

MEDIA

A ‘conspiracy’ for higher ratings – at Newtown’s expense

6 HOURS AGO



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NBC’s newest multi-million-dollar anchor is about to give America – and Connecticut in particular – a lesson in journalistic ethics. It’s a fight that pits the network’s need for ratings and publicity against the pleas of Sandy Hook parents not to cause them more pain.

This weekend, Sunday Night with Megyn Kelly plans to air an interview with conspiracy website author and radio host Alex Jones. In one of his more outlandish theories, Jones has called the 2012 Sandy Hook elementary school shooting “a giant hoax” put on by actors using green screens and props. No one died there, his theory goes. Instead, he says, the Obama administration made it all up in order to increase support for gun control.

The Jones interview is undoubtedly an attempt to attract attention for Kelly’s new show, which has struggled in the ratings against 60 Minutes in its first two episodes. But with that choice, the network is putting its desire for ratings and the creation of “buzz” for Kelly’s show ahead of the ethical consideration of “minimizing harm” in reporting.

That concept is a key component of the [Society of Professional Journalists Code of Ethics](https://www.spi.org/pdf/spi-code-of-ethics.pdf) (<https://www.spi.org/pdf/spi-code-of-ethics.pdf>). An ethical journalist, the code says, should:

- Balance the public’s need for information against potential harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance or undue intrusiveness.

- Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage. Use heightened sensitivity when dealing with juveniles, victims of sex crimes, and sources or subjects who are inexperienced or unable to give consent.
- Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity, even if others do.
- Consider the long-term implications of the extended reach and permanence of publication.

The claim that Sandy Hook was a “hoax” fits the journalistic definition of “harm” because it’s cruel and sickening to many people – especially the Sandy Hook parents and Newtown community. Nicole Hockley, the mother of one of the young victims, calls the hoax theory “beyond reprehensible (http://www.sandyhookpromise.org/sandy_hook_promise_letter_to_nbc_s_andy_lack),” She and others want NBC to cancel the interview so as not to give Jones legitimacy and a platform for voicing his beliefs.

At least one company, JP Morgan Chase, is listening. It has asked NBC to pull its ads from the show that night. And Kelly was dis-invited from her hosting duties at the Sandy Hook Promise charity’s gala.

For her part, however, Kelly has defended airing the Alex Jones segment, tweeting (<https://twitter.com/megynkelly/status/874649711965343744>) a statement in which she says while she agrees the Sandy Hook conspiracy theory is “revolting,” the public needs to hear from Jones, since President Trump has praised him and appeared on his show in the past.



I understand and respect the decision of the event organizers but I'm of course disappointed that I won't be there to support them on Wednesday night. I find



Megyn Kelly ✓
@megynkelly

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Here is my statement regarding Sunday night's interview:

11:28 AM - 13 Jun 2017

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Despite this justification, NBC should think hard about whether broadcasting the interview is the right thing to do. By giving Jones a platform, the network will undoubtedly expand his reach to millions who have never heard his name before. His crazy theories and “fake news” alerts will get new followers, which is the opposite of what should happen.

The “minimize harm” section of the SPJ ethics code has been taken very seriously by Connecticut news organizations in the four-and-a-half years since the shootings. Any mention of Sandy Hook or the victims’ families is treated with the utmost respect and care. And TV stations like WFSB have respected the Newtown community’s request (<http://www.adweek.com/tvspy/wfsb-will-honor-newtowns-request-to-stay-away-on-anniversary-of-sandy-hook-shooting/111325>) to avoid sending reporters to cover anniversaries and other events. While those are undoubtedly newsworthy events, sometimes the ethical consideration of “doing no harm” outweighs the journalistic need to show up at emotional events with cameras rolling.

This is the example that NBC should be following in this case. Instead of giving a platform to absurd theories, they should try to make those theories as difficult to find as possible. When it comes to Sandy Hook, the ethical consideration of protecting Newtown families from emotional harm should outweigh the public’s interest in hearing from an apparently crazy man with a website — no matter what the ratings may be.

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