# Sex and the New York Times: When “Her Too” isn’t “Me Too”

**David Walsh**
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On June 24, the *New York Times* ran a lengthy (3,200-word) article, “How an Affair Between a Reporter and a Security Aide Has Rattled Washington Media,” by Michael M. Grynbaum, Scott Shane and Emily Flitter.

The somewhat peculiar piece recounts the details of a three-year relationship between journalist Ali Watkins, 26, who now writes for the *Times*, and James Wolfe, 57, senior aide to the Senate Intelligence Committee. Wolfe was arrested June 7 on charges of lying to investigators about his contacts with Watkins and three other reporters. Watkins has had her e-mail and phone records seized by federal prosecutors.

The case raises a number of issues. As the June 24 article notes, the “seizure of Ms. Watkins’s records was alarming to First Amendment advocates. With no allegation that classified information was disclosed, they said such a rare and aggressive tactic was unjustified and could undermine journalists’ ability to report on government misconduct.” The actions taken against Wolfe and Watkins form part of the Trump administration’s reactionary campaign against “leakers,” aimed at suppressing the exposure of US government criminality.

However, we are principally concerned here with another aspect of the *Times*’ coverage, which demonstrates the thoroughly two-faced and deceitful character of its editors’ prosecution of the ongoing #MeToo sexual harassment campaign.

Since October 2017, the *New York Times* and significant sections of the American media generally, along with leading Democratic Party politicians, have been attempting to convince the public that a wide variety of sexual activity in the entertainment industry in particular should be defined as harassment, abuse and rape. This has been a critical feature of a large-scale effort to mobilize and expand the Democratic Party’s constituency within the most affluent sections of the middle class, who consider issues of gender, sexual and racial identity to be closely related to their personal efforts at career advancement.

One of the fouler aspects of the sexual harassment campaign, which has run roughshod over democratic rights, has been the attempt, with far-reaching consequences, to stigmatize every sort of sexual stepping out of line or unorthodoxy as heinous and essentially illegal. As the WSWS commented in December 2017: “There are many forms of sexual harassment, which extend from the annoying to the legally actionable to the outright criminal. But a vast range of activities, including many that reflect the ambiguities and complexities of human interactions, is being described as malevolent and even criminal.”

This is not accidental. The distinctions between violent physical assault, “unwanted advances” and, one might add, engaging in sexual relations to advance one’s career have been deliberately and willfully glossed over for political and ideological reasons. When actor Matt Damon mildly pointed out that “There’s a difference between…patting someone on the butt and rape or child molestation,” he was ferociously attacked and told to shut up. It was vital for those leading the #MeToo witch-hunt to present an overheated picture of an epidemic of undifferentiated sexual abuse.

However, the *Times* has now undercut its own wretched, willfully ham-fisted approach to sexual harassment in its analysis of the Watkins-Wolfe relationship and, more generally, relationships between journalists and officials in Washington.

Without overly burdening the reader, who can turn to the *Times* article on his or her own, these are some of

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the relevant portions.

The three authors note that the Watkins-Wolfe relationship "played out in the insular world of Washington, where young, ambitious journalists compete for scoops while navigating relationships with powerful, often older, sources." And: "The relationship has prompted concern in many newsrooms that Ms. Watkins's conduct has made journalists, and particularly women, vulnerable to unfounded accusations of exchanging sex for information."

The *Times* piece explains how Watkins, as an intern for McClatchy Newspapers, began "staking out" Senate Intelligence Committee's meetings, which led to a series of articles on the CIA's spying on the committee and earned her a full-time job with McClatchy. "It also brought her closer to Mr. Wolfe, who would later text her saying how 'proud' he was of her work on the series. In October 2014, after Ms. Watkins had jumped from McClatchy to the Huffington Post, Mr. Wolfe took her to a rooftop bar to celebrate her 23rd birthday; before the night was over, they kissed."

In a key passage, the *Times* piece observes: "Relationships between reporters and sources are an art, not a science: In Washington, meals and late nights out with sources are part of a journalist's job description. But becoming romantically involved is widely viewed as a conflict, opening a journalist to accusations of bias."

Frankly, neither art *nor* science is involved here. This was at least in part crude career advancement, however Watkins may have justified it. One thinks of the ruthless, ambitious reporter Zoe Barnes (Kate Mara) in the television series *House of Cards*, who initiates a mutually advantageous business and sexual relationship with politician Frank Underwood (Kevin Spacey), which proves to have dire long-term costs.

This is not conduct to be commended, no matter how the *Times* tries to pretty it up.

But, in any event, what's striking is that James Bennet and the *Times* editors have suddenly discovered nuance and intricacy in the "navigation" of intertwined professional and sexual relationships. Out of the blue, we learn that some young women may have motives for associating with "powerful, older men," that a certain number may engage in conduct both *consensual* and not especially admirable. Moreover, the *Times* manages to treat both parties in an essentially sympathetic light.

To put it rather bluntly, the *Times* appears concerned, now that one of its own, as it were, has been caught out (a) *not* to alienate possible future sources of information and (b) *not* to undermine or rule out a useful tactic, the exchange of sex for information.

How delicately the newspaper here treats the complexity of relationships, especially when it might be the case the sexual relations involved are part of a *quid pro quo* that may lead to news scoops.

However, the *Times*' treatment of the goings-on in Hollywood has been sharply different. It has never carried an article on the #MeToo allegations that read something like this:

"Relationships between aspiring actresses and producers are an art, not a science. In Hollywood, meals and late nights out with producers or directors are part of an actress' path to parts and awards. Becoming romantically involved is widely viewed as a career move, opening an actress to accusations that she traded sex for a big role."

Instead, for its own political purposes, the *Times* denounces everything and everyone in Hollywood as criminal this and criminal that, creates an unlikely set of wide-eyed innocents, on the one hand, and industry "monsters," on the other. It ignores the unpleasant, murky social and psychological realities in the interests of whipping up the upper middle class identity politics crowd into a frenzy, with which effort the latter is only too eager and willing to go along.

The Watkins-Wolfe commentary further exposes the filthy hypocrisy and cynicism of the *Times*' Bennet and his gang of sex scandal-mongers who pretend to be journalists.

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