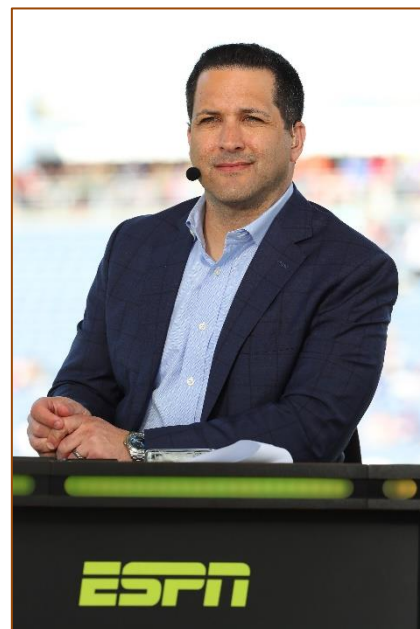


ADAM SCHEFTER & “MR. EDITOR”

THE ETHICS OF PRE-PUBLICATION REVIEW

In 2021, The National Football League (NFL) reviewed 650,000 emails during an investigation into allegations of workplace harassment by Washington Football Team executives and managers (Belson & Rosman, 2021). During this process, it was revealed that some of the emails from former team president Bruce Allen, who was fired in 2019, not only included misogynistic and homophobic comments but also “chummy conversations with journalists” (Farmer & Fenno, 2021). One of those conversations was with longtime NFL Insider reporter for ESPN, Adam Schefter. Emails from 2011 show that Schefter sent a full, unpublished draft of his story about the NFL lockout (which was on-going at the time) to Allen. “Please let me know if you see anything that should be added, changed, tweaked,” Schefter said, and even referred to Allen as “Mr. Editor.” (Farmer & Fenno, 2021). Regardless of “whether the ‘Mr. Editor’ line was tongue-in-cheek or not,” some readers and journalists have condemned Schefter for breaching ethical journalistic standards (Finn, 2021). The controversy over Schefter’s email exchange with Allen highlights the complex ethical boundaries journalists must navigate in collaborating with sources in their reporting.



Schefter defended his actions on the grounds that “it’s common practice to verify facts of a story with sources before you publish” (@ESPNPR, 2021). Of course, this is something all journalists agree on. The Society of Professional Journalists’ (SPJ) Code of Ethics states that reporters should “take responsibility for the accuracy of their work” and “verify information before publication” (Society of Professional Journalists). Especially since collective bargaining talks are complex in nature and the NFL lockout was “a complicated topic that was new to understand,” Schefter said he “took the rare step of sending the full story in advance” “in order to be as accurate as possible” (@ESPNPR, 2021 and Pegan, 2021). But how should journalists go about verifying their reporting?

According to journalist and ethics specialist Thomas Kent, there’s nothing wrong with clarifying information with a source for accuracy’s sake, but “letting sources review content in any more detail is fraught with potential danger” (Kent, 2020). Such danger, *Sporting News* reporter Joe Rivera argues, includes “allow[ing] the source or sources to shift a story, potentially add[ing] bias and most importantly tak[ing] the ‘independent’ out of ‘independent reporting’” (Rivera, 2021). Because they have an “interest in the story being reported a certain way,” “sources often try to influence journalists in order to get more positive coverage” (Petchesky, 2021 and Rodger, 2019). However, the SPJ Code of Ethics is clear that journalists must “deny favored treatment to... special interests” and “resist... external pressure to influence coverage” (Society of Professional Journalists). While it’s unclear what edits, if any, Allen made to the story, many have argued that merely asking for them “is already a breach of the journalistic process” because needing to send the full story to a source “makes it look like we have doubts about the whole thrust of our reporting” and

hints at incomplete work (Rivera, 2021 and Kent, 2020). Overall, what critics have propounded is that Schefter crossed ethical boundaries beyond verification in sharing the full story.

In response to all of the backlash and criticism he received, Schefter admitted that sending the full draft was perhaps “a step too far,” but nonetheless held that “in no way did I, or would I, cede editorial control or hand over final say about a story to anyone, ever” (@ESPN PR, 2021). ESPN even backed Schefter saying, “we believe that nothing is more important to Adam and ESPN than providing fans the most accurate, fair and complete story” (Finn, 2021). If we take him at his word that he truly did not allow Allen to change the story in any significant way, perhaps Schefter just acted quickly and thoughtlessly, without considering the full ethical implications of the email. Sports journalist Darren Rovell appears to echo this sentiment, tweeting: “Give me a break. While it’s not exactly the best of journalism practices, we’ve all done this in the name of accuracy” (Charles, 2021).

In the end, journalists cannot do their work without collaborating with sources. For this reason, it’s important for journalists to maintain good relationships with those they cover while also ensuring their story is accurate. But journalism is unique from other methods of storytelling because it comes from an unbiased, third-party account, so journalists must work hard to retain that independence and not let sources’ special interests factor into their coverage. When preparing to publish their stories, journalists should stop and fully consider the ethical implications of how they verify information with those covered to avoid treading ethically questionable water like Schefter. To do this, Kent suggests that journalists can let a source change a word or two but should talk out a story’s larger angle over the phone instead of sending a source the full draft (Kent, 2021).

Discussion Questions:

1. What are the ethical values in conflict in Schefter’s email exchange with Allen?
2. Do you think Schefter acted ethically, unethically, or thoughtlessly? Would your opinion change if we knew whether or not Allen made changes to the draft?
3. Do you agree with Kent’s suggestions for verifying story information with sources? Are there any other guidelines you would add?
4. How much control or power should journalists give their sources? Does this equation change if the source, unlike in this case, is from an oppressed or disempowered group or community?

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