

Maggie: All right. So I'm just going to talk a little bit about what the assignment is, and then we'll get into the questions.

Alexandra: Perfect. Give it to me.

M: So it's for my media ethics course, so we have to talk to a media professional about just ethics within the job and, like, kind of how they deal with that. Does that sound good?

A: Yeah.

M: All right, awesome. So what got you interested in working in the field of writing and reporting?

A: Good question. I was always interested in reading and writing and I always talking, like I could talk to a brick wall or a tree. I've just, I've always been a chatterbox. And growing up, like I was the kid that like my mom would put me to bed and then I'd hide under the blanket and I'd like take out the flashlight and I would read and I'd stay up late and read. Or like we'd have a writing assignment in like kindergarten, first grade, second grade, and you'd have to like write a sentence, you know, on the front of the page, and you'd turn over my page and there'd be sentences like all the way down the back. So I feel like I've always kind of been this person. And then when I was in high school, I realized like, oh, there's people who are journalists who read and write and talk to people for a living. And I grew up watching the Today Show and I figured I want to do what they do on there. Like that seems pretty fun. So I went to BU, I went to college and I studied journalism and here I am.

M: That's awesome. So you kind of always knew you wanted to do it within like the entertainment industry?

A: Honestly no. It's funny you mention that. I thought if I was going to come out of school and have a job, and that you could, we call it like a beat in journalism, like if I was going to have a

beat, I thought I was going to be covering politics, like on the campaign trail in Iowa, just because I grew up and I loved history and I was interested in politics and a lot of people aren't. And so I kind of thought that's what I would come out of school doing. And BU, the journalism program is fantastic. I learned so much. And they probably do this for a reason. They teach you the skills that you need to be a journalist in breaking news and hard news and politics. And you don't really have time to think about, or at least I didn't. I wasn't really cognizant of the fact that, oh, entertainment journalism is a thing. I can go, I can take this job that I love and parlay it into something that doesn't have to be politics. And so my first internship was the summer after my junior year, so before my senior year of college, and I interned for the Today Show. And I always say my favorite thing about them was that that they, like Savannah Guthrie could be interviewing, you know, like the Secretary of State at 7.30 and then by 8 a.m. she's like making pancakes with Martha Stewart. So I just always loved like that dichotomy and I thought it was really cool that she was really good at both of those things. And so I kind of started to look into like, you know, the Martha Stewart making pancakes of it all, if you will, and the pop culture and the entertainment. And then after I interned with the Today Show, I interned at E! News, which is all entertainment all the time. Which was honestly an internship I kind of landed by accident. I had applied to all these hard news internships and nobody wanted me. And then all of a sudden E! News called me and they're like, we have your resume, we wanna hire you. I was like, okay, great.

M: That is so cool. I'm so jealous of that.

A: By accident. And it turns out I really like it. I love it, in fact.

M: So what does your daily routine look like with people?

A: That's always such a funny question because I guess I do have a routine. Like I do the job I'm supposed to do, but one of the things I love about the job is every day is different for the most part. Like you never really know what you're gonna get. Some days I'm writing two to three articles. Some days I'm interviewing two to three different people. Some days I'm writing one article and doing two interviews. Like, it's a little bit of everything. And some days I'm doing none of the above and I'm out, like, at a cool event. Like on Thursday this week, I'm going to this, like, fun Women in Power luncheon. So I won't be doing any, I mean, I'll be interviewing the celebrities that are there, but I won't be doing, like, a sit-down interview or writing an article, per se. So I guess every day is different, but for the most part, like in broad strokes, I'm scouring the internet trying to come up with pitches, things that I'm interested in, people that I think our audience is going to be interested in. I'm doing my research, like if I know I have an interview coming up, I have to read up on that person and figure out what I'm going to ask them and make sure I ask them different questions so that we get different answers that other outlets don't have or things that they haven't already talked about. I'm sometimes, yeah, sitting down and actually doing the interview or running across town to go do the interview in person. Every day is definitely different, but broad strokes, research, writing, interviewing, pitching.

M: That's so cool. I can't believe that you get to do that. So how often would you say you or any of your colleagues are faced with an ethical dilemma or making an ethical decision when it comes to the things that you do?

A: Yeah, that's such an interesting question. I feel like the answer is all the time and none of the time, as weird as that sounds. Every decision feels like it's important when you're telling a story and you're, you know, you're writing about someone's life. Like, I always say I feel like that's such a huge responsibility. And the last thing you want to do is have someone trust you enough

to open up to you and then have them, like, read the piece and feel like they were misrepresented. Like, that's my nightmare. That feels like the worst possible thing that could ever happen. Yeah. So I think there are a lot of small decisions every day that go into making sure like, just at the end of the day, we're journalists, we're supposed to tell stories that are true. So just thinking sure every decision you make is based in truth and everything's factually accurate. And like, you're telling a story that's true. Just I can't, I can't, I keep saying that one word. But then there are also times where things happen and like I have to, it feels above my pay grade and I have to kick it up to my editor and I'm like, you know, this person's PR team really wants us to not include, you know, XYZ part of the conversation. Granted, it was on the record, like they knew they were talking to a people person. They knew they were talking to a journalist and then all of a sudden they're like, actually, I don't feel comfortable, like I don't want you to run that. Well, then what are you supposed to do? Like it was all said in fair game, but a lot of times it comes down to like balancing the relationship that you have with like the celebrity or the athlete and their PR team. Like is it really worth running this little tiny bit like, oh they accidentally told us, like they're super private about their kids and they told us in conversation they mentioned the kid's name. Oh nobody knows the name of the kid. Oh, great. Now we know. We can talk about how, you know, so-and-so's three-year-old daughter is named Jane Doe. And then they panic and they're like, no, no, no, I didn't mean to do that. Please don't run that. And so then we're like, okay, like, we're not horrible people. If you're really like, if it comes, you know, in terms of a privacy thing, or it's something you really just don't want out there that's flipped out, like, we do usually kind of come to an agreement and most times like you figure preserving that relationship with that person is more important than whatever it is they're worried about.

M: Yeah, and are there like specific rules that are set by the magazine or your higher-ups that you have to follow when stuff like that is comes up and what would those be?

A: Yeah a lot of times it is sort of a judgment call. It depends on the situation, it depends on the celebrity. Like, we definitely do... I don't want to say, like, what's the phrase I want or the word I want? Like, we, I guess, give more grace to certain people than other people. Like, we're going to treat, you know, like an A-list celebrity, just that relationship, it means more or is just inherently different than like someone who's up-and-coming. Not that that means, you know, we give one person more respect than another, but the negotiating piece of things, like what's on the table, like if someone who's up-and-coming is like, I want to be on the cover of People Magazine, we're like, well, now it's probably just not the time. But do something else! But we do have, we have like an in-house legal team, which is really helpful. So a lot of times if we're writing about something that pretty much involves any sort of allegation, accusation, claim, someone gets arrested, anytime the news is related to that, we send it off to our legal team just for them to take a look at to make sure that like, we're not saying anything that leaves the brand open to being sued. So that's helpful to have an in-house legal team for sure. And then there are also, yeah, specific rules that apply no matter what. A lot of times we'll have celebrities or their PR teams be like, can you send us a list of questions in advance so that we can prep so-and-so for the interview so that they know what you're going to ask. And it's our edit policy that we don't send questions in advance. Because the point of the interview is supposed to be a genuine conversation. And if they've had time to think about things ahead of time, it just takes a little bit of how genuine it is. Or it takes a little bit away from the authenticity of it all. So we never share questions in advance. Usually what we do instead is, because again, we know they want to be prepared. We know no one wants to come to an interview with a major outlet and sound like they

don't know what they're talking about or be caught by surprise. So a common thing we do is just, we'll be like, we'll send topics. We'll let you know in broad strokes, here's everything we're gonna cover. We're gonna talk about your new project and we're gonna talk about life as a mom and we're gonna talk about your new partnership with XYZ Brand and we don't feed them the exact questions, but we do sort of give them a roadmap as to what we're going to cover during the interview.

M: Very cool. And on the opposite side of the strict guidelines, what personal values do you have that come to the forefront when you're dealing with something, a decision that needs to be made.

A: Like I was just before I got on with you, this is such a small example, but I was writing an article about an actress who is also a singer and she's got new music coming out. And when we were talking last week, she talked all about like all this upcoming music she has. She told me the dates that all these other songs are coming, la la la la la la. And then when I was writing it today, because we're putting it out just because the first single is out now, I emailed her team and I was like, I just want to be sure here, like, do you want us to publicize the fact that you have more music coming on XYZ dates? Or would you rather we just stick to, like, the peg of the initial single? Because all of a sudden, if I didn't check and I wrote up that she had all of this new music coming and here were the dates that like, you know, fans could expect the new music when that's not what she wanted out there, like, sort of it's a breach of like, privacy sounds weird, but a breach of trust. Like she opened up to me about this stuff. Granted, yes, we talked about it again on the record, but sometimes people forget, like, that everything they say is essentially fair game. And when it's something as small as just double checking, do you want me to mention the fact that you have these other two songs coming this summer, yes or no, and that can preserve the relationship, like it is worth checking in. So I do, I always, better to over-communicate, better to

double check. You know, better to be safe than sorry is definitely a rule I have. And I think too, sometimes when we're trying to craft a headline for an article, you want it to be intriguing, you want people to click on it, but also we're not in the business of clickbait. There are outlets who are, we don't do that. So we're always trying to find the fine line between making sure that people want to click on the articles that we're putting out there, but again, still has to be true. And so sometimes, like, an editor and I will be going back and forth about what we think the headline should be, and then someone who's even higher up will want to tweak it or change it and, you know, make it a little clickier, per se. And so that's kind of a time when, like, I step in and I'm like, well, like, that's not really accurate. Like, I don't, I'm not really sure we can say that. Like, I understand why we want to, but I just don't, we can't.

M: And your name will be attached to it too, so you don't want...

A: Right. Yeah. Exactly. And a lot of times, like, everybody at People knows, like, everybody knows how the sausage gets made. Everybody knows how this job works. So a lot of times they will, like, if I do speak up and I do say something, they'll be like, okay, you're the one who wrote the article, you did the interview, we trust your judgment on it, which is really nice.

A: And then I'll tell you too, I had the very first article I ever had go in the magazine. I had worked here maybe not even six months. And I was so excited, it was such a big deal, I had to pitch this article to everyone and our editor-in-chief and everyone was so gung-ho about it. It wasn't celebrity-related at all. It was a human interest story that I was super passionate about. And the story ended up, it turned out great. We published it, was so excited. And the like subject of the story was this minor, she was a teenager but she wasn't 18 yet, so technically a minor. And she had just lost a parent, and so we had written about all this work that she had done, you know, in remembrance of the parent she had lost. And she was super close with, like, the deceased

parent's friend, and helped in the wake of that huge loss. And she was not particularly close with the other remaining living parent, with the other remaining living parent, just to begin with. Like, before parent number one died, the family really wasn't super close to, never great relationship with, the other parent. And when the article came out, because we had talked to this girl, this teenager, we had talked to, like, the deceased parent's friends, you know, just trying to tell this really beautiful story of, like, honoring and in tribute and, you know, remembering and highlighting just all of this really meaningful work that was being done. And the other parent, who we didn't talk to for the story, because it really wasn't... the other parent didn't really have anything to do with what we were writing about, saw the story come out and was not happy. And actually, like, threatened to sue, which was incredibly frightening. It's still, thank God, the only time that's happened to me. Hopefully it never happens again.

M: That on the first article, that would be really scary.

A: Yep, the first article. I was like, oh dear God, maybe I'm not cut out for this. No, that was just a fluke. It does not happen all the time. It was just this horrible thing that happened once. Did not end up suing. But it's the first article I've ever written, like, I didn't, I didn't know what to expect about any of this process, never mind now this curveball that's come out of left field. But my editors were so supportive and they were like, you followed every protocol we have, like, this is just someone who's basically upset that they're not getting their 15 minutes of fame, essentially, right? So to have editors who were supportive and who backed every decision I had made really was helpful. And I look back now, like, OK, any time you're dealing with a story that involves kids, right, anyone who's under the age of 18, like, yeah, normally what they teach you in journalism school is you do go out to and you do get permission from, the parents, but they don't teach you in journalism school, like, what happens when one parent dies, they don't talk to the

other parent, like, you're talking to someone who's, you know, a parental figure, but has no, like, legal rights over the child, like, what do, they don't teach you what to do in that situation. It's not black and white. It's not black and white, exactly. So I was, I look back now, because in the moment obviously when you're being threatened with a lawsuit, I'm like, oh my god, I should have gone out to the other parent even though it wasn't relevant, like just, just because that's what you're supposed to do, like oh my god. And yeah, I mean, sure. That's what they tell you in journalism school, and like, ethically, yeah, like when it involves a minor, you should make an attempt to, you know, contact all parties. But I do, I look back now and like, it's been so long since this happened, and I still look back and I don't think I would have done anything differently, Maggie. I think I would have done it exactly the same way, even knowing how it turned out, because had I reached out to the other parent, it definitely... I don't think the story would... I think... I think the story would have been killed. Like, I don't think we would have ultimately been able to publish the story, and it did so much good once it was out in the world. Helped raise all of this money and awareness, and it did—it was really powerful. And so I look back and I'm like, well, what was the—like, the sum total of all my efforts was good, was positive, and I wouldn't want that to change. So that was like a very non-black and white, messy, weird situation that happened. And yeah, maybe like, by the book, yes, I did do everything correctly. But then you involve your ethics and your feelings and the shoulda, woulda, couldas. But I do still look back and like, I do it the same way a second time. So I guess I did do everything right. I would say so.

M: And have there ever been times where something like that has happened and there's been not as much like total agreement from your whole team of like, that was correct, even if it wasn't

you, like if you disagreed with a coworker on something in this kind of area, can you talk about that a little bit?

A: Good question. An ethical decision. I've disagreed. Okay. Actually, yes. Now that I think about it. Again, I guess the moral of the story here is a lot of times people have a lot of strong opinions when it comes to stories about kids. That's what I've learned across the board, whether they're famous kids, whether they're not famous kids. Like, people have a lot of strong opinions when it comes to stories about kids. And so a couple weeks ago, there was this famous celebrity child who's, she's not famous in her own right, she's just famous because her parents are famous. And she was turning 18. And so now all of a sudden we're wondering like, does that mean we can cover her whereabouts? Like if she gets, you know, photographed by the paparazzi, do we run those photos? Not in any sort of icky way, but we run like fun pap photos of celebrities all the time. Like, look at Marisha Hargitay on set filming Law and Order, yay. Like, look at Brooke Shields out walking on her way to go to the Today Show, yay. Like, we run stuff like that. And so, all of a sudden there was this discussion, like, are we gonna run photos of her now that she's, you know, technically legal? Are we not going to? Because she's, you know, still technically a private person, like, what are we going to do? And I was in the meeting. They did not ask me for my opinion, because at the meeting, so far above my head, like, I don't even know why I was there. But it was interesting to listen to all of, like, these senior editors and to see sort of how they, who believes what and why. And so, you know, my opinion that nobody asked for, and I didn't tell anybody, but I'll tell you, I don't really think we should like try and report on this girl unless all of a sudden she's like I'm gonna become an actor like my parents or I'm gonna Kick off a singing career and like I am gonna be this public person Like feels kind of weird to go snooping around her life as a high school student, right? Yeah, and there were some editors who

agreed with that and there were some editors who were like No, like by virtue of who her parents are and she's out and about, and she turns 18, like anything we can get on her, we should run. So there are times when people do disagree and the way that it gets resolved, honestly, it comes down to like, who's the most senior person and what's their thought? And so I think they had come to a compromise because it was like two senior people basically at the same level who were on opposite sides of the debate. And a lot of times when that happens, like yeah, you do just try to compromise. Like you try to make both parties as happy as possible. Nobody's, like, the thing I love about working at People is we're not in the business of like being nefarious. Like we're here to tell good stories and maintain these great relationships with people that people find fascinating. Um, celebrities that people find fascinating and interesting and, um, celebrities people love just as much as we love them. So, the good thing is, like, we're never out to get anybody, we're never trying to, you know, write a hit piece or, like, do anything, like, shite-sty. Um, but yeah, when something like that comes up for debate, the, the compromise was, okay, if she does do anything public, we'll talk about it. If she is photographed out with either parent who's a public figure, we'll report on it. But like, yeah, let's not go snooping around her life. Like, let's not do that. Yeah, that's what I would think too.

M: So yeah. Um, those are all my questions. So if you have anything else you want to add, but that was perfect.

A: Yeah. And if when you go to write it you have any questions, you're like, oh my god, I forgot to ask xyz, I will email you my phone number so you can just text me.

M: Oh, perfect. Thank you so much.

A: You're welcome so much. Anything you need, just let me know.

M: All right. Thank you.

A: You're welcome.

M: Have a great day.

A: You too. See you later.

M: See you later. Bye.