



News or Rumor? *Politico* and the Edwards Affair

Case Summary

Countless news stories grow out of what may be conventionally defined as gossip: small talk with a source, or chit-chat at a bar. Tabloids, blogs, and other non-traditional media often feel comfortable publishing such information, even if it has not been independently verified. Mainstream news outlets tend to tread more carefully, wary of spreading unsubstantiated rumors and material gleaned from flimsy sources, or encouraging reporting practices they view as unethical or insufficiently rigorous.

This case, which centers on the newly launched news website *Politico* in July 2008, addresses the differences and similarities between online or tabloid journalism, and more “respectable” mainstream journalism. For almost a year, rumors had swirled that presidential candidate John Edwards had had an affair with an employee, Rielle Hunter, and had even fathered a child with her. Most of the speculation had been limited to online blogs and the *National Enquirer*, a tabloid best known for salacious articles and a mixed record of accuracy. In January 2008, Edwards, whose wife Elizabeth was waging a public battle with breast cancer, dropped out of the race and, for the most part, the headlines too. That began to change in July, when the *Enquirer* reported that it had recently caught Edwards in a late-night meeting with Hunter, and had photos to prove it. Edwards denied the allegations.

Mainstream media (MSM), for the most part, steered clear of the story. That fact alone interested *Politico*’s media writer Michael Calderone, who began to mull the subject for a future article. He knew that *Politico* was keen to make a name for itself as a serious and reliable source of political news, and that Edwards was a well-known figure with a possible role in any Democratic administration. But Calderone was unable to substantiate the story for himself. Even if he reported only on the blogosphere buzz and compared it to MSM silence, that would in effect give the rumors credence and introduce the story into the MSM sphere.

Students trace the story from initial media curiosity about missing online web videos that Hunter had made for the Edwards campaign, to outright accusations in the *National Enquirer* about an affair and possible love child between the producer and the politician. Students also follow

mounting online chatter about the allegations, and the *Enquirer's* new claims in July that the two had met in a Beverly Hills hotel. They consider the case within the context of celebrity journalism and media reporting on the personal lives of public figures, and follow Calderone as he weighs whether, and how, to approach the story of Edwards' alleged affair.

Teaching Objectives

This case highlights the subject of celebrity journalism, and its overlap with political and other types of journalism. The case can prompt discussion about old and new media, and their respective values and practices. Also use it as a vehicle for discussing the fine line that exists between newsworthy chatter and inconsequential gossip; the public's need to know and an individual's right to privacy; and mainstream and less traditional journalism. Finally, use the case as a platform for discussing newsworthiness, sourcing, reporting techniques, and standards of verification.

John Edwards' private life comes under media scrutiny, a now-common reality for many public officials whose out-of-office behavior and personal foibles are subject to the same intense and intrusive coverage as that heaped on entertainment celebrities. Is this fair? Consider the difference between celebrity and political journalism, and whether the same standards of reporting and news judgment should apply.

Calderone did not want to report on Edwards' infidelity per se, but on the contrasting treatment the online and print worlds gave this news. In reporting on that divide, however, he would necessarily introduce the news into the mainstream media. Is that so bad? Why should mainstream media outlets steer away from such stories? Should Elizabeth Edwards' illness influence the decision to pursue the story? Discuss Calderone's dilemma within the context of what makes a story worth pursuing, and how to approach telling it.

Similarly, the story about Edwards begins with information from an unnamed former campaign employee. Is gossip a valid subject for mainstream media organizations? If not, consider how it should be treated, and under what circumstances it rises to the level of newsworthiness. Discuss within the context of the differences and similarities that exist between newer and more traditional media. Also consider the way that US media handle gossip about sexual indiscretions and infidelities compared to media in other countries.

News judgment involves deciding, among other things, whether to pursue a story, what elements to include and how to cast them. Rumors about Edwards' affair emerge when he is still a presidential candidate. But they gather credibility only once he has pulled out of the race and effectively returned to private life. Does his altered status as a public figure mitigate the newsworthiness of his alleged affair? Does he now have a right to greater privacy? Students should define what is meant by "public figure," and discuss whether a person can shed that status when their public life officially ends. Students should also talk about whether politicians have a right to "privacy" that differs from other public figures, including entertainment celebrities.

Information about Edwards' affair comes from the *National Enquirer*, which mainstream media tend to disdain for its sensational stories. Students should discuss its validity as a source for

MSM as part of a larger discussion about the legitimacy of some of the *Enquirer's* reporting techniques, including paying sources, staking out subjects, and staging ambushes. Consider whether a mainstream news organization that bans such practices can defend using information gleaned that way by other outlets. Are the rules different if the reporter is writing an opinion piece rather than a news piece, or if the article appears on a blog as opposed to a mainline publication? Also discuss the challenges of verifying information when involved parties stonewall reporters or issue outright denials, as Edwards and Hunter do. What is the bar for publication in the absence of a clear admission of wrongdoing?

As early as October 2007, news of the possible Edwards affairs appeared on blogs, including those of several “mainstream” news outlets such as the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Magazine*, *Slate*, and even Calderone’s own *Politico*. Yet Calderone questions whether to mention the affair in a traditional (non-blog) column. Consider the role that blogs play in today’s media landscape, where “mainstream” publications sometimes feature stories online that would not run in print. Students should discuss the advantages and disadvantages of differing standards for websites and hard copy versions of the same publication. Additionally, students should consider whether blogs and other stories on a media outlet’s website should all conform to the same standards.

Class Plan

Use this case in a course about editorial decision-making and guidelines; or about ethics in journalism.

Pre-class. Help students prepare for discussion by assigning the following questions in advance:

1) What distinguishes online (blogger) or tabloid journalism from mainstream journalism? When does a piece of news bridge that divide?

Instructors may find it useful to engage students ahead of class by asking them to post brief responses (no more than 250 words) to the questions in an online forum. Writing short comments challenges students to distill their thoughts and express them succinctly. The instructor can use the students’ work both to craft talking points ahead of class, and to identify particular students to call upon during the discussion. Instructors may find it beneficial to ask students in class to recapitulate their online arguments and responses—rather than simply reading the homework aloud—in order to keep the discussion spontaneous and lively.

In-class questions. The homework assignment is a useful starting point for preliminary discussion, after which the instructor could pose any of the following questions in order to promote an 80-90 minute discussion. The choice of questions will be determined by what the instructor would like the students to learn from the class discussion. In general, choosing to discuss three or four questions in some depth is preferable to trying to cover them all.

a) Calderone decides to make phone calls for a possible media story on July 22, 2008, a few hours after the *Enquirer* runs a story on its website about Senator John Edward’s late-night visit to Hunter. However, news of an affair between Edwards and an employee had been circulating since

October. Is Calderone too slow coming to the story, especially since it has long been fodder for other political and media watchers, including *Slate's* Jack Shafer and *Politico's* own Ben Smith?

b) By the end of July 22, Calderone feels he has enough material for a piece that contrasts the mainstream media's cool response to the Edwards story with the intense scrutiny of blogs and the *National Enquirer*. But he worries that a media story is a "sort of weasel way around the unpleasant fact that you can't actually confirm the rumors yourself." Do you agree that merely parsing coverage of the rumor without confirming it as fact is unacceptable? Or is it enough, especially for a political media reporter like Calderone, to cover the controversy as a story in itself?

c) Journalism's mission is often described as "comforting the afflicted and afflicting the comfortable." However, in this case the results may be reversed. Elizabeth Edwards is battling cancer, and publicity about her husband's affair would undoubtedly compound her suffering. Should this factor into Calderone's thinking about whether to write a story? How is the public served by repeating details of an unconfirmed affair, especially since Edwards is no longer a presidential candidate?

d) Is a political figure's marital infidelity newsworthy? Does it say much about personal character or leadership ability? Many admired historical figures had personal lives that today would be judged unacceptable. Does unconventional personal behavior have any bearing on performance as a public servant? If not, why is an affair a matter of national news?

e) By July 2008, Edwards is no longer a presidential candidate nor is he an elected official. Is his alleged infidelity a valid political story nonetheless? Or should his private life be off limits for media scrutiny? Where is the line between private citizen and public figure? Can a figure like a presidential candidate ever truly return to private life?

f) The Edwards camp issues a series of increasingly vague denials that fail to address the circumstances surrounding the missing webisodes and Edwards' visit to the Beverly Hills hotel. Edwards himself deems the *Enquirer's* story "tabloid trash." How should Calderone handle such comments, which scorn the allegations and the investigators but do not specifically rebut the charges, nor clear up the mysteries surrounding the story? How should reporters handle noncooperative subjects and outright denials by principal characters in a story? When is it ethical to run a news item that is declared untrue by the people at the heart of the article? Is it enough to include their denials within the body of the story?

g) *Slate's* Jack Shafer points out that the mainstream media has vigorously pursued previous stories about sexual indiscretions involving politicians. Most recently, Senator Larry Craig (R-ID) had been arrested for soliciting sex from an undercover male police officer—an incident that received widespread press attention. Shafer suggests that media have a double standard: Politicians who take positions that are anti-gay but engage in gay activity are aggressively covered while those who are pro-marriage but caught cheating on their wives are not. Do you agree with Shafer? Does the relative rarity of the former justify a greater degree of scrutiny?

Suggested Readings

Brooke Gladstone, "Page Set-up," *On the Media*, National Public Radio, October 6, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: In the fall of 2005, the *St. Petersburg Times* received a tip that Florida congressman Mark Foley had sent sexual emails to underage congressional pages. Rather than run with the story, the editor deemed the proof—a few ambiguous email exchanges between Foley and a page—"too thin" to publish. ABC News, meanwhile, ran the emails on its blog, "The Blotter." Within hours, the network received enough additional information to blow the story open. Editors from the *Times* and ABC discuss their decisions, and explore many of the same dilemmas that Calderone faced, including how to deal ethically with rumors, and sources who deny wrongdoing.

<http://www.onthemedial.org/transcripts/2006/10/06/01>

Michael Oreskes, "News: A Bit Hard to Define," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 2000, Vol. 5, Issue 3, p. 102.

SYNOPSIS: Calderone is unsure whether the alleged Edwards affair is a story he should pursue. This short article acknowledges the difficulty of defining news, particularly in today's fastchanging media landscape. Oreskes ultimately concludes that "a journalist leaves things out because they are scurrilous and unproven. A gossip doesn't."

Jonathan Mahler, "The Ur-Text of a Tabloid Age," *Newsweek*, September 29, 2008.

SYNOPSIS: This article about the *National Enquirer* highlights "the strange place that America's premier scandal sheet occupies in our media landscape." As Mahler notes, while the tabloid magazine "doesn't compete with newspapers like *The New York Times* or newsweeklies like *Time* or *NEWSWEEK*" and "uses methods scorned by the mainstream media," it also—as Calderone discovers—"lands too many big scoops for the mainstream media to ignore—or, more accurately, that they ignore at their peril."

<http://www.newsweek.com/id/160082>

Charles Ponce de Leon, *Self-Exposure: Human Interest Journalism and the Emergence of Celebrity in America, 1890-1940*, Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002.

SYNOPSIS: This book provides context for a central theme of the case: celebrity journalism. While modern technology has increased the possibilities for journalism about celebrities, de Leon sees the phenomenon as rooted in the late 19th century when "journalists began crafting new techniques and rhetorical strategies for depicting celebrities." He believes that news media are "the most important institutions that sustain the culture of celebrity," which he views as arising "directly

from the encouragement that modern societies provide for... self-invention." Particularly relevant to the case are Chapter 1, "Becoming Visible: Fame and Celebrity in the Modern Age," and Chapter 6, "Political Celebrity in an Age of Reform."

Dennis F. Thompson, "Privacy, Politics, and the Press," *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, Sep 1998, Vol. 3, p. 103 - 113.

SYNOPSIS: What should the press report about the private lives of public individuals? According to Thompson, founding director of the Program in Ethics and the Professions at Harvard's John F. Kennedy's School of Government, journalists tend to claim that such reporting is based on the "relevance standard"—applicability to an official's performance in public office. But that requirement, which reporters and editors often overlook, can also demand limiting publicity about private lives because "cheap talk drives out quality talk," reducing the time and attention devoted to other issues. He ultimately concludes that "just because the conduct was public, does not justify publicizing it more widely. Just because the conduct reveals a character defect does not make it relevant to public office. And just because the public or some part of it is likely to react negatively does not license disclosing it."

Geoffrey Wheatcroft, "Sniggers, Shrugs, and Outrage: What A Country's Response To Its Sex Scandals Reveals About The National Character," *Slate*, May 23, 2006.

SYNOPSIS: US media and public reaction to the Edwards affair, and the personal lives of political figures in general, stands in marked contrast to that of their European counterparts. This article provides a light-hearted look at this differing attitude.

<http://www.slate.com/id/2142257/>