

Columbia Journalism Review.

Is it a bird? Is it a plane? No, it's a journalism ethics quandary!

THE MOST FAMOUS JOURNALIST of all time is also the most famous superhero. For the past three-quarters of a century, with a few exceptions, his alter-ego, Clark Kent, has been working as a reporter for the *Daily Planet*. In a new DC Comics series, he and Lois Lane, his Pulitzer Prize-winning wife, meet a fiendish new foe—a complicated question of journalism ethics.

It's one storyline in *Heroes in Crisis*, a limited series of nine issues. The series kicked off in late September with the revelation that the superheroes of DC's universe had established a secret mental health facility, Sanctuary, to get therapy and treatment for PTSD and other mental health problems. But then a villain arrives and, in a mass slaughter, kills several heroes.

Batman, Superman, and Wonder Woman grieve while trying to find out who was behind the attack. Then comes another ominous development. There are videos of top secret therapy sessions from Sanctuary in which unmasked heroes talk about their private traumas, and someone sends them to Lois Lane with a promise that there are a lot more to come.

Lois Lane weighs her journalistic responsibilities and opts to publish the story, breaking the news of both the mental health facility and the mass killing while taking care to keep all the patients and victims anonymous. Batman is furious. Superman isn't thrilled, but as a journalist, Clark Kent backs his wife's decision.

ICYMI: He helped expose one of the biggest scams in history. Now he's being prosecuted. (<https://www.cjr.org/analysis/oliver-schrom.php>)

"It's at the core of the whole genre," the series' writer Tom King says. "The first superhero, the first person to put on tights and jump over buildings and fight bad guys was a journalist who was in love with a journalist? It's not a coincidence."

King, a former CIA agent who later became an all-star comics writer, doesn't consider himself a journalism expert (though he says that he's familiar with "dealing with information" from his time with the agency). Even so, he's crafted a complex dilemma, as Lois Lane's story touches on mental health reporting, the ethics of anonymous sources and naming victims, and keeping sources secret from the government—or in this case, costumed vigilantes.

King likens Lois Lane's story to a documentary, *Let There Be Light* (1946), about returning World War II veterans with PTSD. The US government suppressed the film for decades, fearing that revealing soldiers' mental health struggles would be bad for morale.

"Journalists have many competing obligations, which is what makes a situation like this so tricky," Matt Pressman, a professor of Journalism at Seton Hall University professor and media critic, says. "Among other things, they are expected to inform the public; protect people's privacy; look out for public safety, national security; and help their employer make money." He adds, "I think Lois Lane made the right judgment call in this instance. She informed the public about something newsworthy while protecting the privacy and safety of those involved."

Most journalism in superhero comics, says Joe Saltzman, a professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, is still locked into tropes and roles that were established in the forties.

In *Heroes in Crisis*, by contrast, Lois Lane is doing serious journalism—though she still seems to mishandle the obvious conflict-of-interest. "Lois Lane is a good reporter who handles the story responsibly but there is a major ethical problem involved: her relationship to one of the principals in the story," Saltzman says of her marriage to Superman. "In real life, she would have to confide all of this to her editor, tell him who the whistleblower was, and excuse herself from the story because of personal interests."

King adds, "The ethics of Lois keeping Superman's identity secret I'm sure have been the subject of debate in journalism schools for 75 years."

ICYMI: Jason Leopold discusses controversial BuzzFeed scoop (https://www.cjr.org/q_and_a/jason-leopold-buzzfeed-cohen.php)

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