



News Organizations Test Ethics in Rush to Cover Michael Jackson

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Two major broadcast networks are facing accusations that they broke their own code of ethics in the rush to cover the Michael Jackson case.

NBC denies that it offered pop star Michael Jackson \$5 million to do an interview about recent child molestation charges. The accusation came weeks after another network, CBS, was accused of paying Jackson to do an interview for the news program "60 Minutes."

As part of the deal, NBC would have shelved an investigative "Dateline" story that embarrassed Jackson.

The "Dateline" episode - a two-hour special titled "Michael Jackson Unmasked" - ultimately did air on Feb. 17, 2003, but the controversy has led to questions about whether the networks broke the unwritten rule that real news and entertainment shouldn't mix and whether they violated a journalistic code of ethics by offering payment to an interviewee.

Paying for news

NBC and CBS, as well as most other networks, maintain that they have a clear separation between their news and entertainment divisions. But with big ratings up for grabs, the field of "celebrity journalism" has increasingly blurred the lines between real news and entertainment.

"Traditionally it is considered acceptable in entertainment to pay for all kinds of things," said Jack Doppelt, a journalism professor who teaches law and ethics at Northwestern University. "Like a concert. You pay someone to sing. In news it's considered that you do just the opposite."

Doppelt said that once journalists start paying for information, it puts the facts in doubt.

"The general danger is that if you pay people for information it is going to be more suspect, less likely to be truthful - more hype," Doppelt said. "Not false necessarily, but hype."

Doppelt also said that paying sources could cause journalists to change how they approach a story.

"If you're paying somebody for something, you're not likely to ask them the tough questions," he said.

A question of ethics

The CBS deal was reported to have included an agreement that the network would air a Michael Jackson music special that it was postponing until Jackson answered questions about the child molestation charges.

Although CBS denies it offered Jackson any money, it admitted to agreeing to air the concert if he appeared on "60 Minutes." The interview was taped Christmas morning of 2003 and aired the following Sunday.

At NBC, executives tried to use the threat of the more negative broadcast to influence Jackson to appear for their interview.

"We urge you to seriously consider the offer we are about to send to you," wrote NBC executive Marc Graboff in an e-mail to one of Jackson's lawyers, obtained by The New York Times. "The acquisition of the rights to this special on NBC will have the added benefit of pre-empting NBC's planned broadcast of Dateline."

Often, as in the NBC example, the lines are blurred not by the journalists themselves, but by business executives higher in the organization. This danger increases as media companies grow and news organizations - television, radio, print and web - are bought by companies that make more money off the entertainment sector than the news, according to media analysts.

And the deals still raise questions about objectivity and the integrity of news about celebrities.

"In this case, they were not only willing to pay for the exclusivity, but to kill a documentary that would be much more hard-hitting," Doppelt noted.

"[Michael Jackson] is both a celebrity and somebody for which there are all sorts of serious allegations. If you're both paying [for an interview] and killing the documentary, you're more likely to hear something that isn't very truthful or playing along with his image."

By Chris Nammour, Online NewsHour

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