turntable sales titled, *"Enjoying Turntables Without Obsessing"*. The story included quotes from Ryan

Holiday, a marketing director who voiced his preferences about vinyl records. The journalists at the *New York Times* later discovered that Holiday was lying and in fact doesn't own a turntable, in fact Holiday is known for lying to the media and has written a book about manipulating the media called, *Trust Me I'm Lying*. The journalist found Holiday through a service called Help A Reporter Out (HARO) a service that helps reporters/journalists find sources by the reporter/journalist sending out a query and any source or person wanting to add their comments to the story emails the reporter/journalist back. The article is still on the *New York Times* website, however Holiday's quotes have been removed and an editor's note has been added pointing out that Holiday has lied to journalists and publications in the past and has written a book about it.

Holiday has stated that his motives in lying to journalists, publications and news outlets is to prove that the media "will literally print anything". This story, similar to *Today Tonight* raises the point that all journalists should do their research, especially their research on their sources to prove that they are telling the truth and that they are legitimate, so that they are telling a fair and balanced story. However they were also quick to point out their mistake and correct it, again, this shouldn't have happened in the first place if the journalists had done their research. It also shows flaws in using the internet to find sources, especially in the broad and generalised way that HARO does. Journalists should sometimes go back to the old-fashioned way of finding sources: calling, vox popping, etc. David Thier published an article on *Forbes.com* focusing on Holiday's media manipulation practices after interviewing him and stated this obvious fact that all journalists should abide and live by.

*"Lying to journalists is nothing new. People have swindled newspapers for free publicity long before tools like HARO even existed. Holiday is probing just how easy it can be in 2012. HARO Founder Peter Shankman notes that anyone abusing the system can be flagged and banned and ultimately, the service is just a tool and should be subject to all the same old rules of journalism. As a journalist, it's always been your job to do your research and check the source, whether you find that source on the street, on Craigslist or on HARO."* (Thier, 2012, p2)

## **CONCLUSION**

In conclusion the *Today Tonight* Facebeef story is a lesson for all journalists to do their research not only on their stories but also the sources that provide information for and make their stories. Journalists, publications and news outlets should always make their best efforts to correct any mistakes they make, however these mistakes wouldn't have happened if journalists had done their job in researching in the first place.

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