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The year in review

1990's biggest ethical headaches and journalistic bloopers

The year's almost over. Time to take a look back at some of the toughest ethical issues that journalists faced and some of the mistakes they made.

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1990 may be remembered as the year that journalists took their role of modern day storytellers to heart. Fact and fiction converged. Truth took a backseat to the good tale. Sometimes, even telling truths turned out to be wrong.

As the year began, journalists blamed everyone but themselves for blowing the reporting of the Stuart murder-suicide case in Boston. They had a hard time letting go of the "White Camelot Couple Gunned Down by Black Felon" myth even as the real story of a man who plotted to murder his pregnant wife was coming out. No one could be expected to know the truth from the beginning, but journalists should be ashamed of their stereotypical presentation of the Stuarts and their alleged assailant.

The "outing" of business magnate Malcolm Forbes after his death this year (See "[The ethics of outing.](#)") forced mainstream media to consider the newsworthiness of sexual activity. The



publishing these, they ended up looking inconsistent and homophobic. If sexual activity alone isn't news, why were 40 percent of people surveyed in February by the Times Mirror News Index able to identify Marla Maples as Donald Trump's girlfriend?

The defendants in the Central Park jogger case went on trial, sparking renewed discussion about whether rape victims' names ought to be used in the news columns. Journalists heaped praise on Des Moines Register editor Geneva Overholser for encouraging rape victims to help remove the stigma of rape by sharing their stories. Yet the year ends as it began with rape being treated in a schizophrenic manner by the press. While journalists argue convincingly that rape is a crime of violence rather than sex and should be treated as such, the majority of news organizations still don't name rape victims without their consent. Meanwhile, other victims of violence are regularly identified with little or no hesitation.

This year the words of some well-known media watchdogs came back to bite them. Andy Rooney was suspended for three months for anti-black comments, Jimmy Breslin was suspended for two weeks for anti-Asian comments directed toward a colleague and then making light of those comments on a radio talk show, and Patrick Buchanan took public knocks for anti-Semitic comments. News media representatives are the "character cops" keeping vigil over the ethics of others. They have a special obligation not to commit the offenses they cover.

Some news organizations became more friendly with law enforcement this year than is generally considered healthy for the practice of journalism.

Some newspapers published the names of "johns" (See "[Naming 'johns'](#)") at police request to help cut down community crime, others asked readers to cut out coupons (See "[Is 'Enough!' too much?](#)") and send in the names of suspicious characters. In both cases, the deputizing of the press damages public trust. How can journalists keep watch on law enforcement when they are acting as police-trained attack dogs?

The defendants in the McMartin Preschool trial were found not-guilty on child-molestation charges. The same verdict would not have been reached had the news media been tried for pro-prosecution bias. Media critics' analysis of the discrepancy between the trial that happened in court and the one in the press revealed loaded language and intimate relationships between some members of the media covering the trial and the prosecution.

Journalistic bias was also evident in the lack of coverage of last April's anti-abortion rally in Washington, D.C. Reporters were all over, and, in fact, in, the pro-choice rally a year before, but they hardly showed up to cover the larger anti-abortion march. The first rally received front-page coverage and weeks of attention by media throughout the nation; the second rally, which drew an estimated 200,000, initially didn't even make the first section of The Washington Post.

The Minnesota Supreme Court's decision that a reporter's promise to a source is not a legal contract left many people wondering just what that promise does mean or if it means anything at all. The decision overturned a judgment made in favor of Dan Cohen, who had charged The Minneapolis Star Tribune and The St. Paul Pioneer Press with breach of contract and fraudulent misrepresentation when his name was published despite a promise of



promises they can't keep.

The drama of Mayor Marion Barry's drug arrest and the media frenzy to be first resulted in reports that were more speculation than news.

Washington D.C.'s Channel 9 provided viewers an artist's depiction of the mayor high on drugs to illustrate a report on grand jury testimony. (Of course, no reporter was present to hear testimony about an event that no reporter witnessed.) The picture was a fantasy illustration, but people believe what they see.

After a decade of women sportswriters having the same access as their male peers to interview players in locker rooms, 1990 brought a new round of sexual harassment of female reporters by members of sports teams. It goes without saying that a woman sportswriter should be able to do her job without having someone's private parts stuck in her face, but news organizations should make clear that sexual harassment and intimidation won't be tolerated even if they have to boycott coverage of offending teams.

In some ways, the year seems to be ending as it began, with journalists blocked from coverage of U.S. military movements. December 20, 1989, George Bush ordered the invasion of Panama. The press pool, established in reaction to the ban of press coverage during the 1983 invasion of Grenada, was escorted to Panama City hours after the action began and prevented by their military escorts from covering the action.

The end of 1990 finds the press severely limited in covering the story of U.S. military action in Saudi Arabia. Despite recent training in governmental duplicity in Grenada, Libya and Panama, journalists seem all too willing to accept the Pentagon's version as the truth. Journalists should remember the lessons of Vietnam (See "[The windbags of war](#)") and not let truth be a casualty of the government's propaganda war.

It's easy to list examples of journalistic irresponsibility or lack of restraint because they stand out against a background of thousands of examples of journalists doing their jobs. On the other hand, we hear about extraordinarily good examples of journalism throughout the year, as they are remembered with Pulitzer Prizes, Peabodys, Overseas Press Awards, and hundreds of regional and local news media citations. Mistakes are easy to forget. They are too easy to repeat.

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