

## “Dr. V’s Magical Putter”

On January 15, 2014, sports blog *Grantland* published the article “Dr. V’s Magical Putter,” a longform piece by journalist Caleb Hannan. What began as an article about a unique new golf putter gradually became an article about the inventor of the putter, Dr. Essay Anne Vanderbilt. In his investigation into Vanderbilt’s invention, Hannan discovered that Vanderbilt had lied about her academic background and work experience and had taken cash from an investor that she never returned.

Hannan also found out that Vanderbilt was a transgender woman and outed her as trans to an investor. Although Hannan had made an agreement with Vanderbilt to focus the story “on the science, not the scientist,” the putter became a backdrop to a story about what Hannan saw as a deceitful personal life and fraudulent professional career. Vanderbilt, who wished to maintain her privacy from the start, did not want the story published. A few months before *Grantland* published the article, Vanderbilt committed suicide.

The article sparked immediate controversy over the merits and ethics of its reporting, as well as its role in Vanderbilt’s suicide. Detractors criticized Hannan and *Grantland* for a lack of awareness and compassion regarding trans issues. Defenders of the article saw value in the story and believed it would be dangerous to not report all of the facts. In an editorial response published in *Grantland*, sports journalist Christina Kahrl wrote, “It was not *Grantland*’s job to out [Vanderbilt],” noting, “she was a member of a community...for whom suicide attempts outpace the national average almost 26 times over.” Josh Levin, executive editor at *Slate*, wrote, “The fact that Dr. V once lived under a different name is not irrelevant to Hannan’s story... But presenting Dr. V’s gender identity as one in a series of lies and elisions was a careless editorial decision. ...Dr. V is a con artist and a trans woman. Hannan, though, conflates those two facts...” Journalist James Kirchick defended Hannan, writing, “What I saw was a careful and ingenious reporter ferret out a fraud with care. ...[There’s] no evidence that Hannan was...seeking to “out” and humiliate a transgender woman... On the contrary, in his article, Hannan arrives at a conclusion sympathetic to Vanderbilt.” Trans advocate and medical doctor Dana Beyer said that the article reflected the tragedy of being in the closet as trans, but did not revel in it or have malicious intentions.

Several days after the publication of the article, *Grantland* editor-in-chief Bill Simmons published a response to the article’s criticism. He wrote, “I didn’t know nearly enough about the transgender community—and neither does my staff... We just didn’t see the other side. We weren’t sophisticated enough. In the future, we will be sophisticated enough... we made mistakes, and we’re going to learn from them.” Reflecting on the article over a year later, Hannan spoke about the complexities of seeking truth in journalism, “At every point in the reporting I could justify myself going forward... ‘I’m doing my job.’ But part of the job was to assess whether it was worth it.”



**Discussion Questions:**

1. While Hannan and *Grantland* were certainly legally permitted to publish this article, do you think it was ethically permissible to do so? Why or why not?
2. If you were in Hannan's position when investigating Vanderbilt's educational and personal background, what would you have done and why?
3. What biases and/or pressures do you think contributed to Hannan pursuing the story and outing Vanderbilt to an investor? How did he rationalize his actions? Explain.
4. If you were in Simmons' position before publishing the article, what would you have done and why?
5. What biases and/or pressures do you think contributed to Simmons publishing the article? How did he rationalize this decision? Explain.
6. Do you think comprehensive reporting and truth in journalism can be balanced effectively with respecting individuals' privacy? Why or why not? How can journalists, in Hannan's words, assess whether pursuing a story is "worth it"?
7. Do you think journalists bear a special responsibility to people who may be at risk of harm or face oppression based on their identity? Or is that too great a burden? Explain.

**Resources:**

Dr. V's Magical Putter

<http://grantland.com/features/a-mysterious-physicist-golf-club-dr-v/>

The Dr. V Story: A Letter from the Editor

<http://grantland.com/features/the-dr-v-story-a-letter-from-the-editor/>

What Grantland Got Wrong

<http://grantland.com/features/what-grantland-got-wrong/>

Digging Too Deep: *Grantland's* exposé of a trans con artist privileged fact-finding over compassion

[http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2014/01/essay\\_anne\\_vanderbilt\\_dr\\_v\\_s\\_magical\\_putter\\_grantland\\_s\\_expos\\_of\\_a\\_trans.html](http://www.slate.com/articles/life/culturebox/2014/01/essay_anne_vanderbilt_dr_v_s_magical_putter_grantland_s_expos_of_a_trans.html)

Pressuring Journalists Won't Protect Transgender People

<http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/01/22/pressuring-journalists-won-t-protect-the-transgendered.html>

10 Questions Bill Simmons and ESPN Should Answer About 'Dr. V's Magical Putter'

<http://thinkprogress.org/alyssa/2014/01/19/3183711/grantland/>

'Dr. V' Writer Caleb Hannan Speaks for the First Time About What Went Wrong

<https://blog.longreads.com/2015/07/20/dr-v-writer-caleb-hannan-speaks-for-the-first-time-about-what-went-wrong/>

The journalist and Dr. V

<http://niemanstoryboard.org/stories/the-journalist-and-dr-v/>

Friend blames timing of Gilbert inventor's suicide on fear of impending article

<http://archive.azcentral.com/community/gilbert/articles/20140124gilbert-golf-inventor-suicide-website-essay-anne-vanderbilt.html>

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