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April 4th, 2023
JOUR 460W

**The Ethical Problem of Truth and Timeliness in Journalism:
Felicia Sonmez's Tweet Regarding Kobe Bryant's Faults on Day of His Death**

Introduction

On the day of Kobe Bryant's death, a journalist from *The Washington Post* tweeted a link to an article regarding sexual allegations against the professional basketball player, resulting in extreme backlash and minimal protection from the workplace. This essay discusses a journalist's moral obligation to share the truth through Kant's Categorical Imperative, approaching the situation with the theory that humans can have good reason and responsibility, thus they have a duty to act with good reason.

Background

On January 26, 2020, NBA athlete Kobe Bryant, his daughter Gianna, along with 9 other people died in a tragic helicopter crash. It was caused when pilot Ara Zobayan lost control of the helicopter while attempting to climb above the clouds in Southern California, crashing into a hillside in Calabasas, CA (Wise, 2021).

When the news had broken out, people immediately turned to social media for information on the matter. Upon confirmation of his death, people had sent out their praise and mourning to the Bryant family. The Los Angeles Lakers shooting guard was a decorated basketball player, known as an NBA All-Star, MVP, and many other notable titles. He created a training complex known as Mamba Academy, participated in the community, and was an inspiration to those in the NBA and those who aspired to be.

In the hours of his death, national political journalist Felicia Sonmez tweeted a link to a 2016 Daily Beast article about the allegation of sexual assault made against Mr. Bryant in 2003 (Abrams, 2020). Due to policies with *The Washington Post*, she didn't provide any commentary on the tweet, just a direct link to the article. In summary, the article discussed Bryant's arrest in 2003 for a charge of felony sexual assault that was later dropped in 2005 after the accuser settled with him outside of the court (Abrams, 2020). He believed that the encounter was consensual, but later came to understand that she thought otherwise (Abrams, 2020).

Sonmez's post immediately faced backlash from Twitter users. She reacted in a tweet that was an attempt to encourage users to read the story, and stated she didn't write it. Then, she posted a screenshot of a rather vulgar email she received and revealed their identity (Abrams, 2020). Sonmez was then told to take her tweets down by the managing editor of *The Post*, Tracy Grant, and the newspaper put Sonmez on paid suspension, not specifying which tweets inflicted the action (Abrams, 2020). The journalist faced a multitude of threats and her own information was being leaked when the editors at the Post suggested she find another place to sleep for the night, leaving Sonmez unsafe and afraid.

A few days later, the Post reinstated Felicia Sonmez on January 29th, 2020 after receiving harsh internal and external criticism over her suspension. Grant stated after an internal review of the situation, they considered Sonmez's tweets to be "ill-timed", however "she was not in clear and direct violation of our social media policy" (Albert, 2020). According to their workplace policy, the newspaper states that "we must be ever mindful of preserving the reputation of The Washington Post for Journalistic excellence, fairness, and independence", stated by Grant. However, it is also a part of the Post's mission statement to "tell ALL the truth as far as it can learn it, concerning the important affairs of America and the world" (Albert, 2020). While Sonmez got her job back with the Post, the way the problem was handled led to a lot of confusion and anger among the journalism community, with multiple newspaper outlets showing their support for Felicia Sonmez through statements and petitions.

The Relevancy of the Issue

The ethical issue with this situation is that The Washington Post didn't protect Felicia Sonmez's right to speak the truth, but rather shut her down and put her on leave because she harmed the reputation of a notable public figure. As a journalist, it's one's moral obligation to the public to share the truth about figures and organizations, whether they be notable or not, and regardless of timing. Due to the Post's reaction to this event, it blurred the lines of what and when personal information should be shared to the public in journalism.

Looking through the lens of Kant's Categorical Imperative, this situation could've gone a completely different route had the newspaper outlet kept respect for persons in mind and protected Sonmez after the situation she was put in. For Sonmez to have withheld that information until it was a timely manner would've been a form of lying, which is against moral law. Many journalists have posted far more heinous things with actual commentary and Sonmez's case, which didn't involve any comments or opinion, was one that should've been defended by The Washington Post.

Sonmez was also trying to get the story out about a woman who had been sexually assaulted by someone of high social and professional standing. Sonmez was acting with due respect towards the survivor of the event, acknowledging her story so it was not forgotten in the midst of his death. It seemed that her motive to post the 2003 article was partly due to the #MeToo movement, as she was too survivor of sexual assault/misconduct, giving her a different perspective on Kobe Bryant. Sonmez addressed that she "can understand that it would be difficult for people to read that, but it's also difficult, I imagine, for all of the survivors in the country to see these allegations essentially be erased" (Abrams, 2020).

While Sonmez's timeliness of posting the article was bold, it made a statement and paid respects to the woman who survived a sexual assault. Regardless of who the perpetrator is, popular or unpopular, a victim of that matter deserves to have their story shared and feel seen. The Washington Post was more concerned on the outrage caused by the post rather than the value of speaking the truth, even when it's not convenient.

Counterargument

On the other hand, one might argue that Felicia Sonmez was going against the laws of morality by not respecting the other parties involved. While Sonmez's intentions were to shed light on a victim of sexual assault and share the story of an influential figure doing wrong, it disrespected the family of Bryant on one of the most tragic days of their life. In ordinance to Kant's Categorical Imperative, this would be defying the moral laws as the tweet, while unsaid, was a direct hit at the reputation of Kobe Bryant. The tweet was ill-timed and Sonmez was aware of the situation upon tweeting the article about Bryant's sexual allegations. This could be considered an act of defamation because it is tarnishing the reputation of a public figure, which also goes against the Categorical Imperative. Kant claims that "respect for others is incompatible with arrogance, defamation, and ridicule" (Hill, 1998). Sonmez's tweet did not include any commentary on the article, just the link, but she knowingly put the article on a platform that she knew would have reached and encouraged her followers to see Bryant in a negative light on the day of his death. To post about a public figure's indecent acts from over 15 years ago on the day of his death is to tarnish his reputation. It's even more disrespectful to do so when the person involved had died tragically on the same day. Sonmez did not follow one of the main points of Kant's respect for persons, which is to "Act so that you treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end, and never as a means only" (Hill, 1998). Sonmez's desired result of posting the article was to remind the public that not all social figures should be entirely deserving of their praise. The day she tweeted that should've been for mourning and paying respects to those lost in the helicopter crash, not putting a spotlight on the mistakes of the social figure.

It goes back to treating others as one would like to be treated, and Sonmez didn't consider that. Had she had posted this a few days after Bryant's death, there could've been a chance that her career wouldn't have been put at risk, and she wouldn't have received threats and slander from social media.

Conclusion

Felicia Sonmez's tweet linking to an article of Kobe Bryant's sexual allegations on the day of his death was an ethical problem in more ways than one. In the perspective of Kant's Categorical Imperative, it both supports and defies the moral laws of the theory.

On one end of the spectrum, Sonmez's link to the article was one with due respect and she followed all of the rules and guidelines of her employer, yet she faced backlash and temporary leave because of who it was about and what events occurred that day. She was addressing a sexual assault victims story, allowing her platform to be a space to recognize that Bryant had made some poor actions in his past. A journalist has a right to speak the truth regardless of who, where, and when. To lie goes against Kant's moral law, and Sonmez saw an opportunity to speak the truth rather than withholding the information until it was deemed appropriate. On the other end, Sonmez didn't take into account how her post might look as far as timing, and how it didn't respect all persons involved. Bryant was spoken of in a respectful light

that day across media, and to attempt to tarnish his reputation on such a tragic day could be considered defamation, and to act in such a way goes against Kant's respect for persons.

Overall, Sonmez's actions opened the floodgates to ethical problems in journalism that needed to be addressed, but to do such on a day when the person of topic has died in a crash along with 9 others, was not respectful of those mourning and the families involved.

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