

# THE CHASER

SPJ

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Fort Worth Chapter / Society of Professional Journalists

*"If it happened in Fort Worth ...  
it's news to us!"*

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Attorney Tom Williams tackles the journalism ethics question

## A discussion for our time

With the new clothes exchanged for what we really wanted, the Christmas decorations put away for another year and the first few mistakes recording the year behind us, it's time to regroup for a learning experience on ethics at the first SPJ meeting of 1997.

We are at last back on our second Tuesday schedule. This month it's Jan. 14. And we will again have a new experience by meeting at the East Regional Library, 6301 Bridge St.

Following a 5:30 board meeting, attorney Tom Williams will join the full membership at 6 for dinner and a discussion on the major libel cases of 1996. Juries awarded average damages of \$3.8 million, more than twice the average of the seven awards made in 1995.

While most of us were preparing for New Year's Eve celebrations, ABC was choking down a judgment from a "Primetime Live" segment concerning undercover reporting techniques employed in a behind-the-scenes story on the Food Lion grocery store chain. With help from Poynter Insti-

tute video tapes, Tom will guide us through examples of this and other costly libel cases.

Please call to let me know you're attending. Dinner costs \$5.50. No reservation means no grilled chicken sandwich, potato salad, cookie and drink for you, bub. My numbers: home 926-9316, office 871-6119. Leave a message on the dreaded answering machine. If lost Tuesday evening, call for directions: 871-6439.

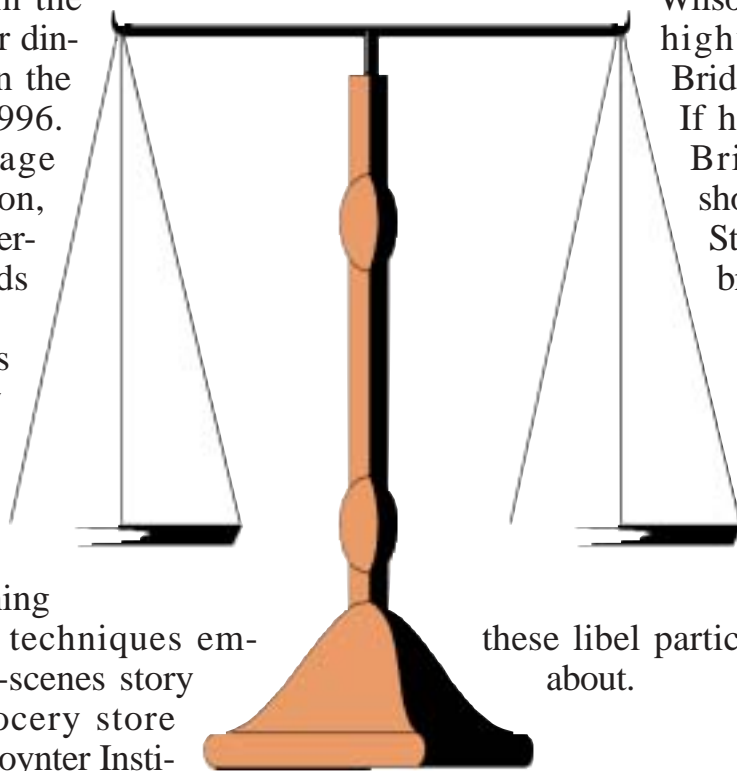
To reach the meeting, if heading east on I-30, get off on Brentwood Stair, go to the light at Wilson Road, cross under the highway and go right on Bridge Street to the library. If heading west, get off at Bridgewood, circle the shopping center to Bridge Street and go left to the library.

Parking is available in front. Go through the double doors and hang a left.

If you get inside the library, you've gone too far.

Kind of like some of these libel participants we'll be talking about.

— Sue Winter



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**B**y now we're all aware of the assault accusations against Dallas Cowboys Michael Irvin and Erik Williams, but I doubt if any of us (unless there's a major revelation between now and the time this newsletter arrives) has any idea what really happened.

A group of us were talking last week about the ethical issues in this case when something in the Star-Telegram basement caught on fire and we had to leave the building. The debate continued outside:

Would we consider printing the name of the woman who accused the two Cowboys of rape? If so, under what circumstances?

Sexual assault has become a "special circumstances" issue in which most newspapers do not publish the victim's name. That seems well and good since for years rape victims were doubly traumatized — first in the assault and then in reporting and prosecuting it.

But what if the accused is really a victim?

In the case of these wealthy and highly visible athletes, what if information emerges that the woman was paid either to make the accusations or to tell KXAS-TV reporter Marty Griffin

about them? What if the rape never happened, and instead this is an unstable woman who had no intention of doing harm? What if the woman was simply out to get the players or make it more difficult for the team to continue in the playoffs? Then again, what if she really was raped, and at gunpoint, as she claims?

What if Irvin, Williams or the Cowboys organization file a civil suit accusing her of slander and the television station of libel? Do we print her name then?

What if the next time something like this occurs, the reporter just ignores the matter to escape being the boy who cried wolf?

How do we balance the public's right to know with the victim's right to privacy?

And just how much are we

willing to bear to become "public figures"?

When ethics are cut and dried, plain and simple, it's easy to stand by them.

But when was the last time that happened?

I, for one, am ready to hear Tom Williams, an attorney and expert on the subject of media ethics, address the subject at this month's SPJ meeting. See you there.

— Carolyn Poirot

# ETHICS

*When right and wrong  
isn't black and white:  
a reporter's dilemma*

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**SPJ**

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