

# Cutting the distinction between hard news and private scandal

It took to get Detroit Mayor Kwame Kilpatrick off the front pages was for Oakland County Executive Brooks Patterson to get special treatment when pulled over for, um, "erratic" driving. The public embarrassments of the mayor and the executive are by now well-known.

What I think deserves some reflective consideration, however, is the proper treatment of such cases by the news media — assuming for a moment the media are capable of going beyond the *National Enquirer* school of scandal-mongering for its own sake. In the case of this newspaper, we try to draw a distinction between the private behavior of public officials and instances where private behavior runs the risk of jeopardizing the integrity of public office.

Over the years, we have known of a fair number of cases where local officials — mayors, judges, city council members — have been inclined to have one too many as they leave the golf course or display a fondness for members of the opposite sex who are not their spouses.

Our standard in such cases is that if the behavior does not interfere with responsible and ethical conduct of public office, we consider such peccadilloes a private matter and, therefore, not to be fit subject for news coverage.

But should a judge, for example, actually preside over a trial when inebriated, we would find a way to dig into the story aggressively.

Why? Because a drunk judge sitting on the bench at a trial is a judge that has cast aside the integrity of his public office. This standard of news coverage, I believe, is rather more rigorous in defining news than that commonly used by the big city papers or TV stations.

Why? Because the kind of journalism we practice in this hometown newspaper — community journalism — is one that balances our journalistic commitment to fairness and objectivity with the simultaneous fact that as community journalists we are members of the community we cover and, hence, have an obligation to consider the consequences of our news judgment.

I have seen too many instances where public reputations of decent and reasonable people were ruined just because a newspaper editor decided to print a story about a private misdeed. I've been thinking how this standard would be applied to both Mayor Kilpatrick and Executive Patterson.

In Kilpatrick's case, three items gained lots of press coverage: The size and conduct of his security detail, the "wild parties" at the Manooagian Mansion and the firing of the deputy police chief.

The size of the security detail is fit for news coverage, if only because it has to do with the profi-

gate expenditure of tax dollars spent on the mayor's security.

And if members of the detail are driving while drunk or cheating on their overtime reports, the mayor should be held publicly accountable for failure to supervise subordinates properly.

Are "wild parties" at the mayor's private residence "news" under this standard? I think not, as long as they are private and do not involve violations of the law.

And if the assertions about the firing of the deputy chief are correct — that he was fired because his investigations got too close to the mayor — that constitutes wholesale dereliction of public duty for honor and deserves front page treatment.

In the case of Brooks Patterson — whom I like personally and whom I admire for his quick wit and sense of humor — the issue is pretty clear. My company publishes newspapers in Oakland County, where Patterson is the big boss and by all accounts a very effective one.

It's been common knowledge to my editors and reporters that Patterson from time to time likes to hoist a few, especially in the company of his various cronies.

But up to now, this kind of behavior has largely been kept in private and hence has largely stayed out of the news columns.

I think this is proper, as up to now there has been little evidence Patterson's drinking habits have adversely affected the conduct of his public office or probably broken the law.

In the most recent case, however, Patterson very likely was driving while under the influence. There is clear evidence that his erratic driving patterns could have endangered others.

And I cannot escape the conclusion that the Oakland County sheriff deputies who hauled him over failed to treat him as a likely drunken driver because they were scared to book the big boss.

Patterson will not formally be charged with violating the law, if only because there is no conclusive evidence that would justify charging him with driving while under the influence.

All this is and will be all over the front pages of the papers, properly in my view and not as instance of scandal-mongering media. Making the distinction between hard news and more private scandal is not easy, especially under deadline pressure and when the facts are never as clear as one would wish.

It's especially hard for us community journalists — whose obligations run simultaneously to accuracy and making an impact on the community — to have a civil regard for the distinction between private behavior and public display.

Phil Power is the chairman of the board of the company that owns this newspaper. He would be pleased to get your reactions to this column either at (734) 953-2047 or at [ppower@homecomm.net](mailto:ppower@homecomm.net).



Phil Power

# Harrison administrator uncovers the rest of the Georgia prom story

Harrison High School Assistant Principal Bill Smith was all fired up not long ago, immersed in a range of feelings and thoughts.

He was offended.

He wanted to talk to me as a member of the media and I soon learned why. He wanted me to tell the rest of the story that wasn't covered by my brothers and sisters in the national media.

"Are you familiar with that story in Georgia about the all-white prom?" he asked me.

They actually had one — deliberately, he said. It was publicized nationally, and the entire Harrison cafeteria fell silent when students saw a news segment about the all-white prom.

So Smith decided to contact Superintendent Wayne Smith in Georgia directly, about a diverse group of students asked how such a thing could happen.

"Our kids said why and I said why, too," Smith said. "I was very impressed with how the superintendent responded to me."

Smith was surprised that this level of segregation still existed in the South. He grew up in Texas. "I've seen the lingering effects of segregation," Smith said.

Smith's first reaction was that the school superintendent was a racist, but his impressions continued to change after he discovered the Georgia County High School's real school prom, which the students organized, had 480 attendees. It was held two weeks after the all-white prom, which was not school-sponsored and had only 15 white couples.

The small prom had tons of news coverage, but the same media didn't shake a reporter's notebook at the larger one.

"Nobody responded," Smith said.

Smith thought about the ethnic diversity he sees daily at Harrison. He knows there are many good stories yet untold about Harrison, too.

So he sent an e-mail to Superintendent Wayne Smith, who said he had received about 1,000 e-mails, including some hate mail, after the news coverage.

"He called me back and gave me a code word," Smith said. "He gave me a code word."

Smith said his secretary patched him to me. He told me the whole story. Fifteen couples impacted the whole school, and the school's whole reputation was destroyed by it.

A few people can destroy a school's image, Bill Smith said, noting Harrison, too, has detractors.

Bill Smith is concerned about the perceptions people have about schools.

"It's such a passionate thing," he said. "People don't always see the real story."

His message that viewers didn't learn about the Georgia school's diverse school and sports teams stuck with me. I'm sure other administrators and teachers become impassioned like Bill Smith, but I don't hear their stories. Recently hired at Harrison, he is a breath of fresh air.

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Georgia Superintendent Wayne Smith didn't return a phone call, but his secretary said the local, community newspaper didn't cover either prom.

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And now you know the rest of this story.

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