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Journalism 4460

Capstone Essay

Racial tension had been building throughout the fall 2015 semester at the University of Missouri.

It began in September, when student body president Payton Head wrote a viral Facebook post about being called the n-word on campus. Students from the Legion of Black Collegians reported being called racial slurs on campus in October, which sparked multiple student protests. Frustrated with the administration's lack of response, student group Concerned Student 1950 stopped UM System President Tim Wolfe's car at the Homecoming parade and issued demands to the university when he didn't acknowledge them. Eventually, graduate student Jonathan Butler began a hunger strike in November with the goal of removing Wolfe from office. He didn't eat for eight days, students camped out on Carnahan Quad in support and the Missouri football team said they'd boycott until Wolfe resigned. On Nov. 9, Wolfe stepped down.

I was a news editor at The Maneater, MU's independent student newspaper, as these events were developing. We knew we had to cover these stories; ignoring them wasn't an option, because our purpose was to cover campus. The challenge for writing about student activism, however, became sourcing and framing. The Maneater had had a rocky relationship with students in the social justice community since the year before when an editorial criticized the title of a protest. Student activists said we only covered them in times of crisis, which wasn't untrue, and they often refused to talk to us. We had a few key student activist sources that trusted our writers and would still work with us, so we were still able to get their perspective, but not as fully as we would

have liked. Our editorial board and staff also lacked racial diversity, which didn't help the appearance of our paper when working to find sources.

These challenges brought multiple ethical questions into play. Sources are essential to the framing of a story. A story can be completely factually accurate, but it's not complete if it doesn't include the right sources.

The Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics tells journalists to consider sources' motives before promising anonymity and to be cautious when making promises. But what happens when sources will only talk to you under the condition of anonymity, even if they don't have a clear reason, and most people from their activist group won't talk to you at all? We typically granted student activist sources anonymity when they requested it, because we felt that their perspectives were invaluable to the stories we were writing. We didn't make promises to sources regarding what we would or wouldn't include in the story, because we wanted to maintain editorial control over our content. Maneater policy mandates quote checks with sources before publication, but never review of the whole story. However, that ended up causing multiple sources to stop talking with us when the story we wrote wasn't the one they had envisioned, even when all the quotes and information was accurate. We felt confident in our reporting and fact-checking, but they likely didn't include the complete picture because of these sourcing problems.

We also had to consider ethics when choosing how to frame stories. As students as well as journalists, we automatically saw the story through the students' lens. Many editors, including myself, also had personal connections to students who were protesting. The Maneater calls itself "the student voice of MU," so we felt that we had the obligation to give the most weight to students' voices, not by being a mouthpiece for activists but by showing their side of the story.

However, another part of the SPJ Code of Ethics tells journalists to “diligently seek subjects of news coverage to allow them to respond to criticism or allegations of wrongdoing.” This is tricky when dealing with any sort of administration that requires journalists to funnel interview requests through public relations officials. That’s not an excuse for not trying, though, and we often didn’t reach out to them at all, assuming we’d be turned down or unconsciously focusing more on students. We certainly weren’t as fair as we could have been to the administrators who were being accused of perpetuating racism on campus. We also didn’t hold the students accountable for the demands they were making or question how feasible they were. We sought truth in our reporting, but didn’t examine as many sides as we could have because we gave more weight to students’ voices.

There were multiple stakeholders affected by these stories that we had to take into consideration. The activist community, which primarily included black students, had the most at stake because we had a lot of power in choosing how we portrayed their actions. MU administrators could also be affected because our reporting controlled how they were viewed by many members of the community, especially students. If we depicted them as corrupt or untrustworthy, that’s how students would see them. Finally, our audience would inevitably be affected because our reporting affects the information they’re given.

I worked with managing editor Katherine Knott and editor-in-chief Liz Loutfi, as well as other Maneater editors, when making these decisions about coverage. We spent late nights in the newsroom discussing how to frame our stories with headlines and tweets, especially for a story written when Jonathan Butler signed a do-not-resuscitate order. That story was criticized for sensationalism, but it was true and we felt that it was an important development because it showed the gravity of the hunger strike.

The biggest takeaway from this experience is that covering social justice issues is complicated. It's far from black and white, and there are many perspectives to consider in these stories. Including or not including certain sources can make a significant difference in how the story is presented and what's included. I'm left with some questions I want to ask myself when reporting future stories, especially regarding social justice. What are this source's motives for talking with me? Am I telling multiple sides of the story fairly, or being a mouthpiece for one group? What perspectives am I not including that I need to? Hopefully by more carefully considering sourcing and framing, I'll be able to tell the most complete version of the truth in my stories.