

Journalistic ethics in transgender tragedy

MEDIA

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Last week a troubling story broke on the high-profile ESPN subsidiary *Grantland*. '[Dr V's Magical Putter](#)' began as a quirky sports story, an investigation into a potentially game-changing piece of golf equipment. The putter's inventor, Dr Essay Anne Vanderbilt, was challenging the old-hat wisdom of golfing technologies with hard physics. An attractive, eccentric inventor with a higher degree from MIT and a decade in secret dealings with the US Department of Defence, Vanderbilt, or Dr V. as she was known, cut an irresistible story for any journalist.

But after the journalist in question, Caleb Hannan, tested the putter and found it roadworthy, he began to investigate not only the science behind it but also the inventor herself, against her wishes. In the process of learning that Vanderbilt's credentials were falsified, Hannan also discovered that Vanderbilt was a trans-woman. In the article, this knowledge is conveyed as part-and-parcel with her fraudulent business claims. Hannan even outed her to one of her investors.

Some months later, a few days after a disturbed email exchange with Hannan, Vanderbilt killed herself.

The internet does not need one more person to stoke the fire against a piece of ethically tenuous journalism, or use one person's tragic decline for the sake of rhetoric. This topic been written about by much more erudite and sensitive people than me — for example [here](#) , [here](#) , [here](#) , and by *Grantland's* own editor-in-chief Bill Simmons [here](#) . But I do want to talk about the aftermath of the tragedy, what it means for both journalists and their subjects, and what reporting might mean in a post-internet world.

In following this issue closely, I am reminded that there are profound cultural changes brewing. The internet has changed what we say and how we say it. How we produce and legitimise knowledge is becoming more collectivised, and more frequently informed by the people who have historically played object to news stories.

'Dr V.'s *Magical Putter*' was written in a journalistic tradition that may struggle to exist in the post-internet world: the tradition of long-form narrative journalism championed by the great American magazines like *The New Yorker*, *Esquire*, *Harpers*, and *Rolling Stone*. Narrative journalism is a highly regarded literary tradition that students and professionals of writing dream of mastering. Some of its finest examples have endured the same cultural longevity and impact on our collective imaginations as the great movies and novels of our times.

It does what traditional news journalism cannot: it addresses the fact that by the act of writing a story, a journalist is present in it, changing it; and that this

has potentially dire ethical outcomes. I don't know of any journalist who doesn't ask ethical questions of themselves and their work frequently. It takes some resolve to continue working in a field that is perhaps, by its nature, unethical. Janet Malcolm's opening line in *The Journalist and the Murderer* comes to mind: 'Every journalist who is not too stupid to notice what is going on knows that what they do is morally indefensible.'

Narrative journalism challenges the ethical lines of writing nonfiction. It addresses the bind journalists feel most troublingly: on the one hand, the obligation to be true to the singularity of your necessarily limited perspective; on the other, to refer to the absolute and baffling limits of knowledge and risk writing unconvincingly, dishonestly, ineffectively. The change in practice will come about because of publishing realities: the speed and infinite possibility of response — to correct, reprimand, enrich — tests the imaginative authority of journalists.

One widely-held assumption about journalism is that it is some form of Truth Telling. It's not so much journalists who believe that; it is laypeople upon whom journalism is put daily. The internet is coming closer to the realisation that journalism is simply the compilation of research that reaches certain ends and is broadcast to certain audiences. That talking back is a possibility. In this changing game, the people who have historically been written about have the means and reach to interpret and respond.

While I feel for Hannan, who has received death threats among his penance, and of course feel terribly for Dr V., whose mental health may have suffered under the stress of a story she did not wish to have exposed, it is quite remarkable that a poorly executed story and the death of a person on the margins can hit a cultural nerve and engender some sort of rhetorical change so quickly.

But perhaps this is just more noise being made to fill the gap left by Dr V. While this saga has brought vital conversations to the mainstream, this is only true because she is dead. Dr V. is the only person who knows what it was to be her; and Hannan is the only one who knows what it was like to author that story.

The rest is, you know, silence.

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