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Outing Oliver Sipple: An Ethical Case Study

**Background**

In San Francisco on September 22, 1975, Oliver “Bill” Sipple found himself in the middle of a crowd. He asked someone what was going on, and someone replied “What’s the matter with you, stupid?” (Luzer). The crowd had gathered to see President Gerald Ford, who was attending a meeting. Intrigued, Sipple decided to wait and see the president. After over two hours of waiting, Ford emerged from the St. Francis Hotel. Sipple, who was an ex-Marine and decorated Vietnam War veteran, saw a woman pointing a gun at the president out of the corner of his eye. He grabbed her arm and diverted the shot, saving the president’s life from an assassination attempt (Luzer).

This was the moment Oliver Sipple’s life flipped on its head. He was gay, and known as homosexual among the gay community in San Francisco, but his sexuality was a secret to his parents and the rest of the world. Sipple tried to downplay his actions and stay out of the public eye directly after saving Ford’s life. He told reporters to “Leave out that Marine stuff. I’m no hero or nothing,” (“I Saw It”) and the *San Francisco Chronicle* reported “that he called radio and television stations and begged them not to mention his name or where he lived.” (Castaneda et al. 57). Despite attempts to remain private and against his wishes, Sipple was “outed” by the press, or had his sexuality revealed without his consent. This was an action from which he would never recover.

Sipple did not tell the press that he was gay. The day after the assassination attempt, he was outed by Harvey Milk, famed politician, gay activist, and Sipple’s personal friend (Luzer). Milk believed that Sipple’s story was an opportunity for the gay community. The prevailing narrative was that gay men were weak, cowardly, and child predators; Sipple’s story showed that gay men were just like anybody else and could even be all-American heroes (Luzer). In addition, Sipple had not received formal recognition for his actions from the White House or the president the day after the incident. Milk believed that this was an act of homophobia and that the White House had not immediately thanked Sipple because they were homophobic (Hunte and Nasser).

Herb Caen reported the story in the *San Francisco Chronicle*. Two days after the event, he published a piece about how Sipple stopped the assassination attempt. Caen reached out to Sipple for comment, but Sipple did not respond. He visited a notoriously gay bar and wrote that it was a spot Sipple favored. Caen also said that Sipple and Milk were friends and that two activists described their reaction as “proud, maybe this will help break the stereotype” (Hunte and Nasser). The story was published without Sipple’s permission, and suddenly the world knew him as a gay man.

**Aftermath**

Sipple initially tried to stop the story by himself. He agreed to talk to reporters from the *Los Angeles Times*, and when asked directly if he was gay dodged the question. Sipple said: “If I were homosexual or not, it doesn’t make me any less of a man than I am,” reported the *Times* (Castaneda et al. 60). Reporters started showing up at his house, and Sipple’s standard response became that his sexuality was irrelevant to his actions. He also insisted that he did what anyone would have done.

Finally, Sipple hired a lawyer. John Wahl had served other gay men in San Francisco and came recommended by Milk (Castaneda et al. 61). Wahl organized a press conference during which Sipple read a prepared statement. In it, Sipple repeated what he’d been trying to say all along: his private life was his business and had no bearing on his actions. “I am first and foremost a human being who enjoys and respects life,” Sipple said. “I feel that a person’s worth is determined by how he or she responds to the world in which he lives, not on how, or with whom, a private life is shared” (Castaneda et al. 62). After Sipple spoke, Wahl announced that they intended to file an invasion of privacy lawsuit which was officially filed on September 30, 1975 (Castaneda et al. 63).

Sipple lost *Sipple v. Chronicle Publishing Co.* in the California Court of Appeals in 1984. Sipple sued for the public disclosure of a private fact: his sexuality. However, publication of private facts by news organizations is legally protected based on its newsworthiness. Even though Sipple was otherwise a private person, when he saved the president’s life he became a public figure (Schauer). The story was especially newsworthy because there had also been a separate assassination attempted against Ford three weeks earlier (Castaneda et al. 57). Additionally, the court said that the news was not disclosing a private fact because Sipple’s sexuality was not hidden. Although his family was unaware that he was gay, hundreds of other people knew that he was gay through his participation in pride parades, frequenting a gay bar, and his close relationship with Milk, a prominent gay figure. Therefore, the *Chronicle* and other publications were legally allowed to publish Sipple’s sexuality (Skinner-Thompson).

After September 22, 1975, Sipple’s life was never the same. Initially, his family was proud of him. They lived in Michigan and Sipple’s father and two brothers worked for General Motors; Sipple’s nephew remembers being told that the day after Sipple saved Ford’s life, his family were congratulated by everyone on the factory floor (Hunte and Nasser). A couple of days later, when the news broke that Sipple was gay, they were jeared instead. His family was also persistently visited by the press. In an interview with Sipple's brother George, he recalled that, when asked about Oliver, his father responded “that the next person that even said he had a son named Oliver, he was going to literally break their damn neck” (Hunte and Nasser). George Sipple was the only family member who kept a relationship with Oliver. The rest of his family did not speak to him, and his father did not let him attend his mother’s funeral (Hunte and Nasser).

Sipple spent the rest of his life in San Francisco. He did not get any money after losing his court case and lived primarily off disability checks. He had been a heavy drinker before, and after he was outed, he slipped into alcoholism and gained weight (Hunte and Nasser). Wayne Friday, Sipple’s friend and active member of the gay community, said that Sipple would often spend his whole check on everybody in the bar and be broke for the rest of the month. “He said to me a couple times,” said Friday, “I went to the Marine Corps and I got hurt. And now what I am known for? For being a faggot” (Hunte and Nasser). He would get drunk, cry, or get kicked out of bars, and some nights Friday drove him home.

On February 2, 1989, Friday, who was also a police officer, was asked to check on Sipple. No one had seen him in a while and his neighbor was concerned. The building manager let Friday into Sipple’s apartment, where they discovered him sitting in his chair with a bottle of Jack Daniels, dead. The second they opened the door, “... I knew what was going on,” Friday said. “It's the smell” (Hunte and Nasser). Sipple had been dead for ten days.

**Ethical Reporting: Homophobia**

“[...] Information such as one's minority sexual orientation can be extremely sensitive and damaging depending on the context in which it is shared” (Skinner-Thompson). Under ethics codes, Sipple should have been protected from being outed. The long-term effects on his life were devastating, and this is not unique to him.

Take, for instance, Arthur Ashe. Ashe was a black American and a professional tennis player. He was not gay, but he did contract AIDS from a blood transfusion (Yardley). Ashe kept his diagnosis private and said that he eventually planned to reveal it when it reached the final stage, but that did not come to pass. Instead, someone told USA Today that Ashe had AIDS, and fearing being outed by the press, he disclosed the diagnosis on television himself (Zonana). Though Ashe was not gay, AIDS was considered a gay disease**.** USA Today defended the decision to report on Ashe’s diagnosis; they said that he was a celebrity, it was like reporting on any illness, and it may even help end the stigma (Zonana).

None of these hold up. Ashe had been retired for over a decade, AIDS was distinct from other illnesses because of homophobia, and the report did nothing to destigmatize AIDS and in fact profited from the dramatization of the diagnosis. It did not matter that Ashe himself was not gay, because the association of homosexuality was enough to have people see him as a degenerate (Shilts). Ashe, as with Sipple, was a private person who’s outing ultimately served no greater purpose than entertainment, homophobia, and greater scrutiny on his life.

**Ethical Reporting: Newsworthiness and Privacy**

Sipple’s case was particularly complicated because of the different definitions of newsworthiness. Legally, the *Chronicle* was allowed to report on Sipple’s sexuality because it was newsworthy. His actions made him a public figure, and therefore in the eyes of the law, reporting on his sexuality was not considered an invasion of privacy. However, legality is not equal to morality (Friendly), and hypothetical forward movement for the gay community is not worth destroying the life of one gay man. Consent is important to ethical journalism. The Society of Professional Journalists’ ethics code says that ethical journalists should minimize harm, as do most other ethics codes (“SPJ Code of Ethics”). This includes giving more leeway to private people and considering the long-term implications of reporting. Sipple was a private person who did not anticipate being thrust into the spotlight when he acted instinctively, and he specifically asked not to be outed because his family would disown him (Friendly).

Sipple’s action ultimately did not meet the standard of the public’s need to know. It may have been ethical and newsworthy to publish Sipple’s sexuality if it had direct bearing on the story. For example, a prominent anti-gay politician who secretly leads a double life and had gay relationships should be outed to the press (Shilts). The public has a vested interest in knowing who governs them, and someone in power with that level of hypocrisy is open to scrutiny. However, a private man who is gay and would rather the world not know does not affect anyone. The story was that there had been an assassination attempt on the president that was thwarted by a citizen. His sexuality had nothing to do with his actions, as Sipple had been saying all along.

**Ethical Reporting: Motives and Harms**

Milk felt that Sipple’s story was an opportunity for gay men that could not be passed up. He had been known to take a radical position on coming out. He said: “Every gay person must come out...As difficult as it is, you must tell your immediate family, you must tell you relatives, you must tell your friends if indeed they are your friends…” (Hunte and Nasser). To Milk, outing Sipple was a necessary political gambit. Caen should not have published Sipple’s sexuality because of where the information came from and the implications that had. As a journalist, publishing Sipple’s sexuality was not only ethically wrong because it was his private life, but it could have been advancing an outside agenda. Journalists are supposed to be unbiased - and although that is somewhat shifting in the modern world - journalists still should not publish information to enhance a source’s political gain.

Secondly, even if publishing Sipple’s story to advance gay rights was a fully ethical decision, the predictable outcome negates this logic, and indeed the information was only meaningful in its irony (Elliott). Milk assumed Ford did not thank Sipple because he was gay, yet Sipple did receive a letter of thanks three days after the assassination attempt, and Ford was publicly tolerant of homosexuality (Elliott). There was no reason the publicize Sipple’s sexuality because there was no discrimination from the White House. Instead, the discrimination came from the press, the public, and Sipple’s family. “Outings don’t change institutions; outings don’t benefit individuals” (Elliott). In the end, outing Sipple did nothing to benefit the gay community and instead reinforced the narrative that a gay hero was irregular. Outing Sipple also did not benefit him personally, and instead led him into depression and isolation. Like with Ashe, this was a predictable outcome. Institutional homophobia is not solved with one positive story, and publication without consent simply opens the subject to high scrutiny.

**Conclusion**

Sipple was outed in 1975 and it destroyed his life up until his death at 47 years old. Since then, there has been significant progress for gay rights. Homosexuality was decriminalized and gay marriage was legalized; it has become easier to be gay in public, but not *easy*, and not for everybody. Sipple’s case is still relevant and serves as a guideline for ethical reporting. A person should not be outed against their will unless it is directly relevant to the story at hand or the power that person holds. “Oliver Sipple saved our president, but his unequivocal desire was not to be sacrificed by some aggressive gays who wanted to exploit him, and by unthinking journalists who just couldn’t learn to say no to a juicy story” (Friendly). Outing can irreversibly alter lives, and journalists hold that power and that responsibility to do better.

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