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Ethics Essay

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Some athletes don't use correct grammar when they speak. That is common knowledge, especially among sports journalists. Athletes use slang and they speak how they talk to their friends, not how a professor or person giving a scholarly speech might. That slang can include words that don't really exist and, most often, grammatical errors. These issues aren't glaring when they're shown on television because many people just see it as part of the player's character. But when those same quotes are printed out for people to read, the errors become a lot more noticeable. As a sports journalism major at the University of Missouri and a Web Editorial Associate for the Minnesota Timberwolves, I heard these types of quotes more than a few times. And, while writing stories, I had to ask myself this question: should I fix the grammar in these quotes so the player doesn't get embarrassed in print, or should I keep the quote as is, preserve the honesty of the quote and risk the player being embarrassed in the media?

I see this issue as a battle between two ethical principles laid out by the Society of Professional Journalists. The first principle says, "Show compassion for those who may be affected by news coverage... Consider cultural differences in approach and treatment." While that quote seems to defend the athlete and cleaning up their quotes, the second principle says, "Ethical journalism should be accurate and fair. Journalists should be honest and courageous in gathering, reporting and interpreting information." That side seems to argue that altering quotes, however small the change, is unethical. This is the dichotomy that challenges me and other journalists. Should we keep the quote as it is and seem like we're trying to make the athlete look bad, or do we change the grammar or slang and lose credibility in the rest of the quote?

Outlets and reporters deal with this every day. Fawn Germer, a reporter for the Rocky Mountain News in Denver, wrote an article for the *American Journalism Review* about this debate. Germer talks to many different sources, and each person has a different opinion. Some, like media ethics professor Sue O'Brien, say there's a difference between changing a quote outright and just cleaning up a quote — which means changing verb tenses or clarifying a “bulky phrase.” Then, there is Susan Feeney of the *Dallas Morning News* who said, “I'm one of those people who think quote marks are sacred, and when you are putting quote marks around it, you are telling the reader that this is exactly what the person said.” Feeney also said she never fixes quotes.

Some outlets have their own specific codes when it comes to quotes. The Associated Press says in its *News Values and Principles* that “We do not alter quotations, even to correct grammatical errors or usage.” CBS News, on the other hand, published a sort of column that mentioned a story where one quote was edited but another wasn't, and the outlet didn't take a stance one way or another.

I came across this issue most often during my time with the Minnesota Timberwolves and Lynx organization. I worked around NBA and WNBA players every day, and I talked to them for my stories. For some players this was never an issue, but for others I faced the challenge of quoting them directly each time I talked to them. One example of this is Zach LaVine, a 19-year-old player from UCLA. LaVine was Minnesota's first-round NBA draft pick in 2014, and he was interviewed a lot. He is a very charismatic guy, and the fans enjoy hearing from him. He is a player who translates well on television and seems very natural when he talks, but his words look jumbled and unorganized printed on paper. For example, after he was drafted by the

Timberwolves, LaVine did an interview with UCLABruins.com. One of his quotes from that interview is:

“You know man, I’ve waited my whole life for this moment. It was just a rush of emotion that came through me, and I’m on cloud nine still, man. I’m ready. I put my head down and prayed to God, thank God, I just hugged my mom, and I couldn’t believe this is happening. You think about this since you’re a little kid, and you just can’t believe it’s actually happening. I’m just ready to get to Minnesota and do my best.”

There aren’t many glaring errors in that quote, but there are run-on sentences, some slang in the “you know man” phrases and a few verb tenses that are inconsistent. That was the way many of his quotes read for me.

I talked to my editor about the best practices in those situations, and he said as long as the edits weren’t drastic and didn’t change the meaning of the quote, he would defer the decision to me. In the end, I decided not to change LaVine’s quotes. I felt that he is still young, and the way he talks is a big part of his personality. I still think that LaVine speaks in a very unique way, and even though his quotes aren’t always very readable his message comes through. In this case, LaVine wasn’t upset. I didn’t experience any fallout of people thinking I tried to make him look bad or appear uneducated in print.

Before my internship with the Timberwolves, I was studying abroad in Spain and faced a similar question. The Timberwolves asked me to do a freelance piece on the growth of basketball in Spain and how Ricky Rubio, a player from Barcelona who currently plays in Minnesota, fits into that growth. I contacted basketball officials around the country, and a communications director from FEB, the national Spanish basketball federation, agreed to meet with me. The man was a great source who knew a lot about Rubio’s career from a young age as well as the context

of basketball in his home country. He was enthusiastic in his answers and obviously passionate about the subject, but his answers were sometimes crippled by a language barrier. He is from Spain, and English is not his first language. So, while he was very conversational and I could understand him as we spoke, going back and trying to quote him proved to be very difficult. I paraphrased as much as I could, but his voice warranted a place in the story.

At first I wrote the quotes down exactly as they were said with the intention to leave them unchanged. There were small grammatical errors within the quotes, like verb-subject agreement and some prepositions that were misused. I made the mental leap that most people reading this story would understand the man was from Spain and that he is still learning English. But then I began thinking more about the position the man was in, and I changed my mind. I studied in Spain for five months and spoke a language every day that I wasn't comfortable with. I knew how I felt while speaking that language: nervous, intimidated and afraid to come across as uneducated. I guessed that was likely how this man felt talking to an American journalist whose first language was English. I talked this through with my editor as well, and he again left the decision to me.

Unlike LaVine's situation, I chose to clean up this man's quotes. LaVine's slang and way of speaking added to his character and let readers see a more personal side of a player. In this case, the grammar issues would have embarrassed this man and possibly other members of FEB. The man was kind enough to grant me an interview, talk to me for 30 minutes and speak in a language I was comfortable with instead of Spanish, his first language. In this situation I felt that not cleaning his quotes made him seem uneducated, when that assumption isn't true. He is so well-educated, in fact, that he is able to speak conversationally in a second language, and he

works for an organization that has international ties. By not editing the quotes, I would have allowed people to jump to a false conclusion, and that didn't sit well with me.

I'm still happy with my decisions in both contexts, but I believe these situations show the complexity of "quote cleaning." There are no hard and fast rules that apply. Ethics is a balancing act, and each situation needs to be looked at on a case-by-case basis. In most situations, there aren't issues to consider. The quote could be published without any editing, and this wouldn't be a debate. But when there is an issue, it is important to weigh each side and what effect an outcome would have on all of the stakeholders.

Accuracy and fairness are extremely important in writing and reporting, but especially when quoting sources. But, while it is important to be accurate, reporters also need to respect people's individual cultures and feelings. I believe accuracy won out in LaVine's case. He is a tough kid that happily flaunts his attitude and personality. On the other hand, the man from FEB could have come across in a false, uneducated light, which might have caused him and his organization embarrassment. In that case, my editors and I decided that compassion and respect were more important than not changing minor grammatical errors.

In conclusion, ethics isn't always about what is right or wrong. It's about what is right or wrong in each case. I didn't think like this coming into the journalism school. I believed there were set standards that everyone in the profession followed, and that there was no room for questioning or doubt. After my time at the Columbia Missourian and in internships, I realize there is a lot more to ethics than following black and white rules. Ethics is a spectrum, and I think as long as your intentions are good and you are as true to the story as possible, there is always room for a discussion.