

CHAPEL HILL, NC -- “Companies are not doing enough to protect employees from sexual misconduct,” Emily Steele, business reporter for The New York Times stated at a panel discussion about sexual misconduct in the workplace and in media.

Reporters and researchers from UNC, NPR, The Hollywood Reporter, and The New York Times gathered at the “Holding Power Accountable: Reporting on Sexual Misconduct” event at UNC to discuss legal and ethical challenges covering prominent sexual misconduct cases in the media.

Kim Masters, editor-at-large of the Hollywood Reporter, discussed her experience with reporting on the Harvey Weinstein case in Hollywood. Reports of Weinstein’s misconduct range from inappropriate advances to rape.

“Harvey was...a big, vulgar human being who wanted to get in my face the first time I met him. I told him I had heard he was abusive to woman. He didn’t outright deny it.” Masters also told listeners that there was an internal document outlining Harvey’s misconduct with women such as Gwyneth Paltrow and Rose McGowan.

“I reported on that document, too, and it was the backbone of Harvey’s story,” Steel added.

Masters responded, “Case after case, he (Weinstein) would pay a settlement and sign a nondisclosure...But his story only became public as he lost his power.”

David Folkenflik, media correspondent at NPR, spoke about his experience with a Fox News lawsuit filed by Gretchen Carlson against former Fox News chief, Roger Ailes. Ailes had a previous settlement with a different woman in 2011. After Carlson’s lawsuit in 2016, Fox News consistently denied knowing of the 2011 settlement. “I have records of security monitoring what people were saying about Ailes after the 2011 case,” said Folkenflik. “They claimed that they didn’t know of his previous harassment cases, but of course they did. The company was spending money on him. This is about power.”

The panelists also discussed what the parameters for sexual misconduct include. Moderator Adam Hochberg asked, “Where’s the line? Is there a line? Is all of this behavior inappropriate or is there a line you can go to and be ok?”

Masters stated, “HR complaints are supposed to be confidential. Annoying jokes, unless they’re serious, are not sexual harassment. Serious is subjective matter. I would be curious to know how the journalists identify that line. What is the line that is worth reporting?”

Barbara Friedman, a UNC professor who studies women's issues, responded, "There is a case-by-case basis. When Kevin Spacey and Harvey are dropped by their employers cold, you know that the companies knew about allegations and did not do anything about it until their power was taken from them."

Steel reported on a \$32 million settlement by Bill O'Reilly, an American journalist, author, and television host, after accusations of sexual misconduct. "Despite that settlement, Fox News renewed his contract for \$25 million a year. They claimed they didn't know about the lawsuit of the settlement. There was not a notion of accountability in this culture."

Hochberg commented, "The people who were victimized reported it. What they found was that people were more interested in protecting the company and not the employee. Does that surprise you at all?"

"The system that is setup to prevent these things are broken. Women don't report because they fear their jobs being lost, being judged," Steel said. "It is a pattern of reports and settlements. Settlements are usually used to silence people."