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Mass Media Ethics

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### I Don't Feel-Good

In recent years, there has been a trend in feel-good stories that upon further examination, are not feel-good, but rather ignore systemic failures to frame the narrative in a positive light. A feel-good news story is designed to make the reader have feelings of happiness and well-being by the time they have finished reading it. Common themes in feel-good news stories involve the overcoming of some obstacle by a person, or the charity of a person or group benefitting another person or group. In true feel-good-stories, however, the obstacles are the result of chance tragedy or unexpected disaster, rather than a systemic issue.

The stories that cover these systemic issues as feel-good stories still frame the story as being one to raise the spirits, but lack any examination of the larger issues that lead to these situations in the first place. Often, these stories center on issues caused by problems with poverty, health care, or employment.

By refusing to acknowledge the systemic issues that lead to these situations, these types of articles cause more harm than good. They frame situations brought on by systemic failures as only capable of being solved by individuals. They do not address the reforms necessary to solve these problems in the long term.

A 2019 Vox article by Samantha Grasso addressed the issues with these feel-good stories. Grasso identifies these stories as being only surface level and having no exploration of the overarching problem in the story, one often brought on through labor, health care, or education receiving a lack of public or private support (Grasso).

Grasso says that “these kinds of stories act as a glimmer of hope in a sea of societal hardship, and, simultaneously, are indicative of total systemic failures (Grasso).” Feel-good stories take systemic issues, and frame them as being an individual’s problem. If one is to take the ethical paradigm of individual versus community, then these feel-good stories would be to individual as more in-depth analysis articles are to community.

In November 1971, former Vice President Hubert Humphrey spoke about the measure of a government being how it treats its most vulnerable members. At the dedication of the Hubert Humphrey building, the former Vice President said, “The moral test of government is how that government treats those who are in the dawn of life, the children; those who are in the twilight of life, the elderly; those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped (Knight).” It is the very failure on the government’s part to care for these groups from which feel-good stories receive their content.

For example, in 2019, a nine-year-boy in Napa, California paid off his classmate’s lunch debts with his own money. The boy, Ryan Kyote, had been inspired to do so after seeing a news story about a five-year-old girl who was denied lunch because she could not afford it (O’Kane).

Many news outlets, the majority of which were local stations or publications, covered this story. All of them centered the story around Ryan and how he had done a selfless act by paying

the lunch debt of his fellow third graders. The stories also addressed how the school never turns a child away that cannot afford lunch, but it does keep track of the lunch debt (Rodriguez).

This story is framed as episodic in nature. It is a story that focuses on an individual event centering around an individual person. This story also falls into the individual category of our aforementioned individual versus community ethical paradigm.

The story of Ryan addresses school lunch debt as an individual problem, and that the only thing needed to overcome this issue is the charitable acts of a few good people. Many of the news articles on this story mentioned other instances of charitable donations to relieve lunch debt, such as when Chobani paid off the lunch debt of a school in Rhode Island (O’Kane). But the issue at hand, that of school lunch debts, is never addressed as a systemic issue.

None of the articles addressed the fact that 75% of school districts report a student meal debt. Although the median amount of unpaid student meal debt for school districts is \$2,500, the debt ranges from the single digits to more than \$856,000 (Lou).

An article from CNN published a month before the articles about Ryan addressed the rise in school lunch debt. The article presented the issue from a numbers perspective, addressing how 40.2% of schools saw a rise in the amount of lunch debt accrued by their students. The article also addressed what schools are doing about the issue (Lou).

Some schools have turned to crowdfunding or private donations to wipe out lunch debt. Schools also encourage families to apply for free and reduced-price lunches. Students who come from families at or below 130% of the poverty level qualify for free lunches. Those with family incomes between 130% and 185% below the poverty level qualify for reduced-price meals (Lou).

The CNN article also includes statements from the School Nutrition Association, which believes that the federal government should provide free meals to all students. This has already been implemented in cities such as New York City and Dallas (Lou).

This article is community focused and thematically framed. The article addresses the issue from the perspective of how the entire community is affected, as well as the fact that the problem of school lunch debt is one that must be solved at a community level. It is a problem that requires official government assistance, and it cannot be solved by the charitable acts of a few. The feel-good stories on Ryan Kyote paying off his fellow students' lunch debts do nothing to address how the government has failed "those who are in the dawn of life, the children (Knight)."

In September 2020, Derlin Newey, an 89-year-old pizza delivery driver received a \$12,000 tip. Newey began working as a pizza delivery driver with Papa John's when he realized that his monthly bills cost more than his Social Security covered (Kacala).

Newey often appeared in the TikToks of the Valdez family (@vendingheads). The family would often take videos of Newey when he arrived with their pizza. The family recorded Newey in part because they were amused by his asking of "Hello, are you looking for some pizza" upon each delivery.

Followers of the Valdez family began asking in the comments why Newey was delivering pizzas at his age. The family decided to ask their followers to make donations for Newey. The family raised \$12,069 for Newey. They presented him with this money in the form of a large check, which was signed as being from his "TikTok Family" (Lawson).

Newey was surprised by the large tip and expressed gratitude towards the Valdez family and their followers. The Valdez said that they were glad they could help him and that “we just need to treat people with kindness and respect the way he does (Lawson).”

This quote from Valdez is a perfect example of the framing of this story. The issue suffered by Newey was that his Social Security was not enough to cover the cost of living. This is framed not as an obstacle that is systemic, but rather one that can and should be overcome through the charity of others. In January 2020, an article from CNBC reported that the Center for Social and Demographic Research on Aging found that 50% of older adults who live alone and 23% of older couples do not receive enough from their Social Security to cover their basic financial needs (Konish). None of the articles about Newey mention this fact; that he is not alone in that his Social Security does not cover his basic needs.

The CNBC article also addresses that elderly households struggle more in some areas of the country versus others, but that there is no county in the U.S. where the average cost of living and the average Social Security benefit are equal (Konish).

All the articles on Newey address that his Social Security not covering his living costs was the reason he started working 30-hours-a-week as a pizza delivery driver, but none of the articles addressed the systemic reasons that his Social Security didn't cover his bills. The issue of whether Newey will continue to work as a pizza driver is also never addressed in any of the articles. The articles never address the failure of systemic support for those like Newey who “are in the twilight of life, the elderly (Knight).”

An instance of the failures of the system to support “those who are in the shadows of life, the sick, the needy, and the handicapped” is made apparent in the story of Cillian Jackson (Knight).

Two-year old Cillian Jackson of Farmington, Minnesota, has a genetic condition which makes mobility difficult. The condition was never named in any of the articles about Cillian, but the condition was described as having similar symptoms to cerebral palsy (Lam).

Cillian’s father, Tyler, contacted the robotics team of his old high school, Farmington Public School, after learning that insurance would not cover a wheelchair for Cillian, and the family could not afford one on their own. Mobility devices for children cost around \$20,000, and insurance would not cover the chair because Cillian “lacks some of the maturity and focus to drive an electric wheelchair in a public setting (Wallace).”

Farmington Public School’s robotics team, Rogue Robotics, agreed to build a mobility chair for Cillian at Jackson’s request. The coach of the team, Spencer Elveback, said that the team was eager to work on this project. The team received some resources on construction from the GoBabyGo program (O’Kane).

The GoBabyGo program creates mobility devices for children out of items like ride-on cars. Cillian’s power wheelchair was built from a Power Wheels riding toy, with a seat from a bicycle carrier, and a 3D printed joystick (Lam).

This story is another example for an individual versus community ethical paradigm. Although the community came together to help Cillian, this is an individual issue. Cillian’s father was the one who reached out to the community when insurance could not help.

The articles about Cillian's wheelchair primarily focus on the Rogue Robotics. The articles praise their selfless action in creating a wheelchair for a child in need. They focus on how grateful the Jacksons are to the team and how resourceful and clever the team was in designing the wheelchair.

Only one article gives the reason that they would not cover the wheelchair, that the insurance company views Cillian as not mature enough to maneuver such a device in public. The insurance company did not address the concept of Cillian having mobility at home. The articles also never address why mobility devices, which are necessary for many children, cost \$20,000. The articles also never mention how much it cost the Rogue Robotics to build Cillian's wheelchair, but it is implied that it was less than \$20,000 (Wallace).

A 2018 article from NPR addressed some of the issues with "durable medical equipment," such as wheelchairs and braces, in regards to insurance. Most insurance companies do not have plans to cover durable medical equipment. Insurers often contact medical supply companies to provide the equipment and negotiate rates. And often, it can be more expensive to go through insurance than to pay out of pocket.

The article describes an incident where a 23-year old woman, Cynthia B. Sosnowski, received a \$1,400 bill from her insurance for a hinged knee brace. Sosnowski's mother, Barbara Barrall, found the exact same brace for around \$89 at sporting goods and medical supply stores. Barrall contacted the orthopedic office which had given Sosnowski the brace, believing that the amount she was being charged was a mistake. The office said that the charge was not a mistake and that \$1,400 was the amount the doctor was allowed to charge her insurer (Andrews).

In the case of Cillian Jackson, the questions of why necessary mobility devices are not covered, and why they are so expensive out of pocket, is never addressed. The story frames itself as one of a resourceful father who reached out to a compassionate robotics team. This story does not call for insurance reform. It instead tells us that the oversight of insurance companies is a minor problem which can be solved with the charity of a few resourceful people. It places the necessary overcoming of the problem on the individual. It does not address how systemic support systems have failed a sick child.

The stories of Ryan Kyote, Derlin Newey, and Cillian Jackson are all presented as feel-good stories. They are stories about the charity of a person or group benefitting another person or group. The coverage of these events is uncritical of the systemic problems that lead to these situations in the first place.

By framing these stories as episodic rather than thematic in nature, the onus of the problem is placed on the individual and not the community. The issues of lunch debt, the cost of necessary medical equipment, and insufficient Social Security payments are all presented as unfortunate happenstances. They are not presented as problems with a larger system that requires government reform. These kinds of unexamined feel-good stories perpetuate the idea that we are all but a “stroke of good economic fortune away from wealth and abundance (Grasso).”

In many ways, these kinds of stories fail two of the four pillars of the Society of Professional Journalism Code of Ethics. The idea of “seek the truth and report it” is not fully applied. These stories do seek the truth and report it in that the information they print on the events is truthful. But by not addressing the grander problems presented in these stories, by not mentioning the systemic issues that are the basis of these stories, they fail to report the full truth (“Code of Ethics”).



These stories also fail to minimize harm. These stories do not actively cause harm, but they do not work to stop harm. They do not address the harm caused by systemic issues. By not addressing the larger problems at play in these feel-good stories, they do not stop the harm caused by them. By not reporting on the systemic issues, they are not educating the public on them. And if the public is not even aware of these systemic issues, they can do nothing to call for a reform of them. They fail to minimize the harm (“Code of Ethics”).

These feel-good stories do not examine the failings on the government’s part to care for the most vulnerable among us, the children, the elderly, and the ill. Feel-good stories that refuse to address the systemic problems which lead to hardship are unethical. They place the onus of these problems on the individual and not the community. In the end, these stories do more harm than good.

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