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## Saddam Hussein is “dangerous to the extreme”: The Ethics of Professional Commentary on Public Figures

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### Author note

Portions of this article were developed as posts on the website, [psychologytoday.com](http://psychologytoday.com), from 2010-2011. The authors thank Deborah Hirsch who read those initial materials and commented on them. The quote, “dangerous to the extreme,” is from Jerrold M. Post’s (1991, p. 279) comments on Saddam Hussein. The authors can be contacted at [michelle.leichtman@unh.edu](mailto:michelle.leichtman@unh.edu) and [jack.mayer@unh.edu](mailto:jack.mayer@unh.edu).

### Abstract

People are intrinsically interested in the personalities of public figures such as the celebrities they follow, political leaders, and citizens at the center of newsworthy events. The goal of the present article is to examine the key issues that surround ethical commentary on public figures by psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. Public commentaries carry with them a host of issues from representing a given discipline such as psychology well, to potentially harming an individual who is discussed, to furthering public education about personality and mental health issues. For this reason such commentary deserves special consideration as to when and how it is appropriate to carry out.

Keywords: ethics, media, personality, public figure, media commentary

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## Saddam Hussein is “dangerous to the extreme”: The Ethics of Professional Commentary on Public Figures

People are intently interested in the personalities of public figures such as the celebrities they follow, political leaders, and private citizens at the center of newsworthy events. To what extent should public discussions of such individuals focus exclusively on their ideas and acts, as opposed to their personalities, character traits, or mental health issues? The political commentator Christopher Hitchens mused, "At my old English boarding school we had a sporting saying that one should ‘tackle the ball and not the man...’" and indeed, arguments that include attacks on a person’s character (*argumentum ad hominum*) often are viewed as impolite, and even as logical fallacy. Yet some philosophers regard raising issues of personality as quite relevant to good argument (van Eemeren, Meuffels, & Verburg, 2000), and empirical evidence bears out detectable influences of leaders’ personalities on their public conduct (Elms, 1994; Winter, 2010). Christopher Hitchens remarked of his ‘tackle the ball’ philosophy during the 2008 US Presidential election:

“I carried on echoing this sort of unexamined nonsense for quite some time...when it hit me very forcibly that the ‘personality’ of one of the candidates was itself an ‘issue’” (Hitchens, 2008).

Another columnist willing to talk about the personalities of public figures is Maureen Dowd. Writing in the *New York Times* during the 2010 midterm elections, she discussed then-Delaware senatorial candidate Christine O’Donnell, who had received media attention for an earlier involvement in witchcraft, campaign funding irregularities, and issues with her personal tax returns. Dowd wondered why established politicians were unwilling to criticize Ms. O’Donnell’s character itself, concluding:

"The insane have achieved political respectability while the sane act too good for it all. The irrational celebrate while the rational act bored and above-it-all"  
(Dowd, 2010, September 18).

Commentators such as Hitchens and Dowd consider a public official’s personality to be relevant to the capacity to lead. When commentators such as Ms. Dowd refer to political candidates as insane, it seems reasonable that mental health professionals discuss the issue and defend her argument, contradict it, or simply reveal a split in professional opinion – the latter openly illustrating the limits of the field. There are other reasons to discuss the personalities of public figures as well – for example, when a person’s comments or behaviors illustrate basic psychological principles, or when an individual’s personality illustrates how psychological forces contribute to the shaping of a person’s life.

The goal of the present article is to examine the key issues that surround ethical commentary on public figures by psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals. We frame our discussion by pointing out the guidelines that professional organizations have established for practitioners providing public commentary and by discussing the role of this commentary in the public sphere. Next, we examine issues we believe are relevant to commentators when they weigh the ethics of providing public judgments of particular individuals in particular cases. We conclude with recommendations for practitioners

and policymakers facing the thorny issues surrounding the ethics of commenting on public figures.

In this review of ethical issues, we make several assumptions that seem consistent with research, common sense, and with the ethical codes of societies such as the American Psychological Association. They are as follows: We assume that professionals' comments on personalities have the power to hurt or otherwise influence the individuals being commented upon, both directly by providing unsolicited feedback and indirectly by shaping their public reputations. Generally speaking, there is evidence that expert commentary has the potential to sway public opinion in a number of domains (e.g., Bornstein, 2004; Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987). We also assume that professionals' commentaries influence both the self-esteem of professional groups, and the image of the profession in the public eye. Laypersons are likely to base their views of mental health professionals in part on available public examples derived from the media. Finally, we assume that the public is interested in the opinions of mental health professionals regarding the personalities of public figures.

### **Professional Guidelines for Commentary on Public Figures**

#### **The Ethics Codes and their Political Backdrop**

If the public hoped to hear a professional perspective as to whether a political figure was exhibiting a mental disorder or was insane, as claimed in Ms. Dowd's earlier-quoted comments, psychiatrists are among the best qualified professionals to render judgment. Nevertheless, the *American Psychiatric Association* currently has strict rules regarding the conditions under which psychiatrists may make their judgments publicly.

This has not always been the case. Up until the 1960s, the American Psychiatric Association provided little explicit guidance for how a psychiatrist might speak to the media about the mental health of a politician or other person in the public eye. Relevant ethical issues certainly were discussed among psychiatrists: Sigmund Freud, for example, believed that public analyses should be carried out only of "historical" figures – that is, the deceased (Elms, 1976, p. 178-179). All this would change as a consequence of events surrounding the 1964 U.S. presidential election.

As the election season drew to a close, then-president Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, and his Republican opponent, Senator Barry Goldwater, continued a polarizing and often frightening public conversation about war, peace, and the future of the United States. Inserted into their debate were key questions about character – in particular, what level of mental stability would be desirable for a leader who could order nuclear strikes around the globe. In this heated context, *Fact Magazine* polled psychiatrists across the country as to Senator Goldwater's mental health. *Fact's* publisher, Ralph Ginzburg, a brilliant marketer, took out one hundred thousand dollars' worth of advertisements in the *New York Times* and other major media outlets in advance of a special election issue containing the poll results (Anonymous, 1964, Oct. 2). The advertisements indicated that Senator Goldwater's character would be brought into question, fueling anticipation of the special issue weeks before its publication. Indeed, the published issue documented poll results that reflected a wide range of potentially damning comments on Goldwater's mental health. While some psychiatrists characterized

Goldwater as normal, others viewed him as alternatively grandiose, obsessive, paranoid, or paranoid schizophrenic (Boroson, 1964, Sept/Oct).

After losing the election, Goldwater sued *Fact* magazine for libel and won \$75,000 (Bickel, 1964; Burks, 1968, May 25). While the lawsuit shed a spotlight on the ethics of psychiatrists commenting on public figures, even before *Fact's* special election issue was published, the American Psychiatric Association leadership had anticipated possible public relations issues around the survey. Dr. Daniel Blain, then President of the Association and Dr. Walter E. Barton, its medical director, wrote a letter to *Fact* magazine condemning the forthcoming publication of the poll results. They accused *Fact* of intending to publish "a hodgepodge" of personal, political and professional opinions, and engaging in "yellow journalism." They continued:

"By attaching the stigma of extreme political partisanship to the psychiatric profession as a whole in the heated climate of the current political campaign, *Fact* has in effect administered a low blow to all who would advance the treatment and care of the mentally ill of America" (Anonymous, 1964, Oct. 2).

### **Present Status of the Ethics Codes**

Following the lawsuit against the magazine the American Psychiatric Association instituted the so-called "Goldwater Rule":

"On occasion psychiatrists are asked for an opinion about an individual who is in the light of public attention or who has disclosed information about himself/herself through public media. In such circumstances, a psychiatrist may share with the public his or her expertise about psychiatric issues in general. However, it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement." (cited in Friedman, 2008).

Although the Goldwater Rule was intended as a sensible solution to protecting the integrity of the psychiatric profession, more recent incidents underscore the severity of its restrictions. A case in point concerns the testimony of Dr. Jerrold M. Post before the House Armed Services Committee and the House Foreign Affairs Committee. On August 2nd of 2000, shortly after Iraq's armed forces invaded Kuwait, Post, a psychiatrist with extensive experience in the analysis of political leaders, was invited to comment concerning the character of Iraqi leader Saddam Hussein. While Hussein had political reasons for ordering the invasion of oil-rich Kuwait, psychological issues also were likely to have contributed to his decision to invade (Elms, 1976). As the United States and its allies considered military action to liberate Kuwait, congressional leaders and others investigated the psychology underlying Hussein's directives, including his motivations and his mental status.

Dr. Post discouraged any misapprehension of Hussein as an inexplicable madman, and instead portrayed him as an effective, pragmatic adversary, who was "dangerous to the extreme" (Post, 1991, p. 279). According to the U.S. Institute for Peace, Post's testimony represented a "contribution of the highest order" to the government and people of the United States, and many acknowledged that it served a key public need at the time. Officials of the American Psychiatric Association, however, were displeased with Post's testimony. Shortly after he testified, Post received a call from the chair of an Association subgroup advising him that some members had complained that he had violated the Goldwater Rule when

commenting on the Iraqi leader's character (Post, 2002). Post was proud of his public service and asserted that the restrictions the Goldwater Rule places on psychiatrists are too extreme. He was not alone in contending that the rule was problematic. The eminent psychologist and psychohistorian A. C. Elms argued that:

"Throughout their vote-seeking careers, politicians regularly hold themselves up for public inspection, and I think professional psychobiographers have as much right and responsibility to inspect their qualifications for office as journalists and competing politicians do" (Elms, 1994, p. 252)

Psychologists are under less severe restrictions than psychiatrists, although they are still advised to be cautious in their public commentary. The *American Psychological Association Ethics* are based on an underlying set of General Principles that include Beneficence and Nonmaleficence, Responsibility, and Integrity among others. These are described as "aspirational in nature," in that they are all desirable, but are difficult to meet in their totality. Specifically as regards "Media Presentations," the APA code Section 5.04, states:

"When psychologists provide public advice or comment via print, internet, or other electronic transmission, they take precautions to ensure that statements (1) are based on their professional knowledge, training, or experience in accord with appropriate psychological literature and practice; (2) are otherwise consistent with this Ethics Code; and (3) do not indicate that a professional relationship has been established with the recipient." (American Psychological Association, 2002)

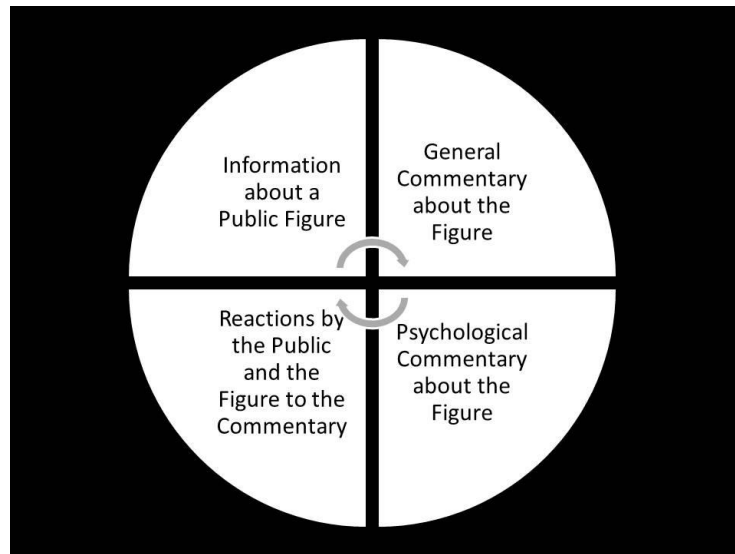
According to some readings, the Media Presentations Section 5.04 allows for the public analysis of a political figure's mental life if it educates the public, violates no rules of treatment or confidentiality, and is otherwise prudent.

### **Public Commentary and Public Interaction**

Commenting on public figures is not a central focus in the working life of most psychologists, psychiatrists and related professionals. Yet how professionals do so is important in that it reflects both on their field and on their relationship with the public. Public commentary overlaps with such activities as clinical consulting and report writing insofar as all involve an assessment of an individual by a trained authority, and usually, some level of communication of that assessment to the individual. Some issues around such assessments extend to all these forms of communication, notably, tact and informative value. In the present discussion we focus specifically on these issues in the context of public commentary.

We view the role of psychiatrists', psychologists' and related professionals' commentaries in the media as part of a public interaction, as depicted in Figure 1. That interaction begins with publicly available information about a person in the news (upper left). Typically a virtuous or problematic act attracts attention and evokes general commentary in the media (upper right). Media commentary often concerns the morality, political sense or public-relations meaning of the person's acts, as well as the psychology behind such acts (Kipnis, 2010). Psychologists and related professionals may add their voices to the general media commentary (lower right). One distinctive feature of public commentary is that the public

figures being commented upon – and the public – have the freedom to respond, and on occasion do so (lower left).



*Figure 1.* The interactive nature of commenting on public figures in the media. When journalists report information about a public figures (upper left), commentators often express opinions about the individual’s personality (upper right). Mental health professionals may also engage in the public discussion through interviews given to journalists or through other media channels (lower right). The public figure then may respond in the media as well (lower left). Figure 1 is a slightly modified version of the unnumbered figure in Mayer (2011, February 22).

On February 14th 2011, for example, talk show host Dan Patrick interviewed Charlie Sheen, the then-star of the CBS show "Two and a Half Men," on his radio program. Sheen had recently experienced alleged difficulties with drugs and alcohol and in the beginning of the interview appeared to express a tolerance of cocaine use for those who could manage it. Twelve minutes into the interview, Mr. Patrick inquired, "...how long [have] you been sober?" Mr. Sheen replied rapidly:

"I've been off... well, I don't use 'sober' anymore. I'm not in AA; I don't believe in it you know, um — it's off an' on — it's been — I was sober five years ago and just bored out of my tree and just decided this is inauthentic: it's not who I am and like that — you know I didn't drink for 12 years and man, that first one Dan, wow...then you got people arguing the disease model or the alcoholism model..." (Patrick, 2011, Feb. 14)

Some mental health professionals used Mr. Sheen’s behavior as a jumping-off point for discussing substance abuse and the distorted thinking associated with it, and predicted that at that time Mr. Sheen was headed toward a “very very unhappy ending” (Nyholm, 2011, Feb. 15; Velez-Mitchell, 2011, Feb. 15). Members of the public replied to posts about Mr. Sheen in the form of adding comments to the experts' blogs and to related articles. Mr. Sheen himself called into Dan Patrick's program two days after his original interview, remarking in a general way on the controversy and expressing his gratitude to his coworkers at CBS for their support (Nyholm,

2011, Feb. 15). Thus, the process moved from information about Sheen's views and potential activities to psychological commentary, to Mr. Sheen's own reactions.

### **The Virtues of Free Speech;**

### **The Virtues of Restraint**

Whether commentary is advisable or not on balance, it is often requested of mental health professionals. Certainly, many of the evaluations professionals make are confidential, anonymous, or of personalities in groups. In practical terms, however, mental health professionals also contribute to public discussions of individual personalities in a variety of situations and for diverse purposes. Whether reacting on-the-spot to a journalist's inquiry about a newsworthy person, blogging, or using the example of a public figure to clarify a scholarly point, professionals make decisions about the appropriate nature and scope of their commentary. Public commentary carries with it a host of implications that loom larger than the narrow confines of the private evaluation of a patient, and for this reason it deserves special consideration as to when and how it is appropriate to carry out.

### **General Principles of Free Speech**

Many people bring a set of preconceived attitudes regarding the idea of commenting about a person in public. Their opinions often reflect diverse cultural teachings, social philosophies and theological guidance worth considering in regard to the value of such public speech.

In broad terms, public commentary represents a potent form of free expression, for which the philosopher John Stuart Mill crafted a powerful rationale (Mill & Alexander, 1999). Mill suggested that if a new opinion contradicted commonly held beliefs but was nonetheless correct, openly discussing it would allow other clear thinkers to agree with it. Alternatively, if the new opinion were incorrect, its discussion would help people to better understand the correctness of their own beliefs. Diverse opinions ought to be allowed, Mill wrote, as the "...silencing of discussion is an assumption of infallibility...".

Diverse opinions may arise as to how a leader's personality might influence her success as a leader, or how a sport figure's behavior may impact his later life. Commentary by practitioners on the personalities of public figures could have just the effect Mill anticipated, strengthening accurate representations of psychological phenomena and correcting misrepresentations that might otherwise pass unchallenged into the public consciousness.

Another general benefit of commentary is that it may raise or sustain public interest in the important issues concerning personality and other matters that surround public figures. A person's interest in public figures seems likely to promote learning about them. According to Silvia, Henson, and Templin (2009):

"... interest promotes the growth of knowledge, competence, and expertise... To use one example, research in reading shows that interesting texts promote the use of deeper text-processing strategies, longer engagement with the text, and ultimately better comprehension and memory..."

Baumeister, Zhang, and Vohs (2004) have argued that both gossip and public commentary allow for cultural learning of a general sort. Both convey stories about people in the public eye and teach about the practical and moral aspects of life decisions. Learning about those around us by hearing and talking about other people begins in childhood (Fine, 2006) and research suggests that children readily attend to and incorporate gossip into their mental



representations (Fine, 1977; Principe, Kanaya, Ceci, & Singh, 2006). Through gossip, children learn to distinguish between typical and atypical interpersonal conduct, they begin to appreciate how reputations are built or harmed, and they learn how to gossip themselves and how to respond to gossip with poise.

### **Cultural Teachings about Gossip**

Despite the arguments in favor of publicly commenting on the personalities of others, some people likely feel discomfort at the prospect of allowing for such comments (although they already often take place). In part, this may stem from the identification of such speech as gossip – as in the case of “celebrity gossip.” An essential similarity between professional commentary and gossip is that both involve two or more people speaking about a third person who is not immediately present. In his essay, “The vindication of gossip,” Ben-Ze’ev highlights some similarities and differences between professional commentary and gossip; among the differences are that:

“People indulging in gossip do not do want to ponder deeply the content or consequences of what they say. Sometimes gossip seems to be talk for the sake of talking.” (Ben-Ze’ev, 1994, p. 13).

Early teachings in Judaism, Christianity, and Confucianism all dealt with gossip, talebearing, and idle speculation about others, reflecting both a widespread engagement in such activity across the world, and attempts to control it through philosophical and religious means (J. D. Mayer, Lin, & Korogodsky, 2011). Contemporary communities that live by these teachings help illustrate these ancient concerns. The strictly orthodox Jewish communities referred to as Charedi (or Haredi) are influenced by Rabbi Yisroel Meir Kagan (1838-1933). Rabbi Kagan’s honorific title, “Chofetz Chaim” means “Desires Life,” and derives from the Psalm, “Which person desires life and loves days...? Guard your tongue from evil, and thy lips from speaking guile” (Psalm 34: 13-14). The Chofetz Chaim’s best-known work is on the ethics of speech, and includes a critique of gossip that draws in part on the Talmudic idea that gossiping hurts three people: The gossip himself, who risks spreading untrue or hurtful information that he may later regret, the listener, who is at risk of becoming a talebearer herself, and the person who is gossiped about, who may suffer hurt feelings and a damaged reputation.

Members of the Charedi community regard *Loshon Hora* (loose tongues) as a seriously sinful matter, and strive not to say unkind or critical things about people not present (Glinert, Loewenthal, & Goldblatt, 2003). People are mutually watchful and remind one another not to say these things, although they understand perfect adherence may not be possible. According to researchers, voluntary “...verbal monitoring has achieved enormous popularity in the strictly-orthodox Jewish community, particularly among women and adolescent girls.” (Glinert et al., 2003, p. 515).

There is much to admire about these ethics. Prohibiting negative comments about others promotes respect among members of a community for one another, as well as kindness and a good attitude toward others. And, it is true that gossip includes such potential collateral damage as injuring a person’s reputation, hurting their feelings, and hurting a community by undermining leaders and their authority. These concerns coincide with those surrounding public commentary by professionals about public figures. Such initially religious teachings, which form part of the Judeo-Christian heritage, may find their way into the more secular works

of ethics such as the guidelines provided by the American Psychiatric Association and American Psychological Association.

Professional commentary also differs from gossip, however. As Ben-Ze'ev points out with a bit of humor:

When people are involved in serious, practical, and purposive talk, they are not gossiping. Thus, when two psychiatrists analyze the love affair of my neighbor, their discussion is not gossip; however, when my wife and I consider the same information, gossip it is. The psychiatrists' discussion is not idle talk (or so they claim)" (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994, p. 13).

Sometimes, not judging also can lead to difficulties.

### **The Duty to Speak**

Despite the caveats that apply to public commentary, the consequences of not judging may be weighty. Judging others can be viewed as an obligation — involving a duty to educate and a duty to warn, in the case of dangerous figures. A "duty to warn" might be advocated according to deontological ethics (deon = duty) (Fisher, 2009). In fact, we can think of people who rely on others to judge as "judgment freeloaders," ceding the field and forsaking any obligation to comment, perhaps to avoid the public criticism that can arise from speaking out. Psychologists, psychiatrists and other mental health professionals are among society's assigned experts in human behavior and mental health. For them to remove themselves from such obligations can itself be viewed as ethically problematic. All told, then, there are some good reasons for psychologists and others competent to do so to join the public fray and comment on the psychology of public figures, provided they do so carefully.

With these ideas as a backdrop, we turn next to the rationales for rendering judgment on particular cases in the public eye.

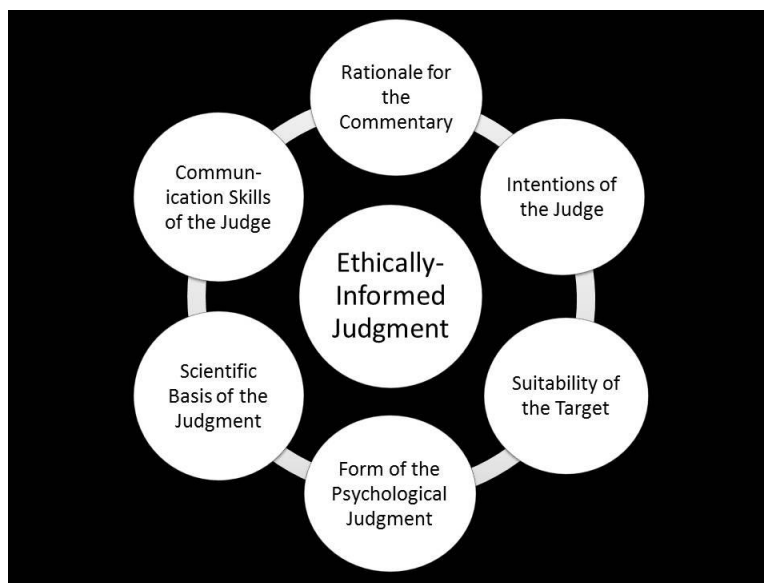
## **Considerations Regarding Ethical Public Commentary**

Given the good arguments both for and against judging other people outlined above, the decision to do so or not probably resides in the specific public context, and with the skills and judgment of the individual professional(s) involved (Elms, 1994; Friedman, 2008; Post, 2002). To some extent, the issues professionals need to consider are similar whether they are making judgments about individuals in public or in confidential forums. These include, for example, the nature of their relationship with the individual being evaluated, the purpose of the assessment, and the tactful and productive delivery of the message. Below we examine six issues (shown in Figure 2) that pertain to the ethics of media commentary by psychologists and by those in related disciplines. Each of the issues may be considered in connection with general ethical guidelines for psychologists, as well as constituting points of reflection for individual professionals deciding whether and in what manner to comment on particular cases.

### **Rationale for the Commentary**

Earlier we examined rationales for public commentary such as free speech and the obligation to educate and to warn the public. In addition to those general issues are specific rationales for mental health professionals to speak about public figures' personalities. For example, it is essential to recognize that professionals are often better qualified than other

people to comment on the personalities of public figures owing to their scientific training. Psychologists and psychiatrists contribute to public education by explaining psychological principles that may pertain to a given media event; they are trained and experienced at recognizing the expression of mental traits, such as sensation seeking or extraversion, and mental dynamics, such as motives and self-control. Their understanding of these phenomena allows mental health practitioners to prognosticate about possible outcomes for individuals — that is, what may happen to a person in the future and how that might impact the people around them. Professionals' comments may have immediate application, for example, in identifying people who pose a threat to themselves or others or in identifying dangerous national leaders on the international scene or at home. These basics of personality assessment and psychiatric diagnoses are offered in a context in which people are likely to pay close attention because they are naturally interested in the event.



*Figure 2.* The issues involved when deciding whether to comment on a public figure. Our overview of ethically-informed judgment (center) arranges the ethical considerations into a ring of six areas in this diagram. These areas of issues range from having a good rationale for making the commentary (top), to deciding whether the public figure is suitable to comment on (lower right), to having a reasonable scientific basis for one's judgment (lower left). Figure 2 is modified from an unnumbered figure in Mayer (2011, January 25).

In addition, professionals are well positioned to set an example of balanced judgment that others might wish to follow. In particular, mental health professionals might be expected to model constructive and accurate commentary couched in the spirit of likelihoods rather than over-the-top exaggerations, and to eschew caricatures in their analyses. They may not always succeed, of course, but are likely to do fairly well on the whole given their experience and training.

Commentary about public figures promotes our interest in others as well as fostering interpersonal learning and promoting socially acceptable behavior. For example, when

commentators condemn a celebrity for tawdry behavior, it may encourage some onlookers to avoid similar acts. Commentary on public figures also teaches people how others act and might act in the future — for example, that some politicians can switch loyalties from one party to another or that a celebrity with a drug problem might relapse, even after treatment.

The advantage of discussing certain widely-known individual cases to illustrate psychological principles also enriches our science. Such cases provide vivid illustrations of otherwise abstract and vague notions. The complexity of individual cases also helps reveal the limitation of scientific generalizations (McAdams & West, 1997).

Weighted against these advantages must be the potential drawbacks of the harm public analyses may cause the individual who is commented upon, as well as any possible negative reflection on the field that might occur from intemperate or erroneous remarks. A further consideration for those tempted to deliver such commentary in the internet age is that the media spotlight can be turned on the commenter as well (Gardner & Herbert, 2002).

### **Intentions of the Judge**

After the 2007 Virginia Tech shootings, in which a lone gunman had killed 33 people on the school's campus and then shot himself, some psychiatrists provided their professional opinions of the killer for the media. Subsequently, the official newsletter of the American Psychiatric Association, the *Psychiatric News*, published an editorial that expressed displeasure with those who had commented, questioning their intent:

"... if one's motivation is to seek fame or to increase referrals to one's practice, then just say no, as this [commenting] is not ethical." (Anonymous, 2007, May 18th)

"Virtue ethics" is a philosophy that focuses on a person's good or bad intentions. Although professional commentators can rarely if ever be certain of their own motives, some monitoring in that regard is likely wise. The editorial writer for the *Psychiatric News* was arguing that the unnamed psychiatrists' intentions were questionable. Yet people's motivations to judge one another are typically complex and unfold at both social and personal levels.

Our social motives — "as members of a group" — emerge in that each of us is inclined by evolutionary descent to make moral judgments of others (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004; Haselton & Funder, 2006). Such judgments serve to enforce social mores, and therefore, to promote the smooth functioning of the group. The editorial at the *Psychiatric News* served that function. Sometimes such enforcement can become callous and spiteful (Canetti, 1962; Kipnis, 2010). Examples of this are not hard to discover on the web, where bloggers and entire sites are sometimes devoted to demeaning someone's character (Denby, 2009). Although public castigation of individuals may provide moral cautions to wrongdoers, it also can devastate innocent or otherwise good people caught in bad situations.

Our motives as individuals often promote our personal well-being and the well-being of others we care about. By better understanding another person's behavior, for example, we can better predict that person's behavior and interact with the person more wisely as a consequence (Haselton & Funder, 2006). Another motive for judging people at the individual level is to make ourselves feel better. For example, we might compare ourselves favorably to someone in public life who is involved in an embarrassing scandal — sometimes called a "downward comparison," perhaps remarking to ourselves, "At least I never did something so foolish!" (Wood, 1989).

Such downward comparisons can enhance feelings of self worth temporarily, and may often underlie our interest in watching celebrities of various kinds become ensnared in scandals of their own making (Kipnis, 2010). We might also judge others for our own political or economic gain, as the editorial in the *Psychiatric News* regarding the Virginia Tech murders pointed out. Yet such motives may not always be bad: If the chair of a hospital's mental health unit commented on the Virginia Tech shooting and then encouraged people to refer those with psychiatric difficulties to a clinic, there might both be an overall commercial interest in his doing so and a positive outcome. Motives and outcomes do not always line up according to a convenient system – a limit of deontological ethics.

Such a motivational analysis of ethics is complicated further in that many personal motives arise at a non-conscious level and are difficult to discern but nonetheless wield a meaningful influence. These motives may be common to the commentator's cohort or culture and act quickly and unintentionally to alter thoughts (Bargh, Lombardi, & Higgins, 1988), reflecting many people's biases as to another person's race, religion, or sexual orientation (Banaji & Greenwald, 1995). There is little possibility that a given commentator will be able to master such non-conscious processes completely.

Nonetheless, it seems plausible that a person who cultivates virtues such as common sense, generosity, tolerance, and loving-kindness will make better judgments about others than someone who eschews such virtues. For that reason, thinking in terms of virtue ethics can take us a few steps toward deciding whether a judgment of another person is on balance good or bad: It seems likeliest that well-intentioned people will, on average, make judgments in a more prosocial fashion than others.

#### **Suitability of the Target and Relation to the Judge**

Another ethical consideration important to deciding whether or not to comment is the suitability of an individual as a target of public commentary (Elms, 1994). The seminal Belmont Report of the National Committee for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, for example, refers to the potential for special vulnerability of certain populations, including minors, certain minorities, the economically disadvantaged, the very sick, the institutionalized and others who may not comprehend properly or who may not be able to object to research participation. Since that report, ethical guidelines for psychologists and other researchers have exhorted the protection of special populations of individuals when they serve as human subjects as a reflection of the principle "respect for persons." Although there are differences between recruiting and employing research participants and commenting upon them, some principles concerning special populations, in particular, are common to both cases. Practitioners' comments are part of a public interaction (as noted earlier), and when there is no possibility for the target to respond to comments, comments ought to be tempered. Naturally, exceptions are possible to imagine (for example, the case of an otherwise vulnerable person who has committed a heinous crime), but at the very least practitioners should stop to consider the nature of the target and their potential vulnerabilities before commenting. For example, it seems reasonable that under most circumstances, a longstanding and powerful political leader would be a more reasonable target for analysis than a teenager who has accidentally ended up in the media spotlight.

The ethics code of the Society of Professional Journalists makes a related point (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996). The code begins with the idea that when journalists write for their readers they perform a valuable public service.

"Members... believe that public enlightenment is the forerunner of justice and the foundation of democracy. The duty of the journalist is to further those ends by seeking truth and providing a fair and comprehensive account of events and issues."

The Society's code contains the following passage as well, embedded in a section instructing its members to "Minimize Harm." It encourages members to:

"Recognize that gathering and reporting information may cause harm or discomfort. Pursuit of the news is not a license for arrogance. Recognize that private people have a greater right to control information about themselves than do public officials and others who seek power, influence or attention. Only an overriding public need can justify intrusion into anyone's privacy. Show good taste. Avoid pandering to lurid curiosity." (Society of Professional Journalists, 1996).

Although mental health professionals are not bound by this journalistic code, it seems to us that those commenting on well-known figures in public forums would do well to keep these general principles in mind.

The relationship between the commentator and the public figure also matters. In a perfect world, professionals' commentaries on public figures' personalities or mental health would be dispassionate, free of personal biases, and informed by science, experience, and the realm of available information. However, public figures by their very nature are often involved in polarizing issues such as politics, religion, criminal cases or controversial public acts and often they may hold and express controversial views. Mental health professionals who may otherwise be quite objective in their research or private practices, may be swayed by biases when commenting on public figures. These biases may be non-conscious, as with the stereotypes we described earlier, or they may be obvious even to the practitioner rendering judgment. For example, is it fair for a liberal psychologist to comment on a conservative politician, or vice versa (cf. Elms, 1994p. 179)? What about a longtime Dodgers fan who is asked to comment on the state of mind of San Francisco Giants player Barry Bonds? A professional's success at commenting may be facilitated by choosing an individual about whom one can take a balanced perspective, and by applying the same level of conscientiousness to balance the commentary as would be done in a private clinical assessment.

The potential consequences of one's remarks also need to be evaluated in advance, to the degree that is possible. The cases of *Fact* magazine's coverage of Barry Goldwater and of Dr. Jerrold M. Post's commentary on Saddam Hussein (both described earlier) aptly illustrate how commentary on political leaders may influence elections and political and military decision-making. In many cases, a single commentary may be simply a single voice in a chorus of commentary. In some cases, however, a public commentary could have a more singular effect. If a mental-health professional convincingly argued that the high-profile CEO of a publicly traded company was unstable during an important moment of negotiations, it seems possible that the company's stock value could be immediately affected.

Although most commentary is probably unlikely to have far reaching consequences for large numbers of individuals and although the consequences of commentary cannot be perfectly foretold, weighing potentially negative implications against the rationale for providing commentary seems prudent.

### **The Form of the Psychological Judgment**

If one has decided to express a professional opinion, another consideration includes the form such a commentary might best take, and whether one type of approach is better than another in crafting a message for the media.

**Holistic v. particularistic comments.** One aspect of the form of a judgment is the degree to which it is holistic and presents a total psychological picture of the individual, versus focusing on a more specific aspect of the individual's psychology. Characterizations of the whole person are the exception rather than the rule and are usually conducted by psychobiographers, psychodiagnosticians and clinical and personality psychologists. For example, psychobiographers are willing to investigate a great deal about the lives of individuals with the intent of painting a picture of a person's broad psychological processes (Elms, 1976; Post, 2002). Psychologist James Lamiell's (2010) historical analysis of William Stern's psychological traits, family life and motivations as his career unfolded across the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries provides one example of this approach. Lindzey & Runyan's (2007) volume, in which the psychobiographers elicited and edited personal autobiographical accounts of eminent contemporary psychologists, provides another. Personality psychologists, too, develop frameworks for depicting and combining diverse information about a person's psychological processes into a coherent picture (J. D. Mayer & Korogodsky, 2011; McAdams & Pals, 2006). The advantage to this approach is that it balances many characteristics of the individual together; the drawback is that it may create a single biased picture of the individual who is under consideration.

A more common and narrower approach is to pick out a few attributes of a single individual and comment on those. For example, in studying US presidents, some researchers have focused on characterizing their intelligence, or a set of motives on which all presidents can be compared (Donley & Winter, 1970; Simonton, 2009; Simonton, 2010). These "limited domain" analyses, to borrow a phrase from Hall and Lindzey (1978), are in principle substantially less invasive than are full analyses of personality.

**Positive versus negative commentary.** A second form the comment might take is to be positive or negative in its overall tone. It seems self-evident that saying positive things about a person has less potential for harm than saying negative things in most instances. The problem with saying only positive things, however, is that being "all positive, all the time" is rarely as informative or accurate as allowing for some diversity of tone. Most people's characters' contain flaws as well as being exemplary in many respects. For that reason, it may be best to integrate positive and negative in descriptions so far as is possible. Balance in depictions is almost always desirable, with the exception of the seriously deplorable person or act.

**Commenting on a specific individual versus on a small group.** Another difference in form is whether the commentator targets a specific individual alone or mentions a broader group. For example, numerous mental health practitioners have commented publicly on actress Lindsay Lohan's problematic bouts of drug and alcohol use and alleged shoplifting. The addiction expert Dr. Stanton Peele (2007, August 7) wrote in a generally sympathetic *Wall*

*Street Journal* piece, “Ms. Lohan needs to grow up, realize her talents, and find ways to fill her time that aren’t self-destructive.” In contrast, other mental health practitioners have commented on similar behaviors at the group level. For example, psychiatrist Dr. Carole Lieberman said of celebrities and socialites accused of stealing, “These are women that are trying to fill the emptiness that they have inside with objects...” (Canning, 2011, June 16). Making comments about a group of celebrities spreads the attention around, which has the advantage of lessening the focus on any one person, but entraps more people in an analysis with greater risk for overgeneralization. Neither of these two approaches entirely protects the targets of commentary, and which approach is fairer may depend on the situation.

**Taking the load off personality when commenting.** Personality interacts in important ways with its environment. Developmental perspectives remind us that personality is but one element in an ecosystem surrounding the person that includes the qualities the individual is endowed with from birth, the physical settings they encounter, the groups they belong to, e.g., their families and religious communities, and the broader cultures in which they live (Bronfenbrenner, 1992; J. D. Mayer & Korogodsky, 2011; McAdams & Pals, 2006; Mischel & Shoda, 1995). Understanding that public figures occupy a special environmental niche and balancing discussions of personality with the surrounding situations and social groups an individual faces, is likely to lead to a superior form of commentary.

**Psychiatric diagnosis as a special form of commentary.** A further special form of commenting is to apply a diagnostic label to a public figure. On the one hand, public discussions of diagnostic categories regarding mental disorders have potential positive effects. Such discussions increase public awareness of mental disorders and their treatment, and provide vivid examples of what the symptoms might look like when paired with a well-known individual. For example, publicity regarding actor Owen Wilson’s depression and actress Catherine Zeta-Jones’ admitted treatment for bipolar disorder spawned articles describing the nature of the disease (Brown, 2011, April 13; Kliff, 2007, October 14). On the other hand, applying diagnostic labels also has the potential for negative consequences. Applying a psychiatric label to a person connects a stereotype of mental illness to the person being labeled and can result in a person’s loss of status (Link & Phelan, 2001). The professional who makes the diagnosis typically does not want this to occur, of course. He or she hopes that any negative consequences will be mitigated by the patient’s obtaining treatment for the ailment – or in the case of public commentary – by educating the public as to this and other instances of the disorder. Diagnostic accuracy also is at issue: even patients diagnosed as schizophrenic may have their diagnosis changed to something else over the course of a decade or less and those not initially diagnosed as schizophrenic may be so labeled later (Chen, Swann, & Burt, 1996). The stigma of a label is relative, of course. If commentary suggests that an individual in the public eye is diagnosed with “Caffeine Intoxication Disorder (305.90)” -- being jittery because of too much caffeine -- the person so-judged is unlikely to experience a loss of status. Nevertheless, the potentially strong negative consequences of many diagnostic labels suggest that the uttermost caution should be applied when practitioners openly pair diagnostic labels with public figures.

### **Scientific Basis of the Judgment**

**Scientific assessment at a distance.** There are a number of methods that professionals can and do employ to evaluate people’s personality and mental health from a distance (Song &



Simonton, 2007). These range from applying clinical intuition based on experience to the application of the analysis of facial expressions. The first method involves an experienced clinical psychologist or psychiatrist's educated impression. Although there are problems in accuracy with this and all methods, it can be informative, particularly for generating hypotheses that can then be further substantiated by other data-gathering, where there is a need to do so.

Examples of this kind of clinical judgment can be found with some frequency in the media, often with disclaimers as to the certainty of the clinical impression. For example, on February 25th, 2011, Dr. Drew Pinsky commented on CNN concerning the aforementioned unusual public comments of Charlie Sheen. Dr. Pinsky shared his opinion that a person who previously has had drug and addiction issues (as had been reported of Mr. Sheen), and who then behaved in a manner characteristic of Mr. Sheen's comments at the time was likely suffering from a hypomanic state, possibly as part of bipolar disorder and would likely get worse (Behar, 2011, March 8). Dr. Pinsky indicated his judgments were based on a combination of the medical criteria for hypomania (found in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual-IV) and his experience of people in his clinical practice who had behaved similarly in the past.

A quite different way in which individuals may be evaluated at a distance is through an analysis of the individual's speech, such as that carried out in automated lexical analyses. Certain computer programs, such as the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) now allow for the assessment of some aspects of an individual's psychology through examining their verbal expressions. Pennebaker and Lay (2002) used The LIWC software to examine New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani's personal comments over 35 press conferences spanning from 1993 to 2001. They concluded that Mayor Giuliani's personality had changed over certain crises that beset him, especially after the terrorist attacks on New York's World Trade Center (WTC) of September 11, 2001. The authors concluded in part:

"Linguistically, at least, times of crisis were associated with his becoming more personal, more emotionally expressive, more cognitively complex, and more future oriented. ... the WTC crisis forced him to socially connect with others in ways he had not done before. Ironically, the WTC experience was associated with his being the most positive in his emotional tone and also the most openly sad in his entire time as mayor." (Pennebaker & Lay, 2002, p. 280)

Non-verbal behavior has also been successfully analyzed – for example, by identifying systematic links between non-verbal behavior and underlying psychological states, as when nonverbal signals of emotional distress in the face, voice, and autonomic nervous system (e.g., swallowing) signal emotional strain potentially related to lying. Ekman (2001) and colleagues have developed detailed strategies for analyzing behavior patterns and facial displays that have been applied to the detection of deception and underlying emotion in public figures from President Clinton to Vice Admiral John Poindexter.

These examples must suffice as representative of a much larger category that includes also observer-based forms of standard psychological measures such as of the Big Five personality traits, psychobiographical, and psychohistorical methods (Song & Simonton, 2007).

**Assessment-at-a-distance and the ethics codes.** Given the diversity of methods available for assessment-at-a-distance, the ethics codes of the respective professional associations give them little attention. The ethics codes generally focus on the customary procedures of tests, interviews, and first-hand observation of clients employed by clinical

practitioners as they carry out assessments. The American Psychological Association code advises that:

"... psychologists provide opinions of the psychological characteristics of individuals only after they have conducted an examination of the individuals adequate to support their statements or conclusions." (9.01b)

And, Section 7.3 of the psychiatric ethics code states, with regard to speaking to the media:

"...it is unethical for a psychiatrist to offer a professional opinion unless he or she has conducted an examination and has been granted proper authorization for such a statement." (7.3)

The concerns of the ethics codes about individual, proximal assessment notwithstanding, most public comments by psychiatrists and psychologists are based on information gathered "at a distance." It is those at-a-distance methods that allow professionals to behave most responsibly in commenting publicly. The American Psychological Association's ethics code arguably allows for such assessment-at-a-distance by specifying that if "individual examination is not warranted or necessary for the opinion, psychologists explain this and the sources of information on which they based their conclusions and recommendations" in section 9.01c.

**Public figures as a special population.** Returning to the issues of assessment at a distance, accurate judgments about celebrities also are promoted by a consideration of the population to which they belong, and the specific situations they encounter. In regard to the population of media celebrities, for example, that group appears to possess a somewhat higher level of narcissism than others (Pinsky, Young, & Stern, 2009; Young & Pinsky, 2006). They also face situations, pressures, and opportunities that are different from those of most people. On the one hand, they experience entitlements, privileges, and special treatment. On the other hand, they face issues with stalkers, death threats, and paparazzi (Rockwell & Giles, 2009). In making sense of publicly available information about celebrities, these unique aspects of their lives should be taken into account.

From the standpoint of the professional trying to understand them, it is helpful to appreciate that celebrities often exercise unusual measures of control over the information the public sees about them. For example, Martha Stewart employed a publicist to arrange flattering press coverage for her, as in a 1995 cover story in *People Magazine* entitled, "The Real Martha Stewart" (Oppenheimer, 1997, p. 350-351).

Sometimes, a public figure's entourage will guide them in ways that might seem unusual or even to undermine their self-interest. Barry Bonds, the San Francisco Giant's ball player, earned 18 million dollars a year and had his own cook, personal stretching coach, and nutritionist while playing for the team. According to one report:

"His enablers indulged and even encouraged his surliness, correctly realizing that sensitivity to others could only be detrimental to his game. ("I told him he's way too nice," Anderson said to an acquaintance who was secretly recording the conversation. "Every time he's an asshole, it just fucking works. He fucking plays good because he's being himself.") (McGrath, 2011, March 28, p. 57).

Whether Bonds really played better when he was surly is an open question, but such guidance illustrates the unusual influences on celebrities to which others might not be exposed.

### **Communication Skills of the Judge**

The skills with which a commentator delivers his or her message are also critical to its impact. Some of the issues involved concern clarity of the message, voice, tradeoffs between tact and informativeness, and distancing of the target.

**Voice.** Some commentators— often celebrity columnists in their own right – cultivate a curmudgeonly or a joking persona to convey their messages. These commentators, and the public who follow them, understand that they exaggerate for effect. Commentators such as Maureen Dowd, Glenn Beck, Christopher Hitchens, and Don Imus fall into this group. Although widely different in style and outlook, each one’s distinctive voice is part of their public persona. They can say something outrageous and be allowed to do so (to a point – some such individuals are fired along the way as well) (Kolker, 2007, August 5). Speaking of some statements to the press by Paul Wolfowitz in 2011, Dowd remarked:

“You would think that a major architect of the disastrous wars and interminable occupations in Afghanistan and Iraq would have the good manners to shut up and take up horticulture. But the neo-con naif has no shame.” (Dowd, 2011, March 13).

Such outlandishness is an integral part of Dowd’s public voice although she – and the New York Times -- have been criticized for it on occasion (Denby, 2009). We would suggest that the fact that it is an expected part of her style provides some insulation from complaint. More overtly, when Don Imus comments politically in a different but equally outlandish manner, he reminds his audience, “this is a *comedy* show.” Glenn Beck claimed to enact a “Rodeo Clown” on his initially highly-popular but short-lived radio program on Fox (Stelter & Carter, 2009, March 30). Such individuals are given a wider latitude to speak by their public than the rest of us, so long as their wit, exaggeration, and humor is in keeping with the times. The danger, for them, is that in matters of taste they may sometimes misjudge what their listeners are prepared to hear.

Most psychologists operating in the public eye aspire to a more circumscribed professional demeanor relative to the high-wire performances of the aforementioned commentators -- although there may be an exception or two among the small group of psychologists who are media personalities themselves. Most psychologists cultivate some degree of seriousness and precision, and typically accomplish that aim. Nonetheless, practitioners must acquire the ability to ensure communication that conveys the desired information while maintaining a level of civility. Communication choices are salient not only for professionals who comment on public figures but for those whose work requires that they describe others in contexts such as writing the clinical reports that communicate psychological assessments (Michaels, 2006; Snyder, Ritschel, Rand, & Berg, 2006).

**Clarity.** A key prerequisite to public commentary is the ability to be able to deliver a focused message with some clarity. No communicator achieves clarity all the time, and those who hear a communication will conceive of it in their own terms, yet practitioners whose written or spoken communications are chronically misunderstood might be well advised to refrain from public commentary on the personalities or mental health of media figures.

**Informativeness versus tact.** Mental health professionals who comment on others sometimes will encounter the dilemma of how much of their scientific analysis to state directly versus to veil in euphemism. Few areas of journalism have dealt with the issue as thoughtfully (and, sometimes, poignantly) as obituary writers. Hugh Massingberd, a journalist for London’s

Daily Telegraph, helped to institutionalize euphemisms in that paper's obituaries. To a gathering of obituarists in Bath, England, he noted, "We all know 'he didn't suffer fools gladly' translates as 'a complete bastard...'", and then went on to interpret a list of similar euphemisms that included:

"Gave colorful accounts of his exploits – Liar!  
 No discernable enthusiasm for civil rights – Nazi!  
 Powerful negotiator – Bully!  
 Tireless raconteur—Crashing bore!" (Johnson, 2007, p. 162).

The problem is that such euphemisms reduce the informativeness of a communication. As Massingberd admitted,

"'He was unmarried' could mean anything from, well, 'he was unmarried,' to 'a lifetime spent cruising public lavatories of the free world.'" (Johnson, 2006, p. 163).

One source of guidance is the target individual him or herself. Some people revel in their lives and obituary writers mirror that revelry, as in this slightly abbreviated example:

"Robert Davolt, a San Francisco leather luminary who immersed himself in the world of sadomasochism for more than two decades, has died of melanoma at the age of 46...A celebration of his life will take place at Daddy's Bar in the Castro on Saturday afternoon...Mr. Davolt was the last editor and publisher of Drummer magazine, a leather journal that closed in 1999. He staged leather contests, wrote a book titled "Painfully Obvious: An Irreverent & Unauthorized Manual for Leather/SM," served as editor of male bondage magazine Bound & Gagged until he got sick, and did an online column for leatherpage.com and its 125,000 readers..." (Johnson, 2006, p. 164-165).

The obituarist Marilyn Johnson commented, "Why not celebrate the leather luminary's real life? He did." (Johnson, 2007, p. 165). By such reckoning, one might take a few more liberties in considering the personality of, say, someone such as Donald Trump who appears to relish his own fame, than in considering the life of J. D. Salinger who went to great pains to retain his privacy.

**Distancing the target.** An additional technique commentators employ is to keep their criticisms one-step removed from their target. In the earlier quote from Maureen Dowd, her calumny is aimed at a "major architect of disastrous wars...". Although it is clear to whom she is referring, the target is not named – at least in that sentence. Or consider this piece by Karl Rove on the Fox News website in March of 2011:

"...three images of Mr. Obama from last week are hardly uplifting... First, there was the president on Libya – dithering, indecisive, unreliable, and weak. As Qaddafi's mercenaries and bombers brutally grabbed back momentum from the democratic opposition, all Mr. Obama could say was, "My national security team has been working...to monitor the situation...to prepare the full range of options..." (Rove, 2011, March 14).

Rove focuses on Obama's image rather than on Obama himself. These "one-step-removed" techniques are reminiscent of the American Psychiatric Association's ethical guideline that a psychiatrist ought never to say someone has bipolar disorder, but rather that "A person who exhibits symptoms like this might suffer from bipolar disorder."

## Conclusions and Recommendations

Ancient Greek physicians may first have defined the rules of confidentiality when they instituted the Hippocratic oath, an oath that professional physicians recited and which states in part:

“Whatever I hear or see in the course of my professional duties (or even outside the course of treatment) regarding my patients is strictly confidential and I will not allow it to be spread about. But instead, will hold these as holy secrets.”  
(Boylan, 2005)

Keeping these holy secrets private was regarded both then and today as key to successful medical practice. Expert practitioners know that they have an immense advantage in helping someone if they can begin with a reasonable understanding of their patient's activities, relationships, and life issues. Doctors and other healers work hard to earn the trust of their patients so that the patients will share with them any information relevant to providing an accurate diagnosis.

Although it is never advisable or even ethical for a physician or mental health professional to violate a patient's right to confidentiality in the patient-practitioner relationship, there are times when public commentary on individuals in the public spotlight are warranted and advantageous. As we have noted earlier, judgments openly made by professionals teach about agreements and disagreements in the field and have the potential to help guide the public. Placing extreme prohibitions on practitioner's ability to provide public commentary may protect the feelings of some public figures and may also avoid certain unforeseen negative consequences, which is laudable. The cost, however, is that psychiatrists and psychologists hide their own scientific authority – and their scientific weaknesses – within a gated community of professionals, denying members of the public the opportunity to learn and to evaluate in what respects they trust such professionals. Paradoxically, overly strict ethics codes may work to withhold important mental-status information about leaders from the public. In contrast, economists (who have no ethical code) candidly and helpfully reveal their disagreements in public statements – an uncensored process that may lead to the greater public good.

The theoretical perspectives we have discussed in this paper connect with research in many diverse domains. For example, the message framing area concerns whether there is a difference between commenting that a person “is bipolar” versus “may suffer from bipolar disorder” (e.g., Dijkstra, Rothman, & Pietersma, 2011). Research into parasocial interactions examines people who depend on media consumption to relieve their loneliness, and could address whether such individuals are more readily swayed by expert opinion (e.g., Ashe & McCutcheon, 2001). Additional research could address questions of source credibility such as “Does commenting on a celebrity detract from or enhance a professional's credibility?”, “What heuristics do individuals use to evaluate the credibility of an experts' statement?”, and, “If a psychotherapist comments publicly on Kim Kardashian, does that make him appear less serious by association – or will some people only want to see such a therapist-to-the-stars?” (e.g., Metzger, Flanagin, & Medders, 2010; Rieh & Danielson, 2007).

Mental health professionals' statements about public figures, we assumed, were likely to draw reactions from the person commented upon as well as from other professionals, and to

influence public opinion. The degree to which this occurs is likely to depend on a host of contextual factors. These include the number of professionals commenting on a given case, the level of agreement among them, the media source through which the message is sent and the idiosyncratic characteristics of the segment of the population attending to the message. These factors, too, are amenable to empirical study, as they have been in studies of health communication and political messages (Gerber, Gimpel, Green, & Shaw, 2011; LaMarre & Landreville, 2009; Silk et al., 2007).

Pending further research in these areas, ethical guidelines and common sense both dictate that professionals need to self-monitor when commenting on public figures. We believe that professionals should be free to engage in this kind of commentary, and that with such freedom comes the responsibility to carefully scrutinize and monitor their public statements. In this article we have described a range of considerations that practitioners might weigh when thinking about providing public commentary on any particular individual. These are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Relevant Issues as to When and How to Comment on the Personalities of Public Figures

Central and Qualifying Issues		
	Central Issues	Qualifications and Considerations
<b><i>Rationale for the Judgment</i></b>		
Potential for Positive Contribution	Comments on public figures serve to educate the public about psychology and mental processes, and satisfy public interest about their public figures. Such commentary may also serve the duty to warn.	Although commentaries educate, they also may cause harm or psychological pain to the individual whose personality is commented upon or cause harm to those around the person. Commentaries also focus attention – both positive and negative – on both the person commenting and on the mental health field.
<b><i>Intentions of the Judge</i></b>		
The commentator's motives may matter to the outcome	A commentator's good intentions may increase the likelihood that commentary brings about education and minimizes any possible pain to others while doing so.	No amount of good intention by itself can ensure that a commentary is well done; other issues must be taken into account. Even commentaries generated from questionable intentions can lead to good outcomes.
<b><i>Suitability of the Target and Relation between Judge and Target</i></b>		
Some targets are more suitable than others	There is general agreement that comments about adults who are public figures and able to defend	Commentary should focus on those who are least likely to be sensitive to public mention. Commentators

themselves are more appropriate than comment about the more vulnerable and defenseless – children, the mentally challenged, or members of marginalized groups.

also should avoid conflicts of interest when they speak; or, if there is a conflict of interest, ought to acknowledge it.

### ***Form of the Commentary***

Certain forms of commentary may be more benign than others

Singling out an individual suggests something unique about the person on the one hand. On the other hand, identifying a small group of people with similar characteristics may not improve the situation.

Although commenting on a group of individuals may take the spotlight off any individual, it also ensnares more people in the commentary

Characterizing the whole person is likely to represent more sides of the individual and therefore reflect better balance in discussing a person.

Commenting on a single part of a personality may fail to adequately represent the whole person. A general commentary, however, runs the risk of reducing the issues involved to a simple positive or negative summary judgment.

Positive versus Negative Commentary

Including some positive attributes of the individual under discussion is generally a good approach.

An attempt to be “All positive all the time” is unlikely to be informative and may not fit the context (e.g., of an unfolding scandal).

### ***Science of the Commentary***

Science of the Commentary

A commentary is likely to be based on some speculation and opinion; at its foundation, however, it ought to draw on sound and up-to-date scientific foundations.

No amount of scientific foundation supporting an opinion is likely to protect a commentator from drawing an erroneous conclusion on a given occasion.

### ***Communication Skills of the Judge***

Good Communication Style

Commentators generally do better when they express an opinion clearly and in a balanced fashion. Clarity and style are of importance to reaching an audience.

No matter how clear the opinion is stated, people will hear what is said in their own fashion. Sometimes the message delivered will be different from the one intended.

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The specific contributions of commentary by mental health professionals include helping people to satisfy their interest in why people behave as they do, communicating key tenets and findings of the mental health field, and modeling balanced and constructive commentary about others – this latter point having, perhaps, some promise in contributing to civility in public discourse.

The arguments against mental health professionals commenting center on the potential harm to the commented-upon individuals' feelings or reputations, and the potential for the commentary to be unwise, misunderstood, or to reflect poorly on the mental-health profession. We view the professional as needing to make a judgment about commenting in each case. That judgment, we believe, best takes into account areas of consideration summarized in Table 1.

Although we are not members of any ethics-writing panels for professional associations, our hope is that the issues elaborated in this article may inform working groups in those organizations, as well as individuals who work as psychologists, psychiatrists and in related careers as they make decisions about when and in what manner to comment on individuals in the public spotlight. We hope to have brought to the forefront the issues described above that are implicit in the ongoing interaction between mental health professionals and the public, with the aim of promoting positive practices in this area.

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