

Introduction: Who Gets to Say What?

Identifying Questions About Speaking Out by Celebrity Athletes and Entertainers

"In the past I've been reluctant to publicly voice my political opinions."

Pop music superstar Taylor Swift got political with her fans one Sunday in October 2018 in a way she'd never been before. Some of the many Grammy-

winning and Billboard chart-topping songs Swift had written

and sold over the previous decade to millions of music fans around the world alluded to her views about gender and power, but until her Instagram post that October Sunday, Swift never had revealed a political identity or endorsed specific candidates.

That day, Swift told her 112 million Instagram followers why she was speaking out about the 2018 midterm elections. Noting she would vote in the state of Tennessee, where she and her family moved when she was a teen trying to break into the music business, Swift wrote, "In the past I've been reluctant to publicly voice my political opinions, but due to several events in my life and in the world in the past two years, I feel very differently about that now." Swift, who won a symbolic \$1 verdict in a 2017 counter-suit

for sexual assault and battery by a Colorado radio show host who groped her,¹ explained the issue motivating her political views in 2018. She wrote, "I always have and always will cast my vote based on which candidate will protect and fight for the human rights I believe we all deserve in this country."

Swift said she opposed discrimination on the basis of gender, race and sexual orientation, declaring, "I cannot vote for someone who will not be willing to fight for dignity for ALL Americans, no matter their skin color, gender or who they love." Therefore, Swift wrote, she would not vote for Marsha Blackburn, a Republican seeking a U.S. Senate seat in Tennessee,

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and explained that Blackburn's "voting record in Congress appalls and terrifies me." Swift said while Blackburn served in the U.S. House of Representatives,

she did not vote for equal pay for women or for legislation intended to protect women from domestic violence and sexual crimes, and she did not support equal rights for same-sex couples. "These are not MY Tennessee

values," Swift proclaimed, before endorsing the Democratic candidate for U.S. Senate, Phil Bredesen, and naming the Democratic candidate for U.S. House of Representatives, Jim Cooper, for whom she said she'd also vote.

At the conclusion of her Instagram post, Swift spoke directly to her younger social media followers, encouraging them to register and to vote in the hotly contested midterm elections across the United States, writing,

"So many intelligent, thoughtful, self-possessed people have turned 18 in

the past two years and now have the right and privilege to make their vote count. But first you need to register, which is quick and easy to do." She ended her post by directing followers to the website vote.org to learn how

to register in their own states. The post soon was “liked” by more than two million Instagram users.²

Swift made her attention-getting post the day after ending a North American concert tour and two days before voter registration closed in her home state of Tennessee. In less than 48 hours after Swift’s post, vote.org officials reported more than 166,000 new voters had registered across the country and that some 42 percent of those new registrants were between the ages of 18 and 24. “We have never seen a 24- or 36- or 48-

hour period like this,” vote.org spokeswoman Kamari Guthrie told *The New York Times*. “This is leaps and bounds beyond what we typically see.”³

Before her Instagram statement, Swift had been scrupulously apolitical, carefully managing her public image and digital identity. In 2008, for instance, when she was first eligible to vote as an 18 year old, she declined to say how she voted in the presidential election that sent Democrat Barack Obama to the White House. *People* magazine reported that because Swift would be in Los Angeles on Election Day, she stood in line for an hour and a half on the last day of Tennessee’s early voting period and signed autographs while waiting. All Swift would tell the magazine was, “I wavered back and forth the entire time I was waiting in line and when I got into the voting booth, I said, ‘That’s the one I’m voting for,’ and I pressed the button. And I feel good about it!”⁴

At age 22, Swift again declined to reveal which presidential candidate she supported, telling *Time* magazine just before the 2012 presidential election that gave Barack Obama a second term in the White House, “I try to keep myself as educated and informed as possible. But I don’t talk about politics because it might influence other people. And I don’t think that I know enough yet in life to be telling people who to vote for.”⁵

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Four years later, Swift was photographed wearing a top with cut-out shoulders to the polls, which caused some observers to speculate she supported 2016 Democratic candidate Hillary Clinton, who had been photographed in younger years wearing something similar. Despite that sort of speculation about her political leanings, Swift did not reveal for whom she voted in the election that sent Republican Donald Trump to the White House. Some commentators took her to task for remaining steadfastly silent about her politics, noting she was the world’s best-selling pop artist

and had expressed feminist views in her music but declined to join fellow artists in speaking out to support Hillary Clinton, the country’s first female major-

party presidential nominee. Nearly two years later, Swift explained she didn’t endorse Hillary Clinton because Donald Trump “was weaponizing the idea of the celebrity endorsement” during the 2016 campaign, and she feared she would hurt Clinton’s candidacy more than help it.⁶

Swift’s 2018 midterm election Instagram post therefore stunned observers with its newly specific political message. Thousands of Swift’s fans, perhaps especially those who had thought she was a closet Republican, engaged in a flurry of speculation about her decision to speak out.⁷ Swift’s post, and people’s reactions to it, also reminded some observers of

the episode 15 years before when another singer at the height of her popularity spoke out about U.S. politics. A typical observation connecting Swift with that episode was this tweet observing, “I’m old enough to remember when Republicans banned the Dixie Chicks for criticizing America while overseas.”⁸

“We’re ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas.”

In 2003, the Dixie Chicks, an American country music trio, were enjoying worldwide popularity before speaking out led to their vilification. Composed of lead singer Natalie Maines and sisters Martie Maguire and Emily Robison, the Dixie Chicks had soared to success by updating traditional country music with what a *New York Times* music writer called “assertive, irreverent femininity.”⁹ Their song “Goodbye Earl,” for instance, suggested a woman was justified in killing a husband who repeatedly abused her. With multiple Grammy-winning songs to their credit, at one point the Dixie Chicks reigned as the best-selling female group of all time.¹⁰

Just days before the United States invaded Iraq in 2003, the Dixie Chicks were touring in Europe, playing a gig at the Shepherd’s Bush Empire theater in London.¹¹ That evening in March, Natalie Maines stood on stage chatting with the audience as the trio readied to perform its chart-topping song

“Travelin’ Soldier,” which mourned a young American man killed while serving in Vietnam.¹² As she strummed her guitar, Maines, a Texas native,

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told the audience, “Just so you know, we’re on the good side with y’all. We do not want this war, this violence, and we’re ashamed that the president of the United States is from Texas.”¹³

Her comments were included in a concert review in *The Guardian* newspaper in London. They spread quickly to the United States, where public reaction to them landed the Dixie Chicks in what *The Guardian* later called “the center of a massive political firestorm.”¹⁴ In an America where patriotism prevailed two years after the 9/11 terror attacks, criticism of President George W. Bush was not popular, especially among country music fans who were listening to radio stations that showcased songs—such as Toby Keith’s “Courtesy of the Red, White and Blue for instance—that one critic described as “steeped in earnestly patriotic drum-

banging.”¹⁵ The Dixie Chicks rapidly were boycotted by country music fans and radio stations, and in Louisiana, a group of fans smashed the trio’s CDs with a bulldozer.¹⁶ The Dixie Chicks’ “Travelin’ Soldier” single quickly plunged from number 1 to number 63 on the country music charts,¹⁷ and soon the corporate sponsor of the trio’s U.S. concert tour bailed out.¹⁸ Just weeks before, on the first day of sales for that tour, the group had shattered a music industry record by selling \$49 million worth of tickets, but by the time the trio began playing those sold-

out concerts,
death threats to the women concerned them enough to hire 24-

hour

armed security guards.¹⁹

As the women continued touring, they tried to clarify their position

of supporting U.S. military members while remaining opposed to the war in Iraq, but their efforts seemed futile. Journalist Howard Bryant noted, “Even money couldn’t save the Dixie Chicks. The band attempted to make a million-

dollar donation to the American Red Cross, which, too scared to challenge the perceived public sentiment or find itself at the center of a possible boycott, rejected the money. One sentence about a war that would soon be historically discredited ruined the Dixie Chicks’ careers.”²⁰

Three years later, the Dixie Chicks released “Taking the Long Way,” an album with a single pointedly titled “Not Ready to Make Nice,” which featured equally pointed lyrics suggesting death threats against Maines were an overreaction to the words she spoke in London.²¹ The album won all five Grammy awards for which it was nominated, including the top three Grammy categories. Yet the Dixie Chicks still found their songs banned by politically conservative country music radio stations.²² The Academy of Country Music awards show audience laughed heartily when host Reba McEntire joked about the Dixie Chicks singing with “their foot in their mouth,” for instance.²³ In 2006, a documentary titled *Shut Up and Sing* depicted the Dixie Chicks picking up the pieces of their lives after Maines’ remarks on the London stage. In the film, the women said they stood by

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Maines’ decision to speak out, despite the costs to their careers and the threats to their safety.²⁴

Ethical Questions Raised When Celebrities Speak Out

Why did Taylor Swift’s political Instagram post leave her largely unscathed, while Natalie Maines’ political comment to a concert audience destroyed the Dixie Chicks’ career? Should constraints apply when celebrity athletes and entertainers speak out about serious public issues? This book examines ethical issues that arise when these famous people speak out on issues often unrelated to the performances that brought those figures to public attention. Taylor Swift, for instance, rose to fame for writing and singing songs about breakups with boyfriends, not for endorsing political candidates, and many of her fans expected her to continue to fulfill that entertaining role. Natalie Maines and the Dixie Chicks rose to prominence with sometimes-

provocative lyrics and big-voiced ballads, but politically

conservative country music fans didn’t expect Maines to criticize the U.S. president while touring abroad. In fact, audiences expected the trio to “shut up and sing.”

Both Taylor Swift and Natalie Maines are U.S. citizens with legal rights under the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution to express themselves freely. Yet, as their cases show, when entertainers speak out about public issues of great import, their views quickly can be magnified and criticized significantly more than ordinary citizens’ words will be. Natalie

Maines expressed her opposition to the Iraq War and President Bush in a country music concert, where audiences typically have expected female performers to look and sound good, and to tackle nothing more controversial than a song about a romance gone wrong. What ethical responsibilities did Maines bear as a public figure when she defied her audience’s role-

related expectations? Some critics said Maines had no right to subject

her ticket-
buying concert audience to political views they might not share.
“There’s a contract that binds country singers to their fans, and the Dixie
Chicks have broken it,” noted a *New York Times* music critic.²⁵ Swift, too,
defied role-

related expectations for a female pop singer who ascended to
fame while remaining scrupulously apolitical.

Did Swift and Maines possess ethically justifiable motives for speaking
out? Although Maines appeared to speak spontaneously as she riffed
with the concert audience before launching into a song, the trio said in later
interviews they had discussed the U.S. invasion of Iraq several times. “We
were about to go to war, and before we went on that night we talked about
how silly we felt having to go out and entertain when our hearts were so

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heavy with what was about to happen,” Maguire said.²⁶ “It felt pretty trite”
not to speak out “on what was supposed to be the eve of the war,” Maines
said. “At that stage too everyone in Europe, or everyone outside of the U.S.,
talked about the U.S. like we all thought one way. So it was important for
me to let them know that you can’t group us all into one.”²⁷

In standing by their anti-
war position, in the face of a country music
establishment that favored President Bush’s invasion of Iraq, did Maines
and her fellow Dixie Chicks display moral courage? Did Swift display moral
courage in making her Instagram post?

*“I saw how one comment ended such a powerful reign, and it
terrified me.”*

Two years after she spoke out about the 2018 midterm elections, Swift
was the subject of a documentary film titled *Taylor Swift: Miss Americana*,
which, in the words of *Variety* magazine, depicted “how gradually, and
sometimes reluctantly, Swift came to place herself into service as a social
commentator.”²⁸ The documentary debuted at the Sundance Film Festival,
and some critics found its most telling scene one in which Swift was seen
on camera arguing with her father and a group of unnamed male advisors
about whether to make her Instagram post endorsing Democratic candidates
in Tennessee. The advisors worried Swift’s proposed post “could have
the effect of halving her audience on tour.” Swift’s father worried the post
would pose risks to her personal safety, saying, “I’m terrified. I’m the guy
that went out and bought armored cars.” Swift conceded her father was
not wrong about stalkers and others who routinely threatened her safety,
but she indicated she erred by not publicly opposing Donald Trump and
endorsing Hillary Clinton in 2016. In 2018, she said, “I need to be on the
right side of history,” and asked her father’s forgiveness before making the
post.²⁹

In interviews she gave to promote the documentary’s premiere at Sundance,
Swift further explained her motivation for speaking out: “This was
a situation where, from a humanity perspective, and from what my moral
compass was telling me to do, I knew I was right, and I really didn’t care
about repercussions.”³⁰ Her decision to speak out doesn’t mean she failed to
understand the possible repercussions of her speech. As an emerging musician,
Swift had observed the Dixie Chicks’ fall from grace. “I saw how one
comment ended such a powerful reign, and it terrified me,” she said. “These
days, with social media, people can be so mad about something one day

and then forget what they were mad about a couple of weeks later. That's fake outrage. But what happened to the Dixie Chicks was *real* outrage. I registered it—that you're always one comment away from being done being able to make music."³¹

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Ethical Obligations When Speaking Out

In addition to considering possible harm to themselves or their careers, how should celebrity athletes and entertainers work to minimize harm to the subjects of speech or the audiences who receive it? It's perhaps relatively harmless for a powerful U.S. president such as George W.

Bush to find himself criticized from a concert stage by a country singer.

He can find a platform through which to respond, should he choose to.

In fact, when President Bush was asked in a network television interview about the Dixie Chicks, he said he supported their right to speak freely and added that "if some singers or Hollywood stars feel like speaking out, that's fine. That's the great thing about America."³² A president also can choose,

as Donald Trump apparently did, not to engage in a tit-for-tat on social

media, of which he was a prolific user, with a music superstar such as Swift.

But what if the subject of the celebrity athlete's or entertainer's speech is a more private, less powerful person? Does the athlete or entertainer bear extra ethical care for speaking out about those people or for speaking out

about particularly sensitive, potentially offensive topics? What ethical obligations

do athletes or entertainers who speak out have for wielding their

public platforms in ways that foster dialogue with the recipients of their views? What about audiences? Do recipients of athletes' and entertainers' speech bear any affirmative ethical obligation to respond? If they disagreed with Swift's post endorsing Democratic candidates, for instance, were her followers ethically obliged to speak out and disagree with her publicly?

What are the limits to audience response? Although listeners and radio stations

hired a bulldozer to smash Dixie Chicks CDs, there was no evidence the dramatic display of opposition harmed anyone. Issuing death threats to the trio and their young children who typically traveled with them while on tour, however, clearly raised the possibility of physical and emotional harm to them. How might respect for the dignity of all people be a required ethical element of speaking out and of response to speaking out?

Finally, and perhaps most crucially, what can we as ordinary people learn from cases of celebrity athletes and entertainers who speak out? How can we speak out ethically and with moral courage in our own spheres of influence? Few of us will find ourselves sharing political views with 112 million

Instagram followers or chatting with a crowd from a concert stage.

Even so, we will experience situations in our workplaces, our schools, our houses of worship and our neighborhoods, and in our e-mail inboxes, our

Twitter feeds, our Facebook pages and our Instagram accounts when we might want to defy the expectations people have for our personal and professional roles to speak out about public issues important to us. If we do so, we want to speak out effectively and ethically.

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Social media platforms, whether Twitter, Facebook, Instagram or others, and the digital devices we use to post, read and view content on those platforms, now are omnipresent in our lives. Many of us rarely tuck our

smart phones and tablets farther away than our pockets, tote bags and bedside tables so we can check digital content incessantly during our days—and nights. These devices and social media platforms arguably offer the most sophisticated means of communication any people in human history have possessed. We adroitly use our devices to communicate our stories and perspectives quickly and widely, with little constraint from the old filters of religious, educational, government, business or journalistic authorities.

This book is written with the conviction that these powerful human communication tools available to so many of us today can enlighten and encourage all of us who seek a better world. The more communication tools we have to speak out and wisely share a panoply of human views and experiences, the better off we all will be in seeking a common good. Yet these remarkably powerful communication tools—especially social media platforms favoring short bursts of attention-getting opinion and rapid “likes” or “dislikes” over sustained discourse and careful argumentation—also present great power to harm and offend other people, whether with untruthful or deceitful content, ill-considered views, or disrespect for others’ human dignity. In that context, then, this book examines ethical challenges facing all of us when we speak out publicly. Serious ethical responsibilities attach to famous athletes and entertainers in a digital world in which many audience members equate celebrity status with authority and expertise about shared public issues. In applying ethical principles to examples of speaking out by athletes and entertainers, this book attempts to help all of us understand our ethical responsibilities for when and how we speak out about public topics in our spheres of influence.

Parameters That Shape the Ethical Analysis of Speaking Out

Before the book moves to a fuller examination of these ethical responsibilities for speaking out, it’s useful to first identify five parameters that guide the selection of the examples of speaking out that this book presents and analyzes.

First, this book emphasizes examples of speaking out that occur in a specific American context. These examples involve athletes and entertainers speaking out in the United States during the first two decades of the 2000s, when increasingly polarized speech has focused on the political and

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social effects of race, gender and class—speech that includes some Americans’ jubilation at electing the country’s first Black president, other Americans’ disdain for the country’s first female presidential nominee, and yet other Americans’ fear of losing status in a country of fast-changing demographics.

As polarizing rhetoric escalated during the 2020 presidential election season, a viral pandemic infected and killed hundreds of thousands of American people, and the related shutdown of the U.S. economy left millions of workers without jobs. The effects of the pandemic and the economic crash were heightened early in the summer of 2020 by a crisis about racism and police brutality. That crisis exploded after millions of Americans saw a video recording of a white police officer kneeling for nearly

nine minutes on the neck of a Black citizen named George Floyd, who lay dying on a Minneapolis, Minnesota, street where he had been arrested.³³ Coming after years of unjustified killings of Black people³⁴ by American police, and at a time when Black people were disproportionately victimized by the viral pandemic and the economic crash, Floyd's death provoked thousands of people to join demonstrations against systemic racism. The resulting attention to the Black Lives Matter movement by celebrities, politicians, businesses, media organizations and sports leagues created what a longtime *Washington Post* sports columnist called "an avalanche" of activism and speaking out³⁵ that merits ethical analysis.

Second, this book examines examples of speaking out in which athletes and entertainers question power and privilege. Speaking out typically generates more controversy and criticism—and thus may require more moral courage—when speakers question the status quo than when they defend it. For generations, from baseball legend Jackie Robinson to football quarterback Colin Kaepernick, controversy and criticism have faced Black athletes who found the moral courage to speak out against racial injustice even while their very presence in sports was derided. In the context of that history, this book considers many contemporary Black athletes' use of social media posts and symbolic gestures to question racial injustice, as well as the consequences Black athletes particularly may endure for speaking out.

Third, this book analyzes examples of speaking out that raise ethical questions both through an initial act of speaking out and through news coverage that amplifies it. Most of the speaking out analyzed here comes from athletes and entertainers who first became famous through what scholars call "achieved" celebrity derived from great skill and talent, as opposed to "ascribed" celebrity derived from family background or "attributed" celebrity derived through media attention alone.³⁶ Achieved celebrities who transcend their athletic or artistic accomplishments to speak out about unrelated public issues bear ethical responsibilities for that speech that are worth examining. So too do the journalists who decide to report on

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speaking out by achieved celebrities instead of reporting on other public issues and who frame that speaking out in specific ways that may affect our understanding of the issues. For example, the book considers both professional tennis superstar Serena Williams' remarks about racism and sexism, and news coverage about her remarks that promulgated the very stereotypes she opposed.

Fourth, this book focuses on examples of speaking out that tend more toward "right doing" than wrongdoing. Arguably, many books and articles about ethical responsibility devote too much space to analyzing cases of unethical behavior that tempt us to think doing right is impossible. This book doesn't devote much space to wrongdoing. For instance, this book does not analyze celebrities unethically speaking out about their opposition to childhood vaccinations or their support for alternative health and wellness treatments. Those books have been written, and they are commendable.

³⁷ This book also doesn't present moral agents as singular moral exemplars. The entertainers and athletes examined here are flawed humans just as we all are. But this book finds their behavior in speaking out more right than wrong in the circumstances, which is what studying ethics is fundamentally about: learning to do as much right as possible in situations that don't offer one right answer.

The fifth and final parameter shaping this book is intended to relate to all of us who read it. We're not famous, and we're probably not trained to excel as speakers, but we can deduce ethical principles from examples of celebrities speaking out and apply those principles to our ordinary lives. Therefore, this book emphasizes examples of speaking out by celebrities who primarily became famous as they honed their talents and training to achieve elite status as athletes and entertainers, and then only secondarily became famous for speaking out about issues that might not be connected to their previous achievements. For instance, when we read about

world-

class sprinter Allyson Felix summoning the courage to reject an endorsement contract and speak out about the treatment of female athletes after they give birth, we can consider whether we have the moral courage to stand up and say "no" in our own work lives, or whether we would use our own stories to make a point in our communities. We also can think about the ethical responses we might provide as listeners to speaking out, especially if the speaker reveals a deeply personal experience. How might we be respectful and humble listeners? When do we need to be skeptical listeners who talk back? Above all, this book intends to derive from famous examples several principles of practical ethics that we can employ as we speak and listen in our own circles.