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The media's moral responsibility in the age of social media

by Maureen Fiedler

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Like few other events of our day, the Boston Marathon bombings underlined the need for responsible, ethical journalism, especially religion journalism. It also called attention to those we might call "citizen journalists," the users of Twitter and Reddit and other social media who relayed accounts of the bombing and its aftermath -- some of it wrong and some of it falsely accusing people who had nothing to do with the bombings.

So with this as a backdrop, this week on "Interfaith Voices," we explored the moral and ethical responsibilities of journalists, especially in the coverage of breaking news, with a focus on religion. Our guests were Amy Mitchell, acting director of the Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism, and Kevin Eckstrom, editor-in-chief of Religion News Service.

Both guests noted that the number of reporters on the religion beat has declined sharply in newsrooms, cutting the number of knowledgeable people who follow the nuances of religions day to day. Thus, there is greater danger that stories will be incorrect, show a lack of knowledge of theology, etc. The example used on the show: "If you say Catholics worship the Virgin Mary, you'll get 100 calls from Catholics telling you that you don't know what you are talking about." (Catholics, they note, pray to Mary, but they don't worship her.)

They note that the use of some words, like "cult" or "sect," is problematic. "One person's 'cult' is another person's salvation," Kevin said.) Certainly a phrase like "Islamic terrorism" attracts attention. ("How is this different from just plain terrorism?" Kevin asks.) Language like the latter feeds Islamophobia.

But whatever the issue, both guests agreed that journalistic ethics now extend to users of social media, not

just those employed in the news business. Want to retweet? "Consider the source."

Listen to the full interview.

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