

Pan Am Flight 103

Executive Summary

In the aftermath of the Pan Am Flight 103 bombing, journalist Tracy Davidson faced a difficult choice: how to report on the tragedy without deepening the grief of the Syracuse University community. With uncertainty surrounding the victims and limited communication with the University and families, she had to balance her responsibility to investigate with the need to give mourners space.

Background

On December 21, 1988, Pan Am Flight 103 bombing occurred on Pan Am Flight 103, which departed London's Heathrow Airport bound for New York City. On board were 259 passengers and crew, including 190 Americans and 35 students returning from a semester abroad through Syracuse University.

Less than 40 minutes into the flight, the plane exploded over Lockerbie, killing everyone on board and 11 people on the ground. Until 9/11, it was one of the deadliest acts of air terrorism and among the most complex international investigations ever undertaken by the FBI.

Tracy Davidson, a new reporter for WTVH Channel 5 News in Syracuse, was immediately assigned to cover the story. In the pre-internet era, information was scarce and slow to arrive; it was only confirmed that there were no survivors and that Syracuse students were among the victims.

With few details, Tracy was sent that evening to report on a non-denominational prayer service for the students. After filing her story, she received a call from her boss, who was dissatisfied and instructed her to return to the chapel to interview grieving parents and friends.

It's widely recognized that the principles of journalism include an obligation to truth, loyalty to citizens, discipline of verification, independence from subjects, monitoring of power, and duty to provide a forum for public dialogue. It's also true that journalists have an ethical responsibility in reporting where one must balance the public's right to know with minimizing harm, showing compassion, and exercising sound moral judgment.

Case

Should Ms. Davidson amend her story to include interviews with the grieving members of the Syracuse University community?