


# Media Ethics: Is It An Oxymoron?

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# What the Heck is Media Ethics?

- **Media ethics** is the subdivision of applied ethics dealing with the specific ethical principles and standards of media, including broadcast media, film, theatre, the arts, print media and the internet. The field covers many varied and highly controversial topics, ranging from war journalism to Benetton advertising.

– **Source - Wikipedia**

# Huh?

- Ethics can be defined as the set of criteria by which decisions are correctly made about what is right and what is wrong .
  - Professor Mark McElreath

# So What Does This Mean for the Media?

- The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues.
  - Code of Ethics from the Society of Professional Journalism



# Looking at Some Examples



- Gary Coleman
  - People Magazine Cover Generic on Death
  - E! Online Had Series of Photos of His Life
  - New York Times had standard obit with correction about his “ex-wife” on June 9

# Flip to Tabloid Media

- Globe Magazine Features Deathbed “Last Photo” on the Cover
- Consumers Are Outraged About Coverage



# But Hang on A Second

- Where did I find this photo of the front page of the Globe? At CBSNews.com.
- Doesn't that make them just as bad?
- “CBS News is the news and information arm of CBS Corporation, dedicated to providing the best in journalism under standards it pioneered at the dawn of radio and television and continues to set in today's digital age.”
  - Source: CBS News Website

# Let's Go Back 20 Years

- The US was facing the Exxon Valdez disaster.
- But the media was totally different back then than it is today.
- 24/7 was something that happened in Emergency Rooms only.

# The Media 20 Years Ago



TIME



CNN

CBS 

# How Was The Exxon Coverage?

- Initially, gave Exxon's point of view
- Brought on "critics" to give the opposing viewpoints
- Stopped short of giving a media opinion
- Six months after spill, media was very complimentary that the spill was 97% cleaned and declared event over.

# The Media Today



# What's Happening with BP?

- Media is now the 24/7 kid on the block
- While “advocacy journalism” still supposedly exists with major networks, cable networks have no problem issuing opinions on how situation is being handled.
- Six months from now, media will not have changed positions they have now.

# So What IS Ethical?

- Exxon Versus BP Coverage in the Media:
  - True?
  - Fair?
  - Balanced?
  - Timely?



# BP Versus Gary Coleman

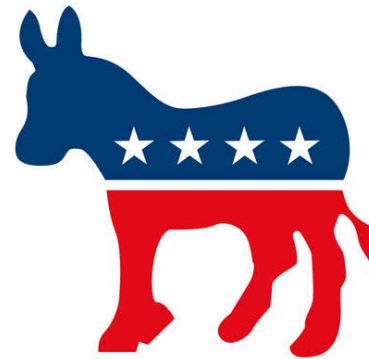
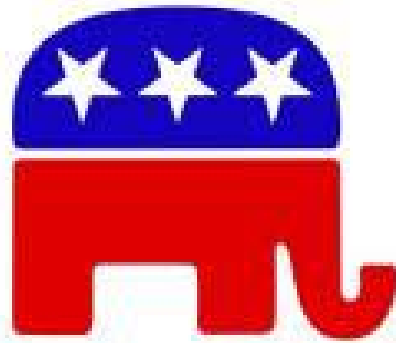
- Which of them:
  - Sought the Truth and Reported It ?
  - Minimized Harm?
  - Acted Independently?
  - Was Accountable?



- In Other Words, Which Followed the SPJ Code of Ethics?



# Let's Switch Gears to Politics



# Presidents Kennedy and Clinton

- Can you imagine the media in the 60's talking about President Kennedy and Marilyn Monroe?



- But President Clinton will always be associated with Monica Lewinsky, thanks to the “new media”



# British Press Council Code of Ethics: Royal Children

- **Children**
  - i) Young people should be free to complete their time at school without unnecessary intrusion.
  - ii) A child under 16 must not be interviewed or photographed on issues involving their own or another child's welfare unless a custodial parent or similarly responsible adult consents.
  - v) Editors must not use the fame, notoriety or position of a parent or guardian as sole justification for publishing details of a child's private life.



## US Press Coverage of Presidential Children

- Glenn Beck, who repeatedly and angrily tells his alleged persecutors to "leave the families alone," spent a good chunk of his radio program this morning mocking and attacking the intelligence of President Obama's 11-year-old daughter, Malia.



# US Press Coverage of Presidential Children

- “Bush Twins Gone Wild”
  - The Bush twins were spotted running naked through the halls of their hotel in Buenos Aires, according to one press account.
- “Jenna and Barbara Bush Gave Secret Service Fits”
  - WHEN it came to protecting **Jenna** and **Barbara Bush**, the Secret Service truly had its hands full, with President **George W. Bush's** wild and crazy daughters doing everything in their power to escape them, a new book reveals.



## So Who Has More Ethics?

- British Media, who have an unspoken agreement with the Palace to not cover activities of the Royal Heirs until they are “of age?”
- U.S. Media, who consider the Presidential children “public figures” and cover all their activities?

## But Back to That SPJ Code...

- Act Independently

Journalists should be free of obligation to any interest other than the public's right to know.



# But Back to That SBJ Code...

Journalists should:

- Avoid conflicts of interest, real or perceived.
- Remain free of associations and activities that may compromise integrity or damage credibility.
- Refuse gifts, favors, fees, free travel and special treatment, and shun secondary employment, political involvement, public office and service in community organizations if they compromise journalistic integrity.
- Deny favored treatment to advertisers and special interests and resist their pressure to influence news coverage.
- Be wary of sources offering information for favors or money; avoid bidding for news.

# Am I Missing Something?

- Julie Chen is listed on the CBS News Website as Anchor of The Early Show
- Yet she is also the host of the Big Brother reality show, also on CBS



# Am I Missing Something?

- Anderson Cooper is Host of AC360 on CNN News and also a correspondent on CBS “60 Minutes”
- Yet he regularly fills in on the “Live with Regis and Kelly” Show



# What Happened?

- When did we stop considering journalists as credible sources and start considering them entertainers?

# What's Next for Media Ethics?

- Beats me – you fill in the blanks!

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