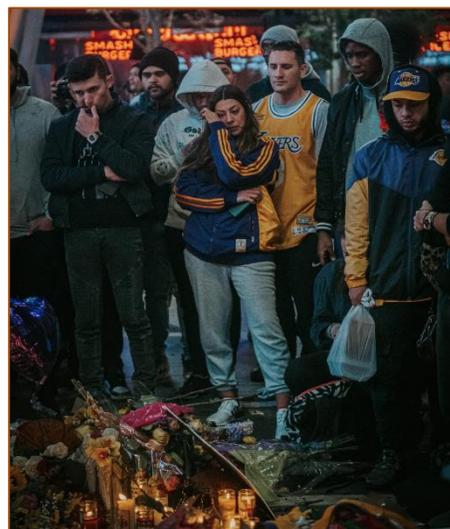




# CELEBRITY DEATH IN THE MEDIA: THE CONTROVERSIAL NEWS COVERAGE OF KOBE BRYANT'S DEATH

On January 26, 2020, basketball legend Kobe Bryant tragically died in a helicopter crash along with his 13-year-old daughter and seven others aboard the aircraft. News of Bryant's death spread like wildfire throughout the mass and social media, as fans all over the world mourned the loss of their hero. Not only was Bryant an NBA star but a philanthropist, well known for his work supporting after-school programs and victims of police brutality. Particularly for Black Americans, Bryant was a role model for many. Isaac Bryan, director of the Black Policy Project, declared: "We didn't just lose a basketball player. This was someone who was becoming a pillar of the community beyond athleticism. It's hard to find things for Black people in LA to look up to" (Gumbel, 2020).



Despite the large outpouring of grief and admiration, not all media coverage of Kobe Bryant was complimentary. Just moments after news of the helicopter crash broke, Felicia Sonmez, a journalist with *The Washington Post*, tweeted a 2016 *Daily Beast* article detailing Bryant's 2003 rape accusation. According to court records, the 19-year-old accuser was examined by sexual assault nurses who documented a bruise on her jaw and "too many lacerations to count," part of a trauma "not consistent with consensual sex" (Lubrano, 2020). While Bryant admitted to engaging in sex with the teenager, thus confessing to adultery, he maintained that the encounter was consensual – or, at least, he *thought* so. In the end, the incident was resolved out-of-court with an undisclosed settlement after "Bryant's legal team smeared the woman's reputation, intimidating her into not testifying" (Lubrano, 2020).

Though Sonmez has "consistently been vocal on issues of sexual assault," this particular act struck a nerve on the blogosphere and she was quickly met with thousands of messages condemning her tweet for being insensitive (Allsop, 2020). Many of those angry with Sonmez wanted the journalist to face consequences for her poor taste, and so, some called for *The Washington Post* to dismiss her from her position, while others sent death threats and leaked her home address online. Sonmez eventually deleted the tweet after she was placed on administrative leave but nonetheless defended her actions saying: "Any public figure is worth remembering in their totality. That folks are responding with rage and threats toward me... speaks volumes about the pressure people come under to stay silent in these cases" (Allsop, 2020). While Sonmez has since been reinstated at *The Washington Post*, this case nonetheless presents important ethical questions to consider when covering newsworthy deaths in the media.



On one side, there are those who argue Sonmez’s tweet was inappropriate simply because it is wrong to speak ill of the dead, especially the very-well-liked deceased. Such a response also points to her quick timing, when not even a full day had passed since Bryant’s untimely demise. As Kerri Sackville notes, in respecting the dead we show compassion for the grieving: “We understand the grief of bereaved people, and hold back from slandering the deceased to avoid compounding their pain” (Sackville, 2019). Here, Sonmez’s actions were viewed as disrespectful to Bryant’s friends and family dealing with tremendous hurt. Outside of this concern, the tweet could be considered problematic due to the nature of the 2003 case itself. On September 1, 2004, the case was dismissed after the accuser refused to testify in court, so no court found Bryant guilty of the crime alleged (Stern, 2016). Under American law we are all innocent until proven guilty, thus, some say that Bryant should be given the benefit of the doubt since he was never convicted of any wrongdoing.

Furthermore, it could be argued that even *if* Bryant did commit the assault, it happened over 20 years ago and he has done more than make up for it – both in settling directly with the accuser herself and working towards personal redemption in his charity work. How long must someone’s mistakes follow them for? Are these mistakes prominent items to recall upon their demise, or should we remember individuals for their successes or improvements? This point is also connected to racial concerns. As many have pointed out, Black Americans (celebrities or otherwise) often face more disproportionate criticism than anyone else. As Bryant knew all too well in his work with the Black Policy Project, focused as it was on violence against Black citizens, it is a common tactic for the media to release every detail of the victim’s criminal record to the public—no matter how small, old, or irrelevant the information is—in order to try and justify the often-lethal violence used on African American citizens by law enforcement. In this way, Sonmez could be viewed as participating in the over-policing of Black Americans, allowing Bryant no peace from his past even after death.

On the other side, there are those who argue Sonmez did nothing wrong in bringing up Bryant’s past. His loved ones will have to struggle and grieve regardless of media coverage; thus, the reality of his sexual assault accusation is not something that we should run away from, but confront head on. “To everyone yelling ‘NOT NOW’: Then when? When are we supposed to grapple with, and tell the whole truth about, the lives of people many admire?” wrote feminist lawyer Jill Filipovic (Gollom, 2020). Unfortunately there are no hard and fast rules about how long one must wait until it is culturally appropriate to discuss the problematic actions of the dead, and due to Bryant’s status as a popular hero, there are many who may never be ready for such a conversation. Why should we wait until there is no one paying attention? Who is served by always “waiting for a more appropriate time?” Many might argue that rape culture in the United States thrives on silence as sexual assault allegations are often overlooked, downplayed, or discouraged because they can “ruin men’s lives.” But, life and death cannot both be excuses to ignore discussing social problems. Neither should Bryant’s fame provide him immunity from criticism that any ordinary person would be subject to.

Furthermore, while it is true that Black Americans often bear the brunt of disproportionate criticism, this shouldn’t mean that we ignore their transgressions. Rather, the argument goes, the issue is that we must expend the same vigilant energy in reporting and starting conversations around white crime. In order to put an end to sexual violence, it is imperative to disrupt the culture of silence it depends on, and thus, no individual perpetrator can be “too important” to disregard. Doing so only enforces the same harmful ideas which keep victims from speaking up in the first place: the problematic



assumption that your abuser’s reputation overrides your pain. Those who stand behind Sonmez contend that, ultimately, priority of concern must be placed with the victim, not the perpetrator – which includes not using hero worship to excuse the excessive response of death threats and doxxing a woman journalist.

Despite Kobe Bryant dying at a tragically young age, he lived a full and complicated life. While he was an inspiration to many and it is understandable that his fans would like to remember positive aspects about him, at the same time it is understandable why seeing assertions that his past rape accusation “doesn’t matter” is concerning for victims of sexual assault everywhere. In cases such as this one, it is vital to tread with nuance and empathy. As Black feminist culture writer Evette Dionne notes:

Thanks to the pressures of social media, in which we react to unfathomable news in real time, we often fall into a binary of good or bad... [but] it is rarely that simple... Only Bryant’s accuser can decide if she forgives him, and it’s not our place to do that work publicly on her behalf. What we *can* do is complicate these conversations so we can usher in more honesty about who’s elevated in the aftermath of a sexual assault and how fame and money insulate perpetrators from being brought to account. We can do this while still acknowledging that Bryant didn’t deserve to die in such a manner at such an age and that the people who loved him are grieving (Dionne, 2020).

As death is an inevitable aspect to life, and as journalists strive for a commitment to truth and justice, we must ask ourselves what is the most ethical way to go about reporting the complex lives of celebrities after death. Should cultural icons be given special treatment that would not be afforded ordinary people? If not, does this imply standards of reporting should be adjusted for the non-famous as well?

## Discussion Questions:

1. What are the central values at stake in the controversies over the coverage of Bryant’s death?
2. Is “speaking ill of the dead” an outdated taboo that should be “laid to rest?” What are the costs and benefits of such a practice?
3. What are some ethical principles that you might suggest that could help guide journalists in covering the deaths of complex and controversial celebrities?
4. How would you like your death—and your mistakes—to be covered or talked about? Does your status as a non-celebrity matter for this calculation?

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