

Taken from the International Debate Education Association  
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## Context

The extent to which the media are legally free to investigate and publish details of public figures' private lives varies from country to country. For example, France is much stricter on protecting personal privacy than Britain is. The debate has recently been given additional importance by the development of Human Rights law within Europe, as privacy is classed as a right under the European Convention of Human Rights, as well as by political scandals in France, Italy, Belgium, etc., which have highlighted the need to scrutinize public figures' behavior closely. The arguments below apply mostly to politicians and other public officials, for example judges and civil servants, but are also partially applicable to celebrities such as film and pop stars, footballers, etc.

## Arguments

### Pro

The people have a right to know about those in power over them. Their salaries are paid for by the people (whether through taxes, in the case of politicians and civil servants, or by revenue generated by films, CDs, TV, etc., in the case of celebrities). The decisions of public political figures affect many aspects of people's lives; in exchange the people have the right to make informed judgments about the kind of leaders they have. Any attempt to restrict what may be reported about public figures in the press could easily become a conspiracy to keep voters in the dark and to manipulate them.

### Con

The 'public interest' is not the same thing as what the public is interested in. There will always be a fascination in learning intimate details about the lives of the powerful and famous, but this should not be a reason to deny public figures the right to privacy that the rest of us enjoy. Nor should public figures be held to higher standards of personal behavior than the rest of society by a sensationalist press seeking only to sell newspapers. If newspapers were forced to focus upon the policies and public actions of politicians, rather than their personal foibles, democracy would be better served.

### Pro

All elections are to a greater or lesser extent about the character of the leading politicians involved. Unless the voters are allowed insights into their private lives they will lack the information needed to make a fair decision at the polling booth. For example, many would think that a politician who betrayed his wife in an affair was equally capable of breaking his promises and lying to his country.

### Con

Private morality and eccentricities have no automatic relationship to someone's ability to do a job well. Many great political leaders have had messy personal lives, while others, with blameless private lives, have been judged failures in office. If modern standards of press intrusion and sensationalism had been applied in the past, how many respected leaders would have reached or survived in office? Kennedy (adultery)? Roosevelt (disability)?

### Pro

A free press is essential to the functioning of a free-market economy, exposing corruption and dishonesty on the part of public officials and businesses. If investigative journalists are prevented from scrutinizing the private lives of public figures, then corruption and crime will be much easier to hide. For example, just how does a senior civil servant afford a Ferrari, a yacht and a villa in Monaco on his government salary?

### Con

Such close press scrutiny actually places public figures under considerable strain, making both poor performance in office and personal problems such as marital breakdown more likely.

### Pro

No clear dividing line can be drawn between public and private behavior – drawing up rules will be arbitrary and will exclude at least some corrupt or dishonest behavior of bearing. For example, President Mitterand of France hid his cancer from the French electorate for years – was this a public or a private matter? He also had a mistress and illegitimate daughter, who were secretly taken on some of his foreign visits at state expense; again, is this a private or a public matter?

### Con

Continual probing into the private lives of public figures actually harms the functioning of democracy. Very few potential candidates will have entirely spotless private lives, free from embarrassing indiscretions committed while young and irresponsible. The prospect of fierce and unforgiving press scrutiny will thus deter many from seeking public office and deny their talents to the public good. Those who do present

themselves for election will therefore tend to be rather unrepresentative individuals of a puritanical nature, whose views on sex, family life, drugs, etc. may be skewed and intolerant as a result.

Pro

Many politicians (and religious leaders) make an explicit or implicit campaign point out of their family values and other aspects of their "private" life, for example by being photographed with their loyal family, and through policy stands on such issues as divorce, single mothers, sex education, drugs, etc. If the public image such people seek to create is at variance with their own practice, such hypocrisy deserves to be exposed.

Con

When personal morality and family life is deliberately and explicitly used by a politician as a reason for them to be elected, then they have chosen to make it a public issue rather than a private one. This does not justify intrusion into the privacy of those politicians who do not parade their personal lives as a campaign method.

Pro

Public figures seek this status knowing that it will bring attention to their private lives – pop stars, footballers, etc. Constant scrutiny is the price of fame. Many celebrities actively seek media exposure in order to advance their careers, revealing many aspects of their personal lives; once success has been bought in such a fashion it is hypocritical to complain of "press intrusion" into those few aspects the star would prefer to remain hidden.

Con

Many public figures achieve celebrity status largely by mistake; it is a by-product of their pursuit of success in their particular field. For example, most professional footballers wanted when young simply to become the best player they could be, at the highest level they could reach. They do not wish to be "role models" and claim no special moral status, so why should their private lives be subjected to such public scrutiny?