

CASE 3-E

LOOKING FOR RICHARD SIMMONS

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Beginning in 2016, one of the trendiest “new media” was actually a reboot of some of the most popular programming long before television was invented.

This was the radio serial, weekly adventures of everyone from the Lone Ranger to the Shadow, which attracted huge audiences during the 1920s and 1930s. President Franklin D. Roosevelt reassured a nation on the brink of war with his “fireside chats,” broadcast on the radio. Edward R. Murrow began his career as a radio reporter covering World War II before he became one of the early giants of the new medium of television. And Orson Welles’s radio program *The War of the Worlds* gave rise to the first empirical research on media effects and is still broadcast today as part of annual Halloween celebrations.

Podcasts were the next-generation radio serial. They combined the intimacy of radio with the on-demand qualities of computers and smartphones. Even the best podcasts were relatively inexpensive to produce. Podcasts provided a way for media organizations, including news organizations such as National Public Radio, to repurpose content, and they were becoming increasingly popular. Downloaded from places such as iTunes, the most popular podcasts of 2017—for example, *This American Life*—could net more than \$50,000 per episode.

Fitness guru Richard Simmons, who led exercise classes that were televised in the 1970s and 1980s, was an early crusader for weight loss at a time when Americans were beginning to expand to unhealthy proportions. With an on-air personality that combined some natural shyness with ebullience, Simmons had been a celebrity for more than three decades.

And then he decided he wanted a quieter life. A life out of the public spotlight. Simmons no longer wanted to be a celebrity.

Enter former *Daily Show* producer Dan Taberski, who said he was an acquaintance of Simmons and a regular at Simmons’s Beverly Hills workout studio. Taberski said he was concerned enough about Simmons’s three-year absence from mediated life that he wanted to find out what had caused him to withdraw to the backstage.

In February 2017, Taberski’s podcast *Missing Richard Simmons* had its debut. The six episodes were framed as a mystery. Simmons refused to be interviewed for the podcast, but Taberski interviewed—or

tried to interview—friends and relatives. After the podcast began, and because some of the content focused on Simmons's physical and mental health, the Los Angeles Police Department, based in large part on the speculations about Simmons's condition included in the podcast, made a wellness check at Simmons's home. He was fine.

In the second episode of the podcast, Taberski urged listeners to drive to Simmons's home for a "stakeout." The *New York Times* reported that Taberski justified the tactic this way: "I don't want him to feel like I'm invading his privacy. On the other hand, I'm Richard's friend."

During the time the podcast was being produced and aired, Simmons called NBC's *Today Show*, saying that he was fine. On his Facebook page, he also disparaged the podcast's claims.

However, Taberski encouraged podcast listeners to call in with "any theory you think we missed." Those tips included assertions that Simmons was bereaved from the loss of his pets or that he was depressed. (Simmons had acknowledged previously that he had suffered from depression.) At one point, Taberski intimated that Simmons was transitioning to a woman, only to discard the idea in the next episode.

The podcast topped the iTunes charts for four straight weeks.

Ultimately, if there was a mystery surrounding Simmons, Taberski didn't solve it. As of this writing, Simmons remains alive and living a more private life.

Micro Issues

1. Using the concepts of privacy, secrecy, right to know, need to know, and want to know, analyze whether the podcast invaded Simmons's privacy.
2. Would your answer be different if the wellness check by the Los Angeles police had found Simmons in some sort of physical danger or suffering from a physical illness?
3. Should Taberski have spiked the project when Simmons refused to speak with him?

Midrange Issues

1. Taberski's podcast told a narrative of a "missing person." Evaluate this narrative for truthfulness. Are there times when "telling a story" is not the most accurate way to provide readers and viewers with information about events and people?

2. How would you categorize podcasts such as *This American Life*? Are they journalism, entertainment, some new genre?
3. How do you think Taberski's background on Comedy Central influenced the narrative choices he made?

Macro Issues

1. The *New York Times* called the show the "morally suspect podcast." How do you evaluate the critic's characterization?
2. Can celebrities such as Simmons have privacy? Can public figures such as Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts have privacy? If your answers are different for different categories of people, explain.
3. Should iTunes or programs such as TMZ be responsible ethically for content such as that provided in the *Missing Richard Simmons* podcast? How should that responsibility be exercised?

CASE 3-F

CHILDREN AND FRAMING: THE USE OF CHILDREN'S IMAGES IN AN ANTI-SAME-SEX MARRIAGE AD

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The brief ballot measure read, "Only marriage between a man and a woman is valid or recognizable in California" (voterguide.sos.ca.gov, 2008), but it was packed with potential for conflict. So when the parents of some San Francisco first graders recognized their sons' and daughters' faces in an advertisement promoting California's controversial 2008 Proposition 8, which successfully sought to outlaw marriage for same-sex couples in the state (protectmarriage.com, 2008), they were shocked.

The ad picked up two scenes from a website news video clip originally produced by the San Francisco *Chronicle* for a news story that described 18 students attending their lesbian teacher Erin Carder's wedding (sfgate.com, 2008). The newspaper story was a feature piece that took no position on Proposition 8. The story included an account of the wedding, which was held on Oct. 10, 2008. In the newspaper piece, and on the 80-second accompanying video, the children's participation was described as "tossed rose petals and blow bubbles . . . giggling and