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Family feud

Handling conflicts between journalists and partners

When a journalist's relationship creates a credibility threat, how do you determine who gives?

By Deni Elliott

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Author bio information is from the time of article submission and may not be current.

Source: FineLine: The Newsletter On Journalism Ethics, vol. 2, no. 4 (July 1990), pp. 1, 8.

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It happens. Reporters and sources who share an interest in a story find that they share an interest in each other.

It used to be “unprofessional” for a journalist to fall in love with someone he might cover. He could have his career or his love, but not both.

But times have changed, the rules have changed. If the newsroom was cleared of everyone dating, married to, or living with a potential source, it would be close to empty.

So what should you do? Since the editor can't tell the reporters' spouses what they can do, is it justified in some cases to, in effect, “penalize” the employee?

Absolutely.



Even if only those reporters with the highest integrity were hired, those who could never be swayed, the audience would suspect that the reporters are as human as they are. The company has the dilemma of treating their highly-principled employees with respect and keeping the trust of an audience that suspects the worst.

The traditional way of resolving the conflict — assigning the reporter to another beat — isn't the cure-all it used to be. Today, stories on even the most isolated beats, such as religion or sports, are entwined with business and politics. And, if it's not the life's partner writing the story, it's likely to be the tennis partner.

The news organization has to trust the professionalism of its staff when it comes to coverage of people with whom they have social contact. But when a staffer's love interest becomes a newsmaker or newsbroker, the company is obliged to ask some questions: Why doesn't this constitute a conflict of interests? How are you and your partner working to avoid professional conflicts? How can the newsroom maintain credibility despite the appearance of a conflict?

Journalists expect other career-minded couples to make compromises and expect other professions to regulate their own. They should require no less of themselves.

Imagine the indignant write-up if a lawyer were to try a case before a judge who was also his wife. Who would blame GM for not hiring that bright young engineer who is married to the R & D genius that Ford brought to town?

Two-profession couples have never had an easy time of reconciling love and careers. More than one spouse has turned down out-of-town advancement because doing so would disrupt his partner's work. When in-town careers conflict, individual aspirations may need to give way to a partner's professional life.

When it's a question of whether the company or the staffer has to bend, general rules can apply. (More on that later.) These rules should be for everyone from those in the executive offices to those on the night copy desk.

Do any of these situations sound familiar? The publisher is getting calluses from sitting on every civic board in town, but the metro editor is forbidden to work for a library tax. Your station's general manager regularly editorializes in support of his wife's pet project, but the assignment editor

can't fundraise for his daughter's school. No one suggests that the popular TV anchor should be taken off the air when her husband runs for office, but the education reporter gets pulled from his beat because his fiancée is a deputy school superintendent.

How dare a news organization hold that the publisher, GM, or talent can handle a tempting conflict but the reporter or someone lower in the pecking order cannot? There's no known



If the “real” problem with conflict of interests is how things appear to the audience, management must know that the public doesn’t separate the publisher from the reporter, the general manager from an assignment editor.

So which relationships should be of concern? Only those that would prevent news staffers from carrying out their watchdog role over a significant decision maker.

The mayor’s husband does not belong in the newsroom, nor does the love interest of the town’s major employer. But, these outright conflicts probably exist with only a handful of people. Most spouses or friends can be active and vocal in community affairs without posing a threat to the reputation of the journalist or the newsroom he works in.

The audience may need to be convinced, however. Full disclosure and plans for resolving the conflict should be shared with the public. Better to let the audience in on the complexity of the issue before it erupts into a public relations nightmare.

It’s a safe bet that a higher percentage of news staffers than news organizations would be willing to withstand this sort of scrutiny. How many news organizations are connected, if not by love then by money, to the institutions they profess to watch?

For another view, see “[All in the family: When a journalist’s spouse creates a conflict of interests.](#)”

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