

Rather Reckless: The Killian Memo Scandal

Even for a respected, credible journalist, one ethic mistake can change everything. In the case of CBS News anchor Dan Rather and the Killian documents, Rather and CBS made a fatal mistake. Journalists are required to report the truth, and although Rather and CBS were under a deadline and rushed to get the story, authenticity should have been the first priority. Although at the time, CBS and Rather felt that the evidence was sound, the fact that the story was “crashed” eventually effected Rather and CBS’s reputation.

The Killian documents suggested that President George W. Bush had ignored a direct order, and ~~experienced~~ received other special treatment from the late Lt. Colonel Jerry Killian during Bush’s time in the Texas Air National Guard. Rather, and CBS believed that this information the public needed to know due to the approaching presidential election. **However, if Rather and CBS had consulted the Principle of Utility, or Utilitarianism,** Rather and CBS would have realized that reporting the story was not newsworthy enough??, was not confirmed as accurate and did not benefit the greater good. **Utilitarianism questions** if doing something that is questionable would benefit more people then it would hurt. Reporting the story without complete accuracy and without feeling complete sureness inevitably hurt the ~~station~~ network and Rather more then it hurt President Bush.

Although CBS and Rather thought the information was accurate enough, unsure feelings surrounded the story. Producer Mary Mapes stated, “From the moment we saw (them) our overriding concern was whether these really represented the truth.” There was no denial from President Bush’s administration; however, there was also no proof that the documents were really written by Killian. **The ethical reasoning processes created by Roy Peter Clark would have been another approach that** would have ~~elevated~~ alleviated the ~~ethie~~ ethical crisis. If Rather and CBS had asked themselves five simple questions, things would have turned out differently. Rather and CBS should have asked what does the viewer really need to know, what good would this story do, how would Rather or CBS feel if the story was about them, were they missing an important point of view, and most of all, if the story was complete and accurate to the best of their knowledge.

Credibility is the most important attribute for a journalist and for a news station. Reporting a story that has missing links, no matter how exciting the story might be, will only adversely affect the journalist and the audience. There might be times where a story will be

“crashed” and it will be accurate, but in a situation where the President of the United States is involved and a **station network** that is openly liberal?? is involved, Rather and CBS should have made extra sure that the story contained complete facts. **Sociologist Herbert Gans suggested stations networks** like CBS have a reputation of framing a story to make a political point. This situation confirmed that to be true, and set Rather and CBS up for disappointment. If Rather and CBS had focused more on reporting the truth than a political vendetta, reputations, the crisis, and the drama would have been omitted.

In a situation such as this, the **station network** and Rather would have benefited from doing one of two things. One of them being **Sissela Boks’s questions in her ethical decision making process. First, how did the station and Rather feel about the action.** Second, was there another way to achieve the same goal that will not raise ethical issues, and last how will others respond. Following through with Mapes convictions regarding the accuracy and asking if there was another way to tell the story at a later time would have changed the outcome drastically. **The other option would have been to follow Ralph Potters, Potters Box Model. His four simple questions test** loyalty and values while forcing the chooser to decide where allegiances lie. In any situation these four steps determine what really matters and how far someone is willing to be go. The steps include, defining the situation, identifying values, selecting principles and choosing loyalties.

Ultimately, personal convictions are the greatest judges to determine whether a situation is worth it or not.