

moved almost absentmindedly through the cafeteria line following her fourth-period social studies class. As she turned from the cashier in search of her 15-year-old brother Jeffrey, who had preceded her through the line, she spotted him standing alone at a far table—and then watched with horror as he pulled a .38-caliber pistol from beneath his windbreaker and methodically began pulling the trigger. Within a matter of seconds four classmates lay seriously wounded, and three students and a teacher lay dead.

From that moment on the events resembled those that had transpired at too many high schools across the nation: A frantic call went out to 911, police and paramedics rushed to the scene to confront the tragic consequences of a disturbed teenager's violent deportment, counselors were brought to the school to assist its inhabitants in coping with the unexplainable, and a community mourned and asked "How could this happen here?"

It did not take long for the police to take Jeffrey Devlin into custody. Moments after the shooting the police found him sitting calmly behind the gym, still holding the weapon that had turned the Langdale High cafeteria into a monument to death. Jeffrey was charged as an adult with first-degree murder and was held without bail in the city jail. In the meantime, the police used a search warrant to retrieve three weapons and five boxes of ammunition from Jeffrey's room, along with other material evidence that might be useful in his prosecution. On the advice of Jeffrey's court-appointed attorney, Laura and her divorced mother rejected all overtures from the local and national media.

Like other members of the community, Sharyn Lassiter was shocked by the shootings. Lassiter was the police and court reporter for the *Andersonville Tribune*, a four-year veteran of the local paper. During her relatively brief tenure at the *Tribune*, Lassiter had compiled an impressive portfolio of articles documenting her community's law enforcement and juristic activities. Most of her coverage dealt with the more sinister side of human nature and the community's disaffected rogues whose social obscurity was transformed only through their arrest for some felony or misdemeanor. Lassiter's diverse journalistic menu ran the gamut from murder, rape, and simple burglary on the criminal side

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The Massacre at Langdale High and Laura's Secret Diary

High school senior Laura Devlin was looking forward to graduation day, the ritualistic validation of an academic milestone. May 16, just three weeks before she was to receive her diploma, was indistinguishable from any other school day as Laura

to the civil docket's less sensational array of lawsuits alleging a variety of physical and emotional injuries.

While Lassiter was sometimes repelled by what she heard in court or by the evidence provided by her police sources, she had fostered an emotional detachment in reporting on the legal foibles of society's miscreants. But the Devlin story was different. *Kids killing kids!* did not follow the script of the typical criminal case. Nevertheless, the young reporter covered the initial phases of the case with her usual commitment to journalistic objectivity and neutrality, the animating principles of her university education and the *Tribune's* newsroom culture. But like most good journalists, Lassiter was not satisfied to report just the facts surrounding the tragic events at Langdale High. The citizens of Andersonville deserved answers, and the *Tribune* was the proper forum in which to satisfy her readers' justifiable curiosity.

Because Laura Devlin and her mother, perhaps as much out of shame as the legal advice provided by Jeffrey's attorney, had refused any public comment and had consistently rejected the media's requests for interviews, Lassiter began her investigation by talking to the principal and several teachers at Langdale High, neighbors of the Devlin family, and, with their parents' permission, several of the Devlin children's classmates. To probe beyond the information contained in the official crime report, she also interviewed detective lieutenant Andy Cherry, a source with whom the reporter had had a cooperative relationship since her arrival at the *Tribune* four years ago. Cherry was in charge of the Devlin investigation.

From these disparate sources, a rather grim assessment of the Devlins' family life emerged. Neighbors remembered Laura and Jeffrey as quiet but friendly children in their formative years. But shortly after Laura's tenth birthday, according to their recollections, she suddenly had become sullen and withdrawn. Her high school classmates rendered a similar verdict. She counted few friends among her classmates, with the exception of three girls who frequently came to her house to study.

Jeffrey was described as very bright, a good student, and socially well adjusted—that is, until his father abandoned the family when Jeffrey was 13.

From this point on, the teenager's good-natured disposition changed. Several classmates recounted his growing fascination with guns and even a threat to bring one to school to "liven up the place." However, they had not taken him seriously. His mother, who had never been a strict disciplinarian, was unable to compensate for her husband's faithful influence in Jeffrey's life, and his obedience to her maternal commands became increasingly erratic. Perhaps Jeffrey's unanticipated rampage was triggered by his unforgiving resentment against his father.

Some of these details were confirmed by Lieutenant Cherry in recounting some of the conversations that several witnesses had had with the investigating officers. But it was not Cherry's confirmations that piqued Lassiter's journalistic curiosity; it was Laura Devlin's diary. The diary—which actually consisted of three separate books covering eight years—had been seized by the police to be used as possible evidence in the case against Jeffrey Devlin. Perhaps the diary would provide some clue as to her brother's motivations in carrying out his armed assault.

Lassiter, who felt uncomfortable at the idea of penetrating the unspoken code of privacy that surrounds a diary, nevertheless buried herself in Laura's personal musings. The diary was a virtual tour de force through Laura's childhood and adolescent fantasies and dreams, but it also revealed a worldview of an increasingly troubled young woman. Laura's chronicle began when she was about 8 and reflected a fairly happy, well-adjusted child. It provided some keen insights into her personal world, a father who was domineering but suitably attentive, and a mother who was loving but clearly unassertive in her relationship to the children's father.

But shortly after Laura's tenth birthday there was a noticeable change in the tone of her youthful literary recollections. Her father figured even more prominently in her accounts, which revealed a pattern of sexual abuse that continued until his departure when Laura was 15. Her increasingly desperate entries, a cathartic attempt to cope with her victimhood, described an emotional evolution from confusion and fear to loathing for her oppressive father. Some of her notations were suicidal, although there was no evidence that Laura

had ever attempted to take her own life. She had tried drugs but apparently decided that her personal diary was more therapeutic than the unpredictable consequences of marijuana and speed.

The diary's references to her brother were somewhat circumspect and not entirely illuminating of the case at hand. However, it did contain regret at Jeffrey's apparently blissful ignorance of his father's sexual perversion and some evidence of her brother's growing disaffection with their father's authoritarian impulses, which seemed to contradict Lassiter's accounts from other sources of Mr. Devlin's departure as the immediate cause of Jeffrey's psychological demise. Despite the apparent estrangement between father and son, several entries also recorded, paradoxically, Jeffrey's depressed state following his father's untimely desertion and his subsequent experimentation with drugs. There were other incidents of his youthful rebellion recorded in the diary. It was clear that Jeffrey had lived a life of quiet desperation.

Lieutenant Cherry allowed Lassiter to take notes and even to photocopy pages of the diary; the original would be retained in the event that the district attorney decided to use it as evidence. Laura's diary helped to explain the pathologies that had engulfed the Devlin family. As a first-person account of wasted youth, it would also make an interesting story—but not before it underwent the ethical scrutiny of managing editor Douglas Hawthorne.

Lassiter had not yet written her proposed story when she met with Hawthorne and city editor Marcia MacKenzie. She understood Hawthorne's ethical concerns but was prepared to argue in favor of a human interest story based on Laura Devlin's diary.

"The information in that diary is indeed interesting," began Hawthorne in convening the meeting in his rather spacious office on the third floor of the *Tribune's* new headquarters. "But I am concerned that we may be crossing the line here in terms of Laura's right to privacy."

"I've thought of that," replied Lassiter somewhat reflectively. "But much of the information is a matter of public interest because of its connection to the school shootings. It helps to explain the circumstances that may have turned Jeffrey Devlin from an apparently normal teenager into a killer."

"In a sense that's true," responded MacKenzie. "But much of this material is very personal and private information, particularly the part about sexual abuse. If we publish this, its impact on Laura could be devastating. Diaries are by definition private; there's nothing to be gained by publishing the contents of this diary."

"But the confidential nature of the diary has already been breached," asserted Lassiter. "The police department has examined it; it could even become evidence in Jeffrey's trial, although the DA hasn't made up her mind about that. And, of course, Lieutenant Cherry let me peruse it at will."

The city editor was obviously not persuaded by this line of argument. "It may be true that a handful of people have examined this diary," said MacKenzie, "but the contents are still not public knowledge. The real embarrassment will come if we publish a story based on this diary in our newspaper."

"I realize that Laura is truly a victim and did nothing to invite this kind of public scrutiny of her family," Lassiter replied, attempting to alter the line of argument somewhat. "And even though she won't talk to the press, her life and that of her mother have been put under a microscope—all because of what Jeffrey did. They're hounded by the media every time they visit him in jail or accompany him to a court appearance. The fact is that they're newsworthy by association with the suspect."

"I'm not so sure," responded MacKenzie, who silently acknowledged the superficial appeal of her reporter's claim but was not quite willing to concede its moral merit. "Where matters of privacy are concerned, we should be clear about where to draw the line between the real public interest and what the public is interested in. I question using any of the diary's contents as the basis for a story, particularly the personal details of her father's sexual abuse. How is that relevant to this case?"

"It's relevant because it places this whole episode into context," Lassiter asserted. "It places part of the blame right at the father's doorstep—a fact that can be most forcefully documented through the pages of this diary. Besides, the diary contradicts the rumors that are floating around that Jeffrey went into a tailspin entirely because of his father's desertion. This may be partially true, but the diary suggests

a problem of longer duration. It may be a little more complicated than people realize, and this story could help to set the record straight."

"In addition," Lassiter continued, "stories such as this could serve as an early warning to the community about the dire consequences of not intervening sooner in the lives of troubled kids. I don't know whether anything could have been done in this case, but the signs were there. And that alone justifies using this diary as a source for my story."

At this point Hawthorne decided that all relevant arguments had been vented and dispatched his two staffers with the promise of a quick decision. As his newspaper's managing editor, Hawthorne was the moral agent because, assuming that he approved this project, the story would be published in both the paper and the *Tribune's* online edition.

THE CASE STUDY

Are the contents of Laura's diary newsworthy? Does the public interest in this information override the privacy interests of Laura and her mother? Does the teenager's relationship to the accused diminish her expectation of privacy, particularly in matters that are tangential to the crime under investigation?

The privacy concerns arise at two different levels. First, there is the status of the diary itself as a viable source of news. Second, the *nature of the information* must be the focus of the moral reasoning process.

An ethical purist might argue that diaries by definition are sacrosanct; except in highly unusual circumstances, a diary's contents should not be violated. The writer has an expectation of privacy that even parents must respect unless a child's safety or well-being is at stake. In this view, the police might be entitled to review the diary to collect evidence in the case against Jeffrey Devlin. But this gives them no right to reveal its contents to third parties. Of course, if some of the contents are introduced into evidence during the trial, then the privacy rights are clearly diminished as far as press coverage is concerned. But this isn't a factor in this case study. On the other hand, one could argue that once the diary is removed through official action from the custody of its owner, it is no longer strictly a private document.

The other issue in this case focuses on the content itself. Sharyn Lassiter apparently believes that there can be no line-drawing here in terms of the news value of the contents. Admittedly, some of the diary's commentary is directly relevant to Jeffrey's state of mind and motivations; some, such as the father's sexual abuse of Laura, appears at best to be tangential to the case. But Lassiter contends that the totality of the diary's contents helps to explain the family circumstances that may have led to Jeffrey's psychological demise.

The counterpoint to this is that, *assuming that the use of any material from the diary is justified*, the reporter should use a fine scalpel and include in her story only the material that directly relates to Jeffrey Devlin's personal behavior and his relationship with his family.

For the purpose of exploring these issues, assume the role of managing editor Douglas Hawthorne, and using the SAD formula, decide whether you will authorize a story based on Laura's diary and, if so, what limits (if any) you would place on the use of its contents.