

TEACHING NOTE:

#MeToo, Charlie Rose and Newsroom Practices¹

Case Synopsis

The case recounts the revelations of persistent sexual harassment by Charlie Rose, a distinguished journalist, and draws heavily on Washington Post articles published in 2017 and 2018 in the midst of the #MeToo movement. It describes a variety of factors that enabled Rose to continue his abhorrent behavior despite the fact that it was an open secret — his power as a star anchor; his network of influential friends and supporters; staff members who were complicit with his behavior; executives at CBS, PBS and Bloomberg who ignored complaints about Rose; and the organizational structure and newsroom practices of Charlie Rose Inc. It illustrates how a network of complicity enables a perpetrator to persist in despicable behavior such as sexual harassment and how behavioral ethics factors support such a network. It raises issues related to news organization leadership and followership and newsroom practices and policies, which curb or enable unethical behavior. It provides instructors an opportunity to discuss the law related to sexual harassment. The case uses sexual harassment as an example of one of a variety of factors that can make newsrooms unsafe and unfair, and as such, it sets the stage for a discussion of how to create newsrooms that are free of all types of unethical and illegal behavior, and as a result, are safe and fair for everyone.

Teaching Objectives

- To help students understand how the concepts of behavioral ethics — cognitive biases, social and organizational pressures, and situational factors — enable sexual harassment to continue in news organizations
- To help students understand organizational factors that contribute to unethical behavior such as networks of complicity, problematic newsroom policies and practices, and toxic newsroom cultures
- To familiarize students with sexual harassment law
- To prompt students to think about how they would respond if they were to see someone being subjected to unethical or illegal behavior in a news organization
- To prompt students to think about how to create a newsroom that is a safe and fair workplace in which journalists can do their best work

Supporting Materials

See “Module Overview: Creating a Safe and Fair Workplace” for a full list of supporting materials that can be used with the case. Especially see the two custom-designed videos: 1) “Understanding Sexual Harassment Through the Behavioral Ethics Lens” and 2) “Networks of Complicity.” Also, note that a variety of short videos on behavioral ethics from the [“Concepts Unwrapped”](#) series of Ethics Unwrapped can be assigned to students and/or shown in class, some of which are referenced below.

Assignment Questions for Students

1. The case describes the two types of sexual harassment that the courts have established as illegal. Based on what you read in the case, what type or types of sexual harassment do you think Charlie Rose's victims could allege?
2. Why and how could persistent sexual harassment by a distinguished journalist such as Rose be allowed to persist for decades in multiple news organizations?
3. Why did people ignore Rose's bad behavior? Do you think any of the behavioral ethics factors came in to play in ways that prevented people from trying to disrupt Rose's unethical behavior? If so, which ones?
4. Who are the people or groups that have a stake in whether Rose is able to persist in his unethical behavior?
5. Imagine that you observe or hear about someone being sexually harassed in your newsroom. What would you do or say?
6. The problems with Rose were not isolated incidents. Why do you think unethical behavior such as sexual harassment has been tolerated in newsrooms more generally?
7. What can newsroom leaders and followers do to create safe and fair workplaces?

Teaching the case

We recommend beginning the module by teaching the case to raise a variety of issues in a vivid and compelling way and then following up with more in-depth discussions and/or lectures related to behavioral ethics, networks of complicity, sexual harassment law, and creating safe and fair newsrooms. This approach enables students to grapple with a number of the issues themselves in an engaging way. An alternative approach would be to begin with lecture/discussions of behavioral ethics, networks of complicity, sexual harassment law, and creating safe and fair newsrooms, and then use the case as a capstone discussion/illustration. The case also raises themes that will be addressed in more depth in the modules "Giving Voice to Values" and "Understanding and Changing Organizational Culture."

1. The case describes the two types of sexual harassment that the courts have established as illegal.

Based on what you read in the case, what type or types of sexual harassment do you think Charlie Rose's victims could allege?

Instructors can address this question initially or defer it to later in the discussion. However, it is important for students to understand that sexual harassment is illegal as well as unethical. A strong case can be made that Rose's victims quoted in the case (Kyle Godfrey-Ryan, Reah Bravo and Annmarie Parr) experienced hostile work environment sexual harassment because of the repeated pattern of sexual behavior (e.g., appearing nude) and sexual innuendos (e.g., asking about their sex lives and sexual preferences) that Rose subjected them to, which impaired their job performance and created a hostile, intimidating and offensive work environment. Rose's problematic behavior appeared to be both severe and pervasive. It is likely that some of Rose's victims could also claim quid pro quo sexual harassment. For example, Rose fired Godfrey-Ryan after she rejected his sexual advances and then told a friend about Rose's behavior. The Hollywood Commission provides [a helpful resource](#) on sexual harassment.

Instructors can highlight to students that many journalists did not understand their rights or receive adequate training on sexual harassment and how it manifests in newsrooms until after the #MeToo movement. For example, in this case, Bravo, who had been both an intern and an associate producer for Charlie Rose Inc., said that she had not even recognized Rose's behavior as sexual harassment until after it was exposed publicly.

2. Why and how could persistent sexual harassment by a distinguished journalist such as Rose be allowed to persist for decades in multiple news organizations?

Perhaps the best explanation is that a “network of complicity” developed around Rose and enabled him to continue his unethical behavior. Rose exemplified the type of perpetrator described in the article “Networks of Complicity: Social Networks and Sexual Harassment.”² He had formal power as the leader of Charlie Rose Inc. and informal power as a star journalist for CBS, PBS and Bloomberg. He had skillfully built a network of people within the organizations where he worked who protected him from sanction, and he had also networked with powerful politicians and the rich and famous outside his work organizations. His network of complicity included active enablers such as Executive Producer Yvette Vega, who had worked with Rose since 1991 and actively covered for him, and passive enablers such as the CBS executives and others in the newsrooms who ignored Rose’s behavior and refused to listen to victims who tried to alert them. They protected Rose from sanction to a degree that seems incredible to an objective observer. No doubt, Rose’s ability to build a network of powerful supporters inside and outside of the news organizations he worked for also contributed to his power and influence and his ability to shield himself from sanction. As will be discussed below, a variety of organizational factors contributed as well — especially weak or nonexistent organizational mechanisms designed to constrain abuses of power and unethical behavior. Rose and his network of complicity created a toxic newsroom culture. The case illustrates what Art Padilla, Robert Hogan and Robert B. Kaiser referred to as a “toxic triangle”: 1) a destructive leader, 2) susceptible followers and 3) conducive environment.³ See the video “Networks of Complicity.”

3. Why did people in various news organizations ignore Rose’s bad behavior? Do you think any of the behavioral ethics factors came in to play in ways that prevented people from trying to disrupt Rose’s unethical behavior? If so, which ones?

A variety of behavioral ethics factors enabled people working in news organizations with Rose to ignore his persistent sexual harassment. Behavioral ethics is a relatively new field that focuses on three types of factors: 1) cognitive biases (i.e., rationalizations), 2) social and organizational pressures, and 3) situational factors.⁴ Behavioral ethics factors can undermine ethical decision-making and prevent people from living as ethically as they intend. Students can raise a wide variety of factors, a few of which are suggested below. See the custom-designed video by Robert Prentice for an application of behavioral ethics concepts to sexual harassment.

Cognitive Biases or Rationalizations

- Self-serving bias. The people working at Charlie Rose Inc. were dependent on him for their jobs and their livelihoods. He had hired them, and he could fire them. He had the power to make or break their careers after they left his employ. As a star anchor, Rose was a valuable asset to CBS, PBS and Bloomberg, so it was in the best interest of their executives to turn a blind eye to his bad behavior. As such, the self-serving bias could have come into play. It posits that people interpret and remember information in a manner that benefits them.⁵
- Denial-of-responsibility bias. This bias occurs when people think that they have no choice but to act in a certain way because someone else — often a superior or someone with more power, authority or expertise — is responsible for setting ethical norms and values.⁶ Certainly, people working with Rose could have felt that it was the responsibility of others — Vega, Rose’s executive producer; the network executives; Rose’s fellow anchors at “CBS This Morning” — to counter Rose’s unethical behavior.

Social and Organizational Pressures

- Obedience-to-authority bias. People have a tendency to defer to the boss and adopt the boss's values rather than making decisions based on their own ethical values.⁷ Following the boss's lead can be a good thing if the boss is ethical, but when the boss is unethical, it can be disastrous. The staff at Charlie Rose Inc. could have felt that they had no choice but to accept the norms set by Rose and upheld by Vega.
- Conformity bias. People are wired to conform to the behavior of their peers, which gives rise to the conformity bias.⁸ As Rose's staff members saw others ignoring Rose's unethical behavior, they could have reasoned that if others were not objecting to Rose's behavior, why should they?

Situational Factors

- Weak organizational mechanisms. Charlie Rose Inc. does not appear to have had any of the usual organizational mechanisms designed to constrain abuses of power. For example, it does not appear to have had a human resources department or any policies or procedures for constraining or reporting unethical or illegal behavior. Neither PBS nor Bloomberg provided human resources support for "Charlie Rose."
- Hierarchical and siloed organizational structure with high power differentials. Unethical behavior can thrive in hierarchical contexts with high power differentials such as Charlie Rose Inc.⁹ Rose was at the top of the hierarchy with complete control over the show, its staff and supporting operations. Moreover, the organizational structure of Charlie Rose Inc. was siloed in that it was separate from PBS and Bloomberg's other entities with little to no interaction or oversight from others with the power to override Rose's authority. This context made it difficult for others to counter or curb Rose's unethical behavior.
- Informal and nontraditional work environment. Rose and his staff often worked in informal and nontraditional work environments such as Rose's homes, hotel rooms, cars and private airplanes. These environments made it easier for Rose to conceal his inappropriate and unethical behavior, and they may have even made his behavior seem less objectionable than it would have seemed in a more traditional office workplace.
- Stress and fatigue. People often make less ethical decisions when they are under stress or fatigued.¹⁰ Certainly, the deadline-driven and fast-paced nature of the work that Rose and his staff did could have made them less aware of the importance of ethical decision making.

The end result was that many people — Rose's staff and managers, and executives at CBS, PBS and Bloomberg — had [moral myopia](#), a distortion of moral vision in which ethical issues do not come clearly into focus; motivated blindness, a condition in which people do not see ethical issues when it is not in their best interest to do so; and/or [moral muteness](#), an unwillingness to talk about ethical issues.¹¹

4. Who are the people or groups that have a stake in whether Rose is able to persist in his unethical behavior?

A stakeholder analysis involves identifying all the people who have a stake or an interest in whether unethical behavior is permitted to continue.¹² It often helps students come to terms with the full extent of the damage that unethical behavior does and understand why someone needs to counter it. The following are among the many stakeholders who were affected by Rose's unethical behavior:

- The victims of Rose's bullying and sexual harassment. Rose harmed many people by sexually harassing and bullying them over a prolonged period of time. In the case and The Washington Post articles, Rose's victims expressed their deep distress in a variety of ways. Some even described crying throughout their encounters with him. Many victims of sexual harassment have serious and lasting physical and psychological harm.
- Charlie Rose. Though it is hard to feel any sympathy for him, Rose himself is a stakeholder. He lost his career, and his reputation was permanently ruined. As Barbara Kellerman makes the point in describing intemperate leaders, no form of bad leadership seems more wasteful and needless than when leaders cannot control their appetites and desires.¹³
- Yvette Vega. Vega, executive producer of the "Charlie Rose" show, ignored Rose's bad behavior and the reports of his victims. She later said, "I should have stood up for (Rose's victims). I failed. It is crushing. I deeply regret not helping them." Her self-esteem, her reputation and her career prospects must have suffered.
- Rose's staff and coworkers. Even people who only observe or hear about unethical behavior such as sexual harassment can suffer psychologically. Certainly, observing or hearing about Rose's persistent bad behavior must have troubled some of the staff at Charlie Rose Inc. and the other news organizations where Rose worked before, during and after the exposure of his sexual harassment. From Gayle King's statement at the beginning of the case, it is clear that she was distressed and troubled. All the staff of Charlie Rose Inc. lost their jobs when "Charlie Rose" was dropped by PBS and Bloomberg.
- CBS, PBS and Bloomberg. Certainly, the reputations of these news organizations were damaged when it came to light that they had employed Rose and ignored signs of his bad behavior.
- The journalism profession. One can argue that the journalism profession is a stakeholder. Certainly, its reputation was sullied when accounts of sexual harassment by Rose and other accomplished journalists were revealed.

5. Imagine that you observe or hear about someone being sexually harassed in your newsroom. What would you do or say?

This part of the discussion raises issues that will be explored further in the module "Giving Voice to Values." Research and experience have demonstrated that people are more likely to recognize unethical behavior when they encounter it and give voice to their values if they have practiced doing so and have developed "scripts" for such conversations.¹⁴ Instructors can use an in-class role-playing exercise to give students the opportunity to practice giving voice to their values and develop scripts. For example, students can be divided into groups of three. One student can be assigned to play the role of a staff member who has seen or heard that Rose is harassing a young woman employee. A second student can be assigned to play the role of a supervisor in one of the newsrooms where Rose works. The first student must give voice to his or her values by reporting the problematic behavior to the supervisor and attempting to persuade her to take action. The third student is assigned to be an observer who will report what worked and what did not work during the exercise to the class in a large group discussion. An alternative would be to have two students volunteer to role-play before the class.

People are much more likely to give voice to their values if they believe that they can do so.¹⁵ As such, it is important for students to recognize that they can and should do something to try to disrupt unethical behavior. As CNN anchor Alisyn Camerota urges in her video, students should tell someone and avoid moral muteness. Research on whistleblowing suggests that one should try blowing the softest whistle first, which means alerting people within the organization before going to external parties.¹⁶ As such, a first step would be to report the bad behavior to a supervisor or to someone in the human resources department. However, as was the case for Rose's victims, at times supervisors and HR professionals ignore problems. When attempts to blow the whistle internally fail, then one must go outside the organization to the media, a governmental entity such as the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission or an industry association. The counsel of a lawyer can be especially helpful in the whistleblowing process.

6. The problems with Rose were not isolated incidents. Why do you think unethical behavior such as sexual harassment has been tolerated in newsrooms more generally?

The case contains a section with a litany of accounts of problematic behavior in the journalism profession and a description of newsroom demographics that sets up a discussion of this question. If students have been assigned to read Minette E. Drumwright and Peggy Cunningham's article "Unethical Newsroom Behavior: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm," they can draw on it as well as the case.¹⁷ The authors identified five themes that explained why newsrooms provide a context conducive to unethical behavior: 1) conceiving of work solely as creating journalistic content; 2) toxic rituals, rites of passage and norms; 3) high power differentials and acquiescent behavior; 4) ineffective organizational mechanisms; and 5) a disruptive industry context. The article also describes behavioral ethics factors that support each of the five themes. Networks of complicity enabled the bad behavior, and together with the themes, created a perfect storm that permitted unethical behavior to persist. Two paradoxes resulted: 1) the ethics paradox, in which journalists had high ethical sensitivity in reporting but were blind to unethical behavior within newsrooms; and 2) the power paradox, in which journalists experienced role conflict caused by the need for initiative, courage, independence and resistance to intimidation in reporting versus the dependence, obedience and acquiescence required within newsrooms. If the article has been assigned to students along with the case, the instructor can ask the students which of the themes or paradoxes they find most compelling and why.

7. What can newsroom leaders and followers do to create safe and fair workplaces?

This question can be addressed from the level of the individual and the organization as well as from the perspective of followers and leaders. Both followers and leaders need to engage in the steps leading to ethical action, which were identified by James Rest.¹⁸ First, individuals must understand the ethical dimensions of an ethical issue (moral awareness.) Second, they must have the ability to decide on a course of action that is ethical (moral decision making). Third, they must want to act on that desire or intention (moral intent). Finally, they must have the courage to act on the desire or intent (moral action). Understanding behavioral ethics enables people to improve on all four steps. Instructors can assign the four videos in the Ethics Unwrapped series "Being Your Best Self," which illustrate the steps to acting ethically and explain how understanding behavioral ethics concepts contributes: "Being Your Best Self, Part 1: [Moral Awareness](#)"; "Being Your Best Self, Part 2: [Moral Decision Making](#)"; "Being Your Best Self, Part 3: [Moral Intent](#)"; "Being Your Best Self, Part 4: [Moral Action](#)." The videos can be used as a pre-class assignment or provided after the case discussion as a follow-up assignment.

In the book "Bad Leadership," Kellerman emphatically makes the point that bad leaders could not persist in their behavior without the support of their followers.¹⁹ As such, it is especially important that followers empower and prepare themselves to act ethically and to hold their leaders to account. This theme will be continued in the module "Giving Voice to Values."

The issues related to leaders' roles in creating safe and fair newsrooms tie in with and lay the groundwork for the module "Understanding and Changing Organizational Culture." Leaders must understand the dimensions of their organization's culture, which includes beliefs, values, assumptions and ways of interacting, and then they must use the principles, practices and policies of good management to change any problematic dimensions.

First, the underlying dimensions of a newsroom's culture must be made explicit. For example, are there underlying assumptions that it is acceptable for editors to bully reporters and that ethics only matters when it pertains to creating journalistic content? Leaders can identify the dimensions of organizational culture by creating forums to listen to employees, or they can use consultants to gather information and insights through conducting confidential, in-depth interviews or surveys with employees. Once the dimensions of organizational culture have been identified, they need to be evaluated critically to determine which dimensions are problematic and need to be changed. Changing organizational culture is a long-term undertaking, but it can be done.

Leaders can change culture through their own explicit and implicit messages, through their actions and behaviors, and through policies and practices. For example, in terms of policies and practices, the types of people who are hired, rewarded and promoted send messages. When Rose was celebrated and promoted by mainstream news organizations, it certainly sent messages that his behavior was not only tolerated but accepted. As another example, training on ethical decision-making or being an effective ally sends messages about what is important and also increases the capabilities of those who are trained. Leaders and managers have many organizational levers that they can use to lead positive change and shape organizational culture. See the module "Understanding and Changing Organizational Culture" for elaboration.

¹This teaching note was written by Dr. Minette E. Drumwright for the purpose of aiding instructors.

²Peggy Cunningham, Minette E. Drumwright and Kenneth W. Foster, "Networks of Complicity: Social Networks and Sex Harassment, Equality, Diversity, and Inclusion (2019), DOI 10.1108/EDI-04-2019-0117.

³A. Padilla, R. Hogan and R.B. Kaiser, "The Toxic Triangle: Destructive Leaders, Susceptible Followers, and Conducive Environments," *The Leadership Quarterly*, 18, no. 3 (2007): 176-194.

⁴Minette E. Drumwright, Robert Prentice and Cara Biasucci, "Behavioral Ethics and Teaching Ethical Decision Making," *Decision Sciences Journal of Innovative Education*, 13, no. 3 (2015): 431-458.

⁵Cara Biasucci and Robert Prentice, "Behavioral Ethics in Practice: Why We Sometimes Make the Wrong Decisions" (Routledge: New York, , 2021).

⁶Biasucci and Prentice, "Behavioral Ethics in Practice."

⁷Biasucci and Prentice, "Behavioral Ethics in Practice."

⁸Biasucci and Prentice, "Behavioral Ethics in Practice."

⁹Minette E. Drumwright and Peggy Cunningham, "Unethical Behavior in Newsrooms: Paradoxes and a Perfect Storm," *Journalism Practice* (2020), <https://doi.org/10.1080/17512786.2020.1825114>.

¹⁰Drumwright and Cunningham, "Unethical Behavior in Newsrooms."

¹¹Minette E. Drumwright and P.E. Murphy, "How Advertising Practitioners View Ethics: Moral Muteness, Moral Myopia and Moral Imagination," *Journal of Advertising*, 33 no. 2 (2004): 7-24; M. Bazerman and A. Tenbrunsel, "Blind Spots: (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011); Frederick B. Bird, "The Muted Conscience: Moral Silence and the Practice of Business Ethics" (Westport, Connecticut: Quorum Books, 2002).

¹²Mary C. Gentile, "Giving Voice to Values: How to Speak Your Mind When You Know What is Right" (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010).

¹³Barbara Kellerman, "Bad Leadership: What It Is. How It Happens. Why It Matters." (Boston, Massachusetts: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).

¹⁴Gentile, "Giving Voice to Values."

¹⁵Gentile, "Giving Voice to Values."

¹⁶S. Bok, "Lying: Moral Choice in Public and Private Life." (New York: Random House, 1978).

¹⁷Drumwright and Cunningham, "Unethical Behavior in Newsrooms."

¹⁸J. Rest, "Moral Development: Advances in Research and Theory." (New York: Praeger, 1994).

¹⁹Kellerman, "Bad Leadership."