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KTVU – A Local Television Station to a National Joke

On July 12th, 2013, KTVU - a local FOX affiliate in the Oakland-San Francisco Bay Area - was covering and reporting new information on the fatal crash of Asiana Airlines Flight 214, which originated in Seoul, South Korea and crashed on final approach at San Francisco's airport on July 6th, 2013, which killed three passengers and injuring 187 – 49 of them were seriously injured. As the news outlet began to gather information, on its KTVU News at Noon show, the show was reporting the death of teen girl on the flight who's cause of death was unknown as she was hit by a fire truck, but whether she was already dead from the plane crash or killed by the truck was still being investigated at the time. Then, anchor Tori Campbell claimed the network had new information. This information was the names of the four pilots operating the flight. And within the next 30 seconds, KTVU defied journalism ethics and cemented this segment as one of the worst and biggest blunders on television.

In this quick [video clip](#), Campbell confidently says the following: "KTVU has just learned the names of the four pilots who were on board the flight. They are Captain Sum Ting Wong, Wi Tu Low, Ho Lee Fuk, and Bang Ding Ow." From a very first glance without audio, it's possible the reader doesn't notice the intricacies of the names. But upon either hearing the audio, re-reading, or just noticing right off the bat, these names clearly mock the plane crash, incorporate profanity, and essentially subject Asian communities to a mockery. To "translate" (if

you want to call it that), the names in order really attempted to say in a form of an Asian language and were likely meant to be interpreted as the following: “Captain Something Wrong, We Too Low, Holy F*ck, and Landing Low.” Whether you consider this racist, an aggression, or a prank, it’s almost impossible to not ask yourself the question, where did these names come from and why did they end up on television screens across the Bay Area?

In understanding basic journalism principles, journalists report and present information that typically comes from other sources. Whether interviewing someone in person or over the phone, attributing another outlet, or using factual data, journalists report information that comes from another perspective, not from their own, but with that comes with the idea of truth. To verify the truth and facts, outlets have (or should have) a copy editor or someone designed to assure everything being published is factually correct. Regardless of a copy editor, all journalists need to present information correctly and hopefully prevent what happened at the 12:00 PM show of KTVU. In this blunder, it presents the opportunity to delve into KTVU’s sourcing and the ethics related to it.

How KTVU sourced plus the ethical issues:

According to KTVU and other reports, it is true that a National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) summer intern confirmed the fake names, but this intern did not create them. It is believed the names were created from a prank. In addition to KTVU apologizing for the blunder, the NTSB issued a statement regarding its intern claiming, “a summer intern acted outside the scope of his authority when he erroneously confirmed the names of the flight crew on the aircraft.” On top of that, the NTSB says that it doesn’t release the names of pilots, crew members, passengers, or anyone involved in transportation accidents to the media according to a

its [document](#) on how it responds to a transportation accident. It also reinforced this in the statement on the mishandling.

While the NTSB is likely a legitimate source and possibly a first thought of one for plane crashes, the fact that this aired live and passed through multiple people without noticing the contents and effects of the names is ethically concerning and misrepresents certain aspects and requirements to be a journalist. Simply, KTVU should have known that the NTSB doesn't confirm the names of anyone involved in the accident. If they did, then they would've questioned it. Even if the names were somewhat more realistic, the NTSB's confirmation – which contradicts its own protocols – should've been the first red flag to the television station. Again, had there been more exterior research, then it's likely the names didn't air.

What's more ethically concerning is that, according to [New York Daily News](#), four KTVU staffers reviewed the names prior to them airing including award winning journalist Roland De Wolk and managing editor Michelle Toy. Toy, who is of Asian descent, apparently read the names aloud and recognized that they were suspicious, but still approved them because of fact that an official at the NTSB confirmed the legitimacy of them. "Given the one producer's misgivings, that should have been enough to override the weak confirmation from the unnamed NTSB source," said Greg Munno, assistant professor of magazine, news, and digital journalism at Syracuse University. Furthermore, according to [SFist](#), Toy did try to tell her station that the names sounded of Chinese descent, but Asiana Airlines is a Korean airline. Also according to SFist, another theory for how the names ended on air is that a former pilot emailed or texted the names to De Wolk who passed it along to the station. He reportedly recognized the suspicion and double-checked with the ex-pilot if they were legitimate. Regardless, the confusion and multiple possible ways that the names were background checked doesn't negate the fact that they did end

up on-air. Munno says for him personally it's not necessarily about how KTVU handled the sourcing, but rather verification and common sense. "One of the things we always talk about in journalism is the first validity test," Munno said about the situation and journalism ethics in general. "Does it pass the spell test? Does it make sense?" In order for the names to get on air, it's most reasonable to assume that KTVU got a hold of the names and verified with the NTSB but got in touch with the intern.

In addition, it's important to note that on the broadcast, KTVU did attribute the names to NTSB, so the station in a way, did follow some journalistic practice by attributing its sources, but missed out on its factual incorrectness as it was an intern who acted outside of his responsibilities to confirm the names to the station. KTVU never identified the position of the individual at NTSB. It simply was referred to by the whole organization, not specifically a communications representative or in actuality, a summer intern. According to [USA Today](#), the publication said the station's website said "We made several mistakes when we received this information." Essentially, these comments define what happened on the broadcast that day. There weren't any verification measures or deep thoughts into how the names read aloud, just a little suspicion. From there, the station made a joke of itself.

According to the Society of Professional Journalists, their code of ethics advises this regarding sourcing: "Identify sources clearly. The public is entitled to as much information to judge the reliability and motivations of sources" (Foreman 225 – *The Ethical Journalist: Making Responsible Decisions in the Digital Age*). The key word in this reference is "clearly." This did not occur with KTVU. As mentioned early, in no way was an individual identified or a specific job title given. Because of this, it creates ambiguity for the audience to determine the legitimacy of it. In general, people associate this incident with KTVU more than they do the NTSB. In

fairness, we can't say that the NTSB isn't at fault here. Yes, their summer intern, who represents its organization, did confirm these fake names and that is its own internal ethical issue in the organization. The names stemmed from a prank and it was not the intern who designed them. In fact, the NTSB, expectedly, fired that summer intern. But KTVU had many opportunities and chances to prevent this from happening and in fact, in its [apology](#) afterward, the organization claims it never read the names out loud, "phonetically sound them out," as their 6:00 PM anchor Frank Somerville said. This claim contradicts what the New York Daily News reported that Michelle Toy read the names aloud, but ultimately, the audience may never know unless you were in the station preparing the script for the broadcast. Also in the apology, Somerville says KTVU had a phone call with the NTSB, but simply forgot to ask what their role was at the company and by not reporting their actual name, it makes you wonder if they basically had a phone call in anonymity. In other words or questioning, did they even know who they were speaking with besides the fact that they had some affiliation to the NTSB?

"That's the whole idea of trust but verify," said Harriet Brown, professor of magazine, news, and digital journalism at Syracuse University. "It's a failure of verification basically, like actual verification. Again, I think its always a question of time pressure versus thorough. That was a huge blackeye for them." Brown brings up the point that KTVU (and in journalism ethics in general) was likely under pressure to get the news out, but discussed later in the paper, you must make sure what you present is factually true plus in a timely manner. That's what make journalists so crucial to society as they are ones sharing major news as soon as possible.

Because of the names' mockery of an Asian language (Asiana Airlines is based in South Korea), the television station published something that can be described as racism or an aggression towards Asian communities mostly in the Bay Area. "I would probably say this went

beyond a microaggression honestly,” Brown said. “If there was a medium-sized aggression, I think it would be in that category.” KTVU essentially associated themselves with these ideas since they were the first ones to report the names while other stations or publications did not. The only pieces other organizations published were headlines and packages reporting that KTVU reported fake names. Ethically, while sometimes journalists report about sensitive topics such as racism, but they don’t present themselves as racist or associate themselves with it. They also publish factual information because anything incorrect related to these sensitive areas will likely receive pushback. In this instance, KTVU somewhat did by carelessly reporting fake information to its audience. Some viewers may have found this comical just because of the play on of words and profanity included in the names. This interpretation also delegitimizes the organization’s value to presenting the news. Typically, the public entrusts journalists to relay trustworthy information and the facts, not entertainment. If they wanted entertainment, they wouldn’t go to KTVU, but this blunder feels almost entertainment like, something you might find on Comedy Central.

Munno recalled a time at the Post-Standard where a byline for the letter to the editor used a sexual innuendo, where the first and last names combined made a dirty joke. Although Munno wasn’t involved, it was still published because the name just flew over the heads of the editorial board. Similarly, the editorial board in Munno’s anecdote can parallel KTVU’s production team who somehow arrived to the conclusion that the names were able to air.

Brown thought how the names ended up on screen was “mind-boggling,” Brown said. “I mean if you read those out loud, there’s no way in hell that you would think that...you would have to question it. I think the fact that people didn’t question it reflects their complete lack of

understanding and familiarity with Asian names. I think so many things had to go wrong for them for that to happen.” Brown said she blamed KTVU more than the NTSB.

Clearly, it’s evident that there’s a whole lot of issues ethically regarding the broadcast clip. Simply, all of the components rely on one main aspect: the sourcing. Sourcing is very important in journalism as it helps establish your credibility. Without sourcing, a lot of what journalists report then turns into columns or opinion-based pieces. Therefore, sourcing and attribution allows viewers and readers to understand where information is coming from and makes it factually correct. Brown referenced the article in Rolling Stone entitled “A Rape on Campus” which was retracted for its poor sourcing and bad factual verification. In comparison, this blunder can relate to this article in terms of sourcing and the validity of the source and fact checking. Brown said she personally couldn’t remember a time in her career that was analogous where she battled a similar journalistic and ethical dilemma, but she made a point that she would have definitely questioned or double-checked the names and the reporting behind it if she were the editor at KTVU or at any other station when reporting any news.

In technicality, the NTSB did give confirmation on these fake names to KTVU, that’s something that cannot be denied as the board itself openly admitted to that in its statement. In the most simplistic terms, KTVU did source, they got one likely with the most up to date information other than the airline. But what failed in their sourcing was identification and outside reporting. KTVU should have checked NTSB’s policy where they don’t release information on investigations and noticed that’s a red flag. They should have gotten the person’s identity and reported that. The final issue is common sense, unrelated to journalistic practice. The names are so easily identifiable as fake with profanity and mocking towards Asian languages and that’s what makes this ethical issue so bad, is just how comical yet embarrassing KTVU handled these

fake names. The names themselves are not comical, but it is ridiculous how they got on air in terms of background checking. Regardless, it's important to expand upon what the organization did and what staff departed from the company as a result. Furthermore, as an aspiring journalist myself, it's important to reflect upon the takeaways and the lessons learned from this national incident.

Takeaways

Upon an in-depth investigation by the station itself of the incident, KTVU [decided](#) to fire De Wolk - the investigative producer -, Cristina Gastelu – special projects producer -, and producer Brad Belstock as a result of broadcast and its effects. As mentioned earlier, De Wolk was reportedly one of those who did review the names prior to them airing. Belstock's firing was actually for violating social media protocol as he tweeted "Oh Sh*t" once he recognized the error. De Wolk responded with a lawsuit, claiming he was wrongfully terminated. Today De Wolk works as an adjunct professor at San Francisco State University's Department of Journalism. Gastelu now works at Udacity as a senior creative producer and for Belstock, he worked at KGO-TV, San Francisco's ABC affiliate. Belstock is also an alumnus of the S.I Newhouse School of Public Communications. Toy, who reportedly read the names aloud and did question the validity of them, did not get fired as a result of the incident.

In regards to other lawsuits, Asiana Airlines planned to sue KTVU but according to [The Atlantic](#), the airline released a statement saying: "Asiana Airlines has decided not to proceed with the case since KTVU has issued a formal apology and in order for us to focus all our efforts on managing the aftermath of the accident." But the airline was also facing its own legal battles, hence the "aftermath" of its statement. 83 passengers on the flight decided to sue Boeing, the

company that built the aircraft. Plus, the passengers added Asiana to its lawsuit, so the company decided to focus on its own legal battles rather than targeting KTVU.

Personally, there's a lot to take away as a student journalist. It's evident that this is also a case of media organizations rushing to be the first to put out the news, demonstrated in the broadcast's motion to cut to "new information." Brown said that she understood that they were probably in a "timed pressure situation." "That's how most broadcasts are done, under heavy time pressure," Brown said. Organizations strive to be the first with information as you'll often see other outlets attribute that "this" organization first reported the news. "They got excited about something that thought was a scoop," Munno said. "they thought they got enough to confirm it and they were too culturally tone deaf to understand they were about to make a horrible mistake." With this pressure of being first comes great responsibility. Until you are absolutely certain, you must verify, double verify, triple verify, etc. your sourcing and information before it is reported, especially if the information brings any suspicion. There's no doubt that the names brought suspicion to those in that newsroom, but they rushed to the conclusion. "Speed and format are not excuses for making mistakes," Munno summarized about the SPJ or ONA ethics codes (he couldn't identify which). "Nowhere in any ethics code does it say, we need to be the first people to report this."

Another main takeaway is to make sure your sources are trustworthy. At first, the NTSB sounds very credible but when you don't ask for identity or even a job title of the individual confirming, it basically can set you up for something like this. There were so many red flags in this situation and yet, KTVU producers gave it the green light to let it be on air. Clearly, the anchor was unaware of what she read until she read it, but again, it's just so hard to believe that this could slip by. In summary, KTVU provided an opportunity for aspiring journalists like

myself to apply this ethical issue to its amateur careers in terms of sourcing, verifying, and pressure to be the first organization to report.

Interviews:

1. Harriet Brown – Professor of magazine, news, and, digital journalism at Syracuse University
Interview: Zoom, Nov. 17, at 11:15 AM
2. Greg Munno – Assistant Professor of magazine, news, and digital journalism at Syracuse University
Interview: Zoom, Nov. 18, at 10:00 AM

Outside Links and Sources:

1. Video Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iUgdVXUDrM8>
2. NTSB Policy Document: <https://www.nts.gov/tda/TDADocuments/SPC2001.pdf>
3. New York Daily News: <https://www.nydailynews.com/news/national/4-5-ktvu-staffers-prank-pilot-names-broadcast-report-article-1.1420574>
4. SFist: <https://sfist.com/2013/08/07/ex-pilot-supplied-fake-asiana-airli/>
5. USA Today: <https://www.usatoday.com/story/news/nation/2013/07/12/ktvu-gaffe/2513971/>
6. Apology Video Clip: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jtxds204ZMI>
7. SFGate: <https://www.sfgate.com/bayarea/matier-ross/article/KTVU-producers-fired-over-Asiana-pilots-fake-4685627.php>
8. The Atlantic: <https://www.theatlantic.com/national/archive/2013/07/asiana-airlines-gain-one-lawsuit-and-drops-another/313187/>
9. *The Ethical Journalist: Making Responsible Decisions in the Digital Age* – Gene Foreman