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Manchester bombing: don't blame the New York Times for printing leaked information

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EPA/Justin Lane

An editor's first instinct is always to publish. And the news executives at the **New York Times** will not have had to think too long and hard about the ethical issues when images from the investigation into the Manchester bombing landed on their desks.

It would have been a very different matter had the leak been to a paper in Manchester or London, where the shock of what happened is palpable and the sense of hurt and harm is very close to home – even among journalists hardened to atrocities such as this. But even here, the imperative to publish would have been strong, and the images have been carried by the British press.

Once, it may have been possible to contain a leak of this nature. But in today's news environment – where traditional news organisations are competing with new media players – it is no longer feasible for the authorities to appeal to the “better nature” of journalists in the interests of “the public good”.

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The New York Times says this evidence was gathered at the scene of the attack

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7

Editors will be conscious of appeals to stay their hand in matters of national security – but within the boundaries of sovereign nations. Making an appeal of this nature to a publication in a different

jurisdiction – and one like the United States where press freedom is enshrined in the constitution – is much more difficult.

Stopping the spill

Once a leak has happened, it is impossible to contain the spill. If the New York Times had not published, someone else would have. And they may have done it in a way that was more disrespectful to the bereaved and injured; and in a manner that sensationalised the material.

In a free society, leaks will always be one of the sources news organisations rely on for their stories. Gone are the days when a chancellor of the exchequer would feel impelled to resign because he had mentioned an item in the budget to a journalist when he was on his way to deliver it, as **Hugh Dalton** did in 1947.

Indeed, leaks now have a special status of their own in the news agenda – leaks by the likes of Julian Assange, Chelsea Manning and Edward Snowden had a greater impact on the news agenda than the work of many a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist.

Legitimate source

From the editor's perspective, of primary importance will be the need to be assured that the material is from a legitimate source. In this case – where the information appears to have come from **official intelligence sources** – the New York Times will have been easily satisfied about the veracity of the material.

The motivation for the leak will also have been taken into consideration. Journalists know that sometimes they are being used. In this case, the motivation is still unclear. And on the face of it, it looks like the material was being shared just because it could be. Even if, as an editor, you know you are being played as part of a bigger game, you might well decide to go to press in any case if the information is clearly in the public interest.

Far removed from the scene of this particular crime, the New York Times will have been less concerned about the impact its story will have had on those who are suffering after this atrocity. A British editor would have almost certainly have considered the issues about intrusion on grief, which is covered by the IPSO editor's code.

They will certainly have been swayed by concern over the impact on the investigation. But they would also be conscious that if the material is out there someone will use it.



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Only those close to the victims will be able to say whether this adds to their sense of loss or not. In many cases, families want to know everything they can – sometimes it is a way of sharing the pain of the loved one they have lost. A vacuum is often worse.

Public interest

In terms of the public interest – this is undoubtedly one of those cases where the need to know is not driven by prurience or the desire for salacious gossip. The importance of the story is perhaps less in what it says about the bomber and his crime, but more about the fitness of international intelligence agencies to meet the threat of terrorism.

It also tells us much about the relationship between Britain and America – particularly as the leak came after home secretary Amber Rudd's blunt warning over the leaking of the bomber's name.

And it reveals a dysfunctional relationship between those charged – on both sides of the Atlantic – with keeping us safe and secure. In bringing that to public light, the New York Times may well have done us all a service. This is a faultline in the fight against terror that needs to be fixed.

The ethical dilemma here rests not with the press, but with the people who decided to share intelligence that had been given to them in confidence. Don't shoot the messenger.

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