

# Convoluting story's tragic ending reminds journalists to be human

The problems with Caleb Hannan's article, titled "Dr. V's Magical Putter," started almost immediately: *"Strange stories can find you at strange times. Like when you're battling insomnia and looking for tips on your short game."*

That's Hannan's lead. The [story he wrote about Essay Anne Vanderbilt](#) proved to be strange, at the very least. It also was convoluted. Broken down to its pieces, the story was about a putter and the woman who invented it. It also was about Hannan's quest to find the backstory of the inventor who lied to Hannan about her credentials. Finally, the story became about his search to uncover Vanderbilt's misrepresentations. As Hannan delved deeper into the story, he uncovered the fact that Vanderbilt used to be a man. He wrote that "a chill actually ran up my spine" at that moment.

This news became the focus of his piece, accompanied by some rough editing (either by mistake or on purpose) that kept switching genders on Vanderbilt. It also contributed, at the very least indirectly, to Vanderbilt's suicide – a fact Hannan placed at the end of his story.

Reaction to the story was slow, with many initially praising Hannan's reporting, but it didn't take long for the reaction to change. Readers were appalled that Hannan was so insensitive toward the issue of transsexuality. Gawker [wrote about it](#); the Guardian [wrote about it](#), too. Eventually, ESPN's Bill Simmons, editor-in-chief of Grantland, [apologized for the thoughtlessness of the story](#).

Most piled on and reported about the inherent problems of the article. Hannan became too intent on the sexuality issue and

lost track of his original story. He also outed Vanderbilt, an act that was wrong on many levels. Hannan lost all form of compassion in his search for the truth of the story. Finding the truth is important for journalists; it's the root of all of our jobs. But sometimes the truth is nuanced – and Hannan never looked for that. He treated Vanderbilt's sex change as the biggest lie in a story of lies. He didn't understand the situation – and, therefore, hurt this woman irreparably. The early reviews concentrated on the reporting and Hannan's unending search into the truth.

But didn't he have a responsibility to Vanderbilt?

After all, from the beginning she agreed to do a story that was focused on the science and not the scientist. He also wrote that, even though Vanderbilt's credentials didn't check out, physicists said the science was sound. Yes, he had a responsibility to fact-check his work; if he didn't nail down the discrepancies in her story, he would have been accused of shoddy reporting. But when he found the truth, Hannan's responsibilities changed. He didn't live up to those responsibilities.

Instead, he outed Vanderbilt.

Reporters have a responsibility to the truth. That responsibility leads to uncomfortable moments. Journalists also have a responsibility to their story. Hannan's story was about a putter. It also was about the false credentials used by the inventor of the putter. Vanderbilt's sexuality didn't need to be part of the story. At the very least, it didn't deserve to be Hannan's "Eureka!" moment.

Truthfully, the story still doesn't have an ending. Although Hannan states that he stopped using the putter, was the science sound? Was the putter worth using?

He never told us that. Instead, we learned a lesson on insensitivity – and we were served a reminder that journalists

need to be more than just dogged reporters. We have to be human, too.