

Case study 9

The privacy of royals and celebrities

We discussed in the opening pages of this book, and mentioned briefly in chapter 7, the controversy surrounding the death of the ‘People’s Princess’, Diana, and the accusation that she was hounded to her death by an over-zealous media. In the wake of Diana’s death, and after calls for privacy for the Princess’s two boys, Princes William and Harry, a gentlemen’s agreement was reached between the media and Buckingham Palace that would keep the two boys out of the public limelight. After the death of Diana in 1997, the media in the UK agreed to allow her two boys to grow up without ‘the constant hounding of the paparazzi she had to endure’ (‘Media Truce With Royals Falls Apart’ 2003). But by mid 2003, the truce seemed to be breaking up. Since it was revealed that Harry had been caught drinking, smoking, and taking drugs, the papers and the paparazzi could hardly contain their eagerness to snap Harry with a drink or a cigarette—hopefully both—in his hand. The boys’ father, Prince Charles, and his lover later to become his wife, Camilla Parker-Bowles, had to contend with media attention for years. In 1999, a British tabloid published a picture of the then royal bride-to-be, Sophie Rhys-Jones, showing her breast exposed (‘Sophie Print a Cruel Act, Say Palace’ 1999). Buckingham Palace condemned the publication as ‘premeditated cruelty’. The picture was in the *Sun*, Britain’s largest-selling tabloid, and had been taken by a colleague during a business trip to Spain in 1988. It showed some horseplay in which a colleague pulled up Sophie’s bikini top, exposing one breast, and both Sophie and her colleague are pictured laughing (‘Sophie Print a Cruel Act, Say Palace’ 1999). Such is the price of fame.

Film, music, and sports stars are always having to cope with unwanted media attention and reading some truth, and much fiction, about their lives in the tabloids and gossip magazines. But in mid 2003, the rich and famous of Hollywood had something else to contend with—Los Angeles police officers selling their ‘secrets’ to America’s supermarket tabloids (‘Snooping LA Cops Sell Off Star Secrets’ 2003). Australian model Elle Macpherson and actors Sharon Stone, Courteney Cox, Sean Penn, Halle Berry, Meg Ryan, and Drew Barrymore were said to be among hundreds of celebrities whose police

profiles were handed over to the tabloids (McKenna 2003). Among the information kept in restricted police databases are addresses, phone numbers, driving and car records, as well as more sensitive information like restraining orders, criminal history, and arrests that did not result in prosecutions.

Issues and questions raised by case study 9

- 1 We've seen in case study 6 above that politicians are considered public figures and deserving of little privacy. Are members of the royal family any different?
- 2 'Royalty have been carrying on like this for centuries, we're just showing the public what they're like', goes the oft-used tabloid editor's justification. What do you think?
- 3 What makes royalty so special that we shouldn't know what they get up to?
- 4 Conversely, what benefit is there in seeing Prince Harry having a drink or a smoke? Or publishing a photo of a partially topless Sophie Rhys-Jones?
- 5 How much privacy does your average sports, film, or music superstar deserve?
- 6 Doesn't the public make them superstars by watching them play, going to the pictures, or a concert? Are they then public property, open to scrutiny?
- 7 How would you like to be one of the Beckhams?
- 8 'If the public didn't want to read and see this stuff, there wouldn't be a market for it' is another media justification. And they're right—*New Idea* et al. sell extremely well—so aren't they just catering to readers' needs?
- 9 Is it the role of the media to give its audience what it wants, however titillating, or to raise the ethical bar a bit?

Bibliography:

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