



Words of the Dying: CHCH TV and Constable Garrett Styles

On Tuesday, June 28, 2011, Managing Producer Debbie Walker at CHCH Television near Toronto faced a last-minute news judgment call. That morning, a respected police officer had been dragged to his death by a car of teenagers. The police dispatcher had recorded Constable Garrett Styles' last words. Styles, though dying, was professional and audibly concerned about the teens trapped in the car. Walker had a copy of the tape.

The *Toronto Star*, another local news outlet, had already decided not to put the audio of Styles speaking on its website. Moreover, CHCH News' own reporter, Cristina Tenaglia, had deliberately left the audio out of her report, which had already run on the 6 p.m. evening news program. Walker did not know about Tenaglia's decision. What she did know was that the audio was in her hands, and it was a strong piece of "actuality," as broadcast reporters call good audio.

Walker had only a few minutes left before the 6 p.m. broadcast concluded. If she were to add the audio to the program for the anchor to introduce, it would have to be immediately. There was no time to contact News Director Mike Katrycz. On the one hand, Walker was confident that the audio would add to the public's understanding of the accident. It reflected well on Styles, and was a powerful illustration of courage in the face of death. At the same time, she recognized that Styles' family might find it painful to have his last words broadcast. Moreover, neither the family nor the police dispatcher had given permission to use the taped conversation.

Walker had to decide—use the recording, or let it go.

The Traffic Stop

The Tuesday before his 33rd birthday started out as an ordinary day for York Region Police Constable Garrett Styles. The city was still in the dark. It was almost 5 a.m. and the seven-year veteran was patrolling north of Toronto when he pulled over a Dodge Caravan on a routine traffic stop on Highway 28, just south of Herald Road in the town of East Gwillimbury.

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There were four youths inside the vehicle; the driver was only 15 years old and unlicensed. Later, a police source would say that the youth had taken out the van without permission.¹ After checking the vehicle's plates, Styles walked to the van and reached inside to get the keys. Suddenly, the driver accelerated in an attempt to escape the officer, dragging Styles for 300 meters (900 feet). The youth eventually lost control of the van and it flipped over. Styles was pinned underneath.

Crushed beneath the van and unable to get out, Styles was still conscious. He immediately called for help over the police radio, speaking with dispatchers for several minutes. The father of two pleaded for someone to get the van off him, and to help the teenagers inside it. As his breathing grew more labored, Styles offered details of the situation, but stopped talking once emergency workers arrived. Though he was still alive en route to the hospital, Styles was pronounced dead at Southlake Regional Health Centre in Newmarket. The van's driver was taken to the Hospital for Sick Kids with a police escort. He was paralyzed by the accident, and lost the use of his legs.²

Following the incident, media outlets in greater Toronto were eager for details of the accident: the deaths of police officers usually garnered wide coverage by Toronto media. But what was unique about Styles' death was the recording of his final words on the police dispatch—a recording that would soon make its way online, on a website accessible to the media. Over the course of the day, multiple news outlets would have to decide: publish a dying man's last words, or withhold them from the public?

Toronto Star Treatment

By the time *Toronto Star* City Editor Graham Parley arrived in the newsroom just after 8 a.m., the assignment desk was abuzz with the news of Styles' death. The *Star*, at an average of over 1.2 million daily readers, had the widest circulation of any Canadian newspaper. It branded itself as a "paper for the people," and was seen as left-leaning. Its online news website was the largest in the country.³

The *Star* got word of the accident right after it happened, just before 5 a.m. Zoe McKnight was in the radio room, which monitored police activity and breaking news round-the-clock. "I remember York [Region police] was really cagey at first, and I called the duty inspector about 100 times to see what had happened," she recalls.

¹ Curtis Rush, Liam Casey and Robyn Doolittle, "Female passenger in van that killed officer says 'sorry,'" *Toronto Star*, October 11, 2012, See: <http://www.thestar.com/news/gta/crime/article/1017498--female-passenger-in-van-that-killed-officer-says-sorry>

² The 15-year-old would later be charged with first-degree murder. His legal case was still pending as of early 2012.

³ For more background on the *Star*, see: <http://www.thestar.com/aboutus>

All they would say was there had been an accident, the roads were closed and there were injuries. I do remember it was very ominous. I think York [police department] knew how bad it was.⁴

McKnight was unable to obtain any further details from the police. Between the start of his own shift at 6 a.m. and the arrival of reporter Henry Stancu at 7, Assignment Editor Barry Brimbecom learned that the road had been closed for a police investigation. Says Brimbecom:

By the time Henry arrived, I knew that a police officer had been injured, but not how badly. He and I discussed whether it was worth going, since we didn't know whether the injury was a minor thing. We couldn't get that detail from the police, so Henry headed up shortly after.⁵

Liam Casey got to the newsroom that day for the 8 a.m. shift. It was his first full week as an intern at the *Star*, and he was immediately sent to stake out the hospital. He remembers:

The 15-year-old kid driving, that in itself made it really interesting. I was up at the hospital for a bit; there were tons of media up there. The most I've ever seen in one place.⁶

Casey spent the day trying to find Styles' wife. He eventually spoke with one of her friends and found out where she lived. He went to her home but no one appeared to be there. Meanwhile, Stancu was babysitting the scene of the accident. People were arriving with flowers, and he wanted to be there to get photos and try to intercept any family members that might show up. Reporter Curtis Rush was back at the office, trying to wring any information he could from police, emergency medical officials, and social media. "We were doing anything we could, because from the get-go you knew it was a huge story," says Rush.⁷

Recording. Constable Styles died just after 6 a.m. Around 10 or 11 a.m., according to Parley, a *Star* reporter heard from a cameraman for another news outlet about a website, RadioReference.com, that broadcast and archived police radio (and other) publicly available transmissions from across North America. It had the radio exchange between Styles and the York police. Scott Colby, one of the *Star's* assignment editors, found the site and the *Star* paid \$15 to join. Colby traced back until he found the Styles [recording](#). Another staff member then [transcribed](#) the tape.

⁴ Sarah Ratchford interview with Zoe McKnight via email on December 7, 2011. All further quotes from McKnight, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁵ Barry Brimbecom email to Sarah Ratchford, December 6, 2011.

⁶ Sarah Ratchford interview with Liam Casey via email in December 2011 (exact date uncertain). All further quotes from Casey, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

⁷ Sarah Ratchford interview with Curtis Rush via email in December 2011 (exact date uncertain). All further quotes from Rush, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

City Editor Parley was unsure what to do with the transcript, or the audio. On the one hand, a police officer—arguably a public figure in his capacity as a civil servant—had died. The manner in which he died—dragged to death by a stolen minivan operated by a child—was newsworthy as well. On the other hand, Parley wanted to protect Styles’ wife and family; hearing a broadcast of Styles’ last words could add unnecessary pain to an already tragic situation. “This is... difficult mainly because in most situations there’s something to guide you, you’ve had it before,” recalls Parley. “I’m not sure we’ve had a story before where we had the communications, where we had a tape of, a cop dying within hours of the event.”⁸

Parley sat down with Lynn McAuley, who ran the newspaper’s website, to discuss whether to post the audio. If Styles hadn’t been so composed and dignified, he adds, there would never have been a discussion. There were good arguments for publicizing the professional attitude Styles was able to maintain. “If someone says ‘Mummy, mummy’ in their last moments, it’s difficult to see a public interest in running something so personal,” notes Parley. But Styles’ concern throughout was the wellbeing of the people in the vehicle on top of him.

“We both decided it wouldn’t be appropriate and took our recommendation to Joe [Hall, *Star* managing editor], who agreed. So there wasn’t much of a debate because no one was really arguing for it to run,” says Parley.

These days, more and more you have to make quicker decisions because the Web comes into account. It’s not like before where you’ve got all day to think about if you’re gonna put it in the story. You have to make the decision pretty quick.

The *Star* decided to post the transcript, which gave the public the opportunity to read Styles’ final words. But it withheld the audio—at once the most moving and the most troubling piece of the news report.

CHCH TV Reports

Meanwhile, television station CHCH, based in Hamilton, Ontario, had also sent a reporter to cover the story. CHCH was owned by Channel Zero, an independent, regional Canadian broadcaster. It served a medium-sized market of Hamilton/Halton/Niagara.

Reporter Cristina Tenaglia went to the scene of the accident in York Region to report throughout the day. There she talked to a freelance cameraman who occasionally shot video for CHCH. He had acquired an audio recording of Styles’ final radio dispatch, and allowed Tenaglia to listen to it. “The tape showed [Styles’] true professionalism and heroism, as he dispatched that

⁸ Sarah Ratchford interview with Graham Parley in Toronto on October 19, 2011. All further quotes from Parley, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.

he was hurt, but so were others, and needed help,” explains Tenaglia.⁹ The words on the tape could help contextualize the story and illustrate Styles’ character.

But Tenaglia wasn’t sure what to do with the audio. For one, she didn’t feel comfortable airing it because neither party (Styles or the dispatcher) had been aware it would be broadcast on television. “Normally the rule with private recordings is at least one party must be aware that the recording is being taped for broadcast,” Tenaglia clarifies. Second, she struggled with the nature of the dispatch itself. “I had ethical concerns about airing the last breaths of a dying man,” she says. Among her concerns were whether she would be doing more harm than good to Styles’ friends and family, and whether she would enter into sensationalist territory by airing the dispatch.

In the end, Tenaglia decided not to broadcast the recording, but rather quote verbatim from it. She sent her report off to the station, which ran it on the 6 o’clock news.

The 6 p.m. Newscast

In the newsroom, a producer had acquired the recording of Styles’ final dispatch off the RadioReference website and took it to Managing Producer Walker. Walker’s shift ran 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., and she oversaw the newsroom during the 6 p.m. daily broadcast. She was the ultimate authority on what ran on-air.

Walker thought Styles’ conversation with the police dispatcher was compelling. She recognized that Tenaglia’s story had not included the actual recording, but did not know that Tenaglia had debated using it. As Walker saw it, the recording gave weight and heft to the story. It painted a vivid portrait of Styles and what many would consider his heroism. So often police received only negative media attention; why should the press shy away from a story that demonstrated the best of police character?

There was still time to work several minutes from the audio recording into the broadcast, introduced as a late-breaking item by the news anchor. The nightly producer was in the control room; the audio was ready to go if wanted. By tomorrow, it would be old news and unusable. Presumably other broadcast networks were also going to air it. Walker had to decide: use it, or lose it.

⁹ Carly Conway interview with Cristina Tenaglia in Toronto on September 21, 2011. All further quotes from Tenaglia, unless otherwise attributed, are from this interview.