

Case 7: Protester Anonymity

Anna is an editor for her college newspaper, and she is covering a student government meeting. At the meeting, the student government is considering a resolution to divest from a country facing allegations of human rights violations against another country in an ongoing land dispute. Divestment would require the college to stop financial involvement with any company involved in the country's activities. The issue is very charged at the college, as many students have ethnic ties to one of the countries involved, and the resolution is part of a large-scale movement across the country. Consequently, the meeting has hundreds of students and community members in attendance, with many more watching online.

All student government meetings begin with a public comment period, during which community members can address the student government on issues relevant to the day's agenda. Before addressing the student government, they are asked to sign up on an open sign-up sheet, and state their name and affiliation to the college before delivering their comments. At this meeting, multiple protesters use the public comment period to show their support for the measure. As people speak, Anna writes down their comments and names for her story with the intention of sharing a few of them on social media, as is standard journalistic practice. However, once the protesters realize Anna is writing down their names, they become upset and demand that she only quote them anonymously. They tell her that they are concerned that if their names are published alongside their sentiments against the country in question, it will be difficult for them to travel in that area of the world to visit family members or their homes, and might put them in physical danger.

Anna is torn. She knows the newspaper she works for does allow individuals to be quoted anonymously if their quote is vital to a story and there are severe extenuating circumstances, such as that they could lose their job or face physical harm. These circumstances are similar to the protesters' concerns. However, her newspaper, like almost all newspapers, has a long-standing policy that people who speak at government meetings cannot be anonymous, for several reasons. For one, it creates a slippery slope — if she agrees to quote these protesters anonymously, she might have to provide the same leeway for others. But certainly it would be bad if certain groups of people could provide

comments without being named. For instance, if public officials or constituents present in government spaces always have the option of making their comments anonymous, there would be little accountability in local government proceedings. This would become problematic since lack of accountability often leads to corruption. Furthermore, these protesters have chosen to speak in a public section of the meeting, where their names are stated to anyone watching. Most individuals granted anonymity give information or comments in situations where there is no expectation it could be public, such as a whistleblower privately leaking information about a company's unethical practices, or somebody involved in an illegal activity individually speaking to a reporter.

Anna doesn't want to put anyone in physical danger, or make it difficult for them to travel home. She believes the protesters' concerns are credible, especially given the alleged human rights violations against the country in question, and further that their quotes are important to her story. However, she also believes that speaking at a public meeting is different than most cases concerning anonymity, because the protesters have chosen to put themselves in a public situation. And she is concerned about creating an exception that could be unfair or damaging to the public's right to know what happens at open, government meetings.

Study Questions:

1. Should Anna grant these protesters anonymity? Do the protesters' concerns about their safety overrule the right of the public at large to know what was said at an open, public government meeting?
2. If the student government didn't require people speaking during public comment to openly state their name, would it make a difference in whether the protesters should be allowed anonymity?
3. If Anna chooses to publish the protesters' quotes, is she ethically responsible for any harm or difficulty they encounter as a result?