

### **Pulitzer Ethics Project: Kaydee Jones, Salisbury University**

Objectivity and impartiality are two foundational blocks on which journalism is built. Originally set to mirror the ideals of democracy, according to Richard Kaplan from [academia.edu](http://academia.edu), journalists are taught to produce balanced pieces that show both sides of a story equally and to report without having personal bias influence their work.

But the ethics of journalists have been tested as journalism has evolved into a field where it needs to be a money maker as opposed to a money taker, said Salisbury University communication arts professor and former CNN correspondent Dr. David Burns. Conflicts of interest have always been an issue for journalists, but it has evolved into a contemporary media issue as their objectivity and impartiality are challenged in all areas from personal entanglements to advertising obligations and social media.

NPR host Michelle Norris' husband accepted a position with President Obama's reelection campaign in 2011, according to an [article](#) from NPR. This posed a serious conflict of interest because it could have affected coverage of the presidential election. But she came to her organization's senior management early on and they were able to put together a plan that would allow her to continue to work there, just not covering politics.

Personal entanglements can be a tricky issue to deal with but this was a case where the conflict of interest was recognized and dealt with in a timely manner so that there was no opportunity for biased reporting, which undoubtedly would have reduced NPR's credibility. But most conflicts of interest are not so easily addressed.

There is pressure that comes from things bigger than the everyday journalist.

"The major threats come from outside," said Aidan White of [PressCouncil.org](http://PressCouncil.org). "Governments, unscrupulous politicians and the overweening power of corporations is regularly brought to bear on newsrooms weakened by cuts and restructuring of the media economy."

News had to make a change in the 1980's that required it to be profit driven, and the pressure caused many journalists to cut corners, said Burns. The shortcuts involved merging news with advertising and the introduction of advertorials, which are advertisements disguised as news.

When journalism began to rely on revenue from advertising, they made themselves vulnerable to subliminal advertising and advertorials, which are put in place not for the benefit of the reader, but to make advertisers happy which is an ethical issue. Burns also said that public relations has contributed to the problem, as many articles come from press releases. Public relations has also overwhelmed journalists in sheer numbers, and it reflects in their reporting. Richard Robbins states in his book *Global Problems and the Culture of Capitalism* that PR employees outnumbered reporters 170,000 to 40,000 in 1999.

Another area that has found ethical concerns with contemporary media is the use of social media and blogging sites. Many reporters find that the lines between professional and personal blur when posting on the internet. It's easy to get opinionated online, and to some extent we are seeing a rise in opinion journalism that was popular before objective reporting, according to Stephen J.A. Ward from the Center for Journalism Ethics.

The integration of social media has been a headache for some more old fashioned reporters but it's been a necessary adaptation, said Jeremy Cox of the *Delmarva Daily Times*. Cox said that small things such as "liking" a page or being friends with a particular person on Facebook could be perceived as a conflict of interest. But reporters have to learn how to make smart choices and use social media in a way that helps reporters and doesn't harm them.

Dr. Haven Simmons of Salisbury University's communication arts department had different feelings toward social media and journalism. He said that it can be irresponsible for journalists to engage with untrained citizens on the internet because it's possible for them to lose their composure, which would be an injustice to the profession and the public.

Organizations like SPJ, NPR and The New York Times are just a few of the many organizations who have ethics guidelines that directly address conflicts of interest or issues of impartiality. Obviously there is a reason to address it professionally- people are human. They make mistakes and may occasionally cross the line between personal and professional. But as long as journalists are aware of the potential issues with personal entanglements, advertising and social media that may challenge their ethics, they can continue to report as they always have—with the public in mind and impartiality in their articles and tweets.

*The opinions expressed by Pulitzer Ethics Project contributors do not necessarily reflect the positions or policies of Maryland Humanities and/or any of its sponsors, partners, or funders. No official endorsement by any of these institutions should be inferred.*