

PRIVACY AND THE PRESS

Arthur Ashe has AIDS—and he didn't want us to know/ But we have a *right* to know. Don't we?

USA Today's sports edit says, "There was no question that this was a significant news story." The New York Time reports that "in a spot check, a half dozen of the nation's newspaper editors...said that Mr. Ashe's prominence would have compelled them to publish the new of his illness. Only one said he would not have published it."

But what about the wishes of Arthur Ashe that the news *not* been made public? Mr. Ashe, recognizing public attitudes towards AIDS, believed that knowledge of his illness would stigmatize him, transform his life and that of his family, and likely bring unnecessary anxiety and suffering to his five-year-old daughter.

And to what point? Magic Johnson has AIDS and *chose* to tell the public, in part so that others would not engage in the same high-risk sexual behavior that led to his infection Arthur Ashe contracted AIDS through a blood transfusion in 1983—before hospitals began routinely to screen donated blood for the AIDS virus.

It seems that being prominent is enough to make one news worthy—and, correspondingly, Unworthy of having one's desire for privacy respected. But to offer "newsworthiness" as a justification for running a new story is at once vacuous and self-serving. What are the canons of newsworthiness? What are the rules here?

The front page of the New York Times proclaims. "All the news that's fit to print." Doesn't that mean that *some* news *isn't* fit to print."? And isn't it reasonable, then for the public to ask, what are the criteria for determining whether news is first to—or broadcast? And what principles govern such tensions as those between freedom of the press and the right to privacy?

These are not idle questions in an age of instantaneous mass communications. They ought not to be left to the musings of philosophers or journalism professors. They are public issues that merit a public forum.

The press performs a valuable function when it calls to ask leaders of business and government to examine their conduct and its basis. It would serve us all well if that same critical spirit would now direct a sustained public examination of the responsibilities of the press.

For Ethics at Work, this is Gary Edwards.