



A free press, but with what responsibility?

“With great power, comes great responsibility.” That’s the famous quote from the Spider-Man comics that succinctly sums up the feeling most of us have regarding any individual or institution that holds a position of power. With the rise of by-the-second news reporting, this is particularly relevant to today’s modern media companies.

In today’s media environment, there is an extreme premium placed on not only being “first” with a story, but to be first with the seedling of a story. To be first with supplying an endless stream of updates to a developing story. You’ve no doubt seen “#Breaking” or “#exclusive” in your Twitter feeds. While this can certainly whet our appetites for the latest big story, and in some cases, gives us an early warning about stories of great importance, this trend is not without its problems.

This is particularly true in police work. Too often we see “witnesses” rush to the TV cameras to give their version of events, many of whom do not end up providing the same courtesy to police investigators.

In a previous column, I wrote about how so called “witnesses” were quick to give a TV news crew an interview in Charlotte, N.C., following an officer-involved shooting. Their interviews, quickly repeated in the news media, combined with a partial video clip, helped fuel anger in the community and led to several days of civil unrest, looting, vandalism and protests. The problem was many of those who gave interviews either did not even witness the event or later recanted the media version of their accounts.

We have seen the same thing happen here locally. In October of last year, there were two officer-involved shootings that led to the deaths of two suspects over the course of a weekend. In one case, an African-American male suspect pointed a gun at officers who were pursuing him, causing officers to take action to protect themselves. The immediate witness accounts on the news included information stating the suspect was unarmed, that the suspect was running with his hands up, and that the suspect was bare-chested, running with his hands up. All of this was false.

With protesters taking to the streets over the incident, Chief Beck, in an unprecedented move, felt compelled to release surveillance video attained from a private business. In the video, the suspect is clearly seen running with his gun drawn, wearing a hooded sweatshirt and clearly not surrendering to the officers.

Likewise, the second OIS of the weekend involved a Latino youth with a replica gun. In similar fashion, eyewitnesses stated that the officers repeatedly fired at a surrendering suspect. The sad reality? This troubled youth had essentially left a suicide note, doctored his replica gun to make it look real and committed suicide by cop.

In all three of the cases listed above, diligent follow-up investigations helped present a clearer set of facts to the public. However, the rush to get content either online or on the air led to the broadcasting of false information, which, in turn, was shared over and over and over on social media, exponentially spreading the misinformation and impacting not just the public's opinion of an incident, but also potentially impacting other witnesses' recollection of what they may have seen.

This is a dangerous trend, and we should all be concerned. But the news media industry should be concerned as well. Their mission is to get the "facts out." And that's an important mission. However, in the rush to get content out, they open themselves up to reporting unverified information, and they may use witnesses who lack credibility, all of which can lead to riling up anger among the public.

So if they use unverified information that acts as a springboard to sparking public anger, or in some cases, violence and vandalism, do they not have some culpability? Free speech has its limits. The most known restriction is crying "fire" in a crowded movie theater. How much more different is rushing a story that a news organization knows has the potential to create civil unrest?

I don't believe reporters use information they know is untrue. Not at all. Perhaps, however, there's some simple steps that may lead to stories not #breaking as fast, but might result in a more rigorous use of facts and witness accounts.

First, before interviewing an "eyewitness," ask if they have been interviewed by police detectives first. Ask if they've informed the police that they have information to share. If a source has not shared it with the police but will do so for a camera, this should raise alarm bells. Additionally, take information that may be easily corroborated or debunked by police officials at the scene before airing an interview that purports to have specifics. At least give the Department officials the opportunity to state, "No, the suspect was fully clothed." Finally, debrief after major events to see what they could have done better. We are constantly the targets of Monday-morning quarterbacking; some of it would be helpful for the news media.

There's a recent local example of several news reporters from CBS 2 Los Angeles and KCAL 9 Los Angeles getting it right during a "viral" officer-involved incident. The incident involves the altercation of one of our off-duty officers in Anaheim with a large group of juveniles who assaulted him. These reporters sought to go beyond the video on an endless loop and canvassed

the neighborhood to get a fuller understanding of the issues at play, which included: constant vandalism, drug use, underage drinking and graffiti, to name a few. If you have not seen them, take a look at **bit.ly/KCAL9clip** and **bit.ly/CBSLAclip**.

I'm not asking the news media to stop doing their jobs. I'm not asking them to hold the police officers and other public officials less accountable. I am, however, asking them to recognize the great power they have and to exercise that power with great responsibility.

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